

Afterword: to the Happy Few

Hope, ye unhappy ones; ye happy ones, fear.

—Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*

I began *Devil Dancer* in the summer of 1980 in Maro, a small, cliff-side pueblo whose whitewashed houses were surrounded on three sides by green fields instead of the high-rise eyesores that dominated the Costa del Sol. At the tip of the town stood the Casa Grande, upon whose patio Raquel Welch once parachuted in *Fathom*, a shallow movie memorable for her contours and some shots of the spectacular coast. Maro's unspoiled state was due to a feudal anomaly: the aristocratic family that owned the place had banned any development. My upstairs apartment on Calle Maravillas (Street of Marvels) overlooked the Mediterranean. Every day the water was a different blue.

In the mornings I awoke to a perturbed rooster and the bleating of goats being led out to graze, their low-slung udders tolling from side to side and each with a long rope trailing from one foreleg. A relentless sun beat down and everyone who could remained inside, but invariably I would see one woman, and only one, whitewashing her house. Apparently the single bucket and brush in town had to be kept in constant use. In the fields a bare-chested man shoveled manure from large mat baskets drooping from his weary horse, while a few women in black swept the streets with straw brooms. For lunch my favorite bar was El Guapo, whose handsome owner asked if I had noticed that all the residents had similar faces. "Todo el mundo son parientes," he explained, we're all related. Since I always ordered red wine, his apt name for me was Señor Tinto.

At the time I saw *Devil Dancer* as part one of a trilogy entitled *Forbidden Voices*. The other volumes, *Lily's Song* and *Tom's Lament*, would be based on Lexington's most notorious unsolved murder, the Betty Gail Brown case, involving a Transylvania coed found strangled with

her bra in her car parked in front of Old Morrison, the centerpiece of the campus and tomb of Rafinesque, a professor who had left his curse upon the college. But that's another story. The immediate challenge was to create a novel about a middle-aged detective who, while investigating the shooting of a thoroughbred, wandered into a labyrinth. My recipe for the novel: pour heartache through a typewriter repeatedly until it comes out poetry. Or, as one old pro put it: Writing is easy, you simply stare at the blank page until blood drops form on your forehead. Above all, I wanted my words to evoke a world that I remembered—Lexington, circa 1972—which, protected by no edict against development, was rapidly disappearing. I would type a page, proof it, then walk the room, a rolled *Newsweek* in hand, swatting flies and an occasional wasp.

In the afternoon I might put on my swimming trunks and walk down to the beach. The narrow path began at the ruins of a 16th century sugar works and descended along ledges lined with cactus-like plants. Quick green lizards scooted past my feet, rattling the dry leaves and setting my heart aflutter. The beach, edged with bamboo shoots, might as well have been in Tahiti. I saw two topless German girls jumping waves and a masked man rise from the surf with an octopus on a spear, but mostly I had the sand to myself. It was so secluded a movie crew had shot a scene there, leaving a tangled snake's nest of film behind. One day, a copy of *The Portable Joyce* in my pocket, I followed goat trails to a Moorish watchtower on a nearby cliff. The slippery slope of sharp, loose stones and nasty shrubs cut hieroglyphics in my arms and legs. The view was magnificent. I dreamed of constructing a house there, with my own Martello tower as writer's studio. Another time I hiked up the mountainside behind town to visit a cave, discovered by five boys in 1959, where Neolithic people had left ochre hand prints on the walls.

In the evenings I took a bus to Nerja for dinner then watched the tourists stroll up and down the famed Balcony of Europe that extended over the water. Some nights the four kilometer uphill hike back to Maro was utterly beautiful. A half-moon, brushed by dark-grey clouds, cast just enough light to reflect off the water in the Águila Adqueduct and design the sea in intricate patterns of pale moon shine and purple shade. A light breeze rustled the sugarcane stalks by the road, my feet kicked up chalky puffs of dust, and my only guide in the dark was the bright new streetlights of my summer home.

After sundown, Maro came alive. Following a meal at about ten, the women placed chairs outside their doorways and in loud, throaty voices kept up a constant commentary across the streets to each other. The men whittled sticks or gathered in bars and debated crops and politics. On hot nights the children played in the street past midnight, while young girls linked arms to sashay by the boys and laugh at their remarks. The nightly clamor was so intense I surmised that the windows of the houses lacked panes because the shrieks of the children would have shattered the glass. One little girl with a horn proudly walked the streets tooting it intermittently to the delight of all—with the single exception of an American who wanted to sleep.

