



And Silent Left the Place

A Novel by Elizabeth Bruce – CC Alum’74

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BLOCK 7

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Discussion Questions

The title of the book is taken from a section of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* about King Midas’ Barber, described in pages xi-xii. What corollaries do you find between the fable of King Midas’ barber in and the story of Thomas Riley’s secret?

“The mighty secret knew, but knew alone,
And, tho’ impatient, durst not make it known.
Restless, at last, a private place he found,
Then dug a hole, and told it to the ground;
In a low whisper he reveal’d the case,
And cover’d in the earth, and silent left the place”

The Prologue: The Calder Story returns the reader to a mud-filled trench on the frontier of the Great War (World War One). Sergeant Riley and three American soldiers under his charge have been cut off from their squad. Riley is delirious with fever and dysentery. One of the soldiers, a racist, young fellow Texan named A.J. Ray entertains the others with The Calder Story, a tall Texas tale about the rancher Ted Calder’s great grandfather, Earl C. Calder, who was the son of a famous New Orleans’ brother owner named Wilma T. Calder. The form of the tall Texas tale (think “Pecos Bill who lassoed tornados).

How does the Earl C. Calder tale in the Prologue fit in with the rest of the novel? What connections does the Earl C. Calder tale have with the rest of the novel’s narrative arc? How does the tradition of the tall Texas tale figure in the book’s structure?

Page xvii:

“‘Young Earl,’ A.J. said, ‘swept Miss Ida off the wagon, kissed her once upon the lips and pointed to the tall grass beneath their feet. ‘This here’s our gold mine, Miss Ida,’ he said. ‘This here’s what we sell—blades of grass walked on by the Savior himself, Jesus Christ, the son of God.’”

What is the significance of Riley's underground room?

Page 3:

"Ready came the rattling sound. Chirping noise hard to hear above the ground even from the first inch of air that hovered over the desert like breath.

"To hear rattling sound a person had to get beneath the land.

"Thomas Riley had figured that out and dug a hole down in the ground years ago."

How does the backstory of Riley during World War One color the actions that take place in 1963? How do they relate to society today? What about the backstory of Riley as a child? How does it relate to the rest of the novel? To circumstances today?

Page 4:

"Something had crawled inside Riley back in 1918 in that wet trench hell in France and plugged his ears. Half-deaf, he'd gone there at the end all those years ago when he'd felt Satan dance hideous and silent before him at a banquet of demons called up from the depths. A.J. too had seen the devil before he died, and cursed his name.

"Detroit and Danny, though, had fallen where they stood, still believing the beast was war."

How is the land of South Texas a character in the novel? What role does it play in the lives of Riley and the other characters?

Page 10:

"'You were raised,' Barnett's father used to tell him, 'on the parched flatness of south Texas where a man's worth can be measured by the stillness of his shadow at sunset and the liveliness of it at dawn.'"

What role do cars, machines, and technology play in the novel? How does the role of technology compare and contrast to technology today? Over the course of your lifetime?

Page 6:

"Then he peeled out, right before the sun come up. Took off down the road spewing dirt, slamming them tires down on the road like it was the road's fault he's hurting."

"People in Texas take things out on the road.

"Riley knew that. It was a talent perfected young in those pats—boys, girls, no matter—peeling out held a kind of holy power there, wedded as it was to big cars, cheap gas, and horizons plentiful about."

Does the role of Rosellen Calder speak to you? Does she personify the archetypical ferocious Texas woman and does that ring true to you? Does she develop beyond that? Rosellen and Dolores embody earlier generations of Texas womanhood. Compare and contrast them to Eva.

Page 17-18:

“Yessir, Dolores, Rosellen Calder is one law-free woman. But then, you always did like that about her, since she was a little girl. ‘That child’s gonna tear up Texas,’ you said. ‘Place’ll never be the same.’”

Riley and Rosellen have a special relationship. What does it evoke for you? How does it ground the novel?

