

Fifty-Two Descriptions of Flag Burning (Part Three)



Rick Moody

Florida

She was a retiree, and almost everyone was a retiree there, and at night, when she couldn't sleep, she would walk the beach, in Fort Lauderdale, the waterfront, compulsively steering around the young in their careless night activities, some nights up until nearly dawn, looking for the blue carcasses of the *Portuguese man o' war*—which was not a jellyfish, she remembered from her time as a middle school educator, but some kind of symbiotic amalgamation composed of innumerable microscopic hydrozoans that liked to stun, arrest, and then constrictively push other life forms up into their gullets. The man o' war was like the pastel blue favored in design in the greater south Florida area; that is, the blue wasn't of the night, of the pitiless expanses of vacuum out beyond our hunk of rock. The blue wasn't of the deeper ocean, of the Winslow Homer variety, the blue was like class dynamics of a merciless Caribbean region with all its post-colonial menace and hallucinatory pestilences, in the time of perpetual Caribbean unrest. The man o' war symbiants washed up onto the shore in dozens, this she knew from sleeplessness, from beachfront Fort Lauderdale, in a line down the beach, from where

the high tide tumbled up on the lip of the sidewalk, the benches of retirees. There was always a person with borderline personality disorder, or similar, wailing along the beachfront that he had been stung by a stray tentacle; his howling reverberating up and down the beach in a delirium of night heat, and she could not tell it from the category five isolation of being older. Was she, this compulsive beach walker, like the man o' war herself, or like the sound of wailing? Her children grown and inadvertently neglectful, her husband somewhat incoherent, her time her own, behaving as the ocean currents behaved? She had once been so many other things besides a pedestrian of the beachfront. She had protested against the war, whichever war it was, and against sexism and inequality and racism and other issues, and now older she still smoked the weed, as she had in the past, and occasionally swapped pills with others of her acquaintance, and almost no one would believe her, if she just told them, she of the bulky blouses and mild dishevelment, the ways in the past that, for lack of a better word she *burned*. A simmering of desire, summonable from the past, ebbed and flowed in the tides, seethed like storms uprising. She could see a fellow across the room, radiant and drunken, at some party, at some consciousness raising, at some school board fundraiser of a cocktail party, and the reaching out for him was malarial, notwithstanding his pretentious corduroy jacket, nicotine stains on his fingers, crooked teeth; she was drawn to him like the campers to the cook-out that spawned an act of arson; she was arsonist of the heart, she was a lighting up of the sky, as with defoliant or incendiary raids, the stories she told her family, the dangerous hitchhiking, the journal of her life to which she gave so much, only to throw the thing on a bonfire, the language of her journal in her, inflammatory, down to the ash, and she followed the radiant sentences, now past, the smoldering with regrets, with desire, and bad choices, and more desire, and then the getting older. She burned a flag the first time in the state of Alabama in 1966 because she could, at night, by a willow, near a creek full of swamp moccasins, with a couple of girlfriends, everybody so potted with idealism that the night was everclear, in a becoming of change, and no one would expect it of her now, she like the blue sea creature with the fatal bite that washed up in Fort Lauderdale and didn't belong, awaiting, desiring and aching and burning in the having lost, in this a society of

engulfment. All of her old friends were back in Michigan. It was easy to be this alone.

Illinois

At the B'hai Temple

of Evanston,

all of the candles

were replaced

with burning flags,

but by whom?

All the nations are one.

