Fugitive Truths

The Fictional West of Thomas McGuane

William Giraldi

Cloudbursts
Collected and New Stories
Thomas McGuane
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For the past five decades and across twenty books of fiction and nonfiction—his first novel, *The Sporting Club*, was published in 1969—Thomas McGuane has been forging one of the most distinctive Midwestern fictions in the American canon. For Americans, west is the only direction with true promise. Manifest Destiny might have been an audacious and defining belief in the nineteenth century, but it is also a literary and spiritual quality, one that pioneers forth from the vicissitudes and fertility of American imagination. Going west made us big and got us rich. McGuane's Irish Catholic parents went west, too, from Massachusetts to Michigan, where McGuane was born in 1939. You will find both Michigan and Key West in his work, and you will find Catholics, too, but it is Protestant Montana, where he has lived on a seven-hundred-acre ranch since the early 1970s, that takes up the most real estate in his fiction. In a 1987 interview McGuane says that he and his family "saw ourselves as Catholics surrounded by Protestant Midwesterners," which might, he thinks, account for the outsider motif that veins through much of his work. Outsiders are important, after all: they're usually the only ones with the clearest view of what's going on.

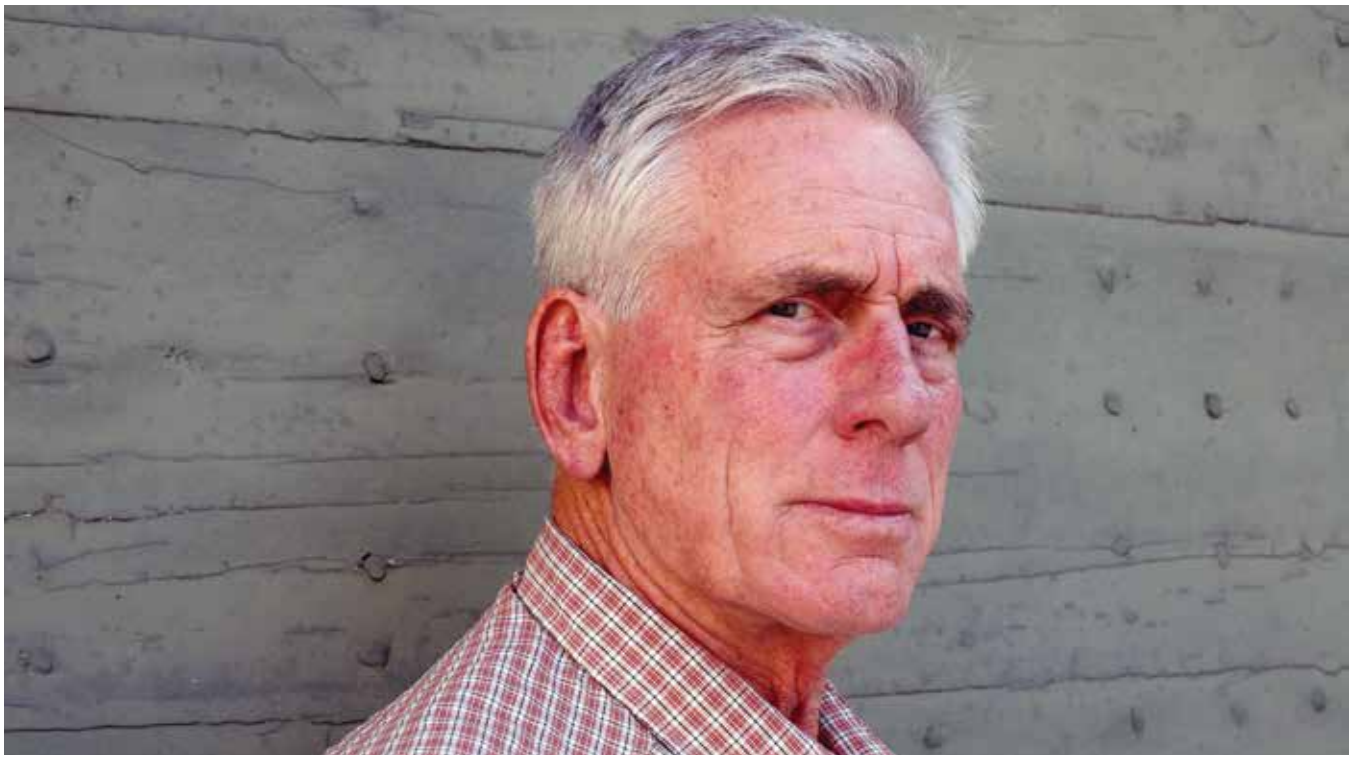
You can easily roll off a litany of those writers who have given us the special shape and syntax of their Wests—Willa Cather, Wallace Stegner, Sam Shepard, Larry McMurtry, Cormac McCarthy, William Kittredge, Ivan Doig, Lee K. Abbott, Rick Bass, Jim Harrison, Louise Erdrich, Pam Houston among them—and McGuane's spot on that list is secure but also something of a singularity. His West doesn't smell or sound like other Wests, like the West we think we know, all that lawlessness and landscape, that bandit logic and whiskey love under stopless skies. McGuane's West has its own sly grammar of understanding, the seriousness of spirit and place often punctuated by an irreverent, absurdist humor.

