

Along A Wider River, new title, sold to Georgia Review and anthology (Best Stories, 1997). For collection, use Along a Wider River, as title, but this unedited version)

Voice of the Alapaha

Now that he is ninety-some-odd years old and can no longer lumber down the banks of the Alapaha, he has to scooch low and back like a brittle old turtle. Down and down the root ladder set in packed gray dirt to the dais of roots below--a broad tupelo, and a cypress older than he is. Still, the cypress is sprouting tender green needles, and the tupelo branches out over the slow water. Cloudy flocked shadows like smoke under glass. Cypress knees, like pagan idols, stand in the eddy along the edge, where now and then a gray-pied moccasin can be seen braided from base to tip. Buzz of crickets and locusts and a hawk crying over the banks of inward-leaning birches, a spring trilling downriver and seeping clear and insignificant into the forever flow to the sea. Felled heart cypress and pine along the unsunned banks are the fish-roe tint of Dump Sanders, who in patched khaki, can blend right in while he fishes.

On the platform of roots, he stands, cranking his backbone to straight position--he will fish now--then reaches for his cane pole in the wattle of bamboos growing along the bank. Old pole has caught many a jack, more mudcats that he can count. He practically lives on fish. Has raised a big family on fish caught out of this hole. That, and the corn and peas and such he grew on halves, coons he trapped in the muddy slews and hammocks of Swanoochee County. Unwinding the line of his pole, he listens for sounds that belong--the river's rilling, a crow's sore-throated caw--sorting them from sounds that don't belong--the clank of wood on metal, which likely means somebody is fishing from a boat upriver.

He goes dead still, his keen shadow merging with the shadows of maple switches on the sun-spotted water below, and gazes upriver, his cataracted eyes picking up the blur of boat and man spiriting from the tea-tinted shallows toward the smoky drop-off of Dump's fishing hole.

In a minute, the boat will pass, and in another minute Dump will bait up with that worm he can't yet see on that yonder red-stemmed maple branch. In spring, you don't have to bring bait. A smart fisherman can find bait; a smart fisherman can whittle cork from the driftwood washed aground like Indian canoes. Helps when you are old and poor and on your own.

The boat trolls into Dump's fishing space, not two feet from him, but blocked from view by the wall-like tupelo. Metal sides scrubbing against the curb of cypress knees. Scaring off the fish. While the man fishes, Dump listens. Phoof! Tab on a can of cola or beer. Sounds of swigging. A plastic tackle box snaps open

and clacks shut. Cursing--the bite of a hook maybe. A red and white cola can tumbles downstream, the stern of the boat scrubs along the cypress knee boundary, and hugging the tree trunk, Dump sidles north along the bank of snaky roots, careful not to trip, careful not to pry his shadow from the shadow of the tupelo now falling across the bow of the boat.

The man's fishing line sings, snaps--"Sonofabitch!"

Dump draws back as if he's been stung by a yellow jacket. He knows that voice--that harpy, gruff boom--a voice he hates. Fears that voice is all in his head. Fears that because he hears it so often in his head, waking and sleeping, he might be only conjuring it from nothing now, he might be losing his mind.

"When you get done turning under that back field, go on over to the old Watson place and fertilize that corn. Rain's on its way."

But it's sundown now, Dump would say to himself, tipping the sweat-sopped brim of his hat and peering west/southwest toward the Gulf, Peter's Mudhole. No clouds scrolling up, just a butchered sun leaking blood onto the pineline (he never said that to Pender, never talked back to any of the men he farmed for). But of course sundown was the whole point: keeping Dump on a job that would carry over into the night and stall him from returning home--home being a small green, dogtrot house that Dump could call his own only as long as he sharecropped for Pender--till Pender could do what he had in mind to do with certain other shared property (Dump never let on he knew what that was either).

Dump waits now till he hears the boat rising along with the current, then peeps through the bole of the tupelo at Boss Pender's padded back and silver head gliding in and out of the broomed willow shadows downriver. Though Dump believes he'll have to wait another hour or so before his fish will come back, he tips to the maple tree, left of the tupelo, and plucks a couple of worms. Deposits them in the Prince Albert can in his shirt pocket. Then he perches on a bench of tree roots above the cauldron of fish slime steeping into the roky damp.

Sunday. Worst day of the week for running into fellows fishing the Alapaha. Seems like Dump spends the better part of his days dodging them. They don't go to church. Dump doesn't blame them. Church is here. God is here. On this sunny morning. A breeze ruffles the tree tops, then wrinkles the surface of the water like silk.

Suddenly Dump hears the boat come banging back--oar on metal, oar on metal--and then it shows in the sun-blared strip of black water off the far bank. Too late to get up and hide--keep still. Riding high and heavy on the jacked-up seat, Pender clanks his paddle to the bottom of the boat, grunts himself forward, and feeds up a rope tied to the bow from the mangle of tackle boxes and rods and a snowy ice chest and what looks like a brown paper sack of snacks. Dump is so still, he's barely breathing; so still, he can feel the pain festering in his joints. His mind never strays far from his body. Shoulders tucked, knees crossed, shrunken, he watches his shadow on the burnished bower of roots, barely thicker than the cane pole in his right hand.

