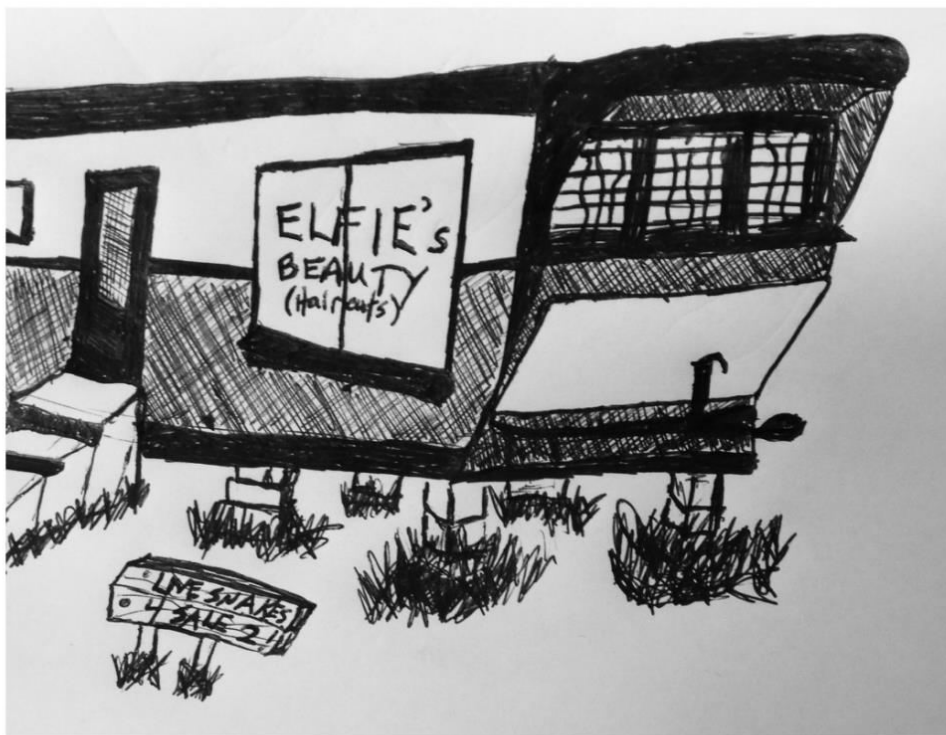

COWBOY JAMBOREE MAGAZINE



Rural Enterprises
Trailer Parks and
Permanent Yard Sales and
Such

**Sheldon Lee
Compton, Frank
Reardon,
Hillary
Leftwich, and
more return!
Interviews and
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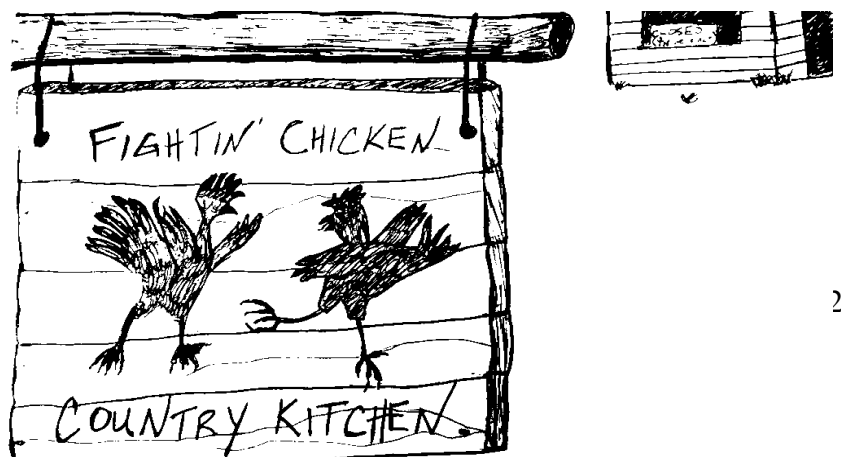
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Grit Lit: It's Bigger than Barnyards and Moonshine
by William R. Soldan

To this day, my gut tightens like a ratchet strap whenever I pass into Columbus beneath the Polaris Parkway Bridge. I used to cop dope around here and all over this end of the city. That was in another life, but still that knot twists and pulls when I cross certain lines, passing places where I crossed so many. Off Sinclair or North Broadway. Sunoco. The video store near Graceland Plaza. Side streets slashing the drag as far south as King, where above the Mexican restaurant, now closed down, I could buy a week's worth of crystal from a Pop artist named J, something to keep me revved up, chasing shadows and the clichéd dreams so many before me died in pursuit of. Around the corner, the balloons to bring me back down again. A guy I ran with, his hands were so swollen and riddled with needle marks they looked like grilled sausage about to split its casing. This is what I think about. C'bus, baby. Home away from home.

In the Speedway on Hudson and High I stop to use the pisser, and it's here in the single-serve restroom with the stuttering bulb that I find it, reliable as April rain: the stipple of blood on the ceiling, where we always left it back then. In the Wendy's or the library, anywhere else that had a lock on the door. Things I once knew are gone, but this side of town, just north of campus, hasn't changed much. Cars zip by and around corners. Inside them, young, fidgety men and women, not much more than boys and girls really, are on a mission. To park and wait with their scrounged bills. At the CVS or the Mickey D's or the alley behind the church. Looking over their shoulders, stinking and shaking. There or somewhere like it. No matter how much you turn your life around, you can always spot your own kind.

I grab a burger at Rally's and get the fuck out of dodge. It's been ages, but I'm still too close. 70 west. Put it in the review mirror.

#

I was asked to write an essay about Grit Lit, based on a Twitter thread I started recently. It was little more than a micro-rant about my occasional frustration with the terms we as writers and editors like to use when classifying our work or the work we seek to publish. The terms "crime," "noir," and "Grit Lit" being the big three in the context of the conversation I was hoping to prompt. The problem isn't the terms; it's

the conflation of the terms—at least when it comes to the first two—which seems to limit a writer's options should they choose to write something that straddles the margin. Well, this is not that essay (not entirely), though the core is the same. The narrowness with which we view certain genres—in this case Grit Lit—has become problematic because our ideas of what it is and what qualifies are based on the association of the term with certain authors from a relatively small region. But Grit Lit is bigger than that—or it should be—and more inclusive than we think, so we need to consider widening our lens and redefining the words we use. We're writers, many of us. Revision is what we do. So let's do it. Otherwise, many great writers are going to end up excluded from circles and markets that would be lucky to have them, and a lot of journals are going to miss out on some top-notch content.

#

I'm traveling to New Mexico by car, on my way to a writer's retreat, which is something that I, with my working-class background, am almost inclined to laugh at. Just the notion of such a thing smacks of the kind of privilege I could never conceive of as a kid. We didn't take vacations and for the most part, we didn't have nice things. We didn't have reliable vehicles or disposable income. My mother worked herself into a state of pain and near disability because she didn't have time to rest. Because resting doesn't pay the bills. And though my wife and I aren't living hand-to-mouth the way my mother and I were when I was young, trips like this are still a luxury I have trouble comprehending in the context of my life.

Venturing from Youngstown, Ohio, the place I call home, there's a sense of blending that becomes apparent—not just on a political or cultural level, but in the fabric of the landscape itself. The working-class cities of the Midwest, decrepit as many of them are, quickly thin out into rural fringes. There are desolate crossroad towns, hidden hollers, and farms in varying states of prosperity and disrepair. Fields full of rusted cars and tractors and dead or dying dreams stretch to the hazy horizon. Why, I ask myself, is a story that looks like this called Grit Lit without question, yet a story that looks like Youngstown or Gary or St. Louis, with their over abundance of abandoned warehouses and freight-yard-ghost-towns, entire neighborhoods gutted, hollow as corpses, somehow isn't? Sure, some might describe such a story as "gritty," but Grit Lit? Not likely.

So here comes the problem when an author writes a story about, say, a returned Iraq War veteran from a working-class rural background who is struggling to readjust to civilian life but who happens to be living with his cousin in the city. Up to the point when the summary of this piece makes the setting explicit, in that final word city, we could easily describe the scenario as one at the heart of a good Grit Lit story without anyone arguing otherwise. This urban setting, however, is the deal breaker for a lot of folks, the one element that makes the story . . . something else.

Now, if a writer wishes to submit this story for consideration, it soon becomes clear that the handful of markets explicitly seeking Grit Lit in their guidelines typically want Grit Lit in the sense that it has become accepted—that is, rural settings and rural characters. The story described is undoubtedly gritty; it has a noir sensibility as well, complete with the tragic ending that is, according to Daniel Woodrell, who’s credited with coining the term rural noir (or country noir or hillbilly noir), the only necessary condition for a piece to qualify. And although there’s a palpable criminal element to the narrative, there’s no crime in it to speak of, at least none as a driving force or goal in the story, which immediately takes any of the crime magazines off the table. (I’ve noticed that even though many crime mags claim to seek noir stories, many have conflated crime and noir and thus think them one and the same, when in fact, despite the obvious overlap, they are distinct genres.)

