LITERARY DOSSIER

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Beautiful as
the poison lilies
of the swamp

CARSON MAcCULLERS 2027

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AIDA
ASSOCIACIÓ INTERNACIONAL DUANA DE LES ARTS

1. THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER

‘It about Willie.’

‘I know.’ He rolled the cigarette gingerly between his palms. His eyes glanced recklessly about him, greedy for the last sweet pleasures.

‘Once I mentioned to you this here Buster Johnson were at the prison with Willie. Us knowed him before. He were sent home yestiddy.’

‘So?’

‘Buster been crippled for life.’

His head quavered. He pressed his hand to his chin to steady himself, but the obstinate trembling was difficult to control.

‘Last night these here friends come round to my house and say that Buster were home and had something to tell me about Willie. I run all the way and this here is what he said. ‘

‘Yes.’

‘There were three of them. Willie and Buster and this other boy. They were friends. Then this here trouble come up.’

Portia halted. She wet her finger with her tongue and then moistened her dry lips with her finger.

‘It were something to do with the way this here white guard picked on them all the time. They were out on roadwork one day and Buster he sassed back and then the other boy he try to run off in the woods. They taken all three of them. They taken all three of them to the camp and put them in this here ice-cold room.’

He said yes again. But his head quavered and the word sounded like a rattle in his throat.

‘It were about six weeks ago,’ Portia said. ‘You remember that cold spell then. They put Willie and them boys in this room like ice.’

Portia spoke in a low voice, and she neither paused between words nor did the grief in her face soften. It was like a low song. She spoke and he could not understand. The sounds were distinct in his ear but they had no shape or meaning. It was as though his head were the prow of a boat and the sounds were water that broke on him and then flowed past. He felt he had to look behind to find the words already said.

‘… and their feets swolled up and they lay there and struggle on the floor and holler out. And nobody come. They hollered there for three days and three nights and nobody come.’

‘I am deaf,’ said Doctor Copeland. ‘I cannot understand.’

‘They put our Willie and them boys in this here ice-cold room. There were a rope hanging down from the ceiling. They taken their shoes off and tied their bare feets to this rope. Willie and them boys lay there with their backs on the floor and their feets in the air. And their, feets swolled up and they struggle on the floor and holler out. It were ice-cold in the room and their feets froze. Their feets swolled up and they hollered for three nights and three days. And nobody come.’

Doctor Copeland pressed his head with his hands, but still the steady trembling would not stop.

‘I cannot hear what you say.’

‘Then at last they come to get them. They quickly taken Willie and them boys to the sick ward and their legs were all swolled and froze. Gangrene. They sawed off both our Willie’s feet. Buster Johnson lost one foot and the other boy got well. But our Willie –he crippled for life now. Both his feet sawed off.’

The words were finished and Portia leaned over and struck her head upon the table. She did not cry or moan, but she struck her head again and again on the hard-scrubbed top of the table. The bowl and spoon rattled and he removed them to the sink. The words were scattered in his mind, but he did not try to assemble them. He scalded the bowl and spoon and washed out the dish-towel. He picked up something from the floor and put it somewhere.

‘Crippled?’ he asked. ‘William?’

(Carson McCullers. *The heart is a lonely hunter*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940. Part II, *Ch*. 10)

2. REFLECTIONS IN A GOLDEN EYE

The Captain stood in the doorway and was noticed neither by his wife nor his servant. When she had been relieved of her boots, Mrs Penderton moved about the kitchen barefooted. She took a ham from the oven and sprinkled the top with brown sugar and bread crumbs. She poured herself another drink, only half a jigger this time, and in a sudden excess of vigour she performed a little shag dance. The Captain was intensely irritated with his wife and she knew it.

'For God's sake, Leonora, go up and put on some shoes.'

For an answer Mrs Penderton hummed a queer little tune to herself and went past the Captain and into the living-room. Her husband followed close behind her.

'You look like a slattern going around the house like this.'

A fire was laid in the grate and Mrs Penderton bent down to light it. Her smooth sweet face was very rosy and there were little glistening sweat beads on her upper lip.

'The Langdons are coming any minute now and you will sit down to dinner like this, I suppose?'

'Sure,' she said. 'And why not, you old prissy?'

The Captain said in a cold, taut voice:

'You disgust me.'

Mrs Penderton's answer was a sudden laugh, a laugh both soft and savage, as though she had received some long expected piece of scandalous news or had thought of some sly joke. She pulled off her jersey, crushed it into a ball, and threw it into the corner of the room. Then deliberately she unbuttoned her breeches and stepped out of them. In a moment she was standing naked by the hearth. Before the bright gold and orange light of the fire her body was magnificent. The shoulders were straight so that the collar-bone made a sharp pure line. Between her round breasts there were delicate blue veins. In a few years her body would be full-blown like a rose with loosened petals, but now the soft roundness was controlled and disciplined by sport. Although she stood quite still and placid, there was about her body a subtle quality of vibration, as though on touching her fair flesh one would feel the slow live coursing of the bright blood beneath.