Pender swivels left in the elevated seat and wraps the rope around a cypress knee, swivels right and picks up a rod, rears and casts, and a glittery red and blue split-tail plastic worm ploops into the water at Dump's feet. Boss Pender is squinting into the sun now, face red as a ripe tupelo berry. Silver hair shining like sun on frost.

Dump has just about decided that Boss can't see him because of the sun in his eyes, or maybe because Dump, burnished the tint of the roots his brogans rub everyday, blends into the background.

Pender reels in and casts again, this time downstream of the tupelo, then shades his eyes with his hand, gazing right at Dump.

"Hey," he hollers, "you wouldn't happen to know a man goes by the name of Dump Sanders, would you?"

Dump clears his throat, spits--he's been dying to spit for God knows how long. "Can't say as I do," he calls back.

"Well," says Pender, shifting and bracing one hand on his bloated waist, "I'm from the IRS. Been looking for a feller owes us some money." His great haunches spread on the boat seat, his gut settles on his lap.

Dump tee-hees into his hand.

Boss laughs. "How you, Dump?"

"Ain't no good," says Dump and wipes his mouth with the back of his hardened hand, then crosses his wrists on his crossed thighs. The way a woman would sit.

"Come by here a second ago, didn't see you," says Pender. No mention of fishing in Dump's hole.

"I been right here," says Dump.

The tip of Pender's rod dips, bends, creaks, and he reels in, watching the water dash and dart and the great fish lunge and wallow, then sulk on its side for Pender to wrench it to the boat.

"Old mud fish," says Pender. "You want him?"

"Can't say as I do," says Dump. When his wife was living she would make mud-fish balls--Dump loved them--fried brown.

Pender lifts the fish by its bottom lip, yanks the hook free, and drops the fish flapping to the bottom of the boat. Poles and cans ringing and knocking. "Old mammy fish like that'll eat up all your bass."

He pilfers in his tackle box, finds his pocket knife, thumbnails a blade to open position, and gets a good grip on the handle in his right fist. Then he rams the blade into the flouncing fish, rinses the knife in the water and puts it back in his tackle box. He picks up his rod and checks his glittery red and blue plastic worm and casts it upriver, Dump's side. The line swings down to Dump's hole as if a magnet is drawing the hook.

"Been catching much this spring?" asks Pender.

"None to speak of."

Pender's rod bends, goes straight. Silence. Then, "Sears is got a lil ole trolling motor I been looking at. I ain't much for all this paddling and it getting hot." He squints up at the sun showering down, at Dump posing in the shade like he's been planted there.

"Course my knees in the shape they in," says Pender, "won't be many more trips for me. That old gout! Can't hardly put in and take out no more."

He reels in, changes lures, this time a yellow plastic worm with a green head and bead eyes, and swings it out, watching water rings form from the bull's eye. He has cast mid-river, halfway between him and Dump. "That oughta do it," he says, and rears till the boat seat groans. "I had to put in up there at the bridge this time. My landing washed out last winter when the river come up."

Dump knows, and suspects Pender knows he know, that Pender no longer owns a boat landing, no longer owns even the land the landing was on.

He waits, reels in a bit. "Looks like this old river's getting wider, don't it?" He rests one hand on his tree-trunk thigh, staring up and down the creek-width river.

"Yessir, it do." Dump has been watching the river widen for the past many years--current skiving away the sandy banks and lashing at the tiers of trees till the treeline that used to stand mid-bank has stepped up to the edge to meet its doom, naked roots anchoring to the riverbottom. He's been watching the river change, just as he's been watching Boss Pender change, from rich man to poor man. All that farm and timber land, in the seventies, dwindling to nothing. Over-taxed, under-valued, lost. Not that Dump could gloat over Pender and the others losing their inherited farms; without them, their land, Dump was out of work, out of house, out of money--not pride, since he couldn't lose what he never had. But losing out himself had almost been worth it, watching Pender lose it all. Watching Pender grow fat and feeble and foolish, from lean and mean and proud.

"Hate like the devil, Dump, to have to leave you with next to nothing, right here at the end of the year and Christmas coming. You with that big drove of younguns to buy Santy Claus for. But you know how it is--I got that fertilizer bill to pay. Seed bill and what-have-you. Looks like farming's going to nothing. Maybe next year..."

Pender's rod bends, his line sings, and he reels with the leisure of a satisfied fat man. A ten-to-twelve pound bass shines silver beneath the umber surface, streaks left then right, flips from the churning water with its sleek body arched, then belly-flops to the riverbottom. The line whips. Pender lurches forward. The boat rocks, balances itself like scales. He grins, laughs, whoops, holds the line tight and high, and trawls the big fish in. "I got you, boy!" he says and reaches into the water and lifts the fish with its notched tail furling. He lowers it into the boat. Rattle of cans, rattle of tackle boxes, rattle of paper sack.

Both hands spread on his knees now, Pender presents his gleeful face to Dump. "Man, I'm burning up," he says. The fish writhes and drums on the boat bottom, sounds vibrating across the bothered river.

