

Barn Away, South ooo

By

Charles Pinch

Guest Editor SALVATORE DIFALCO writes... *Make no mistake, Charles Pinch's short story BARN AWAY, SOUTH, is a strange confection, by turns creepily minimalist then unexpectedly explosive—the metaphor of a coiled black cat (or kitten) readily suggests itself. You never really know where you're going in a Charles Pinch joint, but that's what makes the visit so compelling. The dialogue, while familiar and coherent, has a slightly otherworldly timbre reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's baleful and oneiric exchanges, though perhaps not quite as antiquarian and long-winded. That said, given the pointillism and jagged kinetics of the story, in many respects the shaggy spirit (or spectre) of Ernest Hemingway looms over it—at least ironically. Remember him? He was once considered the master of the short story form. True, he and his beard have been demoted to the remaindered bin these days, but the best of his short stories still stand the test of time, as stories go. I won't go so far as to say BARN AWAY, SOUTH is an homage to Hemingway, and to his prowess with the short story form, but I was happily (and sadly) reminded of him. And while I could go on about antecedents and form, what I really loved about this story—and I'll let readers sort out the rest on their own—and what I love about Charles Pinch's work in general is the consistent offering of startling, deeply resonant and often funny images and turns of phrase. One could quote his work endlessly, and while that would spoil the hunt for treasure-seekers, I leave you with this appetizing little gem: "Mimi and her velvet meekness reminded Doug of a timorous mouse."*

Five stars

Guest Editor TRACEY STERNS writes... *I think the best stories are the hardest to critique. As though they wash over your subconscious like bathing in a hot spring under a soothing waterfall. Pinch's, 'BARN AWAY, SOUTH' is fraught with conflict. The author offers us an opportunity to view the human condition with seeds of contempt and threads of bewilderment. While Doug is financially distressed, compassionate and godless, initially turning to family; his brother, Joe, is ruthless, cruel and morally bankrupt, substituting having found God in order to manipulate scriptures that embrace his particular pathology. His farm is a barren, sterile, northern wasteland: cold, broken and as in need of repairs as he--as uninhabitable as a soul forsaken--sick cows and poison*

soil. Even Boney his one eyed, compliant if not devoted, wife sees beyond his ridged (sic), smite-filled religiosity. The author wisely decides not to describe the violence which is in fact the turning point of the story...like the ending, it is far better left to our imaginations. Still the act is preceded by a munificently incidental line where Doug declares that "God is deaf..." but "this is good meatloaf." This line has a beautifully subtle mix of assonance and alliteration, aside from the conceit that it juxtaposes a deaf God to good meatloaf. Doug makes his exodus from his brother's frigid, rock-ridden farm into the arms of old friends. The story ends with Doug's unnamed other cat chasing a toy across a pepper-salt, basement broadloom rug. It is a delightfully existential metaphor for a catlike god toying with his creation, just passing time, for her own amusement, in eternity's infinite now. There is so much more I could say about this story, you just might want to read it yourself. . .

Five stars

Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... As always, when I write for one of the editors of *Fleas on the Dog*, I tend to try and place a small disclaimer beforehand, it's unnecessary, because the story stands on its own, but full disclosure and all that – I am one of those stand-up, ethical type guys after all...

Charles Pinch's, "Barn Away, South," is earthy – it comes from the land and lays its foundations upon a hard and damn near fallow ground – like a Russian Cormac McCarthy.

With this story I would like to begin by bringing up *fabula* and *syuzhet* – "fabula equates to the thematic content of a narrative and *syuzhet* equates to the chronological structure of the events within the narrative" – effectively the plot vs. the rhetorical experience of the story. What Pinch has done with "Barn Away, South," has taken what is a straightforward story and crafted a tale that is deep, layered in decay, and cold. Easily enough, Doug is a bankrupt man, with only a suitcase to him name, who is forced to ask his brother for a place to stay, and, when that doesn't work out, he must ask an old high school buddy, who lives with his mom, for a small room until he can get on his feet.

That's *fabula*.

The *syuzhet* is the way in which the story is told, and that way is not only something I will not spoil for you, as the act of reading Pinch's work is what makes the experience so much more engaging, but also demonstrates the strength by which this writer operates.