Page 13:

“Rosellen told Riley most everything. Other people wanted to tell him things, of course, but didn’t dare. It’s like that with silent people sometimes. Folks want to give their words to them, weight them down, keep them from floating off to whatever place it is that quiet people go to.”

How does Rosellen compare to women with her circumstances today?

Pages 12-13:

“But then, letting men explain themselves was not something Rosellen Calder did. She never let Ted Calder explain himself...Not that he didn’t need to...But, Rosellen wouldn’t have listened to her husband anyway. Rosellen Calder wasn’t interested in words, or children either. ‘Word ain’t invented yet, can fix a man gone wrong.’ That’s what she told Riley.” P. 12-13.

What role does fear play in the novel?

Page 30:

“Startled, the girl jerked away from the wet chin of the mare and Riley saw the wildness there, deep inside the girl’s eyes, and it stopped him cold. The look of fear.”
“Poor child’s gone off chilled, thought Riley, and he ran his hands across the wet handle of the pump and felt the girl’s fear pass over him and settle in his heart.”

Page 32:

“Girl was scared, Dolores. Something after her. Wasn’t nothing there, of course. No Calder, nothing eyes could see. Whatever it was had got itself inside of her and chilled her with fear, like her blood had gone, left her standing there empty and dry for all to see.”

Tom and Dolores' love for each other laces through the novel. How does their romantic love compare to romantic love in your world today?

Page 35:

"Dolores had done that. She'd left the white baked sand of Padre Island and come out into the water with her husband. And there they'd stood, the newlyweds, tasting their first pure taste of life's beginnings. It was their beginning too, this place, this bare stretch of beach in the Gulf of Mexico—the beginning of all they held for each other and they kissed one another right there in the water and let the salt-filled wave pound over them like the baptism of love it was."

Calder's dog, Lorraine, is blind, like the blind poet Homer. What is the significance of Calder's dog? What is the significance of her blindness? What associations does it invoke for you?

Page 36;

"A pretty dog, but blind. Blind like no dog Riley'd ever known. Like no other being really, man or beast. Calder's dog had two large glassy eyes, pupil-less like jumbo jaw-breakers sucked down to a pure silver blue."

"Cataracts. The dog was born with cataracts."

What does Riley's relationship with this dog evoke for you? How does Calder's dog influence the story? What does she evoke for you emotionally, symbolically, historically?

At the end of Chapter 5, Riley speaks aloud for the first time outside his hole when he talks to the dog Lorraine. How is that significant?

"Are you hungry, girl?" he asked, speaking suddenly out loud.

"Lorraine stopped, startled maybe by the sound of his voice. Riley stood dead still, his heart pounding, trying to figure out if he'd really said something aloud outside his hole. Something in him cracked, something hard and cold, and he stopped breathing for a minute.

"Lorraine looked toward Riley and wagged her tail."

Ted Calder's violation of Eva is told through Calder's POV as a drunken memory. How does that work for you? How is this different from the experience had been described from Eva's POV? What does this encounter say about Calder? About Eva?

Page 48:

"Oh, he thought, oh yes, it had been fine. What he remembered of it, filled with promise like it used to be with Rosellen. Oh so very fine.

"The only thing that bothered him, that tugged at his reverie, was getting clawed and pushed away there at the end when he was spent and sleeping almost, all warm and

comfortable on top of her. The way the girl had cussed and kicked her way loose of him like he was a bug crawling on her bare skin. Some kind of earwig or something.

“Nope, that part, Ted Calder realized, he didn’t much care to remember.”

Why do you think Eva responded the way she did to Ted Calder’s violation? How does the time period play into Eva’s reaction and subsequent silence? Talk about her not talking about it.

What do you think of the relationship between Rosellen and Ted Calder? Between Rosellen and Josue? Between Josue Colon Sevilla and Ted Calder? What are the dynamics between these characters?

