

BARTON COLLEGE

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*Crucible*

Fall 2014

*50th Anniversary Issue*

## NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

*Crucible* was first published in 1964. Originally funded by the Art and English Departments at Atlantic Christian College (now Barton College), with the help of the annual sale of art work donated by ACC art students, for many years *Crucible* received grant funding from the North Carolina Arts Council. The administration at Atlantic Christian/Barton College has always understood the importance of the arts to a liberal education and has generously supported the magazine from the beginning. Beginning with Volume 43, a longtime friend of Atlantic Christian/Barton College began providing a grant to fully fund the publication of the magazine, allowing more college funds to be used for the important work of educating our students. Because of the commitment of Marie Cherry, formerly of Wilson and a graduate of Atlantic Christian College, we are able to continue the legacy of the magazine. We are deeply grateful for Marie Cherry's commitment to the arts at Barton College.

This fiftieth anniversary issue of *Crucible* is the first since 2011 and is larger than usual in order to compensate for the absence of magazines for the past two years. It is also the last issue to be produced by the current editor, after an association with the magazine of forty years. Continuing a tradition established fifty years ago, the 2014 *Crucible* combines work by well-established writers with works by young writers who display talent and a fresh point of view. This is made possible because the editors read the manuscripts "blindly" and judge each work on its own merits.

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## KENTING

Suddenly he awoke.

Everything was dim, slightly wavering. For a few seconds he forgot where he was, and why he was where he was. He looked out the large glass windows. There were deep green hills, stretches and stretches of verdant rice fields, and countless palm trees with leaves swaying, all ensconced in a white mist, silent and sacred. Despite an overcast sky golden rays shone through the gossamer mist, giving the air a moist, yet clear, sharpening quality. Everything appeared with an otherworldly brightness, and it's impossible to tell what time of day it was, existing perhaps only in the interstices of time itself.

Unreal time.

He remembered. Inside the bus, he, they, were on their way to Kenting. It was a scenic tour bus, with two decks, the bottom deck storing luggage, various boons and bounties in gift shop and duty-free shop bags, strollers and walkers, oversized stuffed animals, and other signage indicating 'consumer class on vacation' (of course there were further divergences leading to more specific placards such as 'middle-class Japanese suburban retired couple seeking to rekindle glimmer of romance' or 'nouveau-riche Fukienese using business trip as excuse to get away from family not really caring where he's going—Kenting seemed popular enough—and just planning to catch up on sleep all the way, anyway' ...yet regardless, they all by some karmic miracle ended up under the same roof in the same compartment of the same Kuo-Kuang Express Bus southbound for Kenting National Park at dusk that day)—

*You said, sorry if I'm giving you the wrong impression. This isn't like Speed, or less dramatically, some prelude to a suicide car bombing. After all it's Taiwan, not Israel. You said, the truth is often much more banal.*

—as well as housing the driver, a stocky man in his mid-forties with wire-rimmed glasses and a combover, who had passed out packages of peanuts and moist towelettes to passengers upon boarding. The top deck was passengers entirely, encased in large windowpanes, with TV screens mounted overhead every three rows.

He and his wife sat in the very first row. He looked at her; she was asleep, leaning against the window and somewhat turned away from him. In her lap was her Coach bag with some brochures and a bottle of water sticking out. From the tray table in front of her hung their camera bag. He hugged a backpack in his lap.

He looked around, and noticed: all the passengers on the bus were asleep. Excluding him. He turned around, peered left and right and tried to crane his neck to see farther.

Everyone was asleep. Including his wife. As if under enchantment, or mass hypnosis, consciousness, like air from a vacuum, had been sucked out of this sealed-off time-space. Then for some reason he woke up, like receiving an adrenaline injection straight to the heart, yanked back from the brink of death, a drowning man getting at last a gasp of air...

