ESSAY

COURTING MISS PORTER

A FAN AND FELLOW WRITER SETS ABOUT RESTORING THE TEXAS SHACK THAT KATHERINE ANN PORTER CALLED HOME

TOM GRIMES

It's a gray April day, the Texas sky offering only the stingiest bit of rain. A few drops smack the car's windshield, then cling and spread as wind and gravity dissolve them. I've taken the back roads, rather than the interstate, and as the working-class houses with tiny gardens along the railroad tracks give way to student condos and trailer homes, the road beyond them reveals lush spring countryside. I'm allergic to most of it, but still the gold pods on the oak trees and the salamander greens of ash, elms, and pecans glow in the afternoon's tussle of spotty sunshine and sliding grayness. Beneath a railway bridge the Blanco River appears, slow and uninspired after a year's drought. Beyond the dam the fields open up, the river's high bluff sailing away, and a wide plain pools around me like the antediluvian sea it once was.

The town of Kyle was built beside the central Texas railroad line in the nineteenth century. The tracks cross Center Street near the bank, the four-way stop sign, the Bon-Ton grocery store, and the Taqueria Laredo. The railroad's weigh station is now a barbecue joint, and downtown consists of a library, a church, and a police station with four patrol cars. Two blocks up the street stand a few pretty houses, but the one I'm going to look at is the childhood home of Katherine Anne Porter, Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction and by reputation one of the twentieth century's great writers. After the death of her

mother in 1892, she'd come here from Indian Creek, Texas, with her father, sisters, and brother, Paul, to her paternal grandmother's homestead. At the time, Katherine Anne—known then as Callie—was two. She and her siblings slept in a ten-by-twelve-foot room, which is now the bathroom of the existing building. Looking at the house from the street-side grass, I see a crumbling front porch and a weather-stained clapboard shack that lists on the rotting stone foundation beneath it. I've been told by a colleague in the university English department in which I teach that Porter's childhood home—the place she wrote about, *lied* about, actually, describing it as a Southern mansion, a kind of Tara, with servants and mint juleps served to gentleman callers—that this imaginary Graceland was to be sold off as a mere "house," lost forever as a landmark honoring her work. Knowing nothing of Porter's life and only a smattering of the stories she'd left behind, I said, "Someone should save it."

"Yeah, you." And, with that, my colleague, Robin, thrust a scrap of paper bearing the telephone number of the current owners of KAP's childhood home into my hand.

I thought it sad to see a writer's house vanish. In Key West, I'd lived near Hemingway's house and had seen the shambles made of Elizabeth Bishop's cottage. I felt good every time I biked past James Merrill's house and saw his bike leaning on his front porch behind its gingerbread railing, and experienced a pang of connection as I passed the houses of Tennessee Williams, Thomas McGuane, and John Dos Passos while biking to my job as a waiter. They'd made art in these places. To me, they were sacred. So I took the scrap of paper. "Okay," I said.

I made an appointment to visit the house. Carroll Wiley was waiting for me. He was a university development officer. In other words, he helped raise money. We played basketball together, noon pickup games. We were led around the decrepit place by a barefoot woman who occupied the house, along with her dog.

"They mowed over my roses," she said, ushering us around back.

The weedy yard was shaded by a

pecan tree. Beyond it a lean-to in mid-collapse tilted against a pile of wood planks, rusted gardening equipment, and old tires. The roof and floor of the back porch were soggy, and a decaying sofa, covered with hair, clawed by the dog, and damp to its core, sat near the back door. Cobwebs from the low eaves brushed my head as we stepped inside. The small kitchen had been remodeled in the 1950s with tin cabinets, yellow Formica, a porcelain sink, and bright linoleum tile.

"The house is haunted," the woman told us as we moved into the parlor. "I channel the spirits sometimes, but mostly they're just here. They're pretty nice."

I tried to detect them as I scanned the maple floors, the elegant casement windows, and the sweetly comforting walls. The room gave off a serene, somehow pregnant vibration. With sunlight and some white curtains, it could be pleasant. Off the parlor was a sitting room, and through that a small bedroom with an unattractive built-in closet, then the surprisingly spacious bathroom, large enough to hold bunk beds for several children.

The front porch was a mass of crumbling concrete. But there was an herb garden in the yard, rosemary growing tall enough to season a hundred racks of lamb, basil waiting to sprout leaves the size of butterfly wings.

