

A Narrative Poem by  
Brendan Galvin



# Hotel Malabar

THE  
IOWA POETRY  
PRIZE

# Hotel Malabar

*Winner of the Iowa Poetry Prize*

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A NARRATIVE POEM BY

BRENDAN GALVIN

*University of Iowa Press Iowa City*



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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

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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

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1994

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

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1996

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Gary Gildner, *The Bunker in the Parsley Fields*

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Brendan Galvin, *Hotel Malabar*

Leslie Ullman, *Slow Work through Sand*

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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.

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