

## Climbing the Tower

by the Directorate of Publications. Anyone who owned or imported or distributed *A Feast of Snakes* was, the newspaper clipping said, "in violation of the law and subject to heavy penalties." I read it again because it made me feel more substantial to know that somewhere in Africa somebody had actually read my work and reacted to it so violently that he listed me among those the government looked upon with disfavor.

But even that did not help enough, so when I got out of the taxi, before I went over to the office of the man who invited me to the university, I rushed to the library and looked myself up in the card catalogue. And yes, there I was. I left the university library still feeling diaphanous, still feeling the morning terrors and black twirlies, a burden I carry better at some times than at others. I was softly mumbling to myself as I went into the office of the professor who'd invited me to the university to play writer. God only knows why writers do such things, go hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles to read out of their work the very things that the people in the audience could read just as easily for themselves. If I let myself think about it too much, that alone is enough to give me a bad case of the black twirlies.

The professor greeted me cordially. We left his office immediately because before I gave the reading that night, I was supposed to have a seminar, if you can believe it, in Southern fiction. I was a little late and we had to step lively going across the campus. As we were walking down a long, gentle, sloping hill, the professor turned to me and said casually: "It was right back there where he started shooting."

I looked over my shoulder, and there it was behind me, the Texas Tower, where one Monday morning in 1966 Charles Whitman had shot dead twelve people and wounded at least thirty-three others, after having killed his mother and wife the night before. That mindless slaughter was suddenly alive and real for me, as though it were happening again, and it was all I could do to keep from running for cover. I wanted to tell the professor that I didn't want to hear about it, that I couldn't hear it, but I didn't know how to tell him without sounding a little nuts.

As we walked, he spoke casually, glancing now and again over his shoulder at the tower. "When they first started dropping," he

I was on the University of Texas campus in Austin, back in the state where I had sworn never to go again—having flown from Gainesville, Florida, to Atlanta, to Dallas, to Austin—and I was shaking and scared, feeling very tenuous, as though I had somehow become a shapeless floating fog without substance or identity.

There are some days when I feel my own mortality stick in my throat, when I can't swallow it or spit it up. The feeling first started when I was a child, and it always came on Sunday. An evangelist named Harvey Springer saved my soul when I was twelve years old, but before he saved me, he made me smell the sulfur and feel the brimstone of hellfire and know for sure that I was corrupted beyond even the mercy of God. So on Sunday I would feel my mortality—though at that time I did not know the word—plugging my throat like a lump of half-cooked dough filled with finely ground bits of razor blade.

We all, of course, know we are going to die, but none of us, of course, *believes* he is going to die. Like having a deformed child, it is something that always happens to somebody else. But on the ride in the taxicab from the airport to the University of Texas campus, I not only believed in my death, I could also smell the open grave I would someday be lowered into and could even read the little name cards attached to the funeral wreaths sent by friends and relatives. I took a newspaper clipping out of my pocket for perhaps the tenth time in the last two hours and read that in Capetown, South Africa, my last novel had been banned

said, "they couldn't tell where the fire was coming from. They started dropping here." He pointed at his feet. "And then they started dropping over in the street and then on the other side."

By now I was concentrated, screwed down about as tight as I ever get, but I managed to continue walking and not to do anything unseemly.

"They've closed off the tower now," he said. "Students started committing suicide off the top of it—jumping."

I tried not to listen. I tried to think of the newspaper clipping and the anonymous whatever in South Africa who had banned my book and tried to remember the little square cards neatly on iron cylinders in the card catalogue.

"But it didn't do a lot of good," he said. He pointed off to the left toward a high stadium wall. "They've started jumping off the stadium now. It does just as well."

In the classroom I rambled on about various novelists and short story writers from the South and elsewhere, saying that I didn't know any storytellers who wanted an adjective—Southern or gothic or ethnic—in front of the word *novelist*. I told them that I was a novelist from the South and that I had no alternative but to write out of the manners of my people. A student raised her hand and asked the question that writers learn to invent convenient lies about: "Mr. Crews, where do you get your ideas?" I began my standard reply, which, of course, is a lie that I won't repeat here. But as I spoke, I saw quite clearly the teenage Charles Whitman, dressed in his eagle scout uniform, standing in the Catholic church where he served the priest as altar boy. And from the other side of the room I saw the same Whitman, now twenty-five years old, with a Marine Corps footlocker full of weapons: a 6-millimeter Remington Magnum rifle with a four-power scope, a .35 caliber Remington Magnum pump rifle, a .30 caliber reconditioned Army carbine, a 12-gauge sawed-off shotgun, a 357 Magnum pistol, and a 9-millimeter Luger. It was Monday morning, August 1, 1966, and he was pulling the footlocker across the administration office on his way to the top of the tower where he would become one of the biggest mass murderers in the history of this country. The night before, on Sunday, sometime between

10 P.M. and daylight, he had killed his mother and his wife.

I saw Charles Whitman as a little boy and later at the age of twenty-five after the killings; I saw him there in the seminar room and knew that I was not remembering something or conjuring something, but that I actually saw him. At the same time I knew that he was not there, that he was safely and securely buried in the ground that waits for all of us. I did not feel any contradiction in what I saw and knew. The two mutually exclusive perceptions rested comfortably side by side in my head.

