

Gallatin Canyon: Stories

Thomas McGuane

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Reviewed by Ken Egan

Thomas McGuane's characters seek a last chance, a reformation, a reconstruction, a transformation. Through measures desperate and modest, they attempt to reimagine themselves one last time, to reconceive their status, their identity, their meaning. And time and again, those efforts are thwarted, especially when the characters journey to the Big Sky. Montana is the place where desire meets its check, its limit, its defeat.

McGuane has long been the poet of the absurd, able to locate the reader in a perfectly plausible situation that somehow explodes in hilarious incongruity. He's working the same vein in this short story collection, for as one character says to another, seemingly describing the writer himself, "You probably get off watching people make mistakes" (49). But here McGuane's narrators seem far kinder in representing the longing for change. Unlike, say, *Nobody's Angel*, this collection grants the hapless and haphazard characters a modicum of dignity in their defeats. The dominant tone might be called "McGuane melancholia," a recognition of the human need for self-respect and

acknowledgment, combined with an assured knowledge that such needs will ultimately come to naught. The reader is likely to feel both amused and uncomfortable witnessing these occasions of defeat, for of course, we're implicated in the action—we share these characters' impulses and needs.

McGuane's style has probably never been more exquisite. He has an eye and ear for the classical line, a genius for epigrammatic phrasing. He's able to summon an entire web of implications in pithy sentences: "The air was so clear that [the clouds'] shadows appeared like birthmarks on the grass hillsides" (53). And in another self-referential moment, McGuane's narrator remarks, "Few facts came my way that could not be magnified" (39). At times the writer allows himself a fuller riff, an opportunity to let the lyric potential of the English language override a concern for immediate sense-making. "The Refugee," a longish sea tale that falls somewhere between Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" and Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* in philosophy and style, provides an extended, mesmerizing account of the anti-hero's riding out a Caribbean storm in a small yawl. At moments such as this McGuane hovers on the suggestion, the possibility that the brilliant human voice, articulating the microprocesses of survival against the elements, can save us from our meager selves. But the story's ending (not to be given away) discourages even that hope for our salvaged dignity. A surprising

number of these stories insinuate a karmic justice, punishment for acts of indifference or cruelty, though retribution seems more the work of writerly wit than cosmic law.

At the same time, McGuane is a clever ventriloquist, able to inhabit diverse worlds and idiosyncratic languages. If in “Cowboy” he takes on the voice of an aging con converted into a cowboy by an irascible brother and sister act, in the title story he enters into the first-person perspective of a middle-aged realtor who tries and fails to win a woman with a macho driving trick. We journey also into the creeping madness of a scion to a banking manager, the hapless romanticism of a retiree who leaves Boston for Montana (only to be bested by a paraplegic ex-son-in-law), and the rueful restlessness of a lawyer who retreats to Montana to heal from his bouts of global injustice. This last character—John Briggs—seems especially close to the writer, both in his canny sense of his own foibles and his deep connection to the Montana landscape. In one of the few moments of intellectual and spiritual epiphany, Briggs demands that a visitor pay attention to the wonder of a homesteader graveyard, an original fragment of the Old West: “. . . please try to

get something out of these beautiful surroundings” (55).

And that demand summarizes McGuane’s take on Montana as a whole: while the landscape is spectacular, the culture is paltry. Make no mistake, this is very much a postmodern, media-driven culture. Characters repeatedly cast themselves in roles imagined for them by popular culture, whether cowboy, crazed killer, or aging Lothario. And the material artifacts comprise a repository of the cheap, cast-off toys of American manufacture. Montana cannot provide a simple escape from the simulated life of mass culture. McGuane’s sardonic view of this contemporary malaise has taken on a global cast here, as a farmer’s market displays goods from around the world and John Briggs participates in complex legal negotiations all over the planet. Lurking latent in the text is a deep romanticism that McGuane will not quite allow to declare itself. If only we could turn to the land, enter into an original relation outside the categories of selfhood inculcated by television and the Internet, we might just realize joy. But the satirist conquers the romantic with his sure, deadly accurate eye. We are often fools for love, of ourselves and others, and we cannot transcend the ludicrous means handed us by a dispiriting fake culture.