

## Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

### Beavers, Banners, and Bulls

Here in Chapel Hill we've had this problem with beavers. They've been damming creeks, as is their wont. Unfortunately in the process they've been turning great areas into marsh and creating a mosquito problem, so last year the old boys of our public works department set out to kill the critters, figuring: no beavers = no dams = no flooding = no problem.

Well, anyone who thinks you can murder beavers with impunity in a college town in the waning years of the American Century has been living on another planet. After the predictable brouhaha in the newspaper, in public meetings, and so forth, the decision was solemnly taken to capture the beasts, sterilize the males, and return them to the wild, where the population is supposed to diminish gradually, by attrition.

But wait. We are not simply to neuter these hapless creatures, as one does with steers, or hogs, or geldings. No, such treatment could cause lasting psychological damage, as one dear lady pointed out, and I don't doubt that she was right. Rather than have distressed eunuch beavers on their consciences, my fellow citizens have anted up their tax money and mine to provide—are you ready for this?—vasectomies for the little fellows. So now we are to have beavers with futile but active sex lives, sort of a rodent version of today's college experience.

Those of you who don't live in college towns don't know what you're missing. Count your blessings. Being a professor means I have to know.

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On the other hand, it also means that I don't have to stick around in the summers. Last June our family spent a couple of weeks in and around Barcelo-

na where (it probably won't surprise you to hear) I had some thoughts about the American South.

To begin with, what can the Confederate flag possibly mean to Europeans?

I keep running into it. On this trip I found it on a postcard at a *snack bar* (French for "snack bar") near Montpellier. A year earlier, outside Conegliano, north of Venice, I'd run across a factory with an imposing array of flags out front: the Common Market nations, Japan, the US—and the Confederate States of America. Later, in the market, at a booth selling decals, stickers, and lapel pins, I'd found, with the Grateful Dead, a picture of Elvis—superimposed on the battle flag of the CSA (on the back, the legend "Made in Canada"). Later still, in the Austrian town of Villach, near the Italian and Yugoslav frontiers, an army surplus store obviously catering to flaming youth flew, out front, the Stars and Stripes with a Harley-Davidson roaring out of it—and the battle flag. Back in Italy, on the autostrada from Venice to Milan, I passed a tractor-trailer cab wallpapered with—a giant Confederate flag. In Paris, in the Latin Quarter, I paused at a shop selling cheap straw hats, pocket books, postcards, and—the flag.

What's going on here? Does any-

body know? I suspect this display hasn't much to do with the Confederate States of America. (If it does, though, where were these allies when we needed them?) Rather, thanks no doubt to a motley assortment of white Southern musicians ranging from Hank Williams Jr. and Alabama, to Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Allman Brothers, on back (yes) to Elvis and Buddy and Jerry Lee—thanks to these ambassadors, for many good old European boys emblems of the South connote good-timing, beer-drinking, hell-raising freedom and rebellion. (The Italian factory is another story. I'll bet they just ordered up a couple of dozen assorted flags from a wholesaler.)

To the point is a group we ran into in Barcelona. At first glance "Los Huevos" looked like your typical Euro-scum rock band: a half-dozen long-haired musicians, Jaggeresque lead singer. But they were cooking in a particularly down-home mode, featuring a fine harmonica player. No Confederate flags were in evidence, but the guitarist wore a Jack Daniels T-shirt.

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To an outsider, a newcomer, of course, what is Spanish about Barcelona is more striking than what is not. On the television at our hotel, for instance, we encountered bullfighting, complete

### LIBERAL ARTS

#### ON WOMEN WHO DO, AND MEN WHO DO NOT

These facts on fat just released from the Nutri/System Health and Fitness Information Bureau:

—Happily married women gain an average of 18.4 pounds in the first 13 years of marriage, while unhappy wives bulk up on an average of 42.6 pounds during the same period.

—Just about as many men as women go grocery shopping—96 percent of women shop at least once a month, while 92 percent of men do. Women love shopping lists and discount coupons, while men tend to be impulse buyers and can't be bothered with coupons.

—from the Milwaukee Journal,  
September 6, 1989

with slow-motion instant replay. I was surprised not to find the spectacle more disturbing. In fact it was riveting. It has been remarked that a bullfight is not a sport but a tragedy. (All right, so I've been reading *Death in the Afternoon*. It makes a lot more sense now.) Anyway, the next Sunday evening found my daughter and me at the *plaza de toros*, me bareheaded lest a Durham baseball cap that said "Bulls" be thought in poor taste. In a little over two hours we saw six bulls dispatched with varying degrees of artistry. So far as I know, no one has ever proposed to do vasectomies instead, but that could be a heck of a show, too.