Louisiana

At the infamous maximum security penitentiary of Louisiana, there was a tradition of work songs, and the notable collector of folk materials, Angus McInerney, traveled to Angola to record work songs there. This was during the folk revival of the 1960s. Many of these songs in the so-called McInerney Cache (at Ohio State) were not written down in any way, but were rather improvised and forgotten as soon as finished. A tradition of the work song as practiced there involved rotating lead singing, as in the shape-note singing tradition, where one convict would sing for a number of verses, sometimes ten or twelve, and then with a nod turn the lead over to another. As the singers changed, rhythms and subject matter could be altered significantly, although a pulse was usually relatively constant, written in the blows of a pick-axe, as these were driven by the productivity-related needs of the convicts. Similar themes emerged over time, many of them work-related and often full of humor and sorrow. In general, there is a tendency among the Angola work songs to avoid

direct social or political commentary, except allegorically, though some contend that this is a result of McInerney's own rhetorical and political prejudices, and do not reflect the songs in themselves. The narrator saw what he was intent upon seeing.

And yet among the songs recorded by McInerney is one on reel to reel XIV: II: 3 is "Burn That Flag, Miss Virginia," in which the lead for the song on June 8, 1963, is given, as is frequently the case, as *anonymous*. Naturally, as with all such things, there is disagreement about whether the song is actually called "Burn That Flag," especially in view of the fact that numerous commentators refer to it as "Wave That Flag, Miss Virginia." Presumably close listening to the finished result would support one or the other interpretation, excepting that McInerney used a low fidelity microphone in the June 1963 recordings. In the humid conditions his microphones may have malfunctioned. The words are hard to hear. That has not stopped many transcribers from attempting to get down the words, though we should emphasize that any lyric attributed to Angola prisoners in which they have not had an opportunity to confirm or deny, amounts to a displacement and a kind of aestheticized *control* of the work song, an appropriation, an aestheticizing of material spontaneously generated, which instantly makes the lyric in McInerney's rendering other than itself, and the site of dispute:

Burn that Flag, Miss Virginia
 Yes indeed and don't you please
 I'm gonna have them flapjacks ready
 Some with syrup, some with cheese!

Burn that Flag, Miss Virginia
 God almighty says so, too
 Comes on down from burning bushes
 Wears the devil's red, white & blue

Burn that flag, Miss Virginia
 Light it up and flee the scene
 Feds will catch you, bring you homeward
 Saddest place you ever been

Burn that flag, Miss Virginia
 The Choctaw lived here way back when
 And if you say you ever seen one
 The judge will give you an extra ten.

Whether it is McInerney's own work is unresolved. There are commentators in superabundance who note that not a single inmate at Angola can confirm having been on a work crew that sang such a song, either as "Wave That Flag," or "Burn That Flag," and one critic, in *American Speech* (Burns, 1999), has observed that the dialect McInerney records is neither Black Vernacular Dialect as understood according to its graceful and euphonious rules of expression, nor a related Louisianan dialect associated with Angola, and having a mild Cajun flavor, used often by inmates of European descent. Given the imprecise rendering of the words, one can only assume that McInerney either *believed* he was rendering the text, or *dreamed* he was rendering the text, or was so driven by the desire to collect the Angolan work songs that he was willing to commit infelicities and acts of editorial intervention in a desire to capture what he believed was a pure songcraft, which was more likely a kind of subconscious malevolence. It may be relevant to this analysis to discuss McInerney's later attempt to sue the Smithsonian Folkways label for copyright infringement in the case of their release of *Louisiana Work Songs and Other Music of Protest* (1968), and other recordings. McInerney's claims are of dubious legal merit, and were found so by the courts, the actions being dismissed on multiple legal fronts. McInerney's subsequent efforts to found a small music publishing company likewise did not succeed, and as Burns noted in a footnote in *American Speech*, it appears that he later moved north, and sold insurance in Springfield, MA, where according to state records he did have a vanity license plate, MS VA.

Royalties for XIV: II: 3 have been collected in escrow awaiting a claimant with a strong case. In the meantime the author of the song remains anonymous.