In McGuane's most memorable fiction, his comedic register operates in tandem with an off-kilter sincerity, the kind that unfolds at the edge of irony, those ambiguous borderlands of politeness where pathos is not disregarded, only downgraded. Eros is his métier: the eros for nature and place, the vocal eros men have for women and the muted eros men have for one another. McGuane is our great poet of male camaraderie, of masculine metaphysics, of the jittering *pas de deux* between fathers and sons, brothers and brothers, friends with half a century behind them. The tone of his best fiction, in his early work especially, always proclaims: *This is the way it shall be, and you will accept it.*

Along comes *Cloudbursts*, his collected and new stories, 555 pages of grasping after fugitive truths. In its apprehension of a certain American mode of being—one narrator says of himself and a friend: "We are just doing our job, just two little old Americans"—*Cloudbursts* is an indispensable monument to slip alongside the work of John Cheever and Peter Taylor. The book's epigraph is from a story by Taylor—"The world was still changing, preparing people for one thing and giving them another"—and you see why: McGuane's are overall decent people in a rabidly indecent world, Midwesterners trying to manage their arthritic souls but unprepared for what that management entails. His men and women writhe along the seams of regret and longing, often caught in storms they've stirred up themselves and often trying to dodge "the wrath of some inattentive god," as one narrator has it. In the story "The Road Atlas," one character quips to another: "Your search for meaning is a bore." The cosmos might be without meaning, but life is not without worth. McGuane's people go looking, as one character puts it, for "the kind of light in a desolate place that guides a traveler still yearning for a destination."

Here are stories that proudly chronicle the stumblings and strivings of blue-collar Midwesterners. About "country-people," the narrator of "Sportsmen" says: "Once you get the

William Giraldi's *newest book,* American Audacity, *will be published in August.*



gist of their ways, you can get along anyplace you go because they are everywhere and they are good people." But there's a dynamic variety of circumstance at work in *Cloudbursts*. In "Sportsmen," a boy is paralyzed in a diving accident and the narrator is ravaged by guilt and the inevitable wedge of time that separates friends. In "The Millionaire," with its distinctly Cheeverian family ethos, a pregnant teen is about to surrender her baby to a rich, childless couple. In "Like a Leaf," a retired cattleman for whom "town life doesn't come easy" perches at his window and spies on the "desperate characters" who are his neighbors, attempting to understand "the human situation." "Dogs," about a man called Howie Reed who goes insane and begins stealing his friends' beloved canines, is a mere five pages but has comedy enough to sustain your whole day: "To be the leading adulterer in a small Montana town," Howie says, "is to spend your life dodging bullets. It is the beautiful who suffer." In "Ice," a skater loses his bearings at night on a frozen lake, in flight from "those forces determined to make me worthless in my own eyes," questing for "secret existences I might discover in places where no human is expected" and reciting "the Lord's Prayer in a quavering voice." "Skirmish" and "Hubcaps" are begrudgingly nostalgic for the childhood sublime. "Flight" and "Old Friends" pay homage to the unassailable dominion and dominance of nature: "They followed a seasonal creek toward the low hills in the west where the late-morning sun illuminated towering white clouds whose tops tipped off in identical angles. The air was so clear that their shadows appeared like birthmarks on the grass hillsides." That birthmark simile is exquisite.

