

Charleen Whisnant and The Mill

Close to the big time, as well as I can remember ...

The Mill was published in 1965, in the second edition of the Red Clay Reader. This edition featured a poem by Jack Kerouac and a fragment from Dagon, Fred Chappell's novel-in-progress. I was included because the editor, Charleen Whisnant (now Swansea) encouraged new talent. She even paid us.

The Mill is about Rafe and Reba, star-crossed textile workers. It was inspired by fanciful notions of mill life absorbed growing up in Shelby in the 50's and by my job as a technician for Celanese where I wore a green uniform with "Tom" on the front.

I might have been wearing the uniform when I waited by the Celanese main entrance for Charleen to pick me up. (Within view of the drive where I stood or paced, a pleasant lady in an expensive suit sat behind a big desk in front of an escalator that went from the lobby to the executive offices. Having learned from the maintenance people where the control for the escalator was located, I had fantasies about hiding in a corner and flipping the switch when the old men who ran the company were halfway up. I worked in the basement.)

I am not sure how I heard about the Red Clay Reader. My wife might have seen something in the newspaper. Perhaps Harriet Doar, who worked on the arts staff of the Observer, and who was one of Charleen's new contributors, wrote something.

The Mill was not my first attempt at fiction. However, it was the easiest. Lying in bed on my left side, using a pencil and spiral notebook, ignoring the cats and the TV, I wrote the story in an hour or so. Everything flowed, as if I was transcribing words that came from somewhere else. It was a work of inspiration.

The next night, when I got back to the house that my wife and I shared with her mother (we moved into the Blanton Street home after my wife's father died in 1963), the story still looked OK. Usually they didn't at this point. One interior voice thought the ending might be too much, but the other voices raved that such a startling switch was obviously the work of genius.

It wasn't long after I submitted the story to the Red Clay Reader that Charleen called, suggesting that we go to lunch. I think it was her idea to pick me up in front of Celanese; she might have been there before.

She was driving a sporty car, maybe a Mustang. Later she told me about going to a movie promotion then tearing around Charlotte in the James Bond Aston Martin (the one with the machine guns behind the headlights). She wore loose fitting peasant clothes and she had wild red hair and a big dangerous grin. Like HT, the beatnik girl I had known in West Palm Beach, Charleen was the zoftig type. She was 31, six years older than me.

We went to the Ole Smokehouse on Montford, which wasn't far from Celanese. It was and still is a meat and potatoes place.

I suppose she asked me how I came to write, what I read, and if I had any interesting opinions. If so, I told her I didn't know why I wrote; I read science fiction and I had no worthwhile opinions that I was aware of. I probably told her about being a development technician and maybe about the tow spreader. I might have told her about the airplanes without wings and the spaceship with no visible means of support.

Appropriately, she did most of the talking at this and subsequent meetings at the Ole Smokehouse.

During the course of these conversations she described the Red Clay Reader and what she was trying to do. She related her experiences with Erza Pound, how she had corresponded with him when she was in school and later visited him in the mental institution. I thought that Charleen might be just what a mad poet needed. She regaled me with literary gossip about a famous Russian who, on a tour in the US, required the sponsor to supply a female for the night. She also told me about visits to Shelby and the people in her extended family. These stories had a softer tone and were similar to stories I have since heard from other southern women, dealing with Cousin so-and-so and Aunt this and Uncle that.

At one time or another, she informed me that I had a sort of charming naiveté.

As I recall, the first meeting ended with her telling me that she would publish my story if I could respond to her edits and improve the work. I did, learning how to cut out fat, get rid of adverbs, and switch from passive to active voice. We did not touch on grandiosity.

The experience changed my life.

After the Red Clay Reader came out I was approached by a book publisher (although nothing came of it) and engaged, briefly, in a correspondence with Fred Chappell. Elva Gheen, whose house we bought about 20 years later wrote an article about me in the Cleveland Times. The caption under my picture read "Young Tom Weathers pensively smokes a cigarette".

It was probably because of notoriety from the story that Celanese let me get by with coming in one day wearing a tie and doing engineer's work. The story also had something to do with getting the Patent Investigator's job at W.R. Grace.

I started thinking of myself as a writer as well as an inventor. Since then I have written five or six unpublished novels and six textbooks, which were published. I am still at it.

Here is the Mill.

THE MILL

TOM WEATHERS, JR.

It was hot. The mill occupied the earth like an animal in the heat of the sun and around the mill the row upon row of frame dwellings were like small beasts in the presence of a large and dominant beast.

Rafe Jones lived in one of the little houses that was in sight of the mill. He could hear the low whine of the spinning frame from the bedroom where he rested and the sound he heard was always with him, during the night, and during the day.

He lay on the bed and waited for the whistle to blow. When it blew then he would know that he had ten minutes in which to get ready for work.

All about him, throughout the village, more men waited as he did, sweating, not sleeping, in the hot afternoon, and listening for the whistle to signal the start of the second shift.

They were on beds with sheets wet from sweat, and askew from tossing, lying inside the houses that surrounded the mill, separated from one another by dusty strips of hard-packed clay, and broken tricycles, and old cars like dismembered beetles, and trees hanging limply in the heat.

Then from out of the factory, reinforcing the noise of the machines in its bowels there came the strident sound of the whistle. It pierced over the hamlet, into the houses, into the several stores, and it even penetrated into the patriarch-like estate on the hill, sounding soft and eerie there, a reminder in the distance.

