Waist Deep

Jonathan Liebson

The Southern Cross

Skip Horack
Foreword by Antonya Nelson

Mariner Books
http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/mariner
208 pages; paper, $13.95

In her choice of *The Southern Cross* as last year's Bread Loaf Writers' Conference Bakeless Prize in fiction, Antonya Nelson praises the author for his "restraint"—what she calls a "simultaneous sense of abundance and tantalizing withholding" in his writing. This difficult duality is apparent throughout Skip Horack's story collection, starting with the opening line of his very first story. In "Caught Fox," a divorced father pays a visit to his mentally challenged son on Easter, and on his drive to meet him, the narrator, running late, begins, "I'm rounding the bend at Johnson's Corner when I see Reverend Lyle has a girl waist deep in the concrete pool behind the church." The sentence ambles along at a hurried clip, quickly compiling information as it goes, yet the reader cannot help slowing down midway through. We're snagged by the sight of the girl "waist deep" in the pool, an image too sensual—and too suggestive—to be overlooked. Christians or Southerners may recognize sooner that this is a baptism, but to them the scene will be no less disorienting. It is thanks to Horack's minimalist details that the description seems so provocative. In kinship with Lucas (the father), the reader feels like a sudden and accidental voyeur: he perceives the religious floating dangerously alongside the sexual, and he naturally wants a closer look.

That seed of sexuality, even down to the girl's submissive posture, prefigures Lucas's own submission later in the story. He allows himself to be wooed by a young cheerleader, and in the process, he leaves his son temporarily unchaperoned, a behavior that exposes him for his poor parenting and that results in his feeling guilty. In these sentiments, he has lots of company. He is like so many of the other protagonists in Horack's book, a collection of luckless ne'er-do-wells whose desire for repentance tends to get watered down by the very impulses that first land them in trouble. It's a diverse group of characters the author has assembled. They include an ex-con, a PhD student, a dockworker, a rabbit seller, and an elderly woman moved into a retirement community, to name just a few. From their individual circumstances, they exhibit a common desire to ponder their life choices—to step back momentarily from themselves and consider how they might attain a higher morality. Morality exists on a sliding scale, of course, and instead of the author overseeing the results, it is the characters themselves who take stock of their own behavior, and of whether they approach or fall short of the virtues they seek.

The reader perceives the religious floating dangerously alongside the sexual, and he or she naturally wants a closer look.

That a book called *The Southern Cross* would concern itself with sin and redemption should come as no surprise. Fortunately, where the title offers a more-than-subtle nod to these themes, the stories themselves are much less heavy in their portrayal. Horack succeeds because in serious situations he's able to use religion in a way that's either humorous or playfully askew. Beyond the aforementioned baptism, we see this in such stories as "Chores," where a roadside church sign advertises its weekly sermon by stating, "Our Church Is Prayer Conditioned"; or in "The Final Conner," when the main character's girlfriend points out that the shrimp he uses for bait "aren't kosher…but the trout are"; or in "The Rapture," where a Bible thumper, zealously lecturing a pole dancer about her date with the devil, gets a hard-on.

The title of the above story, along with such titles as "Borderlands" and "The High Place I Go," are representative of the symbolic terrain these characters must pass through—or at least set foot in—in hopes of discovering their better selves. To his credit, Horack consistently and deftly undercuts the gravity

of this soul search. Christianity never rises to the same level of transcendence in his book that Flannery O'Connor tries to instill (some may say impose) in so many of her stories. Instead, religion is sprinkled into the characters' everyday lives, very often mixed in with—or even confused with—the mundane. In one of the most poignant stories of the collection, "The Redfish," the character of that nickname discovers Bible citations spray-painted on the side of a trailer—Genesis 9:11, Psalm 23:4—as he and his girlfriend flee Hurricane Katrina. Redfish admits that "he didn't know [the passages]," and the more we learn about his life and his tumultuous past, the more we see him as someone from whom religion has long been concealed. He's a man who brawls, escapes death, gets incarcerated for the wrong crime, and who—released from jail—stumbles back into a world that continues to cheat him. Add to this the floods of Katrina, and Redfish almost seems like a modern-day Job. In the rising waters, he faces his most difficult test yet: he must decide whether to save his girlfriend's mother by force, or to let her perish by her own stubbornness, in what she considers God's safety net.

Liebson continued on next page

Liebson continued from previous page

At the end, Redfish lets her go. What it means for his soul he cannot say, but with his hands cut up and the rest of him momentarily out of harm's way, he at last comes to accept the meaning of his nickname. It's a modest realization, yet it proves consistent with what so many of the other characters undergo. Horack's collection is founded on smaller moments of self-understanding, rather than on heightened or profound revelations. As his characters are all guilty—either they've done something wrong or have committed an act of bad faith—the author provides them with at least the opportunity for change. Many take a half step in that direction, but for most of them renewal proves largely elusive. In its place, the characters learn the value of persistence. Simply put: they carry on. A potent example of this is seen in one fable-like story, "Bluebonnet Swamp," in which a suffering widower follows a mysterious woman into a murky bog he's never seen before. Removed from his everyday world, he's shown an escaped python that serves to teach him a valuable lesson. The woman explains, "The great trick to a snake's life…is to absorb enough daylight to survive the night." Here, as he does so often throughout the book, Horack distorts a firmly established religious symbol in order to make it more complicated—and ultimately more relevant—to his characters. For people who themselves are flawed, survival gives them one more opportunity to keep striving: one more chance to twist between their true natures and what natures they're still hoping to claim.

Jonathan Liebson is the author of the novel A Body at Rest *(2010). He teaches at The New School and NYU, and his writing and photographs can be seen at http://www.jonathanliebson.com.*