*I can see you now thinking Flatliners, Pulp Fiction, or even The Matrix...*

He glanced at the couple across the aisle. They were a small spectacled Taiwanese woman and a portly brunet Caucasian man. He remembered hearing them talk when they all first got on. At first he thought they were speaking German, but then he quickly rejected that possibility. Not Dutch either. Or any of the Scandinavian languages. Maybe Romanian. Or some sort of more obscure Eastern European language. Definitely more Slavic than Germanic. He had no idea how he was making these sorts of determinations. He looked at them: was she a tour guide? Or did she offer more services? Girlfriend? Wife? Mistress? No, the man's hand had no band or tan line. Successful Eastern European, probably Croat (versus Serb), small businessman, fifties, divorced at least ten years (wife had custody), second spring (check out the designer jeans), somewhat socially inept, slight romantic streak, lotus blossom fetish. The bus driver handed them moist towelettes; the woman said thank you in Mandarin. She: late thirties to early forties, Caucasiaphile, more specifically Europhile (but it's more a personal thing than a cultural thing), worked in tourism or banking/finance (how they met), lived in Europe (probably moved to Croatia) more than a decade, with Nationalist family ties in Taipei. He afforded her a slight sense of ethnic superiority not to mention financial security while she nominally satisfied his mail-order fantasies (his business buddies urged him to just get one from Vietnam or the Philippines, but no, not Ivan, he's an idealist, he's better than his boorish buddies—because love is what separates humans from animals, after all). Her family liked him and was even

more practical than she; his kids got along with her great as they kept anyone racially different from them at a feared and respected distance, but, potential mother-in-law, being of an older generation and still believing in the values of tradition unlike kids today with their MTV and unabashedly capitalist values, remained more suspicious—as all mothers do of mothers of their progeny. Mother was ambivalent about the possibility of grandchildren, refusing to believe her son and this woman from (Thailand?) would choose not to have kids, or even marry. What’s the world coming to, anyway?

By now the woman was leaning her head against the man’s shoulder, mouth drooling slightly. There was little doubt as to the nature of their relationship. (*What? Elementary?*) Exhausted tourists. In the brief intervals between enjoyment people are left to boredom, which is when thoughts tend to sneak in. It’s absolutely terrifying to be left to oneself, from whom one must escape at all costs.

He tried to sleep. To no avail. He looked up at the television. A program was on. Lush green scenery drifted across the flat screen in dreamlike slow motion. He had no idea how long the video had been playing. He thought, at first, he was watching some promotional video for the national park. But there was no narration. Just continuous footage of forests, mountains, streams, grassy plains. A screensaver-type, ‘immersive’ visual sleep aid that was being indefinitely looped? (Like the kind of therapy for children with ADHD? As if the thin line separating these wealthy first-world ecotourists from becoming hyperexcitable savages, the colonizer from the colonized, perpetrator from victim, civilization from chaos, etc... would dissolve once some equilibrium point between tedium and exhaustion was breached?) But, to his surprise, it turned out to be a locally produced nature program; yet unlike *Man vs Wild*, BBC’s *Life* and shows like those, this was almost artistic, with often a kind of vanguard framing, editing and take sensibility reminiscent more of art house films like *An Autumn Afternoon* and *In the Mood for Love*. Psychological. Interior. Civilizational. (A wildlife documentary of midlife crisis and unconsummated love?) **Fictional.** (*The Lion King* meets *Persona*?) In an instance, two bucks appeared on screen, and charged at each other, locking antlers, against what looked like an arid, dusty foothill in the background. Part of one’s antlers broke, a dead twig snapped, fallen by the wayside, freeing it from the deadlock. Without a moment’s hesitation both bucks bent back their legs, lowered their heads and charged toward each other again, like two drunk ruric Mainlanders embroiled in a bar brawl. The other deer was able to lacerate the one with the broken antler this time on the

neck. Which one was weaker, as well as the outcome of the fight, were clear and coldly captured by the camera from a distance.

Cut to next scene. A hunter shot a deer in the head. Blood poured out from the hole in its head. It staggered a little and then fell to the ground, convulsing. Next scene. A small hill of dead deer, one haphazardly thrown and piled on top of another, eyes wide open and gleaming like onyx, dark blood congealed from their mouths on their soft light brown fur.

What was he watching? Shocked, he couldn't believe these cruel and brutally spectacular scenes, which were not without a certain formal integrity, a certain poetry, and even poignancy, were being played out right before his eyes on a 15-inch screen on a tour bus to the beach one late afternoon. Why was the film shown? Were they (the bus company CEO, some faceless middle-management bureaucrat or secretary, the driver) aware of what was being shown? Why was the film made? Who made it? (An ambitious Will Hunting-type amateur filmmaker, working some menial mindless job for the company, too proud to reveal his talents but more importantly his failures, finally finished his masterpiece yet couldn't bear to let it just vanish into oblivion, and so secretly swapped the promotional DVDs out on the buses—or maybe just this one particular bus—thus displaying his opus for the public to see? Of course, tourists don't give two cents.) He began suspecting the driver. What did it mean?

