Knoxville Town & Snopes City : South Toward Home

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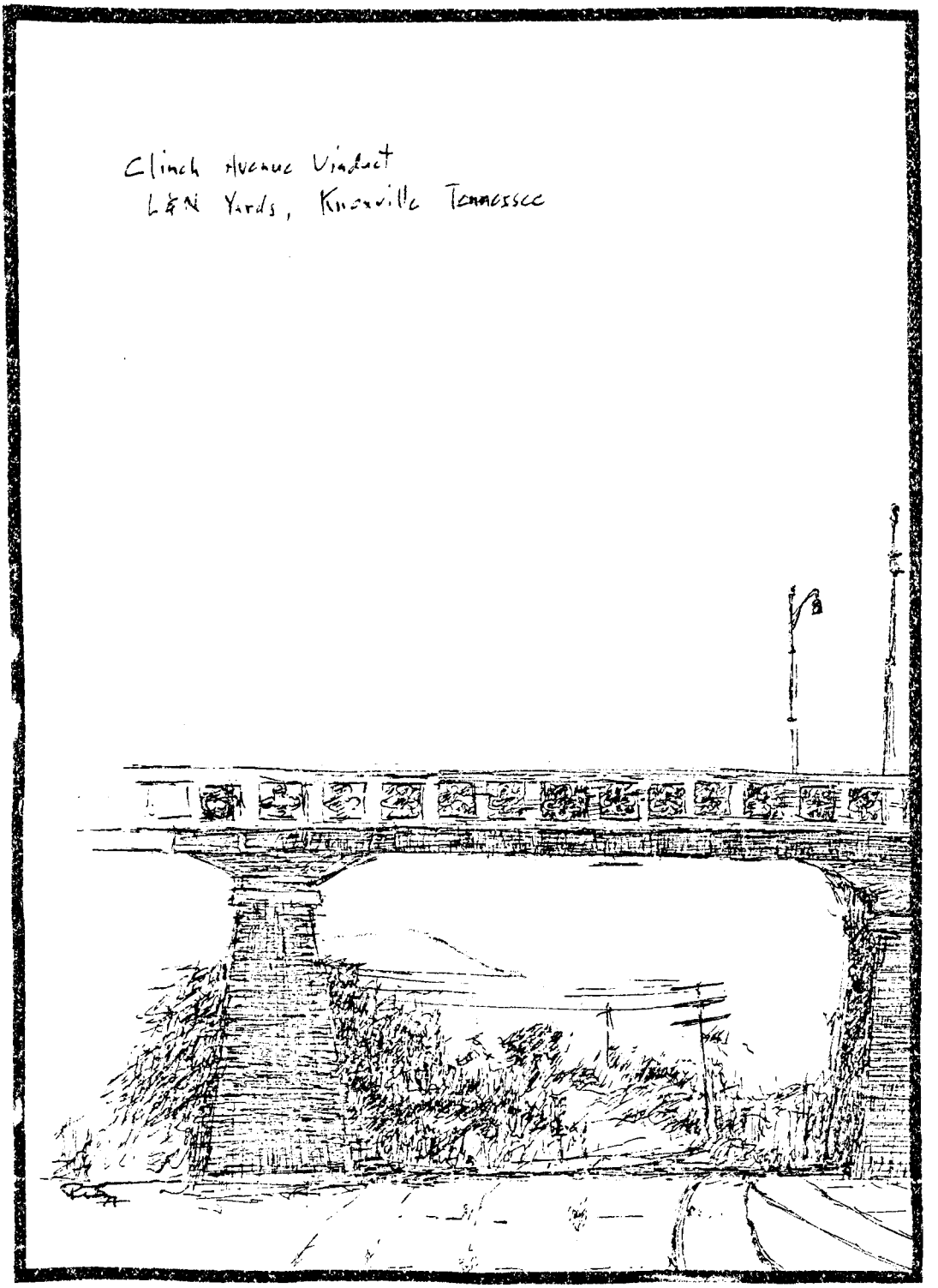

Knoxville Town & Snopes City

SOUTH TOWARD HOME

by

P. E. Balla

Knoxville, East Tennessee, had always been a second home to me. As long as my great-grandmother lived there in the big house on Clinch Avenue it was always easy, it was always home, to come in to town and so be taken in my network of Knoxville family. Through all the Vietnam years, and the even darker ones that followed, my perspectives were shaped by this family: great-grandfather, great-aunts, great-uncles, cousins and more cousins, food, talk, and even a little church, so that, properly smothered, in at least one place the world was right and warm. This was old Knoxville, and even as I lived in it I could not see that old Knoxville was going away, that the old heritage was largely gone, literally urban-renewed away. My people were all working class people, or, to paraphrase James Agee, they were mildly professional. They cherished their illusions, believed in the old ways that were such a comfort for me, along, of course, with the food and the talk. But large and pervasive outside forces had come to Knoxville, and even as my people more or less kept to their ways, these forces were entering the city and taking it, gradually, simply, and then totally, something like the Red Death which entered the palace, as Edgar Allen Poe once described.

