

ANALYSIS

"The Home Front" (1945)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"The Home Front' (1945) centers on the harassment of a displaced German Jewish doctor by his Hungarian landlady and her son. Like many of Stafford's characters, he was once a student at Heidelberg. Set in a bleak Connecticut town devoted to war industries, a setting with which Stafford became familiar during the months Lowell was on parole, the story follows the development of the doctor's love for a cat, Milenka, the only thing in his life he has to care for. The developing tension, 'as killing a hatred...as though they were two jungle beasts, determined to destroy each other,' between himself and the Horvath family over the presence of the cat works itself out in vicious anti-Semitic remarks by the landlady and by the doctor's trying to prevent the capture of birds by the son. It ends when Mr. Horvath shoots Milenka. Unable to do so for Milenka, Dr. Pankheiser gives a 'sea burial' to one of the Horvath boy's captured orioles, which, having freed itself, has then got caught and has died in the doctor's chimney. This act fills him with exhilaration. It also frees him from the murderous vengefulness of his enemies that could have ensnared him and brought him into a corresponding viciousness. The women in the stories...come to their domineering and oppressive roles from their own unhappy situations."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 16

"Stafford's 'The Home Front,' which appeared in the *Partisan Review* in the spring of 1945, is as bleak as its Black Rock setting. It is about an intellectual Jewish physician named Dr. Pankheiser who is a refugee from Germany. Dr. Pankheiser is overwhelmed with nostalgia as he thinks of his student years in Heidelberg, years that were 'rich and full of importance.' Middle-aged and alone, an exile in industrial America, he is subjected to the anti-Semitic remarks of Mrs. Horvath, a Hungarian woman who manages his apartment building, and he has nothing to console him but his books, his prints, and his only 'friend,' an ugly tomcat that comes to his room each evening.

At the story's end he is deprived even of that companion when the Horvaths' malevolent son, a boy whose hobby is to capture birds, persuades his father to shoot the cat because it is scaring his birds away. Dr. Pankheiser, however, scores a Pyrrhic victory over the Horvaths when he provides a sea burial for a beautiful oriole that had gotten caught in his chimney. Making wonderful use of the wasteland landscape of Bridgeport, Stafford succeeded in creating a moving fable of human isolation. It is unfortunate that she did not include this excellent story in her *Collected Stories*, for it deserves to be better known than it is at present."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 139

"Stafford's stories after she finished *Boston Adventure* were more ambitious than her earlier short fiction. She was not as barren as she feared. In the two stories that appeared in 1945, 'The Home Front' in *Partisan Review* in the spring and 'Between the Porch and the Altar' in *Harper's Bazaar* in June, Stafford tackled more serious subjects: the war and religion.

She was evidently pursuing themes suggested by the new, recalcitrant novel about Sonie that she had started, and she was turning away from her past to address preoccupations in her life with Lowell. In fact the two of them seemed to be drawing on at least superficially similar sources of inspiration. In two poems Lowell was working on at roughly the same time, he chose (for one) the same setting and (for the other) the same title. His 'Colloquy in Black Rock' is set, like 'The Home Front,' in Black Rock by the stinking harbor and similarly involves immigrant Hungarian Catholics who work in the local defense plant during the war.

And Lowell's dramatic monologue, 'Between the Porch and the Altar,' takes its title, as Stafford's story does, from a phrase in the Book of Joel, the Ash Wednesday chapter.

Without suggesting anything like an intimate parallel, it's possible to point to general links between Stafford's story of a young girl on her way to the first Ash Wednesday Mass at five o'clock on a cold February morning in New York and Lowell's four-part poem that dwells on mother domination and adultery. Both convey the confessions and confusions of youthful believers, struggling to reconcile the flesh and the spirit, the disorder of life and the order of religion. Stafford had shown Tate a draft of the story in the summer of 1944. It wasn't a formal submission to the *Sewanee Review*, where he was then editor, but perhaps she hoped that he would accept it.

If so, she was disappointed. Tate's response was typically to the point; 'Between the Porch and the Altar' is beautifully written, but I don't think it is successful.' His complaint was that it was too elliptical, that the reader never learned enough about the girl to 'place' the sudden conversion of feeling she experienced at the end. Her abrupt clarity of soul might work in a lyric poem, he told Stafford, but not in a story. 'I wish you would write a full-length story and let me have it,' he wrote somewhat impatiently. 'I am determined to publish you only at your best.' Stafford evidently worked further on the story; at least she smoothed the transition to the concluding revelation.

The story was strikingly well written, a happy balance of exact description of the external world and an unexpectedly concrete evocation of her protagonist's thoughts and feelings. Throughout the story Stafford effectively counterpoised ritual and real life, both of which pulled at her protagonist, whose loneliness was made palpable. Heading for church, with careful plans for distributing her alms (some for the poor box, some for candles in memory of her dead mother and two friends interned in China by the Japanese), the girl was distracted by other, grubbier demands on her money (a poor beggar, an old crone). She was disoriented: 'She was not assured in her heart and she prayed with a dry compulsion.'