While the Captain looked at her with the stunned indignation of a man who has suffered a slap in the face, she walked serenely to the vestibule on her way to the stairs. The front door was open and from the dark night outside a breeze blew in and lifted a loose strand of her bronze hair.

She was halfway up the steps before the Captain recovered from his shock. Then he ran trembling after her.

‘I will kill you!’ he said in a strangled voice.

‘I will do it! I will do it!’ He crouched with his hand to the banister and one foot on the second step of the stairway as though ready to spring up after her.

She turned slowly and looked down at him with unconcern for a moment before she spoke.

‘Son, have you ever been collared and dragged out in the street and thrashed by a naked woman?’

(Carson McCullers. *Reflections in a golden eye*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941. *Ch*. 1)

3. THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING

"Hold still, Fool," said Berenice. "And lay down that knife."

"And we will meet them. Everybody. We will just walk up to people and know them right away. We will be walking down a dark road and see a lighted house and knock on the door and strangers will rush to meet us and say: Come in! Come in! We will know decorated aviators and New York people and movie stars. We will have thousands of friends, thousands and thousands and thousands of friends. We will belong to so many clubs that we can't even keep track of all of them. We will be members of the whole world. Boyoman! Manoboy!"

Berenice had a very strong long right arm, and when F. Jasmine passed her the next time as she was running around the table, this arm reached out and snatched her by the petticoat so quickly that she was caught up with a jerk that made her bones crack and her teeth rattle.

"Is you gone raving wild?" she asked. The long arm pulled F. Jasmine closer and wrapped around her waist. "You sweating like a mule. Lean down and let me feel your forehead. Is you got a fever?"

F. Jasmine pulled one of Berenice's plaits and pretended she was going to saw it off with the knife.

"You trembling," said Berenice. "I truly believe you took a fever walking around in that sun today. Baby, you sure you ain't sick?

"Sick?" asked F. Jasmine. "Who, me?"

"Set here in my lap," said Berenice. "And rest a minute."

F. Jasmine put the knife on the table and settled down on Berenice's lap. She leaned back and put her face against Berenice’s neck; her face was sweaty and Berenice's neck was sweaty also, and they both smelled salty and sour and sharp. Her right leg was flung across Berenice's knee, and it was trembling but when she steadied her toes on the floor, her leg did not tremble any more. John Henry shuffled toward them in the high-heeled shoes and crowded up jealous and close to Berenice. He put his arm around Berenice's head and held on to her ear. Then after a moment he tried to push F. Jasmine out of her lap, and he pinched F. Jasmine with a mean and tiny little pinch.

"Leave Frankie alone," said Berenice. "She ain't bothered you."

He made a fretting sound:

"I'm sick."

"Now no, you ain't. Be quiet and don't grudge your cousin a little bit of love."

"Old mean bossy Frankie," he complained in a high sad voice.

"What she doing so mean right now? She just laying here wore out."

F. Jasmine rolled her head and rested her face against Berenice's shoulder. She could feel Berenice's soft big ninnas against her back, and her soft wide stomach, her warm solid legs. She had been breathing very fast, but after a minute her breath slowed down so that she breathed in time with Berenice; the two of them were close together as one body, and Berenice's stiffened hands were clasped around F. Jasmine's chest. Their backs were to the window, and before them the kitchen was now almost dark. It was Berenice who finally sighed and started the conclusion of that last queer conversation.

"I think I have a vague idea what you were driving at," she said. "We all of us somehow caught. We born this way or that way and we don't know why. But we caught anyhow. I born Berenice. You born Frankie. John Henry born John Henry. And maybe we wants to widen and bust free. But no matter what we do we still caught. Me is me and you is you and he is he. We each one of us somehow caught all by ourself. Is that what you was trying to say?

"I don't know," F. Jasmine said. "But I don't want to be caught."

"Me neither," said Berenice. "Don't none of us. I'm caught worse than you is."

F. Jasmine understood why she had said this, and it was John Henry who asked in his child voice:

"Why?"

"Because I am black," said Berenice. "Because I am colored. Everybody is caught one way or another. But they done drawn completely extra bounds around all colored people...

