GRACE IN THE AGE OF THE SHOPPING MALL / Paul Lyons


That the Northern literary establishment long ago accepted yokels and hayseeds of the South as capable of writing world-class (and highly marketable) fiction has not diminished the sense of mission with which the literary South continues to define itself. No other American region remains as proud of its literature, makes so great a point of promoting its separateness and enduring codes in a time of change and 7/11 Slurpees, or takes as much delight in appealing to its own evolving literary myths and traditions. Of course a fundamental anxiety underlies the South’s continuously renewed attempts at both preserving and redefining its values — patting oneself on the back too hard is a kind of flagellation. But this simultaneous self-critical revisionism and chivalric defense of old values (epitomized by O’Connor’s Julian, who dreams of a white mansion while convicting his mother of racism) contributes to the richly restless, searching quality of much Southern fiction.

Though as a “Best Stories” collection the third annual New Stories From the South does not ostensibly traffic in such issues, it is inherently a political and polemical attempt to reassert traditional Southern values and endorse a view of traditional storytelling as Southern. Taken cumulatively, as the volume covertly asks to be, these fine stories, described on the dust jacket as “of,” “from,” and “about” the South, work to evoke what editor Shannon Ravenel calls an elusive but definitive Southern “affect.” While Ravenel (whose eloquent short prefaces are an annual treat) prefers definitions of these affects that nevertheless “resist being nailed down,” and occasionally proffers concrete definitions that don’t hold up, her selections bare a network of Southern qualities which, when unRaveneled, furnish materials for a poetic. Wherever the authors of these stories are really from, that is, wherever they now live, however non-Southern other fiction of theirs might be, each story in New Stories seems chosen to illustrate distinctive facets of Southern fiction.

At basic levels each announces itself as Southern. Twelve of the sixteen stories begin with specific references to Southern places. On the face of it this doesn’t say much. Fifteen out of twenty stories in this year’s Best American Stories (Houghton Mifflin, ed. Ravenel and Mark Helperin) also mention place within the first few paragraphs. But all concrete place-stationing licenses labelists somewhat: Young Goodman Brown putting his head out into the Salem night prepares the reader for puritan New England; ten stories set on the New Jersey Turnpike might be called Jersey Turnpike stories. (The best Jersey novel I know, The Sportswriter, is by Richard Ford, a Southerner.) Placing a story in the South, however, tends to mean more than placing it elsewhere, since Southern fiction has always relied on strong evocations of place to confirm traditions to which it appeals, and to call into play communal
memory and a sense of home as sanctuary and preserver of identity. And place literally means more in Southern fiction because characters are less likely to go anywhere else! Moreover, add to Walnut Knob or Buck's Gap or kudzued, swampy landscapes names like Annalee, Alfonso, Buzbee, Haber Hill Culpepper, Melvina, and blacks apparently named out of atlases or history books (Vesuvius, Luscious, Onessimus) — add phonetically spelled language like ruin (ruined) and acherine (aquamarine), cuz that's how folks talk — throw in love/hate relationships with the shopping malls and TV (both, like rifles to Indians, appear threatening but mesmerizing) — and readers must know where they are.

But despite the dangers of such self-identification feeling canned, the stories Ravenel collects stay on the right side of the increasingly fine line between regional distinctiveness and cliché. If there are a few too many of the by-now-standard nut cases, shopping mall devotees, battered women, characters come stumped out of Faulkner stories or Bible camp buses, and freakish white trash, all conspicuously manipulated in ways that suggest the deeper moral commitment of their creators, at least there is nothing trendy or bored-with-life about these stories. Nobody mopes or anesthetizes themselves with Off Track Betting or Valium — why bother when you can bury poisoned horses at sea or kill alligators? And if one is disappointed by the scarcity of literate blacks or likeable whites, at last one is pleased by the relative absence of kitsch and yuppies. For the most part these stories avoid minimalist tendencies, like brand naming or flat language (i.e. "Diet Coke. At least a six-pack a day. The refrigerator's crammed full of them. I think they're only one calorie or something"), which are inherently the enemy of regional fiction — since such tendencies suggest that like Windex, Juicy Fruit, or "Dallas" (favorites among truckdrivers in Turkey) the same products are everywhere. In fact, some of these stories avoid level tone with a vengeance (excess) excusable only for its implied eagerness to live the life available on whatever barren ground or narrow-minded terms. In New Stories voice is always liable to overwhelm plot or become theme. Eve Shullnutt's densely metaphoric, synethetical "Voice" is finally as much about the luxurius interdependence of memory and language as about unbalanced love liting a family. Shullnutt opens:

It was the season when odors rose like invisible flame against the landscape of suffocating heat. Beneath the burnt grass and withered kudzu, skunks, rodents, knots of insects were dying, for we saw daily buzzards circling the folds of the hills.

