

*Robert MacGowan*

Two Fictions from *The  
Boatman's Story*

**An Educated Man**

**Y**ou must not think of me as an uneducated man. Fact is, I had a fine education in Mingo, there being only nine of us in the upper grades. Even if our school was in the Pentecostal church, that's just because it was the only building that was large enough for the purpose. Those Pentecostals, they didn't use it during the day anyway. And like Harley's mother said to my mother, "Better the Pentecostal than the penitentiary."

I thought at first that she meant, round about, that we were better off learning our lessons in the tabernacle of tongue speakers than in that mean high school in the prison town, Lewisburg. But then my mother said, "Well, I suppose, though we don't want to be raising chickens for the hawk," and Harley's mother replied, "I may be just a little crazy, but when the wind is favorable I do know a hallelujah from a handsaw and a heron from a hawk."

At any rate, she knew about that Lewisburg high school. Who would want to go to school with the sons of prison guards, a whole class full of screws in the making? Who'd dirty fight and circle punch you, before and after school, using the same arm wrenching, neck choking holds, and working vocabulary that their fathers taught them. Those sons of goons, whose greater ambitions were to grow up as thick and mean as their daddies and join the goon squad themselves, so they could carry on their long family traditions of getting paid for breaking heads. Who'd do things

like bring a riot gas canister into home room and let it off and then be the first ones out the door, leaving the rest of us jammed up in the doorway with red, running faces, the snot down to our shoes. Them sons of bitches who'd say things like, "My daddy, yesterday he shot some shit-head con-vict in the eye with a nut gun. Yeah he did! Shot a hickory bullet right into his eye and knocked it out onto his cheek."

No, you wouldn't want to go there, unless you overvalue the physical appearance of people and things, in this case Lewisburg High School, all brick-walled and limestone-lintled and ivy-bound on the outside, all dull and dangerous on the inside. Unless you have what Mr. Harvard called an "Edifice Complex." Or unless you had to.

Mr. Harvard was the teacher of our Pentecostal school. He was a college graduate. So what if he was one of the V.I.S.T.A. people, those citizen-soldiers dispatched from the north to make war on the front of our poverty? Besides, his college degree was in philosophy, "The Queen of all the Arts and Sciences," as he put it. Our Mr. Harvard, he brought clear water to the muddles of our minds. He taught us about the "twin pillars that support the house of your knowledge;" our ethics, and our epistemology, or "What do you know and how do you know it?" Which is not to be confused with what Harley's mother said it was, the snip and stitch job she'd gotten when Harley was born, in all his crowning glory. "No thank you!" she said. "Sweet Jesus, Joseph, and John! I still have the scar. I do not care for another!"

Mr. Harvard's first act in bringing his philosophical pedagogy to the hollows was to cast a poser. "What is the good life?" he wrote, with his back to us, on the old chalk slate, beneath what he'd already written before we came in—"I am Mr. Harvard" and "Who are you?" Then he faced us and said it aloud, "What is the good life? Tell me—what determines the good life?" He walked around the cold pot-bellied stove and through our double row of wooden, lift-top desks; the kind attached to their chairs with cast iron struts. He waded through us; and he wended his question ahead of him; like a man fishing in shallows, he flicked his line towards one of us, got no bite, and flicked it at another. But we were skittish trout that saw his fisherman's shadow upon the water; we hid in deep, quiet coves, and his casts fell short, his ethical question sank like dead bait in fallow water.

He was a very tall, earnest, string bean of a white man with a shock of red hair on his head, what you'd call a carrot-top. He had it parted on the right and combed over to the left; you could smell Vitalis pomade on it.

He was about twenty-five and a day, I suppose. He had on creased black cotton pants and an ironed yellow short sleeve shirt with a plastic pocket protector; inside it stood a squad of pens in closed ranks—reds, blues, and blacks, all at attention. He wore white socks in shined black leather shoes, which were the size of gunboats and had inch and a half-thick, rippled rubber soles. (Which we were to find generated considerable static electricity when he walked about the room.) Around his neck was knotted a tie cut on the bias from a bolt of black cloth. That tie was as skinny and straight as he was, the color of soft coal in the rain, and long, so long that he had that day (and many other days) absent-mindedly buckled his belt over it. The bottom end of it wagged as he walked around the room, as did his hand in the air when he got excited, one finger stretched upward, like hellfire and brimstone preachers do. But they are John Wesleys, all; Mr. Harvard was a son of Plato, and Plato was born of Socrates—that's the bloodline that we came to learn. It just took a little motivation.

