

Notes on “The Funeral” and *Moon Dog*

Between one city and another the American landscape is speckled with small towns. Populations smaller than a thousand... smaller than fifty... smaller. Villages, hamlets, one-horse towns surrounded by farmland or woodland, scrubland or desertland. Impoverished. Dying. These towns are not *charming*, as the travel magazines tell us. They are not *quaint* or *cute*. They are ugly. And the locals can be uglier.

Social strata occurs everywhere, macro to micro, ant colony to ant hill, metropolis to tribe. The pecking order's often the biggest cock in the henhouse. The richest thief. The meanest sonofabitch. The one who's ruined the most lives. The one who does everyone a favor by dying. That's Mulsen. That's Mulsen's town.

In *Moon Dog* I return to a rural Midwest townscape similar to that explored in my novella, *Drought* (New Directions, 1997). It's familiar territory. I grew up on a farm outside a very small town, population 2,000. I graduated from that small town's grade school, junior high and high school. Although the town was fairly good to me personally, providing an uncomplicated and relatively secure childhood, its manifold shortcomings did not go unnoticed — not by me, not by those who fled and never returned, and probably not by most residents, who kept their mouths shut out of fear of that hierarchy tumble from the monkey tree. What for me was pleasant enough was a horror for others. I witnessed some of those horrors. Heard about many more. And I've never forgotten. And as for forgiveness? That's not the writer's job.

Thus through fiction, *Moon Dog* continues to anatomize the mangy underbelly of a place and people physically isolated, whether by choice or circumstance. It examines the ways adults trapped in small-scale societies survive or succumb to their hatred for neighbors and colleagues, for what they don't understand, what is foreign, what they fear and therefore loathe. It unmask the ways some of those adults prey on children physically

and emotionally, because abuse of the weakest is, to the abuser, an incomparable expression of self-power. *Moon Dog* tells one story of how some of those children return, as adults, to the scene of the crimes against them — for answers, for healing, for revenge.

I've divided the narrative into three cubist parts that shift back and forth throughout the novella: (1) omniscient and darkly humorous, as in "The Funeral," wherein the plot (for lack of a better word) unfolds; (2) explicit and ain't-so-funny journal entries by characters Constance and Joy, which intentionally provide a grim contrast to the humor and allow readers into the disturbed — and disturbing — minds of these two women; and (3) a natural history of the region that paints a backdrop against which past and future crimes occur. Here are two examples of (2) and (3).

CONSTANCE

05/27/99

What is lost memory but an eclipse of the past? The memory exists but remains obscured by the intentional moon of our forgetfulness. Why do we need it? What's done is done.

06/08/99

In memory, there is first landscape before characters, characters before date: The smell of dust, the texture of granite, the sound of wind through leaves. Once there was a road here. It was a pink road.

NATURAL HISTORY

Before the rock quarries came, farmers covered their roads with shale to keep them passable. The shale was pink and broken, smooth and flat and razor thin. There were coalmines in those days. The coal lay beneath the shale that lay beneath the rock that lay beneath soil. The miners dug up the shale and sold it cheap to farmers who covered their roads with it to keep them passable. The shale crumbled beneath wheels. When it rained, it mixed with the soil and formed

a rigid surface, its color a deep rose like watered-down blood. When the sun came out the road dried harder, more compact. After months of rain and sun, freezing and thawing, wheels coming and going, the road became a road—rutted but passable. Weeds grew down the middle of it. Even then the road was on its way to becoming not a road.

Once there was a road here. Now there is a two-mile stretch of grass and weeds and wildflowers struggling between the trees that bend toward each other from either side, blocking the sun and sky.

It is a dark place.

It is full of ghosts.

A final note: *Moon Dog* is a work-in-progress. Fiction is always a work-in-progress, isn't it. Even when the book's completed. Even when the author's dead.