The Dead Mule Rides Again

Jerry Leath Mills

Southern Cultures, Volume 6, Number 4, Winter 2000, pp. 11-34 (Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/scu.2000.0012*

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[172.70.130.221] Project MUSE (2025-04-07 03:55 GMT)

ESSAY

The Dead Mule Rides Again

by Jerry Leath Mills

original drawings by Bruce Strauch

Among many interesting things in Rick Bragg's *All Over but the Shoutin'* (1998) is the revelation that Bragg's Uncle Jimbo "once won a twenty-dollar bet by eating a bologna sandwich while sitting on a dead mule" (xviii).[1] I believe I understand—at least in a literary sort of way—how Uncle Jimbo must have felt.

My affiliation with dead mules in southern literature started close to forty years ago, when I was in graduate school up north in Massachusetts, working in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century British literature and coming vaguely to realize that the culture I was studying was no less distant from me, in terms of much that I felt instinctively or by prior cultural absorption, than the one in which I was currently paying rent. To counter these feelings of nervousness and disorientation (I don't think people used the word "alienation" as loosely then as they do now), I took the more or less obvious solution of reading about what I'd left behind me, for a while, in the South. Not in any systematic or disciplined way—I never took a course in the subject—but in whatever spare time I could find, I read the fiction of southern authors I'd always known about but had never really looked into much during the years I was growing up and going to college in North Carolina. Did I find comfort, warmth, solace, and the confidence of knowing that I was part of something very richly textured? Some of each, of course; but mostly what I found was dead mules, an image that recurred with noticeable frequency in the novels and short stories I was reading. After the fourth or fifth one I started keeping a list—mainly just authors and titles, page numbers if I remembered to; sometimes a hand-transcription of the relevant passage, if it was short. I lost these materials several times, but was able to recall most of them when I started a new list. After I returned to North Carolina to teach courses in the English Renaissance, I kept up my collection, which over the years took the form of jottings on scraps of paper stuffed into a manila folder.

Sometime in the late 1980s I mentioned all this to *Southern Cultures* editor John Shelton Reed in one of the conversations we used to have about North/South cultural contrasts, and he began to encourage me to write my observations into

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The straw that stirs the strong and heady julep of literary tradition in the American South. By permission of the "Dead Mule Club, the best half-assed bar in town!" Drawing by Ellie Cox.

an essay. I thought he was pulling my leg, but as years went by, other people lent support. The results finally reached print as an essay titled "Equine Gothic: The Dead Mule as Generic Signifier in Southern Literature of the Twentieth Century," in *The Southern Literary Journal*, 29 (Fall 1996): 2–17.

As it turned out, more people wanted to know about dead mules than I had imagined. Jane Stancil described the essay in a Raleigh newspaper, and then Peter Applebome did a story in the *New York Times*, and *Harper's* magazine printed an excerpt last November. And now John Reed has invited me to provide an augmented and updated version, which I dutifully offer herewith, through the gracious permission of Fred Hobson and Kimball King, editors of *The Southern Literary Journal*. I have added to my original text such examples of the subject as have turned up since the first version was written—some I missed before, others referred to me by friends, still others simply stumbled upon as I continued to read southern fiction. My commentary is also expanded, especially in the endnotes.

I like to think that my study is more or less innocent of theory, but nobody believes me. I often get some version or other of three questions: Are these passages real? Is the essay serious? Is it a satire?

The first is easy to answer: yes, the passages are real, and you can locate them (barring typos in my references) just where I say they are in the books I cite. The second question is a little more difficult and requires a more subjective response, one that suggests how a dead mule may be more or less serious according to where it's found. A good illustration of this principle is in a story told by the late Beaufort County, North Carolina, humorist Edmund H. Harding (1890–1970) and currently available for listening on tape at the Bath, North Carolina, town museum.

In Harding's anecdote, some rowdy boys steal a dead mule from a livery yard one Friday night and drag it with their horses onto a local minister's front lawn. Obviously distressed upon making the next morning's discovery, the minister sends urgently for the mayor, an irascible and somewhat pompous official who is

extremely annoyed at having his Saturday morning's ease preempted by such a matter. "Preacher," he says, "dead mules are not a municipal responsibility; this is not my problem. Anyway, since you're a minister, isn't the burial of the dead part of *your* job?" "That's right, Mayor," the preacher replies, "but I don't usually like to go ahead with it without consulting the next of kin."

And so to the third question, Is it satire? Possible targets have been suggested, ranging from southern literature itself to enumerative bibliography, but most readers' suspicions seem to light on various types of poststructuralist criticism now in academic vogue. To these I can only plead again my innocence of theory and perhaps add that in some cases I may have consulted rather closely with the next of kin.

I begin again, as in the original, with three epigraphs:

Honeysuckle vines climbed in and out of the lattice and held together the fleshless bones. The heavy head had fallen to the side, the huge dumb head of a mule, and a third hole gaped above the eyes. Its legs were coiled and wrapped around each other, loosed by the decaying skin. Green clumps of mud-clogged grass grew at the end of each leg, thriving on the rotten hooves, and one front leg lay in jagged slivers. Water still ran through the channel between the ribs.
—Sylvia Wilkinson, Moss on the North Side*, 86.*

The man with the tractor was late. We just hung out between the cane and the porch and had ample time to study the corpses. A dead mule was such a big thing my mind couldn't really gather it in. I had to think about him in pieces, like the dead feet, the dead eyes, the dead backbone.
—Barry Hannah, Geronimo Rex*, 16.*

Once we found a dead mule, bones picked about clean, ants streaming through the eyes. The stench was too much for us and after poking the corpse we ran away, gasping for breath. We talked about that mule for weeks. What was its fascination?
—Frank Conroy, Stop-Time*, 24.*

Not very long ago the university at which I taught for many years sponsored a symposium titled "What Makes the South Southern?" One of its sessions was devoted to the question of what is specifically southern about southern literature as distinct from the writing of other regions such as the Midwest or the urban North. Such meetings and discussions are common nowadays, and with good reason. Almost everybody interested in modern literature in America agrees that there's something distinctive about southern writing, but nobody has managed to define convincingly the crucial element that unites the various authors generally thought of as southern while at the same time excluding writers who work in the same literary forms but reflect no special regional spirit or style. What is it that

Is there a dead mule in it?
The author's survey of twentieth-century southern authors has led him to conclude that there is indeed a single, simple, litmus-like test for the quality of southernness in literature. By permission of 100 Straight Products, Inc., of Omaha, Nebraska, manufacturers of accessories for the shooting sport.

links, say, Erskine Caldwell with Reynolds Price, or Cormac McCarthy with Kaye Gibbons, or even the early Faulkner with the late?