Page 21:

“‘God, Teddy, just let him be,’ she said. ‘Poor man’s got nowhere else to go, now that Havana got snatched up by those dogs.’ ... ‘Duty,’ she said, ‘and indebtedness to you is all that keeps Josue here, you stone-hearted dead man. His soul is dying. You know that. His heart is broken clean in two; pretty boy or not, he misses his beloved Esaul so much.’”

What role does Sevilla play in the novel? How is his character pivotal? What do we learn about Calder, Rosellen, and Riley through Sevilla? How does the Sevilla character in the south Texas of 1963 resonate with the realities of LGBTQ individuals today?

Why does Sevilla help Riley? Why does Riley trust him? What bonds do the two men have? What is the metaphorical significance of the tape recorder? Of Sevilla’s contribution to Riley’s recordings? How does this resonate with the presentation of technology in the novel?

Page 28:

“‘Rosellen is right,’ Sevilla would say to himself. ‘It’s just like what she says all the time. ‘Got to salvage what we can from this world. Got to take all we got the strength to carry. Wouldn’t you agree, my friend?’”

How do Riley’s dreams and the dream-place he goes to fuel the story? What do you think of them stylistically?

Page 29:

“The night was late and he was deep in sleep, half in this world, half in the dream place that often took him in the dark or in the day whenever he drifted off as old men do.”

Riley often feels or intuits the emotions and yearnings of others. How does this inform the story? The sense of place? Your relationship to Riley?

Christian religion is a frequent presence in the novel. How does faith influence the forces at play in the novel? How did the Christian imagery affect you as a reader?

Page 39:

“‘Overlaying,’ they’d called it, though Dolores swore nobody’d rolled over on her, their miracle child. ‘God just took her, that was all,’ Dolores said, ‘took her up to heaven He did. Called her back. Wasn’t her time, Tom,’ that’s what Dolores said. ‘World’s not good enough for her yet. Too much evil, God figured, for pure goodness like her. She’s at peace now, Thomas, swimming in His love. It’s a better place, Tom a better place than here. Someday we’ll see her, husband. Someday we’ll know her again. Don’t cry, Tom,’ Dolores said. ‘Don’t cry, honey. Maybe we’ll have another baby someday. Maybe God will send us another little girl. Don’t cry, sweetheart, don’t cry. Everything’s going to be all right.’”

Maurilo and Officer Barnett connect based on their shared connection to Vietnam in 1963—Maurilo through his Army service in Saigon as a French translator and Barnett through his younger brother’s posting in Vietnam as a private in the Army when the U.S. had advisors there in the early 60s.

How did the Vietnam War change the way Barnett and Maurilo responded to military service, compared to Riley and Tukane? Talk about the individualism vs. collectivism respective to each’s experience. How does trauma shape their collective consciousness?

The motif of “the Red Beast of War” haunts the story at many levels. How does the backdrop of war inform the novel? How did it affect you as a reader? How do the desert’s cruelty and the cruelty of war parallel each other?

Page 57:

“Will hunched over and took Jesse’s head into his lap like it was a wounded bird...Streaks of Jesse’s blood smeared over Will’s face until the faces of both brothers were dark and bloody and wore the look of death...Riley looked away...and sat staring at the edge of a sky filled with Barnett’s moaning...It was nearly dark in the desert. The last bit of sunset faded as the two men sat yards apart and the moon rose slowly above them....In the distance a gray lizard woke.”

What is the representation of life alone for an old man? When Riley and Maurilo play cribbage as they wait for John Hopper, what does the cribbage game evoke for you? What does it say about the novel’s theme of the burdens of the old passing to the young?

Page 76:

“There in the green light of darkness, they sat, these two men with lost beloveds....”

