THE LITERARY

Life

The Art of Reading Denis Johnson

THE ENDURING APPEAL OF *JESUS' SON*

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IN 2005 I lived on the corner of Beacon Street and Massachusetts Avenue, right at the frenetic hub of Boston, two floors above the Crossroads Irish Pub. While reading *A Tragic Honesty* (Picador, 2003), Blake Bailey's biography of Richard Yates, I discovered that Crossroads was the smoky womb into which Yates retreated, every day for eleven years, to blitzkrieg his liver and lungs. Below me lived an Indian American intellectual with hipster-literary-narcotic tendencies and more friends than George Clooney, and he knew all about Yates and Crossroads. That's why he'd chosen to live there: to be near the sodden spirit of a writer who'd doomed himself to affliction.

He'd often ask me to his weekend saturnalias, to which he would invite bohemian literary types and multihued ladies of the night, and at which I never felt quite bacchic enough. Once he introduced me to a recent graduate of Emerson's MFA program, a fiction writer in his mid-twenties whose grievance was planted on his face like a flag. He couldn't land a job in writing, couldn't convince anyone to publish his work, and so had become a not-so-reluctant hawker of weed. He asked what books I taught at Boston University and when I came to Denis Johnson's masterwork, *Jesus' Son* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), about a nameless Midwestern wastrel in the stranglehold of heroin and booze, he reached into his weed-packed satchel and produced a paperback copy as if to say, "Ta-da!" He then did what I've come to expect from his lagging species of outlaw literati—he recited the most famous line of the book: "I knew every raindrop by its name."

When I asked him what, exactly, that sentence was supposed to mean, he looked at me as if I were the ignoramus and then said, "It can mean anything you want it to mean, that's why it's so great, man, it's poetry." I tried gently to point out, first, that he'd just defined poetry as intentional nonsense, and, second, that a sentence that can mean anything you want necessarily means nothing at all. I suggested an alternative to him: "I knew every puddle by its name." Couldn't that mean essentially the same thing, rendering "raindrop" a little less potent than he believed? No, he said, offended and red, because Johnson

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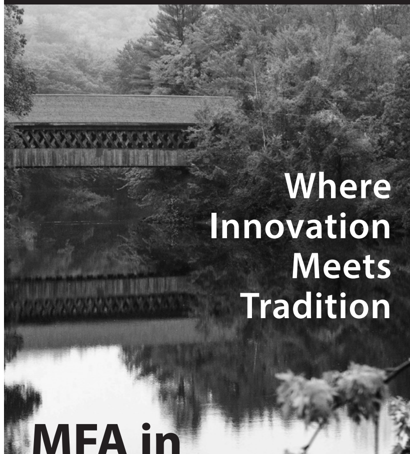

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didn't write "puddle." I was supposed to *feel* the meaning of "raindrop"; I wasn't given leave to *think* about it. He then assailed me with a caravan of clichés, platitudes, and tautologies. How do you argue literature with a person whose paltry self-esteem has somehow become part of the discussion?

Votaries of *Jesus' Son* are never hard to see coming: Mid-twenties, white, and male, they revere *On the Road* and third-raters such as Charles Bukowski and William S. Burroughs, have narcotics mayhem in their recent past, want to be fiction writers but have never read Henry James and would rather inject turpentine into themselves than puzzle through George Eliot or James Baldwin. I was once reluctantly in a Denver café on Colfax Avenue when I spotted a hipster with a paperback copy of *Jesus' Son* slipped into the back pocket of his too-tight pants. It was the old, iconic paperback copy, the tiny black one with the yellow-and-purple title—the one perfectly sized for a back pocket. I'm not sure what other book is nowadays walked around like a wallet, but I've since seen *Jesus' Son* protruding from male back pockets in Washington Square in New York City and Harvard Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts; on Pearl Street in Boulder, Colorado, and on Congress Street in Portland, Maine.

It's beautiful to see, back pockets sprouting *Jesus' Son*, but I've wondered: Do all those hip young men believe "I knew every raindrop by its name" can mean anything they want it to mean? Are these back pockets evidence of what is lazily referred to as the book's "cult following"? Consider that in the novel *More Die of Heartbreak* (William Morrow, 1987), Saul Bellow has that wonderful line to the effect that cults are neither that hard to get nor that much to be proud of. If ever you hear that a writer has a cult following, pause to remind yourself what a cult actually is and how cults usually end. *Jesus' Son*, the preeminent story collection of the American 1990s, is worthy of much more than mere cultism.

