

A Narrative Poem by
Brendan Galvin



Hotel Malabar

THE
IOWA POETRY
PRIZE

Hotel Malabar

Winner of the Iowa Poetry Prize

Hotel Malabar

A NARRATIVE POEM BY

BRENDAN GALVIN

University of Iowa Press Iowa City



University of Iowa Press, Iowa City 52242

Copyright © 1998 by Brendan Galvin

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

Design by Richard Hendel

<http://www.uiowa.edu/~uipress>

No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, without permission in writing from the publisher. All reasonable steps have been taken to contact copyright holders of material used in this book. The publisher would be pleased to make suitable arrangements with any whom it has not been possible to reach. This is a work of poetry; any resemblance to actual events or persons is entirely coincidental.

Parts of this poem originally appeared in *Quarterly West*.

Printed on acid-free paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Galvin, Brendan.

Hotel Malabar: a narrative poem / by Brendan Galvin.

p. cm.—(Iowa poetry prize)

ISBN 0-87745-597-X (paper)

I. Title. II. Series.

PS3557.A44H68 1998

811'.54—dc21

97-33395

98 99 00 01 02 P 5 4 3 2 1

For Ellen and Peter and Carla
and Ellen and Anne and Patrick
and Gwen and Owen and Ellen
and Finnbar and Bramber and Willis
and Ellen.

Ben: Why, boys, when I was seventeen
I walked into the jungle, and when I was
twenty-one I walked out. *He laughs.*
And by God I was rich.

ARTHUR MILLER, *Death of a Salesman*

. . . a wilderness of mirrors . . .

JAMES JESUS ANGLETON

Absolute secrecy corrupts absolutely.

FRED HITZ, Inspector General, CIA,

New York Times, July 30, 1995

Hotel Malabar

PARLIN

*Tape One: June 23, 1976, Hotel Malabar veranda,
Malabar, Cape Cod, Mass., morning*

That coat-of-arms over the mantel in there?

Its motto, *¿Ves tú la manera que van*

las cosas? — “Do you see the way things go?” —
under that single strand of greenery.

That’s catbrier, Maggie, and back about where
the kitchens are now I used to spend
half my hours fighting it off
the back walls of mother’s cottage.

Seems like it’d be up the steps
and through the door quick as
a poor relation if you turned your back
to get a cup of coffee. I scythed it,
sickled it, tore it out by hand
until I sweated so the mosquitoes
traveled from Buzzards Bay
just to get their beaks into me.

I’d have used a machete if I’d known
about one then, but I took hatchets
and fileting knives to it, *thought of*
kerosene and matches, except the cedar
clapboards put me off that solution.

Last thing I wanted was to burn us out,
a doghair from the poorfarm as we were
anyway, with me gone on the water

from age twelve and mother cleaning houses
and taking in the sheets and glad-rags
of the summer folk — “Don’t *ever* study
them things too close,” she’d say
when I could give her a hand. “Just drop them
in the tub.” So catbrier was my first war,
all strands and prongs like bobwire,
and some determined. I found you had to go
under the ground for it, a net of roots
it all shot up from, and sever them
with the spade. Though even then
it only knotted up and spread, so cutting
made it tougher. That was my first jungle,
way before my *campesinos* hacked through
green-black walls of vines and leaves
that came on thick and fast
as a head tide up Duck Creek over there.
Men get older and die, my dear, but jungle’s
always young and full of piss and vinegar
— Don’t quote me exact, I hope! —
multiplying itself without any rules, packing
its spaces with whatever crawls, flies, coughs,
sings, screams and smells, improvising
to carry itself forward and take back
anything looks to it like progress. First time
you notice a tree trunk with gray and green
up-and-down vertical stripes and it’s
dangling orange puffballs, why next time
those puffballs are purple and growing

wooly hair like a Fuzzy Wuzzy and the trunk's
running a black sap that will take away
patches of your hide if you're unlucky
enough to brush against it. Is it the same tree,
or another? Things change so fast there's no hope
of landmarks to tell you where you are
or where you've been. There's fruits cased in
husks like spiny blowfish, and growing
directly from the bark. Bees the size
of my big toe. At times your axe releases
perfumes so's you'd think a woman lovely
as you are was waiting for you there.
Where sunlight penetrates like stain-glass
in a church, there's yowling and crashing
of jaguars, wild pig, the "padre's she-mule,"
that young girl turned four-legged animal,
the Indians claim, when the priest forced himself
on her. Snakes like vines, their heads
disguised as flowers, vines like snakes
binding everything to everything, jiggers for
laying their eggs under your fingernails,
leaves bursting out in shapes the evil mind
of that thing deems necessary that very day:
murderous smells, iguanas ugly as an
aguardiente nightmare and about as long
as you are tall, Maggie, or a poison
concocted in one fruit only, just as
your hand reaches out for it —
the whole business geared to strip you

past your skin to your bones, clawing you
with its spikes like an unwilling bride,
lianas looping your neck to slow you down
for the *carrapatis* waiting by the gross
under every leaf, trunks the size of
bulkheads to block the view, deflecting
your eyesight from the way forward.
Why, once I came upon a huge block of stone
smack in the middle of nowhere. With a Mayan
bigwig carved on it, mean-looking gent
with a pitchfork and a poor infant
stuck on it. Thereafter I always set
my overseers in a line behind my Brownies
chopping and hacking the way in, rifles
at the ready lest some panic run through
the work gang and they drop everything
and retreat the way they'd run off to a dance
and leave everything to Dr. Mañana.
There's no doubt bastard catbrier's
back there behind this hotel still, waiting
just beyond my groundskeepers' mowers.
If we closed up and came back in a year
it'd be up here with us on the porch,
running your tape machine and climbing into
our rockers, just the way jungle takes back
a tired banana *finca* — they're good ten,
fifteen years maybe, then natives set up
with some root crops and a few pigs
and the vegetation swallows their shacks

and plots and even they move on, no profit,
no loss. Strange, how I hated jungle
because it was after my bananas,
but came to admire catbrier for the way
it helped itself to everything. Old baling wire,
fencing, wild raspberry canes, grass, bush,
tree trunks, it just keeps coming, goes left
if you slash it out to right, spirals,
double-crosses and thickens on itself
so cutting it back I began to think,
if a weed could do that why couldn't a man?
Think of a plantation as one strand, Maggie,
and the railroad to port another,
the port itself a third strand, banana
freighters anchored there a fourth, and so on.
All connected underneath, where nobody
could see. Exemptions from port duties,
for example; land received in fair trade
when we give the country a railroad
for hauling the bananas down to port.
Then the port itself: San Miguel, Río Zaca,
Port Adams — all sump holes before
our engineers took them in hand. A lawyer
or two of ours sitting to advise
a presidential cabinet; a few airplanes
on loan to a forward-looking general.
El Pulpo — The Octopus — those yellowsheet
bastards began to call us, but there was
a world to be made down there in that

jungle, and it took a lot more than eight arms
to separate the darkness from the light.
They ought to have called us El Catbrier.
Beans, rice, and pay. That's what we gave
the common folks down there. Schools.
Hospitals and vaccinations. That
and a go-ahead outlook that'd turn their country
solvent and democratic. I would have
all young people the world over
live by a few simple rules to lift
themselves up. Never consider yourself
above anyone who tries. I gave all a chance
and rewarded those showing merit. Beware
soft words and promises. Attend to
your own business with a clear head,
and a steady course will gain you whatever
you desire. Mouth shut, eyes and ears open.
Sow sympathy, reap dollars. And depreciate
nobody, as any man can do you harm.