For Riley, Dolores is a constant presence. His thoughts are frequently addressed to her. How has Riley kept Dolores present in his life? How has this shaped his life alone? Dolores’ presence in Riley’s life stops short of magic realism, however. What do you think of the author’s choice to keep Riley’s inner life believably rooted in tangible reality? How would the novel be different if the ghosts and shadows and presences of those no longer present had been materialized as paranormal phenomenon? How would that coalesce with the hard reality of the setting?

Page 76:

“Boy come by tonight, Dory, Riley thought. Skinny fellow needing help. Looked troubled so I let him in, Dolores, and what’s the harm in that? Talked straight at you, this boy, Riley thought. Yessir, he said, just like a preacher’s son.”

The role of John Hopper, the body hunter, seems particularly relevant today given the brutal realities of migrants crossing the southern border of the U.S. How does John Hopper resonate for you today? In the past? What role does he play in the novel’s landscape? It’s plot? The characterization of manhood and aging?

Page 78:

“John Hopper was an old black man folks called a body hunter. Combed the desert looking for the dead, bodies felled by heat or thirst or the hands of man that strung them up on scrawny trees, the bizarre brown fruit of a barren land. Why he did it folks couldn’t say, salvation or the money, people figured. It was hard to tell. John Hopper kept the sights he saw to himself. Force of habit or act of faith, whatever the reason, he kept quiet.”

What roles do race, class, gender play in the novel? How are they different from today? How is the novel relevant to today’s struggles?

Stylistically, a lot of important information has to be communicated between Riley and Hopper and Hopper and Maurilo without Riley speaking. How did the author’s techniques work for you?

Imagetically, what does Hopper’s truck and search light evoke for you?

Page 84:

“Let’s go, Tom,’ Hopper hollered, and they were off, these three lone men following a shaft of light that parted the desert before them.

“Like slicing into calf’s liver, ain’t it boy? Hopper shouted to Maurilo, and the wind blew over them and scattered his words into a thousand sounds.”

The desert darkness is another presence in the novel. What does the darkness remind you of? What does Hopper’s light do to your feelings about the darkness?

Page 87

“Hopper cranked the light up toward the star-filled sky. The old contraption squeaked and groaned as the beam inched up, brightening a black piece of sky with each new ratchet round until at last the air far above the mound came into view. The stars seemed to hold the dusty beam of light gently from both sides until the heavens wearied and the light scattered into fainter and fainter little specks drifting into dry black air.”

Ted Calder died a violent, desperate death alone in the desert. What images does his death evoke for you? What does his death symbolize for you? What cultural references does his struggle with the snake conjure for you? What do you make of Hopper's belly laugh at Calder's death?

Page 96:

"The snake must have surprised Calder, Maurilo thought and knew he had it right. Come up on the drunkard passed out and slid its body over his to take his warmth until he woke up and panicked. He must have grabbed the snake with the fury of a man betrayed and struggled with it. Maybe the snake had wrapped itself around his arms and hissed like a serpent in Dante's hell and bit him deep and hard. Maybe the smitten man had held the beast aloft like a high priest and bent its reptile's mouth open out of pure drunk rage, and crushed its spine and cursed it blue until, in one final futile act, he'd hurled the dead creature yards away, away from his snake-bit crazy self alone in the desert and dying. Maybe then he'd crawled in pain back to the blanket, to Eva's blanket, and tried to save himself."

How does Calder's death reconcile, or not, with the novel's themes of atonement and penance and redemption?

Stylistically, the details of Calder's death are pieced together by Maurilo's supposition, somewhat like the flashback or simulations used in some TV shows and films. How did this technique work for you? Or not work for you?

Marvin J. Tukane tells Eva all about his wife's leaving and about Riley and his wife Dolores, and then he launches into a reverie about his vision of a bulldozer ballet. What do you think of Tukane's idea? How does it encapsulate the spirit of Texas? What effect does his story have on Eva? On the novel's action?

Page 111:

"I took a swill and said to him, 'Bob, there's a whole side to heavy machinery we've been missing—whole possibilities of joining man to machine and making them dance like butterflies—like goddamn ballerinas.'"

