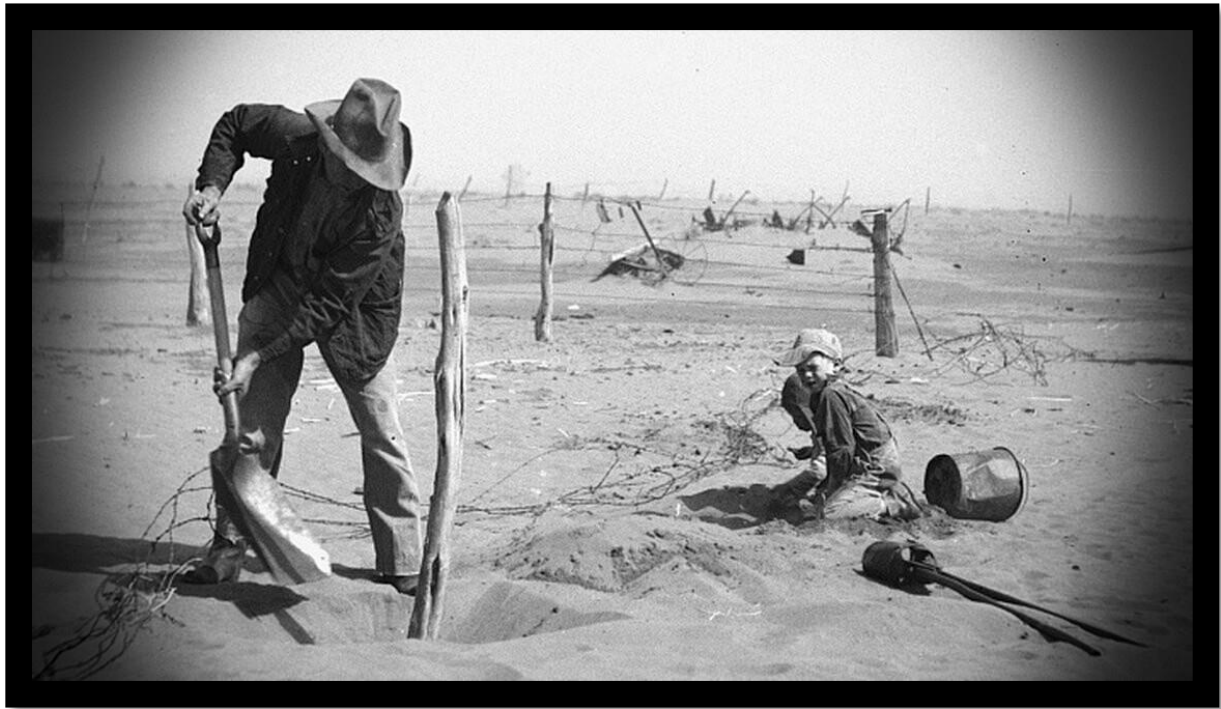


# Cowboy Jamboree Magazine



## “the Family Strain”

*featuring*

*\*new gritty rural & western fiction and creative nonfiction*

*\*new indie press feature: Red Dirt Press*

*\*an interview with Oklahoma Writing Hall of Famer and  
Poet Laureate Candidate William Bernhardt*

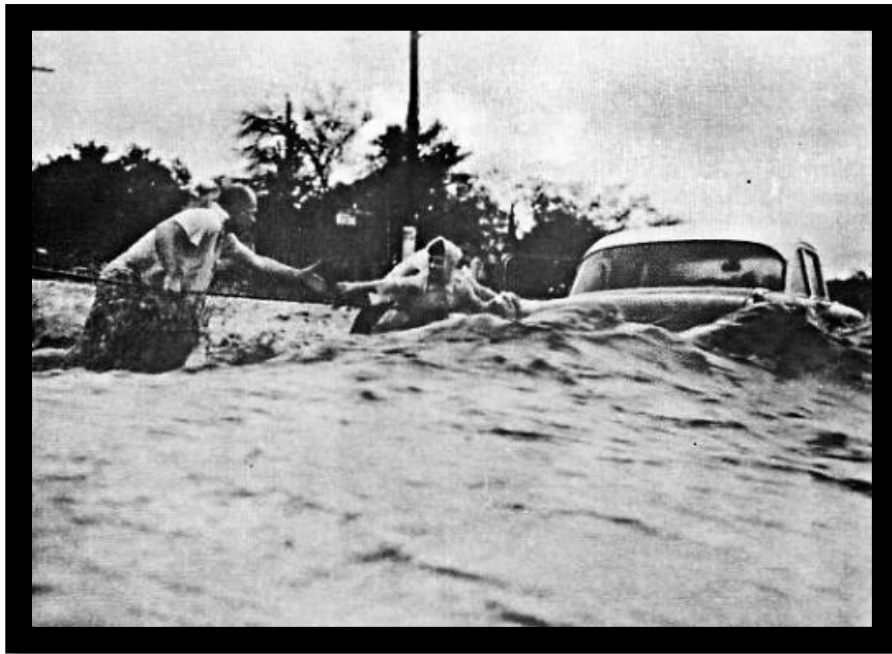
Cover: *WPA Photograph, Dust bowl farmer raising fence to keep it from being buried under drifting sand. Cimarron County, Oklahoma*

“Unless he had whiskey running through his veins, Willard came to the clearing every morning and evening to talk to God. Arvin didn't know which was worse, the drinking or the praying. As far back as he could remember, it seemed that his father had fought the Devil all the time.”

– Donald Ray Pollock, *The Devil All the Time*

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*Lake Texoma flood of 1957*

# Dirt

By Matt Paul

I was tossing rocks from the roadside, aiming for bullet holes in a rusted Mobil sign. As I scooped up more ammo, a colony of desert ants heaved a live millipede into a nest entrance at my feet. I toed dirt into the hole. “A cave-in has these little buggers scampering for their lives,” I narrated in a British accent like on the *National Geographic* documentary I watched with my brother Billy years ago. A group of lab coats had poured cement into an entrance, and after it had set they dug out an entire ant city linked by highways and food storage rooms. They had no idea how a bunch of insects set up home so well, just to leave it all behind. I told Billy I reckoned the queen kept killing the drones, making jackets out of the bodies until the rest got the hint and scuttled her off somewhere cold. Billy was slouched against the wall in a cloud of weed, said, “I reckon you should shut your face hole.” So I did.

Quentin pulled over in his beaten pickup. As a kindness, I stomped the millipede.

“You’re late,” he said, reaching across the passenger seat to open the door.

“Been waiting right here near thirty minutes.”

“Had to circle a few times – thought I had a tail.”

Billy and me always kept moving around the red south-west on account of our thievin’. We’d passed through this backwater mesa a few times, leaving stretches in between so our faces got forgotten. There was always a score to settle, and a good dozen weren’t-hugged-as-a-kid-near-enough types out for our blood. They lived by a code where best foot forward meant you didn’t walk into a room without your weapon drawn.

I held my arms out wide and shouted *hey* to show him I knew he was full of it. There was nothing out here to make a circle around. If he’d been by, I’d have seen it.

“You gettin’ in, boy?” he said to my echo, still drifting across the plain.

I sat on a bubble of yellow foam that had pushed through the upholstery and he sped off, wheels spinning on the loose gravel. From the way he sucked on his bottom lip I guessed he was high on something other than just nerves and the fumes leaking from his duct-taped gas tank.

“Get this thing going, would ya?” he said, nodding at the radio while he unscrewed the lid from a rusted silver hip flask. I hit the button and twisted the dial, hit it again and the screen flickered. “You need the magic touch,” he said, nodding at me to try again. I gave it a hard thump and it blasted the song that goes *just call me angel of the morning*, and I could smell Mama’s cinnamon waffles with maple syrup flooding the pockets. She’d sing along with the radio and fill our hearts and bellies enough that even though we had nothing, we’d never want for more. I remembered daddy, years before the sheriff hauled him away, hugging Mama from behind, swaying their hips to the rhythm. Billy’s sure that last part never happened, but it’s my memory and he won’t take it from me.

“God damn hippy bullshit,” Quentin said, flicking his lank shoulder-length hair back and leaning out the window to jig the aerial bent into a D. He dropped back inside and fiddled with the tuner dial, catching stations from neighboring towns before settling on country and western. He finger-tapped the beats on the wheelin between long gulps from the flask. The pickup reeked of sweat-soaked leather and sun-baked coyote meat fused to the roof-rack. But the engine was a keeper. As long as it weren’t rusted through, we were good to go.

“You and Billy are tight, huh?” he asked a few songs in. The DJ kept saying “it don’t get no better than that, cowboys and girls,” during the cross fades. Dosy-doe stacked on more freakin’ dosy-doe. I’d razored my balls this morning to keep ‘em cool and the skin-on-skin vacuum seal itched and bristled something fierce. Screw desert living, carry me off somewhere cold.

“Known him since we were born.”

“Brothers? He never said, not even before you took off.”

“That a problem?”

“I’m not much for surprises, is all.”

He was side-eying me and wringing the wheel hard, tweaked on something for sure. That was good. It would make things easier.

“He said you could put me to work?” I asked.

“I got something for you.”

I held my head out the window like a dog to feel the grit sandblast my face, to taste America. I wanted to holler out and feel all the things Neil Young and Springsteen had promised from the great wide open.

“You’re not much for talk,” Quentin said after a couple miles. “You one of those choir boys been bent over by a preacher? I’m lookin’ to spill blood, not tears.”

I’d taken hard beatings and handed out plenty more, but 'cause I could only grow a peach fuzz beard I still looked baby fresh compared to other battle-hardened faces. A buckshot ricochet from a shakedown gone south had left Quentin’s cheeks with a symmetrical entry/exit scar, and he carried a swagger that belonged to an outlaw he wished he’d grown to be. I wore my scars on the inside, preferred to let Billy talk me up rather than trade off scuffles with wicked men whose names didn’t warrant another mention.

“I’ve done work.”

“I don’t much trust a face that ain’t clocked a couple thousand miles.”

I showed him my calloused knuckles. “I’ve been around.”

“There’s gonna be killin’ so I need to know you’re good to roll, not pissing your pants and praying to baby Jesus.”

I pulled the handbrake and held my grip. The brake pads started to smoke up like we were doing doughnuts in the high school parking lot. “What’d Billy tell you?” I said.

He screamed *heythefuck* over the metal-on-metal grind that cut right through to your gums. In a panic, he pumped the accelerator instead of the brake.

“What did Billy tell you?” I shouted.

“He said you’d do the job for less green than a fence-hopping Mexican,” he said, spitting strands of hair out his mouth.

“And you wouldn’t have picked me up unless he’d convinced you I’d done work.”

He got his shit together and slowed us right down. “I would’ve just left you out here for the crows and coyotes.”

“Right, so quit the bullshit.”

I let the handbrake off, worried that I’d screwed the braking up good. The car sputtered a little but quickly found its road legs. Quentin pulled a switchblade from his pocket, leaned over and flicked it open against my throat.

“You pull that shit again and we’ll have us more than harsh words,” he said from under Reuben sandwich and cheap whiskey breath. A speck of mustard moved around in his grey-mottled beard as he spoke.

“Just drive,” I said.

I didn’t pay Quentin much mind, truth be told. One night a couple years back -when me and Billy last passed through - he’d helped out a local girl who was getting thrown around by a SoCal biker trying to make some noise far from home. I watched from the bar as he shattered the guy’s forearm with a pool cue, then sent the girl on her way with a fresh whiskey and a fistful of bills. Billy never bought the story when I told it. Not then, not ever. I was just a kid back then, drinking heavy, always getting in my own way. Maybe I had remembered it wrong.

He veered into a cactus patch, hoping to throw a scare into me. I hoped Billy was right and this would be over quick. The plan was dumb, the details sketchy - there were easier ways to make bank. But we were done once this was over, Billy had promised, and I’d learned not to argue with him anyhow. Winning a fight always came down to who yelled loudest for longer, or who could get the other into a full nelson first. No one escapes a full nelson. Billy taught me that. And I never once did.

“What’s going down at Peg’s?” I asked, happy to play my role of curious rookie instead of thinking about the gnawing ache in my stomach. Earlier that day I’d been chased down an alley by a freebasing security guard after trying to hustle a crate of Kmart beans out the back door. Peggy’s Diner was damn near the only living thing out in the dustbowl aside from rattlers that Billy said once stuck a sleeping drifter on the eyeball. It got infected

and eventually burst like a frank on the grill. I'd heard the story before – the details changed as it moved from dive bar to nickel store –but Billy liked telling it.

Quentin answered by lighting a joint and blowing smoke ring sat my face that made him cough so hard that the wheel started rattling loose from the steering column. As tests go it was pretty weak. I lapped up the smoke like a dog taking water from a burst hydrant.

“Damn, kid,” Quentin smirked, drinking from the hip flask again, checking the rear-view over and over. “It occurs to me I never caught your name.”

“Billy,” I lied, swallowing hard so I didn't cough the smoke back up.

“You n' your brother are both called Billy?”

“Crazy ain't it?”

“What's going down Billy Two is we're meeting some friends of mine at the canyon.” “You like beer?” Quentin asked, his calm leveling out.

“Got any?” I said, pissed that he'd ranked me number two behind Billy. I fingered my own switchblade but shook it off. It'd be half the risk and take half the time to do it here, but that wasn't the plan. It wasn't public enough to send a lasting message.

“Reckon you should call brother Billy after we do this. We'll go sink a couple dozen at the bar, bury that hatchet so deep the earth can't spit it back up.”

I turned to my window. “Reckon he'd like that.”

The Canyon was just a pit a few miles into the desert where the old tire factory had burned down. The county got a crew in to dig out the skeleton cos of local kids and drifters lifting the copper piping. Quentin had worked the dump-truck. Billy was a day-laborer making decent cash until Quentin ratted him out for always taking off early to go lay with his girl. Far less could put a gun to your temple out here, but this girl had scraped a little grime away from Billy's soul, and he never said shit to Quentin. Desert mongrels like Billy never let go once they sink their teeth in, though. I could tell this simmered in him.



“These guys don’t dick around,” Quentin said, reaching into his ankle holster and dumping a revolver in my lap. It was going exactly how Billy said it would, right down to Quentin’s war relic of a backup gun.

“Just like one of them video games,” he said, jerking his head left and right, “zig-zag fire, zig-zag fire.”

He passed me the joint, saying it’ll help quit the shakes. I hadn’t smoked a lick since Billy once got me high on something brown and wet that tasted like compost. He insisted I inhale deep. Dirt is all fate had drawn up for us, he had said, so we may as well get a head start.

I took a long, slow draw. Quentin watching, nodding, grinning with tobacco-stained teeth. We were comrades now, brothers-in-arms and smoke.

We turned onto a gravel track leading to the pit. Shielding my eyes from the high sun, I saw the shimmering figures of armed lookouts standing on a dune up ahead. Quentin cut the car engine and let it roll in neutral.

“Game time, son,” he shouted, palm-smacking the side of his head. “We want the black pouch in one of their pockets.”

He breathed quick-hard, the way they teach women to when popping out a kid.

“Rush and tackle, son. Rush and tackle,” he screamed, throwing the door open. He stepped out and used the door for roving cover as he fired at the sharpshooters. It was such a dumb play that he almost deserved what was to come next.

I shuffled over to the driver’s side and pulled the handbrake. Billy popped out from under the blue tarp strewn across construction tools in the back.

“Now we got a gun and a ride, boy,” he shouted through the sliding back window. “Punch it.”

Quentin whirled around, catching on quick. He aimed his gun at me.

“Go, god dammit,” Billy shouted as a bullet took out the side mirror.

I hit reverse as Billy tossed our duffle bags in the passenger footwell and snaked inside. He snatched the gun away and checked the barrel. Satisfied, he thumped my shoulder and rapped his knuckles against the window. Rifle bullets kicked up a rust-red storm around us.

Billy howl-laughed out the window like he'd just flipped off God and sucker-punched the devil, bloody knuckles n' all.

Quentin's eyes met mine. I turned away, pretending to be watching the road out. I'd seen plenty folk get turned inside out by bullets, watched the life spill out of them onto the dirt. But this one wasn't all the way earned - he was paying a million-dollar price for a nickel crime. Quentin had done wrong by Billy, and Billy was right that something had to be done there was no coming back from. You can't change the rules of the game out here 'cause you don't like to play, and I wasn't about to jump on top of Billy's rage grenade.

As gravel met pocked tarmac, I spun the truck around and floored it towards the hills on the bruised horizon. I let myself exhale, slow enough that Billy wouldn't notice.

"Are you gonna have a hissy-fit over how that went down?" Billy asked, nose-breathing hard in my direction. He was usually still jazzed and dangerous until he pissed away the adrenaline, so I kept my eyes on the road signs and my hand on the switchblade in my pocket. Just over the rise was the back road to two highway exits: one to the I-10 leading to Palm Springs, and the I-5 headed north to Jackson County, Oregon. I kept veering onto the rocky verge, hinting at the north exit to the right. A straight shot out this dumpster fire.

"Where we headed?" I said.

"We're finished here. Get us gone."

He'd for sure have us stop at the next place he felt he could do some damage. The barflies and got-it-good folk never saw Billy coming. They kept themselves wrapped up in a safe and comforting blanket, and he was the thing in the dark that snatched it away to be shredded, burned, and buried deep. There was no way to know if fate was done with us yet, but I figured *it won't matter anyhow if morning's echo says we've sinned*.

Billy rolled the window down and spat whiskey-dipped tobacco onto the blacktop. He jerked the chair lever, wincing as he leaned back. I noticed the blood pooling at his hip. He slammed his boots up on the dash, which always meant no more talking. Just drive like hell into the night before they hang us with our shadows.