McGuane's relationship to the West is authentic but essentially ambivalent, which might be the necessary condition of the outsider (Montana, remember, is only McGuane's adopted home, and only for part of the year: he's a Key Wester too). For him, the old myths won't hold; the legends have become musty. Men pretend to be cowboys; women pretend to be rugged; pretending is all they can do because the real cowboys and ruggedness belong to a fossilized time. A renovation of ancient yarns is in order. In the story "Old Friends," one character says, "I desperately wish to be a cowboy," and his friend replies, "Of course you do, Erik." The narrator of "Ghost Riders in the Sky" says this about his father: "My mother and her friends thought that since he was from Montana he must be a cowboy, and in fact he acted like one with many swaggering habits he had picked up from westerns." In "On a Dirt Road," a couple's clothing "seemed rural, backwoods almost, but had something of the costume about it." There's no frontier romanticism at work in McGuane, no Cooperian conflicts of will and rights. He refashions the West to fit our throbbing modernity. While it's tempting to see McGuane's Montanan landscape as a version of Paradise—he lives in Paradise Valley, outside Livingston, Montana—his people are contentedly fallen and don't mind admitting it.

The most important landscapes in McGuane are internal. All serious writers are concerned with the soul and McGuane is no different. But there's no theology at play in his world, systematic or otherwise, no supernatural agency, no overt adherence to church doctrines or decrees. The crosses on the backs of his characters they've carpentered themselves, through their own chaotic desires and comical bungling. If you find in McGuane the Catholic necessity of suffering, that necessity is usually tempered by the smirk of absurdity. In a 1989 interview, McGuane has this to say:

AGENCE OPALE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

I do have an inchoate pining for religion. I see spirituality in the processes of natural renewal, in creation as it were. And I do think my vaguely Manichean worldview derives from my Irish Catholic heritage. In fact, I am very comfortable considering myself an Irish Catholic, implying, as it does to me, a superimposition of the life of Christ upon earth-worshipping pantheism. Like Flannery O'Connor, I frequently portray people in purgatory, hence the irreligious atmosphere.

And just as O'Connor was a Catholic outsider in the Baptist South, McGuane is a Catholic outsider in the Protestant Midwest. The irreligiosity McGuane refers to there takes the form of an often-facetious modern malaise: Christ isn't exactly nowhere but he isn't somewhere either, not somewhere McGuane's characters can ever hope to reach. "Christ plays in ten thousand places," wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins: that's true even in Montana, if you care to look. But benediction and deliverance are a touch lofty for some of McGuane's people, and for others they are downright alien. Most would rather just do their work and hobble by with as little strife as possible. One character in *Cloudbursts* says: "It's awful what your mind will do to you.... Life just rushes at you, and the birds keep dying." Another character is "a loner, and tired of being one, but seemed unable to do anything about it." In "Ice," the narrator says of himself and his friends: "We wanted either spectacular achievement or mortifying failure," but fear they have to content themselves with "the frictionless lives of the meek." The meek shall inherit the earth? Not in Montana.

McGuane's people seem to sense that, in Hopkins's words, "the world is charged with the grandeur of God," but it's also a world kicked at by original sin, and they're mostly resigned to this reality. There's goodness everywhere but they sometimes have to squint to see it.