GORENCAMP

Just some Beltway Bombardier pushing paper
down at Ninth and Pennsylvania, old OSS guy
trying to revive his wartime glory, still
hunting Nazis in the Canal Zone, maybe.
Might be nothing here but any one of a dozen

old colleagues, setting *me* up for a ride
on a banana peel. Parlin doesn't exactly
run this place; he floats around here taking bows,
a real gray eminence, resembles Colonel Sanders
on the Pritikin plan. He leaves
the paper-shuffling to Junior. Unless,
of course, he squats over some problem. Then
everyone rolls out like Waldorf extra-soft.
All but that witch doctor. You've seen
that little dried-up guy, looks like some
headhunters dipped all of him
in the pot? Expressionless as a chunk
of mahogany, tiptoes around here
quiet as a cat. Wears a dark suit
all summer, and never sweats a bead.
They claim this zombie's as close as Parlin
gets to the medical profession. The way
that Indian hangs around the Little
League games, you'd think these swamp Yankees
would burn him and Parlin out, except
they always manage to look the other way
once they dope out what side their bread's
buttered on. I mean he throws a little their way:
New ballfield? Parlin springs for it and they name
the park for him. Once he decided every
third grader needed a harmonica. Combat
delinquency or something. Handed them out
in person. Plus big spenders this hotel
draws to town, plus half the female Malabars

are changing the sheets here and putting
little chocolates on the pillows.
Plus he's a local boy, made good, sound example
for any wayward youth who's interested
in moving the local gene pool closer
to albinos. Thing is he likes to tell
jungle stories to anyone who'll listen.
Sheila's calling herself Maggie Snow
and doing some interviews with him.
He thinks she's writing a book for kids,
inspiring capitalist that he is.
She's neat and trim, besides which
Parlin's about seventy-six and thinks he still
likes sex. Claims he was with United Fruit
in the beginning, but those banana outfits
were around in various shapes and sizes
way before Teddy Bullmoose galloped up
San Juan Hill. We think he got in
in the '20s. Maybe through railroading.
Mañana Banana, they call United Fruit.
You'll get a new vocabulary, working this gig.
They'd move in down there by promising
El Presidente a railroad. Never did
lay rails up to the capital, of course.
Didn't want anyone with smarts poking around,
see them looting the Yellow Gold.
Banana workers get a buck-and-a-half
per diem down there now, so you can guess
about back then. Parlin still calls them

his Brownies, a regular Al Schweitzer.
Like a Brownie doesn't need a minimum wage,
loves bunking twelve to a room in shacks
painted a shade they call smallpox yellow.
Not even garden plots allowed. Mañana
used to pay in scrip they printed up themselves,
redeemable for everything from beans
to burial suits, but only at the company store.
Political system's a Riotocracy:
if the president's palm got itchy, Mañana'd
engineer him out, help him onto the boat:
Havana, the Riviera, Switzerland if he liked
mountains, and bring on the shadow government.
The Army's always shopping for a better deal,
so the First Lady knows not to unpack
the family jewels. Need a railroad bed,
the Army rounds the locals up and passes
out shovels: Bayonet Labor it's called.
Checkerboarding's when the Senate decides
they'll stop Mañana buying up the country,
so Mañana buys landowners instead.
Mostly they'd pay the president
two or three bucks an acre, or promise him
ten percent of profits, knowing the prez
and cabinet would be living it up in Barcelona
by the time payday rolled around. Here's how
you'll know to meet me up here. At ten of one
I'll buy a bag of M&Ms in the gift shop.
One M for Maggie, one for Mac. One of you'll

be there every day. Work it out with her.
Days I'm not there, don't come up here.
Unless something's happening, or Maggie-Sheila
has a juicy tape. If there is anything,
that is. This whole operation — some nights
I wake up in a sweat I'm going to get nothing
but a handful of wet chocolate out of this.
Look. The Krauts were rattling around down there
during WWI and after. Shortwave operators
they couldn't maintain up here, they handed out
the quetzals, pesos, lempiras, sucres, or córdobas
and they were home free. Transmitting from
hotel rooms. Maybe from Parlin's
banana farm, too? That's what we're here
to find out. Be different if we could do
a Black Bag job on his phone — except
he never takes it off the cradle.
Be really swell if we could photograph
his memories, too. These up-close
low-tech jobs, there's too much down time.
Bars, parking lots, the airport.
Rooms like this. That's why you meet an old
operative and you've met a nervous drunk,
spook with enough identities
to constitute a quorum by himself. A lifetime
of teenage fantasies, until he's so split up
he's atoms telling lies to other atoms.
No spy-smasher stuff here, Mac. First time
you change your name you're in a mist

that even you can't see. Whoever called
this game a wilderness of mirrors got it right.
I should have known before I made the leap
from OSS — and never made the leap, at least
to here. But I was hooked once Wild Bill
put me on the bat detail. I tell you this?
How Donovan heard the Japs went gonzo
at the sight of bats? We were preparing
to go in on their mainland, so he got it
in his head to bombard the whole country
with the little squeakers, anti-morale
raids. Shipped us down to Arizona, and had us
fit these canvas funnels up against cave mouths
in the desert. No lie. At sunset they'd
flock out, and end up in these crates
covered with screen, built to burst when dropped
from altitudes and send the Nips right through
their little paper houses. Trouble was,
between the time we pushed them out the bomb bays
and the time they hit the ground, the little
goomers froze. So cold up there the desert floor
was plastered with them, freeze-dried.
But Wild Bill always thought there was a way
to pull off anything. "The perfect is
the enemy of the good," he used to say.
Had us theorizing about heating units
for the crates, even tucking the little guys
in thermal suits, one by one, zipping
them up like kids going out in the snow.

I kid you not! Those A-bombs saved our ass.
I should have chucked it then, before
I fell in love with Edgar Hoover,
only the combination frat-house
and post-office atmosphere convinced me
this was home! I had a good wife once,
nice girl, but she couldn't compete
with this outfit. Got sick of me checking
gummed flaps on the gas bills for tampering.
You and Sheila are my family now. I'll have you
sniffing every room you enter like a dog
after telltale smells, but I can't guarantee
you'll like me or yourself, once you can't
recall what name you sign your checks with.
What have you got for me?