Sometimes inanimate things are personified and become minor characters themselves. Nature, the land, the sky, age, youth, dreams, etc., are given a life force of their own. What do you think of this technique? It is an imagematic personification that stops short of magic realism, however. What do these personifications evoke for you? What effect does this technique have on the storytelling? On the reader?

Page 171-172:

"The lighting sky in Riley's memory pressed its weight upon the bloody ground. The dead lay scattered, their youth hollowed out and spread across the fields, waiting for the crows..."

Page 117:

“Within the dance hall, the music pushed its way over the dancers, out the screen door and onto the parking lot, past people’s shouts and honks and the gravel scattering under their tires as they chased the melody out onto the open road.”

Page 120:

“Suddenly the whole desert seemed to whisper *hushabye*, and Eva was sure it was the sound of the ground breathing.”

p.133

“Leftovers, he thought. Shadows look like what’s left of good times up and gone.”

When Hopper and Riley arrive with Calder’s body, the crowd at the dance hall becomes a chorus of responses. What does this chorus tell the reader about Calder? About the townspeople? About Calder’s relationship with the townspeople?

Page 121:

“The crowd pushed forward. People had to see for themselves.

“‘It ain’t possible,’ someone said, and the chatter grew.

“‘Looks dead to me.’

“‘Daddy, what happened?’

“‘Comeuppance, son.’

“‘What’s that?’”

“‘It’s the shits, son, the goddamn shits.’”

When Rosellen Calder learns of her husband’s death, she remembers their meeting years ago. It’s a crass, combative exchange that ends with Calder’s sincere apology and marriage proposal and Rosellen’s acceptance. What do you think of their rough courtship? Of their complicated marriage? Why do you think Rosellen loved Teddy all these years? What did they have together?

Riley wonders how the gay Josue Sevilla will be treated by the townspeople after Calder’s death. How does his peril affect you as a reader? How does it affect your relationship to the novel’s setting?

Page 136:

“Like everyone else in town Riley knew that only bad news lay outside for Josue Sevilla. Ted Calder and his money were all that stood between Sevilla and those who’d just as soon string the girly Cuban up on the branches of a mesquite tree and let him swing there drawing flies until old John Hopper cut him down and laid his soul to rest.”

Will Barnett shares a piece of obsidian he picks up with Rosellen Calder, inventing a story about Calder having it in his pocket. What does this exchange tell you about Rosellen and Barnett? About Rosellen and Calder? Calder and Barnett?

Page 146:

“Heart of the universe, is what he called these stones,’ Rosellen said, ‘Heart of you and heart of me joined up in blackness too thick to see between. We’re like obsidian, Rosellen,’ Teddy said, ‘Thick and slippery as hardened tar. Ain’t no choice for us, my Rosiebell, except the sleep of stones.’”

As Marvin Tukane drives Eva and Maurilo back to their car, he shares a story about Ted Calder’s father. How does this backstory explain aspects of Ted Calder? Of Josue Sevilla? Of Riley? How does it affect how you feel about Calder? About Sevilla?

Page 155:

“Then old man Calder just went off, wailing like the cattle, cursing God for killing his steers, cussing his son out something awful, like it was his fault the dumb animals died....’You,’ the old man kept hollering at Ted Calder,’ Tukane said. ‘You did this. Odious,’ he called him, skewering his finger at him. ‘Odious, wicked swine.’”

What do you think of Eva’s decision not to tell Maurilo about what happened with Ted Calder in the desert? Why do you think she does what she does? How is her decision informed by the era and place of the novel? Can you fathom her decision? What do you think happens next for Eva? For Maurilo?

When Hopper and Riley stop to “make some water,” Riley reflects on his father’s urgings to “do duty” when Tom was conscripted—at the advanced age of 36—into the Army to serve in World War One. What do you think of the senior Riley exhorting his son to enlist to part of something bigger than himself. There’s a certainty to the elder Riley’s exhortation that Tom Riley doesn’t challenge about what the younger Riley’s life narrative will be in South Texas.