BACKGROUND AND SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

Attempts at answers have included rather literal-minded criteria, such as residence of an author in the South or use of the South as setting, but these usually fail to address fundamental distinctions as to how the South itself is to be defined. Is it a certain number of states or a matter of latitude and longitude, or is it a state of mind and spirit, an outlook or instinctive set of responses that certain writers carry with them wherever they may choose to live and write? Proponents of this latter view, that southernness is a subjective state, cite a variety of intangible qualities, such as a strong sense of place, a concern with history, an interest in religion, a propensity for "gothic" elements of horror and the grotesque, a strongly biblical narrative tradition, a deep sense of loss and defeat, and so on. But any of these elements can be discerned in the thought and art of writers who are in no other way southern. So, while such a list may help to define, it fails to delimit, and we are ultimately left with parallels rather than proofs.

Pushing the issue toward its extreme speculative limits, Marion Montgomery published an essay in the *Georgia Review* that seeks to identify southern writers by their affinities with Homer and Aeschylus and proposes that William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor are truly southern because they write with a figuratively "masculine" voice, filled with conviction of personal responsibility as a condition of human existence. Truman Capote and Carson McCullers, however, though born in areas of the Deep South, are figuratively "feminine" in voice and amount to something like northern writers using southern materials. Novelist William Humphrey has told an interviewer for the *Mississippi Quarterly* that in his opinion "one of the great southern novels" is *The House of Seven Gables* and has even offered tentative support to the idea of calling William Butler Yeats a southern poet.[2]

Louis Rubin, assessing the relationship between the South's insistent awareness of community and the literature this awareness informs, cautions against seeking any unitary component of southernness. He suggests that we recognize that "a work of Southern literature, say a novel, is Southern not because it contains certain ingredients . . . but because some or all of these elements have been made to take on attributes in relationship to one another that might not otherwise exist in just that way."[3]

Professor Rubin, though indisputably a giant among critics, seems to me to have missed the wagon entirely with regard to this issue, and I wish to advance my own modest proposal as a counterbalance and corrective to his argument. My survey of around thirty prominent twentieth-century southern authors has led me to conclude, without fear of refutation, that there is indeed a single, simple, litmus-like test for the quality of southernness in literature, one easily formulated into a question to be asked of any literary text and whose answer may be taken as definitive, delimiting, and final. The test is: *Is there a dead mule in it?* As we shall see, the presence of one or more specimens of *Equus caballus × asinus (defunctus)* constitutes the truly catalytic element, the straw that stirs the strong and heady julep of literary tradition in the American South.

Not that I claim to have sniffed out every dead mule in the library. Far from it. Since I am plowing up new critical ground in this study, I am content merely to cite as evidence some two hundred or so examples (exact figures are difficult to arrive at because of frequently nonspecific collective nouns in the works under examination), leaving further documentation and the formulation of theory to my successors in the field. My approach has been empirical, and my mode of presentation will be simply to present the mule (though not always the whole mule) and little but the mule, confining my interpretive commentary for the most part to a few objective and often overlapping categories: *provenance* (Who are the authors and what are the texts from which these belletristic quadrupeds derive?); *etiology* (How came they to be dead?); and *teleology* (To what purposes are they put? This means both practical purposes—the ends they serve for the human characters in the books—and also purposes having to do with literary technique—whether, for example, they are functional in the plot or story or simply decorative, ornamental factors in the landscape). Finally, I will touch briefly on some possible implications of my study as it opens up new areas for theses, dissertations, and other forms of fiction in the years ahead.

TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

The survey below is organized, coroner-wise, under numbered headings denoting cause of death. Other information, such as multiple examples from the same author, is cross-referenced by heading numbers. Many of these entries

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may smack somewhat of the gruesome or impolite, but I trust that experienced readers will acknowledge the high level of violence endemic to southern writing as a body and therefore accept as necessary its representation in research of this nature.

1. *Asphixiation (probable).* Coal dust and mine gasses are evidently what sealed the fate of the titular beast in Hubert J. Davis's short story "The Multilingual Mule" (1983), set in the mines of southwestern Virginia. After its death the mule is skinned by two fired miners, who dress themselves in the hide and appear in the shafts as a ghost mule warning the other workers (in three languages—English, Italian, and Hungarian) of dangers below, which they blame on management's inattention to safety. The two schemers, having succeeded in getting their grievances redressed, give due credit for inspiration: "The dead mule gave us the idea we needed" (20).

2. *Beating.* This unsettling episode, as recalled by a character in Larry Brown's novel *Dirty Work* (1989), occurs in revenge for a friend killed by a mule kick: "What he did was beat that fucking mule to death. Yep. Saw my daddy do that. . . . And I heard him talking to that mule. Said you son of a bitch I'm going to beat your fucking brains out. Oh he hurt that son of a bitch before he died. Took a sledge hammer handle to him. I saw some bad shit over there but my daddy beating that mule to death was one of the worst things I ever saw" (125).

3. *Collision with vehicles.* William Faulkner's "Mule in the Yard" (1950; incorporated as chapter 16 of *The Town*, 1957) relates the progress of an insurance fraud conducted by a member of the Snopes family and an accomplice named Hait, in which numerous mules are sacrificed for false claims of accidental death: "teams and small droves of his stock would escape from the fenced pasture where he kept them and, tied one to another with sometimes quite new hemp rope (and which item Snopes included in the subsequent claim), would be annihilated by freight trains on the same blind curve which was to be the scene of Hait's exit from this world" (252). Hait's death in this enterprise leads his widow, much later, to shoot a Snopes mule in vengeance (see # 9).

