

THAT SPRING, COOVER MOVED TO MONMOUTH, ILLINOIS, the town where Wyatt Earp was born. Coover rented a small furnished house for himself on a dead-end street, a few miles east of the Mississippi River. Coover had been working construction outside of Lexington, Kentucky, when he got mixed up with a dental hygienist who had a mean-tempered boyfriend serving time in the state penitentiary. By the time Coover came to his senses, he realized it might be best to find employment in another state. He picked up his check on a Friday evening, stuffed his possessions into his blue Buick, and drove toward Paducah. He looked for work for three weeks before he hooked up with a framing crew.

Coover's house consisted of four square rooms, all of them painted a sickly green. There was a little screened porch on the back that faced a thicket of trees. The street seemed quiet enough, the rent was cheap, and the previous owner had left the house clean. Coover moved in and left all the windows open for two days to freshen the air. For those two nights, he fell asleep in a sleeping bag on the porch floor, listening to crickets sing their night songs.

Coover's landlord was one of his neighbors, a retired factory worker named Claude Johnson, a squat, middle-aged man who lived in the last house on the block and drove a tomato-red pickup truck with a dented passenger-side door. A field of corn separated Johnson's house from Interstate 74.

Johnson lived alone, too, and supported himself on disability checks and the rent he could get from his rental property. He had ruined his back working in a factory that made refrigerators and the union had helped him get a good settlement. That was fifteen years ago, around the time Johnson's wife left him and moved to Arizona. His two sons still lived in the Southwest. Coover had seen their pictures on the wall in Johnson's kitchen, both boys thickly built like their father. One worked as an archaeologist; the other was a river guide.



The Green Sofa (mixed media, 24 x 36) by Noyes Capehart



distance

2007 Doris Betts Fiction Prize Winner
Final Judge, Linda Beatrice Brown

BY THOMAS WOLF

"The boys were eleven and eight when she left," Johnson said one night. "I came home from work and she'd left. She must have planned it for weeks. Cleaned me out. Took everything valuable in the house except for the TV and my fishing gear. She wrote me a letter from Utah three weeks later to say she wanted a divorce, and then a month or so passed and I got papers in the mail. I never had another damned thing to do with her, except for signing the papers."

"What about the boys?" Coover asked.

Johnson spit over the rail into the night air. "I heard from them when they were grown. Then they came to visit a few times. They seemed to have got the notion that I walked out on them." He stared off into the corn. Trucks with their high beams piercing the darkness rolled across Interstate 74, heading west. "Life ain't brain science," Johnson said. "Women will kill you if you let them."

JOHNSON HAD A GIRLFRIEND NAMED HOLLY, A BLOND with Cleopatra bangs cut straight across her forehead. She was, at least, twenty years younger than Johnson, about Coover's age, a husky woman with round shoulders and a deep voice. Holly stayed with Johnson on weekends, and the two of them went fishing every Sunday morning.

Within a few weeks, Coover had figured out that Johnson's singular passion in life was fishing. He went after fish the way other men pursued women or money. Most mornings, as Coover loaded his tools and ice chest into the Buick, Johnson's truck was already gone. He had told Coover he kept a boat and outboard motor at Little Bear Lake and he always fished in the mornings, never at night. "The fishing's better," Johnson explained. "Also, my head is clear in the morning, which is not always the case after dinner."

Several times a week, Johnson would leave fresh fish, usually catfish or perch, filleted and chilled, in freezer bags in Coover's refrigerator. While Coover was pounding nails in a Monmouth subdivision, Johnson would let himself into the house and clean the fish in Coover's sink. Sometimes he would sit and drink a beer at the kitchen table and leave the empty can and a note on the countertop. Coover tolerated the intrusions. He had nothing to hide.

Holly had been a student at Palmer Chiropractic College in Davenport, and now she was taking courses at a community college. Her family lived in Ohio. Her father farmed and her mother was on the school board. Coover learned this on a warm Saturday evening in early June as the three of them sat on Johnson's deck, eating batter-fried catfish and drinking beer. Coover was a little drunk. Holly was standing behind Johnson, massaging his neck and shoulders.

Johnson turned to Coover. "Tell the story about your girlfriend."

Coover's head hurt. He told the story without much enthusiasm. He didn't particularly like to talk about his past. He got to the part where the dental hygienist had told him about the boyfriend's release date from prison.

"What was he in for?" Holly asked. She walked around behind Coover.

"Forgery, I think," said Coover, though the hygienist hadn't been too forthcoming with details. She had simply suggested the old boyfriend had a bad temper and that Coover would be wise to stay away.

"Poor baby," Holly said. She fit her hands just under Coover's jaw and lifted his head slightly. "You're tense and stressed out," she observed in a neutral tone. "Try to relax. I learned this in school. You can trust me." Coover was conscious of her fingers pressed firmly to his temples. Her hands were large and strong. He thought he felt callouses on her fingertips. She turned his head sharply to the left, then reset her hands, and jerked his head back to the right.

