

Stephen Gresham

THINGS DARKLY BURIED:
IN PRAISE OF “A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND”

*The ruins of life, darkly buried,
Transform themselves and demand the present. . . .*

— “Country Cemetery,” Herman Hesse

In good fiction, things buried don't remain buried. More precisely than nearly anyone else I've read, Flannery O'Connor knew this, practiced this. It seems to me that she also knew how fate works — that in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” the grandmother's fate does not arrive from the outside but rather emerges from within, from the ruins of her past and her faulty memory. It undergoes the transformation journeys require, and it demands the present: a moment-to-moment futurity in which darkness must arise. Why it must is not explained. I believe it can't be. I have read and studied this astonishing story for more than forty years, and now as a former teacher of Gothic literature and as a writer of commercial horror fiction, I want to identify what continues to stick in my mental filter and what continues to elude me about O'Connor's narrative. When I read it, I find myself in pursuit of the ineffable — that is what good fiction bids — it is what a good fiction writer must commit to. And yet there is more. O'Connor convincingly depicts the modern monster that, along with the vampire, will not stay buried: the malicious stranger. And she accomplishes her feat, as I will suggest, through nearly flawless technique.

From the opening page of this story, I'm carried along by things hidden, buried, unsaid, unsayable. O'Connor puts me in contact with the inscrutable possibilities of detail. It begins when we are not told what The Misfit did to “these people” in Florida. But, of course, we can imagine. We learn further that the grandmother hides Pitty Sing in the backseat, that patrolmen hide themselves behind billboards and informed readers know that most of Stone Mountain is far below the surface of Atlanta, hidden, if you will. We find that Red Sammy's face is out of sight beneath the truck he's working on and that there is a secret panel in the grandmother's house of memory. Things buried complement the effect: for example, we speed by the “old family burying ground” and discover later that The Misfit trio buried their clothes; The Misfit himself was once an undertaker, and, most pointedly, he tells us that in the penitentiary, “I was buried alive.” The litany of the concealed, unseen, unknown, unspoken and the interred goes on and on, adding much, I believe, to the mysterious radiance of this tale.

But the tension truly ratchets up a notch when we find ourselves off the road, accosted by doom. At that point O'Connor employs the technique of "buried action" — violence offstage, handling it as deftly as Chekhov in his plays or as Seneca long before him. In the first instance of this technique, Bailey and his son, John Wesley, are taken beyond the "dark edge" of the woods as the grandmother rambles on and Bailey's wife is silent — speech and meaningful action paralyzed, we assume. Deep in the strained moment, The Misfit's face hidden, we hear one, then a second, pistol shot, and we are left at the mercy of our imagination. This mode of buried action is then repeated a few pages later when Bailey's wife, infant and his daughter, June Star, are also led away. The Misfit, terrifyingly calm, recounts to the grandmother how and why he tried to give himself a new identity. Offstage, there is a "piercing scream" and a shot; we read another exchange of dialogue and then hear two more shots. The horrors are hidden from us, but I find myself orchestrating a scene as brutal and nightmarish as I can withstand. How effective are these moments of "buried action"? I never read them without suddenly becoming aware that I have been holding my breath.

As one who continues to be galvanized by this story, I find that the central fire of O'Connor's technique burns most brightly when the narrative focus shifts to The Misfit and a series of ritualistic, non-verbal moments that arise as if endemic to him. I'll cite several and suggest how, for me, these moments generate a chilling effect. The first of a connected trio occurs just after the grandmother says, "You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?" I would maintain that speech and dialogue are not as significant here as the following description: "The Misfit pointed the toe of his shoe into the ground and made a little hole and then covered it up again." A few lines beyond this tiny and telling burial, The Misfit squats close to the ground and responds to the grandmother's cloying deference by drawing "a little circle in the ground with the butt of his gun." Completing the trio of acts, two pages later, following the grandmother's observation about living a comfortable life free of being pursued, we read, "The Misfit kept scratching in the ground with the butt of his gun as if he were thinking about it." The "it," of course, is calculatedly indefinite. And we find ourselves deep in the realm of the unspeakable.

My surface reaction to each of these moments is to freeze — as I would before a coiled snake — yet beyond the visceral is something more, and I'm pleased to say that I'm not at all certain what. But here's a suggestion. In the course of The Misfit's derelict life, we're told that he's "been most everything," including one who has "plowed Mother Earth." It seems not out of the question that O'Connor is depicting a man often connected to earth, to the haunted ground we all tread, and that possibly at the center of his maliciousness is one seeking identity, a nameless character who wants, desperately needs to find himself, at least ritualistically, in contact with terra firma. It would almost

appear that, Antaeus-like, The Misfit would lose his power were he to locate himself among the clouds and the sun, which are often out of sight as the world of his narrative darkens.

The issue of identity emerges again when Bobby Lee ambles back from the woods “dragging” — not carrying — Bailey’s yellow shirt with its bright blue parrots. The Misfit, desiring, I believe, to acquire some semblance of identity, requests the shirt, ostensibly, in all due modesty, to cover himself. But when he puts on the shirt, I get the distinct impression that this poor, bare, forked animal, this unaccommodated man, has, in contrast to Lear, put on “lendings,” hoping to become one who transcends the roles he’s assumed in the past. I sense that he longs, with his non-verbal act, to circumvent society’s label of him as a criminal or murderer and to transform himself into a man who belongs to himself. Of course, I’ll fully admit that I could be miles off base here: perhaps, in truth, The Misfit is an ironist and pathologically enjoys being a malicious stranger. O’Connor wisely allows that reading.

The final examples of O’Connor’s stunning use of the non-verbal come after the grandmother, misreading that The Misfit is about to cry, touches his shoulder. The inevitable happens, and we are given the following: “Then he put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them.” Notice also that before shooting the old woman, he has hit the ground with his fist. He continues, in other words, to seek out the firmament, trusting it as if it is the only thing real and substantial in his twisted existence — the only thing he can reverence. And when he begins to clean his glasses, could it be that he desires to see, literally and figuratively, the whole of reality — about the world he has unearthed and, more importantly, about who he is?

There is more. I sense — and here I confess to reading beyond the page somewhat — that the most significant bit of non-verbal action occurs when The Misfit, having directed his no-good cohorts to “thow” the grandmother “where you thown the others,” picks up Pitty Sing. I imagine that he presses the cat against those blue parrots on Bailey’s shirt. But what is the significance of this gesture? First, it contrasts sharply with Bailey having earlier slung the creature against a pine tree. Far more importantly, I believe, is this: in his embrace of the cat, an animal with no divided consciousness, The Misfit displays his longing for a psyche not at war with itself, one that will “fit” the demands of the living present.

In closing, I’m aware that there are careful, scholarly readings and discussions of this story. Many are impressive. But to my personal observations, I would add only that I have trouble accepting the well-worn reading of The Misfit as an instrument of Catholic grace. For me, there is no compelling religious or even spiritual vision in this narrative; here I surrender instead to an agnostic realm in which malicious strangers exist and horror happens and explanations, finally, are largely beyond me — if not beyond Flannery O’Connor.

SHENANDOAH

“A Good Man Is Hard to Find” is an elegant nightmare of daylight terrors.

What I sense and feel in this extraordinary story is a somber yet comical rhythm, virtually unbroken, of mystery and enigma, of fate and perversity — a narrative set down to us with the bold and brutal beauty of things darkly buried that must not remain buried.

What I would give to capture a similar essence in my own fiction!

Simply put, no one has ever written a more chilling tale than “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.”

No one.