So where does this leave the author of our returned veteran story? Seems to me that unless the word count is sub-5k, or even sub-1k, opening up the other handful of markets that seek “gritty work” or “work with an edge” or [insert gritty solicitation here], then our writer is pretty much at the mercy of the traditionally elitist and increasingly dull quarterlies and reviews—that is, the “literary” journals that accept 0.1% of their submissions and take damn near a year to respond. Meanwhile, this author’s story would likely be eaten up by readers of crime, noir, and Grit Lit alike. I’d read it. Hell, I wrote it.

#

If folks from the Bible belt could only have one favorite thing in this world, my wager would come with 1 to 4 odds, because out here, it’s a regular crapshoot of gun shops, porn shops, liquor stores, and churches. Which one is taking home the whole pot? A cardboard Elvis leans on a chapel cross beside the highway. Holds

it like a mic stand. All sneer and swagger. Jumpsuit and piled pomp greased back like quicksilver. Up ahead, the Lion’s Den, and a little farther, the tactical supply. Jesus Christ, I think. Even the Son of God would have a hard time choosing.

John Wayne squints from a battered billboard, tells me, “I don’t much like quitters, son.” Grit, it says below his brooding face, #passiton. Which raises another question: What the hell do we even mean by “grit” anyway, the word itself having a double meaning, each relevant to the topic at hand? Do we mean general grittiness in style, tone, and subject matter? Or do we mean, in the southern parlance, tenacity and toughness of character, as in “you’ve got grit, son”? In my quest for a satisfying definition for Grit Lit, or at least a lengthy enough discourse to bolster my point, I’ve come up with the same thing over and over again. Don’t believe me? Do a quick Google search for Grit Lit. Go on now, I’ll wait.

I’ll assume your search yielded a fairly narrow list of books, the majority written by southern or Midwestern or Appalachian writers. The description, something to the tune of a type of working-class literature centered on hardworking, hard-drinking, hardscrabble small town or rural characters whose lives often balance on the edge of uncertainty, often leading them to inevitable acts of desperation and violence. Or something like that.

It’s this perception of Grit Lit being confined to a particular place or region that further limits and confuses the term and alienates a lot of great writers who are absolutely writing Grit Lit. And with anthologies such as *Grit Lit: A Rough South Reader*, is it any wonder that the term is so narrowly defined, with “Rough South” being a term that is more often than not used interchangeably with Grit Lit, much in the way that “noir,” nebulous as ever, has come to be synonymous with crime fiction? The term has admittedly evolved, or has at least expanded to the point that it’s not just Larry Brown, William Gay, Harry Crews, Cormac McCarthy, and a small group of other southern writers of working-class/gothic fiction that fit the bill. Now we have writers from different points of the Midwest and Appalachia—heavy hitters like Donald Ray Pollock, Bonnie Jo Campbell, Frank Bill, Chris Offutt, David Joy, Rusty Barnes, and others—who are part of the conversation, as they should be. But it’s still a fairly small conversation; there’s little to no academic discourse on Grit Lit as a genre or the

authors associated with the term, much in the same way that there's an underwhelming amount of scholarship on the sub-genre of rural noir. This is unfortunate from an academic standpoint because these authors deserve to be discussed in earnest for all they have to offer the literary community and the field of literary study. The bright side is the genre is still young enough to be shaped, clarified, and made more inclusive.

Mostly, regardless of which "grit" you choose to embrace, I argue that the main (but not only) necessary condition for the genre is—you guessed it—grittiness. Tone, style, and/or subject matter—one or more of these facets must be gritty. But let's say for a moment that the folks claiming grit of character (tenacious, no-nonsense, etc.) as the necessary condition are right. The characters that populate the work of the authors mentioned above could certainly be described as such—some of them, anyway. However, this quality of character is not condition enough to qualify a text as Grit Lit. If it was, then pretty much any story with a tough protagonist who shows any amount of gumption would qualify. I mean, I'm all for expanding our perspective and generic parameters, but that would be ridiculous. The result would be similar to the way the term noir has been tossed around so liberally, with every sort of crime fiction being described as noir (even by people who, frankly, should know better) that it's become virtually meaningless. So don't misunderstand; I'm not suggesting we call anything that has gritty qualities Grit Lit. There are, or should be, certain criteria to which a text must adhere in order to make the cut.

(I'll take a moment here to agree with what many folks are likely thinking by now: labels are stupid, they often confuse more than they clarify, they pigeonhole writers, and so on. Yes to all of that and more. But let's face it, we like to categorize things. And as frustrating as it all is, labels are helpful. They stimulate discussion, they create community, and they make it easier for us to recommend stuff to one another, among other things. But they also need to undergo scrutiny and be modified in light of new information, just like our ways of viewing the world need to be.)

The commonalities between the rural narratives and the urban narratives to which I'm referring far outweigh their differences; in fact, the only significant distinction between them is their setting (see, for example, the short stories of Richard Lange, which are

as Grit Lit as they come, despite being set in contemporary L.A.). Although setting plays an important role in the circumstances of characters and thus each story as a whole, every other quality of one is present in the other. Working-class or working-poor people living on the fringe; strained and fractured relationships; hard drinking, hard drugging, "hardscrabble" people; rampant unemployment; isolation; desperation; loneliness; guilt from past transgressions; single parents; blight; struggle, struggle, and more struggle—it's all there and then some. Take our Iraq War vet struggling to adjust to civilian life and drop him into a small town or into the sticks and none of us would think twice about calling it Grit Lit. Place the exact same character enduring the exact same struggle against an urban backdrop and we might call it a lot of things, but I'll tell you right now, Grit Lit isn't one of them. And that's a damn shame.

So here ends my rant, my manifesto, my whatever-the-hell-you-want-to-call-it. I love Grit Lit. And I'll defend those who write it and those who read it against those who deem it unworthy and without merit. Not that any of you need my help. Readers and writers of the genre tend to be as tough and gritty as the narratives themselves and would just as easily use the latest Offutt or Pollock to clobber a naysayer as they would stick it on the shelf. All I ask is that we don't become so set in our ideas about the genre, our understanding of it, that our ability to embrace brilliant work that might fall a bit outside of these notions becomes impaired. Again, I'm not saying everything should qualify as Grit Lit. If everything does, then nothing does. Pure and simple. The same with noir. Just because it's crime fiction doesn't make it noir, and it can be noir without it being crime fiction. If you disagree, write an essay about it. These are important topics of conversation, and we should be discussing them a lot more. The fact that we aren't is half the reason I wrote this one in the first place. So take it for what it is: a log on the fire or a kick in the ass. Either way, let's shake things up.

#

The mountains happen faint and slow, then sharp and quick, as if an invisible hand just ripped a ragged strip from the bottom of the sky. I pass through Punkin Center, Rush, Ellicott, and a half dozen nowhere towns in-between as I head west. Next, Colorado Springs, then south to Pueblo.

I check into a dumpy but comfortable Super 8 motel off I-25. The bathroom wall has a crack running from ceiling to floor and there's plaster and standing water in the tub. But I've slept in worse places. Much worse. And after driving this far from northeast Ohio in less than forty-eight hours, I'd probably sleep in a barn or tool shed with little complaint. I've slept in worse places than that, too. Try bunking down in County jail or on a prison rack in a dorm full of loudmouth felons and tell me I'm wrong.

I spend a few hours looking up marijuana dispensaries. I'm in Colorado, after all, and I've been having some pain. It's the result of an old work injury (moving the wrong way while lugging cases of beer from a walk-in cooler) and usually nothing I can't bear, sticking to a fairly rigorous exercise regimen as I do, but I'm a recovering heroin addict and sick of eating over-the-counter pain relievers like candy on the bad days and having them do nothing but beat the shit out of my kidneys. I haven't gotten stoned in a long, long time—at least a decade—and I really have no desire to smoke, but I'm looking for some alternatives. CBD oil is supposed to be a real game changer, I hear. If nothing else, I have to see this legitimized market with my own road-weary eyes.

In the morning, I find a place on Santa Fe Drive, a stretch that, in many ways, reminds me of home. It's an industrial strip lined with garages and machine shops and lots surrounded by chain-link fences and rusty sheets of metal. Gravel and sun-beaten weeds creep away from the roadside and up a low hill. There are seedy gas stations. Railroad tracks. In the distance, the ominous hulk of a rundown mill, cold stacks fingering the clouds. Like coming full circle.

I find the place, an unassuming little storefront in a plaza beside the Loaf n' Jug. Inside, it smells like all the basements and back road jaunts of my youth, thick and skunky. There's a sign directing customers to their designated waiting area—recreational to the left, medical to the right. I don't have a medical card, so I go left. There's a binder on a table, the menu, like a restaurant's wine list. A guy with a goatee and plugs in his ears stands behind a window and checks my ID. "Out-of-towner," I say.

He grins, says, "All right, man, come on back."