How do you feel about such an historical perspective? How does this certainty differ/concur with your own perspective of your life’s future or past narrative? How does it anchor the novel in a previous time and place? Do you feel you are part of something “bigger than you”? If so, how? How does the collectivist nature of military service contrast with civilian lives and careers? How does this tension manifest itself in the society in which you currently live?

Page 163:

“You’s a piece of history now,’ his father’d said. ‘Done been called to serve. You’s part of something bigger than you. Bigger than you’ll ever be.’

“Riley’s old man stood on the edge of the ravine speaking softly, not looking his grown son in the eye. The sun cast forked shadows on the barren earth. Riley stood behind, his arm curled around his wife Dolores’ waist. He could feel the sweat gathered beneath the waistband of her dress, and he thought of the firm curve of her skin as it moved from back to belly to back again.

“You’s part of duty now,’ his father said. ‘You do duty, son, and I’ll be proud.’”

Sleep becomes a kind of spiritual condition, a dimension of existence with its own mystical force. How are sleep, twilight consciousness, delirium, and dreaming pivotal conditions in the novel? How do these states of consciousness affect the characters and their relationships to each other? How does the otherworldliness of the dream state—or the delirium state—contrast with the hardness and harshness of waking reality?

Page 168:

“He looked at his thin bed next to the wall and even from across the room he smelled the sour wool blanket pulled rough and taut across it, and he longed to crawl beneath the sheets parched white by the desert air and feel their worn softness stretch across his naked feet and hold him high and clean and safe from the mud that haunted him in sleep, the yellow, stinking endless mud that rose up inside is dream world and sent him waking out into the desert, dry and hard at night as in the day.”

Page 169:

“Sleep came to Riley with a terrible swiftness. His bones sank into the dips and curves in the old mattress carved deep by solitary slumber so that Thomas Riley sleeping looked as ancient and invisible as Thomas Riley awake.”

Page 170:

“Then Old John Hopper, the body hunter, burdened with too many souls to keep, closed his eyes and let the shamelessness of sleep overtake him as well.”

Riley’s dream begins with the same *Snap* that the prologue ended with, hopefully returning the reader to the trench warfare in France where Riley lay sick and delirious with dysentery and fever among the handful of Army privates in his charge. The Texas soldier, A.J. Ray, murders and castrates a lost black American soldier for the crime of carrying a gun salvaged off a dead German soldier. Black soldiers in the Army in World War One were not allowed to carry guns and were restricted to service positions, like the mess unit. Riley’s nightmare plunges him back into his state of delirium and remembrance after he and his fellow soldiers are hit with a German mortar round (precipitated by A.J.’s gun blast when he shot the black soldier). A.J. is mortally wounded in this mortar blast and he pleads with Riley to shoot him with the German rifle that the black U.S. soldier had been carrying, implicating the Germans for both A.J.’s murder and castration of the black American soldier and for A.J.’s own death. Riley resists until A.J. insults Riley’s wife Dolores; Riley then commits the sin of killing A.J., a fellow American soldier, and in so doing covering up A.J.’s racial hate crime.

How does Riley’s nightmare and waking remembrance of his war time experience inform his present life? What have been the consequences of these experiences? How do you relate to his responses?

As he lay dying on the battlefield (after a second mortar attack precipitated by the gun blast of Riley shooting A.J.), maggots fill Riley’s wound and the Hell fire and brimstone admonitions of Riley’s father return to Tom in his delirium. Black flies swarm around him and he bargains with them, vowing silence in exchange for his safe return to Dory.

Page 183-185:

“He screamed and tore at his pants until his privates hung naked and grimy in the moonlight, and still they were there, the maggots crawling, feasting on Riley and the wickedness that had settled around him.