"How's that?" Holly said. "Is that better?"

THE SUMMER PASSED. THE HEAT OF JUNE BECAME THE HEAT of July. By August, it had been six weeks since the last rain. The corn was still thick behind Johnson's house, but farmers complained about the heat wave, and everyone seemed more agitated. Two men on Coover's job got in a fistfight in the midst of shingling a garage roof. Coover stepped in and pulled them apart, and neither man spoke to Coover for the rest of the day. Coover was silent too, absorbing the heat like a punishment, driving nails, carrying boards. At night, he sat on his porch and closed his eyes and tried to feel a breeze. On the weekends, he sat with Johnson and Holly and watched the trucks in the distance.

Something cooled between Johnson and Holly. The weekend evenings had more long silences. Coover sat on Johnson's deck and imagined the rough touch of Holly's hands on his neck. He knew he shouldn't be thinking these thoughts, but he couldn't stop himself.

AROUND NOON ON THE LAST SUNDAY MORNING IN AUGUST, Holly walked in the front door of Coover's house.

"He's dead," she said. "The bastard drowned." She sat down on the couch.

It took Coover a moment to understand what she was talking about. "Are you sure?" He said.

"He fell out of the boat," Holly said. Then she got up and walked to the window. With her back to Coover, she said, "Actually, I pushed him out of the boat. You know he can't swim. I pushed him, and I gunned the motor and got the hell out of there. I never looked back." Her tone was flat, unemotional. She turned to Coover. "Don't ask me why. It's not worth saying. I did it and I'm not sorry."

DISTANT

Coover had been fishing with Johnson just once. Johnson had pulled two lifejackets out of the back of the truck and offered one to Coover. Coover had declined, saying that he could swim. "Good," Johnson said. "Then you can save my ass if I fall in," and Johnson had thrown both of the jackets back in the truck. Coover hadn't thought about the fact that Johnson really couldn't swim.

"WE SHOULD CALL SOMEONE," COOVER SAID. "WE SHOULD call the police." He was trying to think quickly. "Probably they'll think it was an accident." But even as Coover was saying the words, he realized he was constructing an alibi and making himself into some kind of accomplice. Johnson was as dense as a boulder. Coover imagined Johnson's bulk sinking in the water. The police would drag the lake and find his bloated body in the mud at the bottom. They would all be on the six o'clock news. Holly would probably be arrested.

Without thinking, Coover reached out for Holly and they stood and held each other in the center of Coover's small living room. Her body felt thick and firm, and Coover could feel warmth that radiated from the middle of her back.

THE NEXT MORNING JOHNSON CAME HOME. IT WAS TRUE that he couldn't swim, but Holly had dumped him out of the boat in a shallow spot where he was able to bob to the surface and watch his boat lurch away. He had splashed and struggled to a tangle of floating logs and waited there until a bass boat with two fishermen came by and picked him up. They drove him to a hospital in the Quad Cities, where he spent the night. He was discharged the next morning and took a cab back to his house.

Holly had parked Johnson's red truck behind Coover's Buick and spent the night at Coover's house. Both of them had listened to the news that evening and expected to hear something of Johnson's fate. Coover had called in sick on Monday morning. It was around noon when they looked out and saw the cab let Johnson off at the end of the street.

"Oh, shit," Holly said.

All day they waited for Johnson to reappear. Once it was dark, Holly backed the red truck out into the street and left it in front of Johnson's house with the keys in the ignition.

Wordlessly, Coover drove Holly back to town, passing the Wyatt Earp house and the subdivision

where he'd worked all summer. He parked in front of Holly's apartment and looked away when she got out of the car.

That night, Coover sat on his porch, staring into the twisted woods. He could hear the trucks rumbling out on the interstate. Coover thought about the distances they had to travel, how the big rigs disappeared in the darkness, following each other on the concrete ribbon of highway that led all the way to the coast. There was a long stretch of country on the other side of the Mississippi river. He began to calculate just how long it would take him to gather his belongings.



Man on a Drawbridge (acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36)
by Noyes Capehart

Upon looking up the author of the story Linda Beatrice Brown had selected for the 2007 Betts Fiction Prize, Editor Margaret Bauer remarked that with a name like **Thomas Wolf** (even if spelled differently) he must have figured he had to be a writer. Wolf has an MFA in Fiction Writing from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He and his wife, Patricia Bryan, co-authored *Midnight Assassin: A Murder in America's Heartland* (Algonquin Books 2005), a nonfiction narrative about the now century-old Iowa murder case that also inspired Susan Glaspell's play "Trifles" and short story "A Jury of Her Peers."

Noyes Capehart was a member of the faculty at Appalachian State University from 1969 to his retirement in 1997, and for nearly fifty years he has exhibited at regional, state, and national levels. His works have been shown in several museums in the US, including the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC; the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City; the Brooklyn Museum; and, in North Carolina, the Mint Museum in Charlotte and the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh. See more samples of his work at www.capehart.org.