I walk in the second door and it's like any bodega or corner convenient store, only instead of lottery tickets and readymade food, the glass cases contain pipes and papers and giant jars full of bud.

Behind the counter are racks and shelves full of THC vaporizers and topical creams and edibles.

"I'm looking for something for my pain," I say. "Something mild, good for the daytime. None of that glue-you-to-the-couch shit. It's been a while, ya know?"

He nods and begins telling me all about the sativas and indicas and hybrid strains. Stuff I used to know, stuff that makes me feel like a fucking rookie again. He removes lids and lets me take a whiff of the different merchandise. Christ, that smell—I think I've missed that more than anything. That I'm even here having this conversation with this guy is tripping me out. As if I'm simply looking for a good book recommendation or trying to decide between the chicken and the steak.

I ask him about the THC-free CBD oil, which is supposed to be good for pain and countless other ailments, but all he has are tinctures containing both, so I say to hell with it and settle on some bud. The old addict justification comes easy as breathing. "I'll take a gram of the Cherry Lime Haze, and a gram of the Afghan Kush," I say, and actually laugh at the ridiculousness of it.

"Good choice," he says. "The Cherry is clean, won't bog you down. And the Kush'll be good for chillin' at night, real body-heavy, perfect for bedtime." I tell him to toss in a container of the turtle brownies for good measure, which is probably a mistake. This is way more than I'll need for the short time I'll be here, but for the price, why not? Turns out when it's legal, it doesn't break the bank. An affordable alternative to dope and pharmaceuticals. Imagine that. I think, Ohio needs to hurry up and get its shit together.

Some dude with a patchy beard and half-lidded bloodshot eyes leans over and says, "Hey, them brownies any good?"

I shrug, then say, "But I'm about to find out."

The guy behind the counter rings up my purchase, my buds in little plastic canisters, labeled with the THC content and a warning not to take it across state lines. He bags it up and staples my receipt to the top. The entire transaction is no different than buying a cup of coffee and a pack of smokes.

On my way out a young guy comes in and starts looking over the menu in the lobby. All of this is so strange, and I realize that the whole weed-is-legal-in-Colorado thing never seemed real to me until now. In the parking lot, an old man sits behind the wheel of a beat-up Toyota, eating Reese's Peanut Butter Cups

and jamming out to Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze."
The dashboard is littered with cigarette packs and food wrappers and strands of screaming skulls and colorful beads hang from the rearview mirror. His tanned face is etched with deep creases, his gray hair buried under a faded baseball cap. I figure he must be the young guy's father, and it occurs to me: this old timer would be right at home in a Grit Lit story. Hell, I couldn't have written him better myself.

The Great Ones Eat Up the Little Ones
By Sheldon Lee Compton

Not a one of us is worth a plug nickel, you want to know the truth. Mackenzie Stumbo back there, sitting right there in the corner where you all forgot he existed, Mackenzie has more moral courage, strength, and integrity in his big toe than me and Chick and all of us combined. How many years you work the mines, Mackenzie? Forty. Over forty years this man went under the mountain and, far as I know, ain't never missed a Sunday service. Wednesday either, for that matter. Husband to a good women, father to three of the best people in this whole town, grandfather to even better kids. And here he sits getting lied to and his time wasted. That's not to mention you other eleven. Each one of you I know and've known for years now. All of you deserve better than to be lied to and used. The worst of you all is better than our best. Do you get what I'm saying?

*

Ford graduated from a religious-based law school in a neighboring state after getting an English degree that included a sparkling roped chord at graduation for doing so with honors. He busted through his courses in short order, did the required reading and finished law school without so much as shifting his schedule once. He simply took what they gave him and came out clean.

Returning home to search for a place to set up an office was routine. He figured he would hang a shingle, make a little sabbatical money, and then be out of the legal business and back in school. He wanted a doctorate in political science. About two and a half years after he opened his office in Red Knife, Hanson County Judge-Executive Chick Collins broke his hip outside the Dairy Cheer.

It was November and Collins slipped on a patch of three-inch thick ice and pulverized both crests of his ilia. That's all people talked about for a month, and just like that. Women were stopping in grocery stores, "Did you hear about Chick? Doctors say he crushed both crests of his ilia." Everybody felt smart using the medical terms. It was three weeks in the hospital and another two months of bed rest after that for Judge Chick. When he finally got up and about, he went to Ford. Dairy Cheer was to be nailed to the wall and that was that.

Ford was a personal injury lawyer. A good one, and Chick knew it. He also knew Bill Singleton, the owner of the ill-fated establishment, was soft. The combination was lethal. Singleton hired a cheap suit out of Crestville who buckled quick and, before long, Ford had bypassed the degree and was in politics.

*

None of them understood anything about what I was trying to tell them. Like sheep they sat there with their only thought about how much trouble I'd get into talking to them, saying all that I was saying. Poor Ford, I bet they were thinking. Not poor me, though. Poor them. Poor all of them.

Hi there, Jimmy, yeah I'm just walking past the judge's chambers calm as can be. Nothing wrong here, Jimmy, move right along.

Why in the world would anybody ever want to settle down in a place like this? A place where you're either held down or chopped down and those are your

only two options. After that, it doesn't matter in the least how you act, how much you let people keep holding you and chopping you.

Everything's fine as paint, Cathy Jo. Just heading down for a smoke or whatever. Need a minute to breathe. Yes, smile and I'll smile and then I'll keep going toward sunlight.

I really can't breathe. I really do need sunlight. I need a light somewhere in this gloom. I'm so sick to hell with the gloom.

*

After winning the case for Chick, Ford helped get the judge's paperwork back in order. In the judge's absence, the county had lost three grants and blew a chance to annex a section of land valued for its business location potential. It took about three weeks to get things straightened out but when he nailed it down Ford had thrown in a renegotiation of terms that would ensure the county got the land. A telemarketing headquarters was built on the land about six months later, and when Jones Food Service moved out not long after, the company became the county's fourth largest business concern.

Ford was pushed into the top list of the county's political figures, without so much as holding an office. The following year, Ford announced his candidacy for Hanson County Attorney and won during the fall race. It was and remains the largest voter turnout in the county's history, with more than eighty percent of the people voting, and most of them for Ford and whoever else Judge Chick backed.

Ford once said he slid into his spot on a firm handshake, a sincere smile, and a thick ass patch of ice. But there was hard work involved, and, most of all, a hunger for the truth. Ford would never admit to the last, he would say it sounded too melodramatic, but most people knew it was true. Most people even understand it's what caused his breakdown. The ones wanting to seem insightful and bright would say they saw it coming.

*

Cigarette's good. First one I've had in six years. And I envy every single person walking past me. The skinny kid with scabs all over his face and half blown on meth or Xanax bars heading to some motion hour bull shit

for his fifteenth PI charge. This old lady who can't have more than two years left to live; I'd give anything to be that old lady. So then which is it, I wonder? Do I envy these people or do I feel sorry for them? I'm not going to have long to lean here and smoke and pretend I didn't just throw the game up there.

Tucker, buddy, everything's okay, yep. No doubt the bailiff had a lot of things to say. How about turning around and heading back to your station at the metal detector. There are knives and cell phones to catch, no offense to the importance of your job, of course. Yes, yes, yes. There you go.

It only now occurs to me that this may be the last chance I'll have to talk to these people as Ford Hamilton, Hanson County Attorney, instead of Ford Hamilton, that guy who lost his mind one day during a personal injury trial. It seems like fate or God Himself at long last intervening again in the meddling affairs of his creation. Now was the time. I needed to give more of the same as I gave to the jury before leaving. Enlighten these folks, whether I envy them or pity them. Or do whatever little I can, not so much to enlighten them but to give them as much reality as possible, the fairest shake I can offer.

I cleared my throat, flicked the cigarette out into Court Street, and began calling people to join me at the front steps of this house of justice and liberty.

*

His breakdown came, melodramatically enough, during a trial. Not a Perry Mason trial, those rarely happen in the real world, Ford often said. This happened during a trial where a couple was trying to get their insurance provider to pony up money they promised on their policy in the event of an accident. Bill and Jill Morgan had been hit from behind. They had told the guy who hit them they were fine and the guy drove off. After he left, Bill called the state police and filed a complaint. It was a hit and run case. They caught the guy and got him on some kind of charges, and the Morgans contacted their insurance. No can do, they said. That's when Bill and Jill went to see Ford and, of course, Chick.

Bill had worked a card game with Chick in the seventies. One of the major players in that game was a doctor named Joyce Pennington, who was what Chick liked to call dead money, an easy kill, just like the restaurant owner. Chick convinced Pennington to see

Bill and Jill, which basically consisted of the two of them sitting in his waiting room watching a talk show and reading copies of *Field & Stream* for about ten minutes and then talking to Pennington for about two minutes, mostly about fishing and where Jill bought her washing powders, it smelled so good. On the day of the trial Pennington took the stand and testified that the couple had suffered severe injuries to both neck and lower back areas in such a way that it had affected their lives horribly, he said, just horribly.