## Status Joe

By Anne Weisgerber

If something is awful, god awful, concentrated in 10-15 funds, and I mean 98<sup>th</sup> percentile, it's still only better than two percent of other stocks. Listen, it's not that I'm a genius I certainly don't take credit when the market goes up and I don't take credit when the market goes down (assuming I can beat it there is my fee then there's always the *underlying* fee) and—for certain—almost every study shows that active management doesn't work if you look—here look at this list of the top fund managers over time—the asset classes that I trade, typically, with the advent of these classes? Five percent cash, US short-term treasury and intermediate bonds, International-US Large-and-Small-Cap, REITs, long-short funds... you can't tell me it's not like playing black and red in roulette; take a look at FAIRY. It's a sector rotation fund and exchange-traded fund for equal sectors; there's equal weight in them 10 percent 10 percent 10 percent, you see? The problem *is* it only launched in 2009 so these are manufactured numbers, back-tested data run with real money, but here's a large-cap growth fund and your goal is never to pick anything in the top ten, because to get in the top ten the fund's manager will only concentrate on 10-12 stocks, so yay, guess what? Next year it's all the bottom. It's not that I pick magically. It's not black and white. One of the kickouts on the due diligence is: “Do you do what your name says you do, Mr. Large-Cap-Growth-Fund?” Well, *do you?* It's pure mechanics: is the fund more than three years old? Does it manage more than 75 million? The PAULI 1000 can't parse its data to that level of fineness. Over time they do fix these things: for instance commodities were finally broken out into a broadbasket. Oil... agriculture... big mix. Do you want to own any long-term bonds now? Probably not; these things cycle through. How can you possibly know when to head for the exits? The question should always be: Who do *you* wildly overvalue?

## Father

By Anne Weisgerber

“Hi. Mr. Battle?” Kyle opened the door to see his roommates’ father, in a light winter cap and Duck-Dynasty beard, reeking of beer and energy. “Jeremy is out right now.”

“Is he.” Mr. Battle looked left and right and down at the ground. “Hmm.”

“Well, want to come in?” Kyle opened the door a little wider. “The place is the usual mess, hope you don’t mind.” He backed into a welcome, revealing the living room, with its laundry-folding underway on the coffee table.

Mr. Battle was antsy, shifting his weight, something simmering.

“I’m watching Svengooli’s pick of the night, a pre-code horror film: *Murders at the Zoo*. Never seen this one,” Kyle said as he moved some laundry off the sofa. “The animals are barely on leashes.”

A seat was cleared, but unwanted. “Can I get you something?”

“I need to shave,” Mr. Battle said, removing his cap.

“Shave?”

“Yeah, I,” he drew his hand through his hair and laughed at the ground. He didn’t finish his thought.

Kyle laughed nervously. He’d only met Mr. Battle once before when Jeremy moved in. He was clean-shaven then. “What’s so funny?”

Mr. Battle half smiled. “I have to get rid of these clothes. Can I borrow something? Maybe I can fit into something of Jeremy’s. Mind if I look?” He made his way down the hall and opened a drawer or two, emerging with a tee shirt and some sweats.

“What is going on? I mean, sure, but...?”

“Can I borrow a razor?” he smoothed his hand down the chin for emphasis. “And, you got a beer? Give me a beer and I’ll tell you what.”

“Okay, first shave. There’s some razors and Barbasol inside the cabinet. Help yourself.”

Kyle folded a few more towels and messaged Jeremy before he remembered to get the beer. He edged in to the bathroom and set the cold can on the toilet top, had a seat on the tub ledge, and waited.

Battle was done shaving, and looked in mirror. He winked thanks for the beer and had a long drink.

“You know that mosque down on St. Martin’s?”

“Oh yeah. What about it?”

“Well, I threw a bag of rotten pork chops on its steps on the way here. Right over the iron fence. That will be a fine hello.”

Kyle leaned forward, elbows on knees. “You what? Stop it; you did not.”

Mr. Battle half smiled again. He finished the rest of the can. “You got another of these PBRs? And yes, I did.”

“Really.”

“Yeah, and realized too late I was on camera, sooo.”

“Oh man. Total rookie. Yeah, I got another beer for you. What’s going to happen you think?”

“Hey, it’s not like I beheaded somebody, or lit them on fire in suspended cages, or rejoiced over....”

Mr. Battle pressed the cold can to his temple. His shoulders bowed forward, and the tension ran through his shoulders, shook in little hup-hups. He put down the safety razor, then tore some toilet paper to mop out beard hairs that might otherwise work their way into the pipes.

“Oh. Hey.” The date came out of Kyle’s fog, looming large. “I’m so sorry.”

Battle dabbed at his face with the hand towel, all the while gazing down his own nose at his own unblinking eyes.

“It’s today?”

Mr. Battle nodded.

“Oh, man. I’m so sorry. Everybody loved Jason. All the girls love Jason. Jeremy didn’t say anything.”

Battle threw the hairy cloth into the wastebasket. “You got another?”

“Sure.” Kyle got up. “Jeremy messaged. He’s on his way.”

Battle looked clean, like a new prisoner, someone that was going to be paraded in front of amateurs spitting hatred. He ached to get dirty again.

“Maybe we can build a trebuchet for the next launch,” Kyle called from the kitchen. “We’ve got a nice flat roof here and some moo-shoo in the fridge.”

Battle sat. On TV, a male character asked a lady, “You don’t think I sat there all evening with an eight-foot-mamba in my pocket, do you?”

Mr. Battle said, “What the hell are you watching?” He had a seat, reached into the basket, and snapped out a pillowcase.

# Texas Never Whispers

By CL Bledsoe

The closer it got to Joey's dad's birthday, the more agitated he became, and with nothing worthwhile to do when he wasn't at work – which was less and less often since Jerry had been cutting his hours – he spent his time lifting weights. So when Chyna rolled in, middle of the night, and flashed a letter postmarked from Texas with his and Chyna's names on it, he wanted no part of it.

“It's nothing bad, I'm sure,” she said. “Probably saying he's sorry he missed your birthdays and isn't around.” She smelled like perfume and Marlboro Lights and took a long drag on a Route 44 Cherry Dr. Pepper from Sonic.

“Shouldn't be in prison, then,” Joey said, glaring at the TV.

Chyna didn't answer that; she just started in from the top, reading it to Joey while he sulked but listened – he wasn't far enough gone in his anger to ignore his fealty to his sister.

The letter started, like she'd predicted, with apologies, and then moved to questions. It asked about Joey's life, how he was doing in school, whether he was doing anything stupid.

“How'd he get our address?”

“He used to live here, stupid,” she said. “And I wrote to him.”

Joey was stunned. “Why in hell would you do that?”

“He's our father.” Her voice was soft, vulnerable.

“Is he?”

She continued reading. Joey's anger caused him to miss the immediate bits that followed, but he tuned back in as his father, apparently in answer to a question of Chyna's, described his life.

“It’s boring here; that’s the main thing. You can read or play cards or something, but it’s the same every day. There’s some real hard fellers here, but long as you got friends, you’ll do all right. The food is no good, but you get used to it. I ain’t never been messed with, to answer your question. What I miss most is seeing you two and your momma and not being in prison.”

“You asked him if he’d ever been messed with?” Joey said.

“I was curious.”

He went on to describe his cell and his daily routine, as per Chyna’s questions.

“I got old, here,” he said. The implication was that he shouldn’t have.

Joey could picture it as she read; the narrow cell, the exercise yard. The images in his head were colored by movies he’d seen: *Brubaker*, with its death row that was little more than a series of boxes; Robert Redford digging hole after hole. He saw his father as the vague memory he had; a bone-thin frame, taut with muscle. The man in Joey’s head was always tan and grinning. He probably wouldn’t be tan anymore, Joey figured. And he sure as hell wouldn’t be smiling.

“I’m going to write him back,” Chyna said, breaking Joey’s reverie. “Want me to say anything?”

Joey considered it. “Tell him not to worry about not being here. I don’t miss him.”

\* \* \*

Joey didn’t see Tommy standing in the doorway watching him work out, though Joey had worked himself into such a state of exhaustion, he could barely register what was right in front of him. Joey finished his rep. and sat up on the weight bench.

“You training for something?” Tommy barked.

“No sir,” Joey said. He wiped sweat off with a threadbare towel.



“Come on and make a run with me.”

“Can I take a shower first?”

“I’d rather you did.”

They drove out by the municipal airport, in the tangle of barely graveled roads, pulled off into a grotto Joey’d never known existed. Tommy killed the engine and pulled up to a trailer hidden amongst some weeds.

“Don’t say a fucking word,” Tommy said.

They got out and Tommy handed Joey a duffle bag from the trunk. They went to the door and stood there without knocking. Joey heard footsteps moving through the brush, and somebody came around the side of the trailer, but all Joey could make out was the twin barrels of a shotgun amongst leaves.

Tommy grabbed the bag and set it down by the trailer door. He stepped back and Joey went with him. Another bag flopped by their feet. Tommy nudged Joey who picked it up. They went back to the car. Tommy cranked it and revved it a few times, and backed out all the way back to the road before turning around.

“Know what’d happen if you knocked on that door?” Tommy asked.

“Double-dog dare me,” Joey said.

Tommy laughed a little. “Hungry,” he said and they went into town for something to eat.

\* \* \*

After that, Tommy was bringing him along all the time.

“You don’t ever ask nobody their name,” Tommy said. “Don’t ask no questions or they’ll think you’re a narc.”

Joey took it all in. At first, it was mostly just him riding along. A couple times, Tommy took Joey with on longer trips; they'd end up trading joints in some tweaker's house while he read from the bible about the end of the world, eating can after can of baked beans; or, they'd stand in some guy's kitchen while his battered-looking wife chased around kids who already talked back to her because they saw their daddy do it, trading shots. It was like that, Joey realized; you had to spend time with them. His experiences with pot smokers had been the same, but he'd thought they were just lonely losers; turned out, you had to put in time, let them get to know you, or they got suspicious.

"Anything happens to him," Joey's mom, KT, said after one trip. "I'll never forgive you."

"I know," Tommy said, a simple statement of fact.

Joey had known his mom and Tommy sold weed and sometimes meth for years; people were always coming by, or Tommy was always off on some errand for days at a time. Joey had assumed it was mostly weed they were selling, and maybe it had been, but these days, Tommy seemed to want to step it up. He didn't offer an explanation, and Joey knew better than to ask for one.

It was surreal for Joey - one minute, he'd be out in the sticks shooting cans for target practice with some guy who'd just as soon stick an ice pick through Joey's eye as see him, and the next, Tommy would drop him off at school, and Joey would be sitting in some class trying not to fall asleep. He smoked plenty of pot and drank, but Tommy only let him try meth one time - Joey was pretty sure it was because of KT. But this one time, they'd been out at a dealer's house, and he'd insisted that Joey join them in sampling the wares. Tommy tried to make a joke about it, but the guy got wide-eyed and weird, so Joey had to do it. Tommy kept eying him as Joey lit the pipe like he'd seen so many others do and hit it.

It was kind of the opposite of pot; whereas marijuana made Joey feel spacy and distant, meth made him feel present, very fucking present, and clear-headed in a deceptive way.

He didn't sleep the next day, or the one after that. He stayed out with Tommy, and when he was finally made to go to school, he cut classes and jogged around the school, grinding his teeth and working out weird theories in his head. When he finally crashed, he slept a solid day and a half.

From time to time, the old guys would stare at Joey for a while and then get this knowing look on their faces. The first time it'd happened, Joey thought he was about to get raped. But then the guy had pointed at him and asked his name. Then he'd started talking about Joey's dad.

As far as Joey knew, his dad ran guns. Some of KT's oldest friends would reference him, but they hardly ever came to the house. The weird thing about them was when they did, they'd actually talk to Joey and Chyna, back when she was around, anyway. They'd ask how the kids were doing in school, the standard bullshit. Joey'd asked Chyna about it one time, and she'd explained they were friends of Joey's dad. He didn't know how to feel about it.

But the way these guys talked, it was like Joey's dad was a legend, instead of some guy rotting in a Texas prison. They'd tell stories about fights he'd gotten into, people he'd screwed over or who tried to screw him over. Joey had never really thought of him as a person, but here he was, living on in the tattered memories of a bunch of tweakers.

After they'd left that one's house, Tommy had been antsy in the car.

"You remember your dad?" he asked.

"Not really," Joey said.

Tommy grunted. "Good man," he said, which shocked Joey.

"You knew him?"

Tommy laughed. “We came up together. He was always smart, smarter than me.” It was the most he’d ever really heard Tommy say.

“Were you friends?”

Tommy grunted. “He told me to take care of you and your momma,” he finally said. Joey sat, stunned, the rest of the ride home. He wanted to ask Tommy questions, but couldn’t think of a one. Later, as he lay abed, trying to sleep, he made a list in his head that he knew he’d never ask:

1. If he was smart, why was he in prison?
2. Does he know you’re fucking his wife?
3. Did you run guns with him?
4. What’s the difference between manslaughter and murder?

\* \* \*

Joey was upstairs, working out again. This time, it was his mom standing in the doorway when he looked up.

“Know what today is,” she said.

“Tuesday,” Joey said, wiping himself off and starting in on curls.

She came in and sat on the bed. “Chyna’s been writing to him. Said he wrote to you.” Joey didn’t answer. “Wrote to me, too.” She let it slip out so he could’ve ignored it, but it hit him like a slap to the face.

“What’d he say?” Joey said, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Said to make sure you don’t end up like him.”

Joey laughed. “In prison?”

“Selling.” Again, it was a simple statement that carried massive weight.

“Talk to Tommy. He’s the one always taking me along.”

“I have. Way he figures it, and I don’t disagree, is you want to do it.”

“I guess I’m learning a thing or two.”

“I guess you are.” Joey switched arms and started curling with that one as she continued. “You don’t have to, though.”

“What else am I going to do?”

She nodded and rose but didn’t leave.

“Does it bother you? That you’re out and he’s not?” He didn’t make eye contact, just let it lie.

“It does,” she said. “But he forgave me. I did what I had to do for you kids.”

Joey thought of a few things to add to that, but he let it go and focused on his exercises. A moment later he felt a cool hand on his shoulder and looked up into his mother’s sunken eyes. Her face was wrinkled, the skin slack. She was nearly toothless, though her hair still had traces of black amongst the gray. There was a squirreliness about her eyes, but in the centers, they were calm. She smiled and he did his best to soften his face.

\* \* \*

Joey rode to school with Chyna when Tommy didn’t drop him off. And almost every day, he rode home with her.

“Come and go for a ride with me,” she said when he met her at her car.

“Yeah, I was going to.”

“No, I mean...just get in, dumbass.”

She took him up Rabbit Road and turned off east on the somewhat paved road that took them, eventually, out to the municipal airport and the tangle of gravel roads that circled it.

“Clint asked me to marry me,” she said, apropos of nothing.

Joey laughed before he could stop himself and she reached over and smacked him, hard.

“Sorry,” Joey said. “So what did you say?”

“I told him I’d think about it.”

Joey looked at her. “Yeah? And what did you think?”

She shrugged, which was a little troubling, because she had this way of lying on the wheel and steering with her shoulders, so when she shrugged, the car veered to the side.

“Really?”

“Yeah, I mean, I really like Clint.”

Joey looked straight ahead. “Why?” He finally asked.

She punched him again. “Never mind.”

“No, I’m serious. Why do you like him so much?”

She glared at him until she realized he was being serious and then slackened up. “I don’t know. He’s nice. He respects me.”

“Does he?”

“More than Tommy and KT.”

“Okay. So what do you get out of marrying him? I mean, what does that do for you?”

“Not everything is about what you can get out of somebody.” Joey didn’t answer. He settled back into the seat and watched the trailers and trees move by. “You can come visit,” she added.

He laughed again. “I’m doing okay.”

She looked at him. “You’ve been going out with Tommy. KT told me.”

He shrugged. “Got to learn a trade.”

It was her turn to laugh. “So you can end up like dad?”

“Least I won’t be leaving a family behind. But at least I can count on you to write me letters.”

\* \* \*

Joey was on a run with Tommy, hanging out at the house of a guy they’d dealt with a couple times, just drinking beers and bullshitting, when the phone rang. The guy’s wife answered and then turned to the tweaker.

“Billy, they’re asking for somebody named Tommy.”

Tommy and Joey both looked up like that cat that had caught the canary.

“You give somebody this number?” The guy asked.

“Hell, I don’t even know this number,” Tommy said.

The guy took the phone and demanded to know who it was, but clearly wasn’t getting anywhere.

“Hell, it’s for you,” he said and handed it to Tommy. “Won’t tell me shit.”

“Yeah?” Tommy said. He had a confused look on his face and didn’t speak again except to say. “Yeah, I get it.” Then he hung up and went back over by Joey.

“Well? Who was it?”

“Wrong number,” Tommy said, pulling on his beer.

The tweaker looked at him, mean as a snake, and then laughed loud. They talked some more, and about five minutes later, there was a knock on the door. The wife went and answered it and cried out as someone shoved her aside. Joey didn't realize Tommy wasn't beside him anymore until he saw him wrestling with the tweaker, who was trying to pull out a handgun from a drawer by the sink. There were two guys at the door, and they beelined for Tommy. One of them hit the tweaker's hand hard, which was half in the drawer, and he yelped. Tommy stepped out of the way, hands raised, while the two took the tweaker to the door. His wife was on the floor, and one of them knelt and helped her up.

“We're sorry, Darla,” he said.

“Yeah, just call me and tell me where to get what's left of him.”

They closed the door behind them.

“Want us to wait with you?” Tommy asked.

She sat at the kitchen table. “Yeah, hell, y'all hungry? I got some squirrel and dumplings.”

“Shit yeah,” Tommy said.

While she was heating it up in a big pot on the stove, Joey nudged Tommy.

“What did they say on the phone?”

“Said somebody's going to come knock on the door and ask for Jack. Said to let them take him, otherwise, they take everybody.”

“Did you know who it was?”

“If I did, I don't want to.”



They each finished two helpings of squirrel and dumplings with some cats-head biscuits on the side before the phone rang. Tommy looked over at Darla, and she gave a 'go ahead' motion. He answered and said, "All right." And hung up.

"Said we can pick him up at Big Eddy Bridge. Want us to go get him?"

"I got the kids coming in from school any minute," Darla said.

When they drove out, they found him in the middle of the concrete, bruised and bloody. They were halfway back to town before they realized he was missing a finger.