He was reminded of a children's show, a cartoon, from years ago about an old woman and a myriad of stuffed dolls she kept. She would tuck each one in at night, but every night after she turned off the lights and left the room, the dolls would come alive—or rather drop the 'act' they were inanimate—and start talking and playing with one another. However, their games would consist of sort of an Olympics of fantasies, where one doll would take ordinary everyday things (a couch, a leftover newspaper, a bathroom scale, sometimes even the woman's Persian cat) and in a turn of make-belief metamorphize them into the most spectacular, imaginative, impossible contraptions and scenes (a taxicab driving through outer space, an avalanche in the Himalayas, a particle beam blaster in an underground secret laboratory in New Mexico, an extinct tiger monster from primordial times), taking the other dolls along for the ride. Yet always, usually at the instigation of another doll, a 'flaw' in the fabric of a particular reality would be revealed, a point of logical absurdity, a paradox, and the fantasy would come crashing down, collapsing under its own weight (often after reaching a point of unbearable excitement, or terror), and the illusion, shot typically

in extremely detailed live-action montage, would simply vanish. Then another doll would take over and ‘drive’ the others through its story. Each night while playing with one another the dolls would subtly and surreptitiously compete for the ‘master narrative,’ trying to subsume all the other dolls’ fantasies under its own. Each doll had its unique talents and characteristics as well. He remembered there were a frog (the central character, a flighty, skittish, Libra-signed adolescent boy who gave off an energy of sexual inexperience and confusion, who was also a bit of a masochist and whose innocence functioned as almost a pheromonal aphrodisiac and turned him into an unattainable object of desire for another doll), a pig (the sadist who was always chasing after the frog), a bear (the jokester whose punch lines always fell flat, random and ostensibly outré and nonsensical, stunning the other dolls for a moment, until it would utter some kind of phonetic mantra—he remembered it was something like, ‘wocka wocka wocka’—and then they would all laugh, and the ‘story’ would resume, as if nothing had happened, no awkward silence, no rift in the fantasy, no discontinuity—he always suspected it to be some sort of subliminal posthypnotic suggestion device, a form of mass mind control, over the other dolls), a pair of fraternal twin gophers (inseparable, finishing each other’s thoughts and sentences, who spoke a private language and could communicate through ESP, and whose powers augmented exponentially when combined. The sign of Gemini. Remus and Romulus), a dog (a jazz and blues pianist with an emphysemic forty-year smoker’s voice, jaundiced, world-weary and wise to interpersonal dynamics, but who as an adult would somehow be subjugated by the other dolls to a speechless pet), a blue-haired monster that didn’t look like anything in particular (Okapi? Elaphure? Platypus? At once paranoid delusional and the voice of reason, the ‘Chicken Little’ of the group, wielding a mighty intelligence and knowledge, the scholar, the Jew), and another pink long frizzy-haired monster (whose vocabulary was generally limited to guttural shouts and monosyllabic grunts. Primitive, chaotic, ultra-violent, the Zen master, the Nazi). Nevertheless every night toward the end of each episode the dolls would be discovered by their mother (the woman whom they called ‘Nanny’) in their doings and misdoings, and they would simply regress from magical, intelligent, scheming, desiring, precocious beings into babbling, almost mentally handicapped, innocent, helpless, altricial infants in front of the old woman (whose face was never shown), and all they wanted would be simply her attention, her love... For a while the kid’s program was rerun weeknights at one AM (he always thought that was quite strange), and he would stay up after his wife had gone to bed watching it, often laughing genuinely and uncontrollably, at other

times with tears welling up in his eyes, going through a rollercoaster of emotions, tears of sadness mixing with tears of joy...

It dawned on him he alone was witnessing a secret, silent massacre.

Extermination.

Mass extinction.

Groups.

He remembered debating once with a young Arab guy in a tee-shirt and khakis holding a sign on the university steps who called himself an 'Islamic fundamentalist,' and who insisted on using botanical metaphors when talking about bombings, such as 'a dehiscence of bodies' and 'the transpiration of the soul.' He even suspected he was a student in the botany department.

He would always remember, in the midst of an intensely heated argument (he was in college), his suddenly blurting out: 'Then we should all just go back to the Carboniferous era,' and the Arab boy's confused, distant expression, gazing back at him, in gentle silence.