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CORMAC MCCARTHY'S LAST NOVEL

EPIC, LYRIC, GOTHIC, CRYPTIC, APOCALYPTIC—each of these terms applies to Cormac McCarthy's last novel, *The Passenger* (2022). Although the title refers to a missing passenger aboard a small aircraft that has plunged mysteriously into the waters off the coast of Pass Christian, Mississippi, it may also refer to the novel's protagonist, Bobby Western, who passes through ordeals and ideals in McCarthy's fraught world of fiction. At the end of his own life, the novelist is also a passenger who composes scenes of death and afterlife, and ultimately the reader is a passenger in the vehicle of this book, which traverses the Deep American South through music and mathematics, physics and metaphysics.

Although most of the novel is devoted to Bobby, his younger sister Alicia takes up the subplot, which is demarcated by italics that surrealistically sketch her life after death. Her state of limbo is portrayed through dialogue with the "Kid," a thalidomide creature with flappers for fingers. Alicia's wonderland is Beckett-like in its absurdist dialogue, but before we get to that stage, we encounter an opening paragraph that describes her death lyrically through the author's hallmark biblical style. The frozen flux of his prose appears in the first sentence with its elegiac cadences and parataxis that moves away from Hemingway's compact syntax toward biblical amplitude: "It had snowed lightly in the night and her frozen hair was gold and crystalline and her eyes were frozen cold and hard as stones." Colours surrounding her corpse add to the macabre atmosphere entrenched in the first simile comparing her hands "like those of certain ecumenical statues whose attitude asks that their history be considered." Already a monument in the Wisconsin wilderness, Alicia's body requires consideration beyond itself: "That the deep foundation of the world be considered where it has its being in the sorrow of her creatures." All co-passengers accompany her to a Dantesque underworld.

The focus abruptly shifts to the mysterious hunter who comes across

her body in a hypnotic religious ceremony: "The hunter knelt and stogged his rifle upright in the snow beside him and took off his gloves and let them fall and folded his hands one upon the other." The author's devotion to detail—fallen gloves versus fallen boot, his folded hands juxtaposed with her hands folded outward—cements the ceremony, even though there is "no prayer for such a thing." All he can say is "Tower of Ivory . . . House of Gold." Death and discovery are "in the scrupulous desolation" of McCarthy's territory: "On this Christmas Day. This cold and barely spoken Christmas Day."

After this sounded silence the narrative abruptly changes to dialogue between Alicia and the manic and mannered speech patterns of the Kid, whose gesturing flippers contrast with the hands of the hunter. This particular dramatic scene is set in Chicago in the last year of Alicia's life. The stichomythia of their dialogue contrasts sharply with McCarthy's prose of compound sentences, yet the repetitions and echoing in questions and answers act not only to change the pace but to reinforce the urgency of Alicia's last desperate moments. McCarthy's writing is simultaneously compact and expansive, as he eschews commas, quotations marks, and apostrophes in his poetic thrusts across the novel's vast canvas. Alicia is a genius in mathematics, while the Kid is an "ectromelic hallucination," a "spectral operator," a dybbuk, and an eidolon. Mathematical enigmas are part of the overall mysteries in plot and character, while the medical term "ectromelic" refers not just to the birth defect in thalidomides but to truncated themes and forms in the novel.

The final paragraph of this opening Alicia segment serves as a transition to Bobby's main plot: "She slept and sleeping she dreamt that she was running after a train with her brother." Alicia's oneiric, hallucinatory story runs into her brother's, and their tracks are parallel and biblical: "We were holding hands and we were running and then I woke and it was day." The novel poses the question of who is running after whom—that is, who is the passenger in the quest for meaning. Plot and subplot are interwoven, even as *The Passenger* becomes intertextual with its companion novel, *Stella Maris* (2022), which consists entirely of a dialogue between Alicia and her psychiatrist, Dr. Cohen—a dialogue far different from the one between her and the Kid. Daylight is never bright in McCarthy's purview, and the beginning of the main narration is no exception, as we watch Bobby: "He sat wrapped in one of the gray rescue blankets. . . . The dark sea lapped about." Homeric and biblical in its epic scope, *The Passenger* follows the odyssey of Bobby

on land and under water. An everyman of the American South, Bobby is also an Occidentalist who bears the responsibility of his father's role, alongside Robert Oppenheimer, in the development of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. The unwitting sins of his father are visited upon him and his sister.