To offer an apparent contradiction, McGuane's Catholicism is secular, shadowy, furtive, though scarcely profane—a cultural Catholicism that remains vaguely sacral but is no longer connected to the church's liturgies or devotions. If his characters can be said to have sacraments at all, these are sacraments of their own dirt-and-blood designs. Their chief sacrament is work. In the story "Weight Watchers," the narrator, a carpenter, says: "I like to be tired. In some ways, that's the point of what I do. I don't want to be thinking when I go to bed, or if there is some residue from the day, I want it to drain out and precipitate me into nothingness. I've always enjoyed the idea of nonexistence."

Nonexistence, oblivion: Catholics don't typically claim to enjoy these. Christ promised eternal life, not blissful nothingness. But then, in contrast to some of his novels, McGuane's stories don't often employ the term "Catholic." In McGuane's 1978 comic gem, *Panama*, a defeated rockstar, Chet Pomeroy, recklessly works to earn back his girlfriend, Catherine, and to keep his raucous life from catching further fire. McGuane has called the novel "a howl of ludicrous despair" that was "written in blood." The blood is the life, but despair is a sin: Chet's life is a saturnalia of sin—the loon can't help himself. At one point, Catherine says that Chet has a "rotten little Catholic heart," to which he replies: "There is no rotten little Catholic heart. There is only the Sacred Heart of Jesus and I have seen it shine in a Missouri tunic." (He means the tunic worn by Jesse James; he's a touch obsessed with James and his outlaw attitudes.) At one point Chet nails his hand to Catherine's front door: he wants the stigmata, his own tortured flesh. Chet is a dramatically bad Catholic, of course; still, that doesn't stop him from adhering to the tag and trying to find some succor in it.

If the characters in McGuane's short fiction are less vocal about their religious affiliations, they share with their maker that "inchoate pining for religion" and also an awareness of the Catholic emphasis on community—communion lower case. They are sometimes given to pronouncements such as: "That's the thing about heaven. It comes in all shapes and sizes," or: "Immortality is important to me because, without it, I don't get to see my wife again. Or, on the lighter side, my dogs and horses." About the mayhem and indiscriminate carnage detailed in newspaper stories, one narrator comments: "Incidents like these make it hard for me to clearly see the spirit winging its way to heaven." McGuane's people seem to sense that, in Hopkins's words, "the world is charged with the grandeur of God," but it's also a world kicked at by original sin, and they're mostly resigned to this reality. There's goodness everywhere but they sometimes have to squint to see it. They aren't Calvinists because they don't expect to see any earthly guarantee that their souls are earmarked for heaven. Some of them hope for whatever meager grace they can get, whatever dignity they can muster. The narrator of "The Casserole" says: "I think, at times like this, your first concern is to hang on to a shred of dignity."

In stories such as "Partners," "Dogs," "Old Friends," and "Motherlode," you see men who have given up on grace and no longer give a damn, lawbreakers wasting their spirits, disowning niceties, trying to find some way to craft comedy from their bad luck. Why comedy in the midst of gravity? Because comedy is one tonic consequence of clear seeing.

Henry Fielding in *Joseph Andrews*: "Life everywhere furnishes an accurate observer with the ridiculous"—with the absurd. McGuane's men and women are accurate observers frequently beset by the absurd, and they react accordingly: with more absurdity. In a 1984 interview, McGuane says: "I don't think the truth is diminished because one finds it funny." That's right on: humor enhances truth. There's nothing in the severity of Catholic doctrine that precludes humor, and that's something else McGuane shares with Flannery O'Connor: the willingness to be funny alongside the dramatic, Christ-infused apprehension of living and dying. The narrator of the story "Riddle" says that his "descent into the abyss was hilarious." Saint Augustine asks: "If by 'abyss' we understand a great depth, is not man's heart an abyss?" Yes it is, and that depth can return echoes of laughter.