MAC

He came home here in '48 and caught up
on back taxes for his mother's place, by then
sandblasted and dangling its shutters,
crawled over with vines. He just showed up,
this ancient bar-fly carpenter they call
the Shingler told me. "You work for him
and Junior, you got the meanest paymasters
in Malabar," he says. This after I wet
his memory with a few jars. Shingler's
got a hot fist around the nickels himself:

always splits in time to beat me for a round.
Full of local business up to here, though,
and claims Parlin turned up with the old Indian
and tore the homestead down, then burned the wood.
Shingler worked the job. They bulldozed
down to sand and started in on the hotel.
Halcyon days for the Shingler. Two years of
working steady, lumber rolling in from off-Cape.
Grade A stuff, he said. Not many in town
recalled Parlin the boy. What was he,
maybe fifty then, gone maybe thirty years?
Where he'd been or how he got the cash
was everybody's guess, until he hung that bunch
of free bananas on the veranda down there.
Fresh one every day. It was small-town rumor
at first: he was Mafia, like all the Dons
hang out with friendly Indian companions.
He spread the loot around, carpenters,
landscapers by the battalion, minimum
wage, of course, except the plumbers
and electricians from Boston. Eyes on the job
as if he owned it, Shingler says. He'd done
construction before, maybe in the tropics.
Something he didn't like, they tore it down
and did it his way. I'll tell you, Chief,
the Shingler's right about Parlin's
economizing. Not just the old man now,
but his son Junior. Seems Junior hired a crew
a few summers back — judge of human nature
that he is — they almost closed the hotel

for him. One bartender, preferred
customer handed him a ten,
he'd get back change for twenty. He gave
the bar away, pouring freebies. He hated
the Parlins because they had him rescue
lemon twists and pre-used lime slices,
wring 'em out to recycle in the Jersey Sours.
He led the college kids in a walkout,
the Thursday before Labor Day. Seems they
caught Junior feeding them dinner-plate
leftovers. Now Junior gets around
the labor problem by withholding salary.
So I get fifty percent up front, the rest
first Tuesday in September. Junior claims
he sees his loyal retainers off to school
with a lump sum they couldn't blow
on surfboards and summer love. A real
merchant prince, wringing his heart over
their futures and all. Wonder what state
labor relations would say about that?

PARLIN

Tape Two: June 26, 1976, private dining room, breakfast

For a Yankee to succeed in the tropics
he's got to drink only such water
as he's boiled beforehand. At first

the heat convinced me I could handle
any John Barleycorn they could make
more easily than here, so presently I'd whisked
myself off to hell on a handcar, Maggie.
Today I take only one tot of whiskey.
To punctuate my breakfast, you might say,
and fuel the digestive processes.
Well, cheers! I got sunlight aplenty
once I got back on my feet, and learned
to pace myself in my labors,
rising early and applying myself until noon,
taking siestas I'd regarded as Spaniard
laziness until I found them part of
the discipline of anyone trying to get a leg up.
An hour's sleep before midnight is better
than two after — that's good policy anywhere,
Margaret. I went for fish and cooked bananas,
the odd, clean chicken, and fresh-slaughtered
goat. Fruits and vegetables, never meat
that's dangled in a market stall
so a green glaze of flies had to be
stampeded off it. And everything I'd wash
in boiled water against the drizzling trots —
if you'll forgive my colorful expressions,
but they do take me back, by God! To this day
I give my dinner a personal scrub
before it's cooked, much to the flusteration
of my help, who grumble at my pattering
in their kitchens. It's good of you

to go along with my old habits, Margaret. When I discovered the importance of right eating I was green and alone and on the stumble, digging shallow graves, *mozo* for the undertaker in a yellow-dog town where grass grew between cobbles and the streets were markets for articles that looked gleaned from the town dumps of Christendom. I mean rags. Six nuts for a centavo, green oranges the size of a child's marbles, clay pots too meager for a raindrop. Half a turnip. Jawbones with barely a meat-rag on them. I swapped my blisters for Señor Sosa's beans and rice, and what chickenfeed it took for my fill of *pulque* or wine or *aguardiente* — it means “water with teeth” and that's just what it is — any mixture of the wild animals to keep me off balance so I didn't have to face in any direction to get me anywhere. Maybe from old Sosa's daily nearness to human conclusions he was pretty good to me, baffled at least how a gringo could slip so far down the ladder as to become cheap labor in his hands. Sosa would study my bloodshot eyes as if measuring how long, how wide, how soon, and how deep my portion under the earth would be. “No holes today,” he said one morning. “You sweep the rich folks’

underworld." He led me back of the graveyard to a door that might better have stood in the castle wall in a Doug Fairbanks movie. Thick, nail-studded, it lay on the ground, and he rattled an old key in its treasure-chest padlock and propped the door with a stick while I shakily lit the lantern. Down one iron flight was a paved floor and vaulted ceiling. Some *hacendado's* private cellar, I hoped, where I could liberate a little hair of the dog behind his back. I was that low. But the walls were like windows in a department store, only without the glass, and the merchandise was shriveled as though it had been dipped in tannery vats: each in a booth, each that tropical earth's final joke, *corpses*, kept by some quality of the soil. Poor bastards, dressed all of them in their finery, gowns and bemedaled uniforms fit for a ball. Their boots were inlaid with ornamental silver. Jeweled buckles on the elegant pumps of the ladies were sad proof that vanity lasts only to that final moment, though who would deny a woman it until then? I say women, Maggie, but in their leathery condition to determine a rich woman from a poor man made little sense. Here and there, tucked in the crook of an arm, a baby

in a christening gown still seemed to kick out against its early termination. Over here was a man as if bent under a basket of charcoal, hair black and thick as the wig of a soprano, but who could say now was he only a laborer gotten up as a *hacendado*? They all had marvelous hair, keeps growing after your death, as you might know. And the smell? Deathly sweet and perpetual enough to keep me from stripping that silver and making a run for it. Some ladies mimicked ancient market crones, twig-arms frozen in a haggle over a smear of goat cheese. One gent seemed to plod along still, so I expected a shaggy-headed burro beyond his shoulder, except his mouth was stunned open as if death's enormous moment had canceled his destination. Below each numbered booth, a name scratched out with a stick before the clay hardened. *Don Umberto Somebody of Somewhere. . . .* "Rent paid until the first trumpet sounds," Sosa nodded where one, propped at a beam as if at some *pulque* stand, glass yet to hand, a *borracho* known thereabouts for his perpetual skinful, seemed to laugh through his gums at a quip still hanging in the air. "Do you see the way things go?" asked my employer, his warning that

I couldn't long continue on my ruinous path.
Was this makework sweeping underground
his way of telling me nothing I could do
would prepare me for their unfortunate state —
therefore to reward myself while I took breath
in this one? To this hour what I own
I own, and whatever I can I control.

MAC

I've gone beyond the call of duty now.
Beyond the call of reason! I'm in like Flynn.
I'm in the family way, with A. Norton Parlin.
At least on his maternal side. This chick
who runs the gift shop started putting
the glad eye on me every time she saw me
doing lawns, clipping hedges, the other
life-on-the-edge stuff I trained at Holy Cross
and the Academy for. Good Christian boy
that I am, at first I thought she admired
my work. One evening I'm out front observing
as our guests take lessons running the hotel's
catboats into each other, and Lett Porter —
the head groundskeeper — comes out
with her in tow. Say Mac, would you run
Prudence home? Misplaced her car keys.