Faulkner is a major despoiler of mules in his writings (see also # 5), and it was no doubt his treatment of them that evoked the famous explanation by Flannery O'Connor of why she avoided his influence as much as she could—"Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down."[4]

In the more modern plot of Clyde Edgerton's *Where Trouble Sleeps* (1997), the lethal vehicle is a truck. An epic collision, fatal to Dolly the mule, forms part of the communal lore of Listre, North Carolina. As told by the driver, a man aptly enough known as "Train," his truck "hit her shoulder and knocked her front end

Collision with vehicles—mules, trains, and insurance fraud in Faulkner's "Mule in the Yard." Drawing by Bruce Strauch.

out from under her, and she busted in through the windshield ass first and stuck there, with that plow whipping around . . . and the truck rolled once when it hit the ditch, broke Dolly's neck . . . and dropped me in Gus White's front yard unconscious, and mule shit all over my face and shoulders. . . . I'd say, 'What happened?' and they'd say, 'you hit a mule widge your truck,' and I'd say, 'Naw,' and they'd say, 'Oh yeah,' and in five minutes I'd say, 'What happened?' and they'd say, 'You hit a mule widge your truck,' and I'd say, 'Naw,' and they'd say, 'Oh yeah'" (141–42).

(In real life, endings are sometimes happier. An item widely reprinted in North Carolina newspapers in the spring of 1997 describes a mule being hit, as it stood in the north-bound lane of highway 421 near Sanford, by a 1980 Dodge van carrying fourteen passengers at a speed of 55 mph. No one, including the mule, was seriously injured. Phil Stone Jr., owner of the mule, told the state trooper after the accident that the mule "seemed OK. They just fed him and put him up for the night.")

4. *Decapitation by irate opera singer.* Cormac McCarthy, who far surpasses even Faulkner in the mayhem he visits upon literary mules (see #s 5, 6, 7, 9, 14, 15), includes in his recent novel *The Crossing* (1994) the following dialogue about a mule whose recalcitrance proves insufferable to the artistic temperament of a singer assigned to tend him in a road company:

> What was it he done to the mule?
>
> He tried to cut off the head with a machete. . . .
>
> I wouldn't have thought you could cut off a mule's head with a machete.
>
> Of course not. Only a drunken fool would attempt such a feat. When the hacking availed not he began to saw. . . .
>
> What happened to the mule?
>
> The mule? The mule died. Of course (227–27).

5. *Drowning.* This is Faulkner's most commonly employed means of dispatch for the mules in his works. In the flood scenes he renders so effectively, we inevitably find drowned mules floating down river. As opposed to the train-struck animals in "Mule in the Yard" (see # 3), which are instrumental in developing motive and plot, Faulkner's drowned mules tend to fall into the decorative or ornamental category, employed chiefly for drama, mood, and atmosphere. In *As I Lay Dying* (1930), for example, Darl recreates a wagon disaster in the surging stream: "Between two hills I see the mules once more. They roll up out of the water in succession, turning completely over, their legs stiffly extended as when they had lost contact with the earth" (142). In the "Old Man" sections of *The Wild Palms* (1939), the flood throws forth its "charging welter of dead cows and mules and outhouses and cabins and hencoops," and Faulkner's prose strikes an elegiac note as the convict's skiff rides "even upon the backs of the mules as though even in death they were not to escape that burden-bearing doom with which their eunuch race was cursed" (145–46). Before the ordeal ends, the accumulation of mule carcasses reaches almost cosmic proportions as the stranded convict remembers "that other wave, the second wall of water full of houses and dead mules building up behind him in the swamp" (156).

Robert Morgan's story "Poinsett's Bridge" (1989) picks up the drowned mule *topos* in distinctly Faulknerian terms: "The body of a mule shot by in the current,

Drowning—Faulkner's most commonly employed means of dispatch for the mules in his work. Drawing by Bruce Strauch.

and then a chicken coop" (159); but Cormac McCarthy (see #s 4, 6, 7, 9, 14, 15) varies it in *Blood Meridian* (1985) by having a mule drowned intentionally: "'The Yumas were swimming the few sorry mules . . . across the river. . . . Downriver they'd drowned one of the animals and towed it ashore to be butchered" (253). (On recurrent uses of mules as culinary items see # 14.)

That the image of the drowned mule also occupies a subliterary folk status in the South is perhaps attested by a common simile in which a wealthy person is said to have "enough money to burn up a wet mule."

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6. *Falls from cliffs.* The novel *Blood Meridian* (1985) establishes Cormac McCarthy as unchallenged king of literary mule carnage. No fewer than fifty-nine specific mules die in the book, plus dozens more that are alluded to in groups and bunches. Mules are shot, roasted, drowned, knifed, and slain by thirst; but the largest number, 50 out of a *conducta* of 122 mules carrying quicksilver for mining, plummet from a single cliff during an ambush, performing an almost choreographic display of motion and color, "the animals dropping silently as martyrs, turning sedately in the empty air and exploding on the rocks below in startling bursts of blood and silver as the flasks broke open and the mercury loomed wobbling in the air in great sheets and lobes and small trembling satellites. . . . Half a hundred mules had been ridden off the escarpment" (195). (See also #s 4, 5, 7, 9, 14, 15.)

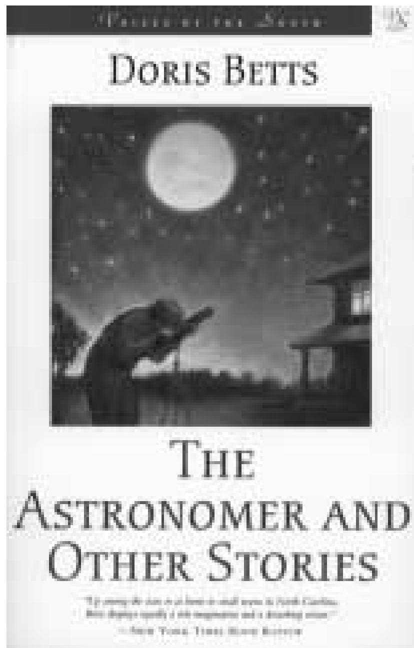
Clyde Edgerton achieves a similar combination of violence and grace in the fall of Old Jake the pack mule in the novel *Redeye* (1995): "old Jake takes a step to the side and back, right at that bend . . . and both his hind feet come over the edge. . . . Here he comes, all silent, hit the wall, knocked up dust and rocks . . . and he hit the wall again, and then went right on out of sight with some rocks and stuff falling along beside him and behind him, on out of sight into the green cedars at the bottom where the canyon wall starts sloping outward" (220).