"Reckon I'll mosey on in," says Pender and swivels his seat left and reaches for the rope wound around the cypress knee. He yelps, yanks back, stands, rocking the boat, and nurses his right hand with his left. The boat pitches side to side; Pender spraddles his legs, trying to steady it. Too late. One more pitch of the stern and water streams into the boat, now leaning toward

Dump's bank, where he watches Pender tilt, sidelong, hollering "Snake!" in that voice that counts in Swanoochee County, then gurgling as he goes under. Silver head parting the blackish water and floss hair streaming over his red open face, he bobs among the scatter of tackle boxes and ice chest, rods and empty cola cans, brown paper sack dumping cellophane-wrapped moonpies and saltine crackers, tinned sardines and potted meat. The bloody carcass of the mud fish sinks, white belly up, marbling the brown water red. Water-darts from the freed bass point toward Dump's hole.

Dump, on his feet now, stiff and silent, watches as Pender dog paddles to the other bank, downriver from the snake-wrapped cypress knee, and drags up to and onto a toppled cypress, panting and gasping. He just hangs there over the water-polished cypress crisscrossing tupelo roots, drenched body half-in, half-out of the water. "Old moccasin got me," he yells, almost apologetic, or as if in explanation, for looking the fool. "What you do bout that?" He is eyeballing his right hand like a fascinating rock.

"They say if you got ery knife," yells Dump, "cut it and suck the pysin."

Still clinging to the cypress with one arm, Pender digs into his right pocket, then gazes downstream at his tackle box gyring around a sand bar.

"You got your knife on you?" he calls.

"Yessir," says Dump, and fishes his jackknife from his pants pocket. "Got one right here I'll loan you."

"How bout bringing it on over here."

"Can't swim a lick," says Dump. He can--or used to could--but he's not going to.

"Don't know if I can make it over there," says Pender, wrenching round to look at the far bank. "I'm just about whipped."

Dump's heart starts pumping hard, as if the snake venom is pumping from Pender's blood stream to his. "Want me to run up to the commissary for help?"

"I reckon," says Pender and rests his head on the cypress trunk.

"Hate to leave you like that."

"I hate for you to," says Pender and checks his hand again. Stuffed and stiff as a tarry work glove.

"It's a good piece there and back," Dump calls, as if to keep talking is the best medicine. "You gone be awright?"

"I don't know," says Pender and lowers his head to the log again.

"I'll be on back," says Dump and starts his slow progress up the bank, looking around now and then at Boss Pender draped half-body over the log now.

"Man that old and fat ain't got no business....," Dump says to himself. Halfway up the bank now.

"Hey, Dump," yells Pender, "I don't think you oughta go yet."

"How come's that?" Dump yells back.

"I don't want to die...be...by myself."

"What you say?"

No answer.

"What was that, Pender?"

No answer.

"You ok?" Dump is scooting downbank again. He'll just have to try swimming, try to help.

"I ain't ok," says Boss. "Ain't ok atall. Think it's my heart."

Dump's foot slips from the rooty ledge and he slides on his belly to the platform below. He grunts. On his knees, he crawls around till he can spot the bloated body through the warp of heat. "I done fell over here," he calls, "broke something."

No answer, no movement from the log, just water lights spiraling up the trees on the west bank.

"You ain't pulling my leg, are you?"

Dump, who never saw the snake, can imagine Boss Pender and his fox hunting buddies at the commissary teasing him later about rushing around trying to get help for Pender, who most likely is playing a prank on him, then sliding like an otter down the bank. They do it all the time. Once, Dump's coon dog leaped off the tailgate of his pickup and hung himself by his leash, and Dump didn't find the dog, dragging behind the truck like a butchered hog, till he coasted in at the commissary for gas and saw them all on the porch laughing. And then of course, there was that other time: all of them gathered to josh and lie and laugh about Pender sending Dump out to work at night so he (Pender) could be with his (Dump's) oldest daughter, who by rights should have been ruined, but instead went on to college--paid her own way!--and became a school teacher. A good daughter. Dump can depend on her to bring him home-cooked food and take him to the doctor--been twice in his life--who even gives him Father's Day cards which he doesn't

deserve because he never said, "Stop there, Pender; don't you mess with my daughter no more. I don't need your work to keep my family in groceries." He never said that. Not even to his wife, who likewise went along to the fields at night, to open the fertilizer sacks and dump them into the fertilize hopper. Both of them knowing, but neither of them saying, just eyeing one another from where she stood by the truck load of fifty-pound sacks with Dump on the tractor, the chut-chut-chut of the engine scuttling across the emerald rows of marching corn and rising in marl and potash dust to the star-pricked sky, Dump's hand on the switch key, threatening to cut the sound so his wife could hear clear what he had to say, that she'd best be getting on to the house--"Stay there where you belong, Woman, and see to the younguns." But he never said that either.

"You better say something," he calls to Pender. "I'm gone if you don't."

The slow water rills, the spring trickles, a hawk lifts over the river, crying.