One boy was dozin'. His name was Purvis; sometimes we teased him as "Doofless," but with broad smiles on our faces, for though he was a tad slow in both ways, Purvis was as muscled-up as Buck Harper's young Charlais bull. Purvis was so big that he had to squeeze into his chair as gingerly as a gin-sotted fat lady stepping into a narrow slip. And as easily confused, for like her, you could see that at times he wasn't quite sure whether he was getting into, or out of it. Mr. Harvard came alongside Purvis and reached a hand out to rouse him and a white spark shot across the gap from his index finger to Purvis's ear lobe with a "Pop!" Purvis jumped up so fast the furniture came up with him, wrapped around his waist like a wooden skirt. Mr. Harvard leapt backwards, greatly alarmed, then leaned forward from the middle to examine the damage done by the lightning bolt generated by his rippled rubber soles. To his relief, Purvis was unharmed; but he'd been mightily impressed and was now extremely alert. The rest of us had at first made astonished "O"s with our mouths; then the titters and whoops baffled by our hands burst loose. Mr. Harvard stood stock-still in the hubbub, marveling at the end of his finger. Then he held it up high so all could see, and rather gravely said, "Let us call this 'The Spark of Inspiration.'" Of course we were all ever after, especially Purvis—once burnt, twice shy, you know—straight-back scholars, chary of that spark plug of a finger, lest we drowse and ourselves be so inspired.

Ora, a perennial teacher's pet, stuck her hand in the air and wagged it. At a nod from Mr. Harvard, she stood up, primmed her face all sweet, and gave him a sure-to-please, or so she thought, stock Sunday school response. "To live the good life is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus," she trilled. "Unh huh," uttered Mr. Harvard, and in a voice so low I wasn't sure I'd really heard it, he muttered to his tie, "Score one for Jesus." Next, he peered up at the ceiling like he was looking for rain, then

dropped his gaze down and closely inspected his larboard gunboat. He yawed it slowly to starboard, then to port and starboard again, brought it back on a straight course to join up with its naval twin, and steamed them both around the room. "What else is the good life?" he boomed, fists on his hips. No mild-mannered teacher now, he was a gunboat diplomat with gimlet eyes. Even his tie bristled with bellicosity—it jugged out from his belt like the barrel of a turret gun. A beam of sun cut through the wavy-glass window and set his hair on fire and lit up sweet little Eydie in a spotter's cone of white light. "What do *you* think, Eydie," he shot, "what *else* can the good life be?" Eydie's eyes widened, and her face paled as white as her sun-struck hair. Her lips puckered up in fear and she looked for a moment like her toothless old Maw Maw. "What do you *think*, Eydie?" The answer splat out of her mouth with the pressure of shook soda: "Having pretty babies, sir, with my husband to be some day, sir." Mr. Harvard took his hands off his hips and beamed down on her, and clapped his long hands once and again. The blood rushed back into Eydie's relieved face. But there was no reprieve for the rest of the class. He immediately spun on his heels, aimed at a clump of us boys, and fired a salvo. The answers jumped from our lips like sailors off a burning ship: "Being happy, that's it. Sir," said I; "Having enough food to eat, sir," said another. "You don't need to call me sir," said Mr. Harvard, all the fight gone out of him after that last answer. "Yes, Mr. Harvard." "To own our own land," declared a third boy, "that's what my daddy says would make everything alright." "Me," vowed another, "I'll get a job picking slate when the mine opens again and I'll buy my momma a 'lectric warshing machine. And her hands won't be red all the time from scrubbin' clothes on the ripple board. That'll be the good life for her." That cleared Mr. Harvard's storm; his shoes were pure pleasure boats now. "How about the good life for yourselves?" he said sunnily. "Could there be any fun in it for you, do you think?" "Oh yeah," pops up Harley, who'd been eyeing Mr. Harvard since his sea-change, measuring just how much he could get away with; now he came out to play. "Oh yeah, I'd be snagging the biggest gar in the river—he'd be about this long" With that, Harley fast-stretched his arms as wide as they could go and bumped my nose with a knuckle, bringing me up and out of my seat, right into mischief. "Yeah," I said, stretching *my* arms out as wide as they could go, stopping a finger on one hand just in front of Harley's nose, so close that he had to cross his eyes to look at it. "A fish with a shore big old floppy tail." And slapped Harley on each cheek with it, turning his head side to side as easy as Edgar Bergen did the wood-head, Mortimer Snerd. That brought