Maine

How his love came to inhabit Petit Manan Island, an island in which in summer there were no animals of the human variety, owing to the breeding of sea birds and seals, is the subject of these lines—

In her pursuit of silence, as she put it, she had allowed her circumstances to narrow. She came to be paid to do the handiwork at the lighthouse and at the Coast Guard station, especially in winter, and in the course of this to raise and lower the American flag, there, some days, it flapped away out front, mostly unregarded, the more so when the storms blew in;

all spruce and fir, mossy shoals, bluffs rocky and severe, and when the winds from the Northeast arose the trees seemed to bow down to these, in awe at the scale of inclemency. She knew and loved the drizzle, and the gales, and the unforgiving and wet winters, and the high seas, and the isolation, and the putting on of the foul weather gear, and the buzzing out to the island in a launch, with her lunchbox and a few supplies, a toolbox, for when the Coast Guard abandoned the spot, and things fell into disrepair.

That her silence was related to bad luck and circumstances of childhood, to which she alluded, did not cause in him a diminishment of loyalty, on the contrary. He had himself worked as forest ranger at Petit Manan Wildlife Sanctuary, which was how they met, until he left of the job for, he thought, a lack of talent, in the area of public relations. Just no good with the politeness thing of it all.

Not long after briefly sharing a ride to the mainland, an overlap in the matter of launches, there was the encounter that took place at the bible study in Steuben, a Wednesday. The Baptist meeting house is on Route One by the auto repair, just up the road from the cemetery. The preacher and his wife served grilled cheese and soup afterward for the faithful, each and every Wednesday.

She came over from the island to lead the classes, now and again. It was far enough to be quite dangerous in bad weather. One wrong turn and off to Nova Scotia. Or worse. But she came, and she led the bible

study, and then she went back to her mainland shack up the road, no running water.

Oh, and the day they met at bible study, Matthew 22: “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” Does it mean, as some have supposed, that there is no quarreling with earthly authority? Or does it mean that the kingdom of heaven, which precedes and succeeds, has no position on the petty concerns?

For some months after this first meeting, the coincidental one, they took great pleasure in seeing each other at bible study. He was not sure, having never told her that there was a feeling, and that feeling was a hybrid of the candy shop, the roar of the baseball stadium, the fish on the hook, and the singing on Christmas carols, a feeling of *all* these enthusiasms, and the onrushing of spirit,

though this was the hyperbole that he felt within himself, that she knew, notwithstanding the enveloping warmth of seeing her in Steuben on Wednesdays, the flurry of awkwardnesses, and when she brought the launch into Dyer Bay, and tied up at the town dock, and went for supplies. He always tidied himself to see her. He was not sure she knew. No, he was sure she didn’t quite know, because the question was of what knowledge was, a felicity or an infelicity, and what was the value of her knowing . . .

It was said that in the midst of her duties raising and lowering the flag on Petit Manan Island, specifically at the Coast Guard station, that she found occasion to burn an American flag on Petit Manan. Out of the blue she did this, with no clear motive, unless a religious motive, nor did she later indicate one, when it came that she was prosecuted for vandalism and was relieved of her duties.

And he wondered if it was just the solitude that did this to a person, or if it were an accurate and faithful interpretation of the idea you ought to *render unto Caesar*.

On the foggy days you could sit down by the town dock all afternoon and watch the boats come lazily in, the rusty, corroded lobster craft and sometimes the sailing vessels, and the kayaks, and the rowboats,

and the launches from all the various island, tospots for getting across a glassy inlet, most days, the boats materialized in the fog as though they were from the past itself, especially the past in which he had had the feeling, and the warmth of it, and the not-telling. After the conviction, she never once attended bible study again.

And then these ships passed by, and on every one of these days he expected to see her, in her launch, coming home again.

Minnesota

Excised from this text, after a complaint by the United States Department of Justice, is a rendering in Helvetica of an American flag, by software engineer Marina Lee, of Edina, Minnesota, in which the flag is easily detachable from a cardboard, or construction paper, or ordinary A4 letter paper, by you, your loved ones, your enemies, or anyone else who should happen upon the stencil, for any purpose. To reiterate, this is a flag of the United States of America produced in a copyright free context, according to the principles of the well known philosophical investigation, "The Work of Art In the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," by W. Benjamin, which flag can be produced, defiled, or honored, in any form according to the needs of the owner of the template. Marina Lee produced the original, and then quickly photocopied the original and discarded it (in favor of the copies), at the University of Minnesota, as a final project for a class whose title has been forgotten.

