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Outerbridge Reach  
By Robert Stone  
Ticknor & Fields

We don't turn to our first-rate writers for answers. Only second-rate writers, after all, profess to have any, and these are less answers than simply where the artist gave up the search.

The large-minded artist is likely to echo Robert Stone: "I see this enormous mystery that I can't penetrate, a mystery before which I'm silent and uncomprehending." So Stone provides questions. Because his questions stare boldly at the profound enigmas of life in contemporary America, neither solving them nor shrinking from them, there are few writers we need as much as Robert Stone.

In *Outerbridge Reach*, his fifth novel, Stone continues to probe the spiritual malaise of the Vietnam generation, its psyche unsettled by a shaken moral foundation, its view of the American Dream quivering. Stone is still, as a critic once called him, the "apostle of strung out," but in his latest novel he adds to his cast of cynical vagabonds something previously alien: a central character who has struggled to be both model citizen and family man.

Handsome Annapolis graduate and Vietnam veteran Owen Browne has reaped some rewards for being a "golden boy." He lives in material comfort in Connecticut with his devoted former-model wife, Anne, and his 15 year-old daughter.

But now in his forties, when time quickens its pace from trot to canter, Owen feels the vacuity and waste of his life. His daughter seldom talks to him. Anne drowns her own unfulfillment in alcohol. A talented writer, Owen now writes only promotional copy for a yacht brokerage. He senses he has never been really tested, his happiness has never come. "Sometimes I feel like I'm in the wrong life," he laments. "I've never done the things I ought to have done years ago. I took a wrong turn." To Owen, the days on his calendar have begun to look wrong.

Then comes an unexpected opportunity. Matthew Hylan, the head of Browne's yacht company, drops out of a publicity round-the-world solo yacht race. Above Anne's protest, Owen volunteers to sail Hylan's boat.

That provides Anne, too, with an unexpected opportunity, at first unwelcome. Filmmaker Ron Strickland has been commissioned to make a documentary about the Brownes and the race. Strickland, far more than Browne, is classic Robert Stone fare: jaded, hip, cynical, perceptive of the ugly and blind to the noble. He feels confident he can expose the sham behind anything, a publicity campaign, a marriage. "Almost all the attractive women Strickland knew had been to bed with him." Now he knows Anne Browne, so, one hand on his camera, he moves the other reflexively toward his fly. He doesn't plan on falling in love with her.

Nor did Owen plan on leading the race, but past the tip of South Africa, nearing Antarctic glaciers, that's where he finds himself. That's when he learns his yacht is built poorly, corners cut,

quality sacrificed. Aware he cannot win, experiencing mystical insights blended with hallucinations, Browne makes a fateful choice. This upright believer of Melville's "Be true to the dreams of your youth" decides to report false coordinates to make it appear he still leads the race. It is as if, at the intersection of integrity and deceit, Browne veers off his own life and onto Strickland's. But realizing "it's truth I love and always have," Browne cannot steer a cheating course for long.

While Browne tours Strickland's moral world, the filmmaker is finding in Anne's nature something he will not let go. Anne becomes apocalyptic ground on which battles of character are fought, while Anne herself struggles to keep life from escaping her. Confused whether fidelity is more a matter of the body or the spirit, Anne becomes the novel's most richly textured character.

In the marbled light and dark of this novel, Stone explores the tragedy of middle-aged romanticism, not death but what has died inside us since our youth. More than in his earlier work, though, he provides the balance of what still lives. If the young idealist Browne seems doomed to disappointed dreams and fractured integrity, the lifelong cynic Strickland has embraced nothing worth holding. Values, in those who have had them, can be resurrected. In *Outerbridge Reach* Stone grimly watches it all happen as his eye bores through mask after mask until the human face is laid bare.