Late that night, when the party was over, the obligatory party at which I obliged my hosts by getting very drunk, I went alone back out to the Texas Tower. I sat in the grass and looked up at it, 307 feet high, and all manner of things ran through my mind. One of the first was Goethe's statement "There is no crime of which I cannot conceive myself guilty." And I thought about the fact that Charles Whitman had told the university psychiatrist that there were days, many days, when he wanted to climb the tower with a deer rifle and start shooting people. How long must he have resisted the temptation? What battles must he have fought in himself before he finally lost it all forever? It excuses nothing and resolves nothing, and this is no defense for him. But sitting there in the grass, I could imagine myself on the perch high above the campus where the streets looked like diagrams laid out for a housing development; I could imagine myself perched there with my Marine Corps footlocker full of death.

As sentimental, romantic, and grotesquely obscene as it may sound, we all know that there are people throughout the world resisting with all their might and will climbing the tower, because once the tower is climbed there is no turning back, no way out of it, no way down except death. It is probably a good thing that the University of Texas officials had closed off the tower because I know that I would have tried to find access to the building, as late as it was, climbed to that perch almost at the top where Whitman calmly and with incredible accuracy shot mothers and husbands and children, shot them dead because it was in him to do it, because his life and everything that made it had taken him there.

Sometime toward morning I got up from where I was sitting

in the grass and walked back to my room. When I got back to the room, I dived to the bottom of a vodka bottle and didn't come up.

As it turned out, the vodka didn't help very much because that night I dreamed the circumstances of what I had known and been morbidly fascinated with for years. I'm not proud of saying that I am morbidly fascinated with such a thing, but again, it is only the truth. That night I dreamed of how, less than three weeks before Charles Whitman climbed the tower, Richard Speck had systematically slaughtered student nurses in their Chicago residence, taking them one by one apart from the others and killing them.

When I awoke, I knew that this day was to be worse than the day that preceded it and that I could not hope to get down from where I was until I was safely home with my books and my typewriter and all the crippled and ruined manuscripts lying about on the desk. I wanted to get back to the place where I had resisted so many things, and failed at so many things, back to the place where even when I succeeded I failed because it was never good enough.

Graham Greene said: "The artist is doomed to live in an atmosphere of perpetual failure." I am very nervous about the word *artist*, not as I have used it, but the way it has been used by so many people who have no right to bring the word into their mouths in the first place. But I know what it means to live in an atmosphere of perpetual failure. I would not presume to think this makes me in any way unique. All of us whose senses are not entirely dead realize the imperfection of what we do, and to the extent that we are hard on ourselves, that imperfection translates itself into failure. Inevitably, it is out of a base of failure that we try to rise again to do another thing.

Finally, with myself more or less intact, I was able to leave Austin and make my way back to Gainesville, Florida. But going home was soured by the realization that I had to go again through Dallas, Texas, that city of doom. I seem to be unable to go into Dallas without getting into some sort of trouble, without having some hostile hand put upon me and some hostile voice accuse me of something which I never have the courage to deny. In that city

I always want to throw up my hands and say: "Whatever the charge, I plead guilty." In Dallas, Texas, I *am* guilty.

I did not leave Charles Whitman in Austin. I will never leave him. The autopsy, after he was slaughtered by an off-duty policeman by the name of Martinez, showed that he had a tumor the size of a pecan growing in his brain stem near the thalamus. It was surmised by various psychiatrists that the tumor could possibly have caused Charles Whitman to climb the tower. Although almost all modification of behavior is associated with the frontal lobe of the brain, it is obvious that since it is housed fairly lightly in a bony box, pressure in the brain stem might translate itself through the brain to the frontal lobe. So, conceivably, it could have caused what happened that Monday morning in 1966. How comforting to think that it might be so. But I do not believe that what happened at the University of Texas at Austin was caused by a tumor.

What I know is that all over the surface of the earth where humankind exists men and women are resisting climbing the tower. All of us have our towers to climb. Some are worse than others, but to deny that you have your tower to climb and that you must resist it or succumb to the temptation to do it, to deny that is done at the peril of your heart and mind.

All the way home to Gainesville, I felt that same tenuous diaphanous quality in the way I walked and what I did and what I said. Someone at that moment was climbing his tower, and I could only hope that he would not look down on me. But worse, much worse, I hoped that I would be spared being on the tower myself, because if I believe anything, I believe that the tower is waiting out there. I have no answers as to why it is out there, or even speculations about it, but out there somewhere, around some corner, or in some green meadow, or in some busy street it is. Waiting.