Don't go clamming without your boots on, Lett
mumbles to me. My other set's at home, she says,
and she's beaming "No shoes or shirt required,
just walk right in!" To Carthage then I came.
But Chief, if you ever have a granddaughter
don't name her Prudence. Let's just say
her nature belies her name. Not quite contemporary
with my mom, but she's been galloped around
the corral a few times. Does Bette Davis gestures
with cigarettes, blows smoke for emphasis,
earrings the size of hubcaps, four-inch heels,
stockings with seams. I pity the poor kid.
Attended the Powers School of Charm. Studied
modeling, then came home to Malabar and married
a fisherman, a real knuckle-dragger
who beat on her at six-pack's end "for being
educated." She's a softie under the high-fashion
ensemble. Gets along with the old Indian.
Understands his loneliness, she says, but here's
the kicker: she's Parlin's niece by marriage.
Seems the old boy took a look around and lit on
her aunt Margaret, a local schoolteacher,
oysterman's daughter, hair-in-a-bun
Hyannis Normal School grad. Dead since '67.
Junior's mom, and Randall's, the one who's still
down there with Mañana. What a cover, the big
banana honcho, and back he comes and marries
Miss Christian Youth Circle. What a cover!

PARLIN

Tape Three: July 2, 1976, Parlin's suite, lunch

Fresh fruits and vegetables, none of these
frozen blocks of greens and meats.
Freezing introduces cancers to the system,
and nothing salted, as salt pickles
first the tongue, then all the flesh
sure as formaldehyde. My good health I owe
to taking such pains, and to my *curandero*
Fermín, that serious brown man
you may have seen about the grounds.
Fermín's been with me this half-century,
and he's his own best proof of his skills.
The last medical doctor I consulted
was a drunken sawbones run out of
Gulfport, Mississippi, for some crime
against the human race. Some said he'd
took off a wrong leg, or fell head over heels
for Miss Morphine, or both. You know how
small towns embroider on events. Imaginative
bastards. They got the drunk part right, though.
This was near Puerto Plata, a banana *finca*
where I broke out from stern to teakettle
in red spots the Gulfport assassinator
claimed was chicken pox. Chicken pox my elbow!
They itched so I was like to claw myself

right to my bones. Fermín lived thereabouts
and they sent for him. I held no case
for chopping chicken heads and lighting candles
and waving grizzards in the air and such,
but I was willing to stand for anything
that might keep me my hide. He made a bath
with herbs he had, then put some in a tea.
A few soakings in that soup inside and out
and I was done. Skin like a newborn baby's.
I never asked him how, just hired him on the spot.
He doesn't say much anyway. Just puts
a paste on where it hurts, or mixes up
a drink and *adiós*. Heart pains, nausea,
headaches, anything. Built that sweathouse
out back for me with his own hands,
and I repaid him with a little greenhouse
he grows some medicine in. That gold ring
I snatched out of those jungles is easily lost
should the wrong finger slip through it, Margaret.
In my time I've seen many a line drop from
frontiersmen to fairyfolk in a generation or two,
robust stock fallen feeble when good blood
diluted itself with actors, Mediterraneans —
you understand? So with the marriages
of my boys, I police the perimeters
of this family like a loyal dog
his master's chicken coop.

Point to that bunch that's hanging on the porch
and say, "Let's talk about these." Steer him
into his Mañana years. Get him off
this Horatio Alger tack, Sheila. Raconteurs!
Next he'll be telling you he captured Sandino.
Singlehanded. Back when they called him
Machine-gun Parlin. The stuff he's feeding you
is half O. Henry, half Richard Harding Davis,
and *possibly* half true. And three halves
never made a whole. Nail him down on
the time frame if you can. United Fruit
won't give the agency a clue, and if we push
they'll put the scream on us and State
will have a gunboat sitting out there
in front of the hotel. What year he started with
the radios, when he became a manager. Names
and dates. Head him that way. He's drifting from
one decade to the next, and back again. The fact
he seems to think sometimes you're Margaret Parlin
is in our favor. In that mode he just might
trust you more. Here's some snapshots of the wife
Mac lifted from his girl Prudence's album.
Looks like Margaret Parlin wore white a lot.
You could fix your hair that way, if you
don't mind being out of style, that is? Do it
for Uncle. When this gig's over I'll write you up

for Spook of the Month. Think of the headlines:
LADY IN WHITE UNCOVERS NAZI SPY NEST.
There aren't enough cassettes in this hemisphere
to hold all he's spewing. Dollars to donuts
he's winging it as he goes. How could anyone
as loony as he is run a plantation
and amass enough cash to set himself up
in an operation like this? By '36 the Krauts
had hooked in with the Japs on the Pacific coast.
German outpost in Mexico City, size of the one
in Barcelona. U-boat refueling in the Caribbean,
they even tried for that. The trade-off was
supposed to be industrial machines, plus cash
of course — it can be a comfort when
you're short on air-conditioning. No shortage
here though. Christ, I wake up and I'm freezing.
Parlin must be making up for all the sweat
he lost down there. Then I have to spend the day
in these seersucker shorts. I mean, I operated
out of Tegucigalpa and never had to bare
these varicose veins. "The Bolivar Network"
they called it. Not my veins, the radio
transmitters. Huge shortwave hookup.
Telefunken funded it with millions
they had in U.S. banks. Seems radio signals
move better north-to-south than across
the Atlantic west-to-east.
Less geomagnetic disturbance.
They'd beam from here to South America

on suitcase-size transmitters, from there to Germany on the big ones. Probably from the middle of the street, the way they spread pesos around. Convoy sailings, routes, cargoes, anything interesting. Every kind of snoop you needed in the Canal Zone those days. Soviets, Japs, a whole colony of Germans with their Leicas, watching ship traffic, snapshots of every inch in Fort Randolph. Two bombs in the Culebra Cut, ten minutes, Goering figured, and the canal was out of business. They say Marconi late in life believed sound waves don't go away, just circle the earth forever, getting fainter. He wanted to invent the ultimate bug, a system so powerful it could retrieve Jesus, delivering the Sermon on the Mount. I'd settle for headphones that reached back only as far as "bluebirds over the White Cliffs of Dover," and somewhere in all that nostalgia there'd be this clickety-clack that'd translate into gibberish — code, and whose finger's tapping that key? A. Norton Parlin's? An associate's? That's what old Beltway Bob thinks. If we can give him names, places, and dates, he'll do what they call "walking back the cat." Punch in our feedback with a bunch of others, those fourteen acres of computers

down there, and reconstruct history.
The trouble is Parlin's cat walks in circles.
Here's a couple more acronyms
to help round out your new vocabulary.
SCADTA. ARCO. If you didn't know
what a church key was you'll never guess these.
SCADTA was the airline that tied parts of
Colombia together, until they shut it down,
problem with the pilots being Nazis,
checking in with Berlin on the wireless,
tracing lost luggage, right? Wrong again!
They'd mapped 300 miles around the canal,
dirt-strip airports, fields large enough for
paratroop drops, Venezuelan tank farms,
every refinery in the Caribbean Basin.
Then the Krauts created ARCO, and built a slew
of airports in striking distance of the canal.
What about Mañana? Big European business
from 1914 on. Did Parlin have foreigners
working for him, swashbuckling around
with talents they couldn't use at home
because they'd have to answer for a few
unsavory acts? Was he in on it, or just
a dupe for recruits planted because
they had skills the banana outfits could use?
We need all the names we can get.
Engineers, machinists, electricians,
secretaries who knew how to extract a lot more
than fishy body fluids. Hell, up here

in the States those years they had us
watching German waiters. Within a year of
Marconi's first wireless they were talking
bananas on it down there.

