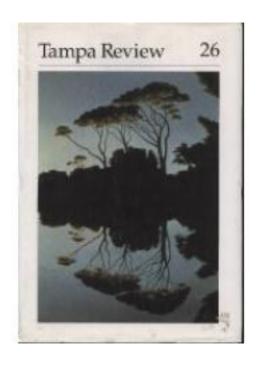
Tampa Review 26



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hristmas Eve. The nativities I visited contrast of darkness punctured by lighti¼Œ and in

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yards the edge of the levee where larger logsi¼Œ used for
br >from their base, and not as walkways for folks the base, are pulled up the slope by four-
on holiday. Two days of wispy rain and tem- wheeler and tractori¼Œ while those for the frame
br >peratures in the forties (enough in the South to are hand-carried by two or more women and
call a white Christmas) made the ascent pre- men. The top pieces that will be placed lateri¼Œ by
carious--thati¼Œ and a few cups of hurricane ladderi¼Œ are brought in by children who treat
punchi¼Œ them like stars. The logs are then placedi¼Œ end
 Bargesi¼Œ hidden by darknessi¼Œ ran the Missisover endi¼Œ to create box upon box of diminish-
>síppi and sounded their fog horns at seven to ing size, spiraling upwards until pyramids
signal the bonfire buildersi¼Œ who distinguished twenty-five feet tall begin to take shapei¼Œ each
themselves by emerging with lighters and one composed of hundreds of parts--not an

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anthemselves by emerging with lighters and one composed of hundreds of parts--not an

br >matches to strike the first tiny flares into the afternoon s worki'4© but two months of week-
night and ignife torches they would use to set endsi¼Œ and the builders claim that their struc-
the levee ablaze. The diesel-soaked logs flashed, tures are sturdy as houses, and that on Christ-
and for a second, seemed to lift off the ground mas morning one can look out the window and < br > as if they were fiery chariots heaven-bound i 1/4 E still see them smoldering all along the high-br-but it s nothing that sacred: it s a celebration for ridge.

-children who know nothing of deathil/4Œ who be- A century-old tradition passed down through < br > lieve they re lighting the way through the fog generations naturally inspires attempts to make
and mist for Saint Nicklus. This is Lutcheri¼Œ one s bonfire uniquei¼Œ and while most take the
Louisiana. Christmas Eve in the South. typical shape"¼Œ there are variations--Cajun cab-
 We wandered to the canal that separates levee ins and deer standsi¼Œ staircasesi¼Œ log housesi¼Œ oil
from water to escape the great heat and stray rig towers manned by plastic Santa Clauses.
>bottle rocketsii¼Œ the crackling of cane that adorns Some are covered in cane that pops when ig-
br>many structures, and this is what we saw: the nited"4Œ others strung with firecrackers whose obvious line of bonfires that began with the gunpowder explosions send a succession of
closest--flames stretched to the black sky thirty echoes across the water and back. Banners hang
feet or more--and moved to seemingly smaller from a few with football team logos, proclama-
>structures until the burning logs diminished tions for Jesusi¼Œ or someone not as well knowni¼Œ
into campfire sizesi¼Œ and then luminariesi¼Œ and but when the fires are lit, they re caught in the
br >then candlelighti¼Œ until the capacity to see even updrafti¼Œ flapping and curledi¼Œ sending bits of < br > night fires failed. Yet we lingered longer and burning cloth into the air like fiery moths. And
br >endured the coldi¼Œ resisted the temptation to no matter the cold shape of individual struc-
return to the heati¼ tuntil our eyes adjusted to the turesi¼Œ all these yuletide offerings are reduced to

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