There is control in this story, patience – a handling of the craft of writing that most would, and should, be jealous of. He takes only takes four lines to craft the setting, the background, the inconvenience, the desperation, and the overall sense of how the worlds we inhabit often spend their time crumbling around us:

Lines marked with thick paint on the inside of the tub. Doug guessed the highest one was four inches from the bottom. He ran the water gleefully, the only warm thing within miles. He laid his pajamas and underwear on the back of the toilet.

Boney pounded on the door. "Tha's enough!"

Here we can see just how poor Doug's brother and wife operate on, their accent, their devout devotion to the simplicity of their lives, the amount of water they use to take their baths for fear of drying up the well, the separation from where Doug used to be and where he stands now, and the exact amount of chill in all of their lives that comes from living on a dilapidated farm in a cold part of Canada in a cold ass time of year.

That truly is just the tip of the iceberg. Each line is packed with syuzhet. Each section compounds upon one another to create the whole sense of being that exists in this story for the reader to piece out. What I mean to say is that Pinch does not tell you anything. The fabula of the story is presented to the reader by the way in which the syuzhet is shown. The reader can only experience the story to understand not only what happens but the underlying feelings and themes (insecurity, fear, defiance, bleakness, the cold, the fall from grace, the longing for the past, and etc.) that permeate throughout – a truly deft understanding of storytelling.

I have said it once and I will continue to say it over and over again, there is something hard and beautiful that lies within Charles Pinch's lines – a Canadian warmth that comes from being lost in a snowstorm, we trudge forward, surrounded.

Five Stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

The barn like cholera remembered. Most of the floor had rotted out. Beneath the sweating planks and humus a bedrock foundation dug and sunk by men who had died of exhaustion. Hay teetered in damp swells. Doug stepped into the daylight with a pail of pink milk. After giving up her fluid the cow coughed and wheezed and rubbed its great swollen hull against the crumbling side of the stall. There was a short chain around her neck. Doug wondered if she wanted to lie down.

BARN AWAY, SOUTH

By Charles Pinch

For Frances, nothing before you, nothing after...

Note: This story was originally published by **pressboardpress**, New Jersey.

“Y’ off, then?”

“Yes...”

“Joe! Are ye not goin’ t’ say goo’ bye?”

“It’s okay.”

“He’ll come round. I know h’ will.”

Joe was in what they called the front room. Newspaper on his lap but he was not reading. Welded line of his mouth, his clay-colored hands. He had got up in the middle of frozen night and limped down the stairs, put a jacket on over his pajamas and pulled the heater plug out of Doug’s car.

It had taken Doug thirty minutes to clear it of snow. Inside, door open, a smell like pooled mercury. Turning the key, he had prayed to Joe’s God. The car coughed to life, then stood trembling. He put the black cat in a carrying case on the back seat, the black cat that sang for her supper from breakfast on. He called the quiet one Mimi and her velvet meekness reminded Doug of a timorous mouse. He’d put towels inside both cages. Already he smelled urine.

“For the trip.” A bag of baloney sandwiches and an apple from a bin held over the winter, wrinkled but sap-rich against teeth.

“I just don’t understand.” Doug’s perplexity.

“Ach,” she said. “Blood is t’icker than water.” Boney stood in the doorway like she didn’t want to be there. Big and fat and settled so huge brown slacks and breasts of a Stone Age Venus to her navel. A dirty apron. She’d lost an eye early on to a brother’s pellet gun. The other, for whole days sometimes, narrowed to a slit like a silver minnow. He’d watched her navigate through her world, the shambling farmhouse, by sonar, by touch.

“Ye will call when y’ get there...?”

“Yes.” He looked about, hand on the open door. At the bottom of a twisted gully, washed out, with uprooted cedars, the collapsed barn. The center beam still standing bare, a fragment of roof. The scrawny cows coughed into the crystal bleak and each morning Joe took their yellow, tubercular milk. Wood for rebuilding in a rotted pile. The government had never asked for their money back.

As he maneuvered out of the driveway he glimpsed Joe through the window. More sticks for the fire and the newspaper threw red flames. It was the face of a red devil: slippery, polyurethane.

The car turned out of the driveway.

Joe stood. “Well, tha’s done.”

