

"Swain Wolfe has created nothing less than a new genre:  
the surreal Southwestern archaeological thriller. A rousing read  
that captures the Byzantine competitiveness of archaeologists."  
—ALEX SHOUMATOFF, author of *Legends of the American Desert*

# THE PARROT TRAINER

A NOVEL

# SWAIN WOLFE

Author of *The Woman Who Lives in the Earth* and *Lake Dreams*

THE  
PARROT  
TRAINER



Swain Wolfe

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## Note on Illustrations

The images on each chapter heading were drawn from Mimbres Indian bowls by Harriet Cosgrove in the 1920s during the time she studied Mimbres ruins in Southwestern New Mexico.

The Mimbres parrot trainer bowl image on the title page was reproduced from a photograph by Frank J. Thomas.

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To Frank and Susanne Bessac,  
Burt Pfeiffer, and Uncle Jimmy

THE  
PARROT  
TRAINER

"Come into my house."

She has no idea where she is.

She has the spirit of the well reared. She says,

"Come into my house," as though

Wherever she is

Must be her house.

"Come into my house," she says.

Not knowing if she is demanding,

requesting,

or inviting,

he goes into her house.

# ONE



Jack happened to look up from the bottom of Lacuna Canyon at the moment a red car flew off the east rim. The black stone he was loading into his truck became weightless. A piece of chrome flashed in the thin air as the car defined a perfect arc in the blue sky and fell into the canyon's shadow.

The sickening *wump* of impact caused small creatures to flee and startled birds—red-and-yellow flecked—to fill the sky. Jack held his breath and listened. A handful of feathers billowed up, glowing white in the sun, and fell back into the shadow.

There was no sound, not even the buzz of insects. The birds, tense and fix-winged, glided above the black-thorned mesquite. The silence reminded him of the white room where his father had stopped breathing. Jack wondered if the driver was alive.

It had taken five and a half seconds for the car to fall the five hundred feet from canyon rim to floor. The car, a Ford Taurus, had landed on its wheels at sixty miles an hour. The tires blew. The trunk and doors popped open. Jack was running toward the car before he realized how far away it had landed. He was well out of breath by the time he peered through the shattered windshield at a somewhat startled, intelligent-looking fellow in his sixties. To Jack's surprise, the man's wire-rimmed glasses were in place. His eyes were open, yet he seemed disconnected. Jack searched for a pulse in his neck. There

was none. The dead man stared out at the desert—the shock still attached to his face.

Jack's extreme need for oxygen stifled his inherent sympathy. He gasped for air, dizzy and hardly able to exhale. That the man was dead and not dying was a relief—death itself seemed so gentle compared to the terrible process of getting there. Perhaps the man's heart had seized up. Jack imagined the driver dead, falling through thin air.

As the world began to solidify and time regained direction, his eyes came to rest on a blank piece of paper near his foot. He reached down and turned it over, revealing a drawing in the style of an ancient Southwest tribe. The image was of a young woman in profile. She wore a white mask with a small triangular beak, two vertical marks on the cheek, and slits to see through. Black ovals were painted around the slits. She held a hoop in which an excited parrot balanced, wings extended, its beak open. The woman's stance was poised and thoughtful. Her bare breasts were small. Her only clothing was a wide belt, worn low on her hips, that held a sash between her legs. Long woven strings fell from the back of the belt to her calves. Jack studied the set of her shoulders and back and the position of her legs. Her entire body was making a gesture. Something in her stance seemed familiar.

He sat down, his heart still pounding in his ears, and stared at the drawing. There was an indecipherable note in a hurried scrawl along one edge.

He was captivated by the gesture that revealed the woman. The gesture was striking, its meaning just beyond the grasp of words. How had the dead man in the red car come by such an image?

Jack got up and looked inside the car. The man wore khakis and a pink and white seersucker shirt. He had short white hair. Jack raised the man's glasses and with thumb and forefinger closed the lids over the staring eyes.