The hills lay belly-up and redish against the skyline, the kudzu, with nothing to hold it, having slipped like a robe downward.

Ovrrripe? Maybe. But whatever else such a story achieves (and it has lovely, moving passages), its texture shows a speaker who loves words and trusts them to lead her to healing discoveries. Consistently, the speakers of these stories cherish the telling process. Like the confused no-count narrator of Mark Richard's "Happiness of the Garden Variety" who says "Let me tell you something about what makes what we ended up doing to Vic's horse Buster all the worse," many of these characters convey an urgent need to talk, tell, and in so doing understand and redeem their experience. "I won't burden you with all the gory details," the narrator of "Belonging" tells the reader in a tone steeped in the need to unburden, but justifiably confident that there are people who will hear when she confides:

I'm not ashamed to tell you what I did next. I pulled over onto the shoulder and put my head down on the wheel and I cried until my whole face was wet and soft. I didn't try to muffle it either, but Christine [her daughter] went right on sleeping in the back seat. Christine could sleep through anything and for this I'm grateful. And when I was finished, I wiped my eyes. I looked at Christine's sleeping face where all was quiet and untouched. No more weeping, I said to myself. And no self-pity. I am back where I belong, I thought. I am home. I am safe. I will not murder anyone's dog.

In their efforts to hold their lives together, that is, these speakers don't go to analysts as their Northern counterparts do (though many may need professional help, or straight-jackets). They tell the stories of their lives to whoever will listen, affirming the power of speech and literature to revitalize teller and audience alike. Storytelling, that is, binds the various "strategies for survival" that Ravenel sees as the commitment these stories share.

The collection teems with tellers, from peaceable porch uncles to kids who play out stories and TV shows for each other to the fanatic of Rick Bass's "The Watch" — 1988 Winner, Weirdest Story of the Year. Bass's protagonist is so crazed with the desire to swap stories with his seventy-seven-year-old dad, a rank, tree-swinging Louisiana Crocodile-Dundee, that he eventually shackles the man to the front porch on a dog chain. The story has gashly lyric moments, stretches where, in describing ragged, apocalyptic swamp landscapes, Bass becomes something of a Bayou Baudelaire, finding the obscure "peals and blossoms" of redemption in the unlikely stories of interdependency. By returning the listener (father) to the teller (son) in this story, a cyclist rediscovers the "thing that was not in him[self] anymore" and can ride by father and son like "a streak, a flash" — like a fleeting glimpse of the world beyond their world.

Jill McCorkle's narrator in the hilarious "First Union Blues" is literally a teller in a bank, and one gets the impression that she opens her heart/mouth as readily as she does new accounts. Like many of the stories in this anthology, "First Union Blues" moves too far afield for its taste, remaining unplotted, more committed to characterization than scene. But McCorkle's ear and eye allow her to invest her speaker's monologue with plots of language and feeling. Her omissions of commas masterfully render the motor-mouth Southern storyteller, giving the sense of a pathological talker exempt from the general human need to breathe. In defining her boyfriend the speaker defines herself as well as the authorial method: "he could have passed for Spanish if he could have kept his mouth shut which he couldn't." McCorkle has the satirist's pile-it-on wit, habitually going the extra clause beyond expectation. In her eclectically compr ed verbal romp all objects are susceptible to zeugma. The narrator's thoughts of drinking coffee lead naturally to a desire to wax her legs. But though her speaker, seemingly as interested in redeeming coupons as values, spouts an unending stream of brand names, song titles, TV shows and
rural clichés that nearly make her self-parodic, there is always a sense of McCorkle's compassion for her characters. The speaker wants to live and to grow, to confide and to connect, and as she thinks "over that word love, and how it is misused and abused," she begins to move/talk toward a moment of liberation or expansion, not quite epiphany, when, fittingly in a shopping mall with her cousin who wants "a better perspective on things," she wouldn't trade places with anyone.

This connection between what might be called grace (a term uneasily applicable to a body of literature zealous about exposing religiously devoid of piety) and the process of telling or talking gives dimension to my two favorite stories of the collection. In Richard Bausch's haunting "The Man Who Knew Belle Star"—which might as well have been called "A Good Woman Is Hard to Find"—a female version of the Misfit makes a self-confessed "bad character" fresh from Leavenworth discover sincerity in himself and recognize his repressed desire to be good and to survive. Bausch's dialogue smokes with lifelike absurdity:

"Look," he said, "we don't have to do any talking if you don't want to."
"Then what will we do?"
"Anything you want," he said.
"What if I just want to sit here and let you drive me all the way to Nevada."
"That's fine," he said. "That's just fine."
"Well, I won't do that. We can talk."
"Are you going to Nevada?"

