

THE
TILTED
WORLD

ALSO BY TOM FRANKLIN

Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter

Smonk

Hell at the Breech

Poachers: Stories

ALSO BY BETH ANN FENNELLY

Open House: Poems

Unmentionables: Poems

Tender Hooks: Poems

Non-fiction

Great with Child: Letters to a Young Mother

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*For Nolan
and
Nat and Judith*

Authors' Note

DURING THE WINTER OF 1926 AND SPRING OF 1927, RECORD-LEVEL RAINS tested—and bested—the poorly engineered levees along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. There were many small floods, many deaths, and still the rains worsened. By March 1927, a thousand miles of levees, from Cairo, Illinois, to the Gulf of Mexico, were in danger of collapsing, and thousands of refugees were being housed in temporary camps. All along the river, armed guards were trained to fight floods and saboteurs. But no training could prepare them for the big flood when it came, on Good Friday, 1927. The levee at Mounds Landing, near Greenville, Mississippi, collapsed, and a wall of water one hundred feet high and with twice the force of Niagara Falls scooped out the Delta. It flattened almost a million homes, drowning twenty-seven thousand square miles, sometimes in up to thirty feet of water, and the water remained for four months. Over 330,000 people were rescued from trees, roofs, and levees. At a time when the federal budget was around three billion dollars, the flood caused an estimated one billion dollars' worth of property damage.

In addition to permanently changing the landscape of the South, the great flood of 1927 permanently altered race relations and American politics, causing hundreds of thousands of African Americans to migrate north, ushering Herbert Hoover into the White House, and cementing the belief that the federal government—which had done

nothing to help the flood victims—should create an agency to prevent emergencies and assist recoveries. Despite these legacies, and despite being considered by many to be the worst natural disaster our country has endured, the flood of 1927 seems largely forgotten today.

The Tilted World is an effort to reinhabit that era. Although the historical background is as accurate as the authors could manage, the town of Hobnob is a fictional creation, as are its inhabitants.

THE
TILTED
WORLD

Prologue



APRIL 4, 1927

DIXIE CLAY WAS SQUELCHING THROUGH THE MUD ALONG THE CREEK'S swollen banks, shooing mosquitoes with her hat, when she saw a baby coffin bobbing against a sycamore snag. For a second the idea that her son, Jacob, buried two years back, might have come home nearly collapsed her. She dropped her hat and her rifle and plunged into the stream. She was crashing hip-deep through the foamy, coffee-colored water when she got hold of herself. It wasn't Jacob in the coffin. Wasn't, in fact, a coffin. She slowed and trudged closer and saw that the box had rivets on metal bands, that it was a small steamer trunk, a hat trunk.

Sounds could carry for miles, echo weirdly, in these wooded hollows, but the last thing she expected now was men's voices. And that they reached her over the hissing, fumbling stream meant the men were yelling. Her husband, Jesse, wasn't supposed to be home this afternoon. She reversed direction in the swirling creek and fought equally hard to reach the bank and stumbled out, waders filled with water.

It was a quarter mile back to the house and she ran it, glad she'd borrowed an old pair of Jesse's trousers and glad too that she'd brought the Winchester. Dixie Clay was light of foot but the rains had swamped their hundred acres and shin-deep mud pulled and slurped at her boots. As she ducked pine branches and dodged a blackberry thicket, she could

hear Jesse's voice, though not his words, and the voices of perhaps two others. A few years back customers sometimes came right up to the house, but Jesse stopped it, didn't want her talking to men. Anyway, they didn't sound like customers.

When she crested the ridge, she dropped to her stomach, but the back door of the house was clear. They must be out front. She started down the gully, terrified when her foot slipped on wet leaves, releasing a cascade of pebbles and pinecones. She went on more carefully and kept to the dense, shaded woods as she made her way around to the front gallery. The voices were clearer now but she still couldn't see their owners. She was about two hundred yards off and to get closer she'd have to leave cover to dart to the stand of tulip poplars at the far end of the clothesline. She was halfway there, low and fast, when she heard a gunshot.

She flung herself at a poplar and crouched, heaving.