on a laugh all around, which Mr. Harvard joined in, until he saw Harley balling up his fist. “But do keep in your seats and keep your hands to yourself.” Harley simmered down, but gave me a look that meant “later.” “Nah,” Jessie piped up, without raising his arm (by now, nobody did), “My daddy says a new engine in the Shivor-lay truck would do us real well.” This brought on a good-natured squabble between the “Chevy boys” and those of us with Fords in the family. That included old beaters, which were real, and bright spanking new stock car racers with orange flames painted on the front fenders to make them go faster, that were not a product of Detroit assembly lines, but of Mingo fabrication factories. No matter, those of us with Fords of either class called ourselves, with fine dignity, “Ford men.” “Hah hah—you mean old flummoxed flatheads, don’t you? Fix Or Repair Daily?” “Oh yeah? What’re you, a rich ’billy boy? Got *two* Shivees on blocks in your yard?” Mr. Harvard gave us a look and we hushed. In an even voice, he said, “That’s good, to hear you debating what the good life is. Here is an assignment—tonight ask one of your elders how he or she defines what the good life is.”

Eydie’s Maw Maw told her, “Why, the Good Life is in heaven, Eydie.” And there were a number of responses like hers, for many of our folk were old-time religious. What Purvis brought in from his father, Henry, was different. Henry’s story was local legend. His mother died when he was eight. Henry and his father laid her out on the kitchen table, covered to her throat with a quilt her mother had made for her. The neighbors and the preacher came. When they left, Henry’s father got drunk and staggered away. Henry never saw him again. The neighbors couldn’t take him in, poor as they were, it was the Great Depression and hardscrabble for all; they had their own to feed. Henry couldn’t stay where his mother had died, where his only home had been, for it was sold in debt auction. So he wandered the hills, alone. He slept in fields and orchards, and burying grounds; in the coldest nights he slept next to roaring coke ovens, at the tolerance of red-faced, horn-handed, coal-shoveling men. He ate crawdads and windfall apples and roadkill and the scraps of the mercy of others. Until he was ten, when he got a job in the mines, though at half a man’s wages; they wouldn’t put up with it if he drew the same. He married at fourteen. He and his wife adopted eight children, one for every year that Henry’d had parents; and Purvis was the first one. The answer he gave his strong son made Purvis proud and happy—he said that his father had put his arm around his neck and rubbed his head. “The good life,” his father said, “is giving your children more than you got.”

Jessie’s grandfather, a newly converted Christian, and an old moonshiner, must’ve been mid-eighty, yet still worked every day. He was a man who had what the Romans called *gravitas*; he had that *gravitas* in spades. Child or man, if you asked him a question he answered you the same. He sniffed the air first, as if the wind carried

truth. He was long-jowled as a bloodhound, and they rose with his nose, over which he looked at you—in this case Jessie, who was squirming, I'm sure—with his dark green, I've seen-it-all eyes, and said: "The good life, Jessie? It depends upon the liver?"

When Jessie recited this in class, Mr. Harvard gave out a great barking laugh, took off an imaginary hat and made a sweeping bow with it. And said, "I would like to meet my master. Ask him, please, Jessie, if he will come and teach a class for us." But he wouldn't, Jessie said—he had a field of mash corn to bring in.

Mr. Harvard made us read old Homer so we could see the search for the true and the good in action; see how the Greeks did it, "When Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone upon the black ships sailing" Even though he did say that ethics is one of those things you really have to learn between your feet. "Learning," he said, "begins with the need to know where *next* to put your feet." As for aesthetics, he said he'd leave the decorating of our house of knowledge to us—we could learn it on our own.