I had assumed that I was the only foreigner in Maro, but one afternoon shortly before I had to depart, I was summoned to a house on another street where a drunken Dansker had passed out naked on his patio. The pitiless sun had seared his skin the color of broiled lobster and his ravaged bedroom made mine look clean in comparison. Since he spoke no English, my services were not needed. I left when the doctor arrived and never learned what happened to him. The diagnosis could not have been good. His plight, Señor Tinto decided, was a cautionary tale worth heeding.

My first teaching job had been at Kenyon, a college noted for producing writers. I lived on the second floor of the old John Crowe Ransom house, where Randall Jarrell and Robert Lowell once had bedrooms. At Ransom's eightieth birthday party I met a dozen famous authors, not to mention those who stopped by *The Kenyon Review* office. Encouraged by visiting poets Toby Olson and Paul Blackburn, I dropped the idea of being a literary critic and began writing and publishing poems. This, I learned to my grief, was an unlikely way to get tenure. After two years at Kenyon, and five each at Transylvania and Vassar, I was fortunate enough to receive a Fulbright to teach American literature at the University of Seville.

I had come alone to Spain in despair over my failed relationships and diminishing prospects. The shelf life of a vagabond professor with shoulder-length hair who had published only poems and book reviews was limited. After my summer in Maro, I returned to the heart of the old city, Barrio de Santa Cruz, on a dead end alley named Consuelo (consolation), where I had rented a room from a taxi driver named Santos and his California wife Barbara. The theater had died in Seville, my friend Rafael told me, because the drama was in the streets. April was a continual Fiesta: processions of candle-lit floats featuring Jesus and Mary during Semana Santa, followed by Feria, a week-long party of riding in horse-drawn carriages and dancing *sevillanas*, capped by Rocío, a holiday blending religious ceremonies with festive celebrations. As enthralling as these spectacles were, I found the happenings outside my door more fascinating. In truth, the rain in Spain does not fall mainly on the plain but in the mountains, while the country's pain, seen daily in the streets, made a mockery of my own troubles. I was an American, and the first time a gypsy woman held out her hand to me I shook it. Watch your wallet, I learned, never look a beggar in the eye. I recall seeing a small boy, in an effort to generate more coins, show his sister how to expose one bare foot from beneath a shawl full

of holes and then slap her to make her cry. In the evenings when I went tappa-hopping along Sierpes, the serpentine street through the old city, the crippled woman who sold lottery tickets on the baby Jesus would cry out "Niño! Niño!" while the silent blind man beside her tapped his stick and an old soldier propped his crutches against the wall to take a piss. Once I saw a man dressed in white playing a fiddle, a bagpipe under his arm, a drum on his back, who waggled his foot in a way that made a puppet dance beside him and play a fiddle too. When I tossed pesetas in the fiddle case, the puppet smiled.

The university occupied an eighteenth-century tobacco factory, where once upon a time a Navarrese soldier met a tempestuous gypsy named Carmen with a penchant for matadors. The fortress-like structure took up an entire block and was protected by a brick wall, moat, drawbridge, and sentry boxes. On my way to class one day I had no choice but to join a protest march that packed the street. We were brought to an abrupt halt in front of the university by a formation of Spanish troops, who fired teargas. A strong wind carried several high-arching canisters onto the grounds of the five-star Alfonso XIII hotel. I clung to the wall to avoid the retreating protestors, whose cause I never learned. My colleagues yelled from a window to get inside, which I did when I could. It was the Sixties all over again. My job was to expose English majors to my Ohio accent while leading discussions of American authors. The light teaching load enabled me to sustain the concentration essential to compose a novel. As a result, on December 14, 1980, I finished a 286-page draft of *Devil Dancer*. I knew I still faced revision after revision. Little did I realize what a long, arduous a process that would be.

On February 23, 1981, I went to teach my evening class and found the huge university building completely dark and all the doors locked. Baffled, I stopped at my local bar, where the owner shrugged and said, "Adiós, democracia." Patriotic music blared from

every radio. Barbara and Santos turned on the television for the nine o'clock news. Instead a Bob Hope pirate movie came on, which, under the circumstances, was deeply disconcerting. What was happening? Later we learned that there had been a coup. A small band of soldiers led by a Colonel Tejero had taken over las Cortes and held the legislators hostage. When King Juan Carlos I adamantly opposed the coup, however, key generals had second thoughts and did not deploy their troops in the major cities. By morning the democracy that had replaced Franco's dictatorship at his death was safe. The next day I returned to my bar and was offered a *Tejerito*, a newly concocted drink from a bottle with a cork carved like the face of the disgraced colonel. Unbeknownst to the conspirators, las Cortes had cameras. We watched replays for a week. Everyone agreed that Colonel Tejero and his duped crew had behaved very badly and that if you were going to conduct a coup this was not the proper way to do it.