"Well," Carroll stood next to me, "what do you think?"

"It's a mess," I said, with a comic sense of hope, the way one foresees hope in a scruffy stray dog. "Let's do it."

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Katherine Anne Porter longed to escape Texas; I never wanted to come live in it. To me, Texas represented America reconceived as Old Testament wasteland. Desert, drought, religion, guns. I was born in New York City. Cabs, subways, crowds, bodies bouncing off one another on Fifth Avenue. Writers, painters, musicians, clubs, galleries, bars. The city was in my corpuscles. In a million imagined lifetimes, I never imagined myself in Texas.

If I missed New York, Katherine Anne would have understood why. "Here is where I can work," she wrote to her father, "and where I can work, there I live." She and I had traded places. At thirty, she lived in Greenwich Village, which I'd called "home" until age thirty-one. She'd gone to New York, I to a small Texas university town ten miles from her childhood home, a place she visited with the father who once had told her she'd never be a writer, just as mine once told me the same thing. Callie then avoided her father for twenty-two years and on the day they attempted to reconcile, they returned to the house. In a letter, she wrote, "My father and I visited the dreary little place at Kyle, empty, full of dust, even smaller than I remembered it."

KAP sought an ideal, imaginary home all her life. The town of Kyle from 1892 to 1901 was mostly dust and sun and winter grayness, with some cattle grazing, some cotton growing in the loamy soil east of the railway tracks, and the trains coming through. The dirt road off the house's front porch trailed west toward hill country, which was to remain impoverished and without electricity well into the twentieth century. In the yard stood a fig tree and a small playhouse. KAP made friends with Erna Schlemmer, who lived across the road. The Schlemmer family was as prosperous as the Porter family was poor. Embarrassed that KAP had to wear a tattered dress the day of her grandmother's funeral, Mrs. Schlemmer made bows for the dress. KAP's huge house with grand porches and nearby slave quarters was a lie. At sixteen, she left home and married John Koontz. The marriage was a means to escape home, as my first marriage was my way out of Queens. So I understood Callie's need to run, because I shared the same need.

But, if I'd known of the sorrow engendered by her memory of the place she was forced to call home, I'm not sure I would have tried to save it. I remained almost willfully uninterested in Porter's life and work. Her childhood house had to be a vague, abstract presence, and the idea of "saving" it was acceptable only as long as I kept her home from becoming my home. It was as if, as writers, we were wary of one another. I refused to be a footnote in her expanding biography; she refused to be rescued by a man. In a strange way, I'd become her last suitor, coming to call at her house like an expectant beau, standing before "the long galleries, shuttered in green lattice . . . covered with honeysuckle and roses." The porches, she claimed, added "two delightful rooms to the house, the front a dining room, the back furnished with swings and chairs for conversation and repose, iced tea, limeade . . . *sangria*—and always, tall frosted beakers of mint julep, for the gentlemen, of course." She was eleven. No gentlemen callers, no wine, no honeysuckle and roses. But literature is emotional truth, not lies that can be refuted by fact. And to KAP and me, literature was our home. But we each had to build our own rooms in it.

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KAP's accomplishments are well documented; as for me, I'd published three novels and had one play produced. I'd been to the Iowa Writers' Workshop and had taught there each summer for five years. Astonishing accomplishments, to me, because they seemed to constitute the biography of someone else, someone more self-assured, less broken inside, less ghost-riddled and haunted. The "impostor complex," Frank Conroy, my teacher at Iowa,

called it. My psychiatrist called it "having no sense of self." I was brilliant, he said, at creating masks. And what are masks but fictions, lies—about how lovely your childhood house was, or how beautiful you are, or how much better your work is than everyone else's work, which is how KAP felt.

But the boys of Texas letters had dismissed her early work, considering it an annoying reminder of their own parochialism. Texas writers of her era were mostly men and apparently happiest when wallowing in Western juvenilia. J. Frank Dobie, meaningless to me both as an Easterner and as a writer, won the top prize for Texas literature in 1939 over KAP's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. His book was *Yaqui Gold and Indian Silver*. Larry McMurtry found KAP's work "fragile, powdery, just plain boring . . . her artistic experience high neurosis," her work empty. Maybe because I'm accustomed to disdain from having lived a childhood subjected to it, and because I'm an outsider in the Texas literary tradition, I was sensitive to KAP's reputation and the way it was manhandled.