7. *Fall into subterranean cavity.* Near the conclusion of Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* (1973), "Arthur Ogle was plowing an upland field one evening when the plow was snatched from his hands. He looked in time to see his span of mules disappear into the earth taking the plow with them" (195). These doomed mules qualify as highly functional in the story, since a search for their bodies leads to the discovery of a number of human corpses stored in the caves underground for sexual use by the necrophiliac Lester Ballard. (See also #s 4, 5, 6, 9, 14, 15.)

8. *Freezing.* Arkansas novelist Jack Farris in *Me and Gallagher* (1982) moves his characters out to Montana where it's cold enough to—guess what. "The storm raged on during the night and the temperature fell and next morning we found the mule mare dead, lying on her back in a snowdrift, her legs stuck up in the air stiff as a lodgepole pine" (36–37). (On this cold note, the Hinton, West Virginia, *Times* yields an example of life imitating art in 1999 in an obituary titled "A Small Black Mule Dies," which reads in part: "Mr. Leroy Jones, the little black mule on Sassafras Ridge Farm, died in the snowstorm on March 4 at age 27. Leroy was best known in Hinton as the ass who bore Mary in the Christmas pageants at the First Baptist Church in the late seventies and early eighties. He lived in Woodrumtown for 22 years, serving as a work animal, cowherd, and companion.")

9. *Gunshot wounds.* The high quotient of gunplay in southern fiction quite naturally extends to some of the mules that grace its pages. Some are shot by accident, like poor Jenny in Richard Wright's "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" (1940)—

Falls from cliffs—Cormac McCarthy sends fifty pack mules over the edge in Blood Meridian.
Drawing by Bruce Strauch.



In Doris Betts's short story "The Dead Mule," bootleggers stash fifty-six half-gallon jars of prime corn liquor in the body of the title character.

"Ah wuznt shootin at the mule, Mistah Hawkins. The gun jumped when Ah pulled the trigger . . . N fo Ah knowed anything Jenny was there a-bleedin" (23)—and in two works by John William Corrington. His story "A Time to Embrace" (1968) depicts a Civil War shootout at the conclusion of which "a mule lay in the street kicking and twitching, with a Yankee soldier lying caught beneath him. . . . But the U.S. mule quivered one final time and some of the loafers went over to pull the soldier out from under him" (125). In Corrington's novel *The Upper Hand* (1967), a mule gets shot for love by a frustrated suitor aiming at a wagon driver whom he believes to be his rival. The lady at issue later remarks, "I let you alone about that mule because it was the only time anybody ever killed anything over me even if it wasn't but a mule" (35).

Of intentional shooting victims, the single largest massacre is probably that of the two dozen executed in Tony Earley's "The Prophet from Jupiter" (1994) so that their carcasses can be used to shore up a rift in an overstressed dam: "Big Julie Cooper took the superintendant's gun . . . and one at a time shot twenty-four Development Company mules right between the eyes. The workmen threw the dead and dying mules in on top of the cars and the wagons and the red roofing slate and the furniture and the stoves, before the rain slacked and the water retreated back to the lakeside of the dam" (335). Olfactory consequences later in the summer are predictably fierce: "They say that you could smell the mules for miles—some of them even exploded. . . . They say that a black funnel cloud of buzzards and crows spun in the air over the gorge. . . . At night bears came down . . . and ate the rotting mules" (336).

Mules absorb lead throughout much of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985), one providing a shield against incoming fire: "He . . . crouched under the ribs of a dead mule and recharged the pistol" (292). (See also #s 4, 5, 6, 7, 14, 15.) As mentioned above in # 3, a mule-shooting episode concludes Faulkner's "Mule in the Yard."[5]

10. *Hanging.* In a notoriously decadent scene in Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), a mule named John Brown, with a spittoon tied to his leg, hangs himself lunging from a balcony over the ballroom of a dilapidated antebellum mansion: "the mule, hung to a beam by the rope-reins twisted about his neck, was swinging in mid-air, and his big lamp-like eyes, lit by the torch's blaze, were golden with death's impossible face, the figure in the fire" (225–26).

Less spectacular but somewhat more functional—because it serves as an index to character, proving that "a mean wild-ass boy like Roland . . . is the kind that'll hang a mule" (101)—is the episode in Kaye Gibbons's *A Virtuous Woman* (1989), in which a wife discovers her anniversary present, a mule named Sugar Pete, hanged in sadistic vandalism by a neighborhood delinquent: "that Sunday morning late we walked out to the pony barn and went under the shelter and I had to holler, 'Don't look, Ruby! Stay back!' But she looked in, looked up at him swinging, all swoll, and she just had to sit down on the feedbox and cry" (100).

11. *Old age.* Although a majority of literary mules die with their traces on, at least one simply ages out, and its body cavity, in Doris Betts's wonderfully titled story "The Dead Mule" (1965), provides a cache to conceal fifty-six half-gallon jars of a bootlegger's prime corn liquor, at least until the sheriff gets wind of the ruse: "Now the jars were coming up out of the guts of that mule, and the Sheriff took them two-by-two from Luther's gloved hands and lined them up in a row like cops in a parade" (78). The worst punishment ironically seems to fall upon Luther, the deputy, who is forced to dig up the reeking evidence. One of his comments has been suggested to me as an appropriate response to my own critical excavations in this essay: "'Jee-SUS!' he said. 'I never meant to wade in it'" (76).