“Daddy, he screamed, and he heard his father’s voice.

“The saved don’t bring no maggots, it said.

“Oh God, he cried, and the flies above him filled the air.

“Sinner, they buzzed. Son of wickedness and swine.

“Please, said Riley, and he saw Dolores’ cool white hands before him.

“Don’t let me die, Dolores. He reached out his hands for hers but the flies swarmed on him and his hands shone black with tiny wings.

“No, he screamed, and the flies scattered. Don’t let me die, he cried, and the flies spoke to him.

“Look upon the carcasses of men that have sinned against me, they cried and their voice was the voice of his father. Their worms shall not die nor their fire be quenched, it said.

“Deliver me, cried Riley.

“Butcher, savage, evil beast, screamed the flies. We remember we remember we remember.

“No, Riley shouted and covered his eyes but still the mangled body of the black soldier came to him, swinging from a blackened tree, swinging high above, his blood falling over a child’s face, salty and warm.

“Let me live, cried Riley, and I will do what you want.

“Silence, the flies screamed, and they flew at him, black like the inside of his soul, black like the bile that filled his veins, black like the faces of the slain men, black like the severed parts of them.

“I am yours, Riley begged, and the flies filled his mouth.

“Silence, they shouted, and their words pierced his tongue.

“I swear, Riley said. I swear silence.

“But the flies grew angrier.

“Just let me be, he cried. Just send me back to Dory.

“Silence, screamed the flies.

“I swear, Riley cried, and the flies flew higher.

“I swear, he cried again, and the flies fell away.

“I swear, he sobbed, and the flies became the stars and one by one their light faded and all again was darkness filling the eyes of the old man sleeping all alone.”

Herein is the mythic bargain through which Riley atones for his sins and—by extension—the sins of his countrymen’s legacy of racial violence. Riley’s lifelong silence in penance for these sins is the novel’s attempt to portray a penance, an atonement, appropriate to the scale of the moral crimes of racial violence. It is one man’s attempt to atone for his nation.

Penance and atonement are concepts rarely evident in the contemporary Western secular world, though they exist in mythologies and faith traditions around the world.

What do you think about the concept of penance? Of atoning for one's own actions? For complicity in moral crimes of the larger society? Does it speak to you spiritually? Politically? Ethically? Emotionally? Is it something you have experienced or witnessed? Is it something you yearn for in your life or in the life of your community? Does it work? Does it have value? Should we as a society, as communities, strive for a return to atonement as a social construct?

Page 189-190:

“When he opened them he saw Hopper clench his jaw and swallow hard and in that moment it came to him, the thing about Hopper that had haunted him hours before, a thing mixed up with all the other distant reckonings of fear and horror, of nightmares that came and came again, the ones from war and the ones from home and the ones that seemed to come out of the sunken earth itself, out of some soul that Riley shared with all the silenced men of old.”

What do you think of Riley's atonement given the generational tools and resources regarding trauma available to his generation?

Different forces speak to Riley. How do these forces influence Riley's actions? The novel's narrative arc?

Page 191:

“Silent and still the darkness called to Riley, *Come Brother Thomas, it said. Come and sit with us and with your lost Dolores, give us your words and we will hold them here safe and still and whole. Come Brother Thomas, come and speak to us.*”

Dolores and Tom's marriage is from an earlier time, very different from mainstream U.S. culture today. What do you think of their marriage? Of their separation? Of their reunion?

Page 200:

“Dolores never had any more children. After Lorraine died, after Dolores left, she never took another man to her, of course, as she had her husband Thomas Riley. Never broke her marriage vows and knew he hadn't either. It wasn't in him, Dolores knew, nor in her neither, and that was a balm to her, a quiet calming that wrapped itself around her many nights as time went by and she grew old.”

Dolores left Riley before she became completely bitter about his silence. What do you think of this decision? Of her rationale? What would you do?

