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Conversations with McCarthy

These are reconstructions of notes made during and after calls.

Any material set off in quotes only separates more vividly recollected material from the rest, and are not strictly quotes.

I wrote McCarthy a letter introducing myself in the fall of 1988, and got a letter back in late spring 1989.

Telephone Conversation, 20 May 1990

From Cormac McCarthy in El Paso, TX

to John Sepich in Chapel Hill, NC

About Twenty-Five Minutes

A couple of weeks before this first call, I'd left a message with a lawyer in El Paso, Bobby Perel, who knew McCarthy. I'd come to a standstill on my work on the French sentence in *Blood Meridian*, and hoped it worth the inconvenience of five minutes of McCarthy's time to add to "Notes" what I imagined would be another text-reference as interesting as the German sentence (Thomas Mann / *Tonio Kröger*) had been.

About 7:30 Sunday night McCarthy called, apologizing that he had been away and had only just gotten the message. To my mind the apology had been unnecessary—I'd called him out of the blue—but it was a kind note on which to open. Said he hadn't answered a letter in the last year: too busy on other things.

My question about the French sentence was the first thing to ask about, not knowing how interested he would remain in the conversation (and, I had left the message that I had a "two minute" question). He said he didn't know off-hand exactly where he'd taken the sentence—that it probably was a sentence out of something else—my suggestions of Joan of Arc stories, Crusade stories, or French medieval romances did not sufficiently jog his

memory (or hit the mark)—but that he would check into the sentence (he wasn't sure he had a copy of *Blood Meridian*).

I thanked him, then (again), for having returned my call (I did not want to drag things out—he'd placed the call, it was his nickel), but we must have talked for another fifteen or twenty minutes. He said he'd moved to El Paso 15 or 18 years ago to write *Blood Meridian*. He said "It's as far west as I could go and still be in the South." He'd been directed to some of the big works on the southwest—Horgan, Bancroft, Spicer—but said to me that he'd found things more suited to his interest in first person accounts of travellers. He again mentioned Ruxton, whom he'd mentioned in his letter as the best writer of those he'd found. He said that *Blood Meridian* was the first of his books he'd researched, the others were "of things I'd seen or heard tell of."

I brought up the subject of the Tarot in the novel linking to Glanton through Ben McCulloch, and McCulloch's having been a prominent Freemason in Texas. McCarthy didn't say yes or no to the thought, but said there is a new good book on McCulloch out of U Texas P.

He said that Toadvine was an example of "the way of all flesh." He said, as a continuation of the Tarot conversation, that he'd followed a historical reference to a Four of Cups card pasted on a wall in Mexico as the basis for including this card in the novel. He also said an odd thing: that the Judge had wanted the reading of the cards on the way to Janos. This is not at all the way I remember the scene, which I take to be between Glanton and the Juggler.

As the conversation went on I said to him that I'd not found an origin for his introductory Valéry quote, but that I wasn't going to ask him about its source since I was having fun reading Valéry in the meantime. He offered the thought that it occurred in a "conversation with somebody in China," a thought which will probably narrow the search (and he said it's in the collected Valéry).

He asked me if I had, in my research, run across a book by "somebody at Vanderbilt,"

and published by Louisiana State UP. I said yes, I'd seen Bell's book, and that it's what had decided me, out of McCarthy's five books, to look at *Blood Meridian* for the thesis. I said that one person I know thinks highly of Bell on *Suttree*, and that I like some of Bell on *Outer Dark*. But it was as if Bell had read a different *Blood Meridian* than I had. I said I'd gone off to the research library with lists of character and place names from the novel, thinking that just getting oriented would be a good start. And McCarthy said he thought the historical approach was probably more fruitful than what he'd seen in Bell's book.

This inclusion of critical business in the conversation wasn't his only reference to such stuff—he mentioned that “in a review” or two he'd noticed this or that item—so I did offer, if he thought it of any interest, to send him a copy of the “Notes” thesis (“Notes Toward an Explication of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*”) newly-combined with “More Notes.” (He saw at once the slipperiness of my thesis title: that I didn't have to produce the “Explication” it does in fact allude to.) He answered that he wondered where I was going with it, was it a book? and that if I sent it he'd take a look at it, as he could.

We talked (he talked) about history, then, out of my remark that he seemed to stay awfully close to the words his first-person sources had used. He said he agreed with Tolstoy that written history is revised and re-thought by succeeding generations. He said history is a “Platonic puzzle,” that it has elements of “Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy,” said that he tended to appreciate a Greek view of history in which “drama and history,” and “literature and history” are interrelated. He said he thought highly of the Italian historian Benedetto Croce. He said that “history serves a need” toward the “continuity of human experience.”