Porter grew up impoverished, yet wrote like an aristocrat. Not in terms of her subject matter, which frequently dealt with naïfs and outcasts, but in terms of a classical line, a syntactical finesse, a moral vision. Tocqueville said that literature in democratic ages can never present, as it does in periods of aristocracy, an aspect of order; that American writers will never possess sufficiently intimate knowledge of the art of literature to appreciate its more delicate beauties; the minor shades of expression must escape them. But delicate beauty and minor shades of expression define KAP's work in the short story. And the lies she told in order to tell the truth were her way of making herself an aristocrat.

Her reputation as a writer, and a room for her life's papers and memorabilia, remained paramount to her. She wanted a place where things that had belonged to her could be fetishized, gaped at in awe. She believed the University of Texas would build and name a library after her. It's tragic to feel that only a constant tending of your memory can make up for the pain you felt in your life. And it's aristocratic to believe that your work and your possessions are worthy of remembering.

As an "impostor," I could never imagine myself worthy of these tributes. But I did understand something Porter may not have understood. "Home" is trust. Home is accepting your fate. Home is finding happiness where you don't expect to find it. Home is Being. And so what I imagined I was "saving" was not a house, but a place where the longings and confusions, the fictions, of living writers might thrive.

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One problem: saving the house would require $500,000.

So, Carroll and I met with a county judge, Judge Eddie, who, not wanting to see Kyle wind up as another stop on the NAFTA rail line, was sympathetic to the project. He called the Bartons, Wynette and Bob, who ran a local newspaper, and Jack Giberson, who was once chief Clerk of the Texas Land Office

"Do you have a contract on the house?" Jack asked repeatedly during our first meeting. Now in his seventies, he had the forceful, if occasionally tottering demeanor of someone who had told the largest state in the Union what to do with its land for twenty years.

"And this Katherine Anne Porter," he said, "she ain't as pretty as she thought. She ain't a looker." He scowled at me for corroboration.

I shrugged. "Not my type."

He looked at his wife, Mary. "See? She just got everybody thinking she was pretty."

We wondered who might contribute to the project. We asked whose mother or aunt or father had owned, repaired, painted, or roofed the Porter house since the turn of the century? Relationships whizzed around me like the cast of a Russian novel. These were people trying to preserve the cultural embroidery of their past by resisting the subdivisions that took over ranch land as families died out, and commercial enterprises that attempted to build plants too close to the aquifer recharge zone.

In a few weeks, we had a bank account; stationery; a sketch of the house; and a realtor, whose eighty-year-old mother, Mrs. Franke, lived up the grassy lane from the Porter house, and who would broker the sale for free. Several newspaper articles announced our preservation efforts.

We raised $35,000 between April and September. We were $465,000 short. I got anxious. The house alone, without a soggy couch, would cost $75,000. We decided to have a fund-raiser in the yard behind the house. I would talk about my vision for the place, which I saw as a residence for writers. Bring new ones in and let them extend literature in the place that had been KAP's home. The temperature was typical September midnineties. Iced-tea glasses beaded, brownies turned gooey as road tar. I had a tie on. Obviously, something had gone wrong with my life. As I looked around at the fifty people gathered on folding chairs, I felt as if I'd morphed into some literary evangelical. I'd already lost my mind once in Texas, full-blown clinical paranoia that lasted for a year. I taught expecting the FBI to enter the classroom at any second and haul me away in handcuffs. I lost hair and developed a scalp rash. When I ejaculated, I came blood. Once my meds kicked in, I was left with only my Catholic guilt and lifelong ontological shame. I believed I could atone for my illusory sins by doing good works in the world. That's why I was here, to do good. After all, Texas was mercenary, its plains and history sown with blood. Hadn't my fellow Texas literary exile, Cormac McCarthy, shown us that? I'd come through paranoia and emerged a monomaniacal, literary Ahab, an evangelical preacher, the bible of KAP's *Collected Stories* in one hand, donation basket in the other. Amid the brownies and the heat, I would speak in tongues.

When I'd finished, a tall gentleman and his wife, Kate, approached me. "I'm very interested in this," he said, then left. Carroll took my arm. "That's Bill Johnson," he said. "He could do this whole project if he wanted to." Mary Giberson patted my arm. "You did good, darlin'."