LIKE all legendary books, *Jesus' Son* has its own story, one Johnson told to *New York* magazine in 2002. Already the author of four lauded novels, Johnson was bankrupt, wading through the flotsam left by his second divorce, and ten grand in debt to those scalawags at the IRS. He made a deal with his editor: He'd exchange a book of short fiction for the ten grand needed to make good his obligation to the government. *Jesus' Son* was the result, the art that emerged from Johnson's delving into the unholy wreckage of his past in order to emerge from the unholy wreckage of his present.

The collection is singular in its alloy of rarities. It wields a visionary language that mingles the Byronic with the demotic—a language of the dispossessed, half spare in bewilderment, half ecstatic in hope. There's the bantam power of its brevity—you can read the book in one sitting—and the pitiless, poetic excavation of an underground existence bombed by narcotics, of psyches that prefer the time of their lives to the lives of their time. It boasts a deft circumvention of that tired trope polluting so many American stories of addiction: the trek from cursed to cured, from lost to loved, from breakdown to breakthrough. It also maintains an effortless appropriation of elements from the three most important story writers of the American twentieth century: Ernest Hemingway's sanctifying of the natural world in *The Nick Adams Stories*; Flannery O'Connor's spiritual grotesquerie and redemptive questing; and Raymond Carver's noble ciphers manhandled by the falsity of the American Dream (Johnson was one of Carver's drinking compeers at Iowa in the early 1970s).

The famous raindrop line appears in the opening story of the collection, "Car Crash While Hitchhiking." On the face of it, the line is nonsense, the blather of a vagrant anesthetized by methadone. Look closer and place it

within Johnson's aesthetic vision, and you'll see the line is really a want of Wordsworthian affinity for the natural world, or a groping after a kind of Buddhist cohesion with the cosmos (at one point in a later story, the narrator wonders about "the miraculous world" of Taoism). In "Car Crash," he'd been hitchhiking at night in a storm, and as he sits in the backseat of a family's wagon, his head rests against the rain-strewn window. That's precisely what you see from that position: not puddles, but streaks of rain aslant on the glass, the world tar-dark beyond it.

He doesn't want to know the names of the family in the car who just rescued him from a godforsaken ditch on the highway. The names of actual people are an alien intimacy; naming raindrops is about all he can muster at this razed moment in his life. Later, drunk midday in a barroom with a guy he doesn't know, he will have the chance to notice: "We hadn't yet mentioned our names. We probably wouldn't." The denizens of Johnson's hellscape guard their namelessness to sustain their anonymity, because naming something is always the first step toward the responsibility of owning it. A fellow junkie once called the narrator "Fuckhead," and this unfitting sobriquet is all he wishes us to know him by.

All through the collection the narrator engages in his own brand of pathetic fallacy as he seeks to feel worthy of the world, to fit himself somewhere on the continuum between nature and man: "Midwestern clouds" are "great grey brains"; "the buds were forcing themselves out of the tips of branches and the seeds were moaning in the gardens"; "the downpour raked the asphalt and gurgled in the ruts"; "we whizzed along down through the skeleton remnants of Iowa." Grey brains, moaning, gurgled, skeleton remnants: He beholds himself imprinted onto the nature-ravished world, just as Hemingway's Nick Adams—in "Big Two-Hearted River" and "The Last Good Country" especially—intuitively aligns himself with the Michigan wilderness, his respite from the realm of macadam and steel so devoid of the divine. For Nick, the woods take on a spiritual significance civilization cannot muster; for Johnson's narrator, it's almost a miracle such gauzy eyes can notice, never mind value, the terror-making beauty of nature. Near the end of his chronicle, as the gauze begins to drop away, nature's color comes in starker detail: He marvels at "one small orange flower…under a sky whose blueness seemed to get lost in its own distances."

CINDY LEE JOHNSON

Denis Johnson, the author of eighteen books of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and plays.

