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WALLS OF BLUE COQUINA

By Sam Harrison

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich

Barely half through, 1990 is already a superb vintage year for Florida fiction. Veteran Joy Williams and newcomer Beverly Coyle have produced excellent story collections. In late June, Peter Matthiessen's powerful novel *Killing Mister Watson*, based on the murder of one of South Florida's most notorious rogues, will appear. Bob Shacochis has given public readings from a novel-in-progress that may become his best. With *Walls of Blue Coquina*, first-time novelist Sam Harrison of Port Orange makes an impressive contribution to Florida bookshelves.

Set on the Gulf coast just below Tallahassee, the novel focuses on what transpires both around and inside 72 year-old Bobby Saul. Bobby sits on his porch gazing at the road that was once made of blue coquina. In his youth, when he drove an ice truck and his wife was ice-cold, he set off twice a week on its silvery whiteness toward a six-months long affair with a tall, dark woman who has lingered in his thoughts for half a century. His wife, who is also his first cousin, found evidence of the affair, and her coldness has continued ever since. They live in tourist cottages they own neighbored by their grandson, their pregnant granddaughter and her husband.

Two quirky visitors change Bobby's life. A Mr. Wilkes arrives "lugging the pillowcase that contained the bones of his infant son." The child had been torn apart by a pack of wild dogs, and Wilkes rents a cottage where he can reassemble the boy's skeleton for burial and realign his own broken spirit. A pack of bikers arrive, and one, Psychic Ike, remains after his comrades ride their Harleys away. Ike drifts into a love affair with Bobby's unhappily married granddaughter, earning his rent by conducting séances and reading palms. "Something very powerful and beautiful is going to happen here," Ike predicts to Bobby. "Something that will change your lives forever."

Ike's prophesy absorbs Bobby. He sits in reverie, waiting to learn what the "something" will be. And many powerful things do happen: births, deaths, estrangements, renewals of intimacy.

Yet, for all that happens around Bobby, as the novel unfolds it becomes clear that the most important things are happening inside Bobby. This becomes, in fact, a novel about waiting. In trying to engage the reader in an outwardly passive act, waiting, Harrison takes on a great challenge. How sensitively and skillfully he meets that challenge marks the triumph of this book.

This is no *Waiting for Godot*. Bobby's is not an absurd but a creative waiting. It proves irrelevant that he does not know what he is waiting for, as if Harrison wrote his novel to illustrate Eliot's words on mystical stillness:

*I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.*

Bobby is no mystic. He cannot wait without hope. Dante inscribed "Leave behind all hope, ye who enter here" above the gate of Hell in part because life without hope is hell. But what Bobby hopes for is less than what he gets.

Bobby's eyes look outward at the Florida color and light that Harrison evokes in vivid detail. Meanwhile, Bobby's mind fills increasingly with what his inner eye sees: the lover of long ago, the wall between him and his wife, his son who returned dead inside from Vietnam and finished the job off himself with a shotgun, old dead friends, memories of times when he felt most alive that now fill the hollowness of his remaining days. Bobby's mind drifts more and more into the encroaching twilight lying between awake and dreaming. In that still and dreamy place, transformation occurs.

Ike's prophesy proves true, not on the objective but on the subjective plane. Bobby's life changes not because of its contents but by how he sees them. The events and people of his life slowly reveal their significance. "A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees," says Blake. In *Walls of Blue Coquina*, we watch an elderly man grow wise as he experiences one of the crucial ripening tasks of the last of life, the coming to understand the nature and meaning of our individual existence, clarifying its pattern.

Sam Harrison sets his sights ambitiously high in this debut novel. His subtle touch keeps this a moving and sophisticated rather than sentimental or heavy-handed attempt. This expert synthesis of idea and craftsmanship marks Harrison as a novelist of great promise.