Bill's father had been born in 1899 and swam in the Blanco River around the same time KAP's family would saddle up a mule or a few horses to make the three-mile trip to Halifax Hole to swim and fish, a place KAP later wrote about in *Noon Wine*. During the Depression, Bill's father had purchased several thousand acres of riverfront land for nine dollars an acre. At age eighteen, Bill had moved from Houston, where the family business was based, to the Halifax Ranch, in Kyle. "I just need to be near flowing water all the time," he once told me. After graduating from UT, he went to work for the family's foundation, which had built the Kyle library and its addition, and was named for his mother Burdine.

Bill's knowledge of Porter was sketchy. He'd heard her name connected with Kyle, but never really associated the house with her. Still, he and Kate had named their second daughter Katherine Anne, in part after Katherine Anne Porter. And Bill's aunt, Ellen Clayton Garwood, had inscribed a book she'd

written to Bill, and mentioned KAP in the inscription. The book was about her father and was called *Will Clayton: A Short Biography*. It seems Will Clayton helped develop the Marshall Plan as Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs during the Truman administration. I thought, if a family can rebuild Europe, it can probably handle a fourteen-hundred-square-foot house.

Bill wanted to do something for Kyle, so he wrote a check for the balance necessary to purchase the house. Then Mary told him, "We need a restoration committee. You're its chair." Reluctantly, Bill agreed. Mary became co-chair. Then six of us, Bill, Mary, Carroll, Wynnette Barton, Judge Eddie's wife Mary, and I—seven if you include the ghost of KAP—began to oversee the restoration of her "dreary little" home.

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In "What Is Meant by 'Telling the Truth'?" Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, wrote that "the truthful word is not in itself constant; it as much alive as life itself. . . . Every utterance has its home in a particular environment . . . when words become rootless and homeless, then the word loses truth, and then indeed there must almost inevitably be lying."

KAP came from a "dreary little place," but lied in order to transform it into a plantation. Why would someone boast about owning old slave quarters? Porter portrayed herself as a Southern belle and named her fictional alter ego in the stories called *The Old Order* Miranda Gay. In the stories, Miranda's homes—there are three—are grand, enchanting places maintained by "faithful family retainers, former slaves." In Porter's mind, she was an aristocrat, and her family was simply down on its luck. By comparison, her friend Erna Schlemmer came from nothing but a family of prosperous German merchants.

But how does one see the end of slavery as bad luck? Did Porter understand the connotations of her lies? A lie is ultimately about power. Sissela Bok, in her book *Lying*, says, "To the extent that knowledge gives power . . . lies affect the distribution of power; they add to that of the liar, and diminish that of the deceived."

KAP's brother, Paul, was devout. Joan Givner, KAP's first biographer, wrote that Paul believed that "whoever tells a lie, flies in the face of God." So, had saying that she came from grand circumstances rather than a "bleak, treeless, undesirable place with a small one-story shack," as KAP's home was described by Erna Schlemmer, destroyed her moral compass?

Robert Penn Warren said, "Katherine Anne Porter's fiction remains, perhaps, the best source of biography in a deeper sense." In world-class fiction, truth—like the devil—is in the details. The stories in *The Old Order* portray a life of

poverty, confusion, fear, and loss. They're also threaded with lies. At the end of "The Grave," Miranda's brother swears Miranda to secrecy about his shooting and slitting open a rabbit, then finding embryos inside. Miranda consents—in the story. In actuality, KAP told her father about the killing and Paul received "a savage beating." Years later, when KAP's brother accused her of lying in the published story about what truly happened, she refused to believe him.

Bok says, "*Whatever* matters to human beings, trust is the atmosphere in which it thrives." KAP's sadness lies in the fact that she missed this central fact of human interaction. She couldn't live with her real past, so, like many writers, she transformed it into something she could live with.

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To meet state and national guidelines for the preservation of a historic home—and anything more than fifty years old in our rootless republic is considered potentially "historic"—we had to permit inspectors to visit regularly during the restoration process to see that we hadn't replaced the 120-year-old floors, or covered up the hole in the roof where the pipe for the old wood stove once snaked through to the sky above it. Even a rusty eye hook screwed into a wall for no apparent reason was deemed "historical" and, therefore, had to be preserved if we wanted landmark status.

But landmark status for a "shack"? What were we really "preserving"? The original house was two rooms. In the 1930s, new owners added the rooms I thought would look nice with sunlight and curtains, rooms KAP had never seen, walked through, or breathed in. In the 1940s, Formica made its way into the kitchen. The outhouse vanished and a toilet appeared inside the house. We wanted historical accuracy. We also wanted air conditioning. No historical sweating would be permitted in the newest "draft" of KAP's home.