(Carson McCullers. *The member of the wedding.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946. Part II, *Ch*. 2)

4. THE BALLAD OF THE SAD CAFE

The town itself is dreary; not much is there except the cotton mill, the two-room houses where the workers live, a few peach trees, a church with two colored windows, and a miserable main street only a hundred yards long. On Saturdays the tenants from the near-by farms come in for a day of talk and trade. Otherwise the town is lonesome, sad, and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world. The nearest train stop is Society City, and the Greyhound and White Bus Lines use the Forks Falls Road which is three miles away. The winters here are short and raw, the summers white with glare and fiery hot.

If you walk along the main street on an August afternoon there is nothing whatsoever to do. The largest building, in the very center of the town, is boarded up completely and leans so far to the right that it seems bound to collapse at any minute. The house is very old. There is about it a curious, cracked look that is very puzzling until you suddenly realize that at one time, and long ago, the right side of the front porch had been painted, and part of the wall — but the painting was left unfinished and one portion of the house is darker and dingier than the other. The building looks completely deserted. Nevertheless, on the second floor there is one window which is not boarded; sometimes in the late afternoon when the heat is at its worst a hand will slowly open the shutter and a face will look down on the town. It is a face like the terrible dim faces known in dreams — sexless and white, with two gray crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief. The face lingers at the window for an hour or so, then the shutters are dosed once more, and as likely as not there will not be another soul to be seen along the main street. These August afternoons — when your shift is finished there is absolutely nothing to do; you might as well walk down to the Forks Falls Road and listen to the chain gang.

However, here in this very town there was once a café. And this old boarded-up house was unlike any other place for many miles around. There were tables with cloths and paper napkins, colored streamers from the electric fans, great gatherings on Saturday nights. The owner of the place was Miss Amelia Evans. But the person most responsible for the success and gaiety of the place was a hunchback called Cousin Lymon. One other person had a part in the story of this café — he was the former husband of Miss Amelia, a terrible character who returned to the town after a long term in the penitentiary, caused ruin, and then went on his way again. The café has long since been closed, but it is still remembered.

(Carson McCullers. *The ballad of the sad cafe*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951)

5. CLOCK WITHOUT HANDS

Jester did not answer for a moment. And when he spoke his voice broke with tension and adolescence. ‘For one thing, I question the justice of white supremacy.’

The challenge was plain as a loaded pistol flung across the table. But the Judge could not accept it; his throat was dry and aching and he swallowed feebly.

‘I know it’s a shock to you, Grandfather. But I had to tell you, otherwise you would have taken it for granite I was like I used to be.’

‘Take it for granted,’ the Judge corrected. ‘Not *granite*. What kind of wild-eyed radicals have you been consorting with?’

‘Nobody. This summer I’ve been very—’ Jester was going to say *I’ve been very lonely*, but he could not bring himself to admit this truth aloud.

‘Well, all I say is, this talk about mixed races and pink mules in the picture are certainly—abnormal.’

The word struck Jester like a blow in the groin and he flushed violently. The pain made him strike back: ‘All my life I have loved you—I even worshipped you, Grandfather. I thought you were the wisest, kindest man on earth. I listened to everything you said like gospel truth. I saved everything in print about you. My scrapbook on you was started as soon as I began to read. I always thought you ought to be—President.’

The Judge ignored the past tense and there was the warmth of self-pride in his veins. A mirrorlike projection reflected his own feelings for his grandson—the fair, unfolding child of his fair doomed son. Love and memory left his heart open and unaware.

‘That time I heard about when that Negro from Cuba was making a talk in the House I was so proud of you. When the other congressmen stood up you sat back farther in your chair, propped your feet up and lighted a cigar. I thought it was wonderful. I was so proud of you. But now I see it differently. It was rude and bad manners. I am ashamed for you when I remember it. When I think back how I used to worship you—’

Jester could not finish, for the distress of the old Judge was obvious. His crippled arm tightened and his hand curled hard and spastic while the elbow joint crooked uncontrollably. The shock of Jester’s words interacted with his disorder so that tears of emotional and physical hurt started. He blew his nose and said after some moments of silence: ‘Far sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child.’

But Jester resented the fact that his grandfather was so vulnerable. ‘But Grandfather, you’ve talked all you want to always. And I have listened and believed. But now that I have a few opinions of my own, you won’t stand for it and start quoting the Bible. That isn’t fair because it automatically puts a person in the wrong.’

‘It’s not the Bible—Shakespeare.’

‘Anyway I’m not your child. I’m your grandson and my father’s child.’

The fan turned in the breathless afternoon and the sun shone on the dining table with the platter of carved chicken and the butter melted in the butter dish. Jester held the cool tea glass to his cheek and fondled it before he spoke.

‘Sometimes I wonder if I’m not beginning to suspect why my father—did what he did.’

(Carson McCullers. *Clock without hands*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961. *Ch*. 2)