PARLIN

Tape Four: July 7, 1976, Parlin's suite, evening

A lot of us was on the beach those days.
At night you'd wrap up in whatever rags
you had and stretch out above the tideline.
You learned to do without even
a washed-up crate — you'd only have to fight
some cast-off German sailor for it
when you got home from hunting up
a meal or a bit of employment.
You bathed with one eye on your clothes and shoes.
I kept a pile of rocks to hand, and not just
for stoning the crowd of bloody-headed
zopilotes — vultures — loitering about each dawn,
waiting for the day I wouldn't wake up.
I have to say I respected their grit a little,
stoned so often they'd shrug and barely
crack a joint, just walk a bit away and commence
waiting again. You ever eat a gull or rat?
Turtle, maybe? Shark? I thought not, a lady
like you are. Some nights the *policía*

would show up and club us through the dunes
just for the exercise, Margaret. Why there was
every kind of human you could think of —
a New York banker on the run from getting
his hand stuck in the cashbox, owned up to be
a man of Yale; coolies who no speakee English;
Jamaica negroes; gents from all the jails
of Europe; a San Francisco lawyer
in a linen suit that looked like he'd
just tried his last case in the lagoon,
still toting a leather satchel in the hope
that any minute now a client might turn up;
and troops of raw kids like me, signed up
for soldiering on the New Orleans docks
only to get down there and discover
the revolution was called off. Mere meat
with a ticket for some skipper glad enough
to pocket the fare one way but not concerned
how we were lacking for the return trip.
I sailed up to that harbor, Mt. Ypiranga
snow-covered in the background
and a layout of pink and blue buildings
and palm-tree plazas down front,
impressive till the breeze turned and garbage
wafted off the streets. *Zopilotes* everywhere,
protected by law since they constituted
the Sanitation Department. Not that
I had a permanent investment in
becoming star gravedigger south of the border,

but one morning of sweeping underground
with the dried manikins determined me
to move up in the world or at least move on.
There was this other rummy on the beach,
name of Ben Timmins, always smiling, though
I didn't see all that much to smile about.
Picked up a few pesos around the saloons,
penny-ante cards and bean-under-the-nutshell
routines. "Ever hear of a Chinese lottery?"
he says one evening. Among the places
he'd been given the hook was California,
where the yellow people had this daily
number drawing you could get in on for a nickel.
Timmins thought that three-chicken town was ripe
for a plucking, but couldn't run his game alone.
We hawked tickets around the plaza
and grogshops, minimum ten centavos a slip,
but even that was beyond the pockets of
a good percentage of our patrons, so we sold
fractions, riding fifteen Indians
on the one number sometimes. Evenings
we drew a winner, giving him an honest slice
considering overhead and our exertions.
Do I have to explain how I liked this better
than planting pilgrims for the next world?
Human beings, I have to tell you, Maggie,
perplex me to this day. On the one hand
there I was on this beach, trying to see
around the corners of my head to keep

some sport from lifting the button off
my back pocket. On the other hand
that same bastard or similar had me
writing up a slip in the town, a number
he'd arrived at by consulting voodoo booklets
or cooking up a system — counting the number
of vultures in a particular tree, how many
steps it took him to cross the plaza
that morning, the total of his children's
ages, the birthday of a total stranger.
Even now when I hear the word "rational"
I think of them and spit. It wasn't long
before we had the *jefe* of police
in for a partner, the bastard pulled
a *pistola* the size of a dog's leg
to emphasize his interest. Kept us
the only game in town, but necessitated
drawing a number held by a shill sometimes.
The way they went for it I was convinced
they'd keep betting even if we'd explained
the set-up. Wasn't it a novel way
of taking food from their babies' mouths
after they'd tried all the others?
Pretty quick Timmins and me had top-floor
quarters in the Hotel Jockey Club, up where
it cooled off after dark. We had clean
women, and changes of clothes we'd send off
clean as a snowbird to the laundry
just to know we could do it. Even the padre

was skimming off a little, blessing tickets. We were already boosting the local outlook when I hit on the lucky stones. I fixed a kid to win big and claim this pale blue stone with a dark stripe down it brought him luck — I knew a place way down the beach where they laid around in piles. Right off we had a run on the stones almost as big as the game itself. Lugged them back by the bushel like quahogs. The kid was our sales agent and we kept it going by every little while picking a winner who'd bought a stone. By now five o'clock looked like Barnum and Bailey was in the plaza. We even had Ben's parakeet Howard select the ticket sometimes. "Ben, Howard's a cunning little bird, but he's going to be strike three," I warned him. The game was getting too flashy out front. Some loser'd try to plug the bird and hit me instead. A coup solved my problem. General Guzman and spouse caught the boat for Rio, their luggage padded out with the treasury. Prada came in and our *compadre* the chief of police lit out for better opportunities. Strike three, the game was over. Next we got into rendering sharks, or was it selling watches? One or the other, let me sort it out. Remind me and another day I'll tell it for you. Come over here by me.

I was retrieving a half-empty Coke
from the hedges when the bee nailed me.
Kids leave the cans all over. Floors, stairs,
anywhere their grannies might do a double
backflip and sue Parlin. My left hand
blew up red and hot, and the bee poison
started up my forearm. I got Prudence,
with the idea of her driving me uptown
to the doctor. Seems the local guy
got his diploma before the state
put a padlock on the med-school door.
“Besides, he’ll charge you like for
major surgery,” she said. “Let’s go see
if Fermín has anything for it.” Brilliant,
a choice between a Cape Cod doctor
and a witch doctor, the chants and dancing
get me every time. Must be my respect
for time-honored folk traditions. No chants,
no dance, she promises, then tells me
how she was messing around with hair colors
and burnt her scalp a while back. “Fermín
made this mudpack on my head, then wrapped it
in a turban of towels. God, I thought.
When this comes off I’ll need a wig for sure.
I held that thought so long I got it