"What did you do?" Tommy asked.

But he kept screaming until they dropped him off at the emergency room.

"Must've owed somebody money," Tommy said.

\* \* \*

After they went home, Joey went up to his room and thought about everything and then went and knocked on KT and Tommy's bedroom door. Tommy hollered from inside, and Joey told him that he wanted to talk. There was a lot of grumbling before Tommy opened the door.

"What in hell do you want?"

"I want to do more, sir."

"Well clean the damn house, then."

"No, with the...you know...what we've been doing."

"Shit." Tommy shook his head and turned and slammed the door behind him.

\* \* \*

Chyna graduated, and Joey was surprised when KT and Tommy actually showed up for it and sat beside KT's mother awkwardly.

"I'm surprised you graduated," the kids' grandmother said to Chyna. She turned to Joey. "Think you can hold out two more years?"

"Yes ma'am," Joey said because it was what she wanted to hear.

Clint came with them when they went out for dinner at The Catfish Hole restaurant, on Grandmother's dime, of course. She nibbled on one piece of fish while the rest of them gulped down hushpuppies, French fries, and piece after piece of fried catfish. Tommy burped loudly and pushed his plate away, knocking over his sweet tea, which deepened Grandmother's scowl.

Chyna cleared her throat. "Clint asked me to marry him," she said, glancing at him. He smiled and took her hand.

"You knocked up?" Tommy asked.

Grandmother gasped.

"No," Chyna said. "Don't be a pig."

Tommy eyed Clint. "You whipped or something?"

Clint shook his head slowly. "No sir. I love Chyna."

Tommy grinned, and KT elbowed him hard.

"And what do you do for a living, young man?" Grandmother asked.

He explained his work for a propane company. It wasn't that interesting, so Joey and Tommy both zoned out. They both tuned in when Grandmother laughed at something Clint had said.

“He’s quit a catch, Chyna,” she added. Chyna squeezed Clint’s hand. Tommy and Joey exchanged looks, frankly too shocked to respond.

The plan was that the couple would move to a house Clint’s grandparents had lived in a little town called Shirley up in the mountains to the center of the state.

“Shirley?” KT said. “Who’s she?”

Joey rode up with Chyna and Clint to help her get moved in that weekend, trying not to flinch when Clint raced up the hills and around the tight curves. When they got to the town, he wasn’t impressed.

“Hell, ain’t nothing here but bears and a Sonic,” Joey said.

Clint laughed. “You’re not far wrong.”

The thing that annoyed Joey about Clint was that he was all right. After they unloaded Clint’s truck, he took Chyna and Joey to Sonic for lunch. They drove back that afternoon with an air of easy camaraderie.

When they dropped Joey off at the house, there was a letter from Joey’s dad lying on his pillow.

\* \* \*

Joey stared at it for a few seconds and then sat on his bed and ignored it for a few more. He started for the door to go downstairs, but he was tired from the heady day and caught himself. He grabbed the letter and ripped it open and scanned it.

“They set a date,” it began. “I’m out of appeals.” The tone was sober with a couple of attempted jokes, even. “I’d like you to be here, since you’re my son,” he said. “But I understand if you can’t.”

He read the letter over three or four times and dropped it. He could hear a hum of music downstairs from KT and Tommy’s room. He went back over to the doorjamb and punched the wood, hard. Then again. Then

again until his hand, not the wood, splintered. He went back downstairs and knocked on his mom's bedroom door with his left hand. When she opened it, he held up the already swelling hand.

\* \* \*

"I'm not going," Joey said. He was on the phone with Chyna, pacing across the scuffed linoleum in the kitchen.

"He asked," Chyna said. "It's his last request."

"So?" Joey said. "Hell, he doesn't even know who I am. I could send somebody else, and he wouldn't know."

Chyna didn't answer that. "I would go," she finally said.

"So go."

"He asked you."

"Oh well."

"You know," Chyna said. "If you hate him that much, you should go just to see him fry."

Joey didn't have an answer for that. They ended the call soon after, each agitated, though without a specific focus for it. He went up to his room, closed the door, and went over to the bookcase against the wall beside the door, squatted down, and pulled the bottom out. He paused and listened, and when he was satisfied, he reached in and dug out a cigar box and sat with his back against the door. Inside, there was a letter and a photograph and some other trinkets. The letter was dated about five years ago. The paper of the envelope had gone yellow, and the letter inside as well. He opened it carefully, being especially gentle with the folds, which were tearing on the edges. He read over it and then folded it and put it back in the envelope. The picture was of a man holding a baby. For the first time, he could see himself in the man's face. He stared at it a long time and then put it back

with the letter. There were other things – a baseball card he'd thought would be valuable someday, some little toys he'd held onto for some reason.

He put it all back in the box, added this new letter to it, and put the box back under the bookcase and pushed it back against the wall. The letter had said it would happen over the summer. Joey didn't know why it was such short notice; maybe his dad couldn't decide to send the letter.

\* \* \*

Tommy drove out to the house of the tweaker they'd taken to the hospital just a couple weeks before.

"You going to Texas?" Tommy asked.

"I don't think so," Joey said.

Tommy made a noise. "Why not?" He finally said.

Joey shrugged. "Why would I?"

"He's going to be dead forever. He's only going to be alive a little while longer. You can hate him as long as you want, but this is your only time to see him," Tommy said.

Joey was stunned silent as they pulled up to the house and got out. Tommy went and banged on the door and grunted something, and Darla, the wife, opened it and let them in. Joey noticed she wouldn't look them in the eye, but he was so focused on other things, he wasn't really paying attention.

Billy, the tweaker, was out back in his shed, apparently. Darla led them through the house and pointed them to a squat, square building still showing its insulation. Tommy glanced back at the house, which caused Joey to. The glass door was closed behind him.

"Run and try that, quiet-like," Tommy said.

Joey tried the door and showed Tommy that it was locked. Darla had pulled the blinds closed as well.

“All right,” Tommy said. “Something’s up. He’s watching us, I figure.”

He knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Billy said.

Tommy nodded to the side and Joey stepped clear of the door. Tommy pushed it open and stepped to his left a moment later, lingering in the doorway just a second. A gunshot rang out. Tommy pulled his handgun out and ran to the side just as a shot blasted through the wall where he’d been. Joey high-tailed it the other way. Tommy found a window and peeked in. He glanced at Joey, who was lying on the ground about fifteen feet away, strode up to the window, and fired several times, then ducked back away from the wall. There were no answering shots, but a sound from the house made them both turn. Darla came busting out, screaming, shotgun in hand, running for Tommy. She didn’t make it, because Joey tackled her before she’d covered half the lawn. Tommy disappeared into the shed, and one shot rang out. Joey rose and trained the shotgun on Darla, who got to her feet and crossed her arms. Tommy emerged a moment later.

“Where is it?” he asked. Darla just sneered. He slapped her, good, across the face, and she fell to the grass.

“It’s gone!” she said. “He smoked it all! Why do you think he did this?”

Tommy put his gun to her forehead. She looked scared but didn’t cry until he took it away.

“When you tell the pigs about who did this, you want to think about that boy in there. Think real good, you hear?”

“I hear you,” she said, on her knees.

Tommy went back into the house. Joey followed, still holding the shotgun.

\* \* \*

After that, the business dried up for a while. The familiar smell of weed began emanating from Tommy and KT's bedroom. The week of the execution came, and Joey was spending much of his time in his room when Chyna came to visit. She tapped on the door. When Joey didn't answer, she pushed it open. He was on the floor, sketching.

"You haven't drawn in a long time," she said.

He looked up at her. "What are you doing here?"

She shrugged. "Visiting. Can I see?"

He passed one up to her. She studied it. "You doing superheroes again?"

"It's from a dream I had," he said.

She carried it over to the bed. "Tell me about it."

He sat up on his elbows and related the dream, all about an alien planet or maybe it was in the future after society collapsed. There were these warriors who jousting but with cars. That's what he was drawing.

"Cool. Did you do any more?"

He showed her a couple others he'd done of the jousting and a protagonist he hadn't worked out a story for.

She set them on the bed, and he kept drawing. "So it's tomorrow," she said, after a while. He didn't answer. "I was thinking of driving down." Still, the only answer he gave was the scratch of pencil on paper. "So you wanna ride down with me?" He paused, but still didn't speak.

"I don't want to see it," he said and kept sketching.

"You don't have to. Just ride with me."

He finished and set the pencil down. “First time I would have seen him in ten years would be when he dies.”

“Just ride along so I have somebody to talk to,” she said.

He sighed and shook his head.

\* \* \*

They left that afternoon after Joey packed some clothes, pencils, and paper. The plan was to drive it in one day, crash in a cheap motel, and Joey would hang out while Chyna went to the thing. They joked and listened to music and made fun of signs the way they used to, before things got tough; Joey started to feel like himself again.

That night, in the motel, they ate pizza and didn’t even turn on the TV. Joey woke in the middle of the night when Chyna threw a shoe at him to make him stop snoring, but even that felt right to Joey. The next morning, she asked if he would go with her. He’d known she would but hoped he was wrong.

“I don’t want to see it,” he said.

“Because you hate him or because you’re afraid you don’t hate him?” she asked. When he didn’t answer, she added, “It’s a chance to see someone die.”

“I’ve already seen that,” he said. He told her about the tweaker.

“Oh Joey,” Chyna said and grabbed him in a hug. Somehow, he ended up in the car trying to think of excuses not to get out all the way to the prison.

There were a handful of protestors outside, which really shocked him. When Chyna parked, he hopped out and went over to them, with her following and trying to stop him.

“What are you doing?” he asked.



An elderly nun with sad eyes explained that they were protesting the death penalty.

“That’s my father in there,” he said.

“I’m so sorry, my son,” she said.

“He killed 37 people.” She just stared for a moment. “But it was manslaughter not murder because he was just involved in the killing. Like he helped other people kill. They couldn’t pin them all on him.”

“Come on, Joey,” Chyna said.

“It must be hard having a man like that for a father,” the woman said. The other protestors were gathering around him and her, now.

Joey shrugged. “He’s been in prison most of my life, I guess.”

The woman patted him on the arm and called out, “This boy is the son of Lucas Newcarter!” People started noticing, then. “How can you murder this man while his son watches?”

“No,” Joey said. “He should die. He’s a bad man!”

“They’re making an orphan! Will that bring back the dead?”

Chyna dragged Joey away to the building. “Bitch,” she said.

A man guided them to metal folding seats in a little room facing a big window. There were a couple other people there, but not many.

“You know, I think you were right,” Chyna said. “He made his bed, and he has to lie in it.”

They brought him out and led him to the chair. It was kind of far away, but he saw them and smiled a little. Joey smiled back, purely by instinct. They put him in the chair and strapped him in, said some words, and pulled a big elaborate switch, and he was dead.

“Well,” Chyna said, “I guess that’s it.”

But Joey was crying, hard. He didn’t know why and he didn’t know how to stop.

## Ethics in Journalism

By Jesse Bradley

The Spider-Man PEZ dispenser almost falls out of my hand before mom clasps her hand around mine. I slap mom's other hand away when she tries pulling back Spider-Man's neck to pull out one of his PEZ vertebrae and she gives me her "I made you and I can unmake you look." The look thaws when I reminder her that the PEZ is for the people I interview, my way of thanking them for their time. She clears her throat, asks if I'd like to practice with her first. I shake my head. I ask her questions all the time like why is the sky blue, where do babies come from, what happened to dad and she always gives me the same answer: because of god.

# The Hi-Line

By Patricia Donahue

From a distance, the Montana prairie appeared flat, but it swelled and heaved under its grassland blanket. Irene was lost on her way back from somewhere she never should have been. Dirt roads and cattle trails hidden in the long grass confused her. For a half hour, maybe longer, she drove through tumbling, rolling shades of green and blue until sage scented wind delivered her to the hi-line, the highway running south of the Canadian border from Minnesota to Washington.

A freight train clattered along the edge of the Pont d'Arc Indian Reservation. She knew she should race the string of creaking boxcars home. Shut this thing down. She was too old to turn her life into a country song. The washboard road to his house started around the next bend. It wasn't a good idea. She made the turn.

Joy stood by the corral fence. Her hair billowed in the wind like a sheet on a clothesline. She wrapped her fingers around her neck to catch it.

"He's not here."

"I was just... I brought some chiles. I hope I got the right ones. Habaneros and anchos and some chipotles."

She had meant to hand the chile peppers to Joy right away, but she'd left them in the car. She always brought gifts— chiles they couldn't get at their market, a framed photo of the horses, a pair of hand-thrown coffee mugs.

"Thanks. He likes...we like spicy food."

When a gust almost knocked Irene into the fence, a black and white paint horse started and snorted.

"I like to listen to the wind," Joy said.

Irene held on to her hair and said she did too.

“It messes with cell reception. Just before you drove in, I was talking to my...our daughter and I lost her. There’s some sun tea inside.”

Irene wiped the soles of her dusty sandals on the welcome mat.

Joy poured tea into flowered glasses and set a plastic lemon on the table beside them. “Real or pretend sugar?”

“Plain is fine. Thank you.”

Joy busied herself at the stove. When a gas burner ticked to life, she lit a cigarette on the flame. There were signs of him everywhere. His canvas jacket on a peg, a two thirds full jar of change from his pockets, and his town boots, worn black leather embossed with red wings.

“Does ranch work keep you slim or do you work out?” Irene said.

“I guess you work out.”

“I used to run. Not a lot of time lately and my husband hurt his foot.”

Irene let the mention of Dennis hang in the air while she figured out what to say next. She’d observed that Pont d’Arc Indians seldom asked or answered direct questions. The more she asked, the less information she got.

“He’s at work. I don’t know when he’ll be back. You’ll probably see him before I do,” Joy said.

Irene sipped strong tea. “He must always have a lot going on. He has a hard job, especially now.”

“He’s been gone a lot.” Joy stirred Splenda into her tea. “When he’s late, I worry.”

“You’ve been together a long time.”

“I know him pretty well. Maybe better than he knows himself.”

“I think I know what you mean. Dennis and I have been together since high school.”

Joy looked surprised.

After a moment of silence, Irene said, “My grandmother used to say angels were passing over when it got quiet.”

“Indian way, spirits are talking to us. We don’t always listen.”

Joy’s dark eyes took in Irene, but gave nothing back. Her finger circled the rim of her glass.

“That horse needs to be ridden more, calm him down. He hasn’t had much time.”

What was Irene supposed to say now? She faced a wall of family photos. Across wood veneer paneling, girls whose angled faces blended both their parents grew from babies to young womanhood. A little girl in a cowgirl outfit grinned her grandfather’s smile and a smaller child sat on a horse with him. The first time he brought her here, Joy asked Irene if she had grandchildren. Startled, she said that wouldn’t be happening for a while.

“It changes everything,” Joy had said. He had excused himself to check on the horses.

Ice cube clinks filled the silence as Irene drained her tea glass. She turned away from the photos toward the kitchen window and focused her gaze on the invisible line the horizon drew between here and there.

“Sorry to bother you. I just wanted to drop the chiles by. If I gave them to him, he might forget. May I use the bathroom?”

She looked at her reflection and wondered who the hell she had become. She should get the damn chilies and go. In the hallway, she peeked in their half open bedroom door. A striped blanket pulled tight across a high, wide bed. Flat pillows and hospital corners.

“Something I want to show you.” Joy said.

In the living room, she spilled open folds of deer skin. A faint, oily scent rose from it as a dress covered in beads spread before them— a background of blue seed beads decorated with animal teeth. Rows of blue and white beads in chevron designs edged the skirt, and larger beads and tin cones dangled from the fringe.

Joy ran her fingers over the shapes on the bodice. “Those represent clouds and the four directions.”

Irene’s arm reached for the dress, but she pulled her hand back. The shapes and colors made the dress seem alive. “That...that’s amazing. It must have taken months, years to make.”

“It’s been in his family since his great-great grandmother. The women of the tribe made it for her after her husband led a big battle. They knew what it means to be a warrior’s partner. Warriors had more than one wife then. The dress was for the one he counted on. The sits-beside-him wife.”

Irene kept as still as she could.

“Some of his family thinks it should have gone to his sister or been buried with his mom. She gave it to me when she knew she was dying. He was still a crazy mess then, but she never gave up on him.”

The beadwork rippled the way water wobbles when sunlight hits it. Over the radiating colors, Irene leveled her gaze at his wife. This woman, she supposed, knew exactly where her husband was and where he had been. Anything she didn’t know about him was because she didn’t want to.

“It’s beautiful. Thank you for showing it to me and for the tea. I should go. I’ll just get those chile peppers.”

Joy began to refold the dress on the bias.

“It wasn’t all romantic when he proposed,” Joy said. “I’d told him to get out. My mom told my sisters and me you don’t threaten to leave a man unless you’re ready to go. The door hinges stuttered behind him. He stood on the porch step and talked to me through the screen. He said, maybe we should get married, if you want to.”

Irene forced a half smile. “I better go.”

The women didn't look at each other when Irene extended her arm to hand Joy the grocery bag. It smelled smoky, spicy and a little sweet. A long, loud neigh came from the corral. Irene lost her grip on the bag and chiles spilled orange, green and the red of dried blood into the grass. She searched in the slick stalks for leathery chile skins. Tiny spikes pricked her fingers.

"I'm sorry," Irene said.



## Rural Writer Interview Series: William Bernhardt

By Adam Van Winkle, CJ Editor

*The Oklahoma Writing Hall of Famer, New York Times Bestseller, and Oklahoma Poet Laureate Candidate on the Oklahoma writing scene, his candidacy for Laureate, and his upcoming book, Challengers of the Dust.*

AV: Congratulations on your candidacy for Oklahoma Poet Laureate. How did this come about?

WB: I was nominated by World Literature Today, which obviously was an enormous compliment. I have been absolutely floored by the reception my poetry has received. I didn't publish poetry for many years, primarily because I was afraid no one would take it seriously, given my reputation as a novelist. As it turns out, the poetry has earned some of the best reviews of my career.