I offered to send him, at this stage of an unexpectedly long call, some dollars to defray his bill, to which he replied, no, no, don't worry about it. (I knew I ran a risk of shutting down the conversation by bringing the matter up, but, certainly, even more strongly, I didn't want him put-off by the whole thing when the bill arrived in a few weeks.) The conversation went on without much of a delay for this re-grouping.

I asked him a question about a part of the book Jake Mills has questions about, of the scene of the kid and the judge in the jakes, and what happens. All the reader has are the reactions of other characters and no description. I said to McCarthy that it seemed to me that the kid couldn't have lived through his experience with the judge, that I'd gotten the impression out of the Indian treatment of enemy war dead in the novel that the Judge had probably given the kid a full treatment of such things, and that some of what was going on in the latter jakes scene had to do with 1878 people reacting to that type of bloody war result. McCarthy said that he really didn't know what had gone on in the closed outhouse, but that what I suggested didn't strike him as too far off the mark. His answer, as were most of his answers to direct questions, more a reaction to a leading question than the presentation of a formulated response of his own. Nevertheless, it was my distinct impression that the kid did die at the judge's hands in that encounter, McCarthy's reluctance to characterize the manner of the death notwithstanding.

I did ask one last question, about the Epilogue of the book, saying that I knew his words "fire in the hole" were both a term used in blasting/mining. He said yes, it's a term from "demolition work," akin to "timber" in logging, but that what his Epilogue had been written to be was a description (without "nomenclature," I suggested) of someone using a post-hole digger, going down to rock, as far as possible, then moving on, and of someone with posts following. The blades of the throw-down digger strike sparks on that rock layer. I said anytime anybody writes about making fire people read Prometheus into it, and he laughed and said yes, but that his Epilogue was about fences. A "literal description of a mundane activity, of post-hole digging."

That was it.

Telephone Conversation, July 1990
 From Cormac McCarthy in El Paso, TX
 to John Sepich in Chapel Hill, NC
 About Twenty Minutes

NOTE: I had, two weeks before this call, sent McCarthy a copy of an early version of “Notes on *Blood Meridian*,” to which he refers in his opening remarks.

I’d asked him, earlier, about the research I’d done on Tarot stuff in *Blood Meridian*, and he remarked that it seemed to him that I “didn’t need any help” from him on that score. (He well may know more of the Tarot than I did, and that I may not necessarily have covered all the Tarot stuff in the book: his remark only seemed to confirm that I had not gone astray.)

I said his book’s worth the time. He said “Notes” covers a lot of ground, that there was “a lot of stuff [he] hadn’t caught.” I said that that situation wasn’t exactly the best, and asked if I’d gone off track. He said something about “not really.” I mentioned the gunpowder stuff, if I was off track there. He said things went pretty well with gunpowder: not really off track.

I remembered to him that he had remarked in our earlier conversation that he’d made the point that the book is a romance, and I said that I had done some work on what the handbooks say is a “Romance,” and we tended to agree that it seemed “probable” that Holden, out of the novel’s last chapter, could live forever. He said there were, he thought, “certain indications of the supernatural” in the book. He said that there seemed nothing to stand in the way on the grounds of physics as we know it.

I remarked that he must have the best memory in the last two hundred years, to have done work so close to the historical sources, or that he’d worked well with xeroxes. He said that the book’s made up of what’s out there, and then you see what you can do with it. I mentioned Bell’s *Achievement* (which he again recognized) on the Yumas’ dress, and he proposed that every detail in the novel is based on actual fact.

He asked me what was my plan for “all of this” “Notes” business. I said I hoped it might be available, at least a copy per state, accessible with some slight bit of effort, to save somebody a little time getting started, to provide some bibliography.

We talked about Ruxton’s eye on the coach (he said “I wouldn’t have even remembered where it came from”), and the dead cattle set on their feet by travellers. I said that the books he’d used, even when identified, swim in and out of focus in my memory, that I’d been nagged by the recollection of the coach (thought it was in the Nacori funeral) and had re-found it, and had located the cattle business and then found I’d lost it.

I said the “Notes” format was out of what was at hand (and he chuckled: it may have seemed a response to words of his on the historical in the novel), but that I supposed, if anything, its ordering was similar to George Sturt’s in his *The Wheelwright’s Shop*, with a section on the shop’s history, some sections on the work itself, some on specific workers.