Now the voice, unknown to her, grew louder. "You want I should just kill you now?"

A mumble in reply.

"Then shut your piehole."

Dixie Clay was determined to move closer. Then she heard a staccato clacking. A rattler, she thought. But it was early April and rattlers should still be underground. Unless the rains had choked them out? She took a breath and forced herself to look down. Her trembling fingers were knocking her wedding band against the barrel of the Winchester. *Dix*, she told herself. *Dixie Clay Holliver. Steady now.*

She worked her way among the slick poplars and finally hunkered close enough to look down the slope, past the moat where the scraggly rosebushes had drowned, onto the front gallery. There was Jesse, sitting in the rocker, and beside him two men stood, one early twenties and clean-shaven, nosing his handgun into a shoulder holster. The other, older, bearded, wore a homburg hat and leaned against crates of whiskey stacked on the hand truck.

At first they were strangers, but then she remembered a few days back, how she'd been standing at the counter of Amity's store, testing the weight of different ropes, when she sensed a man at her side. She didn't turn. "I wonder if this will hold shut a busted valise," he said, and snapped a rope between his hands. She pretended the comment wasn't addressed to her and moved down the counter toward the fishing lures, letting Amity swoop in. Still, Dixie Clay felt his eyes. She was a small woman and men liked that, liked too her brown curls and the constellation of freckles across her nose. But she felt no pleasure in it. Long had it been since she'd thought of her legs as good for something other than walking to the still, her arms for something other than stirring mash. That day, exiting the store, she'd seen the man leaning against a car, talking to another—talking about her, she could tell. Maybe if she'd looked them over instead of hurrying away, she would have realized what they were. But she hadn't. The rain had brought plenty of strange men to town, some working as sandbaggers, others as engineers, or journalists, or National Guardsmen patrolling the levees for saboteurs.

And now it had brought these two revenuers. Dixie Clay crouched, her heart galloping, and peered through the scrubby azaleas that footed the poplar copse. Jesse looked small, like a naughty schoolboy. His arms were folded behind his back and through the rocker slats and she guessed he was handcuffed. Handcuffed, but not shot. His lemon-yellow shirt still tucked in.

"But if we come back here," said the younger agent, tapping a Lucky Strike from its pack, "with a newspaper writer?"

The older man shook his head, but the younger continued. "How did those Jackson fellas get their pictures in the paper? You wonder how?" He paused to pinch the cigarette between his lips and light it with a match. "They called the damn paper, that's how." He exhaled and dropped the match to the boards. "They don't hack open kegs of giggle juice out in the country by theirselves with no one standing by.

No sir. They telephone the paper. Then they tie a goddamn necktie. Brilliantine their hair. And only when the tripod's up do they make like Jack Dempsey."

Dixie Clay willed Jesse to look at her, to communicate what she should do, but if he knew she was there, he gave no sign. He stared out, chin raised. From that distance, his eyes looked black, not different colored as they were, the right one blue and the left green.

The older man crossed his arms and propped them on the handles of the hand truck, then propped his foot on the metal bar. He was shod with brogans, not boots, so there wasn't a weapon there, and Dixie Clay could see he wasn't wearing a shoulder holster. Beside the front door rested a shotgun. Perhaps that was his only one. "You want your mug in the paper so bad?"

"Don't you?" said the younger agent. "Give your wife something to crow about at Temperance? Besides, it'd be good for the campaign. And fetch us a raise, I bet." He brought his cigarette to his lips and glanced at his partner. "Think of us out yonder"—he jerked his cigarette in the direction of the still—"whiskey spraying up from a dozen barrels, us with our axes raised. And it's a big still, bigger than the one they found in Sumner, I promise you that, and those collars ain't paid for a restaurant steak in a month."

"No phones out here. We'd have to drive in, call the paper, drive back out, take better part of an hour."

"Then we'd best get going before it gets dark. I'll fetch the car."

For the first time Jesse spoke. "Gentlemen—"

With that the older man whirled and backhanded Jesse so hard that the chair rocked on its rails, balanced for an impossible moment on the curved tip, and then careened forward again.