In the Poe story the Red Death wore a mask and so, unnoticed, gained entrance. In Knoxville the mask was worn by gentlemen bankers, and entrepeneurs—people with such high-falutin ways that my people never quite took them seriously. These were developers. William Faulkner had another name fo them: Snopeses. Faulkner was terrified of the Snopeses and what they signified for the town and the countries where they were invariably trying to take over. Probably their greatest crime was in being impersonal—edifying their security with riches and power by which they could continue lording it over people: succeeding and not really caring for the people, building, or land they destroyed in their way. Snopeses cared for nothing except their own aggrandizement and had no principles except succeeding in their wealth and power. And Faulkner said Snopeses would never go away from human life; we'd always have them: history might properly be understood as individuals rising now and then to keep the Snopeses from winning completely.

I never did think the Snopeses or the developers—they're all the same—ever had a chance of winning in Knoxville. I figured it was in the mountain and valley culture to care for certain ways, call it inertia if you will, but nothing would change it much. I remember how one world-famous traveller, John Gunther, who with his own television show and lots of books on travel to back him up, had said once in the late

1940s that of all the places in the country where he had been, the saddest, ugliest town of all was Knoxville, Tennessee. That rather pleased me, for I figured the man addicted to his sophistication and unable to see the things by which I thought this overgrown village so slumbrously charmed. Why spend the energy working at some job you hated, for instance, just to put a pretty coat of paint on your house—especially when the smell of all those pine planks weathering in the hot summer air, mixed in with the smells of honeysuckle, spirea, and a jungle of other foliage, all commingled into a general peaceful intoxication of the spirit, and it was just as well to sit on your front porch and see your neighbors, their kids and grandkids, all equally content and at peace. Snopes would have you in his bank, working, for the minimum wage. He'd take his profits off you and invest in advertising to get you to want to buy this, that, or the other. And if you'd buy it on time—or better yet buy a TV so you could see all those things he wanted you to want paraded right in your own home—then by golly he'd have you. He'd have you by installments and forever, and you could forget that old homeplace and its porch and you could just move right on out to the suburbs where there weren't any porches, just the garages with the cars in them that you had to buy, on time, with interest, in order to get there, and televisions on inside that kept telling you all the things you had to go to the shopping center to buy. But I never thought Snopes had a chance in Knoxville. Even the feds, who in the name of national defense were putting the straight lines of interstate highways across the continent, destroying any neighborhoods in their paths, couldn't get the Southern Railroad in Knoxville to sell its yards. So the feds had to put their highway in a big circle around the Southern yards, and all the tourists heading for the Smokies or to Florida farther on had to figure out for themselves why such a big loop around nothing. For there wasn't anything going on in these yards anymore, just weedgrown fields, rusting rails, and yonder an old roundhouse where my great-grandfather had worked for forty-three years. Then there were the L & N yards, weedgrown, too, right downtown, and I always used to imagine the skinny-as-rail farmers, and the grandmothers and children, who used to use this station. I could always see the fat businessman, a forerunner of Snopes, perhaps, only this one, like all Knoxville businessman, didn't really care for all that rush and hurry. He'd just as soon get off his train and take his time getting across the street to the old L & N Hotel, where he could have a little bourbon whiskey. I'd see him in his seersucker suit, his straw hat, lifting it a little, maybe, to wipe the heat of the day away from his brow, not hurrying, but still feeling the motion of train travel and the grit of train cinders across southern fields and mountains, anticipating the bourbon that even in prohibition good old boys (others of my mother's people) would have brought in out of the mountains to the hotel for him. Course I'd just be imagining all this, for even in my youth the L & N station and yards were in ruins like the Southern, and the L & N Hotel was boarded up. The Bijou down on Gay Street showed only porno films, till they got that boarded up. And the townhouses where the old folks used to stay across from the Catholic church on the main hill downtown, those, too, were in bad state of repair. Firetraps. The Sterchi's name on the warehouse was fading away, and the biggest merchants were moving off Gay Street, away to the suburbs. Nobody much came downtown nights anymore, except me

and those men hungry and lonely enough to pay for the women there who had prices easy enough on them, and half of them were police decoys after a sin-hating cop became mayor.

You had to go into your imagination to see the old Knoxville, however plentytiful were its ruins. Or you could go into Jame Agee, those first pages of "Knoxville Summer,. 1915," or all the book that follows, *A Death in the Family*. But it's a curious thing: the people of Knoxville, most of them, scarcely know who this, their greatest writer, was. Knoxville also produced Joseph Wood Krutch, George Washington Harris, and, by the maternal side, Tennessee Williams, but you won't find any statues to any of these fine American writers, or memorials, or plaques—nothing in their home town, nothing even in the updated editions of the Betty Creekmore official history—though Agee does have the distinction of having named after him the modern apartment complex where some developer had bought and torn down his boyhood home.