Like Nick, too, the narrator will become a writer, will be helped by the restorative force of art. It would have been impossible for Johnson to shirk the almighty influence of Hemingway's Nick Adams in his crafting of stories that follow a single antiheroic character from darkness to the welcome bruise of dawn. In the triumph of its narrative formation, *Jesus' Son* was an unintended precursor to a screwy genre that had such a deservedly abbreviated life in American publishing: the novel-in-stories. *Jesus' Son* cannot be tagged a novel by any sane definition, and it underscores a necessary point about Denis Johnson: Despite his mammoth, National Book Award–winning *Tree of Smoke* (FSG, 2007), his true genius, like Hemingway's, is for compression. His novellas *The Stars at Noon* (Knopf, 1986), *The Name of the World* (Harper Collins, 2000), and *Train Dreams* (FSG, 2011) have a concentrated vigor, a welterweight agility absent from the much heavier *Already Dead* (HarperCollins, 1997) and *Tree of Smoke*.

IT'S become something of a cliché for a writer to claim Flannery O'Connor as a godmother, and she's become, with Kafka, the go-to scribe whenever a reviewer or a blurbist needs to summon a genius for the usually fatuous comparison. Few are worthy of appearing in the same sentence as O'Connor, but with *Jesus' Son* Denis Johnson made himself one of them. In O'Connor's postlapsarian mythos you'll find the blasphemous suspicion that God is an escaped mental patient unworthy of his reign. For Johnson's narrator, that suspicion is a daily part of the way he believes, or tries to believe, in deliverance. He ambles "under a sky as blue and brainless as the love of God." When he drinks

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himself blotto at a pub, he does so "far from God" because he can't quite decide what's more monstrous: a god who won't rescue or a man who won't repent.

Like Christ, Johnson's narrator has been promised heaven but also condemned to an outsized anguish on earth. He cannot be Christ himself—he is neither that hubristic nor that special—but he can be Christ's child, because the ordeals of the father are typically replayed in the life of the son. (The title of the book comes from the Lou Reed song "Heroin": "When I'm rushing on my run / And I feel just like Jesus' son.") And he differs from so many of O'Connor's sanctimonious con men—Shiftlet in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Mr. Head in "The Artificial Nigger," the preacher Bevel in "The River"—in that his flashes of the sacred are earnest, a bona fide grasping after both betterment and the sublime.

But he feels terror and awe before the sacred, forever walloped by the inexpressible mystery of it: "On the farther side of the field, just beyond the curtains of snow, the sky was torn away and the angels were descending out of a brilliant blue summer, their huge faces streaked with light and full of pity." In "Dirty Wedding," he follows a bewitching stranger off the train and into a Laundromat: "His chest was like Christ's. That's probably who he was." As with the sacred itself, the narrator is at once a part of the world and apart from it, immanent when sober and transcendent when high. Johnson understands that the inverse of the sacred is not the secular but the profane, and that the sacred cannot be found in theology but only in experience. That understanding does not endorse the druggie's counter-culture cliché—kick open those doors of perception—but is rather the natural outcome of Fuckhead's yearning for the sacred despite his persistent state of profanity.

When the narrator's junk-headed friend employs the term *sacrifice* in an unexpected way, he asks himself, "Sacrifice? Where had he gotten a word like sacrifice? Certainly I had never heard of it." Forget about our use of sacrifice to mean the surrender of something, recall that the word comes from the Latin *sacrificium*, meaning "that which is made sacred," and the narrator's confusion about the term becomes more than just a druggie's quirk of personality. The sacred—those "things set apart and forbidden," per Émile Durkheim's definition—has been the narrator's aim all along, whether or not he's been completely aware of it. The most consequential sacrifice in Western civilization, Christ's willing death on the cross, is a bit lofty for Johnson's character. He is only Jesus' *son*, not the messiah himself (*Christ* derives from the Greek *cristos*, which means *anointed*). Where then can his own sacredness be found? How can he be his own anointer? What, at this broken time in his life, remains set apart from him and forbidden? Normality, sobriety—an opportunity to begin again.

The sacrificial object achieves its ultimate worth only upon being sacrificed, and therein lies the charming tenor of *Jesus' Son*, the charismatic pitch of its telling. The narrator evokes these days of ruin through the fondest nostalgia, with a tenderness peculiar for a vista revealing so much pain: "Most days in Seattle are grey, but now I remember only the sunny ones"; "all the really good times happened when Wayne was around"; "it was a sad, exhilarating occasion." Writing about *Jesus' Son*, John Updike asserted that the stories are "remembered in an agreeable haze"—Fuckhead's nostalgic, postaddiction longing has morphed the worst of times into the best of times. "Numinous dishevelment," Updike calls it, but the narrator writes from a locus of health, from a place in which he no longer feels the Romantic compulsion to quest, to make of his disastrous life a living artwork. The numinousness and dishevelment have passed, hence his

longing. You miss youthful abandon only when you've been saddled with adult accountability.