Dixie Clay hadn't aimed, hadn't meant to fire, but the shot blasted from her gun, and the men on the gallery leaped and she leaped too. They dropped low, the bearded one scrambling behind the crates of whiskey and the other diving behind Jesse. Dixie Clay looked down, shocked, at the Winchester. Now they'd be in even more trouble. And

she certainly wasn't willing to shoot these revenuers to save Jesse. At times, in fact, she'd entertained the dream of shooting him herself. No, not shooting him, just getting him gone. Disappearing him, bloodlessly, and at a distance.

As if reading her mind, Jesse hollered into the eerie ringing birdless silence. "Boys! Don't shoot yet. I know you got 'em behind the crosshairs"—Dixie Clay saw the two men exchange a glance—"but don't kill 'em till we see if we can't work things out." Jesse turned his face to the man using him for cover—"Now, if you ever want to see your picture in the *Delta Democrat*, you'll drop your gun and unlock these cuffs. Unless you favor the obituary section."

Across the porch the older man was gazing at his shotgun by the door, a full eight feet from where he crouched behind the whiskey.

Jesse noticed and pressed on. "Just one of you with a weapon at hand, and I got me four godless shiners aiming at your tenders. So drop your gun and uncuff me."

Instead, behind her husband's rocker, the young man's elbow flashed and a handgun snaked up and pressed itself to Jesse's jaw. The agent yelled, "Give yourselves up and I won't blast him to hell, like I've a mind to. We'll take y'all in nice and peaceful."

Jesse tossed his head back in what looked like merriment. "Hey, now," he told the revenuers, his voice droll, "that threat ain't worth a pinch of coon shit. These fellas don't care if you kill me. It'd just mean one more slice of the whiskey pie for them. And as for you?" Jesse made three quick clucks with his tongue. "They might shoot you just for target practice." He commenced to rocking as if it were a Sunday afternoon filled with nothing more pressing than shelling peas. A fist flew up from behind to steady the rocker and Jesse's chair stilled, but his body seemed at ease and he crossed his feet with their two-toned boots.

"Yup," he continued, flexing his foot, then circling his ankle. "They're bored and ornery. Sharpshooters from the war, that's who I've got working for me. Just itching to trade some lead." Jesse lifted his

chin and called to the woods, “Hey, Clay! Show ’em how you beat the kaiser!” He paused, surveying the gallery. “Hit the pie plate!”

On a cord from the ceiling, she’d strung a tin pie plate and filled it with birdseed. Now she aimed the Winchester. *Clay. Dixie Clay. You can do this. Are you not that girl who won the blue ribbon for down-the-line single-barrel clay pigeon shooting, back when you wore pigtails?* She remembered the years of hunting alongside her father, remembered shooting a panther out of a pin oak. She visualized that shot, and visualized this one. She squeezed the trigger. The pie plate rang and danced on its cord and the birdseed exploded, then bounced on the floor and rolled still. She used the diversion to scuttle behind the sassafras, the last shelter before the downhill slide to the front gallery forty feet away.

“Hah!” Jesse yelled, watching the pie plate jangling. “Now it’s getting fun. Tell you what,” he said, addressing the revenuers and starting to rock again. “Let’s have us an exhibition. Yuh-huh. It’s Four-Fingered Fred’s turn.” For a second Dixie Clay was so caught up in Jesse’s fiction that she expected this phantom beside her.

Jesse continued, “Freddie, you big galoot, see if you can strike that there pack of Lucky Strikes.”

The revenuers looked at it, lying flat where the younger one had dropped it. Dixie Clay aimed at the red circle that centered the green package, calmer, feeling again that electric connection of gaze to target, as if her eye fired the gun, not her finger on the trigger. She shot and the package did not explode in a flurry of confetti. She’d aimed low, though the hole in the floor wasn’t more than an inch off. Not a bad shot, all told.

“Ah, Fred, Fred, Fred, I guess you needed that fifth finger to make that shot. Bit sloppy there, Fred. Your unlucky strike, I guess. Well, Bill, it’s up to you.” Jesse made a show of considering possible targets. “Tell you what, Bill. Tell you what I need. I don’t like the homburg hat.”