turned around in my head so it was O.K.
I'd be a blonde when I felt all cheerleadery
and churchy, brunette when I was blue
and considering a change of name, Dahlia
or some such, dark and dangerous. Maybe
even a redhead for when I was plain horny.
After a week of hiding in the house with that
rig on — talk about wearing a bag over your head.
Brown stuff was leaking through the towels,
and stink! Honey, I wouldn't walk out
to the mailbox. When Fermín peeled it off
I was close to sorry, the thought I'd never
get to model those wigs. He just gave me
a baggie-ful of salve to put on a couple
of red patches that were left, I mean
not one hair never even fell out.
What a sweetie. He grows these things
and gets some other stuff from cousin Randall
on the plantation. Fermín's shy
as a sandpiper though. I'll talk to him
for you." By now my hand feels like
it's been in the beehive a day or two,
so I wasn't disposed to argue. Then
she came back and took me to his cottage.
Of course I'd seen the old man wandering
around the hotel before, but that wasn't
close up. On the path out back we kept
hearing this *whomp, whomp*, and when we turned

the corner there he is in the dunes, winging
a tennis ball off the cottage wall,
rattiest ancient fielder's glove I've ever seen,
the pocket thumped blacker than he is.
His eyes are blacker still, and so deep sunk
he looks through you like he can read
the seams on the back of your skull.
He's all sinew and muscle, but I couldn't
guess his age. Fifty, a hundred and fifty?
Not a gray hair, it's black down to his
shoulders. Long hands for a small guy, too,
and his mouth's always in neutral, never smiles,
never frowns. He takes my swollen hand
in his, gentle as a nurse, then goes inside.
"Talk Red Sox and maybe he'll open up,"
she says. Out he comes with a pot of gummy
spice-smelling ointment and smears it over
my hand. Mind you, he hasn't said a word yet,
so I ask him how the Sox did yesterday
and this little glitter comes up
to the surface of that bottomless look.
Beisbol, he says. Crazy for it, follows
the Sox on the tube. Couldn't shut him up
about them. It's like talking sports
with Tonto. If my hand ever shrinks
we're going to have a catch together.

I mean I feel like I'm the last Flying Wallenda, out on the tightrope by myself with Gorencamp at one end and Parlin at the other, both so erratic, shall we say, that I feel safer staying on the rope than going near either one. At least *you* don't have Parlin to deal with. With him it's this tacky charade. Look at my hair and this dress. Remember Hepburn in *The African Queen*? I've got two Allnuts, so I'm twice as lucky. Then there's some kinky business the old goat must have picked up in the tropics, years of subjugated women. Try telling yourself "This is for Uncle Sam" while he's applying that stuff to your person. All I can think of is I chucked a career in corporate law for government service, and look who's getting serviced. That old pink man, nobody would believe it! We're going to come up empty, Mac. Nada. There's simply nothing here, no matter what Special Agent in Charge Gorencamp thinks. Easy for him to sit up in his suite waiting until the sun's above the yardarm so he can crack the gin and start thinking up the twenty questions for today. Know what

he asked me yesterday? If I'd ever heard of
Fedora. You mean the hat? I said. So then
he bullied me for like an hour, about Soviet
defectors and how you and I can't do our jobs
if we're this dumb on history. Let's try
the Bay of Pigs, he said, I'll make it easy
for you. That's when I cut out. They warned us
he was flaky, but I thought they meant a few
pecadillos. It might be getting time
to exercise the option they gave us,
call D.C. and pull the plug on him.

PARLIN

Tape Five: July 11, 1976, Parlin's suite, afternoon

Can you see enough to operate that thing?
Don't open those curtains, today,
whatever you do.
The vermin are winning today, Margaret.
My eyes keep jumping at the light.

Well if it's chicken the one day,
bound to be feathers the next.
But Timmins the old grifter had
another plan. We'd watch the sharks
patrolling off the beach, so many fins

some days it looked like sawmills
cruising around for employment.

Some way of raking in
a few potatoes off them, Ben kept muttering.
Besides eating the bastards, he meant.
We'd had our fill of shark steaks,
beaching out. When a fresh one
washed up we'd stone
them ugly birds off it. Not badly flavored,
either, well done,

but the raw slice was too red
to look at without thinking you was
about to be a cannibal, and the fish
was only the middleman. Pass me
that water. Many thanks. Got to lie down.

Now Timmins got
the bright light for a shark
slaughterhouse, use the whole beast
the way they do a steer or hog in Chicago,
brains to trotters. We'd render the oil
to a lubricant for watches and other
delicate mechanisms. And the meat?
Why, dry it for fertilizer. What about
selling the skins to a tannery? Even
the spines, turn into walking sticks,

fine conversation pieces. But I wasn't
about to wrestle one
of those birds into a boat.
That I knew from cod-fishing right here
on this bay, damage an only-
three-foot dogfish could do in a dory.

Club its lights out and soon's
your back was turned it commenced to flap
and flipper and snap to the effect
there wasn't room for it and you. "We don't
lay a hand to them until they're stiff
as floorboards," Ben promised. "We hire Miskitos."
Miskito is not
a yellow-jack-carrying bug, you understand.
Indian that lives down there.

Have I
told you this already? We paid a centavo
a fish, and pretty quick we had the tribe
harpooning on the water from their dugouts.
Where was I? The sharks.
Yes, we had fires
under steel barrels on the beach.
We'd peel the beasts and spread the skins
to dry on wooden flakes, then carve
and boil the meat. We skimmed the oil
and stored it in more barrels, meanwhile

laying out the spines next to the skins
so gobbets of flesh dried good enough
to pluck right off. Give the spines
a few licks of shellac. Two things
we hadn't counted on: one was the unescapable
interminable god-awful stink. Even dried,
meat mounds rotted.
Flies and *zopilotes* loved it.

We'd come down from the hotel to the sharkworks
after breakfast, and soon as they spotted us
there'd be this black explosion off that meat.
No problem with the walking sticks. To advertise
we'd carry one around the plaza. Until
we had the greasers cracking smiles behind
their hands, that is. Hard on a gringo,
since you look them people
in the eye for them to know what's what;
aside the fact they think all Yankees
shoot accurate. Second thing was,

second thing was our clothes. Smell like
a rotting shark, there's no trouble
finding a seat in the cantina. Bay rum
wouldn't kill it, nor rosewater.
Deadbeats down there steal anything
just to do it, but nobody went near
our place of business. No fear of leaving

that mess by itself overnight. We'd foxed
ourselves pretty good: nobody
wanted the oil, the fertilizer, nothing.

Oh, somebody somewhere maybe, New Orleans
businessman, Mobile, Alabama,
woke up every morning
wishing he could get his hands on some.
Shark products. But who was he, and how
to get it to him, and where? Timmins
just laughs. "Why hell," he says, "who'd buy
a fish-smelling watch anyway, somebody
had too many friends, wanted to know
which ones was true?" Nothing. By then
all feathers,
three heaping platefuls a day.

But if nobody wanted fishy timepieces,
knotheads sure as the devil
would buy ones that didn't tell time.
We'd got a box of kiddies' tin pocket watches,
dimestore fakes, a cardboard clockface
the tin hands went around sure enough
if you moved them. Then we'd install
what they called a kickbug inside, picked
them off the leaves after dark. Indian
holds a watch to his ear, he hears it tick,
the bug kicking to get out. Burn up
your territory quick that way, have to

keep moving, but we didn't and the new
alcalde had us picked up. Reform party
knew we'd cleaned up with our lottery
so they levied us heavy, told us
to move on and give the citizens a rest.
I was tired of flim-flamming, Margaret.