*

Now just stop and listen to me for one minute. Sixty seconds. Listen to me all of you all. I have something so important to tell you. Where to begin? You come here. See how rail thin and beaten down this man is. Homer isn't it? Homer Moncrieff. Yes for sure. I don't know Homer here but I know Homer. Look at him. He's worked his whole life, goes to church, married to the same women for more years than I've been alive. He's never hurt a soul, and, if he has, they deserved it. Now he's had his share of flaws over the years, but does that make it alright for the haves to keep knocking him down? And what do the haves have anyway that's worth anything. And what do they have. These godforsaken haves, these Chicks and Joyce Penningtons, these judges, yes, these immoral judges and their homes on the mountaintop above everybody else. Homer, I want to apologize to you, sir. No, no, I need to apologize. So I'm sorry and my mother's sorry and my law degree's sorry, and my gas guzzling SUV is sorry. We're all sorry. It's all sorry and more sorry and more sorry.

*

Bill and Jill were going to be heading home with a little over two-hundred thousand dollars, after Ford's fee. He knew he had done absolutely nothing more than be connected to Chick Collins in return for more money than most people in Hanson County earned for a year's work.

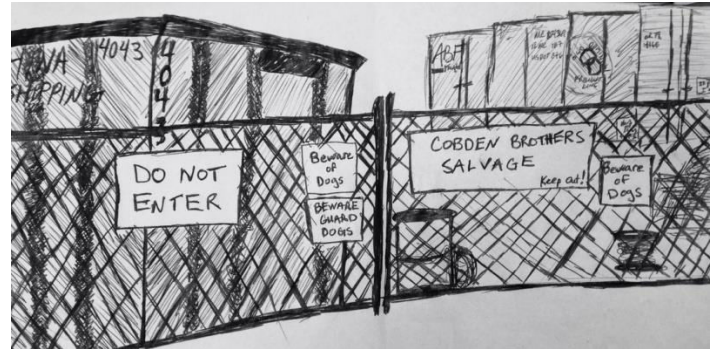
People in Hanson County knew it too. Ford decided he wasn't going to see this thing through. He wasn't even going to come close to doing that. In fact, he couldn't go one more second doing anything other than putting distance between himself and this brand of justice, this good old boy setup.

While the jury deliberated, Ford crept away from his desk, past the judge and into the back hallway area where the jury room was located. He approached the door and then recoiled back into the hallway, turned and took a drink from the hallway water fountain. Breathe in, breathe out. In, out. In, out. When he was centered again, sure this was his mind at work at not only his emotions and returned to stand outside the door for awhile. When fully prepared and ready to carry through, he opened the door.

Twelve faces stared blankly up at him. He knew most of them and most of them started right in on him without a moment's hesitation, leaning forward in their chairs, casting glances at the jury foreman, who cast glances back. He was a school teacher, but Ford couldn't remember his name. He looked like a school teacher now and not like a jury forearm. Not confident or decisive. The others, too, seemed smaller in their surprise. He had never seen a jury deliberating, he realized. So this is the mighty peers, he thought, and the questions poured over Ford. Where was the bailiff? How did you get in here? You have to leave now. Good Lord what are you doing in here? Leave now, Ford, and we won't say a word.

*

Oh how I hurt for you all oh say can you see can you see how ugly it all is underneath and on the outside and within the heart of all things here in this ruin of rolling hills once mountains pushing up to heaven only to fall short just see it and understand it and break out break out change your life your constant acceptance and how you settle for so much less than you should be given less respect less humanity less home less jobs less heart I will stand in this place on this corner as long as it takes until you hear me listen don't just pass me by I will come again tomorrow and the next day and the next day until you stop and listen oh how I hurt for you all don't pity me don't pity yourselves prepare to rise on a golden crest out of chains and into the hereafter where all will be glory and glory will be all.



The Shooting Star Flea Market By Frank Reardon

I thought of her lying on the bed naked. Skin like rows of porcelain playing cards. How she turned over on her back and faced me with a look that told us both we were still young enough to ignore our lazy decisions. Her feet pushed into my then thin stomach, nudging me to get on top of her and go at it again. I passed her a joint I had rolled instead. She took a puff, then another, and I watched the smoke flow from the dark red color of her lipstick over my head, and out the window of my basement bedroom in Lynn, Massachusetts. It blended with the midnight sky and street lights. A smokey army burying the city into the roots of its own silence. That was some twenty years ago.

In the thickness of an endless hangover I ended up in St. Dymphna, Alabama. In the middle of

nowhere, thirty miles east of Huntsville. Forty-four years old with white hairs in my once red beard. Less hair on top, and glued to a lawn chair behind a wooden booth where I sold used books. Books I bought in large quantities from public libraries on the cheap.

Some call it the 'Shooting Star Flea Market'. I call it the dead end road of life. It's set on top of an old drive-in from the sixties. Still has the old sign at the entrance, except now it pointed down. There used to be six of us working here, now only three of us. Adam Van Wronk, a Vietnam vet who lost both his legs from the knee caps down after a landmine explosion, sold all sorts of military garb. And Larry Crandall, an elderly black man who once owned a farm out by Scottsboro, sold wooden birdhouses he made in his garage. He told me: "It was something to help calm him. Helps him focus on Jesus, instead of bars and women thirty years younger than him."

I'm not sure what happened between 2000 and 2018, but I ended up here. It was like Purgatory picked my number in a holy game of bingo and sent me here. It went by too fast to even recall. I guess that's why I'm here, sipping on a bottle of Dr. Pepper with brandy inside, my mind running back to the past.

Lately it had been memories of Virginia Ann, and how we once had plans to marry and have kids. Neither of us had a job worth a damn, but they were both good enough to get us a two bedroom apartment in Everett near the candy factory and ocean. Sure, between the stench of factory and ocean it might've smelled like we lost out on life, but it would've been our life and that was worth something.

I'm convinced of how naive I once was. How much of a fool I'd been to let myself fall in love so effortlessly like that. For the longest time I believed fleeting memories of love, even young love, should be drowned out with alcohol. Of late, my aging mind has wanted to keep some of it hidden in a safe place for selfish reasons; so I can lie and tell myself that I am more than the liquor I drink every day. It's true I picked booze, adventure, and depression over Virginia Ann. She was willing to give her all to me. And even though she hadn't the slightest idea what to do with a person in my condition, she still wanted to try. It took

me awhile, but I'd come to understand how rare it is to find a person, any person, who wants to help.

"Jackie," a voice yelled. "Snap out of it and watch this shit!"

I saw Adam Van Wronk sitting in his wheelchair some fifteen yards away with a pistol.

"What the hell, Adam?"

"See them there tin cans I set up on them rocks?"

"Yeah."

"I'm going to nail each and every one of them. I was a good shot in Nam. I tell you that?"

"Only sixty times a day," Larry interrupted.

"I don't think you should be doing that. What if the police come?" I said.

"Ain't no police coming out to St. Dymphna. You know that, Jackie."

"But Henrietta and Boyd might call the cops."

"You kidding me? Ain't no one been to that diner in weeks. They could use the bang-bang!"

"That's not true," I said, "We had that one fella come out a couple weeks ago."

"He asked us for directions. If you remember, Jackie," Larry said.

"You heard Larry," Adam said. "He came for directions. Ain't no one buying our stuff. Plus, it's us who keep Boyd and Henrietta in business."

"I think they do better than you think," I replied.

Adam turned his wheelchair around and faced us, his nubs tied off at the end by green cargo pants.

"Really, Jackie? They live in that barn without a proper bathroom behind the diner. If they were doing so good they wouldn't be across the ways from us. Screw it! Watch me take out these damn cans, will ya?"

He straightened his neck and clenched his jaw with four day old white stubble, then aimed the gun with daring green eyes at the cans. It was like he half expected the cans to fire back. He took down the first can with ease. The second can, an old grape soda can, popped off its position when the bullet hit the rock. "That counts," he shouted. Adam then looked down at the remaining three cans and missed them all. "I guess two out of five ain't so bad."

Larry said nothing and went back reading the Huntsville Times newspaper. It was getting hotter than Hell's furnace with the midday Alabama sun beating down on us. I looked over at the diner: the lot empty; grass growing up from the cracks in the asphalt, and a half lit sign that said "Dymphna's Delights."

"Why don't one of you try? I got more bullets. Here, let me go set up the cans."

"I'm good," I shouted.

Larry flicked and folded his newspaper over letting Adam know he wasn't interested.

"Well, damn. What's a feller got to do to lighten things up around here? I know!" Adam shouted. "I ever tell you two about the Go-go dancer I met in a Saigon bar named Claire?"

I poured brandy into another Dr. Pepper, and brought it to my lips. "Don't think I have."

Larry put the Huntsville Times newspaper on a small table and he stood up. "I've heard this story at least fifty times. I've known this crippled son-of-a-bitch a long time, must've heard this story twice a week the last bunch of years," Larry said. "If you want to torture yourself, Jackie, be my guest, but I'm going over to the diner for some of Boyd's catfish. Either of you rednecks want anything?"