In the story "Weight Watchers," the narrator's mother once superglued her obese husband to a toilet seat. In "Grandma and Me," the narrator is in charge of his blind grandmother, and they picnic at a river before he becomes distracted and forgets about her there: "I had just settled Grandma on her folding chair and popped open our box lunch when the corpse floated by." In "On a Dirt Road," the narrator is comically obsessed with his mysterious neighbors and the likely infidelity of his wife, and through it all, he's given to the wryest observations, in mockery of his own panting heart: "I couldn't tell if the whiskey was helping or not; on the one hand, it seemed to numb me to the escalating misery; on the other hand, it made the drama of it more florid." In "Weight Watchers," the narrator says: "I view pets with extraordinary suspicion: we need to stay out of their lives. I saw a woman fish a little dog out of her purse once, and it bothered me for a year." In "A Long View to West," a son and his father have this back and forth:

"What're you doing?" He wished he hadn't asked.
"Dying. What's it look like?"
Clay didn't know what to say, so he said, "And you're okay with that?"
"How should I know? I've never done it before."

Wallace Stegner once called McGuane a "word witch," and one wishes he were more consistently witchy in his stories, more inventively exuberant, more accepting of the anarchic prose energies he harnessed in his first four novels and in *Panama* especially. Those energies are unleashed to lovely effect in the finer stories in *Cloudbursts*—"Zombies," "Dogs," "Grandma and Me," for starters—but too many of the stories are too plainly told, devoid of the linguistic witchery we know he's capable of. In a 2005 interview, McGuane has this to say about his more placid style: "My interest in language is not quite the runaway fervor it once was because I feel a greater need to put it in the service of other things. And right now my interest strangely enough is in storytelling." Not strange at all; he's been an expert storyteller from moment one. And he sets up a false dichotomy there: exuberant language on the one side and storytelling on the other. Those "other things" he mentions are not separate from exact and exciting language but are an intrinsic part of it.

So with a talent as great as McGuane's, it's disappointing to come upon more than one palsied sentence: "If only he could interest himself in keeping up with the Joneses, he could head off the troubling clouds"—a line which performs the almost magical feat of mingling three clichéd and clashing metaphors in only nineteen words. "Vicious Circle," from the title on, relies too much on coincidence and cliché: in the span of only two pages you are smacked with "the coast was clear," "piercing blue eyes," "razor-sharp knife," "following suit," "sky-blue eyes" and a "gaze" that is "penetrating." You might try to argue that your average Montanan speaks in precisely those clichés, and maybe you can wiggle by with that argument when the story is dished in the first person, as it is in "The Casserole," where in only twelve lines you must endure "the whole enchilada," "eat them alive," "no strings attached," and "the usual suspects." But what about when the story is dished in the third person, as it is in "Vicious Circle"? Those clichés are McGuane's.

And yet in the same story, he can mobilize the surprising and aptly unusual adjective and verb: "He changed the water filter in the basement and removed the ghastly mushrooms that had volunteered there." You'll find his observant potency everywhere in *Cloudbursts*: "He had a way of shooting his cuff to see his watch that seemed like a thrown punch"; "he was very likely to say something specious, but the appearance of its having been tugged from the depths of consideration made him difficult to contradict." He knows that the forearms of a plumber are different from the forearms of a carpenter or mason. One woman lives on a street "on which either invidious competition or the boundless love of property had prevailed in the form of one perfect lawn after another and hedges that seemed to have been purchased in sections." One husband is referred to as "a specimen of tidy manhood."

In a 1990 interview, McGuane refers to "the blackness that comes from my Irish Catholic education, in which there are sinister visions of a horrible black hell." That term "blackness" puts one in mind of what Melville said about Hawthorne: "This great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeal to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free." McGuane's world, though periodically blighted by sin and folly, isn't as depraved as Melville's or Hawthorne's, never mind Poe's—not even close. Calvinism makes for bad optimists, and even worse humorists, but the Catholic stresses and pressures in McGuane's fiction, though gently dispersed, are at bottom life-enhancing, and this is what you have in *Cloudbursts*: a writer in giddy control of his inventions, unafraid of putting hilarity up against heartwreck, and convinced that stories well told speak to what is lasting in us. ■