

Excerpts from *Flesh*

Professor Vernon Knowles, emeritus, was a former member of our esteemed English department, from the days when an English professor was expected to be a cultured gentleman—there’s your gentility again. He wore the emeritus label like a badge of honor, despite Ed Schamley’s joke that *emeritus* in Vernon’s case meant “without merit.” Vernon had an appallingly large fund of eighteenth-century literary anecdotes with which he used to bore his classes: what Boswell said to Johnson, what Johnson replied, and so forth. Near the end of his tenure, he got kicked upstairs to administration, at which point he became a dean who told literary anecdotes. His deadliest quality was his habit of lecturing, developed over years at the front of a classroom. He didn’t talk; he pontificated, which is fine for a cathedral but ludicrous for a supermarket, or wherever you happened to meet him. His wife Iris wisely became a lush some years ago.

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Two years earlier, when my parents paid a visit to Ole Miss, they happened to hit Homecoming weekend. After observing the whole scene, my father, the only person I knew who really thought before he spoke, said it was like being back in the Fifties. The girls in their cheerleader outfits, the men with well-maintained hair and badly maintained waistlines, the wives who with make-up accomplished more elaborate cover-ups than the Alger Hiss trial, the martial band music, the sea of smiles (nervous, genuine, blinding, drunk) that wafted everyone along to the Vaught Hemingway stadium, where the Rebel fans still waved the Confederate flag and yelled, “Hotty toddy!” as they spilled Tom Collins mix on the row in front of them—no matter how long I’d been here, I was always struck by this animated diorama, all of which could be summed up in one simple sentence: I live in a foreign culture.

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He gently pulled her against his side, her soft weight sloping into his shoulder. The hand sliding up and down her arm moved around to stroke the underside of her right breast and disappeared between the double wall of flesh beginning at her armpit. His arm went down, down, as if he were reaching for his wallet, but the angle was different. It’s amazing how resilient those old sofa cushions are, how a hand can maneuver between the upholstery and the sitter. I imagined the smooth bulk of Marian’s buttock, cupped and squeezed through her skirt, then deserted for the moister depths. I could almost feel the slick wetness. The two of them rocked gently back and forth, as if they were riding a buggy.

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Brother Jim arrived at the limit of his circle, five feet away from the merge of Max and Bibi. He hunched forward, his black suspenders thrumming with tension. Bibi looked beseechingly at him in true religious terror. Her huge bosom, which had been heaving tumultuously, was suddenly still.

Brother Jim eyed them for just a moment. It was a long moment. “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? Corinthians 3:16!” He wheeled around and started off for the center again. Halfway there he turned and shouted, “ROT IN HELL!” His eyes, so help me, flamed red.

And Bibi fell backwards, as if pushed by the hand of Providence, right on top of her seducer. “And they shall fall one upon another.” Leviticus 26:37.

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Maxine swam in the adjoining lane, her broad body plowing through the water like a ship’s hull. Most swimmers of any speed look as if they’re cutting through the surface, but with Maxine the illusion was the opposite. Her great broad arms made it look as if she were pushing the whole pool backward in order to advance.

A bikini would never have contained such bulk, but even the largest available one-piece didn’t provide full coverage. The reinforced elastic shoulder straps only barely restrained her breasts, and the fabric was like a second skin at the belly, contouring a navel like a great unwinking eye. Walking in the shallow end of the pool, she looked like some imperious queen nereid. Beads of water clung to her smooth white skin, the roll of her belly and buttocks riding the surface like a whale.

After they finished their laps, it was time to play. She would sit on the concrete edge of the pool, and when she stretched out her arms, Max came to her as if abasing himself before a goddess. Sometimes he would swim right into her, and she would trap him between her monumental thighs, huge columns of flesh as big around as other women’s waists. A wisp of blue-black pubic hair showed against the huge pale whiteness when she spread herself for him. I caught a whiff of danger and stayed away—but not too far.

Beyond this point, I may not be the most objective reporter. I *know* what he saw in her.