

Stephen Hundley

“Big Rain” Poem Thoughts—For the Notre Dame Review

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“Big Rain” was written as a gift for my grandfather, and serves as sort of a bridge between where I’m from and where I’d like to go. The bulk of my work is in fiction—most of it drawing from an autobiographical place, but straying, more and more, into the speculative and outright-weird. That’s something I’m doing intentionally—trying to twist and ultimately escape the Southern and Appalachian tradition that’s been so important to me as a reader. In a piece of short fiction, I’ll write a story in a place like the Edisto river bottom (where “Big Rain” takes place), but have it involve an atomic bomb or aliens or something to jar or, hopefully, complicate the traditional combination of Southern-ness, the land, and some kind of spiritual connection between the two. It’s a connection that I believe in and one that, when I think on it, calls to mind the para-normal. That’s why writing based in the South can, and I think should, flirt with the bizarre. Because the South (and all natural spaces where humans have lived for a long period of time—different groups of humans) is a bizarre, time-bending place where the same narrative play out again and again.

In poetry, I’m still hoping to question or tamper with the old David Bottoms-style loco-descriptive commentary on Southern spaces. “Big Rain” is grounded in that tradition. More realistic. I did that, in part, to appeal to my grandfather and allow for a more straightforward reflection of a time that was important to us. That said, the speaker is still an observer who is interested in the spectacle of the boneyard and gut-dump as well as the natural history and human history of the space. For me, as a child, this was a wonder-place. The big rains would come and reveal all sorts of things—successes and blunders, victories and embarrassments, artifacts—from our time and before. I’m talking about the story of the place—trying to get a piece of it, acknowledging your place in it, and sorting through the feelings that come along with those kinds of meditations. “Big Rain” is the result of all that. It’s also an homage to the people who raised me so close to these semi-wild, sometimes macabre, but nearly always beautiful spaces. I’m thankful for that experience. I hope that comes through in the work.