A drive inside a snow globe. He stopped at a gas station, invisible until he had reached the door.

“Is there a phone?”

A man wearing a faded Santa Claus hat pointed to the wall beside a Coke machine. Doug hefted the clunky receiver while coins dropped. Spoke. “Rob...? My cell phone’s busted. I’m calling from the highway. Be there in three or four hours. Weather’s pretty bad. Say ‘hi’ to your Mom.”

In the washroom he ran oily water over the burns on his wrists. He bought two tins of cat food with snap open tops. In the car, he sat and watched the black cat eat noisily. Mimi was a bird lapping nectar. At his foot, the busted cell phone, inches from the accelerator pedal. Doug kicked it against the sidewall.

“Y’r bedr’um. It’s nay what you’re used to, prob’ly.”

“It’s a nice bedroom, Boney. I’m grateful.” He remembered their first awkward meeting when his gaze had stalled at her shuttered eye. He remembered too she had brought city hands to her wedding. But Joe and time and labor.

“Is tha’ all y’ have?”

Doug swung the suitcase onto the bed. “My whole world. I told Joe a little but not the whole truth. How bad it all became.”

“Eden here. Can ye milk a cow?”

“I can try.”

“I painted the chest and pulled the lamp ‘side y’r bed out o’ the crawlspace. We don’ have an attic.”

“It’s a nice chest. It’s a nice lamp. I may take a nap.”

“Dinner’s a’ six.”

“The problem with cities is they breed evil. Look at Sodom and Gomorrah.”

“Remember when we used to say ‘Sodomy and Gonorrhoea’?”

“I think it unfair and unkind to mock your brother, Doug, after he has opened his arms and heart to ye.”

“I meant no offence.”

“We live by the Bible now.”

“Betty told me you got religion.”

“Betty is wrong.”

“Oh no, Joe. We did.”

Joe picked up his fork. Prongs at Doug.

“How’s she wrong, Joe?”

“I ‘got’ no religion. I found God. We be eatin’ now so I’ll say the blessing.”

The bedroom as cold as thin. In the middle of the night he heard things behind the walls. When he turned, the mattress creaked. Boney had spared only a single blanket. He slept with his coat over him and his jacket over his feet. The cats trembled under the bedsprings. When he came up with their dishes the black cat stuck its head out. Mimi burrowed in shadow. Joe’s big dog never allowed upstairs. Bear-claws echoed on the kitchen linoleum.

Joe had left high school early. He’d enlisted in the army and for a time served as a peacekeeper in a hotbed near the equator. Back in Canada he was brown and grave. He got money on discharge and bought a farm in a scrubby part of the

province where nothing grew. He married Boney. One time he said to Doug, “I aint never havin’ kids. I hate ‘em!”

Doug was flourishing in the city then. He sat a stone desk in a glass tower. No birds flew past his window but sometimes a helicopter did. He ate in restaurants and ordered dishes that originated on the other side of the world. Quaffing wine, he talked about ‘noble rot’. He rode the subway to and from work. He liked sunshine but most of his waking hours were flooded with halogen.

“Ye take the tit like this.”

“Okay.”

“Then ye pull and squeeze at the same time.”

“Pull and squeeze.”

“Just pull she’ll likely kick ye in th’ head.”

The barn like cholera remembered. Most of the floor had rotted out. Beneath the sweating planks and humus a bedrock foundation dug and sunk by men who had died of exhaustion. Hay teetered in damp swells. Doug stepped into the daylight with a pail of pink milk. After giving up her fluid the cow coughed and wheezed and rubbed its great swollen hull against the crumbling side of the stall. There was a short chain around her neck. Doug wondered if she wanted to lie down.

“We don’t bathe, really,” Boney explained. “We wash. We ‘wash up’ as Joe likes t’ say. It’s because of t’ water.”

“What about it?”

“Well’s a’most dry.”

“What are you going to do when it’s all gone?”

“Oh, it’ll be a while yet.”

Lines marked with thick paint on the inside of the tub. Doug guessed the highest one was four inches from the bottom. He ran the water gleefully, the only warm thing within miles. He laid his pajamas and underwear on the back of the toilet.

Boney pounded on the door. “Tha’s enough!”