During two years in Spain my personal life took a turn for the better—much more than I could have imagined. "As the need is sorest," Lotte Lenya sang in *The Threepenny Opera*, "so the answer comes soonest." In December of 1979, I met Roser (pronounced rosé like the wine) at a conference in Santiago de Compostela, the end of the road for many a pilgrim. She taught English literature at the University of Barcelona. We began corresponding and I went to see her several times. "You are big boys, really, you American men," she once said, but then one day added, "I love you just a lot." Before my summer in Maro, we had spent two weeks at Saffron Walden, a picturesque English village where a few stone cottages had steeply pitched roofs of thatch, the village green sported a maze, and we walked arm in arm through the streets of the town in love with architecture. One evening a drunk grabbed my jacket, fixed me with a bleary eye, and talked about how Harry Truman in the Great War was a man tough enough to do whatever was

necessary. "But now you've got a softie, 'aven't you?" he asserted smugly, referring to President Carter and the hostage crisis in Iran. I pushed him aside but not before he stroked, in parting, Roser's bare arm. London had changed since last I saw it. Men in bowler hats with umbrellas under their arms had been superseded by young punks in black boots, tie-dyed jeans, and Mohawks of purple hair, who leaned out the windows of the speeding train and spat at each other. Thankfully that ugly episode was followed by a high tea of scones with clotted cream at Stratford on Avon.

The summer after Maro, I stayed with Roser and her parents at Vilanova i la Geltrú, a coastal town thirty miles south of Barcelona. We were married that July, honeymooned in Granada, and began our new life in Frederick, Maryland. About this time *The New Yorker* came out with a cartoon of a happy couple in bed clicking flutes of champagne and the caption read: "To Senator Fulbright!" I had found a job at Mount Saint Mary's University, where I would teach American literature and retire as a professor emeritus. Roser still teaches Spanish at Hood College in Frederick and publishes novels in her native Catalan. I continued to revise my manuscript and sought the advice of authors I respected at Bread Loaf, a mountain-top retreat for people in love with words. "Every time this guy opens his mouth," Stanley Elkin said of my old pickpocket Conor, "he signs his name." John Gardner generously offered to read *Devil Dancer* but died in a motorcycle crash shortly after the conference.

In the fall of 1985, Ruth Cantor agreed to represent *Devil Dancer*. In my naiveté I assumed that if a novel had an agent publication was assured, a movie version to follow. I should have looked more closely at her savvy words, which I quote in her memory: "Lots of interior action, lots of brutal insights into the human condition. . . . It's awfully good despite a very poor market outlook and I'd be willing to try it. There may be some market somewhere still for high literary quality, but after thirty plus years in the business, I'm

inclined to be wholly cynical about that." To her credit, she found several editors who praised the book's sense of place, gritty realism, poetic language, unorthodox play on the genre: "It's the story of a goodhearted but slightly ineffectual detective," one said, "who learns more about himself as the book goes on than the case he's trying to solve." I was a talented writer, editors agreed, but they all rejected *Devil Dancer*: "Despite the resonance of the prose, I think _____ would still have a tough time publishing this as successfully as either you or we might wish."

Having a first novel rejected is a common fate. Like many a writer I buried my manuscript in a drawer. A pile of rejection slips did not enhance my dossier, however, while publishing essays on classic American authors did, and I was awarded tenure. Afterwards, I spent ten years working on a novel about the civil rights movement in Mississippi, *The Children Bob Moses Led* (Milkweed Editions 1995). Then something strange happened: three non-fiction books appeared that revived my interest in *Devil Dancer* and made my novel seem prophetic. Sally Denton's true crime account of drug-running in the 1980s by the scion of a prominent thoroughbred family, *The Bluegrass Conspiracy*, featured a few of the people I had drawn on for my characters. One, for example, lived with a cocaine dealer, turned FBI informant, and disappeared into the witness protection program. Lush horse farms and seedy dives described in my novel reappeared as settings for Denton's exposé of Kentucky corruption. *Wild Ride*, by Ann Auerbach, explained how the suspicious death of Alydar in 1990 brought down the famed Calumet Farm. Finally, Ken Engle's *Hot Blood* detailed a plot by a few financially strapped owners to hire an assassin called the Sandman to make the murder of their race horses look accidental so that they could collect the insurance. These books goaded me to re-work *Devil Dancer*, adding chapters on the money involved in stud fees (my novel takes place shortly before Secretariat sent prices through the roof) and