AV: You're a New York Times bestselling author. Independent bookstores and literary festivals have a solid foothold in Oklahoma City and Tulsa. Several colleges in the state boast capable creative writing programs. This Land Press and Red Dirt Press are Oklahoma-based. At Cowboy Jamboree we've read many great submissions by Oklahoma writers. How do you view the Oklahoma literary scene now and its impact on the national literary scene?

WB: I think the Oklahoma literary scene is far-reaching and well-respected anywhere you go. We have an enormous amount of talent in this state, far beyond our per capita share. I'm happy to support our homegrown programs whenever possible. The publishing playing field has leveled with the advent of online sales and digital

publishing. It's no longer necessary to run to New York every time you want to publish a book.

AV: Ben Kincaid is an Okie that finds himself at work and traveling all over the country. You've stayed in Oklahoma despite teaching, speaking, and reading all over the country. How much of you is in Ben Kincaid?

WB: Probably more than I would care to admit. I wanted to create a lawyer-hero who was still a human being, with flaws and foibles like human beings, rather than some infallible thinking machine. I think it's Ben's humanity, and his genuine concern for his clients, that attract readers.

AV: Your prose has found a home with Ballantine Books and been on the New York Times bestselling list.

What about Red Dirt Press attracted you for your newest poetry collection, Ocean's Edge?

WB: The Publisher at Red Dirt, Amy Wilson, contacted me not long after my first poetry book, The White Bird, was published and asked if I would like to do another poetry book with her. I didn't feel I was ready then, but about two years later I was, so I called her. There are not that many outlets for poetry these days, so when someone is kind enough to reach out to me, that's something I tend to remember.

AV: Tell us about Challengers of the Dust (just out with This Land Press). This looks like it's real red dirt country reading and right up our alley at CJ.

WB: Challengers of the Dust is a historical novel set in 1935, Dust Bowl Oklahoma. Two young men are thrown together under the worst of circumstances and forced to accept a near-impossible mission the puts them in contact with the situations and people of the era, including some famous faces you might recognize. The title came because one of the main characters is very involved with the pulp magazines of the time, which ultimately have been so influential on modern-day popular culture.

*More on Bernhardt's The Ocean's Edge (from Red Dirt Press): William Bernhardt's second poetry collection explores the complex tapestry of family and the subtle interconnections that bind us to our past and forms the ballast to identity. Popular culture merges with classical allusions, weaving the colorful threads of a fabric composed of moments lived and still to be lived.*

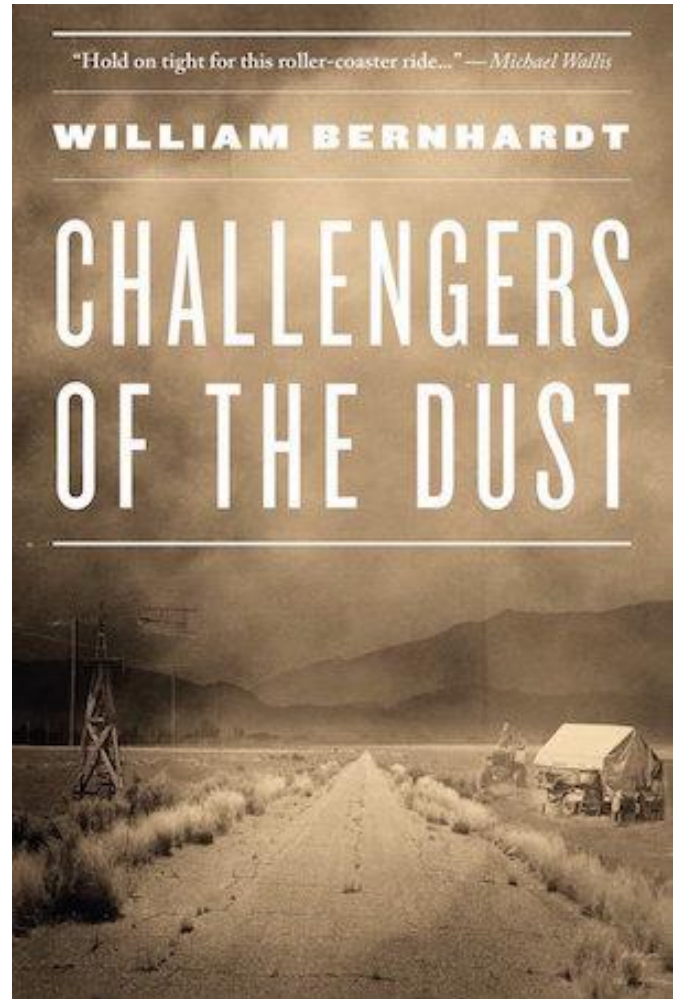
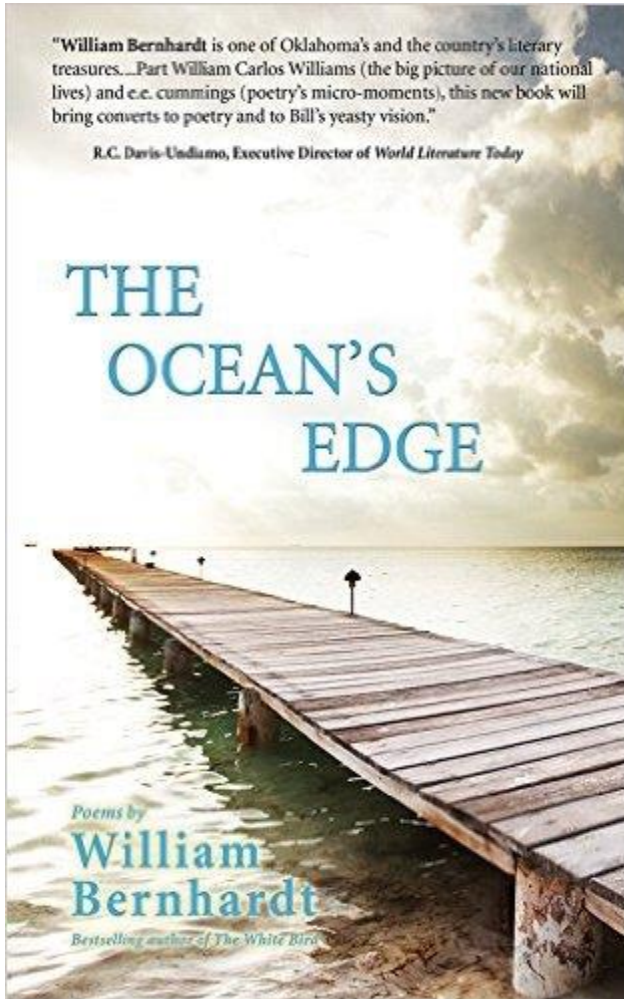
*"William Bernhardt is one of Oklahoma's and the country's literary treasures. Part William Carlos Williams (the big picture of our national lives) and e.e. cummings (poetry's micro-moments), this new book will bring converts to poetry and to Bill's yeasty vision. This is poetry for those who love reading and want a reminder of why they should read more poetry. They will not be disappointed."--Robert Con Davis-Undiano, Executive Director of World Literature Today.*

*More on Bernhardt's Challengers of the Dust (from This Land Press): George Earle returns from college to his Oklahoma birthplace and finds it drastically altered. The Dust Bowl and the Depression have transformed the bucolic farmtown into a desolate wasteland where few are healthy, happy, or employed. A chance encounter with Pretty Boy Floyd lands him in jail with a melancholy pulp-literary agent named Hart. They're given one chance to avoid execution by accepting an unlikely task: find local powerbroker Doc Bennett's wayward daughter. They head east meeting migrants, vagabonds, rail-riders, rainmakers, a few destined to become famous, a few too dangerous to live, and the most ghoulish acts of a starved population, while attempting to fulfill their impossible mission.*

*Praise for Challengers of the Dust: "Wow! That was all I could say when I finished devouring William Bernhardt's Challengers of the Dust. Readers beware, hold on tight for this roller-coaster ride that starts and ends in Oklahoma's No Man's Land of the Dust Bowl 1930s. Along the way you will meet con artists, maniacs,*

daredevils, cannibals, and an array of so many famous and infamous personalities that *Forrest Gump*'s celebrity encounters pale in comparison. Mr. Bernhardt, you have done it again. Don't quit now. More please." —Michael

*Wallis, Pretty Boy: The Life and Times of Charles Arthur Floyd*



## A Bend in the Road

By Elizabeth Farris

Elroy slips a quarter into the jukebox. Five plays per. He punches the E-6 key five times. Shit. He turns around and grins to show me that he's lost another one. The bruise on his chin is yellow — must have been last week. He sneers, I know you love it, Ruby gal. I stand behind the bar and avoid his stare, wipe it down with my filthy rag. Tex Ritter sings *The Wayward Wind*. Five times in a row. Shit.

The 45s are all ancient: *Take Me Back to my Boots and Saddle*, *My Adobe Hacienda*, *Riders in the Sky*. Gene Autry's ghost stands in the dark corner next to The Sons of the Pioneers.

Every afternoon when Dwayne shows up after his route, he starts his selection with A-14 so Rex Allen is the first one out of his five. At least Dwayne makes Rex step aside for four others.

Two years. I've come to think of these songs as the local lingo.

Most folks around these parts speak silent in between shots of Jack Daniels. After I unlock the door at 2, they come in and pause, allow their eyes to adjust to the dim light, then head straight to their place. It's like they feel the need to keep loyal to some Boulder Flats tradition. Arnold has had his own barstool for who knows how long. And J. T. has come to know this, but only after a few talkings-to. All Arnold needs do is nod and I refill.

Before Pops left me the place, he explained why he chose to settle in this bend of the road. Ruby honey, he said, it has no swank, but it fetches an honest dollar. The quarry will always yield so keep the place open and you'll do fine. This is the chance for you to finally rest and mend your thoughts.

I hired J. T. to patch the cracks in the drywall. To sand and refinish the floorboards. He agreed to take it in trade so I kept a tab to pay him back in drinks. I bought new curtains that let in a bit of light, and set out a few bowls of beer nuts. Everything's entitled to a spruce up, and this place was no different.

And I swapped out a few of the records. I put in a Reba, a Tanya Tucker. I thought about Emmylou Harris but then I found Dottie West singing *Leavin's for Unbelievers*. And I got *Couldn't Do Nothin' Right*, one of Roseanne Cash's best. If I didn't know any better, I'd reckon those girls wrote songs with me in mind.

But Dwayne saw that Tanya Tucker was in Rex Allen's spot and he kicked the jukebox with his boot. One of the inner lights shattered and a sliver from the bulb fell and scratched *When the Bloom is on the Sage*. The record skipped to the chorus and kept repeating. Arnold got up from his stool and yelled until I yanked the plug from the wall. He threw down a five dollar bill without even finishing his drink and stomped out with the rest of them.

Elroy and most all the boys from the quarry stopped coming in. And those that did, would take theirs home in a brown paper sack without leaving even so much as a nickel tip on the counter.

The days dragged on and on and there were hours between which the door never opened. Every night I sat in darkness at the window of my one-room above the bar. The red light at the junction flashed and the old sorrows returned. Burdens drained till there was nothing much left.

J. T. came in. I set out a glass and started pouring. But he just stood there.

I want my money, he said.

I don't have it. And if things don't pick up —

Not my problem, he said. And he stomped out.

I emptied the coins from the jukebox. Loretta Lynn was there. Tammy Wynette. I longed to sing with them, to produce anything other than a shaky whisper.

But I had no choice. *Mule Train* went back in, to bring back the long-haulers. I propped open the door three days straight and used my handful of quarters so Arnold would hear *Along the Navajo Trail* as he staggered home from the garage. Tanya and Reba and Dottie and the rest of the girls went into a box I keep in the office. They stepped aside for Rex Allen and Montana Slim.

I've gone back to wiping the sticky off the bar with a grubby rag. Keep the glasses topped up, gather the tips and stow them in my jeans pocket. A dry gust of wind accompanies each arrival. And Dwayne is back again, staring into space, making a steady tap with the edge of his cardboard coaster.

At closing time, I set the chairs bottoms up on the tables and mop. If ever I get a second chance, I want to be Patsy Cline with white fringe hanging off the bottom of my red skirt. I'll take the floor and pick up the mic. The band will watch for my signal.

# Red Birds

By Dwaine Rieves

Your daddy calls you the Price of his life. “At least the asking Price,” he tells the man who laughs like a monster before reaching down to shake your hand. You do not shake hands, never have and, until this moment, have never imagined that your daddy could talk so much like a preacher. So, is he selling you or his life? This is your first memory of your daddy talking to a strange man, you and your daddy on the sidewalk outside the barber shop, the strange man someone important because your daddy holds you by the shoulders, so it is impossible not to shake hands with this black-suited stranger who wears a hat like old men do in yellowy pictures. The stranger’s not that old but the church is full of old men. Sometimes it seems they’re turning the whole town a little yellow, that kind of sandy color God probably knew some places best be pictured in.

The yellow is also a reflection from the walls of your house, a kind of washed-out yellow that your daddy calls the natural look of Santa Fe stucco. It is 1961 and the world is modern, so you watch your house a lot this year, not only as you walk home from school, but sometimes during the day when you poke your head above the high windows in your classroom to find your stucco house looking back at you from halfway down the street, its big picture window fixed like a radar antenna on where you are, the house doing its best to figure out what you’re learning in school. It’s different from other houses, a difference that you’re not sure is good or bad. Your daddy works at the bank, your mother too, so you hope people understand your house has to be modern and different because of the money things they do.

“Price, say hacienda for Miss Hattie,” your mother said not so long ago. You spouted it out through some missing teeth, and then your mother repeated it. “Ha-chee-enya—isn’t that cute?” Miss Hattie, who lives next door in a house with a roof shaped like a pyramid and a porch that runs all the way around it, laughed but your daddy



didn't. He pulled at his collar and looked at your mother in a way that Miss Hattie noticed. "Peggy, don't tease him," he said before he walked away to do something important. He's very proud that you're a boy.

December is another afternoon after school when you're stretched out on the new couch. You're watching television and eating marshmallow treats, which your mother made. She gets off early on Wednesdays, so she's already collected clothes from the line and will soon start ironing, but until then, she's catching up with Miss Hattie on the telephone. Today is different, you can tell it from the way the marshmallow drips really slow when you hold a treat above your mouth. You can also tell it from the way your mother slammed the ironing board on the Santa Fe tile, the way it screeched when she spread the steel legs. It's different because there may be ice soon outside. That's what she said when she first called Miss Hattie. They've gone on from there, moved on to serious things.

"Hattie, I've had it with him," she says and you think *me*, she's had it with *me*. You're the *him* she's telling Miss Hattie about, something the house picked up on radar, something she'll later tell your daddy once you're in bed and watching the lights go out.

"Absolutely right—you were, Miss Hattie. At the bank yesterday, someone left the newspaper unfolded on my desk, that picture face-up. No...no telling what people think."

You hold the rice crispy treat in the air, watch the white goo leak out. It's not about you. It's about the newspaper, the one that's unfolded on the coffee table where they left it last night. You heard them through the walls.

"Oh, he said exactly what you'd told me he'd say—just an advertisement for Gerald's flower shop, that open house next week. Said Gerald's funeral home was doing better than his flower business. But both of them, there in that picture, two years in a row?"

The sound of her voice is like the white goo, too cold to be runny. Pull a treat apart and it sticks in the air. Gerald is just a friend. She ought to know that by now. Friends act funny sometimes, even when they don't mean to.

“As if they're proud of it, the two of them propped like bookends before that church door—people can't help but think things.”

On the television screen, the duck has drawn a gun on an old prospector. They've gone at it before. The duck wins.

“No, from what I understand, Gerald stays in a motel... Well, maybe. I know Lucius has a room somewhere on the campus. Apparently the chapel has a few rooms they rent out to men.”

Your daddy called it a Goddamn room, a Goddamn room in a Goddamn cathedral. You didn't understand what God damned and the way your mother shouted, she didn't either. Just as you didn't understand why he went where he did that weekend, except that it was some kind of pageant, some ceremony called Hanging of the Green, which, when he first said it, made you think of a bad dream where your daddy and Gerald Dalton chased down the Martians and then hung them from the tree limbs, all those skinny green bodies whipping about in the breeze. Only it has to do with Christmas your daddy said, church decorations. Your mother sometimes helps decorate the church for Christmas. You don't understand what's wrong with him doing such a thing up where he went to college. That's why you need to go to college, to learn about Hanging of the Green.

“Oh, he says their days as roommates are long over. Says they drive up to Sewanee just for that pageant. God knows what they really do up there.”

Your daddy's got a diploma that's framed and on the wall behind his desk at work. When your mother started work at the bank she just picked the money stuff up, so she's taking some classes on Tuesday nights. You heard her tell Miss Hattie that she's keeping an eye on him. She doesn't seem to like where she sits at the bank.

“Well, he did...Sometimes during the summer, usually on Thursday nights, right after supper. Business talk, he’d say... What, Miss Hattie? Sure did, a little after midnight. So yes, I knew. But you better believe I put an end to those escapades.”

You believe in a lot of things, but you don’t believe your daddy was in an escapade. Escapades are like capers, like they have in old cartoons. Your daddy doesn’t watch cartoons and your mother doesn’t either. Maybe they both should. Anything can happen in a cartoon. The duck’s old-fashioned, fat in the behind like Miss Hattie.

“I told him point blank last night... I sure did. Lucius, I said, you go with that man next year, don’t come back thinking things will be the same.”

Static sometimes just means the cartoon’s old. It’s trying to be the same, but it’s not. You poke out your tongue and lick the hanging goo. You take it in a way that lets it sit in your mouth, nothing chewed. The prospector’s back. He didn’t die. You thought your daddy kissed your mother last night. You thought that was good, but then they cried.

“Well, he got the message. I think he’s learned a lesson. Sure do... There really wasn’t much to it, but even if there was... You’re right. It’s over, history.”

History reminds you of George Washington, but your daddy doesn’t look anything like George Washington. He’s tall and brown-eyed, always seems to be looking up, even when you know he’s not. At night, when he bends over you, he smells like the Navy, like the ocean when the battle ships go down. Your mother’s nice looking also although she seems to look down a lot. She can’t help it since her nose is Lebanese and heavy. She told Miss Hattie her blood’s Lebanese. You pray for her a lot.