12. *Overwork.* As Reynolds Price observes in *Blue Calhoun* (1992), it takes a sorry man to work a mule to death—"Back then *white trash* didn't mean *poor* or *lazy*. People saved it to use on vicious families . . . who beat their children mercilessly or plowed their mule till it died in harness" (71). That is precisely the point that Arna Bontemps makes about two landowners in his fiction, Major Stevenson in "A Summer Tragedy" (1933) and Marse Prosser in *Black Thunder* (1936). "Major Stevenson had the old notion that one mule was all a share farmer needed to work a thirty-acre plot. It was an expensive notion, the way it killed mules from overwork" (140). "Marse Prosser thunk it was cheaper to kill a old, wo'-out mule than to feed him" (60). Similarly, Erskine Caldwell (see also # 16) opens a story of

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Overwork—"Major Stevenson had the old notion that one mule was all a share farmer needed to work a thirty-acre plot. It was an expensive notion . . ." Drawing by Bruce Strauch.

brutal exploitation in "Savannah River Payday" (1931) with "the partly-devoured carcasses of five or six mules that had been killed during the past two weeks by the heat and overwork at the sawmill," going on to a pungent notice of how "the full stench of sun-rotted mule flesh settled over the swamp" (653). Allan Gurganus's narrator in *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All* (1989) shows us the actual collapse, and implies an apotheosis of sorts, of a Confederate mule pressed into hard service as a cavalry mount: "And when it hit the road that polite beast was dead. Dust lifted off of it like some flour soul was rising" (492).

Arna Bontemps gives us two landowners who work their mules to death in "A Summer Tragedy" (1933) and Black Thunder *(1936). Photo by Walden Fabre, Nashville, Tennessee, courtesy Beacon Press.*

One old mule that is *almost* worked to death but awarded a brief indulgent respite before its end is the centerpiece of a remarkable scene in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), in which a full-dress mule funeral takes place complete with singing sisters and eulogy: "He spoke of the joys of mule-heaven to which the dear brother had departed this valley of sorrow; the mule-angels flying around; the miles of green corn and cool water, a pasture of pure bran with a river of molasses running through it; and most glorious of all, *No* Matt Bonner with plow lines and halters to come in and corrupt" (274). (Lest this scene be misjudged as lacking verisimilitude, compare R.T. Troxler's personal reminiscence as quoted in a history of Alamance County, North Carolina: "Mildred . . . had a real talent for animal funerals. Her range of animals to feel sorry about, when dead, went from a bumble bee to a mule. She would not stop preaching the funeral until she had us all crying.")[6]

In an earlier work, a play titled *Mule Bone* that Hurston coauthored with Langston Hughes (1930, but not produced until 1991), the deconstructed skeleton of "Brazzle's old yaller mule" furnishes a turkey hunter with a legbone for weaponry in a dispute with his partner over downed game that leads to his prosecution for assault with a deadly object.[7]

13. *Rabies.* Jesse Hill Ford's *The Raider* (1975), set in west Tennessee, contains the ditch burial of an unspecified number of mules killed by bites from a rabid fyce dog.

Mulephagy—The adaptation of mule meat to culinary requirements, a staple of southern literature, seems to have been introduced into the South by Yankees. Drawing by Bruce Strauch.

14. *Stab wounds.* A frontier woman in William Humhprey's *The Ordways* (1965) skewers a mule between the ribs with a kitchen knife in order to set before her family a meal with biblical overtones: "Unleavened bread, yes; they were unused to any other kind. But it was not the paschal lamb that the Ordways slaughtered before the flight from Tennessee, it was the family mule" (52).

Since the subject arises (along with the reader's gorge, perhaps) so opportunely at this point, it seems appropriate to discourse more largely on the rich subtopic of *mulephagy*, or the adaptation of mule meat to culinary requirements. Because several accounts of that practice come to us from stories set in the Civil War, it may be helpful to preface this part of our survey with a glance at one of numerous extant historical reports of what seems, like other more recent dining customs, to have been introduced into the South by Yankees. Sarah Debro, a former slave interviewed in 1937 at the age of ninety, recalls that she was "never hungry til we waz free an' de Yankees fed us. We didn't have nothin' to eat 'cept hard

tack an' middlin' meat. I never saw such meat. It was thin and tough wid a thick skin. You could boil it all day an' all night an' it wouldn' cook done. I wouldn' eat it. I thought 'twuz mule meat; mules dat done been shot on de battlelfield den dried. I still believe 'twuz mule meat."[8]

Turning from historical example to the higher reality of fiction, we find mule consumption popular among both Blue and Gray in short stories by Mississippi author James Street. "All Out with Sherman" (1945) offers this exchange between two Confederates:

> "You boys had any rations?" Ax asked.
> "Yep," Jim Dickson said. "Found a dead mule up the road last night."
> "Any left?" Ax was hungry.
> "Nope." Jim yawned and stretched. "Best meal I ever had, Ax. Cooked it myself." (202–03)

In the northern camp in "They Know How" (1945), however, regional loyalties frustrate the palate: "Old Sam looked longingly at the Missouri mule. . . . He could do wonders with mule meat, too. The Missouri sergeant read the look in Sam's eyes and said, 'Nothing shaking. That mule's from up home'" (179).

Tastes formed in the military travel home in Thomas Wolfe's play *Mannerhouse* (ca. 1922), a product of his efforts in G.P. Baker's workshop at Harvard:

> EUGENE: We grew lean in the cause of glory, eh, Major?
> GENERAL: What became of that very excellent old mule in your company, Eugene?
> EUGENE: The old boy went to glory weeks ago.
> GENERAL: And yet you are hungry?
> EUGENE: Hungry! No, I *was* hungry. We finished him off in three days (95).[9]

Attribution of a taste for mule meat constitutes a slur in Margaret Skinner's Memphis novel *Old Jim Canaan* (1990)—"'No, not pig's feet,' says Uncle Jim. 'Mule meat. They don't know any better'" (144; see also # 16 above). But mules are consumed readily by man, beast, and fowl in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) (see also #s 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 15), and a character in Bernice Kelly Harris's *Purslane* (1939) finds the practice a perfectly acceptable topic for mealtime conversation: "Uncle Millard near the foot of the table was telling about the Christmas dinner he ate in the pesthouse years ago, declaring it was fried dog and mouse stew with a slice of boiled mule" (146).[10]

15. *Thirst.* Alkali flats in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) yield no shortage of "the black and desiccated shapes of horses and mules. . . . These parched beasts had died with their necks stretched in agony in the sand" (246–47). (See also #s 4, 5, 6, 7, 14.)