I brought up the subject of Cortes in my Gunpowder pages: he said everything’s based on something (I didn’t get a feel for whether or not he’d planned the correspondence when writing, but that the world might be found full of such serendipity).

He said that he’d been to his book’s town Jesús María, but that its name had changed since 1850.

I mentioned I’d spoken with Ralph Smith. He said “So you did talk to him,” which I took to mean, certainly, that he was familiar with Smith’s writing, and maybe also that McCarthy had talked to Smith.

He asked if the history or geography of *Blood Meridian* had been of particular interest to me before I’d begun work, and I said no, I’d only known what popular entertainment had presented: that I’d started with a list of place and people names, to answer my own questions. I said I had just closed my eyes and gone ahead. He said it didn’t sound like bad advice. I said I trusted that what I had might in turn, to some extent, answer others’ questions.

I brought up Faulkner’s “Dry September”: the “lidless fixity” image which also shows as “stars in their lidless fixity” in his book (in *Concordances*): he said “things come from

somewhere” and that sometimes you write and don’t know where things come from. That every great novelist has in common with every other great novelist the fact that they have read all the great novels of the past, so such things are possible.

I brought up the fact he’d mentioned working on two books set in the 1940s in the southwest when he’d written me in the spring of 1989. He told me it’s actually three novels, as rough drafts. I asked if they needed to be read together, and he said no, though they’re related. Asked if they shared any characters, and he said yes.

I asked if he tended to get “intense” when he got down to his actual writing, and he said “I have no idea.” Then he told a story of a “terrific wing shot” who’d “slaughtered all the quail” on a farm one day, and the farmer asked him if, when he aimed, he had both eyes open or if he closed one. The man said “I never thought about that,” and that that was the last bird he ever killed. I said I would go to my grave an unhappy guy if I’d brought him to the wing shot’s predicament. Then I said I trusted that he’d faced such questions before, and had passed beyond them, and he laughed, and said yes. [I later found in Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* that the writer is at times a “wing shot” “bringing down the bird of thought as it flashes by.”]

We talked for a while about South American writers: that Borges, he thought, was “world class,” that Borges was the “first time in a thousand years that the world has had a world class writer alive.” I found out that Borges had only died about two years ago. I said that in the mid-Seventies I’d read all of him I could find, and remarked on the change in atmosphere blindness brought to his prose. McCarthy had nothing to say to the thought. I said that without Borges, and John McPhee, and him, the century would have been less interesting for me.

He said he’d spent some time in Buenos Aires, visiting.

I brought up Gabriel Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and McCarthy said something to the effect, “What can you say about someone who’s on a first name basis with a criminal like Castro?” I have not any real idea what politics the writers of South America

profess, and so that dimension to the conversation died off.

He said he thought it time to let me go, and I took the opportunity to mention Mills' article "American Tolstoy," that Mills had said he'd sent a copy to McCarthy. He asked me if Mills was a friend of mine and I said I'd taken one of his courses, and that we'd gone out fishing. He said he seemed to remember the piece and to "tell him thanks" and that he was sorry he didn't respond but he had "mail up to the light fixtures." He said to say hello and that he appreciates the interest.

That was about it.

Telephone Conversation, Late July 1990

From Cormac McCarthy in El Paso, TX

to John Sepich in Chapel Hill, NC

About Ten Minutes

McCarthy called unexpectedly, saying that he'd been talking to a man in Austin, Texas, a man to whom McCarthy thought he'd like to get a copy of my "Notes." He told me the guy had done the screenplay for the television production of Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*, and that he was responsible for the gift of J. Frank Dobie's papers to the University of Texas at San Marcos' new Southwestern Writers Collection. He said I might get my name in the credits of *Blood Meridian* as an "Historical Adviser," if it ever got to be a movie. I said I'd seen such a credit trailing the PBS *The Gardener's Son*, for which he had written the screenplay.

I told McCarthy that getting the guy a copy of "Notes" sounded alright, and that it seemed to me that my sending him one of the "formatted" "Notes" booklets seemed more appropriate, as it's two sides to a page, and optically reduced—looks like a book--than to send the fellow Xeroxes McCarthy might make from what I'd sent to him.

He said that it was up to me, whichever, and gave me the address of Mr. Bill Wittliff as the guy to send it to.