The practicalities of death demanded specific, methodical attention. He wanted to know who the man was and where he was from. Jack walked around the car to the passenger's side, retrieved a day pack from the floor, and opened it on the hood. In an outside pocket, he found a passport and an ID card from the University of Leipzig.



The man was Hans Becker, a professor of anthropology, born April 7, 1939, Dresden, Germany. Jack wondered if Becker had been in Dresden during the firebombing. Little Hans would have been five.

Jack studied Becker's stoic passport photo, concentrating on the mouth and eyes. Here was a man who had survived a terrible war, who had forty years of socialist cynicism replaced by a Happy Meal, and who died on impact. Jack wondered if the Germans had developed a sense of irony.

There were three kits in the pack. One with medicinals—antiseptics, gauze, a vasopressor for allergic reactions, and the requisite elixirs for pain and sleepless nights. One held small tools—a nice Swedish set. And one included a compass, candles, flashlight, and a suction device for drawing venom from bites. In another pocket he found a brilliant blue and scarlet parrot feather and a silver frame wrapped in chamois with the photograph of a serious, sexy woman probably in her fifties. There was no camera. He repacked everything, mindful that he was tampering with evidence. Evidence of what, he was not sure.

He had picked up the pack and started toward his truck when he noticed several more pieces of paper scattered in the brush around the car. The feathers he had seen fly up after impact were pages from a notebook that had been blasted through the window and carried up by the draft.

He began gathering pages. A few feet away, one had caught on a agave plant. Others were scattered through the mesquite and rock habitat of snakes and Gila monsters. He retrieved what he could and sat on the hood of the broken car to examine his find.

The notes were carefully printed in German with a ballpoint pen. In addition to the trainer of parrots, there were two other drawings and a photocopy of a map. Since his German was rudimentary, he skipped to the newfound drawings—sketches of a zigzagging snake with a lightning bolt along its side and a creature with the head of a coyote, a fish's tail, and the legs of a man. The images appeared to have been copied from the pottery of the Mimbres Indians, a prehistoric tribe who had lived in the area until A.D. 1130. Jack knew the era well. At one time, decorated Mimbres bowls had been the focus of his

dealings in Southwestern artifacts. The painted images had been his obsession. Evidently, they still had the power to draw him in.

The Mimbres had painted abstract, playful figures of animals and spirit creatures. Becker's drawings of the coyote-fish-man and the snake could have been exact copies of Mimbres images, but their renderings of humans were usually stylized, often stiff, or abstract. The parrot trainer was different. She had a smooth, rounded shoulder, a graceful back, and exquisite thighs. Even though she was depicted with a mask, the drawing seemed more like a portrait of a particular person. Jack had seen hundreds of bowls from this period and had owned and sold enough of them to make him wealthy. None was quite like Becker's parrot trainer.

If the bowls had been in the car, they would have shattered, but there were no bowls and no shards. It was unlikely Becker would have sketched something he had found and intended to take—perhaps the bowls were not for taking. If he had discovered them in a ruin, why would he leave them behind? Maybe Hans had an ethical dilemma.

The photocopied map suggested Becker had in fact found a ruin. The map depicted trails and geographical details, including a narrow canyon with a creek bed and south-facing cliffs. A small cross marked a point near the canyon's rim. The map must have come with a story so convincing that Becker believed it. The original had been drawn before logging roads were built. That was at least forty years ago and in some places, more than a hundred. The map showed a road added in ballpoint, no doubt by Becker.

Jack tried to match the map with his memory of the immediate area. Nothing came to mind. Perhaps the detail was too small. A series of numbers was written across the bottom with the notation: *Drehen Sie Westen am gelben Metallhaus*. West, maybe yellow, and metal house. *Drehen* probably meant "turn."

He stood up and looked through the splintered windshield at the man who had written the notes and drawn the images Jack held in his hand. The notes, the map, and the parrot trainer now owned Jack as he assumed they had owned Hans Becker. He felt he had inherited another man's obsession.

Jack murmured, "Goodbye, Becker," then he turned and walked the half mile back to his truck.