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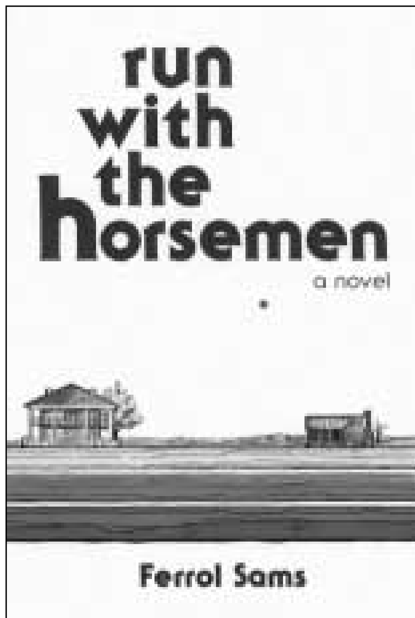


The owners of a failed bank are accused of taking mortgages on dead mules in Ferrol Sams's Run with the Horsemen *(1982).*

16. *Unspecified but presumably natural causes.* Many dead mules in southern writing simply turn up and people stumble upon them with little notion of where they came from, as in the examples from Sylvia Wilkinson and Frank Conroy printed as epigraphs near the beginning of this essay. In an episode in Flora Ann Scearce's *Singer of an Empty Day* (1997), a country man views such matters in the best light he can: "'Well,' Papa said, 'at least he hung on till you got ye mortgage paid off.' He squatted beside Buck, feeling cold mule flesh. 'Deader'n a door nail.' He sighed" (186).

A rare example of an *urban* dead mule (decorative variety) is one encountered on a Memphis street in Margaret Skinner's *Old Jim Canaan* (1990)—"The corpse of a mule lay rotting in the street" (274; see also # 15); but most lie, as we would expect, in such country settings as that of Marianne Gingher's "The Kiss" (1968), whose main character "had learned to write as well as read before Mama Dear got old and sick and the mule that had carried her down the road eight miles to school each day had died" (2). Charles Portis's itinerant narrator of *The Dog of the South* (1979) finds a touch of home in Central America—"Through a tangle of branches I saw a dead mule" (226)—while a rather puzzled sharecropper in "Daughter" (1940), by Erskine Caldwell (see also # 12), reports that "the mule dropped dead in the barn. . . . I wasn't nowhere around. It just dropped dead" (268).

An accusation against the owners of Babcock's failed bank in Ferrol Sams's *Run with the Horsemen* (1982)—"Comp was wont to mutter darkly that the Babcocks had taken mortgages on dead mules" (73)—seems obliquely related to an anecdote that used to circulate in oral tradition in parts of the South about how

Joseph Mitchell, recorder of the "vesicular stomatitis, or horsepox," method of killing—you guessed it—mules. Photo by Anne Hall (1989), courtesy Pantheon Books.

two fellows (call them Joe and Bob) decide to raffle off a mule at a dollar a chance. After they sell about a hundred tickets the mule dies. Bob says, "Well I guess we'll have to give all the people their money back," but Joe says, "No way. I'm just going to keep on selling tickets." Bob, being an honest man, drops out of the deal, but on the night after the drawing, curiosity prompts him to call his former partner and ask how things went. "Just fine," Joe reports, "I made about three hundred dollars." Bob says he'd bet there were a lot of angry ticket holders, and Joe replies, "Naw, just one, and I gave him his dollar back."

17. *Vesicular stomatitis.* Down in Black Ankle County where Joseph Mitchell sets "Uncle Dockery and the Independent Bull" (1939), the weather turned bad one January and "two mules got sick and died of something called vesicular stomatitis, or horsepox" (369).

18. *Submersion in domestic metaphor.* Once again, Cormac McCarthy creates an exclusive category (see # 4) with a scene in *Cities of the Plain* (1998):

When he turned around Billy [Parham] was standing in the doorway watching him [John Grady Cole].

This the honeymoon suite? he said.

You're lookin at it.

He leaned in the doorframe and took his cigarettes from his shirtpocket and shucked one out and lit it.

The only thing you ain't got here is a dead mule in the floor. (145)

PROLEGOMENA FOR FUTURE INVESTIGATION

The data cited above, while far from exhaustive, should be more than adequate to establish the textual basis for a distinct Dead Mule Zone (DMZ) containing writings by male and female, African American and Caucasian authors of various geographical points of origin but all generally regarded as southern in the ways their books are promoted and discussed at large. I believe that I have clarified a link that banishes vagueness as to what really constitutes "southern literature" as a meaningful denotation of genre. My own browsing in the area is finally at an end, and I am ready to leave the field to another, more coltish generation of critics and scholars. To do otherwise would resemble beating a dead—well, we all know what I mean. I will, however, tarry a moment more and turn from the concrete to the timidly speculative for a few final observations.

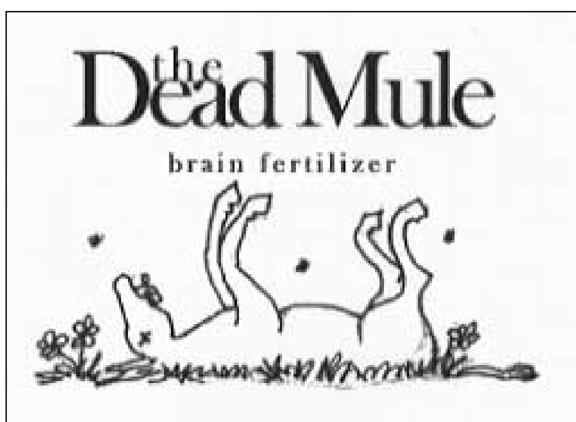
Although the dead mule is ubiquitous in southern literature, its presence is rarely reported in actual daily life, a fact attested to in Henry Taylor's fine poem "Mule Trader." Photo of Henry Taylor by Melissa Laitsch (1995), courtesy Louisiana State University Press.

