

Samuel F. Pickering

Taking the Night Plane to Tulsa

When folks feel good in Tulsa, they stomp on the floor and holler “shit.” In Hanover nobody ever feels good. New England will turn any man’s Blue Bird of Happiness into a Turkey Buzzard. I ought to know; I’ve been here nine years. Soon, though, everything’s going to change. They next time a jet engine whines I’ll be traveling west. An acquaintance argues that my dissatisfaction is not New England’s fault. Corn and crows, he says, can’t grow in the same field. Perhaps, but there is not much corn grown in New England, and I’m not a crow—no, not even a towhee or a chickadee, although if I stay around here much longer surrounded by lads with necklaces, purses, and tight pants I just might become one.

Have you ever heard of a town without a used car lot? Hanover, New Hampshire, is such a town. Used car lots are the signs of dreams. A man sees a rainbow, hurries to the used car lot, buys a chariot of hope and wheels over the hills and far away. In Hanover the rainbow, like the Dodo, is extinct, and there is no market for used cars. The town fathers have banished used car lots. Even worse, no one ever comes to town, suddenly sees a shaft of golden light, sings “oh, happy day,” and sells his car. Like cattails in a wet wasteland, parking meters stand where green vineyards once grew. And pinched foreign cars with their windows tight scrape through the streets, then are sealed in garages whose fronts button down like double-breasted suits. In Tulsa used cars shine on every corner. Tulsa is full of folks ready to shift gears and pursue their dreams. People whose eyes glitter like diamond stickpins in the neckties of Baptist preachers crowd the streets.

New England would bore the ass off an elephant. This past winter a debutante in Tulsa canceled her ball at the last minute because she came down with a sudden case of worms. Such things don’t happen in New England. I understand that the worms have almost been wiped out at Wellesley. An admissions officer swears to me that there hasn’t been a serious case there in the last three years. More’s the pity because those folks in Massachusetts need something other than George McGovern to stir them up. Intellectually New England is as complacent as a Bible Christian in a poker game with two aces up his sleeve. New Englanders worship the meaning of words, not words themselves. In the beginning was the word, not the sentence gummed with meaning. Joy in the word is the creative spirit, and New England priding itself upon possessing truth or upon stoic terseness is deader than integration in Boston. The

celebration of silent gentility is nothing fancier than the worship of death. In a society in which gaps fill pauses in conversation and genteel silence smothers the controversial, quasi-theological writers thrive. Only New England could worship Emerson preaching self-reliance when anyone with any part of an eyeball in his head or a whitlow on his thumb knows that this world has had too much self-reliance. What we need is a little more relying on each other. In contrast to the doily-bound reticence of New England is the creative garrulity of the Southwest. Words, accompanied by a steaming, whistling train of rich malaprops, rush to fill pauses in conversation. Style is more important than content; joy in the word flourishes and literary creation blossoms brightly.

If a New Englander ever does talk, he makes one want to be in church listening to a five hour sermon on Presbyterian missionaries. Some say Old Man Know All died last year, but if he did, he was resurrected in New England. Once a New Englander gets going, he sounds like a bumblebee in a sugar barrel. There's a lot of noise but not much traveling. Everybody up here is busy getting close to the soil. That's fine with people who groove on Annie Dillard and think that trees are for poetic inspiration and not lumber. God made trees for monkeys to climb and men to chop down. Monkeys get coconuts and men get houses. Of course Vermont is doomed. The state is little more than a suburb of New Canaan and Greenwich. Rumor has it though that these two country clubs are about to be sold South. I've heard that oil money plans to dismantle them brick by brick, clapboard by clapboard, polo field by polo field, and ship them to Philadelphia, Mississippi, where they will be reassembled as retirement homes for rich Choctaws. I have also heard that they are going to be bulldozed, dumped into freight cars, and used for a landfill in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana. An environmentalist will probably prevent this. One look at all those psychiatrists' bills and "how-to" books and the water moccasins would shed their skins and head for high ground. Can you imagine the problems of an alligator who swallowed a personalized Connecticut license plate which read "Super" or "Marvy"?