The story teetered toward skepticism, for structured piety seemed wan and irrelevant compared with clamoring life. Yet at the same time Stafford's 'natural aestheticism,' as Taylor had called it, presented anything so simple as an endorsement of 'the coarseness...the grossness' of daily existence. The girl gave her dime to the crone, rather than spending it for a candle as she had planned, but she was repelled. When her trials of charity were over, she wiped away the official ashes, 'leaving herself alone possessed of the knowledge of her penance'--a penance that brought ambivalence, not complacency. Catholicism was not a matter of easy motions for either Stafford or Lowell....

Patriotism was an equally fraught subject during those years. It lurked behind Lowell's 'Colloquy at Black Rock' and was at the center of Stafford's 'The Home Front.' The surfaces could hardly have seemed less alike. Still, some underlying affinities were clear.... Stafford's 'The Home Front'--the story she had described as 'something completely new' for her--featured an unfamiliar protagonist: a late-middle-aged German-Jewish doctor exiled in Connecticut during the war, who Ian Hamilton, Lowell's biographer, has suggested was 'quite clearly Lowell.' That is too reductive an autobiographical reading, but the story's theme was close to home.

'The Home Front' was about unpopular permutations of patriotism, about the unredeemable destructiveness of human nature. The whole point of the story was to complicate 'sides.' The Hungarians who ran the doctor's boardinghouse were loyal contributors to the war effort, yet they were anti-Semites. The doctor was a Jew watching the war from the sidelines, but he was also a German full of nostalgia for the old, civilized Germany and full of crude loathing for the dirty Hungarians. The war between the doctor and his landlady was played out through their pets, a car and birds respectively, none of whom made out well.

The story was unnerving, for it was unclear where--if anywhere--Stafford's own loyalties lay. Though her imagination obviously kindled to memories of Germany, the result was that cold lack of compassion in her writing that she had worried about to Peter Taylor the year before--and that editors had complained about long ago with *Autumn Festival*. But *Partisan Review* was impressed by it, naming the story the 'second prize-winning novelette in the *Partisan Review*--Dial Press Contest.

Randall Jarrell's reaction, in a letter in August of 1945, spoke to the sinister ambiguity of the story. A great cat lover--and a war poet--he was immediately drawn in: 'Anything happening to one's cat is the most painful subject in the world, so far as I'm concerned. I liked your story in *Partisan* extremely, Jean...and felt indignant at their giving first prize to Schwartz's much inferior (but ideologically *so* much more congenial to *PR.*) *But* I had the horrible feeling all through the story that so far as I was concerned--it was a subject nobody *should* write about; that's crazy, but, boy, that was the way I felt'."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 185-88

"The Home Front,' appearing in the *Partisan Review* in 1945, explores both regional and cultural innocence through the figure of Dr. Alfred Pakheiser, a German Jew living in an American lodging house during World War II. Charlotte Goodman observes that the bleak Connecticut setting of this story reflects the town of Black Rock, Connecticut, where Stafford and Lowell lived after his release from prison for draft evasion. In any case, the theme of exile introduced here anticipates many of Stafford's later works. Firmly grounded in a historical period, the story has an ironic title that captures the impermanence of wartime and frames the cultural hatred and mistrust Stafford expresses through Dr. Pakheiser and his anti-Semitic Hungarian landlady, Mrs. Horvath. Nostalgic for the Heidelberg of his youth, Pakheiser realizes wryly that, just as in those days, his only friends is the gray tomcat who visits him daily. The palpable hatred of Dr. Pakheiser and Mrs. Horvath mirrors the larger war in the background; Mrs. Horvath's son's hobby of catching birds is as unnatural as the wartime act of taking prisoners. Implicitly, Stafford suggests that irrational prejudices--whether against cats, birds, or Jews--destroys the fabric of humanity and doom us to misunderstandings both large and small....

Pakheiser is a victim of the illusory world that exists only in his mind: the 'imagined' America the *Quaker City* travelers invariably compare to the barbaric realities of Europe or the Near East. He romanticizes his student days in Heidelberg; ignores the industrial dump behind his rooming house, preferring to gaze through the other windows overlooking the water and imagine himself in the country; and individualizes his grim boardinghouse room with pictures and objects from his past, pretending his temporary 'home front' is indeed home. But the doctor's greatest illusion is that, unlike the Horvaths, he harbors no prejudice. With unrelenting irony Stafford allows us to see the world according to Pakheiser: he refers to the Horvaths as 'savages,' imagines them eating gross foods and far meat, wonders if they ever bathe or brush their teeth, and, with chilling clarity, observes Mrs. Horvath's 'flat Magyar nose.' Adding to the doctor's painful isolation are his almost female refinement and sensitivity, his worry that he is becoming 'an old lady,' and his fear of Mrs. Horvath's veiled accusations of his unmanliness. Victims of the same prejudices about each other, these 'allies' wage war on all fronts: countries, nationalities, genders. The story's carefully plotted, four-part structure ironically undercuts its depiction of the randomness of human violence and the mindless hatred underlying all prejudice."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 8-9

Michael Hollister (2020)