"I'd like to remind you that I'm not a redneck seeing I was born outside Boston."

"But you're white?" Larry asked.

"Yes."

"And you've been here how long?"

"I don't know...a long time."

"You're a damn redneck, Jackie. Ain't no ifs, ands, or buts about it."

"If you say so."

"I'll take some hush puppies," Adam interrupted.

"You got any money for them hush puppies? This ain't no charity."

Adam reached into his pocket and slammed a five into Larry's hand, "Fine, don't hook up a friend."

"I don't intend to."

From thirty yards away I watched Larry walk around a hunk of Spanish moss. In front and above him a giant faded red sign that read: "The Shooting

Star Drive-In" pointed down towards the ground. Back-in-the-day it had once pointed up towards the sky, like everyone had a chance at the drive-in. At one time they all gathered there to forget their lives and share in the laughter, romance, horror, and thrills. Now, like the three of us broken and aged peddlers on the dirt lot, it's lost to time.

Adam told me the sign used to have tiny light bulbs inside the lettering that lit up in multiple colors and chased. One could see it for miles above the cotton. Now all that remained were the rusted out sockets jammed inside their holes, useless and twisted to the dark nights of Saint Dymphna. The dust kicked up from Larry's boots and floated a short while around the concrete that held the broken sign hostage, then it settled into the growing weeds and vanished, leaving Adam and me with nothing more than visions of the past.

I tried to close my eyes and think of Virginia Ann and her white smile. Instead I remembered what it was like to hold her hand. Everywhere we went our sweaty palms were locked. I never dragged and she never pulled. We walked in CD stores holding hands. Into head shops to buy new pipes for our weed holding hands. I tried to remember the way she kissed me before our hands let go of one another. It's all I wanted to remember.

"Okay, Claire," Adam interrupted, "She was a real piece of work."

"Claire doesn't sound like the name of a woman from Vietnam."

"Her actual name was Ngoc. It means valuable gemstone."

"Then why Claire?"

"She wanted me to call her Claire because she saw it in a movie one time. I met her in one of those American bars. It had go-go dancers, hamburgers, and Budweiser. Real classy joint. She was the prettiest thing I had ever seen. This was before I lost my legs, of course."

"Of course."

"There was a Hendrix song on. You know Hendrix, right?"

"I'd have to say I think so, Adam."

"Anyhow, she jumped right on stage. She had on those knee high white plastic boots; white short shorts; and a little white top. She danced inside my heart that whole night. In My Heart! For real! After a few trips to the bar I ended up asking her to sit with me for drinks. Her English was bad, but good enough for us to carry a simple conversation. I swear, you could hear gun fire and bombs exploding all around us but it didn't matter it was like we were the last two people on earth. In love, in the middle of a war. We went on like that for awhile, meeting at the bar and other places all over Saigon."

"Why didn't you bring her home?"

"I asked her and she said yes."

"What happened?"

"A landmine happened."

"She didn't want to be with a cripple?"

"On the contrary, she did. I mean my junk still worked. Plus all the money the Army was going to give me for my legs. She visited me in the hospital every day until I was strong enough to get in a fuckin' chair."

"Did you bring her home?"

"No, the pain from my wounds got to be too much. I developed a taste for heroin. It ruined things."

"Man, that's gotta hurt. Sorry."

"Not as sorry as I am. She stole my wallet."

"What?!"

"Yeah. One night I was in her small apartment overlooking the Saigon River. Beautiful place, ever been?"

"No."

"You need to go!"

"I'll call my travel agent as soon as I get back to my motel room."

"Fuck you, Jackie," Adam replied. "Any way, I was on her couch, took a real nice shot. Lost my pain, lost my mind, lost my sight, everything. I was in the feel good zone, buddy, let me tell you. Them fuckers over there they take their product seriously. Then, I woke

up awhile later and my wallet with a thousand American and my ID were both gone. On the coffee table there was a note that said "Sorry, Baby, Love Claire." I'll never forget it. Instead of a dot over the I, she used a heart. I wheeled myself back to the bar she worked at everyday for a week, but she was never there. Owner had no idea what happened to her. Her landlord said she left in a hurry because she left behind all of her belongings. She just up and vanished with the wind, it broke my heart. Eventually I had to go home due to my legs and being useless to the war effort."

"That's it? Seems to me she turned out to be a real crook."

"That's the thing, Jackie. It doesn't matter that she was a crook, I loved her. You can't help who you fall for. Could be a college women with a fancy degree and a future. Could be Ma Barker with a house full of guns and stolen property. Could be a biker woman in tight jeans who wouldn't give you a second look because you don't own a Harley. You cannot help who you love. I certainly don't regret falling in love with a Vietnamese woman who stole my money and vanished from my life forever. The memories sometimes outweigh than the agony. And let me tell you, I'd live that agony of betrayal for a thousand years more if I could put my arm around her shoulder, and walk along the Saigon River for another second. I could die a happy man right now if she was here and told me that she loved me in that broken English accent of hers, jus' one time. She was something I tell you. Larry thinks I'm dumb and I should find me another woman. I mean, over the last bunch of years I did. One from Oklahoma that I married for a year. She couldn't put up with my drinking, so it ended. I had a handful of other ones. A few I thought I loved, but none of them came close to the little thief from Saigon."

"That's some story, Adam."

"How about you, Jackie, any woman worth talking about for you?"

I didn't say anything to him about Virginia Ann, I kept her to myself. She was for me to remember. Those long ago days in the '90s when I felt I owned the world. Adam might've had the Saigon River, but

Virginia Ann and me, we had the Charles River. We'd eat magic mushrooms and walk throughout Harvard Square. Eventually we'd fall in the grass underneath the Cambridge sun. "What should we do with our lives?" I asked her in the grips of stunning colors. And through the distorted sounds in my mind she brought my face to hers and kissed me. She didn't need words. I was the words, and she was the motion that put the words into action.

"He tell you all about the woman who stole his wallet," Larry said, handing me a sweet tea in a white Styrofoam cup."

"He did," I said. "It was a lovely story."

"I don't know about lovely," Larry said. "Maybe insane."

"How about you? Any woman for you?"

Larry sipped his tea, leaned back in his chair, and smiled, "I'd have to say all of them, Jackie. I loved all of them. Some have called me a 'dog', but I think I'm full of passion is all. Nope, can't ever say I wanted to settle down with jus' one. At least not forever."

"Say, Larry. What's he doing way out there in his wheelchair?"

"Does it every time he tells that damn story. He goes off and looks at those old rusted out steel beams that used to hold up the movie screen. Jus' sits out there and looks at them for 'bout an hour or so. He'll be fine."

"Think we'll get any customers today?" I asked.

"Do sharks walk on land?"

"No."

"There's your answer."

"Why do we bother coming here?"

"Something to do I suppose. Maybe we're sitting back and waiting for the good Lord to take us home."

"That's what life has felt like for the last few years. Jus' coming here everyday in the middle of all this cotton to sell a book or two every few months. Lately ain't anyone come here."

"We're the last vendors. You know very well the others left. Dayton, Purvis, and Crazy Katherine with

her 'talking cactus plants', couldn't make a living. I'm surprised you can, Jackie. I'm retired. And Adam, he's been living off the government for years. You though, I'm not sure how you survive."

"To be honest Larry," I replied, pouring brandy into the sweet tea. "I'm not sure how I even got here. It's like the world forgot that I existed. It put me down for a second to finish doing something else and forgot to come back. One day I was a young man, then I'm here in St. Dymphna, I aged somehow. I can't seem to recall the last twenty years. I'm not sure what happened or where it all went. I remember '99 into part of 2000 and all the years before, then boom! 2018, and trying to sell used books to no one."

"You do know who St. Dymphna is the Patron Saint of, don't you?" Larry said.

"No."

"Look her up. Might explain a thing or two about this place."

"I'll do that. But, you know, some days I don't want to be forgotten."

"But we are, Jackie, except it. Think of it this way: All three of us earned a lifetime of scars and stories. See the lines on my face? And yours? You don't get them from age, but experience from being in love and from the pain after it ended. A long time ago we created them out of our experiences, now all there's left to do is show our scars and tell our stories. No man should be allowed to ask for anything else from life," Larry said. "I'm glad when they put me in the ground that I'll be a story. That my younger man bullshit will be a laugh rolling out of some fool's mouth over a cold beer. I'm glad that my story will enrich the soil and help grow cotton, so some kid in Kentucky can wear a t-shirt made from the crap I pulled out at all them Blood Buckets back in the day. Both Adam and I have twenty years on you. You might think about leaving this place and creating a couple more stories before God comes for you. You ain't that old, not yet."

"I'm comfortable here I guess."

"Don't get too comfortable. There's more life in you. Get out of that seat, put down the booze and go see a few more things. Fall in love, get laid. He ain't

ever going to tell you that,” Larry said, pointing to Adam. “He wants you here. He needs you here.”

“Why?”

