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CRY ME A RIVER

By T. R. Pearson

Henry Holt, 258 pp.

A black 1960 Plymouth Fury, sleek as a panther. My first car. Autumn days I'd pile a buddy or two inside and head for the Hudson Valley. We had always some nominal destination, some diner or soda shop maybe fifty miles north, but with the motor purring easily at 65, the green swirl of the trees, Dion and Jackie Wilson oozing around us from the reverberating radio, all the pleasure was in the ride.

T.R. Pearson's novels offer the same kind of jaunt.

This irrepressible, eccentric young yarnspinner, often likened to Twain, doesn't caution that "persons attempting to find a plot" in his narrative will be shot—he's got one here about a murdered cop and the fellow officer/narrator who hunts down the killer—but Pearson skips off the plotline at every opportunity. The novel's essence lies in its comic tapestry of digression.

Set about 80 miles west-northwest through the Blue Ridge from the Neely, N. Car. of his early novels, Pearson populates his southern Virginia locale with cops who apprehend thieves by throwing up on them, backwoods brothers who argue about John Gavin while watching porn flicks, transportation foremen who write sonnets about paprika, and lonely women who phone the station nightly about prowlers. There are the principled Spivey sisters, "tramps, but they honored routinely between them the obligations of the order and serviced as a custom those men who went to the expense to squire them about." There's Dewey, the cop who inspires confessions by dangling suspects from high places and pressing nightsticks against their inseams, who won't brook any lip, having "little use for rejoinder, no personal threshold, truth be told, for quips and wry asides."

Ripest for knowing something about the murder, though, is Red, the spicy tart who can't say no and keeps Polaroids of herself naked, who struck "the men about as exotic and unforeseen." She may prove the hot corner of a love rectangle that left one victim's head "splintered like a piece of crockery, a regular confusion of scalp and bone and gore and matted hair."

Pearson spares little that's ghoulish in our human drama. There's an undercurrent of raw horror in his vision, as if some civilizing filter had been removed, a vision evoking flashes of paleolithic hunters and Vietnamese jungles. Yet, he renders even the most ghastly scene not only painless but hilarious, describing it with neither cruelty nor indifference but a detached and penetrating eye. Slovenly Curtis Talmage is not repulsive, he'd "taken maybe his supper by tossing it into the air and running under it with his mouth open." When a fellow named Akers gets shot by another named Wade, Akers "took notice of the wound, the hole through the jacket and through the shirt and clean through the breastbone as well which that Akers studied and that Ackers perused, lifted even his jacket flap for an unimpeded view in advance of raising again his face and paying his last scrap of heed on this earth to Wade alone."

At times, our narrator sounds exactly like Huck Finn: "I simply hadn't figured I could get by with a lie until...suddenly it struck me that, once all you've got is corpses, there's no overwhelming reason to be honest and precise....Sometimes the truth is fine enough and so much as consoling, but every now and then it's likely worlds worse than a lie."

Those echoes of Huck, the syntax of the Akers quote reminiscent of Joyce, cornucopian diction strikingly like Lee K. Abbott's, at least one image we've seen in DeLillo, these resonances challenge the growing critical consensus that Pearson is a pure original. Even his exuberance conjures Tom Robbins, and Pearson's wonderful narrator, usually as slick-tongued as a tobacco auctioneer, suffers Billy Budd-like vocal paralysis at crucial emotional junctures.

But if there is no completely new literary thing under the sun, surely it hasn't shined on much like Pearson. With an outlandish voice that enraptures some and exasperates others, he's not for everyone. He won't, for example, please those impatient to learn what happens next. But he will delight those willing to savor his uproarious anecdotes, his spine-chilling asides and his mountain canvas so rich with color you hate to blink.