The mineral money in the southwest is developing new art forms and new ways of living. No right-thinking southwesterner wants to refurbish a battered Saltbox infested with roaches, earwigs, and history. He wants his house clean and new. Not long ago I visited a dentist friend in Lubbock. Over the fireplace was a family portrait. My friend and his wife were both naked. Like a good little woman, the wife sat demurely while he stood proudly erect. Gainsborough didn't do the painting, but the artist tried to capture my friends' innocent glory. And the painting was certainly more interesting than the hand-me-down portraits of bearded horse thieves and preachers one sees in New England. The southwestern imagination is expansive not reclusive, communal not individual. The Brazos is the American Nile and the gritty soil of the southwest has something in common with the dunes of Egypt, for its sons raise pyramids to their own greatness. No southwesterner would be satisfied like Emily Dickinson with an orchard for a dome. Instead the southwesterner builds the Astrodome. Instead of a bobolink for a chorister, he flushes a covey of Dallas cowgirls and keeps the Sabbath, not by staying at home, but by joining his friends at the stadium. Stretching above Tulsa is the two hundred foot prayer tower of Oral Roberts Uni-

versity. With steel girders jutting out as a symbolic crown of thorns, the tower strikes horror into the minds of second-generation Episcopalians. Yet, Oral Roberts University is reaching toward something, through vulgarity to an unknown beyond. The highest point on the campus of Dartmouth College is the tower of Baker Library. On top of the tower is a weather-vane, an emblem that makes no statement about life and serves no practical purpose. Why put a weathervane on the tower when everyone knows the weather is always going to be “mostly bad”?

Like the weather, religion in New England is sorry. It can't flourish in towns called Hebron, Canaan, Lebanon, Bethel, and New Haven. It does best in places with heathen names like Skiatook, Pawhuska, and Tishomingo. Often the name is the thing. And when a town is given a heathen name, its inhabitants realize that part of their nature is bad and they try to do better. That's not so in New England. When it comes to low-down, hypocritical meanness, folks here are not just green, they are ripe. Like copperheads in the Blue Ridge Mountains, New England is crawling with Unitarians. It has been said that the Unitarian church in Norwich, Vermont, doesn't even have a Bible, much less religion. I'd just as soon pray in the YMCA. Of course, you can't find one of those around here either. The YMCA in Norwich is now a health food store, filled with skinny kooks, sitting around like a flock of tom-tits chewing sun flower seeds and God knows what else.

Religion in the southwest is creative. Baptists have tried so hard to stifle the imagination that they have created worlds alongside of which Sodom would seem dull as ditchwater. My Aunt Sally, the one with the spayed pup Polly, writes that recently there has been a great commotion in her church. One of the maiden ladies testified on Rogation Sunday that she was with child and said that the Second Coming was only a few months away. It seems that this maiden had been seen after the church picnic walking with the nice, new, young preacher Brother William. Most of the congregation believes that Sister Rebecca is a chosen vessel. But my Aunt Sally who went to Sweetbriar has her doubts and writes, “when the Lambs of God meet together, they will play and divert themselves.” When I go to Tulsa, I'm joining Aunt Sally's church. It has a full-immersion baptismal font with a glass front. Baptisms are important events, although sometimes things get a little out of hand. Once a bad boy caused a hollering among the sisters when he dumped a bucket of bullfrogs in amongst the saved. Another time a hard case dropped in a couple of black leeches, who when they are hungry can stretch out a yard or two. Aunt Sally tells me that so many folks were possessed by the spirit that day that the chiropractor next door complained, saying the shouting was ruining his business.

Aunt Sally's church is not air-cooled, and the doors like the hearts of the people, she says, stay open during meeting. One Sunday last July while the congregation was praying up a storm and not rolling their eyes around like they do when old Deacon Griffiths preaches, a donkey wandered in. Before anybody could stop him, the donkey had high-stepped it on up to the front of the church and commenced to eat the lilies which Sister Lucille had given in memory of her dear departed Franklin. Kneeling before the altar and praying so loud that he could be heard in the next county, that nice young William didn't hear the chewing going on behind him. The choir saw it all right though, and it threw them right off of “Nearer My God to Thee” and onto

a fit of whooping. This irritated the old donkey and he must have figured he could do better. When he finished the lilies, he threw up his head and let out such a bray that Brother William jumped up like he had been shot. Later he said he thought Balaam had ridden down for the service, but Aunt Sally says she reckons he thought that Sister Rebecca's daddy had finally caught up with him.

In Oklahoma folks don't worry about mending walls. Everybody's got a gun. Guns make people normal. Living up here is like living in an out patient clinic next door to a mental health center. Come spring most people are ready for white sport coats, the kind with the wrap-around arms. A little more lead and a lot less talk would do people hereabouts a wheelbarrow full of good. This is not a normal place. You might not credit what I have to say, but it's true. Bend over up here to tie your shoelaces and only the good Lord knows what will happen to you. In Tulsa a horny toad might run up your leg but that's about all. Things are so normal in the southwest that there's a big Baptist school down near Waco that says in its faculty handbook that teachers can be fired for "gross abuse of trust in faculty-student relationship." Hot-damn, during my vacations, I'm traveling to Waco. When a school has to print a rule like that, there must be some old-fashioned religion going on. I wouldn't be surprised if nice William didn't hear the call and join the faculty in Waco. The southwest's the place for love. Not long ago when I was flying from Nashville to Dallas, a pert red-head plopped down next to me. She was Miss Tommy Tricky, an exotic dancer who had just appeared in the Pussywillow Club in Nashville. We got along like a banjo and a fingernail. When we parted, she gave me one of her promotional photographs. It was slick; she didn't have much on and was half-turned around pecking over a bottom that was as white as fine alabaster.

