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Backwater

Mark Time

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MARK TIME

BACKWATER

I

it is late winter
afternoon
we cross the Atchafalaya river
and drive thru Lottie, Texas
then into Louisiana
which is swamp, backwash, bog, bayou, river, pond, stillwater,
stream
a highway that has to be one long bridge over the swamp
trees that grow out of the wet underbrush
trying to find sunlight
chickens, cows, horses, sheep
black cows on green fields
hawks, red birds, vultures, ravens, trees with nests
Spanish moss, fungus, parasites
algae in stillwater
pigs
hunters wading with shotguns
nothing but clouds for sky
in some places beautiful
lush, wet as hell, fields soaked, black birds,
sparrow hawks with red rust backs
and then so many antique antique stores
full of antiques
selling their antiques
always water by the side of the road
Shreveport
and we drive onto the overpass
right over the cemetery
and when the freeway drops down
on the other side of the cemetery
we know we are in
Shreveport
the signs say
DON'T PARK ON SHOULDER
SLIPPERY WHEN WET
and it is always wet
the abbreviation for Louisiana is LA period
la la la
la la
brown trees only a few flowers

II

on the way back through Louisiana now
 we were in New Orleans
 Mardi Gras
 in a big crowd waiting for the parade
 memories of an old drunk wino queer approaching me
 lusting after my young male body and long curly hair
 calling me woman and chickee
 he stands staggering, scratching, rubbing his balls
 throwing his arms around me
 hugging me
 someone in the crowd takes our picture
 and I just being nice
 and he asks me for a kiss
 and I tell him I like him and I understand
 and I show him my girl-friend who has been standing right next to me
 the whole time
 and he grabs me again and hugs me and starts to pant
 and move up and down
 and I squeeze out of his bear hug
 and I tell him that he understands me as well as I understand him
 and that I still like him and that he ought to go find himself
 some nice young boy-friend
 and he says, "I'll bet you think I'm a dirty old man."
 and I say, "Yes, you are a dirty old man and I still like you
 and you know you understand."
 and he says we've treated him nicer than anybody else ever did
 and that he's worthless and no good for anybody anymore
 and he starts to cry
 and I tell him to forget it
 and he hugs us all and leaves, slowly

III

and I remember the French Quarter
 in tremendous close crowds
 cramming the streets with people
 everybody drunk, shoving
 then we go to bars that have girls dancing in their underwear
 Sandy, Maria
 lots of bumps and no grinds
 then leaving drunk
 and three big thugs hired by the bar come out and grab me by the hair
 and shirt.

and demand that I pay again for the beers that cost a dollar a piece
 and we had already paid for them once, inside
 and I say that we've already paid
 and they say look, do you want us to take you around back
 and take off your glasses
 and I am forgiving and humble and kind and considerate and
 say we've already paid
 and they slug me in the stomach and try to drag me around back
 but I grab onto a post and hold on
 and Dan rushes up and gives them five dollars
 and they drop me and I look at them and say, "How can you do this?"
 and they leave except for one who stands at the door of the bar
 and Dan tries to drag me away but I tell him to wait a minute
 and I go up to the thug and say, "How can you do this?"
 and he says get lost
 and I say, "How can you do this?"
 and he says nothing
 and I say, "You dickless shit-head."
 and he pushes me and I fall in the gutter and Dan picks me up
 and we walk off

IV

then Tulane University
 the campus and the people
 and that's that
 the old houses all over
 black slums shacks shacks shacks shacks shacks
 beautiful awful old white house mansions with great green growths
 of trees and bushes and grass all over the houses
 shops
 100% human hair wigs for sale
 still on the people
 more cemeteries under the freeway
 crayfish nets for sale
 so many blacks in gas stations
 old black man in cap shuffling down the street
 Mardi Gras parades with hundreds of kids dressed up in military
 uniforms that we're supposed to like
 young girls with black dresses, and black boots, and black belts,
 and sunglasses, and bayonets, and rifles, and helmets,
 and guns, and formations, and marching
 and with their rifles with the bayonets on the end
 sticking straight out and up from their hips

my guts turn over and gush out of my body
the slosh runs down the gutter

and then finally some nice rhythm and soul bands
playing as they dance in the street
and floats with dressed-up people throwing brass coins
and strung beads

V

the difference between the old black man shuffling
and the old white wino talker
is that the old white man is the best pool player in the world
8 ball, 9 ball, one pocket, snooker, etc.
and all drunk and talkative
and has to tell you his story
and say how pretty your girl-friend is until finally he's saying
she looks like Pocahontas
and then the old black man is unseen
because he has transcended almost everything
all in his head
and knows completely that it doesn't matter at all at all
and he just shuffles as he feels
and is living it out simply because nothing is to talk about
and he can not be hurt because he realizes he can't
and he knows that death is good and he lives it
and everything disappears from around him and he feels
his own body move slowly in the wilderness
and it is all right
and he doesn't worry about anything, whether it is a small matter
or a tiny one
and he hardly thinks at all because he just is
and he almost knows
and he's a little past all that because he's old
one's universe is one's universe
and I watch as he shuffles down the street
and he doesn't see or look at me
because I really don't exist
and neither do I see him

VI

and we took the ferry across the Mississippi
for free
and got very cold

and had to stand around when we got back cold cold
 and the Mississippi isn't very big at all
 only about half a mile across or less
 and dirty and oil on both shores in the form of old docks and
 boats and dry docks and hydraulic monsters of boats
 and barges and noises
 and the South is everywhere present in the South

VII

I wake up after no sleep
 three in a bed
 cheap motel
 outside of Baton Rouge
 on the way out of Louisiana
 back to New Mexico
 and walk into the early morning thick late-winter bayou
 and look into the stillwater and brambles
 thorns everywhere
 and find a way around the sitting water
 and climb over a barb wire fence that I don't even hardly touch
 for the undergrowth
 and climb deeper into the vine thorns
 and brown twigs and trees on top of me and underneath
 pulling at my skin
 the thorns and sticker bushes and brambles
 and in the middle of the thorn bush I crouch
 clawed on all sides
 and a scarlet bird flies up all scarlet only scarlet
 like the sun twenty feet away
 and blue jays and woodpeckers and robins
 little grey tiny birds that fly up close and actually
 right thru the tangle maneuvering perfectly
 and I cold
 and sometimes I feel like Jesus among the soldiers
 and sometimes I feel humanly awful among the perfect animals
 and perfect birds of absolute nature
 and sometimes I feel other things that are less
 and sometimes I don't feel
 as I ride in the car going home
 walking down the road
 sitting in the thick prickly bushes
 the thorns pulling me from the outside and the inside
 down and apart
 into the fallen leaves that mold and disintegrate into earth