Bobby is also wrapped in an atmosphere of mystery that suffuses the opening paragraph with its description of the Coast Guard's running lights nearby and the lights of trucks along the causeway from New Orleans to Biloxi and Mobile in the distance. If these lights pierce the darkness, Mozart's violin concerto playing on the tape deck lends additional mystery to the surrounding darkness and heat. Moreover, it is a reminder of Alicia's engagement with the violin throughout *Stella Maris* (star of the sea) and the overall role of music in the contrapuntal rhythms of this novelistic duology. Harmony and horizontal expanse of suggestiveness are matched by vertical lighting effects: "The tender was lying on his elbows with the headset on watching the dark water beneath them. From time to time the sea would flare with a soft sulphurous light where forty feet down Oiler was working with the cuttingtorch." Indeed, the two opening paragraphs seem to echo Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) in its atmospheric play of light and the hint of a menacing undercurrent beneath the surface, as Bobby "watched the lights moving along the causeway like the slow cellular crawl of raindrops on a wire." Cellular and celestial, *The Passenger* traverses the American heartland and heartbeat.

This languorous and lyrical description turns to clipped dialogue between Bobby and the tender, Gary Campbell, before he descends into the depths to examine the dead bodies in the airplane. The dramatic effect of the dialogue and the description of lights "strobing faintly, where they passed behind the concrete balusters" insinuates itself throughout *The Passenger* with its highlights that are in themselves ghostly passengers in the narrative. Through a pool of light Bobby examines the drowned aircraft: "The people sitting in their seats, their hair floating. Their mouths were open, their eyes devoid of speculation." Ghoulish as this scene may seem, the bodies of these passengers are less important than the unresolved mystery of their deaths. In other words, the crime is less important than the nature of death itself in all its manifestations.

From the waters of the Gulf Coast, the narrative shifts to New Orleans, where a Joycean rhythm captures a riverine flow: "Coming downriver an

antique schooner running under bare poles. Black hull, gold plimsoll. Passing under the bridge and down along the gray riverfront. Phantom of grace. Past warehouse and pier, the tall gantry cranes." In McCarthy's view, these cranes carry the weight of the world as well as the gravity of grace, and this spectral vision is "[s]omething out of another time" or "[f]amiliars out of another life." Thus begin many tales of deformation and defamiliarization. In this way, *The Passenger* travels a great distance beyond American regionalism toward universal truths and destinies. Timeless and of another time, it belongs to another world.

In the next Alicia interlude the Kid gives directions: "The first thing is to locate the narrative line. . . . Start splicing your episodes." In other words, in the duology of companion novels filled with the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and mathematics of Kurt Gödel, the reader must adjust to fiction's strange loops of braided narration. The Kid continues in the role of fool or jester, offering commentaries of truth: "The question is always going to be the same question. We're talking infinite degrees of freedom here so you can always rotate it and make it look different but it aint different." Stealing sentences from Alicia's diary, the Kid pontificates in dialogic fashion that evokes Franz Kafka's diaries, Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" (1871), and Samuel Beckett's plays. As well, his words serve as guideposts to unreliable narration: "To the seasoned traveler a destination is at best a rumor. . . . The real issue is that every line is a broken line. You retrace your steps and nothing is familiar." He concludes his speech in the manner of a M. C. Escher etching that loops the void: "Every wordline is discrete and the caesura ford a void that is bottomless. Every step traverses death." The Kid can step from nonsense to the depths of philosophy, while McCarthy avoids commas and other stops of a caesura in his carnivalesque and grotesque juggling of highbrow and lowbrow.