He spread a Forest Service map across the hood and began scanning for a set of lines that corresponded to Becker's map. None of the numbered Forest Service roads matched the German's numbers. After several minutes, he gave up, hopeful the notes would tie the map to the territory. He had taken only two semesters of German and that was years ago. Now he would have to look up nearly every word. Somewhere, buried in boxes stacked in a storage room of his rambling house, was his German-English dictionary.



He drove the twenty miles north and west to Silverado, a high and hilly mountain town of eighteen thousand, not far from the Arizona border. It was cold in the winter, which saved it from being overrun by the elderly fleeing the ice-encrusted states of Montana, Minnesota, and North Dakota or by boomers fleeing the human compressions of California and New York. In the summer, it was too hot and dry for tourists. Since the underground mines had closed in the sixties, there were no decent-paying jobs.

It was a typical Western mining town, divided by several gullies that collected massive amounts of water during the late summer rains. Cars had been washed through storefront windows, and once a goat drowned in the hotel lobby. Silverado's main claim to fame was the rumor that William Bonney—an Irish man-child known as Billy the Kid—had committed his first murder in a local bar, defending his mother's honor. They say he stabbed the offender three times with a pocketknife and fled into the desert where he wandered for three days and nights. After that, the diminutive Bonney became an outlaw, infamous for killing and terrorizing the good people of the Southwest. He had not lived to write his life story or tell it to *The Denver Post*. This oversight allowed better folks to besmirch his good name, leaving Silverado's only celebrity a nasty little villain.

A thousand years ago, the area had been home to the Mimbres Indians. Their ruins, scattered every three or four miles along the

creeks and rivers of the surrounding watersheds, had been worn by rain and wind for nine hundred years, then eroded down to dirt by a century of archaeologists, museum directors, and pot hunters. The town maintained a museum chock-full of lonely Mimbres pots, metates, and mysterious stone objects. The museum's florescence, as they like to say in the archaeology business, had come and gone twenty years before. The museum creaked, but its patina gleamed.

Jack drove into the old part of town from the east side in the afternoon heat. The asphalt was starting to quiver, and the air-conditioning units in the windows of the old stone structures were not performing as advertised. The neighborhood near the business district consisted of small houses made of stone, wood, and a few of brick—with high fences and a sparseness of grass.

He turned up the third gully, known as Arroyo Seco, proceeded past the Silverado Bar, The New Mexico Apartments, and Silly's Bar and Grill, to Carmen's Office Supply and Copy Shop, where he parked and went in. He copied only Becker's notes, keeping the map and drawings for himself. The shy, freckled girl at the register glanced at the copies but could not bring herself to ask about the foreign writing. She made change and managed a quick smile.

Jack drove up the street to the Silverado County Court House. The sheriff sat in front in his car listening to a deputy spit half-formed sentences from the radio. Sheriff Evans, an obese, wheezing Indian with jumbo jowls and the standard ponytail, stayed in his car for several hours at a stretch. Getting in and out was work and time-consuming. The front seat had been mounted on extra-long rails, allowing him the necessary room. Heavy-duty springs and antisway bars had been installed. What he needed, and claimed to have on order, was an antigravity kit. Evans found the car comforting, like body armor. Car bound, he had decided, was better than desk bound. It got him out of the office and around people, so he could do his job. Evans liked to eat, and if that was a problem for some people, he told them they could always vote for Hurley, the fat *white* bastard.

Jack pulled up next to the sheriff and listened to the patrol car's radio—Edwin, the deputy, was following up on a report that some

fool had driven off the Lacuna rimrocks southeast of town. Edwin was having little luck finding the fool's exit from the flatland into the canyon. Jack got out of his truck, walked over to Evans, and handed him Becker's pack. "Hello, George."

"Hiya, Jack." George struggled with the pack, dragging it across his great stomach and onto the passenger seat. "What've we got here?"

"Your fellow came off the rim about two miles south of the Ocate mine. The pack was in his car. Tell Edwin to check near where the Binford Road dead-ends on Foucault Lane."