I began to look at preservation the way I look at writing a novel. You begin with a vague longing, a setting, a ghostly cast of characters, and your skill as a craftsman. From there, you fashion an imaginary place, much as we fashioned, or refashioned, KAP's childhood home.

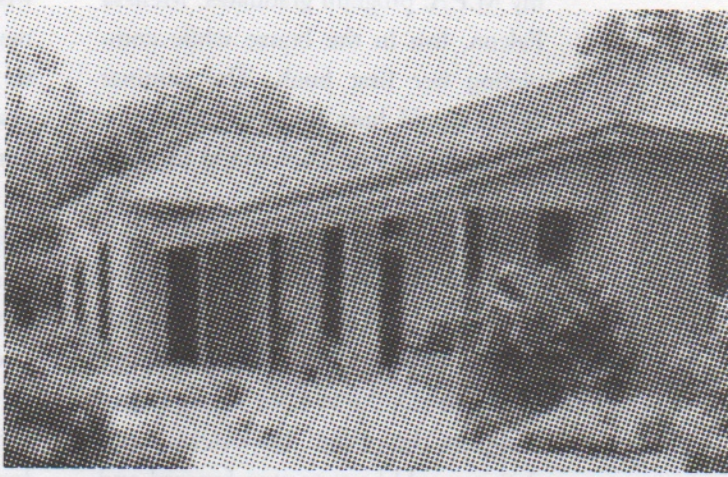
Whenever possible, we left things as we found them. When this wasn't possible, we replicated historical detail as best we could. Our architect, Emily, showed us drawings of roofs used in the nineteenth century and we replaced our soggy one with one that matched the style of the times. We agreed the front porch had not originally rested on concrete, so we jettisoned the cement and reset the porch on wooden posts. We balanced the house on a new foundation. We screened in the back porch. We found a splinter of wood inside one wall while digging for an electrical line and realized it bore the original color of house

paint, avocado green. KAP would have approved. She loved Mexico, and now her mini-Tara looked like guacamole.

But would she have approved? In a way, we were preserving her lies about the past. Had we let the house molder into dust, her fictions of it would have become history, which is merely the sum of lies that outlasts other lies. We were giving her "dreary little place" a temporary permanence, and she might have hated us for it. Or, as Bill and Kate said, she might have loved us. KAP had always wanted a home in Texas, and recognition for her work as a writer from the state that had produced her. She'd wanted a legend to grow up around her, too. Because of our efforts, this would now come true. She would become an aristocrat, after all.

But first—we needed another $400,000 dollars . . . and then some. How, I wondered, did I get myself on the hook for raising half a million dollars just to restore the house, and *another million,* now, to operate it? I'd lie awake at night when the alcohol wore off and the phantom world of my depression came alive. I imagined having to pay off the $75,000 house personally. If we began restoring it—adding the three kitchens and the parking area for the tour buses that Mary Giberson wanted—I'd owe another $3-400,000. We'd decided to knock down the decrepit lean-to and put up a seminar space (my brilliant, $120,000 idea!) in order to hold readings and workshops. I'd owe that too, and I still wouldn't have a dime of the million I needed to run the new air conditioning! KAP had imagined a grand Southern life to make her pain vanish; I'd invented a criminal yet redemptive Dostoevskian one to torture myself.

Winter is my suicidal season, February the worst. So I was no stranger to



KAP's divided thoughts. My life is grand, my life is horrible. I can do anything, I'm a complete failure. Driving to the house one day, the sun shining, the river emerald green and flecked with diamond white ripples, I thought that crashing into the base of the old iron trestle railroad bridge doing about eighty would be a good way to go. I guess my suicidal anxieties came through at the restoration meetings. I said I didn't want to begin work until we

had funds to cover both the restoration and operation of what had now become a "literary center," not simply a writer's residence. We'd had some disagreement about this. I said, if you let a writer live in the house to work, you can't have people walking through it. Mary and Wynnette wanted the townspeople to have access to the house. Bill wanted it used by a living writer, someone who would work in the house. We compromised. We would have one of my M.F.A. program graduates, Melissa Falcon, live in the house while completing her first book. The seminar space would host readings and workshops. The house itself would be open on a limited basis for kids and people interested in KAP and literature.