a possible extortion racket. To gather more information, I made excursions to Lexington and Newport, Kentucky, and returned to my birthplace, Youngstown, Ohio, a mobbed-up city when I was a boy notorious for its gangland bombings, to research the Mafia.

Long story short: Simon Lipskar at The Writer's House submitted the improved version of *Devil Dancer*. Literary editors said it was a crime novel, crime fiction editors said it was too literary. Their consensus: he certainly can write, thanks but no thanks, manuscript is being returned under separate cover. One revived my dreams of a film: "Thoroughly researched, very textured, very authentic.... Novel has great cinematic potential, just calls out to be turned into a screen play."

For the next decade I focused all my energies on writing a novel grounded in the authentic history of the Ohio Valley frontier, 1770-1812: *Blacksnake's Path: The True Adventures of William Wells* (Heritage Books, 2008). Since I had already done the research, my agent Michele Rubin said that I ought to write the biography. I was reluctant to repeat myself, but I took her advice and completed *William Wells and the Struggle for the Old Northwest*. Michele also suggested that I revise *Devil Dancer*, bringing the murdered race horse alive so we care about his death, enhancing Wendell's motivation to solve the crime, and showing how his genuine sympathy encouraged people to confide in him. In addition I made countless changes to tighten the prose and sharpen the focus. As the surgeon said: when in doubt, cut it out. Call me Mack the Knife. I have always seen *Devil Dancer* as a noir novel in the Raymond Chandler tradition. I'm no fan of crime fiction in general, but I admire such works as George V. Higgins' *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*, for its expertise on how criminals talk and operate, and John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, in which Savannah is the true subject of the book and "who done it" of secondary importance. While Michele was

submitting *Devil Dancer*, Jaimy Gordon's *Lord of Misrule*, a novel that evokes the same sleazy side of the horse racing world as mine, won the National Book Award.

I have put much of what I learned during the five years I lived in Lexington into *Devil Dancer*. The book is comprised of stories within the story and is distinguished, I think, by a series of distinctive voices that evoke personal worlds: Conor's pickpockets, Brad Davis's big-time horse racing, Julian's Vietnam veterans, Betty's poor Kentucky coal miners, Grady's small-time crooks and homeless men, Caprice's Newport and the Mafia, are all authentic. I even once knew an old alcoholic whose throat was slit, not fatally, in the Mecca Bar. While he was telling me the tale he peed his pants.

Devil Dancer owes a direct debt to three Kentucky authors: Ed McClanahan's inspired essay in *Famous People I Have Known* brought me to Boots Bar to see Little Enis perform. David Maurer's *The Whiz Mob* provided the argot of pickpockets and Hank Messick's *Razzle-Dazzle* related how Newport was once Kentucky's Las Vegas. Finally, my debt to Roser, as I trust this memoir has made clear, is beyond words.

Over the decades, as I persistently revised *Devil Dancer*, I drew strength from the example of Thoreau, who, after *Walden* was initially rejected, worked on the manuscript for years, until each sentence sang. My novel was now a far better book than the draft I completed in Spain, but in the meantime conglomerates had bought up the New York publishing houses and the bottom line trumped all poetic ones. Serious mid-list authors were shunted aside as the plot-driven blockbuster express sped by carrying nothing that mattered to no place of importance. As for me, I preferred the local stops. In a final ironic twist, after *Devil Dancer* was at last accepted, the publisher suddenly decided that it contained "too much bitterness" and asked me to brighten up its dark vision of life. I refused and returned the contract unsigned. Fortunately ("as the need is

sores..."), Hope Maxwell-Snyder and Somondoco Press came to the rescue. For this relief, much thanks. Since its inception I have believed steadfastly that *Devil Dancer* deserved to be in print. If you have stuck around for this account of the book's prolonged genesis, then I hope that you liked it as well. Welcome, as Stendhal hailed his dedicated band of readers, to the happy few.