The unique rhythm of *The Passenger* continues immediately after the Kid's stage directions, "Places" (in a placeless world), to the main narrative that chronicles Bobby in New Orleans: "He walked down to the French Market in the morning and got the paper and sat on the terrace in the cool sun and drank hot coffee with milk." This nod to Ernest Hemingway—yet another passenger—befits Bobby's visit to Belle Chasse to discuss newspapers and the fact that the plane crash doesn't appear in any of them. In search of clues for the missing passenger Bobby circles islands in a boat and finds tracks in the sand. Bobby's quest is primordial: "He picked up a piece

of parchment colored driftwood in the shape of a pale homunculus. . . . He could be the first person in creation. Or the last." A solitary seeker in a bleak landscape, Bobby concludes that "the man who'd gone ashore on the island was almost certainly the passenger." The passenger is the missing part of the protagonist—whether physicist, racing car driver, brother, or son.

Bobby lunches with Debussy Fields in a glamorous scene that contrasts with earlier starkness, yet even in the midst of extravagance she references more ancient times: "I want to be as old as I can be. Atavistically feminine." A transgender woman, Debussy is one of Bobby's closest friends, and her name suggests some of the novel's impressionism and joins the list of composers in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*. Shortly after the Debussy dialogue, Bobby seeks the help of a private eye by the name of Kline, and their carnivalesque conversation is timed both for the detective's fees and for dialogic pacing. Where Debussy is extroverted and a homonym for comedian W. C. Fields, Kline is more circumspect, as befits his investigations. McCarthy sets up Kline for the limitations of detective work and for some comic relief in the otherwise grave novel. When Bobby enters Kline's office, he notes that "[t]here was a parrot in a cage in the corner of the room," which "crouched and studied him and then raised one foot and scratched the back of its head." Kline inherited this bird from his grandfather, who ran a carnival, and like his grandfather's clock it hasn't spoken since his death. Deaf and mute, the parrot stands as a metonym not just for Kline but for the entire hermeneutic process of investigating the novel, whose mystery remains unsolved.

Born in Montreal to a family of Bavarian immigrants, Kline stands in contrast not only to Debussy but also to Dr. Cohen, the psychiatrist in *Stella Maris*, who is also a "close listener." Kline asks Bobby the meaning of gluon, "the exchange particle in quark interactions," which reflects the essence of McCarthy's dialogue and duology. Just before Bobby's second encounter with Kline, the narrator recalls the Thalidomide Kid and his Minstrel Show, which act as a counterpoint to Kline's carnival. "Like Debussy, Kline took his wine seriously." The covers of the two novels also form a Klein bottle with their inverted versions of a blood meridian split with a drowned, masklike face.

The Passenger ends with Bobby holed up in a windmill in Spain in a tilt back to *Don Quixote* (1605-1615). He is "the last pagan on earth" surrounded by shadows "of lands unknown alike to men or to their Gods." He

cups his hands to the unknown in a gesture similar to Alicia's desire for Dr. Cohen to hold her hand "because that's what people do when they're waiting for the end of something." The two novels loop incestuously, as Alicia tells her psychiatrist the meaning of "The Prestige" during acts of magic. *The Passenger* is prestigious in McCarthy's valedictory sleight of hand that opens with Mozart's *Violin Concerto No. 2 in D Major* (1775) and concludes with the equivalent of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9 in D Minor* (1824). His odes of joy and melancholy summon strings, winds, brass, and percussion in chords that echo King Lear's pathetic fallacy. From the crescendo "where the cold sidereal sea breaks and seethes and the storms howl in from out of that black and heaving alkahest" to the diminuendo "singing softly upon his pallet in an unknown tongue," McCarthy masters the firmament's resonance.