I asked if there were plans to do a film of *Blood Meridian*, or something, and he said that the producer Michael Mann had an option on the film rights to the book. (Wittliff later answered the same question about "plans" for me on the phone by posing a question on the order of "Do you know how Hollywood works?" I took his question to mean that nothing's absolutely ruled-out, but that announcements aren't remotely pending on the subject.)

I thanked McCarthy for his thoughtfulness.

Telephone Conversation, 12 September 1991

From Cormac McCarthy in El Paso, TX
to John Sepich in Chapel Hill, NC
About Fifty Minutes

McCarthy was returning a call of mine. I said it'd been about six months and I was curious what was going on. He said he'd been out trying to line up lawyers in the aid of a friend of his up on some Federal charges. Half the lawyers in El Paso, he said.

He mentioned a "funny" dust wrapper I'd sent him, on *101 Uses for Human Skin*, or some such. He said he was sure it wasn't real, and I said no, it wasn't. It was from the late '50s and was supposed to make a gag gift for the hospital-bound and shut-ins to have as a conversation piece. Others in the series are *Forgery for Fun and Profit*, and one for burglary, and I forget what else. But this one seemed to "belong" to the author of the Glanton story, and so I'd sent it. I said he should display it and *really* get the rumors flying.

Said I was working on Mephistopheles stuff in *Blood Meridian*, but didn't get much significant rise out of him on the subject, though Satan, he remarked, is an "interesting figure," and seemed to get more play than the good, on the whole.

Mentioned the "quarter" and "half" moons stuff in the novel, but, again, got not much.

Remarked that someone had wondered if he'd seen Chamberlain as early as its 1956 publication: he asked if it did come out in 1956. My impression certainly is that he had not immediately latched onto it as some beginning for his novel at that time.

Asked him what was new with him. He said he will have a book out in April or May of this next year. He'd just gotten a manuscript off to his publisher. The second novel of these three he's working on is fairly along, and the third is a rough draft. I asked and he said this one next spring will be *All the Pretty Horses*.

He also said he'd gotten an "award" for a play he had written, *The Stonemason*, about three generations of Black stonemasons set in the mid-50s or 60s. Said it was "based on people I knew."

Said I was glad for him, that I did wonder how he made ends meet: he said "people give me money," and we both chuckled a bit.

I remarked *Suttree* had some humor, and wondered if *Stonemason*, as based on laborers, did, too. He said it's not a "humorous" thing. Somebody had written him they'd read *Suttree* "laughing all the while," which he found inexplicable, and I said there was funny stuff in that novel (Harrogate asking for a glass of water after having spent days in the sewer, the "something crawled up there and died" fart in the cafe), and he said it's "the everyday stuff of life, I guess."

I asked him if he had a place picked out for his manuscripts (trying to start a conversation about the Southern Historical Collection at UNC), and he said the advice to him had been to hang onto everything.

I mentioned the manuscript page reproduced in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, of the tent coming down on Reverend Green, and he was unaware of that use. He said he won't send manuscripts out until they're complete. People in New York will make copies (the "bastards") of everything and it gets all over: "it's like someone reading your mail," and they don't care.

Said he'd seen a movie the other week which he felt had about half its script stolen from his book: "whole lines of dialog taken out word for word; didn't try and disguise it." I said the question is what's worth trying to pursue for damages.

He related a story of a friend who'd, when young, taught at Cal Tech, and who'd invented a *Mathematica* program, and then Cal Tech said it was theirs. Ten years later he has a thriving company based on his revenues (millions, he said).

He said 35 years is old for a physicist, "it's like being a writer at 95." If it hasn't been done by the late 20s it's probably over. "Physics is basically what we have for a vision of the

world.”

I said somebody had said poets get going (with some notable French exceptions) in their later 30s. He mentioned the physicist Schroedinger and “wave mechanics.” I asked how old Heisenberg was with his “Uncertainty” business, and McCarthy said 23 without missing a beat: “They’re generally kids.” I named a local math prodigy, and McCarthy said he’d better get going because he’s got five or ten years if a junior in high school now.

I asked why. He talked about physics as so much abstraction. He asked if I’d read Koestler’s book *The Sleepwalkers*.

I said things about time passing more slowly when young (doing things for first time takes more concentration, therefore it’s not “bled of its strangeness”).

I asked if he had any snapshots of himself, might he send one along. Said his publisher had had some made recently and would see about getting one on if he could.

I brought up Bill Wittliff as a photographer, and that the two rooms promised for the Southwestern Writers Collection had, Wittliff said, become seven by the time the doors had opened. McCarthy said UT-San Marcos is lucky to have him as a friend (to have given them Frank Dobie’s papers), and that he’s a “very nice guy.”