“I don’t know what I would have done without you, Miss Hattie. Between Lucius and Price, work and school, I sometimes just feel like I can’t go on.”

Your mother does have a lot on her. You wish you could iron. Sometimes you pick up the dirty things. You wear socks. Socks keep your toes from going between the tweed and making holes in the couch cushions.

There's already a hole in one of the cushions, the one right below your feet. Your daddy said it looked like a rat gnawed on it, but it was really your toe. He laughed when he said it, but your mother didn't. She flipped the cushion, so the upside went down.

“Then I'll say to myself, just look at Miss Hattie, if she can raise six boys, I can raise at least one, give him a decent start.”

Decent is a word that, if it has a color, must look a lot like Santa Fe stucco, with ridges coming out where the ice cream was pushed about until all the milk evaporated and the cream turned to concrete and then stayed like that, stuck. You've scrapped off some parts that pooch out. It's chalky, nothing like real ice cream.

“I'm praying too, Miss Hattie. When Kennedy's sworn in, I'll bet the Pope will be sitting in the front row. At least we elected a man who knows war.”

At school, the teachers talk about war. You hear them out in the halls, at the corner where they smoke cigarettes. The war will start with Sputnik missiles, may come right over your school, but Kennedy's going to fight to keep the Russians out, even if he talks a lot to the Pope. You want to fight like Kennedy someday and go to college but you'll never go to Hanging of the Green. You'll fight if your daddy tries to take you up there.

\* \* \*

Christmas has come and gone. A new year starts tomorrow. Your mother is putting on her earrings while looking out the kitchen window where, you already know, the red birds are sitting on the steel cable that runs to a power pole. It's frosty out there and when you first looked, you thought it was snow, but it never snows in Georgia so the red birds make do. Your daddy says the frost freezes the bugs, holds them still so the birds can eat them, but once the sun heats up the grass, the birds disappear because the bugs have thawed out and gone down their

holes. Your mother's going to work today because they need banking people to work on the last day of the year, which must be important because they've sent your daddy to a really big meeting in Atlanta, which is why he was up so early. The birds must have been surprised.

Today you're to stay with Miss Hattie and watch television or go through her attic where she keeps the uniforms her dead husband used to wear. Your mother has the whole day arranged and, once she drops you off at Miss Hattie's place, it is to pass just as she said it would, except the day stays cold and your daddy stays in Atlanta.

\* \* \*

It is supper time already and your mother has cooked macaroni and cheese, mixed in some chips of Spam that, when washed off with the milk you spill into the bowl, look a lot like the tiny bricks a tornado tossed about when it came through. But it's good and your daddy would enjoy it also if he'd been on time only he's not, and your mother has called Miss Hattie. She's worried. You can tell it from the nervous way she squeezes the telephone receiver between her head and shoulder, so she can pull back the curtains and look out the kitchen window to see where your daddy's car is not parked.

"Miss Hattie, have you heard of bad weather up north?"

She writes her words in the air, points to the north, which is in the direction of Miss Hattie's house, only way beyond it and the school. The red birds probably head up there once the sun burns frost off the grass.

"Makes me wonder about car trouble."

Your mother is good about holding the telephone receiver, so her hands can move like the preacher's do when he tells a story, like when he described how Jesus saved the sinful woman that the Pharisees wanted to stone.

Russians are a lot like the Pharisees. They'd be better people if they had Spam in Russia. When milk meets cheese it looks a lot like stucco.

“I'm sure you're right. He's bound to call if the car needs towing.”

Your mother hangs up the telephone, and you both finish the macaroni and cheese and move to the living room where you stretch out on the sofa and watch Jackie Gleason while she sits at your feet. She runs her fingers down a page of one of those open book tests they give all the women who want to sit at new places in a bank. Sometimes she looks to the picture window and gives herself time to think. It's a college class, she's said, so it has to be decent and anything decent is also hard. That's how a college teaches people to think.

People who think a lot still need to feel things, so you are not surprised when your mother puts her hand on the sofa and looks up from her book and all that thinking. She likes to feel your feet, but soon she's up.

Your mother paces before the picture window, looks out the glass and you join her there, the two of you looking out to where the porch light has covered the front yard in a cold macaroni color that almost runs to the empty space on the concrete where your daddy's car should sit. Atlanta is a dangerous city. You've heard her tell Miss Hattie that, and she must remember it because she pulls a finger to her mouth as if she needs to bite the polish off the nail. She holds it there while Lawrence Welk polkas so loud on his television show it seems to upset her. She looks at you, says nothing and runs to the kitchen telephone. You follow her, sticking your head around the doorway and watching even though you are not a spy. You just worry about her a lot.

She has barely finished the dial when she tells Miss Hattie, “I'm calling the sheriff.” She braces her right hand on the kitchen counter as a lot of words come and go, and you can't follow them all because they're quick and spinning so fast they almost make you sick.

“I'll give you a buzz when I hear something.”

When your mother gives Miss Hattie time to speak, you know what she says. It's always what Miss Hattie says, something about keeping everybody in her prayers. She says it even when you first pick up the telephone and

then hand it right over. “Price,” Miss Hattie says, “I’m keeping ya’ll in my prayers.” You always feel a little sick when she says that because it sounds like she knows something’s about to happen, something that’s never good.

Once your mother hangs up the telephone, she holds her lips together tight then tells you everything is just fine, that Miss Hattie thinks there may be some sleet up toward Atlanta and your daddy is so smart he’s probably driving real slow, especially over the bridges. She tells you to go back to the couch and you do. Next thing you know, she’s waking you up and the flag’s flying on the screen while the television preacher prays.

“Price, let’s go to bed,” she says as you wipe the crust from your eyes. “I’m sure your daddy will be home any minute now.” She turns off the television, walks you down the hall, kisses you good night and tells you she will leave the porch light on, so your daddy can find his way home.

\* \* \*

This is not a dream and if you’ve been dreaming, then the dream is over because the doorbell is ringing. Dreams are meant to end by themselves, and if they don’t, there’s a problem. Like when somebody’s cow gets out. You grab your pillow, hold it to your chest just in case. A pillow can block a sword if it had to, or at least slow a bullet. It is a shield, a good one. You hold it like a Roman. “Price,” your daddy would say if he was here, “be brave.”

The doorbell is ringing again and there’s a shadow—it can’t be a burglar because it smells too much like your mother—moving down the hall. She walks like a cat when she’s not sure of things. But that’s during the day and this is night, so your daddy should be going to the door. He would already be there, if he was here. But tonight, he’s not here. You can tell it—your mother walks like a cat. Something bad has happened, just like Miss Hattie always knew it would.

Maybe your daddy is the man behind the door. Maybe he forgot his key and when your mother went to bed last night, she locked him out. She must think so because she's moving faster now. You can hear her stepping over the living room rug, moving to the door like it's important. A cat would be hiding behind the couch. She flips the switch on the front porch light. More yellow comes, the kind that bugs don't like. Then the lock, it is your mother unlocking the door. There's got to be a man out there, so she only cracks the door enough to look. You know how she likes to do things. But then she screams, and she's not supposed to do that. She screams again, so you jump from the bed and go.

You inch into the hall, the pillow before you for protection. Nothing is right. You're wrong. Your daddy never made it home last night. There is a war. You just feel it, there's too much breathing in the air. The army's been called up, troops surrounding your school, the new president coming through the door. He's serious. Maybe the Pope's been called. You lean against the wall, drop the pillow, move your hands along the wall and follow where they lead.

You bend low and peek, so your mother won't see you. But you can see her, your mother as you've never seen her before, shaking and pulling at the man in the doorway. He's trying to stay back from her, trying to keep her hands off him.

"Oh, Officer," she says, "don't tell me. Please don't tell me."

He will tell her. That's his job and the world better get ready for it. The officers are behind him. They're all here in the middle of a war, a really bad one. Your daddy is a casualty, a hero. You always knew he would be one. "The final sacrifice," the president will say and then put his hand over his heart. You'll salute like a soldier. Or maybe he survived, your daddy out in the car with the other officers, your daddy waiting for a surprise appearance. Your daddy saved the nation, the man in the suit will say, a heroic effort for a noble cause. The news though is probably bad. It is news about your daddy, news that your mother probably can't handle, but you can. You'll accept the medal on his behalf.



You listen as your mother steps back, so the official and his soldiers can come inside. You hold the corner, and when you look again, a soldier is hugging your mother, she on the couch rocking back and forth in his hands. He's a fat man in a caramel-colored uniform with black boots that reach his knees. There are others. Stars glow on their collars like little satellites, souvenirs from the important launches.

"I'm mighty sorry, Missus Beekman," the officer says. He says "mighty sorry" again and again, as if he is actually telling her about a secret tunnel they've had to build, this tunnel she and you will need to run through before the Russians come. When another uniformed man takes a seat in your daddy's chair, you bend forward so you can hear their secret plan.

"We got a telephone call at headquarters shortly after midnight. The police, the patrol up in Tennessee said they found a body at the University of the South, a man shot dead on the chapel steps up there. They had his wallet, ran the ID."

You shake. The bad words belong on the television, but they're not there. They're here, coming from a soldier who sounds like he's saying what a general told him to say. "Mighty sorry, Missus Beekman, just mighty sorry."

*Just* is the wrong word. *Mighty* is even worse. That officer's got it wrong, the general's confused. The guy shot dead is always the loser. Your daddy is no loser. Your daddy is big in Atlanta. He makes a lot of money. Your mother knows that, but she can't tell them that because they are soldiers who simply take orders. The orders have taken over. There is no plan. You are wrong. You close your eyes and check the wall.

"From the way they found the gun, it seems he shot himself.."

Something falls, hits the floor as your mother screams, a hard wet scream that spills loud then drags her down there with it. It does. It's wet and it drags her down.

You are scared, but you do it anyway. You run into the room and see her there. You see your mother looking up to you, your mother on the floor and raising a hand. You reach for her, you scream also and she takes

you into her hands. You both are alone, so alone down here on the floor. There is no tunnel, no secret plan. She pulls you to her chest and together you rock, just the two of you at the knee of the man who wears boots that reach his knees.

\* \* \*

The funeral home is a place where people don't belong. The rugs on the floor are thick and fancy. The shapes in the wool look like the colors swirled to the point where they got stuck. Red is darker than blood, blue something lint will always stick to. Miss Hattie's front parlor is a lot like the Dalton Funeral Home. It's supposed to be used only for special occasions, like when the preacher comes or something needs to be signed. The funeral home is like a museum. Nothing can be touched, so you stand back and hold your mother's hand as she hugs people who must like the smell of carnations.

Your daddy would not like this place. He wouldn't like the faces some of these people are making. He'd call them fake, tell people to lighten up. He'd tell them to get back to work. He'd be like Jesus, drive the moneychangers from the temple. This place is full of moneychangers. They're in disguise though because people write checks now and try not to talk about it. Women poke at the flowers and whisper. Men pretend to listen. Your daddy would tell you to watch out for spies.

You walk with your mother to the back room. She holds the arm of your grandmother and with her free hand she tugs you. You know where you're going—deep in the heart of the temple where they keep the bodies. But you follow because she needs help, the reinforcement of family. "Price, you're my family now," she said, "my reinforcement." She knew you'd like that word. You don't need to remember *reinforcement* now. You just need to remember there's a spy in this crowd. Your mother knows it. She knows who to look out for.

The casket is metal, long like an altar. But this is no church and these people no worshipers. They are here to watch, like moneychangers. You stand with your mother before the casket. People cry behind you, move closer to your mother's back. They think she might collapse, but you know she won't. She is a strong woman. She knows what must be done, and you're prepared to follow her orders. You'll need to start thinking like your daddy did.

Your mother's black dress crinkles at the elbows as she picks you up, so you can see. She wears gloves, each finger black and stiff. She moves like a machine. She lifts you high, so you can see the body. She moves closer, and then bends you forward, so you look him directly in the face. "Price Honey, just look. It's your daddy."

Your daddy lies below you, the top half of his casket open, the inner lid covered in puffy silk that's the color of milk but also seems to glimmer at times a little pink. The lamps at each end of the casket are tall, the fat white globes painted with red roses that coil among green vines and golden ribbons.

"Kiss him," your mother says.

She turns you within her arms, so now you see his face again. His skin is wrong, too dry and powdery. You look at this man who should be your daddy but is not, so you want to tell them all what you know, that this man is not who they say he is, that they've got it all wrong.

"Go ahead, Honey. Kiss him."

You turn away from the head, push at her arms.

"Price, you need to kiss your daddy. Go ahead, kiss him goodbye."

This is wrong—you can never kiss your daddy goodbye. This cold strange thing is not your daddy. She is wrong. They are all wrong. You look at her, all these people. They are nodding. They are all watching. Your

mother pushes your head down with her black fingers. You start to cry. Lilies reach up, Easter lilies that smell sweet and confused, the odor wrong as the body of Jesus was when they left him in the tomb. You need Jesus.

“Go ahead,” she says. “Kiss him.”

You sniffle some before you lean on into the casket. You try not to breathe, but you can’t help but smell the casket air, this fake smell of starch and money. It smells nothing like your daddy. It’s too full of the Holy Ghost, too white and cold. You close your eyes and kiss the face of this imposter. You kiss the cold stucco.

Your mother pulls you back to her black, crinkly chest. She holds you tight while everyone looks, while you pray for Jesus and his stucco taste to leave your lips. She lowers you to the floor, stretches her neck and looks up to Heaven. She cries quiet and you cover your eyes. You can’t help it, and she knows it—you can never kiss your daddy good-bye.

When you look up, a hand passes over your head, a hand in a black suit sleeve that gives where a stiff white cuff pokes through. The great hand reaches inside the casket and rearranges something before it withdraws. You look up and recognize Gerald Dalton, the undertaker your daddy was supposed to stay away from. Mister Dalton owns the funeral home. Your daddy never said he was a spy. Mister Dalton pulls a gardenia flower from somewhere within the casket and hands it to your mother.

Your mother goes hard as Mister Dalton holds the flower before her. She pulls you tight against her legs and holds you with one open hand while she looks at the flower. He pushes it closer to her, but she won’t take it.

People are watching. You can tell it because they’re shuffling about, breathing loud. The people are moving as though something needs to be done. But your mother is giving the orders now and they can only watch and listen.

“Sir, you’ve done enough,” she tells Mister Dalton without looking to him at all. She turns her head around, looks to your grandparents, and once she grabs your hand she pulls you back quick to where they stand.

Mister Dalton has stepped behind some flowers in the corner of the parlor. He must know he needs to hide. You can't be a good spy if you don't know how to hide. There's no question about it now—Mister Dalton is the spy. Even though he is some distance away, you can smell him, that stuff an undertaker must wear because bodies can't help but smell bad.

Your mother couldn't help but drop the flower. Your daddy couldn't help what he did either. You know that, you and all these people do. What they do not know is that they were wrong about that body in the casket, that you did not really kiss your daddy. You will never kiss your daddy good-bye. But you will say what they want you to say, pretend like they want you to pretend. And when the cold days come back, you will let the red birds keep thinking the frost is snow even though the bugs know better. Just as God knows Mister Dalton is a spy, and a spy like him doesn't stand a chance. People are smarter than birds. They know what might get away.

*The End*

# The Patriarch

by Ken Teutsch

The sun was warm on Dermott's back. In the leaves of the walnut tree above his head, a mockingbird let out a short virtuoso medley of greatest hits. It would be a real pleasant morning, he mused sadly, if it weren't for all the crashing and screaming. He tilted his head and listened to the clatter of scattered cutlery and the crack of splintering wood coming from inside the house. He sighed.

He looked at his shadow stretching out across the yard toward the pasture fence and tried to calculate the time. Still early. He glanced a little guiltily at the beer can in his hand. Well, not *that* early. Something caused a resounding THUD somewhere in the shadows behind the screen door. The window panes rattled. Dermott crossed his legs at the ankles and slouched a little farther down into his rusty, metal lawn chair. One of these days, he thought, the old man's going to pitch one of these and stroke out once and for all. He took a sip of beer. He found that the prospect did not exactly fill him with dread.

Dermott lifted the yellow hard hat from his head, scratched his brow and replaced it. He glanced at the other hard hat on the chair next to his. On the front were black, stick-on letters: "P-J." It had originally read, "P-JOE," short for Poppa-Joe. The front of Dermott's own hard hat read, "D R M T T." Vowels, for some unknown reason, seemed to lack the perseverance of consonants.

Dermott hated his name, vowels and consonants both. He would have gone by his middle name, but he didn't have one. Back when he moved off to Dallas he started telling people to call him David, a name he had no connection to, but which sounded sort of nice. He was back home now, though, where everyone knew him. He could not escape it. He was called Dermott because that's where he was born—Dermott, Arkansas. His mother and father had been on their way back to Mississippi after visiting family in Oklahoma; their car happened to break down in that nondescript location, and his mother had gone into labor before they could find someone to fix their transmission.

For Dermott's entire life his father had dutifully repeated the line that if the car had held out for another few miles, his son might have been named "Lake Village." It wasn't particularly funny in the first place, and had been droned out so many times over the years that it had ceased to be a joke even to the teller; it was just something he said. For that matter, had his father actually ever been joking in the first place? Clearly he couldn't be bothered to give the matter any thought at the time. (Dermott's mother was groggy from anesthesia and not consulted.) If they'd made it a few more miles, maybe Dermott actually would have been named Lake Village. If they had stayed a few days longer in Oklahoma, his name might be Bartlesville. Frankly, he was a little surprised he wasn't simply named Maternity Ward.

Inside the house a large piece of glass loudly became many smaller pieces of glass. Not the TV? No, that surely would have made a heavier crash. A mirror, maybe. Poppa-Joe's muffled voice echoed out the open door and across the yard, bellowing something that Dermott couldn't quite make out. It sounded like, "Raisin fixture!" Or possibly, "Grazing tincture!" Dermott tried to come up with curse words that sound like that, but couldn't think of any. Maybe Poppa-Joe was coining new ones. He was certainly much more creative along those lines than he had ever been with children's names.