You had to go into your imagination to see the old Knoxville because, like Cavafy's Ithaka, it probably was only in your imagination all along anyway. And the Snopeses have, in fact, been taking over. First, like good Snopeses, they got the poor and the powerless. They got the blacks. Used to be two creeks on either side of old downtown, both flowing into the Tennessee River at the foot of the hill. On one side, across from the L & N yards and Second Creek, was Ft. Saunders hill. White folks—my great-grandfather—lived there. On the other side of old downtown, across First Creek, was old niggertown. They called it Mountain View. They had their own churches, some a hundred years old, and brick, with pride and love. They had streets which went every which way, which no white man could figure out (which explains why the whites were just itching to tear it down). And they had dirt swept clean in front of the wooden shacks, even if they didn't have lawns; and geraniums grew in tomato tins on front porch railings. Maybe they had some crime and some drinking, but no one will ever know, unless somebody will write their memoirs of it. For Snopes got the whole community. Tore it all down. 548 acres of homes and churches, shacks and stores—all to make room for a virtual desert of monied interests: a new Chamber of Commerce, a coliseum, a Hyatt-Regency convention hotel, a make-believe fort (supposedly imitating an early Knoxville stockade) to draw tourists, an incredibly sterile housing project to quarantine the elderly off to one side, and, coursing a longside it all, over where First Creek used to run, a freeway interchange. And the place looks like cold hell. Scarcely a tree in sight. Scarcely a pedestrian ever. For this is a place that's been given whole to the geometrical, the monied, and the large-scale. The building and the empty spaces between the buildings are all designed to dwarf the human spirit, and the developers can't even find more Snopeses like themselves to move in and build on the weedgrown lots where a human community used to be.

They used federal funds to pursue this kind of "urban renewal" (Snopes has even got to our language, too) in Knoxville. In 1964, after they'd urban-renewed Mountain View away, officials at the University of Tennessee had their turn to Snopses. They'd wanted more room to expand their athletic and fraternity campuses, and in 1964 they got the feds to put up two-thirds of the money to begin throwing people

out of their homes in what they called the Yale Avenue Project. This was 136 acres of stately old homes, no shacks here, but alot of elderly white—and they still tell the story of the little old lady who refused to move. She'd been raised in that house. That was her family's home. And she stayed in her rocking chair till the wreckers had to pick her and the chair up and carry her out and let the dozers destroy her place just as soon as she was out. And about the same time they got ninety-six river-front acres, the Riverfront-Willow neighborhood, with federal funds again. Snopes' language had it, "to puchase, clear, and improve" but anybody could see it was, again, a matter of moving people out and developers in.

The only mistake was that most Snopeses didn't care about old downtown Knoxville. West Knoxville, suburbia, along the interstate highway, was where the action was. Where the clean-cut middle class, the new class, could have their shopping centers, subdivisions, air-conditioned office buildings, neon rows, free parking, and wet t-shirt night, where good-looking girls clad in jeans and t-shirt let good-looking boys throw buckets of water on them so the crowd could applaud the best set of breasts.

Downtown was just a relic of the past anymore. TVA was already moving in, ready to devour just about all that was left of it—TVA which was now committed to fueling that rising suburban culture just as it had once been committed to preserving and nurturing the indigenous culture of the Tennessee Valley. First TVA bought and destroyed the row of old townhouses up on Vine Street, across from the old Catholic church. Then TVA's dozers moved down the hill, into town, taking a dozen city blocks in all. And it built two multi-storied office towers, modernistic cubes of horizontals and verticals with hermetically sealed windows and no windows at all for the first two stories: just fortress wall to keep at bay all those salvation army lonelies, pawn shop loiterers, and old railroad men who still clung to a world they remembered even as it was being torn down around them.

TVA had boughten and thrown out blocks of small shopkeepers in order to build its office towers, to landscape around them, and to have parking lots and broad boulevards leading to them as if this weren't town or even human community but merely so much more voiceless land for TVA planners to fasten upon. If you remember old Knoxville you can stand on the balcony plaza between the two TVA towers and look out over what's left of town, old downtown, and you have the singular sensation of being on the prow of a ship at sea, moving relentlessly, thoughtlessly, on over whatever lies in its path. Or does one feel like a vulture, amid a passel of vultures, looking down from this plaza over the spoils being descended upon. Or is Poe's metaphor not most true after all—that it's a red death that has gotten into our midst and we don't know it, having fled long ago to that new culture of automobiles and neon and wet t-shirt night and long ago lost memory and given ourselves over to Snopeses and whatever their toll might be.

P. E. Balla writes: "My own mother's people are from Knoxville. I've spent years , since I was eighteen, wandering back and forth between the southern mountains and Detroit, trying to reconcile the respective lures." At present he lives on a two hundred acre farm in the New River Valley of southwest Virginia.