

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/1

*William Crawford*

### **Shooting Photographs of a Wrecked Freedom Bus Conjures Up a Visitor or Two From Mississippi's Darkest Past.**

I had passed the decaying bus on Northwest Boulevard more than a few times. Its rusting carcass with badly fractured glazings held a funky allure for a wandering photographer like me. I shoot stuff no other lensman would likely touch. My goal is simply to elevate the mundane to pleasing eye candy.

I whipped my little car into the side street, hard by the overflowing junk yard. It was still early and the light was scarce and flat. I slapped a walkabout zoom on my old Nikon. The bus was mostly gutted and its damaged, clouded windows served up impromptu abstract art. I had a strange sense of perusing an outdoor museum.

I soon heard a slight scrape in the loose gravel behind me. Up came an old bent over black man dressed in a well used straw fedora and a brightly colored checkered shirt with baggy pants. He had a fag fired up and I was suddenly dodging his thick sweet smoke. "Name's Cleveland," he mumbled. "Want to know the history of this here bus?"

Well, I was just waiting for better Golden Hour light, so a little backstory, real or imagined, would be just fine.

"She took us to Meridian in '64," he offered. "I was just a freshman at Winston Salem State then." Bingo! In an electric instant, I knew this was a Freedom Bus and Cleveland might well be an aging civil rights hero. My suspicions were quickly reinforced. He pulled off his straw fedora to daub away some perspiration on this humid North Carolina morning. His balding head held a thick ugly scar from one ear over to the other. In a flash I knew somebody had beat the living hell out of Cleveland, probably back in 1964.

In a slow but steady voice he told me his sordid tale of being recruited to register Mississippi voters by the fledgling Congress for Racial Equality. He had been working the rural counties around Meridian when three of his colleagues were kidnapped and murdered, their mangled bodies ending up buried in an earthen dam.

Cleveland opined "I was lucky to make it out of Neshoba County. They caught us buying gas at a little place, and they beat us with their clubs for fifteen minutes straight! We had to go all the way to Jackson just to find a hospital that would help us."

Cleveland was never really the same he lamented. He dropped out of college and he eventually found steady employment on a city garbage truck for 29 years. "As bad as I had it down there, at least I lived to raise a family," he remembered.

Cleveland had had enough! He was restless and this story was still painful. As we exchanged respectful good byes and he lumbered away, the sun was higher in the sky, and I was trying to shake off my astonishment enough to start shooting the bus. I felt new found motivation because I knew I was photographing a small piece of American history.

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Traffic was picking up on the Boulevard and I busied myself shooting the battered hulk from a variety of angles. Suddenly the sky darkened a bit and an eerie calm descended kind of like being in the eye of a hurricane. I looked around quizzically and then I noticed a vintage black town car moving slowly past on the Boulevard. The back window was down just over halfway, and a young man with a distinct Jewish countenance and a scrubby goatee stared blankly at me as the car rolled past. There was something about that guy — but hell, I couldn't put it together in this suddenly surreal setting! Traffic picked back up and the sun peeked out. I shot for another quarter hour and I left satisfied that I had an exceptional early morning. But that kid in the back seat just stuck in my subconscious ...

A few weeks later I was glued to my iPad reading about renewed efforts in Mississippi to indict someone for the long ago murder of then teenager, Emmett Till. Out of nowhere my bright screen shifted on its own to a Wikipedia entry about the three slain civil rights workers near Meridian. Their photographs were there and my heart skipped a beat when I saw that third pic. A goateed Michael Schwerner stared back at me. The same young face that gazed stoically at me from the back seat of the passing town car a few weeks before. The Wiki entry said that the KKK had referred to the brave civil rights organizer as "Goatee" when they put a bounty on his head back in 1964.

I was momentarily dumbfounded but this wasn't the first time for me to be engulfed in this wild otherworldly shit. Over the years, while shooting, I had supernatural encounters with Rod Serling in San Francisco and Pancho Villa in an obscure West Texas cemetery. This rendezvous was closer to home, but it offered me further insight into why I am still shooting as I near my 80th year. Those giants of combat photojournalism (four Pulitzers) who got me started in Vietnam but who are now mostly gone are still sending me bizarre opportunities from the Other Side. And you can bet CRAWDADDY can damn well still press his shutter!