“So he can tell you about his past over and over again. He ain't got nothing else, but the damn green army clothes on his back.”

The sun was going down on the Shooting Star Flea Market, but still bright enough for the three of us to remain. It was Virginia Ann's favorite time of day, when the day mixed with the night. The summer clouds colored in gold and pink over the beach as we drove to Kelly's Roast beef for sandwiches before a party. We both loved a good party with friends, beer and weed, but what we enjoyed the most was watching each other laugh from across the room. I'll never forget how she'd wink at me. A wink that opened and closed my breath with the movement of her eyelids. She loved me and I loved her, until the wraiths stole my mind. Their claws ripped into the skin of my brain and rearranged things. One day I was prepared to marry her. The next, I asked her to leave me alone. I kept losing jobs. I couldn't tell her I loved her anymore, even though that's all I wanted to do. It burned in me like an angst poem written by a teenager. One afternoon I was drunk at a bar. Sitting with pints of beer, paying for them with her money, and she walked in and sat down. She was as beautiful as ever. I could tell by the look in her eyes she wanted to help me, but all I could say was “leave me alone. Go home. I don't want you here.” She left without a word or a look, and I kept drinking, trying my hardest to escape the nothingness within.

We lasted a few more months, but it was more about desperately trying to find the glue that once held us together. I knew she'd been ready to leave for awhile, but she held out hope that I might be able to escape my afflictions, but I couldn't. I sank deeper into alcohol. My face changed. My clock changed. My habits, and music changed. I stepped through a door with such hope in my soul, but came out the other side angry and afraid. I could no longer get it up due to alcohol, and if I did, it was all about me. One day I told her I had an affair. An affair that never happened, because I was too much of a coward to admit my problems. I grabbed my music, books, and tool box and put them into the back of my pickup truck. I

looked at her sitting on the edge of the bed. The same bed we tried to make a baby on. The same bed we dreamed on. The same bed we laughed on for hours while passing joints to one another. She sat at the end of it broken, alone, and afraid. Yet, she also had a new look in her eyes. A look of hope and possibility. I'll never forget it, because I haven't seen that look on another human's face since.

I closed the door and drove away. And I kept driving for as long as I could. I drove for what seemed like years through the headlines of the day, and through brief encounters with people in different states, until my truck broke down. I didn't have the money to fix it, so I took off the plates and abandoned it in a Wal-Mart parking lot in Madison, Alabama. I continued to walk until I got so tired that I collapsed in a grave yard; half- drunk, nearly broke, and hungry. The name on the grave I sat next to said: Karen Osgood. She had died young, thirty-three years old in 1944, by the look of the grave no one had visited her in twenty or more years. Moss grew on the sides of the stone, as did grass and the feeling of loneliness. I had no one to talk to. No one to hear about where I'd been for the last couple years, so I hugged the gravestone until my arms started to blister and ache.

Adam wheeled his chair towards both Larry and me. I could see he was doing it with one hand, in his other hand he was holding the pistol to his temple.

“Damn fool,” Larry shouted, throwing his newspaper to the ground.

“I got to do it. I can't take it anymore,” Adam shouted.

“Over a damn woman from forty years ago?” Larry replied.

“This place...my mind.”

“Go ahead and try it,” Larry said. “It won't work.”

I drank from the sweet tea and brandy mix, then jumped each time Adam pulled the trigger, for whatever reason nothing happened. He looked at the pistol with a purple faced rage “What the...?” he said.

“You know damn well this place will never let you go unless you pack up and leave for good. And the only way that's gonna happen is when you realize it for yourself. You know it, Adam! I tried to do the same thing in '92 and 2001. I'm still here. Still waiting. Still forgotten by the rest of the world. You think I like it any more than you?”

“I can't take feeling like this anymore”

“You have to take it, Adam,” Larry said. “Them's the rules. You knew it the second you wheeled your ass by that damn drive-in sign with all those fucking troubles of yours. You could've stayed on fixing engines at the garage, but you came here instead.”

“What the shit, Larry?” I asked, watching Adam burst into tears.

“He'll be okay, Jackie. Jus' gotta give him a few minutes is all. The past has its way with us sometimes. She won't let up neither. Yup, jus' doesn't care until there's nothing left of us but meat for the hungry lions.”

“But the bullets...what happened to them? Why?” I asked.

“He's been through this before only he doesn't remember. Doesn't want to remember. Can't say I blame him. Takes a strong mind to remember the moments we locked up long ago. That's how you found us in this place selling shit to nobody. It's easier to be forgotten in the now, than it is to be forgotten by our memories.”

“Still, I don't.”

“Damn, Jackie. That's why you don't belong here. Think of it this way, you got stuck in the mud and your truck just needs a push is all. Get to pushin' before you are stuck selling them books forever. “

Adam rolled his wheelchair back to his stand. He rearranged a few World War II helmets to face the front of his stand, in case a would be buyer pulled into the Drive-In and wanted some war-machine junk. Larry took a breath and fidgeted with a few birdhouses, then he sat back down with his newspaper. Both of them returned to their routines like nothing happened. They acted as though they'd seen it and acted it out too many

times before, that it was just another minute hidden inside another ordinary day.

It wasn't until I got a job at a supermarket in Huntsville a few years after I left Massachusetts that I could afford to use the internet. I looked up Virginia Ann and found that she was married to a guy named B.J. Farnsworth. They had a big house, a few children and lived in Revere. She seemed happy enough. The look in her eyes wasn't the same, she looked tired. At first I thought to myself that raising kids made her tired. A day job made her tired. Things that would make any human tired. At least she's happy, I thought. At least she has the family she always wanted. Then I noticed she had a little online shop where she sold handcrafted jewelry. Beads, and different fake gemstones; strung together to make bracelets and necklaces. She even modeled a few of her creations on her website.

I emailed her to say 'hello'. A week later she responded. Said she was excited because she'd been making the jewelry for a year and never got an order. Thought the message would be her first. However, she kept most of the disappointment to herself. She told me she was happy to know I was still alive. Happy I didn't end up in a gutter somewhere talking to myself. I never heard for her again.

I left the Shooting Start Flea Market that night. Watched Adam and Larry from my rear view sitting in the same statue like positions until they vanished from my sight. I ate dinner in the motel room I was renting by the week. When I finished I walked out on to the balcony and lit a cigarette. I looked down and watched raggedy looking children run around the courtyard. I then noticed their parents loading boxes into a van in a hurry. It looked like they were trying to get as far away from St. Dymphna as they could. I tossed the butt off the balcony, missing another set of ghosts moving out of my life by inches. A new memory to live among the thousands of images I had already hidden somewhere inside my body.

I opened the door to my motel room and sat down on the bed. I looked at the cheap painting of a cowboy hanging on the wall above the television set. He didn't have a care in the world, I envied him. The sun went down with every last bit of hope I had left in me. I wanted to climb into the painting to live the

rugged life, but everything got too quiet, too fast. A voice from inside stopped me mid-thought. It wrapped its dark arms around my back, then covered my head and spine like an iron blanket. I was scared. I refused to turn around and face it, but when it reached over my shoulder holding out a new bottle of brandy, the fear faded. There was truly not a person left in this world who'd waste their time trying to convict me.

Coping
By Hillary Leftwich

It was one of those lazy Sunday afternoons when my dad decided it would be a good idea to make me watch *The Shining*. When I told him it looked scary, he said it wasn't that scary, and besides, it took place here in Colorado and it would be good for me to learn more about the history of our state. My older brother was at a friend's house blowing up bottle rockets and riding his bike, the usual weekend routine. I was happy to have him out of the apartment. My dad rented a unit out of a fourplex behind the dirt bike hills on the west side of Colorado Springs. It was known as the low income area of town, a place where almost everyone was on government assistance and took the bus to work, leaving behind broken down cars balanced on cement blocks alongside battle-busted refrigerators.

My dad refused to watch cartoons and told me so as he turned the knob on the channel to the old black and white TV we had in our living room, displaying Jack Nicholson's car driving what I know now as the infamous Sidewinder Pass. We shared the upstairs floor with one other unit where our neighbor Carl lived. He was part of a biker gang and drove an old orange muscle car when he wasn't riding his motorcycle. Almost every weekend, Carl would get drunk and lay spread eagle on the asphalt, laughing hysterically as his friend revved his car's engine a few

yards away from him, headlights on, radio blaring Creedence Clearwater Revival. I thought it was funny. All the neighbors would yell out their windows to keep it down, damnit. Everyone but my dad, who stood at the front door of the duplex smoking one cigarette after another, not saying a word.

Eventually, Carl's laughter would turn into crying. I couldn't tell the difference at first until his friend revved the engine again and sped towards him, stopping within inches of his leather boots. Carl yelled at him *do it, just do it, fucking Christ!* wiping the tears from his cheeks with the back of his hands. Eventually they both stumbled upstairs to pass out until the next weekend.