Marina Lee entered the University of Minnesota intending to study medicine, but, over the course of her four years, became disillusioned, in part because of a romantic relationship, termination thereof, with a fellow student of cognitive neuroscience (the duration was two years, three months, and eleven days), name omitted. Lee then began taking courses in the department of philosophy in particular and also the liberal arts in general, culminating in her new major of *American Studies*, in the course of which she encountered Benjamin's essay, while studying writings of the European continent. Obsessed with the idea that her life in the United States of America made a mockery of what her parents and grandparents had sacrificed for, she began, according to the essay that was produced alongside

the flag template, to express feelings of revulsion toward the flag, this coinciding with behavior that Lee herself referred to as contrary to professional advancement, namely dysthymia including refraining from food. The flag template, copied for each of the students in her seminar, was posted online by one her classmates under the title “items for defacement,” and by virtue of being posted on mostly unknown *dark web* kinds of sites, the template, though generally considered somewhat facetious as an example of direct action, took off, and was attached to many posts, particularly posts that were sharply critical of the status quo.

Soon there began to appear online a variety of graphically defaced flags, flags with flames on them, hand drawn onto them, raising an issue that Lee had raised herself in her essay, namely whether a drawing of a flag burning constituted the same thing as an “actual” burning flag. Was the mimesis of the artifact the primary means through which we might evaluate whether the flag was “actual” or not; for example, would a photograph of a burning flag be more offensive, even if heavily doctored or photoshopped, than a drawing of the flag, and what of a written account, and, furthermore, what constituted patriotism in the matter of flag burning, was it a conclusion of necessity that flag burning was contrary to patriotism, not an activity of utmost reverence with respect to one’s nationality? On bulletin boards, the young and those with a lot of time on their hands began drawing flames onto many of the Marina Lee flags, often appending discussions of why they had, for example, chosen flames in blue, or magenta, and where, exactly, they procured the pigment for their stylized conflagrations. This went on, for a while, mostly without the participation of Lee herself, who was availing herself of university health services, deeply worried that to graduate without any idea of how or where she was going to apply herself professionally was going to mean that she would have to move back in with her parents and their occasionally unyielding ideas of professional progress.

The sculpture department at the university had just begun employing a 3D printer, and allowing students to use it, these printing assignments that took hours upon hours, and there were any number of arguments and disputations among the students about who got to print when. It was only a matter of time, as you can imagine, before some of Marina Lee’s classmates decided to attempt to make a Lee flag template, aflame, in three dimensions, suitable for use as a

plastic trinket or decoration for your holiday tree. Printing the burning flag in 3D, did become inevitable, as one student finally told Lee, who promptly interviewed her classmate, transcribed, and included the dialogue in her term paper. This flag can be used for any purpose, especially in light of the fact that you have now purchased this flag, and are a private owner thereof, including the provenance or history of ownership. It could be printed for use as a placemat, or doormat, or small carpet, or on toilet tissue if needed. It is, in fact, an American flag that can be used for any purpose, and which even violates the taxonomical commonplaces that we associate with a *flag*, the first a most important of which is *waviness*. A flag is not a flag if it does not have a *waving* essence, and thus this is a flag and a not-flag, burning and not-burning according to analogical usage.

Marina Lee repudiated the creation of the burning flag template, likewise the three-dimensional burning flag template, and, after a time, did in fact return to the study of medicine, in particular she earned a degree in psychiatry, and while feeling that her studies in the humanities made her a better doctor, she didn't pursue them any further than in her *undergraduate times*. On a sub-reddit concerning the Marina Lee burning flag discussion, Lee is thought to have written the lines: *the proliferation of these images is like the preservation of the caterpillar at the expense of the butterfly.*