"Did you see the car go off the road?"

"No. I saw it flyin' through the air after he'd gone off the road."

"Is he dead?"

Jack squinted up at the sun. "He is."

"Anyone you know?"

"Never saw him before." Jack looked down at George. "He's a foreigner. German."

"You didn't tamper with his stuff, did you?"

"Not so as you'd know, George." Jack smiled and handed him a pile of loose notes. "These blew out of his car."

Evans thumbed the pile of notes. "Looks German, all right. What do you suppose these are about?"

"Maybe he was interested in Americana."

"A history buff?"

"They like Indians." Jack smiled and walked back to his pickup. "Tell me what you find out about the German," he called back at George.

"You interested in him?"

"He fell out of the sky, dead at my feet. Of course I'm interested."

George grinned. "Just another dead white man."

"You're a dangerous Indian."

"You're a rich white guy. You got nothin' to worry about."

"You think all white guys are rich."

"The ones who live out here are. Mexicans and Indians are the only folks who're smart enough to survive on nothin'. Poor white guys just curl up and die—maybe drive their car off a cliff. But like I

said, you don't have anything to worry about." The sheriff's repressed giggle sounded like the soft neighing of a draft horse.

"Put your name on that. It'd be reassuring if they come for me."

"Call if they come." A stream of tobacco spit bounced on the clay. "I'll send a posse."

Jack backed into the street, shifted into low gear, turned right and right again, and cruised slowly down San Ignacio Street, the second gully, toward the highway. Through a plate glass window he watched a woman with long black hair folding clothes in the Laundra Queen. Two tourists, lost souls anchored in the heat, stared at his truck, hypnotized by its surreal lack of progress. Jack gave them a slow wave. The man began to raise his hand, then stopped, unsure of what it meant to wave to a stranger in such alien country. Jack watched them disappear in the rearview mirror.

Idling along in low gear, he felt as though he were drifting through a child's game of Slowville, a hypothetical town where everything became glacial, ponderous, and deliberate. He had to slow the world down. People were, after all, falling out of the sky, dead at his feet. He took the side roads home.



During a 150-year period archaeologists called the Classic III, the Mimbres had made their most distinctive geometric designs and images of animals, spirits, and people. Shallow bowls, most six to twelve inches in diameter, were the painters' canvases. Some drawings had an Escher-like quality. One famous bowl had spirals made of cubes folding in on themselves or spilling out, distorting the spherical belly of a smiling, round-faced critter with clawed hands. On another pot, a maniacal bat, its wings painted with black and white squares, glared out at the observer. A bowl, perhaps by the same painter, depicted a pear-shaped creature with a long, thick tail that came to a sharp point above its head. No one knew the meaning of these images. They were as much a mystery as the Mimbres themselves, whose cultural memory disappeared with their language. No other tribe even had a story about them.

Jack laid Becker's drawings on his desk. The images in Becker's notebook appeared to have been copied from bowls made at the height of Mimbres culture, also the moment before its collapse.

More likely than not, had the images been copied from a museum collection, Jack would have known the bowls. The images could have come from a private collection. And there was the intriguing possibility that the bowls were newly dug. It was this possibility that had compelled him to keep Becker's drawings and the map from the sheriff. Jack did not want Evans and his deputies getting excited about the prospect of a new find. He did not know what he would do with the site himself, if he could find it, but he wanted time to look things over without the interference of competing state and federal agencies, archaeologists, and the droning do-gooders who would descend on any scrap of the past.

He knew the original set of notes in the sheriff's hands would never be translated. Without evidence of foul play in Becker's death, the notes would be sent back to Germany along with the "deceased and effects."

The idea of finding an undisturbed Classic Mimbres site was extremely unlikely. In the 1970s, when the best bowls started to sell for several thousand dollars, a frenzied race developed between archaeologists and pot hunters—or, as they were defined by the archaeologists, antiquities looters.