I drifted a mention of Anareta out on the current to see if it would go anywhere, mentioned I’d gotten some stuff on “Anaretic Places,” paused, and the relative emphasis of his punctuating “m—humh” did, for me, support my guess that he was conversant with the concept of “Anareta” beyond, for instance, his simply having lifted his “planet Anareta” phrase from some literary matrix. He did directly answer saying he didn’t remember the reference in the novel, but that it might have been a “symbolic” thing.

He said “I worry about you spending all this time and energy” on the book, and I said his novel’s thoughtfully put together, and not to worry about this end of things, that most of my research was historical. He said the more he got into it “everything seemed to fall into place.”

He chuckled when I remarked that I’d seen the business of Glanton and Lincoln

cremated, as a “McCarthy” story, that such things occur in *Child of God*, and in *The Gardener’s Son*. He said when he’d visited Yuma, AZ, he was reading the paper at breakfast, and found, accidentally, as he was in his research, the *Yuma Sun* story on scalping. I said it was a perfect match, with even the locale for the newspaper piece in some perfectly-named “Afar” region.

He asked what I was doing. I said something about building houses, and that the construction was nice, that it is a world not necessarily based on words. [I built seven houses that year.] Said that I was having a nice time talking to my lawyer neighbor. Mentioned, as part of something about Hemingway’s suicide (got unhappy, ran out of hope, I don’t know what), which had come up in one of those conversations, that his death was the day after my birthday. McCarthy said, without missing a beat, that Hemingway was born the day after his birth.

We talked a little about building houses. I claimed everything after the sticks and the rough inspections was cosmetic: spackling and paint. He talked about some designing he’d done that he’d liked, cathedral ceilings, balconies, windows from ground-to-gable up two stories.

A little more to that talk, but not much.

Telephone Conversation, 8 December 1991

From Cormac McCarthy in Pecos, TX

to John Sepich in Chapel Hill, NC

About Twenty Minutes

McCarthy called unexpectedly. He said he called out of his “apparent resolve to never write another letter.” Said he was in a motel room in Pecos, Texas, waiting to attend the trying of a Federal case against a friend of his the next day (to be Monday), and who could use the moral support.

I asked him to confirm the title of his play, and he said *The Stonemason*—“singular”—and that it’s to be produced at the Arena theater in Washington, D.C., next fall, maybe September.

I told him I’d gotten a note from the writer Larry Brown about the play as scheduled at the Arena, as Brown found out when working in D.C. on his play from *Dirty Work*. I went over Brown’s books for a while with McCarthy, doing what I could to lead McCarthy into reading some of them (stressed *Big Bad Love*, as, into Part III, there’s not a thing wrong anywhere). He said others had mentioned Brown to him, and maybe he’d find a copy.

I confirmed his next novel’s title as *All the Pretty Horses*. I said Brown had written that there were plans that McCarthy’s editor Gary Fisketjon would send Brown a galley of the book. Then McCarthy said he had put my name in for one, and to let him know if it didn’t arrive in a reasonable time. I said Brown had mentioned February. McCarthy said he didn’t know, but that he’d sent corrected proofs back to Knopf “yesterday morning” (Saturday morning), and he would expect galleys to be out before February.

I said I understood he’d moved publishers. He said yes, “across the hall.” When asked “Why?” he said he seemed to know more people, to have “more friends,” at Knopf than Random House. I mentioned I’d heard his earlier editor Albert Erskine had been Faulkner’s editor, and he said yes, and John O’Hara’s, and others’. He said Erskine must surely be in his 80s.

He asked about my article in *The Southern Literary Journal*, wondering what the “*Journal* was.” I said something about Holman and Rubin at UNC. Rubin, I said, was apparently more-and-more retired, but was a name in the criticism of Southern fiction, and that Rubin’s Algonquin Books is Larry Brown’s hardback publisher. I told McCarthy that my next article is supposed to be in *The Southern Quarterly* and he said something about “southern” always turning up in the titles of these magazines. I took his remark to suggest a shake-of-the-head at this apparent need to pigeon-hole fiction by region. Though I did later make the point that Robert Bly is known as a “midwestern” poet, we did not then much investigate what “help” these categorizations are supposed to provide. [For as world-encompassing as *Blood Meridian* is, and as many world-wide translations as Bly has published (Lorca, Neruda, Vallejo, Hamsun, Tranströmer), I felt I might be hearing a bit of repugnance at labelling. Wondering what I was hearing, I thought of writing a question about the thought in a letter.]