It has on occasion struck me as odd and ironic that a phenomenon so ubiquitous as the dead mule in southern letters should be so rare in the actual daily life of the main geographical equivalent to the DMZ, the American Southeast. Having expended countless hours in the fields and forests of Dixie as boy and man, as hunter, fisherman, relative of farmers, and fugitive from urban complexity, I have never laid eyes on an actual dead mule. Many times in my rambles have I stumbled across dead cows, dead hogs, dead goats, and in fact more dead possums than I could say grace over—but not mules.

For a long time I attributed this gap in my experience to some deficiency in my powers of observation, but I have been gratified of late to discover that I am not alone. I am pleased to read, in an article in *Scientific American* magazine, that the British army harbors a proverbial belief that "one never sees a dead mule," and again, in *Death in the Afternoon*, to note Ernest Hemingway's contention that you do see them in war but nowhere else: "In twenty years of observation in civil life I had never seen a dead mule and had begun to entertain doubts as to whether these animals were really mortal. On rare occasions I had seen what I took to be dead mules, but on close approach, these always proved to be living creatures who seemed to be dead through their quality of complete repose." A similar experiential basis lies, no doubt, behind Henry Taylor's fine poem, "Mule Trader," which ends:

> My father told him the mule was dead.
> "You, sir, are a God damn liar!
> I been selling mules for forty years,
> And I ain't *never* heard of one dying!"[11]

This quality of near immortality that real-life mules seem to have may be, in part, a genetic gift from their asinine fathers, who enjoy a similar reputation for indestructibility in the countries where they are still common. From the distinguished British angler Harry Plunket Greene comes the information that a sec-



Fertilizer. Image courtesy www.deadmule.com.

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tion of the river Bourne is known among local trout fishermen as "the Jackass Hatch (so called because it was reputed to be the only place in England where anyone had ever found a dead donkey)."[12]

I prefer to see it differently, however. I like to think that—at least in our South—mules experience not actual death but *transmogrification*, a deliverance through the transforming power of art from mortality's corruption to a fierce foreverness in the well-wrought urn of southern lit.

What others will make of my efforts I can only surmise, but I should think that many scholarly purposes might be served by what I offer here. Practitioners of hermeneutic exegesis may turn to an exploration of the epiphanic potentiality of the dead mule within its various interpretive and intertextual reticulations. Semioticists may determine that one person's mule is another's magnolia, while New Historicists may find in these signifying mules subversions of social and philosophic fabrics thought previously to rest unexamined, especially in earlier authors. For me it is reward enough to know that any bookseller, handing a work of southern fiction across a counter, can now quote with deep conviction that poignant line from Richard Wright, "Well, boy, looks like yuh done bought a dead mule!" (24; see # 9 above).[13]

NOTES

1. Dates following quotations from primary sources are the dates of first publication; page numbers refer to the editions used in this study and cited fully in note 13 at the end of the essay.

2. Marion Montgomery, "The Sense of Violation: Notes toward a Definition of 'Southern' Fiction," *The Georgia Review*, 19 (1965): 278–87; quoted by Asby Bland Crowder, "William Humphrey: Defining Southern Literature," *Mississipi Quarterly*, 41 (1988): 537.

3. Louis D. Rubin Jr., "From Combray to Ithaca; or, The 'Southernness' of Southern Literature," in *The Mockingbird in the Gum Tree* (Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 22.

4. Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1969), 45.

5. A story about a shot mule once circulated orally around Alamance County, North Carolina, concerning a highway patrolman (call him Barney) who enjoyed hunting and consequently knew a good many farmers who gave him permission to pursue game on their lands. One such farmer called Barney one evening with an unusual request, saying that he had a mule that was terminally sick and in pain but which he couldn't bear to shoot. If Barney would be good enough to put the old mule out of its misery the next time he came hunting, he (the farmer) would be much obliged and would come along later with a tractor to haul off the carcass.

Sensing opportunity for a practical joke, Barney took two friends hunting the next morning at the mule owner's farm, went up to the door, and pretended to speak to the farmer (who was not at home). Stamping back to the car in feigned anger, Barney snatched his service revolver from the glove compartment and growled, "that old bastard won't let us hunt. I'm about mad enough to shoot his durn mule," which of course he did, right between the eyes as the animal stood looking at him in front of the barn door.

Barney's companions, either fearing the farmer's wrath or deciding that Barney was too crazy

to hunt with, drove off in a cloud of dust, leaving the hapless law officer with a smoking gun, a dead mule, and a twelve-mile walk to town.

6. *Alamance County: The Legacy of Its People and Places*, ed. Elinor Samons Eulis (Legacy Publications, 1984), 452. A similar and more formal example of equine funerary oration is reported by Joshua A. Lee in his fascinating nonfiction memoir, *With Their Ears Pricked Forward: Tales of Mules I Have Known* (John F. Blair, 1980). One chapter is devoted to "Old Jayrack's Funeral," which took place at the Simmons Branch Baptist Church near Millersville, South Carolina. According to Lee, the Rev. Jonas Mack deduced no biblical evidence for or against a mule's possession of a soul, but concluded that if it does have one, "When the roll is called up yonder, Old Jayrack's goin to be there" (113).

Lee also describes the fate of Rox, an especially cantankerous and powerful mule, who fended off men trying to cut his traces after he ran into a swarm of angry hornets and was consequently stung to death. Silas, his owner, "asked that the outlaw be buried where he had fallen; and he was, on the hillside near a big tulip poplar" (38).

I have heard other anecdotal accounts of hornet, wasp, and yellow-jacket attacks on mules but have found none involving any other insects. However, Jeff Beane has noted, in an article titled "A Wing and a Prayer," that in the rural South the praying mantis was once commonly known as "mule killer" (*Wildlife in North Carolina*, 64 (February 2000): 2). It seems unfortunate that fictional possibilities of this designation have been neglected.

7. See Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (University of Illinois Press, 1977), ch. 6.

8. *The American Slave; A Composite Autobiography* [1941], ed. George P. Pawick. vol. 14, pt. 1 (Greenwood Publishing Co., 1971), 252.