No mug and jug teacher was Mr. Harvard, no teaching by pouring forth knowledge out of his big jug into our little mugs, like most do. No, not our Mr. Harvard; he taught us the experiential way: "Be the angry sea!" he commanded two of the girls. To a knot of boys, he directed, "One of you get on your back behind them and be a black ship sailing on the broad back of that sea. Purvis, you do it. Lie down there on your back and be a long black ship; and I'll give you some weight to bear." "Yes, you can too be a ship. No, don't think about it, *be it!* Eydie—go on and help Jenny and Mary be a rolling green sea. Reuben, you stand right up on Purvis—you are a stout black mast. And Harley, you are a sail full of Aegean winds." (A perfect description, if you ask me.) Harley grumbled and stalled, but he did eventually stand on top of Purvis with me. (It didn't bother Purvis; he just looked up and smiled at us.) And Harley did spread his arms like he was a sail, although he looked more of a rag-ass scarecrow, and I gladly told him so. The girls got on all fours, and all in a row, and made jerky little waves with their bodies that wouldn't fool anybody. But soon they got into it and were dipping and rising like sleek, playful otters. Creating powerful waves with deep troughs; even, at Mr. Harvard's request, filling their cheeks with air, blowing gusts out their mouths to show the wind spray. "That's it!" exulted Mr. Harvard. "That's it!" "Now, Ora and the rest of you boys, jump quick to your stations—and bring your oars. Slip them through the oarlocks. That's right." He beat a slow drum roll with his palms, on his desk, to set the rowers' pace, then hollered, like the wind was whipping his words away,

“Put your backs and legs into it, for you are avenging Greek warriors, rowing towards Troy!”

Mr. Harvard was our wide-browed Zeus, which he needed to be, to settle our Olympian quarrels, like who would be the noblest of us—brave Hector of the shining helm; or become the man-breaker, the brilliant-in-battle, pride-filled and wrath-mad warrior, Achilles.

Our girls? Why, all our girls were Helens. Amazons, and Athenas too. They tried on every goddess. (But never Queen Hera; I’ve often wondered about that.) With a certain shyness, they were also sirens singing, drawing us boys irresistibly toward them, to perish in piles on the shoals beneath their feet. Harley, wanting more direct action, became a Cyclops roaring, which developed into a steady role when he wasn’t in another, because he liked to screw one eye down and, with a toothy leer, ogle the girls. Who encouraged his one-eyed forwardness by giggling back and tittering forward, their hands pushing him away, their eyes bringing him back, their laughter peeling round the room like bright silver bells.

Harley was once my horse. I kicked him in his sides; I wheeled him where I wanted. Soon enough, he was riding on my shoulders, wreaking his revenge. But mostly he and I were foot soldiers—heavy infantry who stood our ground, side by side, back to back—noble Greeks, doomed Trojans—against impossible odds; finally falling, thunderously, gloriously into death, our armor clattering down upon us, on the bloody plains of Troy.

Homework? Who wouldn’t delight in what we did to prepare for school; like Harley and me practicing our Hector speech:

“Oh, you fickle gods, how you’ve dangled me on strings; and now I see you pluck me to my doom. Yet before I die, let my life sing in one fine deed, that a part of me shall never die.”

Or, standing unarmed before the gates of Troy (which really was the wood behind the church), booming out our great Achilles’ war cry, bringing fear into the hearts of the Trojans. As well as that of a tom turkey that we scared right out from beneath the trees, down a dry branch and onto the crushed-slate road, Harley and me laughing him on his way, as he gathered up his skirts like a huffy monk, stuck out his neck, and flutter-skittered off the track, his fan of ruffled feathers disappearing in a gully of dusty ferns.

When Harley and I finally returned to our respective homes, my mother said to me: “Come to supper, Reuben, and take your cap off at the table.” “I am no Reuben,” said I; “I am Odysseus. Bring me a side of ox. Feed me now, woman!” But my mother quickly unhorsed me; gaffed me, she did,

with her spear of authority, throwing me onto the hard ground of common day and putting me, hatless, in my place: "You're no man yet and you'll eat what I put in front of you!" Such treatment hardly touched my noble spirit, though, for at cock's crow I'd be a god, a fleet-footed one at that.