I told McCarthy I’d run into Robert Bly at Duke Friday night, and that Bly seemed as lively as ever. He said he’d read Bly’s *Iron John* (people had suggested it to him: he said he had thought it would probably not be his “cup of tea”) and McCarthy said he thought it wasn’t half bad. He said something to me about having a hard time with poetry as an “art form:” thought it ought to take music with it, or something. He said he wasn’t sure what to think of poetry between Donne and Yeats. And I spoke highly of a transforming effect the musicians on tabla and sitar that Bly had brought along Friday had had on a second poet/translator at the reading, Coleman Banks. I swear Banks was addicted to Bly’s musicians by evening’s end. McCarthy said he’d seen Bly on PBS, and had noticed the music he used. I said to McCarthy that Bly’s head/heart distinction didn’t allow war except for situations with an intellectual component, and McCarthy affirmed the thought: *Blood Meridian*’s scalphunting gang is to some extent directed by a Harvard type (a *real* “hairless” giant). I said it’s my impression that McCarthy, Bly, the two of them—worlds apart—are working at the same thing.

I said I'd run across a weird story in the last few days: a woman whose husband had committed suicide a year and a half ago had, in the last week, gone out to the run where her dog was confined, only to find it dead, by some fantastic chance hung by its collar on the stub end of a branch slightly poked through the chain link fencing. The remarkable aspect of all this had to do with the fact that the woman then said that the death of the dog hurt her more than had her husband's death. McCarthy responded with a story from Alice Miller, a German psychiatrist, concerning Nietzsche's breakdown, that his collapse came as he saw a man viciously beating a horse in the street. Nietzsche threw his arms around the horse's neck, weeping uncontrollably over the lovelessness of the world. His last ten years, after this event, were apparently spent in a sanitarium.

McCarthy said he wondered if the story of Nietzsche had something to do with the nobility associated with horses, and the pitiful state to which the one in the street had been reduced. He said that people can project upon their pets the "tragedy of their lives," and the "unhappiness of childhood," and that it can be the case that the loss of a pet can cause greater grief than does the loss of a spouse. I said that the loss of a child is, I am told, the greatest of such losses. He said his sister had lost a child, and so he had some experience of it.

He asked if I knew anything about Ron Hansen's new novel, something about a nun's visitation, *Mariette in Ecstasy*, he thought. He'd read Hansen's *Desperadoes*, and said it's good. I said no about *Mariette*. He said he was looking for Alice Walker's new book, he'd heard it is good, and asked if I knew anything about it. I said no, that I'd been reading Larry Brown (I figured I might as well do what I could for Brown, while making excuses for my ignorance at the same time). I mentioned having sent him a copy of "The Sawyers" chapter from George Sturt's *The Wheelwright's Shop*, that I figured to clear my conscience of having earlier brought the book's title up to him. He said he had looked for the book (it sounded like something he'd like), but that El Paso doesn't have any bookstores worth the name. I said I'd see about finding a copy for him here. And he said yes, do that.

That was that.

Telephone Conversation, April 1992
From Cormac McCarthy in El Paso, TX
to John Sepich in Chapel Hill, NC
About Fifteen Minutes

On a Saturday (and before publication of *All the Pretty Horses* or of the Woodward interview with him), McCarthy called to say that he had given my phone number to a woman from Denver's *Rocky Mountain News*, who had gotten McCarthy's number and had talked to him for a short while. He said she seemed ok, but was asking him questions which he didn't have much in the way of answers to. And, also, that she gave him the impression of having not much read his books. I said that as a matter of fact she had called the afternoon before, and that I had talked to her for a while, and, yes, she had not read any of his books, that she had gotten McCarthy's name (and perhaps number) from a friend of hers in El Paso.

I said to him that it had seemed a little odd she introduced herself as having gotten my number from McCarthy, but that I would, under such circumstances, be glad to talk to her. I said to McCarthy that I'd mailed copies of my articles to her, for what good they'd do, being on *Blood Meridian*. And added that I'd suggested she begin with *Child of God* in her reading. It's a short and relatively directly-told tale, and that it might be good to keep in mind, as she read it, what differences would exist in the telling of Ballard's tale had it been done as a newspaper story rather than in the manner of McCarthy's novel, she being associated with a newspaper, book editor for it though she was. And I talked to him of my dancing around to best ready her for the fact it's a rough book in some ways (Necrophilia, with a capital "N," isn't most people's cup of tea), no matter that it's a jewel of a book first and foremost. And at this he laughed, and he said that, when these niceties come up for him to deal with, he tells people *Child of God* is "semi-autobiographical." And I laughed, and said "Isn't that the bottom line for every novel out there?" and we went on a little more.