9. This episode may have its roots in Wolfe/Westall family tradition; Wolfe records the following in an early outline of material for literary use: "Good story—Uncle Bacchus and the red hot gun—300 miles around on mule meat—Papa and Wes as Yankee mule boys." Thomas Wolfe, *The Autobiographical Outline for Look Homeward, Angel*, ed. Lucy Conniff and Richard S. Kennedy (The Thomas Wolfe Society, 1991), 24.

At least one dead mule provided comfort in a non-dietary capacity during the Civil War era. Tom and Susan Bradley of Boerne, Texas, have called my attention to an artifact known as the "War Quilt" depicted in *North Carolina Quilts*, by Ellen Fickling Eanes et al. (North Carolina Quilts Project, 1988), which describes its provenance as follows: "After one battle, when [Dr. Robert Wilkerson Cooper] went out on the battlefield to see if he could aid anyone alive after the carnage, he found a quilt on a dead mule. . . . Recognizing it as a quilt from a Southern home, he took it home to his mother . . . who washed the quilt and mended it. Afterward it was used for special company" (59).

10. That the *topos* of mulephagy persists in southern oral tradition became known to me in 1992, when I overheard the manager of a convenience store near Fredericksburg, Virginia, complain to his supplier of wrapped sandwiches that "a man took a bite out of one of 'em yesterday and said he believed you all were making 'em out of dead mules."

An exception that may prove the rule that dead mules come up only in *southern* fiction (or it may extend the DMZ to ninteenth-century France) occurs in the *haute cuisine* of J. K. Huysmans's *Against the Grain [A Rebours*, 1884] (Dover Publications, 1969), 11: "The viands were served on black-bordered plates,—turtle soup, Russian black bread, ripe olives from Turkey, caviar, and mule steaks."

11. Theodore H. Savory, "The Mule," *Scientific American* (December, 1970): 106. By way of empirical verification, I might mention that a gentleman named Matt Hollar recently called me to re-

port just having seen an obviously dead mule stretched out in a pasture on the edge of our town, but when I arrived at the scene with camera in hand minutes later, the allegedly defunct animal was walking around eating grass.

Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), 134–35. A classical example of dead mules in war, and of ingenious uses to which they might be put, is in Tom Allen's "Through the Alps to the Gates of Rome," in *Greece and Rome: Builders of Our World* (National Geographic Society, 1968). For Hannibal's army, mired in the Arno marshes during its campaign against Rome, "to faint was to drown, so men slept on grisly islands—piles of bloated mule corpses" (318).

Henry Taylor, "Mule Trader," in *The Horse Show at Midnight* (Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

12. Harry Plunket Greene, *Where the Bright Waters Meet* (Andre Deutsch, 1983), 67.

13. Primary texts used for the passages quoted above are the following: Doris Betts, "The Dead Mule," in *The Astronomer and Other Stories* (Harper and Row, 1965); Arna Bontemps, *Black Thunder* (The Macmillan Company, 1936), and "A Summer Tragedy," in The *Old South* (Dodd, Mead and Company, 1973); Rick Bragg, *All Over But the Shoutin'* (Vintage, 1998); Larry Brown, *Dirty Work* (Algonquin Books, 1989); Erskine Caldwell, "Daughter" and "Savannah River Payday," in *Jackpot: The Short Stories of Erskine Caldwell* (Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940); Truman Capote, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (New Random House, 1948); Frank Conroy, *Stop-Time* (The Viking Press, 1967); John William Corrington, "A Time to Embrace," in *The Lonesome Traveler and Other Stories* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1968), and *The Upper Hand* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1967); Hubert J. Davis, *The Multilingual Mule and Other Stories* (Commonwealth Press, 1983); Tony Earley, "The Prophet from Jupiter," in *New Stories from the South, The Year's Best, 1994*, ed. Shannon Ravenel (Algonquin Books, 1994); Clyde Edgerton, *Redeye* (Algonquin Books, 1995) and *Where Trouble Sleeps* (Algonquin Books, 1997); Jack Farris, *Me and Gallagher* (Simon and Shuster, 1982); William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (Random House, 1964), "Mule in the Yard," in *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (Random House, 1950), and *The Wild Palms* (Chatto and Windus, 1952); Jesse Hill Ford, *The Raider* (Little, Brown and Co., 1975); Kaye Gibbons, *A Virtuous Woman* (Algonquin Books, 1989); Marianne Gingher, "The Kiss," in *Teen Angel and Other Stories of Young Love* (Atheneum, 1988); Allan Gurganus, *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All* (Alfred K. Knopf, 1989); Barry Hannah, *Geronimo Rex* (The Viking Press, 1972); Bernice Kelly Harris, *Purslane* (University of North Carolina Press, 1939); William Humphrey, *The Ordways* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1965); Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing,* ed. Alice Walker (The Feminist Press, 1979); Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* (Random House, 1985), *Child of God* (Random House, 1973), *The Crossing* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1998); Joseph Mitchell, "Uncle Dockery and the Independent Bull," in *Up in the Old Hotel and Other Stories* (Pantheon Books, 1992); Robert Morgan, "Poinsett's Bridge," in *New Stories from the South, The Year's Best, 1991*, ed. Shannon Ravenel (Algonquin Books, 1991); Charles Portis, *The Dog of the South* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1979); Reynolds Price, *Blue Calhoun* (Atheneum, 1992); Ferrol Sams, *Run with the Horsemen* (Peachtree Publishers, 1982); Flora Ann Scearce, *Singer of an Empty Day* (Mount Olive College Press, 1997); Margaret Skinner, *Old Jim Canaan* (Algonquin Books, 1990); James Street, "All Out with Sherman" and "They Know How," in *Short Stories* (Dial Press, 1945); Sylvia Wilkinson, *Moss on the North Side* (Houghton Mifflin, 1966); Thomas Wolfe, *Mannerhouse*, ed. Louis D. Rubin Jr. and John L. Idol Jr. (Louisiana State University Press, 1985); Richard Wright, "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," in *Eight Men*, ed. David Bradley (Thunder's Mouth Press, 1987).