But we still needed the $400,000 for renovation and $1 million for operation.

"I'll take care of it," Bill said. He'd quickly realized that if we were going to complete the project, his family's foundation would have to step forward and see that it was done. And he'd obviously detected my anxiety. One evening, he asked me to stay behind the others. We'd been meeting in his foundation's office, a renovated nineteenth-century building near the railroad tracks in Buda, the town above Kyle where KAP once briefly and unhappily lived. Maybe my sleepless nights showed. Bill said, "You know, if we need $25,000 a year or so to cover initial expenses, I can do that. I think we should just renovate."

I'm not sure who was more stunned: me, by Bill's generosity, or KAP, who now had a new gentleman caller, one who could truly put roses and honeysuckle on her porch's latticework.

That KAP had written about the river Bill's father had dived into as a boy, swinging from a rope tied to a cypress tree, then letting go thirty feet above the water to plunge into it, was a thread in the fabric of personal, cultural, and, at this point, metaphysical history Bill didn't wish to see broken. We were creating new threads, weaving them into the fabric of time and place. As Bill began to research KAP's life, he discovered that her first novel, or "nobble," as she called it, written and "published" by KAP herself at age six, was entitled *The Hermit of Halifax Cave*. Legend claimed a hermit lived in this cave at the turn of the twentieth century. Now the cave resided on Bill's thirty-three-hundred-acre ranch, tucked into a bluff one hundred feet above the river. To enter the cave, once its thirty thousand Mexican Freetail bats have flown south for the winter, you get on all fours and crawl through a tiny hobbit hole. A few feet in, you can stand up. The curved rock ceiling above you is maybe twelve feet high, and there's a ledge you can slide along, then drop down behind, which leads into an even bigger cave, or bat plantation. During the Civil War, Confederate troops mined the bat guano, shoveling it into buckets which were then lowered by

pulley down to the river and dragged by boat to the other side where nitrates were extracted from it and transformed into gunpowder.

So, we had Chicano bats aiding Confederate soldiers who had lost the war, only to have Katherine Anne Porter invent stories about the Old South that threaded their way into the lives of Bill, myself, and now, as the weave grew even more intricate, Curt Engelhorn, nephew of KAP's childhood friend Erna Schlemmer and the fourteenth richest man in the world.

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Erna Schlemmer received the letter from KAP that described her childhood home as a "dreary little place . . . decayed, smaller even than I remembered it. I never lived there really, and have not any memories that I cannot bring up, look at, and put away calmly." KAP confessed to Erna her plans to run from her disastrous first marriage. It would be another forty years before they met again. KAP had returned to Texas, believing UT would name its new library after her. "Not everybody lives to see his own monument," she wrote, "and I hope to." The monument never materialized. The library director may have mentioned establishing a room, or perhaps just a closet, for her work. KAP believed he meant a seven-story, two million-volume library. He didn't deliver, the liar. But the visit "home" rekindled her friendship with Erna, whose family she described as "my oldest friends, the only people who have known me from the cradle . . . and with luck will see me to the grave."

Erna's sister, Anita, had moved to Germany, married, and given birth to a son, Curt, who now, at seventy-five, lived there, as well as in Switzerland, Monaco, Bermuda, and Portugal. Curt's sister Elizabeth lived on a ranch in West Texas and was Mary Giberson's dear friend. "You know, Curt's coming through town," Mary told us. "I think he might like to see the house where his mother and aunt played." Curt had recently sold his pharmaceutical company for $11 billion, and I imagined the chance to visit the small, dusty railway town that had been his mother's childhood world might somehow bring him "home," too.

He arrived three months later. As he walked through the rooms of the tiny house, the floorboards his mother and aunt had walked over years before bent under his feet, the dust retaining some infinitely small speck of the dust they had breathed was breathed by him, and some new generation of longing was born.

Shortly afterward, I wrote him a letter. He called back. "I'm not giving you the whole banana," he told Carroll. He gave us $1.2 million.

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Nietzsche believed lying was noble. "A great man," he wrote, "rather lies than tells the truth; it requires more spirit and *will*. There is a solitude within him that is inaccessible to praise or blame, his own justice that is beyond appeal."

The U.S. Secret Service takes a dimmer view of lying. "We need the names, addresses, and Social Security numbers of everybody connected with the event for an FBI check. Caterers, ushers, everybody. Even you."

