

Essay for Christian Patterson's *Redheaded Peckerwood*
by Luc Sante

A boy and a girl and a car and a gun. The formula is deeply encoded in American mythology, a twentieth-century commonplace, half threat and half desire. The threat part needed just the slightest suggestion from the broader culture to implant itself in the minds of small-town burghers, trembling in their beds; the desire angle could only have been born of desperate times. Imagine what the appeal might be: you and your love object are desperadoes on the run, hauling the back roads, pursued by sheriffs' deputies, a loaded weapon on your hip, death in one form or another the only possible outcome. It's a suicide mission with no conceivable effect, only consequences; a political action for and by a constituency of two. It is the sort of fantasy that can emerge only when people are trapped like rats even while they know that there is an unreachable alternative out there somewhere. To go on the run is to chase the dragon of that vaguely envisioned other life, in full knowledge of the futility of the effort and the inevitability of the end. Since the formula stirs together three of the most combustible elements in American life--sex, speed, and ballistics--you simply have to accept that you will explode along the way.

The formula was already traditional by the time Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate hit the road in 1958. The principles were laid down most famously and enduringly by Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow in the few years before they were gunned down in 1934. The romance in their case was as evanescent as the damage was real; they were accomplices rather than a couple, although popular imagination supplied the sentiment. But they were married in blood--Bonnie took 23 bullets and Clyde 25. The very large chord they struck continued to reverberate, and the cultural echoes were not long in coming. Edward Anderson's novel *Thieves Like Us* and Fritz Lang's film *You Only Live Once*, both 1937, took a liberal view of the Bonnie-and-Clyde story: decent people from the heartland, pushed to their limits by hardship and despair, simply snap--"the pure products of America/ go crazy."* The most sordid elements of the Parker-Barrow tale are airbrushed; what you see instead are people from a Dorothea Lange photograph, combating their own powerlessness the only way they know how. In the absence of any other sort of transcendence, the Liebestod at least allows them to rise above the earthly plane. A decade later, after the war, when Anderson's novel was filmed by Nicholas Ray as *They Live by Night* (1949) and Joseph H. Lewis made *Gun Crazy* (1950), the socioeconomic situation was less dire, and the story was recast as one of young lovers fighting the unfeeling incomprehension of their communities. The class-war aspect is barely visible behind a heavy scrim of half-chewed psychology, streaked with that venerable American nostrum, self-fulfillment. Still, they were lovely romantic mirages, those pictures, containing arcade holes into which you could insert your own face and make love to whichever Cathy or Bowie until the clock ran out.

Charles Starkweather only needed to have been alive in the 1950s to have absorbed this legacy. The doomed heroic pantomime, which owed something to popular bandits from Jesse James to Pretty Boy Floyd, was by then inscribed deeper in the culture than the westward trek of the pioneers. Starkweather was made for a short life of trouble. He had a speech impediment, severe myopia that went undiagnosed for most of his life, and bowed legs due to a birth defect. He was bullied throughout his childhood and

adolescence. His family was of the poor-but-honest sort that are esteemed more in theory than in practice--seven children, frequent unemployment on the part of the father. Psychologists would have no problem working out a diagnosis for Charles (often referred to as "Charlie" in the literature although he signed himself "Chuck") after the fact, and maybe it could have been seen coming beforehand as well. It was the rage of the beaten-down; the kind of suicidal rage that might have gotten him killed before he ever went on the spree. The fact that he hero-worshipped James Dean seems at first like the all-too-convenient sort of pop-culture detail that the press loves to use as a hook, but it actually reveals something about Starkweather's vulnerability. He was not a schemer, not out for profit, not simply unhinged, and not very much like D. H. Lawrence's idea of the essential American soul: "hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer."** He was, somehow, a romantic who killed people, or at least a thwarted personality who imposed a monstrous series of events as his signature upon the world because he couldn't think of any better way to get himself recognized.

The James Dean connection made it seem like a generational thing as well. The teenager, as a demographic category, had recently been invented by the media, and sociologists agreed that he/she was a problem. What clinched a good part of the reasoning in that vein with regard to Starkweather was the presence of Caril Ann Fugate: pretty, apparently willing and, at 14, still morally unformed. The upshot was that an anomalous act of violence in the center of the country became a lesson, a warning, a horror waiting to happen in your town. And Starkweather was indeed a harbinger, but far less of any generation-gap stuff than of the ability to command instant death that has become the imaginary safeguard of millions and the hallmark of an even more alienated America.

Starkweather killed Robert Colvert, a gas station attendant, on December 1, 1957. On January 21, 1958 he killed Velda Bartlett, Caril Ann Fugate's mother; her stepfather, Marion Bartlett; and her two-year-old sister Betty Jean. Over the next few days he killed August Meyer, a family friend; Robert Jensen and Carol King, who had offered the couple a ride; C. Lauer Ward and Clara Ward and their maid, Lillian Fencil, whose house in a rich part of Lincoln he invaded at random. Fleeing Nebraska, Starkweather and Fugate drove to Douglas, Wyoming, where he killed Merle Collison, who was sleeping in his car. The pair was captured almost immediately. Fugate was given a life sentence in November 1958 (she was paroled in 1976); Starkweather was executed in the electric chair at the Nebraska State Penitentiary the following June. He was not yet 21.

