

The First Two Pages of “Nostalgia” by James McCrone
From *Low Down Dirty Vote, Volume 3: The Color of My Vote*,
edited by Mysti Berry (Berry Content Corporation)

An Essay by James McCrone

The opportunity to write “Nostalgia,” which appears in *Low Down Dirty Vote, Volume 3*, came as I struggled with a short story about the mob. I’ve long been mystified by our collective fascination with the mob and mobsters, and I wanted to look at it differently. Living where I do, in South Philadelphia, I’ve overheard a few conversations about how things were better ordered or made more sense when Wise Guys ruled the roost. And I’ve thought, “Wait...what?”

The theme of volume three is “The Color of My Vote,” which struck a chord that resonated with the mob story I had been struggling with. That shockingly misguided wistfulness about *mobocracy* that I’ve overheard fused in my mind with echoes of our national dysfunction—the delusion that life overall was somehow fairer, more just in some earlier, hazily defined day. It struck me that the root of reactionary efforts to suppress and disenfranchise voters might issue from a similar misbegotten longing for a time that never really existed. And thus, the wise-ass who gets sucked in was born, along with the title, “Nostalgia.”

The story begins with an oath from the narrator, a promise to himself:

“I’d go,” he says to himself. “And I’d go for the head.”

I hoped to grab the reader from the opening, and to generate questions, too. For a start, his affirmation is a response to an FBI Agent. But the narrator is a wise-ass petty thief. Why would he willingly help the Feds? Why is a petty thief involved with the FBI? And what does the narrator's brother have to do with it?

I wanted to tell a story from the perspective of someone who has contempt for people stuck in the past. But he nevertheless succumbs to his own brand of nostalgia. And is shaken from it. The narrator has learned something, we know from the opening—something from which he can never go back. The mobster-reactionary Miss Havishams on the other hand are people who can't seem to move on or function in the real world—people for whom spite and revenge become all-consuming.

The story begins when the narrator and his accomplices are “called on the carpet” for an earlier burglary they committed, rounded up by dirty cops working for Mr. Johnnie, a small-time fence who fancies himself more important than he really is. “Not that there was [a carpet] in that shitty back room full of electronics junk,” the narrator observes. He watches Mr. Johnnie with disdain, “playing-acting for the goons standing guard.”

There hadn't been Wise Guys or “turf” in Philly for 30 years or more. Johnny was just a puffed-up fence for stolen goods. People in the neighborhood treated him like a big shot—but only because it flattered *their* vanity, like they were all living together in some movie where the world still made sense.

By the end of the first page, the timeworn image of some *caporegime* dealing in stolen goods, favors, and death from some crappy backroom is upended. Not only is there the kind of thing the reader might expect here, but there is also:

...an American flag and one of those “Don’t Tread on Me” snake banners pinned together on the wall behind him. There were mounted posters and yard signs and other political stuff stacked against a wall to the left of where Johnny sat. Most were turned to face the wall, but I could see a couple—Back the Blue, Punisher skulls, black-white-and-blue American flags. Johnny was losing it, I thought.

We’re in new territory, even if it feels like a retread. Even if everyone’s acting like it’s 1974.

When Johnnie tells them that they’ve been called to account because they’ve “stolen something of mine,” it strikes an odd note for the narrator, and fear in his accomplices. The rules are changing—*have* changed—but why? he wonders. And above all, how? He’s troubled that in order to walk out of that shitty room he’ll have to give back what they stole (an admittedly “sweet” score), but questions of why and how things have changed continue to occupy his mind.

It gets worse, and darker, and even the narrator gets caught up in it.

As the story came together, I liked that something more-or-less benign, like nostalgia, could be a malignant, negative force. I found myself pulling *Docherty*, by William McIlvanney, down from my shelf, chasing a quote I dimly remembered. Early in the book, the character Miss Gilfillan, unable to sleep, takes

“a dose of nostalgia like a drug.” And I had what I needed to complete the story.

Nostalgia as drug was more apt than I knew at the time...

The full story came out on May 15, where you’ll find stories from cozy to noir in this third volume as 22 writers explore the terrifying reality of life at a global turning point. *Low Down Dirty Vote, Volume 3* will donate \$10,000 to Democracy Docket, which is “dedicated to providing information, opinion and analysis about voting rights and more.” This volume’s theme, the color of my vote, drew writers from around the globe: all across the US, India, Germany, and the UK. The anthology includes award-winning writers, and writers who are being published for the first time, from a variety of backgrounds and life experiences.

It features: Anshritha, Eric Beetner, Stephen Buehler, Patricia E Canterbury, Sarah M Chen, David Corbett, Jackie Ross Flaum, Katharina Gerlach, Barb Goffman, David Hagerty, myself, Camille Minichino, Ann Parker, Thomas Pluck, Miguel Alfonso Ramos, Ember Randall, Travis Richardson, Faye Snowden, Misty Sol, DJ Tyrer, Gabriel Valjan, and Bev Vincent.

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James McCrone is the author of the Faithless Elector series novels—*Faithless Elector*, *Dark Network*, and *Emergency Powers*—“taut” and “gripping” political thrillers about a stolen presidency. His work, “Ultimatum Games” appeared in January in *Rock and a Hard Place*, Winter/#7. *Retreats from Oblivion: The Journal of NoirCon*, recently published “Eight O’Clock Sharp.” “Nostalgia” will appear May 15, in the short-story anthology *Low Down Dirty Vote, Volume 3*. His next novel, currently under review, is *Bastard Verdict*, a political thriller set in

Scotland. He's at work on a thriller set in Oregon's wine country, a (pinot) Noir tale of corruption and murder, w/t *Witness Tree*.

He's a member of MWA, Int'l Assoc. of Crime Writers, ITW, Philadelphia Dramatists' Center and he's the vice-president of the Delaware Valley Sisters in Crime chapter. James has an MFA from the University of Washington in Seattle. A Pacific Northwest native (mostly), he lives in South Philadelphia with his wife and three children.

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