So this was how they'd finally catch me. At a National Literary Landmark ceremony, with Laura Bush giving the keynote speech. My faith in good works had undone me. I'd be imprisoned for imaginary crimes. I should have stayed home and written another novel, as the Superman would have done.

Instead, I find myself showing Brent, the Secret Service agent, how to climb into the attic, where, in June, it's 150 degrees. He's checking for bombs. Dogs will be brought in to sniff the house and surrounding yards the morning of the event. Streets will be closed, traffic halted on the interstate. The trains that have run hourly through Kyle since the cattle days of the nineteenth century will sit and wait miles outside of town. The president's wife is coming. Her favorite author is Katherine Anne Porter. I know this because I work for the Texas Book Festival, which Mrs. Bush initiated to raise funds for Texas libraries.

After Brent checks the attic, he crawls under the porch, then takes a tour of the neighborhood, his dark suit jacket stained with perspiration in the one-hundred-degree breeze. Meanwhile, I drive to Austin and enter Cowgirls and Lace. The testosterone alarm goes off. There's a man in the store! I need fabric for pillows, something Victorian maybe. Burgundy is nice, but too bordello-like. I buy fabric with an elephant on it. It has a chic postcolonial look. We begin filling the house with antiques. Lila Knight is our period design expert. She's a friend of Bill and Kate and thrilled that we're preserving more than another log cabin. We buy couches, rugs, bookcases, and a nineteenth-century rail clerk's desk that we set beneath a painting of a fox hunt conducted by aristocrats and their white-breasted dogs. I get on my hands and knees and scrub the floors. I touch up paint that's been scuffed by the black-soled shoes of Secret Service agents who drop in for their twenty-seventh tour of the house. I get seventy e-mails a day. Put up a tent, take down the tent. No packages may be presented to the First Lady. Where do you plan to have the photo line? No pocketbooks for women. Where will Mrs. Bush stand? Where will she walk between 9:37 and 9:38 A.M.? If she goes in this door and out that one, she walks eight fewer steps. Write that down. No cars within a three-block radius. No pedestrian

traffic. Where's the nearest trauma center? Sixteen hours a day for five weeks, cleaning, hammering, hanging pictures. The house has to look perfect. The dogs arrive at 8 A.M.

Mrs. Bush arrives at 9:36, as planned. Half a dozen black SUVs swoop into the street beyond the driveway. Bill and I give Laura a private tour of the house, accompanied by a cameraman from the *Today* show. Then we leave her alone to enjoy the house and reflect on it, alone, for five minutes. That's her "holding time," built into the schedule. A hundred guests who have cleared security wait on the lawn, seated in chairs. Then Mrs. Bush takes a seat on the front porch while Tim O'Brien speaks about Katherine Anne Porter and her publisher, Sam Lawrence, who had published Tim's work and once offered to publish mine. Sam's dead, and so is KAP, yet, oddly, we're all still somehow connected.

Then Laura stands up to speak. Her remarks are lovely:

There is so much more to this house than its remains. This is a corner of Katherine Anne Porter's imagination, and . . . how lucky we are to be trespassers here.

In many ways, the stories that come from Kyle are love stories. They capture the elements of any true love: beauty and ugliness; hope and resignation; sorrow and joy.

This porch may seem disappointing when compared to her written memories of it, but what matters more than these surroundings is the immortal spirit of the little girl who grew up here.

In "Old Mortality," she wrote, "We are drawn and held here by the mysterious love of the living. The visible remains are nothing . . . they are dust and perishable as the flesh, but their living memory is enchanting."

Her life began and ended here, as did many of her stories. But that phrase, "coming full circle," denotes some sense of completion, some termination . . . when really, a full circle has no beginning or end.

Then Bill rises and stands alongside Laura and Ramiro Salazar of the Texas Center for the Book to accept the National Literary Landmark plaque. Sixty seconds later, the SUVs are gone.

Jack Giberson has Alzheimer's now and no longer remembers who I am, or whether or not KAP was beautiful. And, sometimes, when we walk the grounds of the Halifax Ranch with one of our visiting writers, Bill and I wonder about the strange fate that brought us together and made us friends. I sleep better now, too. The FBI (or Secret Service) checked my background and I'm not really guilty of anything. My paranoia, it seems, had been based on nothing but lies my mind told to itself. I even have an honorary Secret Service pin to prove it. And for the moment I seem to have, as KAP does, a home in Texas.