He said that if I didn't mind he would give my number out to people who got through

to him with questions. I said to him, well, there are two things I can think of to say: first, that I didn't mind talking to folks, for the most part, and second, God help us that I didn't much warrant the results, as I talked to those people in the future. He laughed, and said he thought it'd be ok, that he didn't much want to just hang up on folks, and seemed to think the talk with *The Rocky Mountain News* thing sounded as if it'd gone alright.

[Some weeks later I got a call from Philippe Garnier in Los Angeles, again referred by McCarthy, an introduction which produced some interesting things, some letters, an article on *Blood Meridian* he'd sent as having run (I could only make out my name) in a Paris daily.]

[I believe I never did mention to McCarthy the correction to the proof of *All the Pretty Horses*, that I'd sent to Gary Fisketjon, of the Wallace book changed from *The Horse in America* in the proof, to *The Horse of America*.]

Telephone Conversation, November 1992

From John Sepich in Chapel Hill, NC
to Cormac McCarthy in El Paso, TX
About Ten Minutes

Later of an afternoon I called Bobby Perel's office, to leave the briefest of messages to congratulate McCarthy on having won the National Book Award with *All the Pretty Horses*. I got through to Mr. Perel, identified myself, and said I wanted to leave that message about McCarthy's award. He said "What?" and I said I was just calling to leave a message. He said "Wait a minute," and put the phone down. My first impression was that I'd irked him with my interruption. But the phone came back with McCarthy on it. He'd been in the lawyer's office, and my asking to leave a message had been confusing.

Anyway, I said to McCarthy my congratulations, and he said he thought it an honor. I tried to kid with him that it had come so many years into his work, and did not take to the jest, but repeated that he appreciated it.

I asked him if he'd written the remarks read at the ceremony, and he said no, he didn't do that sort of thing. I also asked, as it had been on my mind, if he'd done the dust-jacket stuff for *Blood Meridian*, as it seemed to have information not contained in the novel itself (the date of the massacre, for one thing), and that *Pretty Horses* has stuff about "dreams" on its wrapper (and that the lullaby the title is from talks about dreams), and he said God no, somebody else writes that.

I wished him well, and that was that.

Telephone Conversation, November 1993

From Cormac McCarthy in El Paso, TX
to John Sepich in Chapel Hill, NC
About Twenty Minutes

McCarthy called a Friday, Saturday, and Sunday running, to me catch at home on the Sunday. He said he'd been back in El Paso only a couple of days, having been in Sonora, Texas, since about (March or) April, having just readied the version of the second volume of *The Border Trilogy* to send up to Knopf. I said I'd wondered if I'd irritated him, with it having been so long between calls, and he said, no, he'd been holed-up with the manuscript. And, he asked, if I felt funny about the silence, how, he pressed, did I think his mother felt about it?

Anyway, he said he'd found on his return to El Paso the copy of my *Notes on BLOOD MERIDIAN* that Bellarmine College had sent him. He said he'd been aware, from some years ago, of the stuff in it, but seeing it all together he wanted to call and say it seemed to him a nice lot of work to have done on his book. I said it had been my pleasure. He'd done such a good book, and whatever length my stuff ran to was only as absolutely brief as I could be in answering my curiosity. He said he thought his brother in Knoxville was going to buy some copies. [My wife Kathy had said that his call Friday ran a little while, as he said to her things about his estimate of me. On Sunday he spoke kindly of *Notes*.]

He asked how it was selling, and I said I didn't know, I hoped well, as the Buick could stand some work. He said he was working on a 4-wheel drive pickup truck, thinking such a vehicle was about the best thing for the southwest and his needs.

He asked about the conference in Louisville, and I said it was ok, that a lot of people talked "ritual space" and "regeneration through violence," and as many French philosophers as you could think of, but that some people made presentations that the average reader would find helpful. I told him, I remember, particularly, of one guy (John Lang) who'd done

a paper on *Child of God* from a premise, approximately, “the pros and cons of having a relationship with a person who’s dead,” and that I’d appreciated his perspective of logical extremes to the point of telling him of McCarthy’s “semi-autobiographical” stance on *Child of God*. McCarthy said a woman, a friend of his, who had been at the conference, had talked to him about it, and had sent him a program. He asked if I’d met her, and I said I hadn’t known of the connection or I would have.