My dad never talked about Carl. I asked him once why he didn't say anything, but he just shook his head and mumbled something about how Vietnam messed with people's minds. He'd seen a lot of things when he was over there himself. Things he never wanted to talk about with me or my brother. I didn't push him to tell me. Not then and not now. But every once in a while The Shining will come on TV and I'll sit down to watch old Jack holding an ax and laughing his ass off, remembering the day when Carl, spread eagle on the asphalt, eventually stopped laughing.

The Flag Salesman By Heath Dollar

Prairie Dog Brown stood on the side of the road next to his truck surrounded by thirty flags that were flapping in the wind. He had American flags, Texas flags, Come and Take It flags, Don't Tread on Me flags, the Confederate battle flag, the Christian flag, the Goliad flag, and a flag featuring the head of Willie Nelson with a huge leaf behind him that made him resemble a saint from the church of the blessed skunkweed.

Prairie Dog was mighty happy because there was a good steady breeze blowing, and the flags were flying on their poles with an adequate amount of drama. He stood up straight with his chin held high, turreting his head from Mason to Dixon, his eyes inquisitive, his nose testing the breeze. Standing there in his clean, faded jeans, a plain white T-shirt, and scuffed, but well-treaded, work boots, he lowered the brim of his Waylon County Feed and Seed hat to better shade his silvery-blue eyes. From beneath the canopy of the feed store brim, he tried to guess the length of the long lanky shadow that stretched across the gravel before him.

A few steps beyond his shadow, cars passed on either side of the highway, their drivers gunning the throttle on the straightaway, passing him by without so much as gliding a toe from the footfeed or tendering so much as a glance; but he was not discouraged. He spent plenty of Saturdays out on the highway selling flags. He had a regular job, after all, and selling flags

just got him out of the house when he needed an excuse to get some time alone. He made a few bucks here and there, which paid for fishing lures and boxes of shotgun shells, but what he enjoyed most was the time to just sit on his tailgate and think about whatever he wanted to think about.

He wouldn't be thinking about anything too deep, though. He had no interest in contemplating existence or anything like that because whatever was was and whatever wasn't wasn't, so he saw no point in thinking about it. But he liked to let his mind ramble around, to let it graze and wander the pasture. He wouldn't let it go far. His mind had enough room to stretch its legs, but there were fences to keep it from wandering off.

A silver pickup pulled onto the shoulder, and a young man who looked barely of bar-going age stepped off the running board and down to the ground.

"Howdy," the man said.

"I'm good," Prairie Dog said. "Fine as fur on a bullfrog. How are you doing?"

"If I was doing any better, I'd have to be twins."

The young man, who was built like a bullrider, walked among the flags. He wore a pearl snap shirt and kept his hair cut short in the style of a 1940s rancher.

"You ain't got no Mexican flags, do you?"

"Nah, I don't carry 'em."

"Canadian?"

"Ain't got none of those either."

"Do you have a rainbow flag?"

Prairie Dog eyed him with suspicion. He wondered if this ol' boy stopped on the side of the road with the singular purpose of making fun of him.

"Nah, I ain't got one. But I got a Texas flag. I've even got a Burnet flag, from the Old Republic. Blue background, yellow Lone Star in the middle. The letters of Texas going between the points of the star. Looks pretty damn cool in my books. Just got them Burnet flags in, too. You'd be the first one in town to have one. You'd be starting a trend."

"That ain't what I'm looking for."

"Well, I got the Stars and Bars, as you can see, and the national flag of the Confederacy. A lot of folks buy both the Stars and Bars and the Christian flag together. But the Stars and Bars sells like hotcakes on its own, and so does Old Glory. Can hardly keep those two in stock."

The young man leaned against the truck.

"If you don't have any rainbow flags, Mexican flags, or anything like that, do you at least have an old Russian flag? You sure you don't have an old hammer and sickle flag somewhere?"

Prairie Dog looked either way down the highway to make sure there weren't any cars coming.

"I got one behind the seat of my truck. I don't put some of the flags out in case someone gets the wrong idea."

Prairie Dog slid his hand behind his bench seat and produced a flag. He quoted his price. The man smiled and handed him the money.

"I know it ain't none of my business," the roadside salesman said, "but you ain't a communist, are you?"

"Let's just say that I am a weary neighbor."

The young man took the flag and drove away. Prairie Dog felt kind of guilty about carrying the old CCCP flag, but business was business, and, hell, even the president wanted to have the current Russian autocrat's adoptable babies, so selling that Russian flag could not be completely bad. At least he wasn't selling those damn Hitler flags. He had a set of morals, for God's sake.

While he was thinking about all of this, Prairie Dog sat on the tailgate of his truck cleaning gunk from beneath his fingernails with his pocket knife. There was always gunk beneath his fingernails. He repaired lawnmowers for a living, and there was always oil or grease caked up somewhere for him to get under his fingernails. His wife hounded him about it, gave him manicure brushes for Christmas even, but he thought that using a manicure brush was too candy-ass for a man, so he dug underneath his fingernails with a pocket blade, with marginal results, which was fine by him. At least he wasn't a candy-ass.

More vehicles whizzed past. The rigs rattled Prairie Dog's truck, and the pickups a bit less so. The cars simply made a sound, and that was all. Prairie Dog didn't wear a watch, but he could tell by holding his hand up between the horizon and the position of the sun that it was about an hour until sunset. A hand's width was about an hour, and he would leave when the sun was two fingers from setting. Prairie Dog had sold only one flag all day when a huge black pickup with a skull in a cowboy hat airbrushed on the door came to a stop. A man with a big woolly beard wearing a leather vest, jeans, and a pair of crocodile boots jumped out of the cab.

“Hey, Prairie Dog,” the man said.

“Howdy, Buckshot,” Prairie Dog replied. “If it ain’t my best customer. Good to see you there, pardner.”

“Hell, Prairie Dog,” Buckshot said, his eyes coyote-wild but focused. “My goddamn neighbor hung up a damn commie flag today.”

“Are you shitting me?”

“Nah, I ain’t shitting you. I gotta counterbalance that crap. Mutually assured destruction. You know what I mean?”

“Does he got other flags hanging up as well?”

“Nah. That’s the only one. Damn pansy ain’t got but one flag up. He hung it from the roof next to his kids’ basketball goal. And they can’t shoot a lick, by the way. Always missing the backboard. They probably couldn’t make the peewee team. Anyway, that ain’t the point. I need more flags. I think he’s mocking me.”

“What flags do you got already?”

“I got a Texas flag, a Confederate battle flag, an American flag, a Come and Take It with a cannon, a Come and Take It with a machine gun, a Fifth Cavalry flag, a Don’t Tread on Me flag, and a Dale Earnhardt flag all in my front yard. I even have a statue of Stonewall Jackson on horseback in the middle of the yard. I wanted a metal one, but those damn things are expensive, so I got a concrete one and spray-painted it bronze. It looks bad-ass. It’s standing right next to my statue of Davy Crockett in his coonskin cap, which I painted in full color. He’s pointing his long rifle toward the holly bushes. Damn near looks real. So I got my place looking good, looking like it should, and then here comes the asshole next door. He ain’t got nothing but mowed grass, daisy flowers, and some fancy-looking bushes that he clips all the time. Then, suddenly, today he thinks it’s a goddamn pissing contest. Bigger’n Dallas, this ol’ boy hangs a Russian flag, the one with the hammer and the sickle, right in front of his house. Well, that ain’t American.

Americans love freedom of expression, but that ain’t an American expression. That ain’t something somebody should be displaying. Love it or leave it, like ol’ Merle says in the song. If you’re runnin’ down my country, Hoss, then you’re cruising toward a country ass-whipping. So I’m going to overwhelm him in a neighborly way. I’m gonna fly so damn many flags that I break his spirit. And even if I don’t break his damn spirit, I’m gonna fly so many flags that nobody is going

to even notice his piddly-ass commie flag. That’s the way to do it.”

“Well, what ain’t you got?”

“I ain’t got a Confederate national flag. Give me one of them.”

“You want the Christian flag, too?”

“I’m a Christian, as you well know, but I don’t want to advertise it like a Pharisee.”

“A lot of the ol’ boys that buy ’em only wave ’em at night.”

“Really?”

“They burn crosses in the yards of folks that are different from them and carry the Christian flag and the Stars and Bars.”

“That don’t sound real Christian.”

“That ain’t none of my affair. I just sell the flags.”

“Well, give me a Christian flag. I’ll fly it day and night. Do you have any red flags?”

“Red flags?”

“You know the flag. The flag of no quarter. The flag Santa Anna showed the defenders of the Alamo.”

“I got one behind the seat of my truck. I’ll go get it. I don’t fly it so folks don’t get the wrong idea.”

“Throw in a couple of Stars and Bars and three more Come and Take Its, the one with the machine gun.”

Prairie Dog put all of the flags into a paper grocery sack. The sun was one finger from setting. Buckshot paid him with a stack of crumpled bills and climbed back into his pickup.

“Have a good’n,” he said.