As I say, we knew we were in Spain. But we were also constantly reminded that we were in Catalonia, and the distinction Catalans often make between the Spanish "state" and the Catalan "nation" is easily and sympathetically grasped by someone from a place where caps and bumper stickers say "American by birth / Southern by the grace of God."

Want a quick tour of Barcelona? Walk away from the harbor that once served Romans and Phoenicians. You come first to the medieval "Gothic Quarter" around the cathedral, then to spacious neighborhoods of boulevards and cafes that feel like Paris without the tourists, finally to execrable high-rise worker-warrens that should merely be passed through as quickly as possible—which is usually not quickly at all, given the gruesome traffic. Moses Hadas remarked once that "a subject people's only glories are departed ones" and Catalonia's cultural high-water marks came in the 12th century and in the first third of this one, which makes for some fine Romanesque and *art nouveau* architecture.

The most famous building, of course, almost the city's signature, is Gaudi's unfinished sand-castle church of Sagrada Familia. Its original plan calls for a sculptured devil in the form of a serpent, handing a bomb to an anarchist worker. Gaudi was an early victim of the Barcelona traffic, run down by a tram before he lived to see the Civil War, but he knew an enemy when he saw one. In the cloister of the old cathedral is a chapel dedicated to 930 priests, monks, and nuns of the diocese murdered in that war, many by anarchists. (If those killed by the Na-

tionalists have a memorial now I didn't see it.)

After the war, Catalan autonomist sentiment was vigorously suppressed by the Franco regime. In particular, the Catalan language was expunged from the schools and public life. Since Franco's death, however, restrictions on Catalan have gone the way of bikini tops on the Costa Brava. Now Castilian Spanish has little more standing in Catalonia than English does in Quebec. A tourist can get along pretty well with Castilian only because most waiters and hotel staff seem to be Spanish-speaking migrants from the impoverished South; as one moves up the economic ladder Barcelonans tend more and more to be bilingual, and some refuse to speak Castilian on principle. Newcomers are encouraged to learn Catalan, and to all appearances are fully accepted once they've done so. Road signs are provided in both Catalan and Castilian, but the Castilian has often been effaced by language vigilantes with spray paint. Meanwhile the Catalan flag of four red stripes on a yellow field, representing the bloody fingerprints of a national hero, is everywhere.

Elsewhere (across the French border in "Occitania," for instance) the typical separatist is usually a member of the petit-intelligentsia who dreams of being minister of culture or ambassador to the Court of St. James's instead of senior lecturer in sociology at a provincial university. But Catalan nationalism's appeal is both broader and deeper. The major nationalist party is headed by a banker. That may help to explain why Catalans, who can be unreliable Spaniards, seem to be good Europeans. As it's usually presented, "Europe" strikes me as an idea that only a chamber of commerce could love, but Barcelona has always been a bourgeois city of merchants and manufacturers, many of whom would prefer to think of their town as a major European metropolis rather than the second city of Spain.

In other quarters, I suspect, the appeal of "Europe" is that it may eventually make Spain obsolete. There's an image lurking about of the New Europe as a loose confederation of communities: Catalans, Flemings, Bretons, Alsations, Basques, Occitans, Welsh—in time maybe Croats, Vlachs,

Lapps, Ukrainians, who knows? This vision of all the old, suppressed, organic nations rising up, shaking free of the artificial strictures of states, becoming fully themselves—this pluralistic vision conflicts with the ambitions of the Eurocrats in Strasbourg, but it's a lovely, romantic idea, and I wish it well. It reminds me of *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, when the king gives each district of London its independence. Pointing to "old inviolate Notting Hill," he says: "Look up nightly to that peak, my child, where it lifts itself among the stars so ancient, so lonely, so unutterably Notting."

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## Letter From the Heartland

by Jane Greer

Make a Joyful Noise.  
Awomen.



Two years ago, because it felt inevitable and right, I took the happy leap of faith that I had been approaching for years and became a Catholic. The reasons why are perhaps fodder for another letter at another time. Let me just say here and now that current church music and liturgy were *not* among the compelling forces.

Not that mackerel-snappers are worse in those respects than any other denomination—but that's my point. They sound just *like* any other denomination, and all of them are pretty lame these days when it comes to the glorious possibilities of the sung English language as a path to the salvation of the soul. I expected more from the church that spawned Palestrina, the church in which Christ's presence in the Eucharist is not considered merely symbolic. (As Flannery O'Connor said, if it's just a *symbol*, then to Hell with it.) I expected more from the church that gave rise, literally, to the great cathedrals and can trace its popes directly back to the day when Christ commissioned Peter. In short, I expect-