Just as the murder spree was affected and perhaps partly guided by the movies, so it in turn inspired movies: Terence Malick's *Badlands* (1973) as well as the much lesser Tony Scott/Quentin Tarantino production *True Romance* (1993) and Oliver Stone's fashion-conscious *Natural Born Killers* (1994). The plainspoken title song of Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska* (1982) is in a voice that is to a degree Starkweather's, although it owes some of its images to the movies. The couple with their gun and their car has continued to inhabit the American mythosphere, although--fortunately--more as a cultural trope than as an actual criminal phenomenon. The Raymond Pettibon cover of Sonic Youth's album *Goo* (1990) shows a sunglass-wearing couple in a car: "I stole my sister's boyfriend. It was all whirlwind, heat, and flash. Within a week we killed my parents and hit the road." The romance stands next to the violence no matter what anyone does with the rest,

which is paradoxically perhaps why Starkweather and Fugate have had few imitators. Romance may be harder to come by than psychopathic rage.

Christian Patterson has taken it upon himself to try and situate the actions of Starkweather and Fugate in their time and place. You can't, he knows, walk a mile in anyone's shoes without seeing where that mile will lead. He comes at the highly charged material as a poet and a gumshoe, employing tools from every part of the photographic--you might just say "the visual"--arsenal. He followed Starkweather and Fugate's trail, visiting all the places where they stopped, rooting through civic archives and newspaper morgues, seeking out material survivals of their lives and actions. Some of the photographs are of actual settings, some of actual artifacts, some of symbolic landscapes, and some of metonymic objects; there are also archival photos and reproductions of pertinent documents. The resulting book-length montage presents a cycloramic view of the story and its people, places, and things.

In many ways the assemblage resembles the accumulation of data that accompanies a crime-scene investigation, which usually includes many seemingly random, oddly contingent bits of documentation. Look at that ragged stuffed animal, plug-ugly even when new: it is the very one that Starkweather tried to buy on credit from Robert Colvert, whose refusal led Starkweather to kill him. Patterson found it in the remains of one of the murder sites. Somehow it was not found by investigators, who would certainly have added it to the exhibits at the trial. Here it assumes its authority without any need for a caption--its grimy poignancy tells all you need to know.

Murder charges everything it touches. Every blurred photo, scrap of writing, wadded rag, and broken comb--things you'd never look at twice in any other context--takes on immanence from its association with violent death. Murder makes every contemptible detail an accretion of pathos, a precious token of life on earth; every one could be the last thing you'll see: mousetraps, Shinola, dirty sheets, flypaper, pinups, graffiti, mold. That house at night--actually the one down the street from Fugate's family home, since hers was torn down years ago to make way for a supermarket--looks ominous even with no context, but the association, however once-removed, effortlessly talks anybody's imagination into making it a murder site. The telephone is a model that dates from at least a decade after the events, but the tangle of wires, the bruised wall, the wooden stand intended for some older apparatus, all look like evidence, because otherwise why would you look at any of it twice? The glare of the world's passing attention on once and future dusty Nebraska obscurity is a one-story clapboard storefront selected by fading sunlight to stand apart from its row.

Those objects and structures are contrasted with radioactive pictures of landscapes and skies, from austere to apocalyptic--"Landscape on Fire" and "Prairie Grass Leak" project torment onto nature the way the possessed mind does. But anyway nature is a dump: oil spills, piss and blood and antifreeze on snow happen just like murder and for similar reasons, differently scaled. Sky and ground are infinite and inexhaustible--maybe if your thinking is conditioned by an existence dwarfed by the immensity of the flatlands, you begin to think that human life is microscopic, trifling, a burned-out 40-watt bulb in a room destroyed by weather.

The contrast among the kinds of imagery forces the eye into a dance of continual rapid refocusing, as the pages alternate between surface and depth--fields of buckshot and

fields of snow and the surface of decaying walls all hit the eye as equally flat, but an optical readjustment occurs immediately. The hors-texte artifacts weirdly somehow put you into a frame when you touch them. Another sort of surface-depth dialogue appears in the way the evidence pictures relate to the landscapes, as if mimicking the distribution of labor between illustration and text--although whether the objects annotate the landscapes or vice versa is never resolved. Maybe the skies and the grasslands of the Midwest contain somewhere within their depths answers to all the troubling questions, so that the objects and documents are appended by way of material reference, as trial exhibits or pictures in a dictionary. Or maybe it is the objects that know the score, while nature is the emotional thermometer outside the window.

In *Redheaded Peckerwood* Christian Patterson is working out something that hasn't been done much before, if ever: a kind of subjective documentary photography of the historical past. That requires that the individual pictures be true, as close as possible to the physical details as historically established, while remaining ambiguous and unsettling--because each of them is only an aspect of the story, and because in each of them something is wrong. The accumulation of them, meanwhile, is what thrusts the viewer into the emotional center of the story, in a way you could call novelistic. While each individual photograph pulses, sometimes alarmingly, all by itself, the meaning of the whole only coheres when all of its parts and all the subliminal connections between them have been fully absorbed, a process which takes time and perhaps distance. *Redheaded Peckerwood*, which unerringly walks the fine line between fiction and nonfiction, is a disturbingly beautiful narrative about unfathomable violence and its place on the land.