Eventually, prices for the most exquisite bowls passed the \$100,000 mark. It became illegal to disturb grave sites, and the government began prosecuting looters. Known sites had been churned over two or three times. Archaeologists themselves had gone back and excavated sites that had been studied years before, reexamining shards and bits of charred wood.

Since the passage of ARPA (The Archaeological Resources Protection Act) and NAGPRA (The Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act), antiquities collections became a political strain for many archaeologists and museum directors. The new laws gave the tribes the legal muscle to reclaim their ancestors' bones and possessions from the museums.

Then there were the Indians who liked the high moral ground of

being here first. They did not want ancient bones examined, because an early skull with distinctly non-Indian, European features might be taken as proof by some, including Aryan racists, that Indians came late and wiped out the white, "peace loving," first Americans.



In 1982, Jack had traded a single Mimbres bowl for his house and one hundred acres. The dwelling extended out in three directions from the original adobe hovel that sat just above the two-hundred-year flood plain of the Joaquin-Jimenez River.

The structural forays that defined the house were the accumulated necessities and ecstasies of seventeen different owners over 150 years. Heavy rains had forced the Joaquin-Jimenez over its banks a few years before. Although the highwater was far short of his house, it inspired Jack's dream that his treasures, washed from their rooms, went swirling through the halls—roots in the shape of cats, devils, goddesses, sex organs, and snakes; Navajo and soap tree yuccas; black alder; giant opium poppy pods; skulls of deer, bear, wildcats, horses, and javelina; faded door panels painted with the ascensions in orange and green, and a yellow bicycle; dried roses, tulips, narcissus, juniper, hop sage, and Russian olive; cones from ponderosa and piñon; a faceless wooden santo, tin *retablos*, and wood panels depicting an epidemic of devils, swarms of saints, an assembly of Christs, a multitude of Madonnas—all awash, surged through the rambling house, out the many doors, pulled through and away, into the storm.



Jack pinned Becker's drawing of the parrot trainer next to a bookcase in his study and stared at it for several minutes. The Mimbres had shown great skill as draftsmen. Their animals could be nuanced and subtle, yet humans were usually drawn in stiff, nearly ritualistic formality—never as realistic individuals. For whatever reason, the Mimbres had not done portraits. Perhaps it was believed dangerous



and not allowed. To Jack's thinking, the artist who had painted the parrot trainer had broken a taboo.

When they stopped painting animals and people, the Mimbres themselves seem to have vanished. Every Southwest archaeologist had a theory about where they had gone—north to join with tribes that became the Zuni, south to Paquimé, west to the Hohokam, east to the Rio Grande, or into the mountains above the valleys where they had lived in pit houses generations before. Wherever they had gone, the Mimbres were never the Mimbres again. As a culture they had lost definition.

The accepted theory was that the Mimbres had rapidly increased their population during years of plentiful rain until their numbers began to consume the upper limit of what could be grown and hunted in good times. Then came a series of droughts that brought them down.

The Mimbres had been different from most Southwest tribes, having refrained from slaughtering one another over their diminished resources. Two hundred miles north, the Chacoan-Anasazi, driven by their leaders' savagery, had reduced themselves to paranoid bands living in fortified pueblos and cliff fortresses. Wars of attrition raged for centuries, leaving the Zuni, Acoma, Laguna, and Hopi the victors.

Jack's interest in the Mimbres waned even before he stopped dealing in artifacts fifteen years ago. In the Southwest, anything Mimbres became a merchandizing ploy, a gimmick for the Downtown Associations. Mimbres designs were stamped on plates, bracelets, T-shirts, and paper place mats. Aggressive marketing sponged up the Mimbres mystery.

He quit the antiquities business, because the value of things had come to occupy his mind for too long. Being a dealer had reduced his life to "what can I get for it?" The assessment of everything became a nauseating habit, then an addiction. In the midst of a delight or an ecstatic discovery, the worm of worth would creep into his brain, rendering his joy into appraisal, dead with value. So he quit, with the help of a three-step program. First, sell everything. Sec-