Dixie Clay looked to the older man’s hat, sticking a few inches above the stacked cases of whiskey. Jesse continued, “Don’t care for

the crease running down the middle, see. All the gentlemen nowadays know it's the smoother, rounded bowler that's in fashion. Bill, I need you to take that crease out of our chum's hat for him."

Behind the sassafras, Dixie Clay didn't move. Shoot the hat off his head? Surely Jesse didn't—

Jesse was talking again, his voice still humored, and only because they'd been married for six years could she hear the strain in it. "Yup, I need a little haberdashery for this gentleman sporting last season's fashion, cringing yonder behind the hooch we worked so hard to cook. You do that, Bill, and then, Bill, then maybe your brother Joe can trim the man's whiskers." Jesse angled his mouth to stage-whisper to the younger agent still holding the handgun to Jesse's jaw, "We like our revenuers well groomed." Jesse turned back to the woods. "Now, Bill—"

"All right!" the bearded man snarled. "You got us." He jerked his head to his partner. The younger man tossed his revolver, which skidded across the floorboards. Then he shouted toward Dixie Clay, "I'm reaching for keys, you hear?," and he bent his face to where Jesse's hands were cuffed behind the slats of the rocker.

Freed, Jesse sprang up and lunged for the younger man's pistol and then rose and backed to the door to grab the other's shotgun. He aimed them at their owners. For a moment all three stood like stiff actors waiting for the curtain to fall.

"Alrighty then." Jesse smiled, white teeth beneath the wings of his black mustache. "I'm taking these feds to town, see if we can't come to an agreement. Y'all see any shenanigans, you got my permission to shoot. Otherwise, it's business as usual." Jesse put his foot on the grain bin beside the door and tucked the handgun in his bootleg. Then he waved the shotgun at the men and gestured at the gallery steps. They walked down and Jesse stooped beside the rocking chair where the handcuffs were dangling and threaded them through the slats and pocketed them and followed. "Well, well, well," Jesse said to their backs as they splashed across the yard. "Where'd you hide your paddy wagon?"

Dixie Clay didn't hear the answer but saw Jesse nod his glossy dark head as he marched them west, down the drive to Seven Hills. The sun was an orange smear behind the clouds at the crest of the ridge, and Dixie Clay watched until they disappeared and the colors of the sky leached after them. So Jesse would bribe them. Jesse would bribe them, and that would be the end of it. Nothing would change. She leaned her forehead against the puzzle-piece bark of the sassafras and let out her breath in a shaky stream. The damp bark smelled like root beer; she'd forgotten that. A string of sweat ran between her shoulder blades, down her backbone. She leaned there until the peepers set up their evening song around her.

She pressed off the trunk and decided to pick her way down to the stream to fetch her hat and see if the steamer trunk was still there. She half stumbled, half slid her way to the front gallery and sat on the steps to peel off her waders. When she stood, she returned the chair to its correct angle. Then she went inside to fetch the lantern, every key she could find in the house, the Disston handsaw, and the bent-nose pliers. She grabbed a heel of bread and a hard-boiled egg for her supper and, after giving the mule his, she climbed the ridge again and forged her way to the stream and found her hat.

The trunk was still caught in the snag and she hoisted it to the bank, bruising her thighs and drenching herself all over again. It was dark now and she sat the lantern atop the trunk and tried every key in the lock, hoping one would have the magic silhouette, but key after key refused. Nor could she pick the lock with the pliers. She'd almost resorted to the Disston when she spotted one last key in her sack and inserted it and heard the tumblers give. Inside, there was a dry chamois leather sack and she loosened the drawstring and drew out a mandolin, a bowl-backed beauty carved of mahogany.

She left the trunk yawning open on the spongy bank and took the mandolin with her, plucking a few strings as she walked, musing on its worth. In truth she wasn't of a mind to sell it, though neither she nor Jesse could play.

She wished he would come home, tell her he'd settled the matter with the revenuers safely. But it wouldn't occur to him that she was frightened. Well, Jesse had said it was business as usual. And because her business was moonshining, and because at her back the moon was fixing to shine, it was time to go to the still.