“Myself, I don’t believe it.”

Doug’s fork stood upright in his mashed potatoes. They were home grown in Boney’s garden by the septic tank. With margarine and diluted milk they whipped up like stucco.

“Everybody believes in God. Well, no, tha’s not true, now. But they should.”

“Why should they believe in something that doesn’t exist?”

“Are ye sayin’, brother, tha’ His existence is a matter of opinion? Thine opinion does no’ disprove it.”

“If he does exist, he does so as a reflection of ourselves. His creations.”

“How do you figure...?” Joe held the knife and fork close to the blade, close to the tines, not like he and Doug had been taught.

“He is imperfect.”

“Nay. The Lord thy God is perfection. The Bible says so.”

“The world he created is imperfect. It exists as a reflection of him, Joe. A perfect being responsible for something imperfect. How perfect is that?”

“Y’ are talkin’ in circles. Beware the fool’s tongue.”

“You think the world is perfect?”

“Anyone wit’ a brain knows it’s nay.”

“If God is love—“

“God *is* love.”

“Why does he not hear us in the hour of our distress? Why does he abandon his faithful flock?”

“He abandons them not.”

“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

“T’was the Lord testing His son, Douglas.”

“Testing? What about the Christians in the arena? Was he testing them too?”

“Pass the relish, Boney.” Joe chewed slowly. Doug waited. “The answer is in your Bible. Immersion in scripture is what y’ need to refresh your soul, brother.”

“Is he a god of compassion, Joe?”

“He is.”

“But there was no compassion for the martyrs when they begged for his help.”

“God is love, Douglas.”

“God is deaf, Joe. This is good meatloaf, Boney. Mom used to fry the onions first, though. That way they didn’t taste raw. Do you remember, Joe?”

“I remember.”

Snow shadows deeply darkening. A winter sigh. He woke after the first rope encircled his wrist. He sprang up like Lazarus. Joe pushed him down onto the mattress and clamped him steady with the weight of one knee.

“What are you doing?”

“Quiet now. You’ll wake Boney.”

“Joe, cut it out!”

He lashed the cord through a loop in the burly knot. Doug curled up like a salted leech, eyes glinting.

“The city breeds evil. It poisons the mind, Doug. Ye are the proof.”

“Stop it, Joe!”

“You’ll not desecrate the Lord in thy brother’s house.”

“I’m sure I didn’t mean to.” Doug rigged his brother’s ankles together.

“There are consequences to this sort of thing! You’ll not mock Him.”

“We were having a conversation for God’s sake!”

“How long do y’ leave him like tha’?”

“Until he learns.”

“How will y’ know, Joe?”

“I will know.”

“Do I feed him, then?”

“Nay. The fathers of Christendom fasted as we fast on the Sabbath, Boney. Douglas is nearer his Maker on an empty stomach.”

“Do I feed his cats?”

“Oh yes. The little ones are innocent souls in God’s eyes.”

He spent a long time in the bathroom. Ran water defiantly. Boney did not pound. He emerged a steam-spirit and confronted his brother.

“What you did was criminal.”

“Are you goin’ t’ call the police on us?”

“Yes, Boney, I am.”

“It’s family business, brother. The law has no place here. But call if you like.”

The big dog sat at Joe’s feet, a lion for Jeremiah. It looked at Doug with mournful eyes.

“Are you goin’ t’ call, then?”

Doug rubbed his wrists together. “I should. You know I should.”

“Call if you like,” Joe said.

“Leave it to God to screw something up, right Joe?”

Mimi in deep sleep on the passenger seat. Past Bracebridge the drift down softened. Snow feathers descended like manna. Strains of *Cavaliere Rusticana*. He turned the volume up. Through the grill of her cage the black cat swatted at snowflakes. Gripping the wheel, his wrists burned in the ice-air. His ankle tingled when he raised his foot to the brake pedal.

It was five in the afternoon, still light, twilight behind the trees. Doug parked in the driveway next to a fleecy spruce. Rob had already come out of the house. He stood on the cement porch in corduroy slippers with a beer in his hand.

“Good drive, Doug?”

“After Bracebridge.”

“She’s really coming down.”

“Still coming down.”