It occurred to me.

Time to time, in the hoosegow,
under the stars, on an empty stomach,
avoiding honest labor was
a damn sight more wearing
than doing it! Not Ben though.
Fast and loose. Just shook his head,
disgust, and caught a steamer out.

Down in Costa Rica, last I heard, peddling
a gadget he calls a galvanic belt. Costs
but a dime to make: strips of zinc and copper
wrapped in oilcloth, blotting paper between.
Soak the paper in vinegar, you've got
a battery, gives off a few volts.
Wear it around the waist and it restores
your glands back to age twelve. What a figure
the man is. Probably caught a bullet.
Some hubby's pot-metal revolver.
Some pushover, dog tracks on her belly,
given his nose for that kind. Hail
and farewell, noble Roman said.

Where was I? Yes. Railroading. There was.
Slash-gang, cutting jungle. Draglines.
Dynamite. On the new grade

lifting sleepers
off a flatcar, positioned them. Railgang
seating track. Locked it in.

Engine and flatcars are moving up, slow,
settle roadbed. Would have made old
Henry proud, assembly line.

Welders. Riveters. Chinese.
On the job, we were. Mestizos, Indians.

Tough railroad birds
from up there in the States, lifetime Hoggers.
Beg pardon? Railroad talk for engineers.

Gandy dancers. Hot. Aches to speak of it.
Headaches. Yellow jack. You still there? There.
I loved you. Love you. Never meant to do
what I did. Sleep now. Rest, my dear.
Bormann. I swear I didn't know.
Captain Krueger until
they were ready to leave. Then, Herr *Bormann*
thanks you. Fourth Reich
will remember you a hero. Flesh looked like
potatoes

too long in a clambake. Gratuity I accepted,
commensurate — the risk I took. Needed me
to keep my mouth shut. Shoot me,
and United Fruit and United States Navy's
on them quick. Without that money,
never met, my dear. Never have gone back,
up there, found you. Built our hotel
up there. Nothing.

Beat this town for the way it beat mother.
Good girl you are, carried our secret
too close to your heart. Who's here?
Who does whose laundry now? What bastard's

their ballfield named for?
Strangling in catbrier,
that pillar. Air thick as
sour milk, frogs. His crown a skull.

Treason. They'd get me for, Margaret.
Spit me on his fork. Get me Margaret!
No. Margaret get me Fermín, Fermín!

GORENCAMP

We didn't learn a lot about bananas,
did we? Have to get out my old fifth-grade

geography book. But that's what makes
our calling interesting. You think you're going
for flounder and the catch of the day
turns out to be the Loch Ness Monster.
Something had to slither out, all those
tall tales piled on the truth
to keep it down, but who'd guess it would be
Martin Bormann? He's a generational thing now,
kids, like Esso and Moxie. Neither of you knew
what a church key was either, remember?
Hitler's secretary, close advisor, Nuremburg
wanted him for the deaths of five million
human beings. Never would I have believed
Time would throw the name of Martin Bormann
on that heap of lost words. Lost worlds, maybe.
Now there'd be the blessing. If we could *afford*
to forget the names and acts of those monsters,
that is. But now the question's whether
we believe the old banana man, for he does ramble.

FERMÍN

Snow and this cold, cold sea. How Luis Tiant
ever live in this country? Lu-is! Lu-is! Lu-is!
First time those flakes dance in the air
I think they my *huacos*. Only white because
we in the white man country now.

The Señor explain. That get me wondering
can my *buacos* ever come here to help me,
cross this cold sea to this white
country with no palms, no stinktoe tree,
no lianas, no monkey pot fruit, no nothing
but that sea and all this sand. It crash
all the year out there, wild as pigs
running crazy scared through forest.
But *buacos* come. First time I smoke
they come, small and black as words
on sports page, only they dancing. Then
I think, You fool! Think this cold
keep them away? They come all times
after, and live in pine trees. Forest
helpers live in all the gringo pine trees.
That the joke! In fruit, in leaves of tree,
in trunk. What if white man know whole tree
they live, come out to help me when I ask
them right? Then the Señor make me
this glass *shabo*, put in pipe so hot weather
come in. Put in tables for my seeds, plants,
dry leaves. Say, Fermín, this for you.
Do what you do here. You know. It's
the Señor save me, help me when white
Jesus book man say, No more *curandero*,
we have bigger medicine. Say all *Tirios*
going to live in fire forever, what we do
to Jesus. Who this Jesus, I say? How *Tirios*
kill, we never hear of him before you come?

The people still come to me, for they sick,
take away *yubala* enemy put on them. Only now
I'm deep in forest, and pretty soon
Jesus book man tell me stop and go away
or he turn the people against me. Then I help
the Señor. Where all the bigshot Jesus
medicine then? I help the Señor drive out
the *ruba* from his body, then he say, Fermín,
you come and live on *finca*, I take care of you.
Don't have to fear missionary
and you people no more. Just do your business,
he say. But first I do business on
Jesus book man, ask my *huacos* send a *yubala*
on him, then an *olaba*. Pretty soon
he not even cayman food, get carry
out of village to Río Zaca boat. Sometime
I like to send *yubala* on they vacation people
come to this hotel and look at me,
they can't control their eyes. Señor say,
You wear these suit. They good suit, keep me warm.
They vacation people, what they do here
anyway? I see this woman one time,
stand in lobby and cry. Holding white dog
size of tinamou to her neck. Just
stand there and cry. It strange thing
to put on ugly clothes, fool hat nobody wear,
lie around on sand get drunk, when it rain
buy too many clothes in shop, you already
got too many clothes, these young girl. Change

clothes every hour. You look in vacation eyes
you see sky, not even one bird flying. You see
it look like eyes not attached. Good thing
Fermín in control, not worry his mind when
little kid point, say, Hey Dad, look at
old Hippie. Winter cold, but not so bad
when Prudence read about Grapefruit League
in paper. The Yaz, Spaceman Lee. Big boats
don't come in harbor, bring even more
vacation people. Don't bring even more
vacation bag so Señor's *mazos* stagger
under load the way hunter carries king anteater
out of forest. No cigar boat though.
Fermín only see cigar boat that one time,
shabo on top. That the time Señor bring
itch-dass men to *finca*. Men say *itch, dass,*
gesick, gobble-gobble like that. One
he have skin all over burn. They bring
in hammock. Señor say, You help?
That the big job. Two year, maybe more
it take? That the time I call on *buacos* most,
cover whole body, mix of *tapu, pavari,*
sabeocha. Skin come back slow. Each time
I take off, little better, little better.
Then almost like new. Then Señor take away
gobble-gobble men. That only time I see
cigar boat. Except in book Mac reading.
Bet you never see boat like this,
he say. Only one time, I say. 1945? he say.

Long time ago, I say. Tell him about
itch-dass men. Then we play ball, talk about
the Yaz, if he lead league in RBIs again,
do puma-crouch on TV, wound up at plate,
hot for kill. Mac give me this Sox hat.
We hit 'em out, lunchtime he come over from hotel.

