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# DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my best friend and wife of nearly half a century, Patricia, from whom I learned to appreciate the things that really matter in life and the power of unconditional love.

This book is also dedicated to my colleague, the late Patrick J. White, the ultimate reader and teacher who, better than anyone, understood power in all its permutations.

**Epistle to Patrick**

Dear Whitey:
We had a meeting today; uncharacteristically,
You didn't show.
We needed you—not just for the quorum.
We heard you made a move,
To a new place.
Good for the new, bad for the old.

And what about those eager faces,
Who, a few days hence,
Will be sitting at their desks,
Waiting for the legend
They've heard about galore
To show and deliver?
Maybe he's stuck on I-95.

Even your old desk up on third
Will be shocked
When, bright and early,
You don't show.
What gives?
Maybe the elevator's broken.

Once before, briefly, you didn't show,
Then you reappeared—transformed,

With new limbs and wheels.
But otherwise the same Whitey.
Welcome back!
In your absence, things were dull.

We heard your new colleagues
Are all so lively,
Your students all bright,
The meetings so exciting,
Your new wheels supersonic,
And the craic all ninety.

We're stuck now in your old place,
And you're frolicking in your new,
Zipping on those supersonic wheels,
"Crossing the bar,"
"Seeking to find and never to yield,"
Probably with Grant in a mighty session.

Thanks for the memories, Whitey;
Thanks for the lessons;
Thanks for the spirit you sewed.
We know this time there's no return,
So here's a standing O,
Cheering for the right reasons, "Bravo! Bravo!"

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Without the continuing support of my family this project would never have been completed.

# PREFACE

**T**he eighteenth-century German poet, philosopher, historian, and playwright Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805) once declared that power is the most persuasive rhetoric, and from several perspectives his observation seems to be true. In many ways, our lives are shaped by various forces and patterns of power that affect us daily and for the long term. Some of these are trivial, others are profound; none is without consequences.

Inspired by James Joyce's *Dubliners* and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, and influenced by the tradition of the Southern grotesque, the twelve stories in this short story cycle explore many forms and patterns of power discernible in the world. Although they employ several narrative styles, the stories are all set in the mythical town of Elsburg, USA; each story is discrete, but many are also related and interconnected to other stories in the collection so that the reader who undertakes the entire cycle—especially in one sitting—should form an impression of the dynamics of this microcosmic community—its mores, its culture, its politics. More than 30 characters who populate this community are portrayed, some in more detail than others, but all of whom contribute, for better or worse, to the multifarious forces of power and vitality that operate in Elsburg.

As with all my literary endeavors, I hope this collection of narratives will help the casual or careful reader to achieve Horace's classical ideal: entertainment and enlightenment.

# PROLOGUE

**B**y power . . . I do not understand a general system of domination exercised by one element or one group over another, whose effects… traverse the entire body social… It seems to me that first what needs to be understood is the multiplicity of relations of force that are immanent to the domain wherein they are exercised, and that are constitutive of its organization; the game that through incessant struggle and confrontation transforms them, reinforces them, inverts them; the supports these relations of force find in each other, so as to form a chain or system, or, on the other hand, the gaps, the contradictions that isolate them from each other; in the end, the strategies in which they take effect, and whose general pattern or institutional crystallization is embodied in the mechanisms of the state, in the formulation of the law, in social hegemonies. The condition of possibility of power… should not be sought in the primary existence of a central point, in a unique space of sovereignty whence would radiate derivative and descendent forms; it is the moving base of relations of force that incessantly induce, by their inequality, states of power, but always local and unstable. Omnipresence of power: not at all because it regroups everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced at every instant, at every point, or moreover in every relation between one point and another. Power is everywhere: not that it engulfs everything, but that it comes from everywhere.

Michel Foucault (1926-1984), French philosopher and historian of ideas, in his *The History of Sexuality.*

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# SPARKLE

**T**he crowd had started gathering by mid-afternoon although the program wasn't scheduled to begin until 7:30pm. The Advance Team had been in Elsburg for about two weeks, visiting the local churches, the Super Wal-Mart, and even Sal's Place, talking to the editor of the *Elsburg Gazette* (published twice weekly, on Tuesdays and Fridays), and putting up posters everywhere anyone wanted one posted. The word was definitely out: Rev. Donnie Sparkle was coming to Elsburg! The same Rev. Sparkle who had worked miracles in Batesville, just 20 miles away. The same Rev. Sparkle whose fame had preceded him everywhere he went. Everyone had heard about Sparkle, and now he was coming to Elsburg, where hardly anyone ever came who didn't have to, say, visit a relative or take advantage of the blockbuster sales at the Super Wal-Mart. People were curious; people were excited; people could hardly wait to see Sparkle in action—in Elsburg—and today was the day.

But a few Elsburgers weren't excited—just curious. They were mostly the preachers at the local churches, some of whom feared Rev. Sparkle might just steal their own Sunday thunder. And, of course, there were a few outright skeptics, but they were pretty much the silent types who rarely got excited about anything, even the Saturday night drag races and monster truck pulls at the Elsburg Speedway, as it was called, but in reality was an abandoned cow pasture surrounded by a few dilapidated wooden stands and several racks of flood lights mounted on precarious, decaying pine poles. But these folks were definitely in the minority. "It's the most excitin' thing in Elsburg since the bank robbery in '62," exclaimed one long- time resident. "I can't hardly wait."

By 7:15pm all the seats in Civic Hall were taken, with many unlucky later arriving folks standing wherever they could in the old converted city storage barn in every available space not already taken by the early arrivals. Elsburgers loved their politics, but even politicians had never drawn this big a crowd. Sparkle