“Mom says the cats can stay in the basement. It’s a finished space. They’ll have lots of room. I miss Sooty. We had to put her down Thanksgiving. Is that it for your luggage?”

Doug lumbered the suitcase out of the trunk. “This is my whole world right here.”

“You travel light, bud.”

“Called bankruptcy.”

Rob had fattened like quality pork. His face was pink and white with sorry white eyes. Small mouth and gray teeth. He suckled his beer. “I ran into Dieter Howitzer the other day.”

“I haven’t thought of Dieter in twenty years.”

“I told him you were bunking with us till you found a place. He said the three of us should get together.”

“That sounds good.”

“Are you busy Thursday night?”

“You know I’m not.”

Inside, his mother Winnie on a treadmill. She waved at Doug like a tourist. “Long time, no see, pardner!” Her hair was buzzed like Rob’s. The vibrations from the machine caused her voice to jiggle. “How was the drive?”

“Good past Bracebridge.”

“The weatherman’s calling for a three day blow,” Rob said.

“That’s a story by Ernest Hemingway.”

“Ernest Hemingway’s dead.”

“He shot himself, Mom.”

“Put your bag in the bedroom next to the bathroom.” Winnie switched the machine off. “I wanted to put up different curtains. Flowers aren’t for a man.”

“I love flowers, Mrs. Acton.”

“It’s Winnie. You’re not a schoolboy anymore!”

“Remember the brown sugar sandwiches you used to make for us when we came home from school, Mom?”

“Do you remember them, Doug?”

Doug threw his suitcase onto the bed. The coverlet looked painted on. A dust-free *pot-pourri* of scented cedar chips beside the night lamp. He returned to the living room. They were still talking about Hemingway.

“I haven’t read him since high school. Have you read him since then, Doug?”

“No. Not lately.” Doug was thinking about his cats.

Rob said, “There’s an apartment for rent in the building across the street.” He pointed to a window as clear as oxygen. “The landlord’s Polish. He told me one of the units was coming up for rent.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

“Doug’s tired. Doug, you’re yawning.”

“I’m going to settle the cats in.”

“There’s plenty of room downstairs.”

“They’ll have the run of the basement,” Rob said.

“Take a nap before dinner, Doug.”

He pulled the cuffs of his shirt down to cover his burned wrists. Staring up at the white ceiling, he saw patterns like swirling snow in the stucco. He closed his eyes. The black cat crawled onto the bed beside him. Mimi curled against his ear.

Afterwards, he smelled roast beef or steak.

“Feel better?”

“I dozed off.”

“I limp some days too.”

“Oh, that? Ankles are a bit stiff. Dinner smells good.”

“You like chicken thighs?”

The basement was a self-contained unit. Salt and pepper carpet. At one end, a small bedroom with French doors. The kitchenette included a washer and dryer. Everything was white including the furniture. Above the couch and across from the plasma screen was an oil painting of an elk in a forest. Doug couldn’t read the signature that took up most of a corner. He thought he could be standing in a model unit at a home show. It felt, after the biblical north, like the world before sin.

“You’ve done nicely, you and your Mom. Do you miss married life?”

“No. It was a mistake. I should have never married. Mom and I get along well.”

Doug hooked his thumbs into his pockets. “Yesterday morning I was milking a cow. Tonight I’m standing here. It feels like a different planet.”

“Did your brother really take a swing at you?”

“Yes. With a crowbar.”

“You want to avoid an oncoming crowbar.”

“Probably my own fault. Betty warned me.”

“It’s a bleak part of the country. I used to like Joe.”

“I still like him, I guess. Betty says they’ve been spraying toxic chemicals on their potato plants. They’ve been doing it for years.”

“Toxic chemicals?”

“Bug killer.”

“Oh.”

“They eat a lot of potatoes.”

“It may have poisoned their brains.”

“That’s what Betty said.”

“Do you mind if I ask why he took a swing at you?”

“I pulled the tit. I didn’t pull and squeeze.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I never got the hang of milking a cow.”

Three wooden placemats. With the chicken, rice and salad.

From the living room Rob said, “I’ve set out our old high school yearbooks. I thought Doug and I would go down memory lane tonight. Do you mind or would you rather we watch television?”