I talked about having been passed a typescript copy of his *The Stonemason* at the Bellarmine conference, a copy said to have been made on the QT by a kid working at *Esquire*. As I remember, McCarthy got a little quiet for a moment. McCarthy’s next pre-publication excerpt, from *Cities of the Plain*, did not appear in *Esquire*.

I said I’d send him a poster from it (“McCarthy’s Desk”), and that Peter Josyph who’d done the art for the poster had read *Blood Meridian* aloud to himself, and done a paper on what he’d learned from the experience. I said Peter had, among other things, found a lot of interesting “punctuation by spit” in the book, which seemed to be of some interest to McCarthy. [I spoke to Peter soon after this call, who said he’d put copies of the poster and his article in the mail to McCarthy.] I mentioned Peter’s notice that McCarthy could only be read aloud one way, as, for instance, Thoreau does not have to be. McCarthy mentioned John McPhee’s *Survival of the Bark Canoe* as Thoreau’s name came up. We compared some John McPhee stories (somewhere it’s noted he’s mentioned he’s liked McPhee’s books), and I ventured that I’d read McPhee in the ’70s, and I talked about *Curve of Binding Energy*, and he mentioned *Conversations with the Archdruid*, and I said I knew I’d read that, too (with these others), but did not much remember the premise for the title (which is true, and, too, I wondered how he’d talk about the book), and he clearly presented the Sierra Club officer as akin to the tree-worshipping Druids, and an Archdruid, therefore, and I said, oh, yes, I remembered now, and that someone (Leo Daugherty) had sent me a recent parody of *Blood Meridian* which took a Druidic slant: the kid with a chainsaw, the judge dancing on the stump of a redwood at its end. I’d send him a copy, I said.

He said he'd just put in the mail to Ecco Press proofs of *The Stonemason*, for them to issue in paper. That someone may take an interest and produce it later on, but that at least now it would be between covers, and that would be fine, it would be out of his hands.

I said, speaking of the '70s, I told him the best "portrait of the artist" I'd ever read was Kotzwinkle's *The Fan Man*, a regular Gene Harrogate, trying every angle, but to do with music rather than money as the point of it all. That I liked, though I hadn't read it in years, the outrageousness, the comedy of it. He seemed passing interested, and said he'd read something he remembered as Kotzwinkle's "swimmer" something, he thought, and I said *Swimmer in the Secret Sea*, and he said yes, and I said I'd read enough of Kotzwinkle to appreciate the fact he wrote a different book each time out, a point I thought appropriate to make with the author of such varied books as he's done. [I sent him a copy of *The Fan Man* when I found it.]

I asked him if he'd seen *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and he said someone had recommended it to him, but no, he hadn't. I said I was reading it and thought it well worth it (in retrospect, its business on "fire," particularly).

That's what I remember.

In May 2007 I recount the following McCarthy contacts:

Telephone Call, Mid-June 1994

From Cormac McCarthy in El Paso, TX
to John Sepich in Peoria, IL
About Twenty Minutes

McCarthy called after he had wrapped-up some writing, and “before I called my mother,” he said.

I talked about the people here (Kathy, Keri, Karlen) wanting to get a horse barn going. Land prices in Illinois are lower than in North Carolina. [We bought a horse boarding place that August, 85 acres, 36 stalls in two barns, a riding arena with apartment, a Quonset hut, a little house. And that set-up, and the paying job, gave me things to do for twenty-five years.]

I talked of clinical depression and of having met Shelby Foote, both in my same time-frame. We talked (maybe generally I talked) of other things for a while, but of nothing to note here.

Letter, Early August 2002
From Cormac McCarthy in Santa Fe, NM

McCarthy sent a five-sentence letter:

He wrote that this would be his last letter. He wrote that I didn't owe him an apology (for what, I couldn't say). He wrote a word of "hope" for me. He wrote that if I sent him more letters that'd be alright. He wrote he'd called the house, with no answer, before he'd written. He closed the letter, as he had for years, as "Your Friend."

I'm glad that I'd been able to do him a few favors. He'd been more than generous to me.

Over the years, I sent him some more letters, and two or three packages.

I did always enjoy hearing him laugh.

In early 2020, I wrote McCarthy if he'd please sign and return a copy I'd sent him of The Stonemason. He was kind, and I got it back in about six weeks, and he had again addressed me as his friend.

John Sepich
2 July 2023