Tom and Dolores both experienced harsh parenting—Thomas from his racist, fire-and-brimstone father, and Dolores from her enraged mother. What effects do these characters evince of their harsh upbringings? How does that harshness play into the novel and its setting?

Page 201:

“Dolores’ mother’s anger seemed to have no end. Her life was one long howl of “Pick that up, get over here, shut your mouth. You children are worthless, you hear me, worthless stupid little nothings. All you want to do is chitter, chitter, chitter, chat. I won’t stand for it one minute.”

Stylistic Elements:

Literary fiction writer the late Lee K. Abbott (with whom Elizabeth workshopped some chapters) declared that Bruce’s novel uses a 3rd person singular central consciousness POV/point of view, which is a rather unusual technique. It is described online as “the perceptions of the events given voice by the narrator are the preconceptions of the character; filtered through consciousness of one particular character.” In other words, the tone and syntax, vocabulary and speech patterns of the focal character are mirrored in the voice of the narrator or authorial voice. *In Silent Left the Place*, the central consciousness shifts as the POV characters shift from chapter to chapter. 3rd Person Singular Central Consciousness is not a POV often used in contemporary literary fiction; it is much less psychologically close and has more of a storyteller quality to it, especially given the novel’s essentially oral quality; it is written as if spoken aloud by a storyteller.

Did you notice this unusual POV? What did you think of it? Did it confuse you? Amuse you? Annoy you?

The novel has a spare, indirect storytelling style. There are no polysyllabic words in the book, and while there are many long sentences, compound sentences, even run-on sentences, there are not a great many dependent/independent clauses, parenthetical expressions, and other complex sentence structures common in more cerebral novels. The inner voices of the characters are minimal, save for Riley, and there is an absence of the introspective, self-consciousness that often characterizes contemporary literary fiction of the English-speaking West.

The novel’s action and subtext are communicated more through terse, plain-spoken dialogue and of the characters’ gestures, pauses, and physical movements rather than through analytical thoughts of highly verbal characters.

Page 11:

“Barnett pressed the tip of his tongue hard against the inside of his upper lip, as was his habit, and held it there while he buried his thoughts, buried them deep into the skin between his lip and gum stretch out taut as far as it would go. Paper thin, barely skin, more like silk stockings pulled tight across an open palm. Barnett held his mouth that way until the shape of his trailer came into view miles down the road.”

“And then, with a whistle, he let go and let his jaw relax.”

Similarly, most of the exposition is revealed indirectly, through associative thoughts, flashbacks, or the sharing of local lore by one character to others, or directly via the authorial voice.

Page 9 (authorial voice):

“Riley’d waited, hardly breathing, his voice coiled up ragged in his throat, for her to come back. They days passed and the nights came, and still he waited, visited by the dreams, until finally he pursed his lips and packed his bags and summoned John Hopper to bring his truck around and help him move, back to Cisco, back to home.
“Riley’d been there ever since. Alone and still not talking. Not to people anyway.
“Folks had come to understand.”

Throughout the novel there are often references to a collective townspeople or generalized Texans in expressions like “people said” or “folks had come to understand” or “the story went.” There’s a Greek chorus aspect to this commentary by a generalized body politic. Who do you think this chorus is? Does it speak to you? If yes, why? If not, why not? What do you think of this technique?

For example, Chapter 1 (page 3) opens:

“Thomas Riley finally broke his word that time the winds come up. Rose up sudden and fierce, they did, all fury and wildness, then nothing.”
“People still speak about it. Curious, they say. Winds of change.
“A wakeup call, the preachers said. Get ready.”

Similarly, on page 55:

“Jesse Barnett, the story went, must have flown sideways and up and over the desert, his body limp and dead before it hit the ground. The side of his head was gone. Shattered and bloody and scattered over the dirt. ‘Fodder for the buzzards,’ people said. ‘Just a hollow shell now with a dead man’s face.’”

What questions or confusions remain for you? Other thoughts?