GORENCAMP

It's plausible. One theory always had it
that Bormann broke through the Red Army,
made it from Berlin to Schleswig-Holstein.
Hitler's successor Donitz, their U-boat
genius, was still holding out there, and three
of their last subs gave up in South America.
For years rumors drifted back from all over
down there. Sighted among Brazil's Kraut colony,
Argentina, Paraguay. Wiesenthal believes it.
Freshen your martini, Maggie? Or are you
Sheila again? Are you sure? Please don't be
embarrassed. Help yourself whenever you're ready.
All these bags of M&Ms, too. Unless I can
negotiate a price with Mac's friend
in the gift shop. Mac and I hope Parlin
added a codicil just for you. Not funny,
I know. This business of old men chasing old men.
Bormann would have been in his mid-forties.

Wherever he went the Fourth Reich's maybe
his rusty belt buckle by now, plus a few
skinheads he wouldn't sit down to *sauerbraten*
with. Do we report this or forget it and let
the dead bury their dead? Outside the tabloids,
who'd believe us? Trot the Indian out
as an accomplice, we'd have Black Panthers,
Gray Panthers, American Indian Movement
on our case, to list a few. I deeply regret
you never got to take him up to Fenway, Mac.
Like to see your face, Brother Fermín
doing a chant, seventh-inning stretch;
down in the dugout whipping up a salve
in case Tiant threw his whole body out,
whacky delivery he has. Brilliant move,
that Sox cap you bought Fermín. Tipped it
our way, son. What if we kill the tapes
and don't turn this one in? Is *that* the catch?
Someone down at Oz-on-the-Potomac has me
chasing Parlin, already knowing what
he was up to with Bormann? Ignore that man
behind the curtain. Old Snore-in-camp dropped
the potato again. Handed him Martin Bormann
and he blew it, pass me his severance
papers there. Sometimes I have this dream
Hoover's still running things from On High,
still on his pillow so he's taller sitting
than everybody standing at his desk,
still miffed because I somehow rubbed

Lawrence Welk the wrong way, that time
he had me squiring Welk around D.C.,
or because I wore a red tie in his presence,
proved I was insincere, or else my palm
sweated on the one occasion we shook.
A thing like this would've made us all,
once upon a time, but when you've been
around this track a few seasons you know
whenever it looks like you have everything
you may be closest to having zip. Heads
we don't, tails we do. Let's think it through,
even as we toast and pity poor old fatherless
A. Norton Parlin. Had to be malaria,
recurrent strain the Indian couldn't put down
this time. So Parlin walked into that wet
blue delusion winking and flashing at him
out there as though he could escape
by going south, and maybe cool off at
the same time. Except he was in way over
his corny bow tie and that sad floating
panama hat before he got a single
tootsie wet. And Mac, you've won yourself
a lifetime of free medical consultations!

THE IOWA POETRY PRIZE WINNERS

1987

Elton Glaser, *Tropical Depressions*

Michael Pettit, *Cardinal Points*

1988

Bill Knott, *Outremer*

Mary Ruefle, *The Adamant*

1989

Conrad Hilberry, *Sorting the Smoke*

Terese Svoboda, *Laughing Africa*

1993

Tom Andrews, *The Hemophiliac's Motorcycle*

Michael Heffernan, *Love's Answer*

John Wood, *In Primary Light*

1994

James McKean, *Tree of Heaven*

Bin Ramke, *Massacre of the Innocents*

Ed Roberson, *Voices Cast Out to Talk Us In*

1995

Ralph Burns, *Swamp Candles*

Maureen Seaton, *Furious Cooking*

1996

Pamela Alexander, *Inland*

Gary Gildner, *The Bunker in the Parsley Fields*

John Wood, *The Gates of the Elect Kingdom*

1997

Brendan Galvin, *Hotel Malabar*

Leslie Ullman, *Slow Work through Sand*

THE EDWIN FORD PIPER POETRY AWARD WINNERS

1990

Philip Dacey, *Night Shift at the Crucifix Factory*

Lynda Hull, *Star Ledger*

1991

Greg Pape, *Sunflower Facing the Sun*

Walter Pavlich, *Running near the End of the World*

1992

Lola Haskins, *Hunger*

Katherine Soniat, *A Shared Life*



Hotel Malabar

A Narrative Poem by Brendan Galvin

1997 Iowa Poetry Prize

"The view from the Hotel Malabar is one directly into the complex and self-contradictory heart of the American darkness of this waning century. Brendan Galvin has once again proven that long narrative poems can be as alive, exciting, and meaningful as the best novels without losing an ounce of poetic quality."—R. H. W. Dillard

"Dovetailing first-person narratives of a handful of colorful characters, Brendan Galvin has constructed a story of strong import and cool ingenuity. Joseph Conrad or Graham Greene might have written something like *Hotel Malabar* as prose, but Galvin has made it genuine poetry as well as first-rate storytelling. This one's a dazzler!"—Fred Chappell

"For those who may think that poetry has abdicated its storytelling authority and lost out to the novelists the compelling power of narrative, Galvin's *Hotel Malabar* strongly says otherwise. *Hotel Malabar* has the fast-moving plot of a page-turning thriller, characters to enjoy and to remember, and a glorious sense of place. Galvin proves that poetry can, in the right hands, do it all, and with wonderful economy and efficiency."—George Garrett

"*Hotel Malabar* is a weird, gripping, and altogether remarkable poem about America's Imperial excesses and the twilight world of espionage in which paranoia and manifest destiny jostle with the familiarity of burlesque comics doing their ancient routines.

Galvin is one of our finest poets, and his preeminence as a master of the long poem is generally acknowledged. To his *Wompangoag Traveler* and *Saints in Their Ox-Hide Boat* he now adds this latest poem, which is altogether a triumph."—David R. Slavitt

Hotel Malabar reads as if Brendan Galvin merged the William Faulkner of *As I Lay Dying* and the Joseph Conrad of *The Secret Agent* with Elmore Leonard's dialogue and the imagery of Orson Welles' *The Third Man*. The result is a narrative poem that reads like a popular novel even as it displays the images and rhythms of a master poet.

The setting is a Cape Cod hotel during a mid-1970s summer, and the poem unfolds through the monologues of five distinctive characters, an elderly Yankee "banana hand" who spent years in Central America as a plantation manager, three federal agents sent to discover his wartime activities there, and an Indian *curandero* who is the old man's source of medicines. As it moves relentlessly toward its conclusion, this poem/mystery novel/spy thriller asks questions about human motivation, the nature of truth, and the consequences of secrecy and the willing fabrication of illusions, of a life lived in "a wilderness of mirrors."

Brendan Galvin is the author of twelve collections of poetry, including *Winter Oysters* and *Saints in Their Ox-Hide Boat*. His awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Sotheby Prize, and the Folger Shakespeare Library's O. B. Hardison, Jr., Poetry Prize. He lives in Truro, Massachusetts.

University of Iowa Press

Iowa City, Iowa 52242

Photos by Ellen Galvin

ISBN 0-87745-597-X



9 780877 455974

9 0000



P O E T R Y