When Rafe heard the whistle he opened his eyes and stared without seeing at the wall. Then he brought his vision into focus and got out of the bed. He went

to the dresser, and from under a magazine with a picture of a movie actress on its cover, he took out his billfold, a small, well-sharpened knife and some loose change. He put these things in his pockets and stood before the mirror for a moment, looking past the pictures his wife had pasted there, to see himself.

He was not old, nor was he young. The face reflected in the mirror had nothing in it. It was blank. He turned from the mirror and went into the living room.

He was alone. His wife was not at home because she worked the first shift, and their child was not there either. He had gone somewhere and no noise muffled the hollow echo of Rafe's footsteps.

He went to the screen door. It had a patch of cotton stuck in it to keep away the flies, but the cotton did not work and the flies came inside anyway to drone from room to room. Rafe did not care, and he walked out of the door and onto the porch. All around the mill and along the street, in a number of the quiet houses, other men did the same thing.

They stood on the paint flaked and warped wood of their identical porches, then they descended the creaking steps to walk past wilted flowers planted in halves of old tire carcasses, and in the tires filled with dirt, to gather in an ant-like procession in the street.

The men were mostly pale and white-skinned, and they blinked in the harsh light. They were silent. The children that played in the dirt alongside the road, did not pause or look up when a group of the men went by. Rafe's child was playing somewhere like those he passed and he saw the blond head of a boy he thought

was his, kneeling in a circle of other boys who were taking turns throwing a knife at a stick. Rafe started to say something but when he came closer he did not recognize the child and he remained silent.

The quiet gathering walked on. In their wake the red dirt of the road was broken into small clouds of dust that hung in the air for a moment then fell.

When they arrived at the mill it was 2:00 p.m. and the men, except Rafe, did not hesitate but walked directly inside. Near the door a tree had once grown to provide an area of shade and transition between the harsh outdoor light and the interior gloom, but the tree had been cut down to give the mill parking space. Rafe stood for a moment and looked at the naked place where the tree had been. Then he joined the others and they disappeared as a group into the dim light of the plant.

The men and women who worked the first shift were waiting for them. They stood by their machines and looked between the door leading into the work area and the old fly-specked clock which hung at a crooked angle on the wall.

Rafe was the last to enter. The light had changed and he blinked his eyes as he walked, not able to see, but with assurance from long travel, to the spinning frame that he operated.

He said hello to the man he was to relieve. The other smiled but except for that his face was as empty as Rafe's. They talked for a while, shouting over the roar of the machines into each other's ears about the work that had been done and the work that was yet unfinished, then the man who had been there during the first shift, left, and Rafe was alone.

He began to do his job, tending the spinning frame with sure and deft movements, his hands of their own volition taking off and replacing bobbins of yarn. His eyes were blank and he walked in a waking dream. No one of the newly arrived crew spoke, and the only noises heard were the ever-present powerful hum of the spinning frame and the loom's furious clatter. The men worked on unceasing and they appeared only as moving shapes, black in the dust and gloom.

After three hours had passed, the people were allowed to go in small groups to the break area. It was located in a corner where there were no windows. On the crates which were used as seats, some of the women had placed old cushions of faded and worn fabric.

Rafe rested on one of these. Beside him sat the woman, Reba. It was not uncommon for men and women on the second and third shifts to have affairs, and Rafe had once been very much involved with Reba. It had died away when she became attracted to another man, but Rafe still had strong feelings for her.

Sitting with her, his eyes were not blank. They

looked fiercely at the woman who was made uncomfortable by his gaze. When she rose to leave, Rafe's claw-like hand held her in a tight grip, and she sat down nursing the bruises he had made on her arm.

They did not speak. The woman was nervous and looked away, like a bird, from one place to the other, and her bird-like, high-lifted bosom rose and fell in heavy movements.

Rafe's face burned and his hand shook. He looked at his hand and he looked at the woman: at her thighs, at her buttocks. He held his hand before his face, then he put the still shaking hand on Reba's leg.

She stiffened and screamed, "You're crazy, Rafe. Let me go!"

She tried to move, but he continued squeezing through her work clothes into the yielding rubber flesh of her leg. She screamed again, and one of the other men came to where they were. It was the one that now held the favors of Reba.

He was young and his greasy hair was long. The faded denim pants he wore were tight and his genitals bulged at his crotch.

Rafe did not look at him, nor did he release his grasp on Reba's leg until the man spoke.

"Rafe, goddamn you, let her go!"

Then Rafe stiffened and his eyes grew as blank as they had been before. He looked up. His face was drawn mask-tight as he rose in a slow movement from the crate where he had been sitting, to stand before the man.

Very slowly, very easily, Rafe reached into his pocket and pulled out his knife. He opened it, holding it before his body. Overhead the stained light from a flickering bulb was intensified in harsh gleams reflected from the blade. The other man saw the knife, and when he did, he bent down in a graceful movement to pick up a soft drink bottle, breaking it against the wall, leaving a sharp and jagged nub of glass in his hand.

No word was spoken as the two men walked toward one another. Reba's eyes were bright, and her breath came in heavy, panting sighs. Rafe swung in an arc with his knife, and the other caught him in the face with the broken bottle. There was a flurry of red movement, as violent as the outside afternoon was still, then the two men fell apart, both of them mangled and butchered, to drop bleeding on the floor.

An hour or so later that afternoon, in Asia, an American and a Communist soldier, for no apparent reason began fighting and killed one another. The next morning a similar fight occurred between two parties of fifty men each. In a week's time the world was at war, then after that it was quiet again.