McRae, a drifter headed vaguely toward open spaces, finds himself first drawn out by questions, and later forced to talk to his hitchhiker passenger for his life with the desperation of O'Connor's Grandmother. By the end of the story McRae lies in a gully repenting "everything he had ever done" until the light of grace appears, ironically a flashlight in the hand of the frail, pistol-packing nineteen-year-old girl who will, if she finds him, execute his bad-natured self.

In Pam Durban's "Belonging" the narrator, staggered by a knock-down divorce, heads for home, Timmons, South Carolina: "Home to recover a simpler sense of belonging," to feel less "capsized." But here, in the midst of dust and drought, she must support her father—terrified by retirement—and her mother, who faces bone cancer with courage, whiskey, and humor. The story is told from Macon, Georgia, where the narrator has remarried and rebuilt her life. Occasionally, though, the old mental scars reappear; she wakes at night unable to place herself in "time or space or inside the confines of anyone's love." And yet in these moments memory shines into the present; she remembers a photograph of a buck who came out of the Timmons woods in search of water and drank from a woman's dish-pan. Like the buck drifting up out of the shelter of the trees to a dangerous place, her memory ventures into consciousness, enabling her to risk the recovery of her stronger self through trust in human connections.

Such luminous moments, when a remembered photograph of the non-human proves sustaining, approach religious mystery. McCorkle, Bausch, and Durban allow to be voiced this sense that the grace available at the mall or at gunpoint or in old photos is inexplicable, though communicable. "Facts are just a lot of things that don't change," Bausch's Misfit says."I hate facts," McCorkle's narrator says, adding: "I think facts are boring. A fact is just a base, a foot in the door, to perspectives and instincts." What matters and communicates, finally, is as unforeseeable, indefinable, but as certain as the press of sensibility upon sentences, the art that gives beauty and significance to the common and rude.

The New Stories press after such mystery with varied success. Most reach after grandiloquent, uplifting endings. Richard's narrator, having worked up the gumption to face the consequences of his negligence, feels a sudden elation: "crossing the last causeway bridge home I'm happy heading there as a human in Vic's acres again." Larry Brown's narrator in "Facing the Music" struggles to arrange a sexual appetite for his wife after her mastectomy, but in the end remembers their honeymoon, and when she turns out the light he finds "Nothing's changed." The couple "find each other in the darkness like people who are blind." "Belonging" ends:

I sit here and remember myself until I feel myself surrounded again, to the ends of this earth surrounded, by my own kind.

Such words, tuned properly, manage to intimate a realm beyond that of logical action, to point through a shimmery screen of language at ineffable but sharable emotions.

In selecting as she does, then, judiciously but with a programmatic preference for stories in which rich language registers the meeting of the human and the mysterious, Ravenel as well as the authors of New Stories are involved in the making of Southern literature. In a less impassioned way than that of Mark Helperin (who slaps his anti-minimalist cards on the table in his introduction to Best American Stories) but as surely, Ravenel's selections celebrate the salvific resources of language. Of course it's slippery to call this infused plentitude distinctively Southern, since many of the New Yorker school are also Southern. Bobbie Ann Mason, to cite one example, regularly makes it into national anthologies, but has not yet appeared in New Stories From the South. Plenty of spare, well-executed minimalist stories by Southerners might well have made someone else's Southern anthology (though not mine). But Ravenel makes the moral commitment to disown by exclusion, and to posit as representative of the best impulses of Southern literature affirmative stories that respond with compassion, humor, and feeling to the question or challenge of what it is to be fully human.

In the end, however, though the collection as a whole is first rate, few of the stories have the range, dimension, and emotional force to stay with the best fiction. All of the stories in New Stories From the South were presumably submitted for consideration (along with one hundred other stories) by Ravenel to Helperin, this year's guest editor of Best Stories, but none were selected. Now there is no accounting for taste, but it's worth noting that Helperin chose stories by Bausch and Bass that Ravenel could have included in New Stories, but didn't. In both cases Ravenel selects the story more of or about the South that will contribute to her sense of what makes the Southern short story distinctive.

Ravenel, that is, opts for stories that collectively might be read as chapters in
a single book whose theme is the ongoing hold of the Southern vision and landscape as they find their language — frequently the language of homecoming — in story. On these terms, and for its high quality and diversity, New Stories, like its predecessors, is itself an excellent new chapter in a larger and ongoing definition of Southern short fiction.