JOHNSON learned from his teacher Carver that the American Dream can be a pernicious ruse. Carver's characters are disappointed and disillusioned if not altogether destroyed, and they're never entirely certain who or what is to blame for their stagnation or demise. In "The Bridle," a character says that dreams "are what you wake up from." In the final story of *Jesus' Son*, as Johnson's narrator adapts to sobriety by working at an old-age home in Arizona, a senile man tells him, "There's a price to be paid for dreaming." Fuckhead can feel "the canceled life dreaming after" him—the canceled life of a Carverian character, which for him would be an improvement, a promotion from *inferno* to *purgatorio*. Carver's men and women wish for an earthbound *paradiso*, but Fuckhead never commits that error of ambition: He'll settle for an uncomplicated cleanliness.

In Carver's stories "Fever," "A Small, Good Thing," and "Cathedral," characters grant themselves a minim of grace through the simple act of human communion. Fuckhead himself has a Willy Loman complex: He wants to be well liked by people, and in the story "Dundun" he isn't ashamed to admit it. Nor is he too choked by testosterone or pride to admit his extreme vulnerability, his throbbing want of maternal love: "And with each step my heart broke for the person I would never find, the person who'd love me." About his dope-hooked girlfriend, Michelle, he regrets that nothing in his power could convince her to "love me the way she had at first, before she really knew me."

And that's the key to what elevates *Jesus' Son* so far above William S. Burroughs's *Junky* (Ace Books, 1953) or the nihilistic bilge of Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* (Simon & Schuster, 1985). Those delinquent books constitute a literature of delirium, a moral vacuity that by definition cannot be redemptive; their pages parade characters whose inner lives have been so charred by solipsism and drugs that they can scarcely register a genuine emotion, never mind a meaningful idea. Johnson's narrator, however, intuitively comprehends that love and human goodness are the only redeemers worth having. His story might end with neither total redemption nor the completing embrace of love, but, as he admits early on: "I've gone looking for that feeling everywhere." Halfway into the collection, the character Georgie—played to perfection by Jack Black in the 1999 film version—echoes Samuel Beckett: "We can't go on." He omits the second half of Beckett's famous line, "I'll go on," because he and Fuckhead aren't yet prepared for progress. True progress, they must learn, comes after forgiveness.

YOU'VE probably heard the familiar pabulum that literature unveils something called "the human condition" in its exploration of something else called "universality." Try not to believe that. Even if we could identify this mysterious thing called the human condition it's not the thing we'd be searching for in literature. Great books are not echo chambers for your own selfhood. There's very little in *Jesus' Son* with which the everyday reader can "identify." (Teachers: Don't ever let a student get away with proclaiming an inability to identify with a book. Literature isn't meant to confirm identity but rather to challenge and upset it.)

Johnson's narrator is part messiah because he's been charged with salvaging himself from devils most of us will never be sunk enough to know. We go to *Jesus' Son* precisely because in its most sublime moments it reveals to us a condition both lesser and greater than human. We go to it for the flawlessness of its aesthetic form, its transformative spiritual seeing, and the beauty, the deathless beauty, of sentences that sing of possible bliss. ∞

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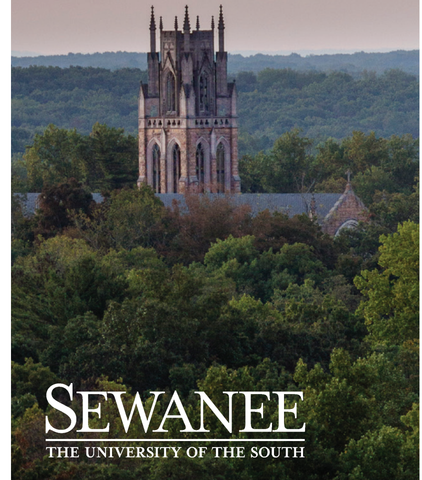

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