“I don’t mind. Do you think Doug will mind?”

“No. He won’t mind.”

“Tell him dinner’s ready.”

Rob rapped on the kitchen window. Doug had stepped outside. He stood in the middle of the Acton’s backyard with a scarf around his neck and Mimi bundled in his arms. The moon bowled up behind the bare trees. It was gauzy and misty like an apparition.

Inside, the black cat chased a catnip mouse across the salt and pepper broadloom.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I wrote this story sometime after 'Requiem' (see Issue 9-Fiction). They are both 'winter tales' but that's where the similarity ends. By then I was becoming intrigued by the use of compression as a literary device and putting the parts together—the quick scene shifts—was like working with stained glass, each panel fitted into a separate lead frame to provide an overall picture—or narrative in this case. A bit like cloisonné technique. It's the only story I've written in this fashion. I believe it works in 'Barn Away, South' but I don't think it would work anywhere else. Most people who read my stories describe my style as 'minimalist' and this is true. I eschew the Jamesian construction and all its baroque flora just as I am uninspired by the Byzantine mechanics of someone like Virginia Woolf—a writer, who frankly, leaves me cold. Burroughs's 'Naked Lunch' is a star-bright exception. Early on, my formative influences were Hemingway—inevitable if you like simple prose—later Carver, Tobias Woolf and somebody else whose name escapes me at the moment. I also stumbled upon Somerset Maugham, whose best work was written in the early years of the last century—as a result of an accident—and became infatuated with his urbane, sensibly tailored and well-behaved prose and neatly plotted linear narratives. He was responsible for reawakening my interest in writing after an hibernation of four or five years away from fiction and writing of any kind. The result was 'Builders' (Issue 10-Fiction). He is interesting today as a period piece but his limitations after a short time become disappointingly apparent. Hemingway was a different story. It was through reading him and studying his style that I discovered you could say something without saying something. He recognized this himself and called it 'the iceberg'. I think his importance as a stylist and a writer ends with 'The Sun Also Rises'. Everything after that is the increasingly self-conscious doodling of the celebrity, and, in the case of the late 'The Old Man and the Sea' embarrassing in its sentimental garnish. But the Nick Adams stories show him at the top of his manhood, erect, throbbing and bursting with the spunk of gleaming youth and mysterious masculine virility. To me, 'Big Two-Heated River' is one of the four or five best American short stories ever written and I don't see it any time soon being jostled out of position. As is the case with virtually all my stories—'Barn Away, South' was written quickly, in a single, frantic session. I ruminate over ideas, chew the cud, piss around for a while, think about what I want to say and then generally, just forget about it. Then one day the story emerges suddenly and usually unexpectedly and often inconveniently—like in the dead of night. So I write it down. This part is purely mechanical—I don't think—it's already complete in my head and just requires transport to materiality. I don't do draughts. Il mio buon amico the phenomenally talented writer Sal Difalco (see Issues 9 & 10 Fiction) said in an email to me... 'I think you have a great novel in you.' No I don't. You can't write novels the way I write my short stories. All our roads come to an end at some point and this is mine. I want to thank Sal, again, for his elegant and quietly radiant note, my long time friend Trace for his/her typically literate and effortlessly written critique that is about as close as prose comes to poetry and of course, our*

irreplaceable Joey Cruse. I didn't even know words like 'fabula' and 'syuzhet' existed—let alone what they meant. Leave it to this champion sorcerer to take them in hand and plummet the depths. And not just with my story. He does it over and over and over again in every issue and there is never a false note, never a false step and never a pitch that isn't perfect. Grazie mille per tutti. Sono in debito con voi.

GUEST EDITOR BIO: Salvatore Difalco's story *We Are Not Happy* as well as his interview appeared in Issue 10. A widely published Canadian author, he lives and writes in Toronto.

GUEST EDITOR BIO: Tracey Sterns's (pronouns he/she) story *Ball Caps and Coffee Mugs* was published in Issue 2. He/she lives in the GTA and frequently guest edits at FOTD.

AUTHOR BIO: Charles Pinch cofounded *Fleas on the Dog* with Tom Ball in December 2019. He is a senior editor on the site and has degrees in fine arts and philosophy from McMaster University and University of Toronto.