Dermott had recently learned a new term. He had read it in an article on the internet. *Geriatric disinhibition*. He liked terms like that: slick, scientific ways of saying common things. Geriatric disinhibition sounded a lot better than, "too old to give a shit anymore." It's when an old fart decides that he has spent enough time obeying laws of society, laws of common courtesy, even laws of physics, and no longer considers himself bound by them. At some point the thought forms: "You know what? Nobody whose opinion matters to me is even alive anymore. Hell, pretty soon I'll be dead myself! From here on out I plan to do what I damn well please. Stand back."

Something rustled in the leaves above Dermott's head, and a large, round object thudded to the ground a few yards away. Dermott paid no attention; it happened all the time, and his skull was safe under its plastic dome.

Dermott and Poppa-Joe spent a great deal of time sitting in those chairs in the deep shade under the big black walnut tree, and for a surprisingly long stretch of the year the tree threw walnuts at them. In the past, when

the racquetball-sized things came rustling and thumping down through the branches they would both cringe, hunch their shoulders, squint their eyes, and try to draw their heads in like turtles. This was hilarious in the extreme to Dermott's brother Randall's two kids when they came to visit. So on Poppa-Joe's birthday a year and a half or so ago, the kids had presented them with the two personalized hard hats. The kids (or their father) may have meant it as a joke, but Poppa-Joe pronounced his the most sensible birthday present he had received in half a century. Now they never sat down without putting the hats on, even in the times of year when the nut threat was lowest. (At the moment, Fall was in the air. Nut Threat Orange.)

Their mother had been lucid when the time came to name Randall. That was their mother's family name. Randall also scored a middle name: Alan. They weren't sure where the Alan came from, but it clearly meant something to their mother. Dermott liked to think it was the name of an old boyfriend. Also unlike Dermott, Randall married and had kids of his own, with names of their own which were chosen by their own mother. These kids with their new names gave the old man his new name: Poppa-Joe. They did it to differentiate him from their mother's father, who was dubbed Poppa-Ray. Now everybody called the old man Poppa-Joe; he probably even thought of himself as Poppa-Joe. Amazing the power children have over grown people.

They just called Dermott, "Uncle Dermott." What else could they call him?

He up-ended the beer can and gurgled the rest of the beer down his throat. He would have liked to have gurgled another, but the ice chest was empty, and if there were any more beers left they were inside in the refrigerator, which, from the sound of things, was at the moment being beaten with something fairly heavy. Table leg, maybe. Possibly the hat rack. Dermott sighed again. This was shaping up to be... He had been about to think, "as bad as the Thing with the Suspenders," but stopped as the words began to form.

No. It wasn't likely to be *that* bad.

Randall, in addition to getting married and having children, which Dermott didn't, also went to college, which Dermott didn't, either. Dermott hung around doing odd jobs for a while, then moved to Texas for a job with Marathon Oil. Then they moved him out to Gillette, Wyoming. He didn't much like Wyoming. Having grown up in the wooded south, the open plains made him feel like a june bug on a beachball. At night he got the



feeling he might fall off into outer space. So he moved back to Texas. Then they laid him off. He tried to stay in Texas, but all the while he somehow knew he would come back here. Then he had to. His mother was dying.

That was a year carved out of his life, separated from all the others, and set on a steel table under a heat lamp. It was a year that drove both him and his father insane. Like, *clinically* insane. It had been rough on Randall, too, but Randall had his own family. After the funeral and all of that, Dermott had stayed to take care of his father. He felt that his mother would have wanted him to. In his grief-induced mania, Dermott became frantic to do anything he could to make his mother happy, as people often do for their loved ones once it's too late and doesn't matter anymore. But the old man didn't seem to appreciate it. He just kept asking, "When are you going back to Texas?" Finally it dawned on Dermott that Poppa-Joe didn't understand that Dermott was taking care of him. Poppa-Joe thought that *he* was taking care of *Dermott*. And he didn't like taking care of Dermott any more than Dermott liked taking care of him.

If his mother had been alive, she would have slapped both of them.

But there was nothing and nobody in Texas to go back to now, and no money to go back with. He got odd jobs here and there around town as he had when he was a teenager. He slept in the room he had slept in as a teenager. He and his father rambled around the house bumping into one another and getting on one another's nerves when they weren't sitting in the back yard dodging walnuts, drinking beer and getting on one another's nerves. And before you knew it, it was five years.

In three months it would be six. Six years.

Without a warning rustle another walnut crashed like a meteorite onto the metal TV tray next to his chair, sending empty beer cans springing into the air. Dermott jumped several inches into the air himself and glanced upward. "Bosch *rabbit!*" came a strangled yell from the house. "Menstrual *scabbard!*" Dermott began righting the scattered beer cans and sighed yet again. Maybe, he thought, I should should just take off the hard hat and end it all.

The unexpected crash brought Dermott's mind back to the Thing with the Suspenders. It, too, had been out of nowhere, and like many things that come out of nowhere, it had been coming for a long time. The old

man, never exactly a sweetheart even when at his best, started becoming steadily and progressively more irascible and short-tempered as soon as the moderating influence of their mother disappeared. He began from time to time to make known his preference in television programming by yelling and throwing a shoe rather than by hunting for the remote. He would upon occasion open a recalcitrant pill bottle by slamming it in the bathroom door. And he had so terrorized the poor half-wit teenaged girl who waited tables at the café that she hid in the back whenever he came in, and everybody had to walk to the kitchen door to get their tea glasses re-filled.

But the Thing with the Suspenders was most assuredly a watershed.

Poppa-Joe had always worn khaki pants—presumably since they were invented. Work, play, parties, funerals—it didn't matter. However, his spreading belly had reached the point where a belt was only an ornament, and nothing was holding up his britches anymore but wishful thinking. So, like it or not, he had to go over to suspenders if he wanted to go on wearing pants. Trouble was, they didn't make the kind that buttoned anymore (and hadn't for fifty years), and khaki waistbands are apparently slippery and ill-adapted to the little clips. So the clips tended to pop loose when strained by activities such as getting up, sitting down, bending, walking, standing or breathing.

It transpired that one Saturday Randall and his family were visiting, and everyone was out under the walnut tree. The neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Dollarhyde, had walked across the road to say hello and make note of how much the grandchildren had grown. (Mrs. Dollarhyde, although a decade or so younger, had been great friends with Dermott's mother, and felt a certain responsibility to spoil the grandchildren in her friend's unfortunate absence.) On that particular day Poppa-Joe's suspenders were being particularly devilish, and each snap of the suspenders made the old man snap back with barked cuss-words, which tickled the grandkids, but embarrassed Randall's wife. She finally asked him to watch his language in front of the children.

That's when the geriatric disinhibition kicked in full bore. Poppa-Joe began a loud pronouncement about his rights concerning what he could and couldn't say in his own God-damned yard, and decided to stand up while delivering it so it would be more official. That's when it happened. The strain caused one suspender to let loose

with a crack like a pistol shot, and the metal clip whacked Poppa-Joe just above his right eye with such force that he sat back down so hard that the metal legs of the old lawn chair bent and tilted him back to stare up into the walnut tree. He sat there a moment, stunned, as a trickle of blood rolled down his cheek. Everyone looking on sort of gasped. Dermott and Randall both rose to step over and help their father out of his warped chair.

And then the old man lost it.

First he started cussing with the speed and fluidity of a holy roller speaking in tongues. Then he kicked so violently at Dermott and Randall that they both retreated behind Randall's wife. He began to flail to left and right trying to extricate himself from the bent chair, all the while pulling on the suspenders in a violent effort to get them off of him before they could treacherously draw more innocent blood. Finally, one side of the chair buckled and sent him rolling across the ground, grappling with the loose suspender like Tarzan fighting a boa constrictor.

The children began to scream, especially the little boy, Sonny. He was ten, and had only a week or so before seen a video in health class about epilepsy. So he made an immediate diagnosis and began pointing and shouting, "He's having a sheezer! He's having a sheezer!" (His teacher having told the class in no uncertain terms that it is no longer properly referred to as a "fit.")

Now the old man, his white hair twisted in all directions and full of sticks and grass, his khakis besmirched by the walnut twigs, first sat up and then struggled to his feet, still cussing without apparently needing to take a breath, and managed to pry the suspenders loose from his waistband. Now he had them, and could turn his full fury on rending the filthy, rotten things to pieces. But the suspenders were made of elastic, so try as he might to tear them, the things just mocked him by stretching when he pulled them so that he stood there yanking them in this direction and that direction—left, right, left, right—like a maniac exercise instructor demonstrating an upper-body workout for the criminally insane.

Dermott and Randall just looked at each other, knocked temporarily back into helpless childhood by their father's behavior. Randall's look seemed to say, "You're the oldest—you tackle him!" And Dermott's stated, "But he likes you better."

In the meantime, Mr. Dollarhyde had frozen in place and would continue to sit like a lawn ornament until the entire episode was well past, at which point he would say, “Well, guess we better be getting on back across the road,” as though nothing had happened at all. Mrs. Dollarhyde, on the other hand, had jumped to her feet and was backing away with the back of one hand against her mouth like an actress beholding a rampaging savage in a silent movie. Randall’s wife, Lucille, who had been pointed out by many people both inside and outside the family as quite possibly the only one with any sense in the whole bunch, stood, gathered her two children behind her where her husband and brother-in-law were already cowering and began saying, “Poppa-Joe! Here! Here now!” Which did no good, but was about as reasonable a course of action as could be undertaken given the circumstances.

It was at this juncture that Poppa-Joe gave one great pull on the suspenders with his right hand, and lost his grip with his left. The ends of the hell-spawned things snapped outward and then back, with the sound of two pistol shots this time, and smacked the old man squarely in the face once more. And as suddenly as the commotion had commenced, silence fell on the shady space under the walnut tree like a lid slamming down on a freezer. Poppa-Joe slowly raised his hand to his face to feel the new, painful welts. Everybody else just stood and looked at him.

After a long moment, the frazzled, panting old man lowered his one hand and looked at the suspenders still gripped in his other hand. He looked slowly around the yard in all directions for a moment before marching straight ahead. Randall and Dermott jumped aside as he passed, Randall muttering, “Daddy?” in a half-hearted way. Poppa-Joe ignored him. Indeed, he ignored everything except his destination, which was the garden shed. He vanished into the shed for a moment and emerged with the axe in his hand. He stomped over to the large stump they used as a chopping block, put the suspenders down on it and began to systematically raise the axe and chop the suspenders into small bits. He was so intent on his work of destruction that he didn’t even notice when his khaki pants fell down around his ankles.

Dermott heard the screen door kicked violently open. He continued to stare placidly ahead across the yard as the horror movie sound effects of rasping, phlegmy breath and thumping, draggy footfalls approached behind him. There was a particularly disturbing whistle like there was a hole somewhere in the apparatus. The shape of his father moved into Dermott's peripheral vision and came around in front of the other lawn chair. The form paused, picked up the hard hat from the seat and flopped heavily onto it. It was clothed in about a half-acre of blue denim: since the Thing with the Suspenders, the old man had finally abandoned khakis and wore only coveralls.

Poppa-Joe put on the hard hat and slumped back into the chair, slowly shading down from fire-engine to his usual shade of red. Dermott waited quite some time before speaking.

“Did you notice if there was any more beer in the icebox before you beat it to death?”

Poppa-Joe took a deep breath, which seemed to finally get his respiration back into a more or less normal pattern.

“When are you going back to Texas?” he said.

## Cowboy Jamboree's Rural Press Series: Red Dirt Press, Shawnee, OK

by Adam Van Winkle (CJ Editor)

Aspiration is a funny thing, especially in the writing world. One may feel very accomplished at writing. To write something, even to write it well, is one thing. Publishing, reading, and working the craft of authorship is a whole 'nother.

Steven L. Parker, 76-year-old tribal judge and practicing attorney in Tecumseh, Oklahoma, is on the novel circuit for the first time in his life, reading what was once a manuscript that sat unread for years in his desk drawer in his office. Now, BS, his Dixie-noir crime novel from Red Dirt Press (Summer 2015), is a huge hit on the crime book circuit and in far-flung bookstores and western and crime reading groups. Now the judge finds himself signing autographs and reading at bookstores across the country, the special invited guest of Wyoming book clubs, and even reads to fans at senior citizen centers.

His book is a stunner: It is a hot, sultry summer in Little Dixie, Oklahoma in the 1970's. A young man commits a robbery that forever changes the course of his life and those around him. Rural poverty and injustices assert themselves as the norm not the exception; by the end of the novel the reader will feel that he or she lives in Crow, Oklahoma, the setting of this debut novel. An exciting read by an author who knows the interior terrain of the human heart, the traditions of a unique rural heartland, and most importantly, how to convincingly portray the universal human condition.

Part of the mission of Amy Susan Wilson at Red Dirt Press in Shawnee, Oklahoma is to discover the manuscripts sitting in drawers and locked away that folks need to be reading. She is looking for new and emerging voices writing from and about Red Dirt country and similar rural places. RDP boasts significant publications with well-known authors as well. New York Times Bestseller, Oklahoma Writing Hall of Famer, and Oklahoma Poet

Laureate candidate William Bernhardt released his latest volume of poetry with RDP entitled The Ocean's Edge (Summer 2016). JuliaNunnally Duncan's essays have appeared in journals including Evening Street Review, drafthorse literary journal, Prime Number Magazine, and others. Her poems have also appeared in scores of journals, including North Carolina Literary Review, Carolina Woman Magazine, Western North Carolina Woman, and Heyday Magazine. To date, she has published three poetry collections, two novels, two short story collections and one essay collection. Her next poetry collection will come out under Red Dirt Press (2017).

"Publishing is the Wild West right now," Wilson says of the industry. With a Columbia MFA and years of work at Simon & Schuster, Wilson speaks from experience. So why did she venture in with her own press? Simple: "We were getting so much good stuff for Red Truck Review, we had to do a press." Red Truck Review has since become Red Dirt Forum for relaunch under the RDP brand.

I asked William Bernhardt then, if publishing really is the Wild West, what factored into his submitting the latest volume of poetry to Red Dirt. His response focused on the talent behind the Press: "The Publisher at Red Dirt, Amy Wilson, contacted me not long after my first poetry book, The White Bird, was published and asked if I would like to do another poetry book with her. I didn't feel I was ready then, but about two years later I was, so I called her. There are not that many outlets for poetry these days, so when someone is kind enough to reach out to me, that's something I tend to remember."

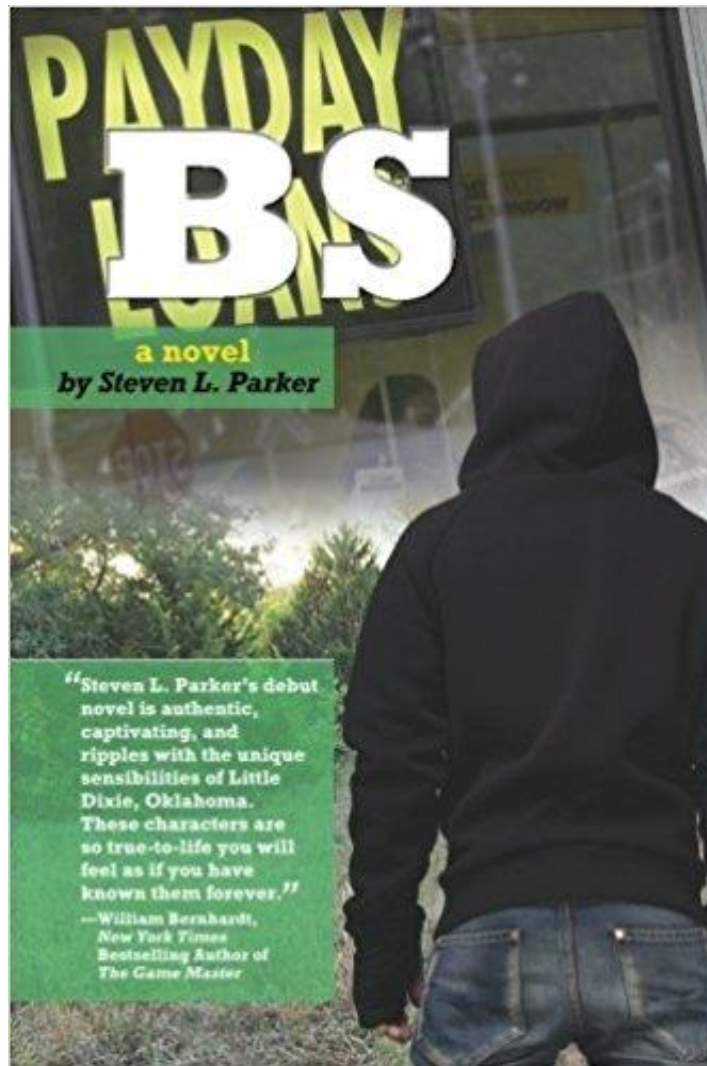
So RDP's editor is out there recruiting? "Absolutely," Wilson says, and lists Midwestern Gothic and The Southern Literary Review and World Literature Today and Steel Toe Review as places where such stuff is found. "We look," she adds, "to have several books shortlisted for the Oklahoma Book Awards in various categories this year." With recent features in Oklahoma Gazette, here, and elsewhere, RDP is certainly carrying its load to support and promote rural writing with Wilson at the helm.

You don't have to wait for Wilson to find your work if you are an interested author, there are open submission periods for book queries and manuscript submission. That said, RDP looks for the best in New South and rural writing. And often, Wilson says, that means a lot of heartbreaking rejections. "I just rejected sixteen in a row,"

she says of a month's reading work.

Check out [reddirtpress.net](http://reddirtpress.net) or their page at the Poets & Writers press database ([http://m.pw.org/small\\_presses/](http://m.pw.org/small_presses/)) for more information, how to contact and submit, and to check out the fantastic rural writing RDP has to offer.

