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BERN PORTER’S

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“Porter is to the poem what Duchamp was to the art object, a debunker of handiwork fetishism and exemplary artist-as-intercessor between phenomenon and receptor.”   —Peter Frank

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The Holy Face of Jesus
(After the Holy Shroud of Turin)

Adored Be The Holy Face of Jesus
O Lord, show us Thy Face, and we shall be saved!

“By offering My Face to My Eternal Father, nothing will be refused, and the conversion of many sinners will be obtained.”
- Our Lord To St. Mary of St. Peter - November 1846

B. P.
ON SUNDAY

There are holes in heaven
When you look through the trees
Especially at morning
When rain in swift descent
Vears from the sky,
When air is asleep
Except for birds,
The murmured drenching of leaves
And rumble
Of a distant train
An articulate six o'clock
With no gold but gray
And slow heave of foliage.

Why revere a cathedral
When trees in shadow
Spread wilder and more varied
Than any church?
And who could not, without an altar
Worship the inscrutable silence of a tree
Or loneliness of early rain?

NIGHTFALL.

The evening nods with easy grace
Lower and lower from the western sky.
Velvety blues lie along the sidewalk
Lean against the walls of buildings
Touch the windows and slowly sink
Into the alleys to sleep in darkness.
A winter tree shadows the ground
And telephone wires stave the sky with unsung music.
The street lights in a slow crescendo
Ignite the evening.
PARSONSFIELD, Maine (AP) -- It took Carolyn Chute five years to write the 2,600-page manuscript she refers to as "the big book."

Since then, the novel has languished for nearly five more years in publishing limbo, leaving the author wondering whether a work of such epic scale will ever find its way into print.

"The School on Heart's Content Road," is a big book in every sense of the word, with an abundance of characters and multiple story lines. The main plot depicts a self-sustaining community in rural Maine that finds itself targeted by FBI agents determined to root out what the media portrays to the outside world as a sinister and threatening cult.

"I agree that it's long for one sitting at the beach," Chute says. "It's got everything -- kind of like the Bible, but not really."

She has no objection to the minor changes she calls "feather dusting," but is dead set against chopping off major sections of the book or shifting its focus from the conflict between powerful business interests and the exploited underclass.

Now, Chute and her agent are exploring the idea of speeding up publication by breaking the novel into a trilogy and seeking a new publisher. She expects to have the first book ready within days and the two others in a matter of months.

Disdain for 'Beans'

The long delays have taken their toll. Chute battled periods of depression, worrying that she and her husband were sinking into the grinding poverty she wrote about in her signature first novel, "The Beans of Egypt, Maine."

With the publication of "Beans" in 1985, Chute burst like a comet onto the literary scene. Critics gushed, comparing her to Faulkner and Steinbeck. She
became a regular at writers' workshops, and her best seller about the hardscrabble Bean clan found a place in high school and college classes.

Today, Chute speaks with disdain about that first book, viewing it as a relic of her past that she has sloughed off and moved beyond.

"It would be as if a person were a carpenter and they made this magazine rack for their mom when they were in junior high, and later they're building cathedrals," she says in an interview in her cluttered but comfortable home in the foothills of the White Mountains.

Chute continued the Bean saga in her second novel, "Letourneau's Used Auto Parts." That was followed by "Merry Men," which she still regards as her favorite, and "Snow Men," the most recently published book that was savaged by critics.

Some reviewers complained it was too political, but the anti-corporate and anti-big government message is as much a part of Chute as her Earth Mother mode of dress that includes a peasant-style skirt, long johns, mud boots and a kerchief that holds her reddish-blond hair in place.

Chute, whose home lacks indoor plumbing, recently made a grudging concession to modernity by acquiring a computer. But because she has no printer, she cannot use it to work on her manuscript.

"If I can master the e-mail, I'll be lucky," says Chute, who turned 55 in June. "It takes a lot of time, and I'm hauling water, lugging wood, doing work and taking care of my garden."

**Fighting for rights**

When she isn't working on her novel, Chute spreads her populist message through the 2nd Maine Militia, her antiestablishment soul mates who enjoy shooting guns while railing against big business and government bureaucrats. She says the group is neither left-wing nor right-wing, just "no wing."

Chute's rebellious nature, activist bent and taste for satire have led her to engage in protests in support of workers' rights, float the prospect of a write-in campaign for governor and contribute a "Dear Revolutionary Abby" column to the Maine Commons, an alternative newspaper.

In so doing, she has become an advocate for white working-class men, a group she believes has emerged as society's scapegoat with no defenders.

"Even dogs and cats have animal rights," she said. "Working-class white men are the last ones left."

With her husband, Michael, on disability and the advance that Chute received from Harcourt Brace & Co. for the big book now a distant memory, she says the couple has been struggling to make ends meet.

Lack of affordable health care for the poor has long been a source of rage for
Chute, who says her three Scottish terriers -- Betty, Florence and Margaret -- are the first in the household to get their needs met. It was only when she was able to pay for the services of a foot doctor to tend to an ingrown toenail that her gait improved and she began to feel better overall.

The couple received some help from friends who staged benefits to help pay doctor bills and replace a broken windshield in Michael Chute's truck. "We're rich in friends," she said.

As Chute traces the lives of community members in "The School on Heart's Content Road," she chronicles the struggles of a family with a dying child and no health coverage. The family's plight recalls Chute's loss 20 years ago of a child that was stillborn, a tragedy that she blames on her inability to get timely hospital care because she and her husband lacked insurance.

Events that unfold within the community are set against the bigger picture of what is taking place nationwide as Chute shows how decisions by government bureaucrats, corporate leaders and the media impact the lives of her characters.

Chute's agent, Jane Gelfman, said she is confident that the book will find a publisher and win recognition as a major work of American fiction.

Rejecting the idea that Chute may be out of fashion, Gelfman said the novelist is more relevant than ever, particularly in the post-Enron era. She said the themes of the book are sure to resonate with readers.

"It says a lot," she said. "It's about community, it's about the necessity for interdependence, it's about the influence of corporations on American private as well as public life. It's very timely."

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Who Cares?

Who cares:
• if the Belfast Opera House has been closed for 30 years?
• if the Belfast Monument remains undeveloped?
• if terrorists want to blow up Belfast's high bridge?
• if Belfast is the drug capital of Maine?
• if Belfast's Playhouse is having a hard time staying open?
• if Belfast has no hotel?
• if five letters addressed to the city manager personally six years ago were never answered by him?
• if the oldest think tank in the world is on Salmond Street?
• if the Belfast Historical Society Museum has a hard time staying open?
• if Belfast wants a casino?
• if Belfast is the most famous town in Waldo County?
• if no one cares about caring?

Bern Porter
Belfast

Please write and tell us how to Build a better Belfast.

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