If you want to play house, go to the southwest. The ladies out there remind me of Tammy Wynette's voice. Tammy's voice is smooth as velvet but every once in a while there's a gulch in it. Love ought to be filled with gulches. Passion ought not to flow like molasses out of a jug. Men like stumbling into gulches and then climbing out cut and bleeding. Many nice women in the southwest make a handsome living on alimony. In New England, the judge like as not will award it to a man. Not only that but women up here look like they were dragged right off the ark. I met a graduate of Wellesley the other day who had enough suet on her hair to keep all the starlings in Vermont well-fed during February. In Tulsa things are different; they have beauty parlors. The bouffant is still stylish. And when a lady goes walking, she looks sweeter and cleaner than a strawberry ice cream cone.

Love in New England just isn't any fun. Nobody here has to gallop out the back door praying that the old man's shotgun will misfire. Here if you get caught, you are offered scotch and soda. Next comes a discussion of human needs and individual fulfillment. Values are laid on with a trowel. And then, and this does take all dog, the aggrieved husband suggests that the three of you form a more intimate relationship. I'd rather be a bug with a bee martin after him than be caught gallivanting in New England.

Folks in the southwest haven't read Emerson and they season their recollections with lies. Stories told in bars will make a man swallow his grin and fetch a howl. In all my years in New England, I've not once heard anyone talk about Henry the hare-

lip and his mean mammy Mary Lou. Nobody hereabouts has ever been to the side-show and seen Henry's cousin Billy Bob the birth-marked boy. In Wetumka you'll hear things they have never heard in Woodstock. Some of what is said might be banned in Provincetown, but most of it is all right. Speaking of Wetumka, I once saw quite a fight there. I don't know what started it but a big man in a red and orange shirt grabbed a little man in overalls and started to squeeze him. He squeezed the little man so hard that the little man's eyeballs bulged like a bullfrog serenading his sweetheart. The little man didn't fight back. You would have thought he was asleep. This discommoded the big man, for he was used to people biting, scratching, and praying. He asked the little man why he didn't struggle, saying he was fixing to apply his famous Chickasaw squeeze, one which, he added, had almost popped out more eyeballs than the goings-on in Waco. And that, dear hearts is saying something, for I have just received another letter from Aunt Sally. She writes that nice William has moved to Waco. It won't be long, she adds, before he becomes a pillar of the community, spreading the good word and sowing the gospel seed far and wide.

Anyway, the little man yawned when the big man addressed him. Then he allowed as how he was getting ready to fight, but he liked the people in Wetumka and didn't want to damage their property. Before he fought, he explained, he had to look around to see where he could throw the big man and not hurt any houses. So he could see better he was bulging his eyes. He was about through, though, he added, and he told the big man that he could soon expect to be bouncing across the prairie like a hoppergrass ahead of a fire. These words fell on the big man like a two by four and he lit out like a hound dog with a polecat after him. Some say he crossed over to Arkansas and is lying low in Fayetteville, hoping the little man doesn't look his way. In any case he was last seen high-balling it through Tallequah heading for the state line.

Like the little man, people in Oklahoma see things differently from people in New England. Once I was eating tortillas in a cafe in Antlers. It was family style and a bunch of us sat around the table. One fellow who did some commercial traveling in that part of Oklahoma began to describe the famous bees over at Idabel. The bees, he said, were as big as turkeys. "What," said a youngster who worked for HEW and had a hairdo that looked like a milking machine had been sucking on it. "What," he said; "how big are their hives then?" "They are the same size as normal," the traveler answered. "Very strange," the young man said with a smirk on his face; "how do they get into their hives?" "That's none of my business," said the traveler, "let them look to that."

And that's the way I feel about New England. Let them that suffer here look to it. Nobody else wants to. I'm taking the night flight to Tulsa. Once I get through the mud to the airport, I'm throwing my L. L. Bean boots into the garbage can and slipping into some new Florsheims. On the airplane I'll be the fellow in the double knit. My necktie will gleam like the sunset. Turned backwards, it will deliver a full-fisted, eyelid bruising message. Sit next to me, and if we get along, I'll invite you to lunch with my Aunt Sally and Sister Rebecca—whose standing in the church is, I hear, not quite what it used to be since she produced a Messiahess instead of a Messiah.

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