And so, Steve Parker and others have found home under the Red Dirt heading and look to build on. In addition to his legal profession and running his own cattle, Parker is nightly hard at work on his follow-up to his debut novel. He has, after all, an awaiting audience.





## House Next Door

By Julia Nunnally Duncan

My uncle Lloyd died of a massive heart attack when he was forty-four years old. It was May 14, 1965, and I had turned nine the month before.

Lloyd was my father's younger brother, and he and his wife Jewell lived in the house next door to my family. So on that day in May we lost not only our kin, but also our next door neighbor. Such a loss in our rural North Carolina neighborhood was great because the families on our street were close. Like the close-knit residents of Mayberry on *The Andy Griffith Show*, most of the folks in my neighborhood attended the same community church, the children went to the same school and played together, and we constantly visited each other's houses. Neighbors joined for Sunday afternoon picnics or even weekend trips to Myrtle Beach. We ate out together. In fact, a couple of days before Lloyd's death, he, Jewell, and my family shared a meal at our local Pilot House Restaurant. During this time, Petula Clark's song "Downtown" was the number one hit, and it played on the car radio during our drive back home.

A good-looking man who favored the actor Robert Young and was affectionately nicknamed "Peach," Lloyd was a World War II Army veteran, straight-laced, and dedicated to our Baptist church. He was our choir director and a Sunday school department head. He was also a skilled organist. He had a spinet organ in his living room, which he once showed me how to play. I always thought it unique that he owned an organ. Most families then had an upright piano in their house, but rarely an organ.

He was a good uncle. Though he and Jewell had no children, he seemed to enjoy my company. He gave me a little job of finding lost golf balls he'd putted in his backyard and paid me a dime per ball. This was good money for a child. But most importantly, he gave me one of the most meaningful gifts of my life. When I was seven and started into his backyard to play, as I often did, I noticed that he was standing at his back stoop, a sable and white collie puppy frolicking about his feet. At the time my favorite television show was *Lassie*, so I raced to

see the puppy. Lloyd saw my excitement and put the puppy in my arms. As I nuzzled my face in its soft neck and savored its puppy aroma, Lloyd said, “Would you like to have that puppy?”

I couldn’t believe what he was asking.

“Yes!” I said.

“Well, go ask your mama and daddy.”

I ran home to ask and quickly went back to get the puppy. I named him *Laddie*, and he would be my constant companion for many years.

On the morning of Lloyd’s death, my mother was in Jewell’s kitchen, applying a color treatment to Jewell’s hair. Around eight o’clock, Lloyd came home unexpectedly from his job as a supervisor at Broyhill Furniture plant. He went straight to his bedroom and lay down. It was odd for Lloyd to come home this way. Like my father with his hosiery mill job, Lloyd took his furniture plant job seriously and must have hated leaving his workers unsupervised.

Jewell and my mother heard a strange noise, as if Lloyd were in distress. Jewell went to the bedroom to see what was wrong.

Soon she came back into the kitchen and exclaimed, “He’s dead!” Apparently, he had died before she reached him.

Frantic, her hair still wet with the color solution, Jewell rushed across the street to get our older neighbor Neal. Neal immediately called McCall’s Funeral Home, which sent an ambulance to get Lloyd’s body. According to Lloyd’s death certificate, he died at home at 8:15 a.m.

I’ve always been troubled by Lloyd’s premature death. For years I’ve heard the same story: the day before he died, Lloyd had been to the hospital for medical tests, and, according to my mother, “He had been sent away with a clean bill of health.”

But, obviously, something was not right.

In going through my grandmother's old letters, I found one that my aunt—my father's younger sister—had written to my grandmother from Sacramento, California, where she lived at the time. The letter was dated March 29, 1965—six and a half weeks before Lloyd's death. She wrote: "I'm glad there wasn't too much wrong with Lloyd's stomach."

My mother, too, has remarked that before his death, Lloyd "had been sick with stomach problems."

Like Lloyd, my maternal grandmother received a dismissive diagnosis when she grew ill in 1962. Suffering from back and chest pain, she sought a doctor's help. He came to her house, examined her, and concluded that the cause of her pain was "chronic neuritis." As it turned out, she had actually suffered a heart attack. The next day she was taken to the hospital where she died.

Lloyd's death certificate states that his immediate cause of death was "massive coronary occlusion," and the antecedent cause was "myocardial infarction."

Upon further investigation, I have found that the symptoms of myocardial infarction include nausea and vomiting—symptoms that might be mistaken for acute indigestion.

So I believe that Lloyd's doctor, like my grandmother's doctor three years earlier, did not detect his severe heart problem, perhaps misdiagnosing his symptoms as indigestion and erroneously sending him home "with a clean bill of health." When Jewell heard the noise in the bedroom and went to see what was wrong, she was totally unaware of Lloyd's dire heart condition. His death certificate states that the interval between the onset of his heart attack and his death was six minutes. It's no wonder she didn't get there in time.

That first night after Lloyd's death, Jewell was distraught, probably still in shock, and didn't want to stay in the house alone. My mother stayed with her.

As was still the custom at that time, my uncle's body was brought home to lie in state. His open casket was set up in the living room, where family, friends, neighbors, and church members gathered to view his body and pay their respects. Women brought an abundance of food to Jewell's kitchen for anyone who might be hungry.

After the funeral at our church, Lloyd was buried at McDowell Memorial Park, a recently established cemetery on the outskirts of town.

Following the burial, Jewell continued to feel uneasy about staying alone at night. Her own family lived some distance away in the mountains of Yancey County. My first cousins, two sisters aged seven and eleven, volunteered to spend one night. They arrived early that spring evening, and we played outside till dark. My mother stayed another night.

But one weekend morning my mother said, "Jewell asked if you would spend the night with her tonight."

I imagined that my two cousins might be there again, and it would be a sort of pajama party.

"Yes," I said.

As the afternoon passed and evening came, I realized that my cousins were not coming. I began to fret and dread the sunset. I dared not go outside to play for fear Jewell might see me and call me up there. The thought of being trapped all night in a lonely house with an aunt I didn't really know that well tormented me.

I made no moves to prepare for my overnight stay. Around dusk I sneaked on my pajamas and slipped into bed. My parents were down the hall in the front room watching television. My older brother was still outside playing with friends. In a while, my mother, who must have been looking for me, came into my bedroom.

"Julia," she said, "you ain't gone to bed, have you? Ain't you going up to Jewell's to spend the night? You said you would."

Playing possum, I shifted and pretended to rouse. I mumbled, "I'm already asleep." Burrowing deeper under my covers, I rolled over to face the wall. I hoped my mother couldn't hear my heart thumping.

She quietly left my room and went up to Jewell's house herself. She never scolded me for going back on my word. She must have understood how I felt.

To my relief, Jewell never asked me again to stay overnight. In time, she left our street, moving back home to Micaville in Yancey County. For a short period, she rented her vacant house and then sold it to my oldest brother and his wife. So once more we had kin living next door.

Jewell never remarried, and when she died in 2009, she was brought back to McDowell County to be laid to rest beside Lloyd at Memorial Park.

Today, my nephew and his family live in the house that once belonged to my uncle Lloyd. When I look at it, I remember the days when I played in his backyard, Laddie by my side. But I also recall a promise that I broke to a grieving widow who did not want to stay there alone.

Like the song "Downtown," the house reminds me of a sad moment in my family's history.

## Merry Christmas, Love Mama

By Nancy Faulkner Sackheim

At 4 a.m., less than thirty minutes into one more attempt at a bad night's sleep, my phone rings. "Mama's bleeding inside her head, and it's shoved her brain over to one side!" My little sister may not have a medical vocabulary, but she knows how to get a point across.

"I'm at the emergency room. Mama fell down last night and I couldn't wake her up this morning. The doctor here says she's not going to, but it's Kenny Enwright, and you know Mama can't stand Dr. Kenny 'cause he wanted to cut her neck open when all she had was Bell's Palsy. I don't know what to do. Ya'll got to get here now."

"You talked to LeeDavis, yet?"

"No ma'am." Fairly rasps, her voice the casualty of an assorted drugs/cheap red wine-related car accident from her private Christian Academy high school cheerleading days.

"I'll call her. I'll get there as quick as I can. Is Harley with you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Crises tend to formalize interactions in the South, even among family members. Fairly is just one yes ma'am away from full blown hysteria. Thank God for Harley. He may be red neck and overly fond of Crown Royal and Seven, but he loves Fairly, and that makes him a prince in my book.

I walk over to the bank of windows that surround this bedroom. Zuma Beach below and Pacific Coast Highway winding off into the sparse Southern California Coastal hills. Headlights crisscross in the distance and faint whoops of joy rise from predawn surfers catching a wave. I dial the number I know by heart. My big sister. LeeDavis. The doctor who knows a massive brain hemorrhage when she hears one.

“This ought to be it. It would be for anybody else. But I wouldn’t count on it.” As the oldest, LeeDavis has experienced more of Mama and is the least sentimental. She and Mama got off on the wrong foot before LeeDavis' eyes were even open.

The first born son in Mama's family is always named after the Father of the Confederacy. Mama is a firm believer in tradition, but after LeeDavis was born, she had no intention of repeating any of the child producing process. What she failed to think through was how five-year-old LeeDavis would feel on her first day of school when she had to answer present to Jefferson Lee Davis Davis. It was particularly unfortunate that Mama had married a Davis. Later on, much later on, Mama had me out of guilt and Fairly was happenstance. Her words exactly.

I tuck the phone into my neck as I take three pairs of slacks, all black, from my closet and slide them off their hangers. I dig through one drawer and then another, pulling out sweaters and t-shirts, black, green, purple, red. I put the red one back, then pull it out again, and toss them all on the bed next to the slacks. Shoes. I need shoes. I walk back to the closet. Do I have any shoes that aren't sandals?

"I know you said you'd never go back there, LD, but...." hoping she'll say yes before I begin coercive tactics. I do not want to be there without her.

“It’s the week before Christmas. I’ll have to use all my frequent flyer miles and fly standby. I’ll pay a ransom for the last broken-down cigarette-reeking rental car in the lot and drive two hours through Jesus country before I pull into that rutted gravel driveway. It will be cold and wet and miserable, just the way I remember it. Then, Mama will come out of her coma to say, ‘Do you realize how fat you’ve gotten?’ I’m fifty-four years old. I know exactly how fat I am. Of course I’m going. Wouldn't miss it.” And hangs up. LeeDavis has never seen the point in saying goodbye to end a call. If you're done, you hang up. LeeDavis is aware, and doesn't care that most people don't agree with her.

Five hours into the next day, not yet dawn, but almost, I turn the corner onto the street of my childhood, then into the rutted gravel driveway, veering to the right to park alongside a red Yaris, Toyota's version of a clown car. Must have been all LeeDavis could get. That rental car agent has already gone out on stress-related disability. Guaranteed.

I turn off the ignition, then the lights and for just a moment I stare at the house I grew up in, its uneven white wood siding and thickly-painted black trim blurred by icy, unrelenting rain. Not so big after all. Just an old house. I twist my neck back and forth, wiggle my shoulders. Time to get out. Attempting to stay dry as possible, I slide across the front seat, shove the passenger door open with my foot, and haul out my purse and suitcase before sprinting to the front porch.

Same white swing, same black rocker. Different cushions. Two steps up to the door. Gathered sheer window curtain looks the same. Unlocked. It always was. Everyone always welcome, particularly strangers. Fresh audiences for Mama.

LeeDavis sits at the kitchen table. She's been here since midnight she says. She looks like one of those guys in prisoner of war movies. She's not making eye contact.

Fairly stands at the counter in a long blue terry cloth robe with the hood up. She's emptying a bottle of generic 100 proof rum into a white bowl, which she's guiding on the turntable of an ancient Hamilton Beach stand mixer. The beaters are going at a pretty good pace, except for an occasional hitch when one bent blade clips another. The raw smell of cheap rum reminds me of the days when Daddy sat there with a bottle of Old Charter nestled in a brown paper bag, tipping a little Coca Cola into his whiskey glass between every two or three Pall Malls.

Fairly looks up from the bowl, "Hey, Jane. You made it. LeeDavis and I have been talking and talking. I'm making a rum cake for visitation tomorrow. It'll be ready in forty-seven minutes if you want a piece." She beams at me like I got there just in time for the morning coffee klatch. A stranger might think she was in shock. Family knows that's just Fairly



In the middle of the table is a newspaper folded open to an ad for “Fairly’s FotoArts; specializing in family portraits, holiday themes, school photos, and boudoir romantic photography.” I look a little closer and see there’s a photo of our mother in the ad, back arched, sporting angel wings and a tinsel halo. She looks like she’s about to lift off. I glance at LeeDavis. She looks straight ahead and murmurs, “Fly away, Mama. Fly away.”

“Isn’t she the cutest little angel? I was mad as all get out at the paper when the ad didn’t come out Monday like they said it would. But then, it came out yesterday. I’m wondering if the newspaper didn’t hit the sidewalk almost exactly the same time Mama passed. I bet it did...God’s plan.” Fairly nods at us with righteous Christian conviction, then holds up the paper so we can get a better look. “I got copies for ya’ll. I was going to photograph the kids as little Christmas angels this year, you know, something different from sitting on Santa’s lap, but the wings came in too late. I got Mama to wear ‘em instead for my weekly ad. Let me go hunt up those copies.”

Fairly walks out of the kitchen, and LeeDavis’ eyes snap into focus. “I put my stuff in Fairly’s old room. The bed has three mattresses piled on it, but the door locks.”

That leaves me in the living room on a 40-year-old sofa bed. Mama bought it from my best friend’s mother June Ann when she went into Long Term Care at the hospital. She wasn’t sick or anything, just tired of taking care of herself. Mama took it as a personal affront that June Ann gave up, but that didn’t stop her from buying the sofa for \$25. June Ann was asking \$50, but Mama talked her down, saying it should be kept among friends so one day if June Ann changed her mind and moved out of long term care, at least she’d have a bed to sleep on. Mama would have charged her \$40 to get it back.

Fairly comes back in to present us each with a copy of our winged and haloed Mama. She leans in to hug LD, who feints left and leaves the room. Fairly looks after her and says, "Poor thing. Did you see how she almost broke down?" I ended up with both hugs, and made my way to bed with the faint aroma of rum clinging to the back of my shirt where Fairly's hands had clasped me close.

In the old living room, the sofa has been opened out into a bed and made up with fish sheets. Not “Finding Nemo” fish sheets, but “Bubba, I got me a big mouth bass” fish sheets. The pillowcases are blue and white striped and have bright yellow stars here and there circled with the phrase, “When you wish....” I decide not to

go to bed after all. It's 5:30 a.m.

The first ham arrives two hours later. Food is the universal sign of condolence in the South, and nothing says I'm sorry for your loss like a baked ham. By noon we had four. By late afternoon we had an even dozen.

Mama's Sunday school class brought over an endless parade of covered dishes. Baked beans, green beans, potato salad, canned pear halves with mayonnaise, grated cheddar cheese and half a maraschino cherry. Mysterious casseroles with fried onion rings on top. Pans with instructions taped to the foil covering, "reheat at 350 for 20 minutes, but also good cold."

Before long we've loaded the kitchen and dining tables, set up a card table and cleared all flat surfaces. Most dishes have either Campbell's cream of mushroom soup or Velveeta cheese in them. Except for the desserts. Two pecan pies, one burnt. Three chocolate cakes (one of them made from a box). Banana nut loaf, banana cream pie, banana chiffon cream pie, one each. Two pound cakes, one lemon ice box pie, a chocolate chess pie, 15 devil's food chocolate cupcakes, and a quart of nonfat Cool Whip. Fairly's 100 proof rum cake is nestled right in the middle of all those teetotaler sweets. There's also a jumbo size package of Jitney Jungle assorted cookies which sits unopened, but on display so nobody's feelings get hurt.

Some time after the Methodists down the street deliver a cream cheese strawberry jello sheet cake, it starts sleeting. Then the temperature drops, and everything begins to freeze. All night long we hear tree branches cracking and the crash of an occasional car sliding into another. By the next morning we are in the midst of a full-fledged ice storm. Nobody can get out. Nobody can get in. It is just the three of us, twelve hams, baked beans for sixty, twenty-two assorted side dishes (most containing kernel corn) and nine desserts apiece.

The church service is postponed a day. Flying back to California in time for Christmas looks to be a prayer that will go unanswered. LeeDavis has the gray, haunted look of a prisoner without parole. She picks all the pecans off the good pie, then starts on the burnt one. She follows that up with three German chocolate cupcakes, a slice of blueberry pound cake, and takes a tablespoon to the cool whip.

I break two plastic openers on the wine bottle I'm holding between my knees, then begin digging out the cork

with a butcher knife. When I get deep enough that the blade is too wide to fit in the opening I switch to a wood-handled coca cola ice pick. It's older than I am, and more than a little rusty, but still has a sharp point.

Fairly stays on the phone letting people know how Mama died. Every once in a while she gets a wrong number. She tells them, too. They offer their condolences and say they'll try to make the funeral if we get a thaw.

Soon after I break through to the wine, the central heat stops blowing hot air. This is beginning to rank right up there with all the Christmases of our childhood.

Every Christmas Eve Daddy would go down to Jay's Department Store where one of his sisters worked, and have her pick out a present for Mama. Then he'd go down to the VFW to share the cheer of the season. By the time he was all cheered up, we were late for gift opening at our cousins, and Mama would be throwing stuff in her suitcase saying she was leaving and never coming back and whatever we did when we grew up we should never get married on Christmas Day to an alcoholic who can't take five minutes to buy his wife a present.

Then Mama would bang open the screen door and head out down the front steps dragging the big brown suitcase with the matching train case while we hung on to the sides trying to pull her back inside. She'd eventually let us. Afterward, we'd cry till we hiccupped ourselves to sleep listening to her scream at Daddy about how she should have known he'd never amount to anything, and how Christmas Day is the worst day of her life every year. Then the next morning we'd wake up and go see what Santa brought us. We never remembered about Christmas Eve from one year to the next when we were little. I don't quite remember when we began to dread it.