Mr. Harvard also taught us by using Socrates' method, with accompanying peripatetics. (That means "pacing," he said, part of Socrates' style.) Mr. Harvard got us down to "The Truth" of a thing by questioning us as he paced, first giving us a straightforward, general one ("Everybody knows that's true, right?") and then, once we'd leapt to it, a corps of tougher nuts. He rolled his eyes at the absurdity of some of our answers, but just as quick aimed a grin at anyone who moved us right along. The closer we got to The Truth, the more high strutting his steps became and the wilder his red hair cox-combed the air, and the faster his quick finger jabbed it, alternately pointing out good answers and puncturing wrongful deductives. And the more his back arched, until he was taut as a drawn bow. Until he became the drum major leading our philosophic marching band, his left arm a hard-angled vee riveted to his hip, and his Socratic right arm a flashing baton. He squared the corners of the room and then changed directions, all to the quickening chant of our answers and the tapping beat of our excited feet, until the whole room was abump and awhirl with our seeking of The Truth.

Oh! If you were there, looking in through one of the wavy-glass windows, seeing us dance and hearing us laugh with sheer joy at the learning, you'd tighten your laces and join the shivaree. Be advised, though: that's what they poisoned Socrates for—dancing in school—Mr. Harvard told us so. And like I said in the beginning—Pete and re-Pete—you must not think of me as an uneducated man. The facts of the matter are that I had a classical education; I've studied Greek. I'm a Harvard man.

No. That's not how it was. It's just the way I wished it had been. There was no Mr. Harvard—I made all the good of him up, just to fool me, not to fool you. And there was no Pentecostal Academy. I went to the penitentiary school. Because I had to. But mean as it was, Lewisburg High was only the warm-up for a tougher school, where the test always came before the lesson. Of my studies in philosophy, I tell you this: I searched for the truth in green darkness, in a land from which aesthetics had fled. There I took my lessons—in man killing; and there I learned my ethics—in the fields where the fickle gods dangled and dropped me. Like an old Greek, I learned my ethics in the rain.

### Do You Want To Fly?

The clouds above are like droves of fleecy white sheep. The sky they graze is the color of blue bells. Beneath the clouds, two men walk up the skirt of the hill, bare-chested in open flak jackets, their helmets cocked back on their heads. One carries a bazooka across his shoulders, holding it there with his forearms, his hands resting lightly on the tube. The other man carries a rocket in each hand.

A fire team of men lays tangle-foot barbed wire outside the perimeter. Two of them manage the wire off the spool and a third man kneels, holding an engineer's stake upright, keeping his hand low and away from the heavy sledge with which the fourth man drives the stake deep into the ground.

I can hear Red in the company command post, behind me, higher up on the hill, squaring away a replacement: "This can't be right. This can't be your real name—*Johnny* Popejoy? Given names do not have belittling 'y's spliced on their aft end. I guess your parents wanted you to always be their little Johnny, huh? Not here. Here we need big Johns, not little Johnnies. So what's it going to be, Popejoy, do you want to grow up or not?" "Yessir I do", says the new man. "Do what?" says Red. "Grow up, sir, I want to grow up". "No you don't! Not with that name you don't. I think maybe you're Peter Pan—but then I guess we should call you Petey Pan, shouldn't we? Well, do you want to wear tights and fly through the sky? Do you want to *never never grow* up?" "No Sir! I don't want to wear tights and fly through the sky! I do want to grow up!" "Make me a believer, Private Popejoy—tell me your grown-up name. Tell it to me now!" "Sir, I am Private *John* Popejoy, Sir!" "No you're not! Because I'm promoting you: Private First Class John Popejoy, but we'll call you 'Jake'. Now, how about that?"

I've got to turn my head now, to see them as I thought they'd be: the newly named Jake grinning with pride at Red, his irregular, baptizing lieutenant, and Red, his lips pursed, his great head giving one slow up-down nod of satisfaction. As I turn about, there flies a zippey bee past

my cheek, a thud felt more than heard in the sandbags behind my head; a hole in one, size less than a penny. Sand is leaking out of it.

At the perimeter, nothing has changed: the labor party still lays wire there—the sledge bangs on the stake—and the bazooka team is still making its way up the hill; I swear, I can hear their labored breathing as well as I can hear Red dismissing “Jake”. But it’s all in slow motion, and everything I see is just a little blurry; even what I hear comes slower. It’s as if the air has changed into water. Otherwise, not a thing has changed, except for there being a little hole in the sandbag, behind where my head would have been if I hadn’t turned around to look up at Red and the new man.

Beyond the wire, there are still chains of brown paddies and green tree lines, and hazy gray mountains in the distance. There are still white clouds in the blue sky above. Nothing has changed, except sand is leaking out of the bag.

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