# Some People Always Have to Lose

By Terry Barr

“Well who knows/Have we really changed/Some say we have/Reflecting our past/Who can say/Who can say?”

--Buckingham-Nicks

I first watched color TV at Jerry’s house. It was New Year’s Night, 1968, and our families were absorbed as Tennessee, SEC champion, played Oklahoma, Big 8 champion. Tennessee missed a game-winning field goal at the very end and lost by two points. As Alabama fans, we hated the Tennessee Vols. Still, they represented the SEC, our home conference, so we had to pull for them. Jerry’s dad, the Rooster, had another reason, however, that motivated his Volunteer war cries:

“Oklahoma is full of niggers.”

He meant, of course, the team, not the state. I haven’t looked up the demographics, but I’d bet that even back then, the greater Birmingham area, including our town of Bessemer, could rival the entire state of Oklahoma when it came to the African-American population living there.

Back in this era, no one playing football, or any other sport, in the Southeastern Conference was Black. And though there were other Black guys playing for the Sooners that night, the Rooster was particularly livid about Oklahoma’s star nose-guard, Granville Liggins. Even before the game started, he predicted that Tennessee’s very white starting center, Bob Johnson, was “gonna murder that nigger Liggins.” And from time to time during the game, indeed, Johnson’s driving block put this twenty-one-year old college guy, who was simply trying to be his

best, on his back. I remember the glee in the Rooster's voice, the maniacal laughter during those, for him, vindicating moments, despite the fact that Liggins' Sooners maintained a 10-12 point lead for most of the game.

It's funny, but the two things I remember most, maybe the only two things I remember about that game, were the Rooster's laughter about Liggins lying on his butt after Johnson's block, and the fact that all the Volunteers were white.

The SEC would soon integrate, and oddly, Tennessee would be one of the first teams to do so. Our beloved Alabama Crimson Tide, however, would be one of the last.

That New Year's night almost fifty years ago sticks with me so vividly, however, not because of the Rooster, a limited man, but because of his son Jerry whose slim frame, pleasant face, and blond hair caused him to look nothing like his father. Yet, as in so many cases with an oldest son—and in this particular case, the oldest son who was an only child—Jerry was the Rooster's pride and joy, the target of most of his attention and, I'm sure, his love.

For even a man like the Rooster felt love.

Truly, the Rooster gave Jerry both material and immaterial gifts many of us never had. Jerry had the first motorized trail bike I ever saw. Coached by the Rooster, Jerry became the ace pitcher for his little league team, The Bessemer Boosters, and could fire a pitch easily past my eyes. But Jerry also had a pretty mean temper if he didn't get his way, and a foul mouth, also inherited from his dad. He'd call you a "bastard" or a "fucker" quicker than any kid I knew.

Things must have been tough on Jerry, the Rooster managing the Boosters and all. He continually challenged Jerry to throw harder, to win...or else. The Rooster literally crowed every time Jerry pitched a complete game win.

What happened when Jerry lost, the "or else," I never saw.

But those losses and that challenge, I don't think, affected Jerry nearly as much as the one he must have heard and felt every day of his school life after 1966, the year Bessemer's school system finally integrated.

My parents instructed my brother and me to never use the word "nigger."

"It isn't polite," they said.

"It's a sign of improper breeding," they believed.

Yet, whenever we were around Jerry and his parents, we all were doused with a liberal spray of "nigger" this and "nigger" that. These weren't the casual references to Black people used by the classic Old South gentry. These were the references you'd spell "niggah." You'd hit that first syllable hard. You'd curl your upper lip when you sounded it.

You might spit afterward, or at least give the impression that you wanted to.

Jerry's mother Nancy, unlike the Rooster, was not a native of Alabama or a native southerner at all. As my mother said, Jerry's mother was one of those "loud-mouthed Yankees." She'd be quick to add, though, that Nancy "meant well" and "would do anything for you and do it big":

"We were playing bridge one night," my mother said one morning, "and Nancy brought out a plate of sandwiches for the four of us. There must have been ten or twelve sandwiches on the plate! Even the Rooster yelled, 'My God, what do you think we are, Nancy!'"

"Yeah," my father said, "and then she brought out another plate with just as many as the first one! How she thought we could eat all that I'll never know."

Then, too, Nancy would splurge on the 25-cent ICEE's for all of us; she'd be willing to take us to Cherokee Beach—really a lake in Shelby County—or to Joe Harper's Par 3 anytime we wanted. I think she probably encouraged Jerry to do well in his schoolwork, to be a good boy and, like me, a pack-obeying Cub

Scout. She and my mother were both den mothers, both heavily involved in the school PTA. She took Jerry to the Baptist church every Sunday morning, while we were living through Methodism two blocks away.

The one thing she never did with Jerry, however, was correct his mouth. I don't know if it was the Rooster's influence or whether she had always spoken it even back home in the Great Midwest. But from her mouth too, Black people were one thing and one thing only. Jerry never had a chance.

It was another gift his parents gave him, and skinny though he was, Jerry's voice carried long and loud. So when he uttered the "N" word, with a volume claiming and carrying authority, everyone heard it. And to my memory, no one challenged it. My memory, though, never took me far inside Jerry's house, when it was just the three of them.

The things they must have said. The races they had to run.

Because I was two years older than Jerry, who was in turn two years older than my brother Mike, our paths diverged when I reached high school. We lived only three blocks from each other, so it wasn't as if I never saw him. But each high school year is equivalent to dog years in the social fabric of a teenager's life. After Jerry turned sixteen and could drive, I'd see him sometimes at the local hangouts: Pasquale's Pizza, CT's Game Room, or Jaws Lounge. Places to play foosball or air hockey. Places to try to weezle underage beer. Places to leave in order to smoke joints in cars. Everyone back then smoked joints, for ounce bags cost only \$15. I'm not sure that I ever shared a joint with Jerry, but the point is that I could have. In so many ways we were all alike: rebellious rock and rollers; long-haired, patched-jeans-wearing Bessemerites.

White boys.

By those high school years, many of us had quit saying "nigger," regardless of whether or not we thought it. While I wasn't certain as to which way Jerry was leaning during these years—what he thought about race, culture, or politics (the Rooster was a staunch George Wallace man, but then, my own parents voted for Nixon in 1972, so

the times did seem to be changing, back)--there was a moment I can't forget: a moment in which Jerry did something uncharacteristic of anyone else I knew then.

I don't know where his parents were on this particular Friday night. I was home from the local college I attended and ready to meet up with old friends. Jerry had the house to himself, and like most normal kids of late high school age, he staged a party. The house was packed with many of my current and former high school friends carrying six packs of Bud or Sterling, with burning joints crossing each other's paths. As parties go, it never got out of hand, but what I remember best, even in the clouded state I floated through that night, was sitting on that very couch where eight or nine years earlier I had watched the Vols lose to the Sooners: where Bob Johnson, a white center, had touched the skin of Granville Liggins, a Black nose-guard.

I was looking through Jerry's album collection. In the background, the Allmans were singing something about "running and hiding," but in this room, the lights were up, and I saw in the midst of so many records one I didn't have, but wanted: the first and only Buckingham-Nicks album. These two would join Fleetwood Mac in another year and forge one of the hottest rock acts of the late 70's and 80's. But right then, they were hot mainly in Birmingham.

"Man, I love this record," I said to Jerry.

"You can take it if you want," Jerry said.

He smiled as he said it, genuinely.

"You sure?"

"Sure man. I don't mind."

For the only time I knew him, Jerry hurled a curve.



My intention that night was to take it, listen to it for a while, and then give it back to him. But I never did. We'd see each other on occasion, but he never asked for his record back or mentioned it at all. I'd think about what kind of guy gives an old semi-friend a record and what kind of guy never gives it back.

In many ways, I still don't know what to think of those two guys.

#

Decades have passed, and I still have that record on my basement shelf. Though vinyl has made a comeback, the needle on my turntable arm must be thirty years old. I could change it if I wanted, but on the rare occasions I need it, it still works. The Buckingham-Nicks record's sturdy vinyl makes me believe it would still sound good. Yet when I think of playing it, something inside makes me freeze. Something makes me refuse to wipe away the dust.

Maybe it's that something that keeps me from remembering, too, exactly when the Rooster died. Usually in our weekly phone calls, my parents inform me of who they've lost recently, and most likely that's how they told me. No special call to me; no need for comforting words.

What words do you utter when the person who died is a man who cheated at Par 3 golf; a man who regularly walked right into your unlocked house unannounced, with no formal greeting, not even a hello, found you in your den or kitchen, and stood there staring as if you should have known better? A man you spent so many Friday nights playing poker and bridge with?

The first man you saw wearing a jockstrap?

The man who kept calling African-Americans "nigger" until the day he died?

He died of some form of cancer, I think, and I was living either in Knoxville, Tennessee, where I had gone renegade for graduate school but still didn't root for the Vols, or in South Carolina where I got a job teaching

literature to liberal arts students. I didn't think of driving home for the funeral service, of calling Nancy or even Jerry. Too many years had passed, I consoled myself.

Is there is a statute of limitations on telling old friends how sorry you are for their loss, even if you aren't?

Yet, when my own father died in 2000 from Parkinson's-related complications, there at the funeral home, on the day after Christmas, was Jerry. He really looked the same, except for the blondish beard, but then, I had one of those too. He hugged my brother Mike, and me.

"Your dad was a good man," he said.

And while maybe I should have, I didn't, couldn't, say the same about his.

But Mike and I did tell Jerry how glad we were to see him. Jerry touched our hearts, and for a few minutes that winter morning, I saw us back in time, ICEE's in hand, a new ballgame awaiting in our summer yard.

What do we feel for our childhood friends?

"O mirror in the sky what is love?"

#

Four years ago in that sea of madness called Facebook, Jerry "friended" me. And then the madness truly set in.

I had heard he was divorced but had a daughter and now a granddaughter. My mother kept me informed of him via Nancy:

"I feel so sorry for her having to have lived so much of her life with Rooster! She's coming to our church now. She says she got tired of those Baptists and wanted something different. Last week, she asked me why the preacher didn't talk about sin. I told her that that's not the way we do it in the Methodist church! And then she said, 'Amen!'"

Sadly, just a few years before Jerry and I found each other again via social media, Nancy died. Cancer. I had spoken with her once when I was home for a visit. Her Yankee voice still rang true, and nowhere in our conversation entered the word I used to hear both she and the Rooster utter so frequently. Of course, nowhere in our talk entered the name of her deceased husband either.

I asked about Jerry, and I got the typical mother's response: "Oh, he's doing fine."

That was it, and she died not long after.

We accept the love we think we deserve, a famous movie character once said. But do we accept love from old friends; do we think it's still the same? That it can last?

I wish I could say that Facebook has reunited my old friend and me in healthy, loving ways. But all I can say is this:

"Obama is not planning on leaving the White House. Wait for it."

That is a direct, unsolicited quotation from Jerry, whose other messages suggest that a "revolution" that all white people should be prepared for will take place soon; that Obama "hates all white people."

That if you're a Democrat, then un-friend him now, for he has nothing in common with you anymore.

Part of me thinks I should block his posts. There is no reason why I should remain loyal to Jerry because, as old friends go, we did nothing to ask for or demand each other's loyalty. We were friends almost by default, our parents thrown together by other mutual friends, which, maybe, is the usual way of childhood friendships.

As I read through his scroll, though, I know the source of those messages of hatred and racist fear. We are the products of both our genes and our environment. I don't know the circumstances and disappointments of his

life, but I do know that within him somewhere is the guy who liked having fun; the guy who wanted to be liked and to be a part of the normal growing up world of Bessemer.

The guy who gave me a copy of the Buckingham-Nicks' greatest song, "Frozen Love."

#

Loyalty, though, works deeply within our bones. I choose not to un-friend Jerry as he asked because of this, a private exchange between us, the measure of old friends who can't forget. The hope I have that when it comes down to it, we can cast aside our worst tendencies, our genetics, for in the end, there is nothing neither lost nor gained. It's the thinking, and sadly, the fear, that make it so:

"Hey Jerry,

I didn't want to do this on the public site. For you and me, let's put the Politics aside. We knew each other well as kids, and as many kid friends do, we lost track after college. Mike and I were so touched to see you at Dad's funeral. That was such a thoughtful thing to do. Had I known your address, or had I been on Facebook when your mom died, I would have reached out then. So let me do so now. I spoke to your mom on several occasions when I was in Bessemer. I'm glad she and Jo Ann were such good friends, especially toward the end. I think of how generous Nancy always was. You guys brought us ICEE's once, and not the small or medium ones, but the giant 25-cent ones. Our Moms were/are trips.

I'm heading to Bessemer today to get mine and bring her back up here

for Christmas. I know you miss yours, but I hope that your memories of all those days are mainly good and loving.’

“Buddy, nothing could ever soil the great memories I have of the three of us as children. My dad went to school with your mom, and our parents played cards all the time. I still remember the push feeling of your lawn that your dad poured his soul into. It’s great to hear your mom is still living. I think it is awesome that you will get to spend Christmas with your mom. Merry Christmas my friend. Enjoy your mom while you have her.”

Reflecting our past.

And accepting it.

We *have* really changed.

## Contributors

**Matt Paul** doesn't like heat, but he does love deserts. He is aware of how little sense this makes. He has a website like a grown up person: [mattjpaul.co.uk](http://mattjpaul.co.uk)

**Anne Weisgerber** is Assistant Fiction Editor at *Pithead Chapel*, and a Reynolds Journalism Fellow at Kent State University. Her recent fiction has/will appear in *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Structo Magazine*, *The Collapsar*, *DIAGRAM*, and *Gravel*. Recent non-fiction in *The Alaska Star*, *Alternating Current*, *The Review Review*, and *Change Seven*. She's a current nominee for Best of the Net, Best Small Fictions, and The Pushcart Prize. She keeps information current at <http://anneweisgerber.com>

**CL Bledsoe** is the assistant editor for *The Dead Mule* and author of fourteen books, most recently the poetry collection *Trashcans in Love* and the flash collection *Ray's Sea World*. He's been nominated for the Pushcart Prize thirteen times, Best of the Net three times, and had two stories selected as Notable Stories of the Year by Story South's Million Writer's Award. Bledsoe has published stories, poems, essays, plays, and reviews in hundreds of journals and websites, including *The Cimarron Review*, *The Arkansas Review*, *Pank*, *Nimrod*, *New York Quarterly*, *Barrow Street*, *Gargoyle*, *The Hollins Critic*, *New World Writing (formerly Mississippi Review Online)*, *Hobart*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, and many others. Originally from a rice farm in eastern Arkansas, Bledsoe now lives in northern Virginia with his daughter.

**Jesse Bradley** is the author of *The Adventures of Jesus Christ*, *Boy Detective* (Pelekinesis, 2016) and the Yelp review prose poem collection *Pick How You Will Revise A Memory* (Robocup Press, 2016). He lives at [jbradleywrites.com](http://jbradleywrites.com).

**Patricia Donahue** now lives in the California high desert mountains. For ten years, she worked in Native American communities in Montana and New Mexico as a liaison between the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Native American Nations.

**Elizabeth Farris** is a 2015 Master of Arts in Creative Writing graduate from the International Institute of Modern Letters, Victoria University, Wellington New Zealand. She divides her time between the green bush of New Zealand and the dry desert of Arizona. Her short stories have been published in anthologies in the US, New Zealand, and Australia. A few of her stage plays have been produced and she's done a bit of indie filmmaking.

**Dwaine Rieves** was raised in Mississippi and now lives in Washington, DC. His fiction and/or nonfiction has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Baltimore Review*, *Salamander*, *The Bellevue Literary Review* and other journals. His book, *When the Eye Forms*, won the 2005 Tupelo Prize for Poetry.

**Ken Teutsch** is a writer, videographer and performer living in Central Arkansas. His short stories have been published in various online publications and collected in anthologies including *Old Weird South*. He can occasionally be seen and heard portraying the world's least successful country music star, Rudy Terwilliger.

**Julia Nunnally Duncan** is a North Carolina author. Her most recent book is *A Place That Was Home* (eLectio Publishing, 2016), a collection of personal essays about her life in a rural Western North Carolina mill town. *A Place That Was Home* has been nominated for the 2017 CSPA Book of the Year Award for Nonfiction: Biography. A new poetry collection *A Part of Me* is forthcoming from Red Dirt Press in spring 2017. Julia lives in her hometown Marion, NC, with her husband Steve, a wood carver, and their daughter Annie, a college freshman.

**Nancy Faulkner Sackheim** was born and raised in Cleveland, Mississippi. She is a member of both the San Diego and Boston writing communities. She earned her master's degree from USC's Professional Writing Program, spent several years working in the television industry, and is a member of the Writers Guild of America West.

**Terry Barr's** essay collection, *Don't Date Baptists and Other Warnings from My Alabama Mother*, was published in 2016 by Red Dirt Press. His work has also appeared, or will soon appear, in *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *Hippocampus*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *The Big Roundtable*, and *The Bitter Southerner*. He lives in Greenville, SC, with his family.

**Constance Beitzel** is former lead editor and writer for *The Buzz Magazine*, a weekly culture rag in Champaign, IL. Currently she is a PhD candidate studying American Literature and Women's Studies at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale.

**Adam Van Winkle** was born and raised in Texoma and currently resides with his wife and two dogs on a rural route in Southern Illinois. He has published, read conference papers, and edited in the academic field on Bob Dylan & James Joyce in addition to publishing short fiction and creative nonfiction of his own. His writing has appeared in places like *Cheap Pop!*, *Crack the Spine*, *Vignette Review*, *Steel Toe Review*, *Dirty Chai*, and *Pithead Chapel*. His debut novel, *Abraham Anyhow*, was released by Red Dirt Press in March 2017. His creative writing focuses, not surprisingly, on the rural folks he grew up with. In Summer of 2015 he founded *Cowboy Jamboree Magazine*, named for an old book of cowboy campfire songs to publish and promote gritty rural and western stories. *Cowboy Jamboree* issues now receive thousands of readers. Van Winkle is named for the oldest Cartwright son on *Bonanza*. Find him at <http://www.adamvanwinkle.com>