“You, too,” Prairie Dog Brown told him, his fingers fondling the bills within his right front pocket. “Hope you enjoy the flags.”

“You know I will. Everybody will. Don’t tread on me is all I can say.”

Prairie Dog nodded.

“Take care, Buckshot. See you soon.”

Prairie Dog watched the man in the crocodile boots put his truck in gear and drive away in a Dixonward direction. Then, in the growing darkness, he took a notepad and a pencil out of his glove box. On the first page, he wrote “5 Rainbow flags, 5 Mexican flags, and 5 Maple Leaves.” If he was lucky, his order would be there before next weekend, when he would set up along the highway and sell those flags like hotcakes.

Kingsway Inn Motel
By Tom Darin Liskey





CJ in Books!

If you start a lit rag you've got a real drive to put the stories and writing you love into the world. If it finds a wider home beyond that, it's icing on the cake. We know we've been putting out good grit lit. It's our standard, and we're overwhelmed by the writers, young and established, that have graced our pages having found some worth in our little Cowboy Jamboree publication to submit at all.

It's no shock to us then that five authors have found larger book homes for their CJ prose this year, but we're damned happy to crow about it.

Noah Milligan, Dwaine Rieves, Jesse Sensibar, Heath Dollar, and Bill Soldan have books out or coming with pieces that first appeared here at CJ. We know these guys are studs and will have success with their books, but we wanted to brag a little about them ourselves and get some thoughts from these writers on those books and what a reader might see and get out of their larger books

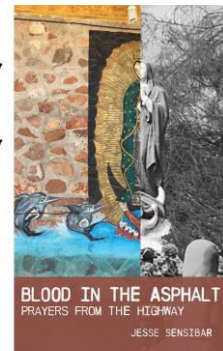
Jesse Sensibar

Book: *Blood in the Asphalt: Prayers from the Highway* (Tolsun Books, Fall 2018)

Original CJ Story: "Dogfight Behind Glass" (Issue 1.1)



THE
HIGHWAY
GIVES.
THE
HIGHWAY
TAKES
AWAY.



OCTOBER 16, 2018
TOLSUN BOOKS



CJ: How did this book project evolve?

JS: Well it sort of evolved as two projects, really. Both the shrine stuff involved came out of my lifetime of work on the highway as a wrecker operator. A lot of the short prose is based on that and my interest in the shrines comes out of that. The shrine stuff really

evolved very organically in that I always thought that somebody should be documenting these things and one day I found myself on the side of the road with the shrine in front of me and an iPhone in my hand that I could use to take pictures, and a Facebook page that I could post them to, and so that's what I started doing.

CJ: What author or authors might your book remind readers of and why do you say this?

JS: One of my worries about my books is that bookstores aren't going to carry it because they won't have any idea which fucking shelf to put it on. But, if pressed, I would say that my work personally reminds me of the work of Jim Harrison, Donald Hall, Michael Herr, and perhaps a little bit of Charles Mosley and Harry Crews.

CJ: What do you want a reader to get out of your grit lit? (Or, what do you imagine they will get, if that's easier?)

JS: I hope they'll put their fucking seatbelts on.

William Soldan

Book: *In Just the Right Light* (Unsolicited Press)

Original CJ Story: "Letting Go" (special Harry Crews issue)



CJ: How did this book project evolve?

WS: The first of the stories I wrote was "The Bad Ones," which included part of what eventually became the opening story "Trapper's Creek." That was in late 2013, shortly after my son was born. I decided to make them two separate pieces when the old man, Arthur, demanded more page time. I was happy to oblige. But I still didn't have a vision for it yet or anything like that.

Then I wrote the story "Something Special," which is set in the same fictional town, and I realized I was far from finished writing about this place and its people. Several other pieces developed from there, and soon I was on my way.

This was when my writing had recently begun moving in a different direction. I'd only been writing fiction seriously for maybe two years at that point, mostly horror stories, since that's what I grew up reading a lot of, and I didn't really know what else to do. Then one of my professors introduced me to the work of Donald Ray Pollock. I read his story "Pills" and it blew my mind. I quickly bought *Knockemstiff*, which is still my all time favorite collection. I read the entire thing in a single sitting then read it again. It was the first time in a long time that I'd read a book I couldn't stop thinking about. I'd be at work and just counting down the minutes till I got off so I could hurry home and reread it. It was a fucking revelation.

I grew up in several small towns after moving to Ohio in the 80s, and Pollock's characters and setting reminded me so much of the people and places of my childhood that I realized I had a very deep well of life experience to draw from in my work, one that I'd barely been tapping. So I credit DRP for instigating my transition into Grit Lit and rural noir. I'd already been a fan of Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and the Southern Gothic tradition, but it was the Midwestern and Appalachian authors—people like Pollock, Campbell, Offutt, and others—whose work spoke to me in a way that nothing else ever had. It had never occurred to me to write realistic stories about my people and my places—desperate people, desperate places. It seems obvious to me now, but at the time, it was a huge eye-opener. Like I'd just been waiting for permission or something, stupid as that sounds.

I guess *In Just the Right Light* is my attempt to join a conversation I hadn't been aware of, one which I felt I could contribute to in a meaningful way.

CJ: What author or authors might your book remind readers of and why do you say this?

WS: Well, there are those already mentioned above, for obvious reasons, but I don't like to compare myself to other authors, even those that have been huge

influences on my work. People will likely think it's reminiscent of *Knockemstiff*, of course, if for no other reason than because the bulk of my stories take place in the same small town, though Miles Junction is fictional and *Knockemstiff* is not. Bonnie Jo Campbell's *American Salvage* was another one that helped light my way, in terms of the types of stories I wanted to write. One writer whose work mine likely *won't* be compared to, but whose short fiction is a tremendous influence on so much of my work, is Richard Lange. His collections *Dead Boys* and *Sweet Nothing* are among the handful of books I reread at least once a year. My book owes a lot to Lange's writing.

Anyway, while I'd be honored to even be mentioned in the same sentence as these authors, I don't think my book is *like* any of theirs. Their books are all unique artifacts, unlike anything else, and I'd like to think my work is, too. Its own thing, I mean. I'd like to think it has its own voice and energy, its own blood.

CJ: What do you want a reader to get out of your grit lit? (Or, what do you imagine they will get, if that's easier?)

WS: I always hesitate when asked this sort of question (sort of like the last question), because any answer I give feels to me like it smacks of some kind of agenda. And I don't have an agenda other than to write stories people will hopefully enjoy. But the short answer is I want them to have an emotional response, whatever it may be. A visceral feeling that sticks with them for a while after they're done reading. Thinking is great, but more than anything else, I want readers to feel something while they're engaging with it, and after.

The slightly longer, more specific answer is that I guess I want them to experience a sense of empathy and discover a new perspective toward a way of life and certain people—in this case poor people, addicts, single mothers, and misguided kids who become misguided adults—that often go overlooked except when they're the subjects of ridicule and contempt.

But mostly, I just want them to like what they read.

Noah Milligan

Book: *Five-Hundred Poor* (Central Avenue Publishing)

Original CJ Story: "A Good Start" (Issue 2.1)



CJ: How did this book project evolve?

NM: The collection is comprised of ten stories, eight of which have been previously published, so the book itself has been a long time coming. The story "Amid the Flood of Mortal Ills" was the first story published in this collection back in 2011, I believe, so I really didn't write these stories with a cohesive theme in mind or anything like that. It just sort of serendipitously worked out that way. The main subjects tackled are problems that Oklahoma faces on a daily basis. There was an editorial in the *Oklahoman* a little while back that detailed some of our rankings in the nation, and the picture it painted wasn't very flattering. We've got some of the highest incarceration rates in the country, and we're number one in incarcerating women. We have terrible mental health outcomes. We have some of the highest rates of violence, gun violence especially. Teen pregnancies. Substance abuse. Education. Just category after category, Oklahoma is ranked one of the worst in the nation. Don't get me wrong, I love Oklahoma. Have spent my whole life here. I'm going to raise my children here, but there are so many things that we could do better. These struggles are really what inspired this book, and has informed a lot of my writing throughout my career.

CJ: What author or authors might your book remind readers of and why do you say this?

NM: To be honest, I'm not really sure. I've had a few readers tell me that the collection reminds them of Steinbeck. I've had a few others tell me that a couple of the stories remind them of George Saunders. But I

don't try to style myself after other writers. I just hope the book doesn't read as a second rate knock off of anybody.

CJ: What do you want a reader to get out of your grit lit? (Or, what do you imagine they will get, if that's easier?)

NM: I've never considered myself as a grit lit writer, so I'm not sure if I can have an encompassing answer for all of my work. For this particular book, the title *Five Hundred Poor* is inspired by Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, so when people pick up the book I think they anticipate stories about the financially poor overcoming odds to find happiness or monetary success or something, but that's not really the case. These are grim and dark stories about people who find themselves in desperate situations, and as such, oftentimes react desperately. A lot of what happens in these stories will make people uncomfortable, but I think that's important. Although we're the wealthiest country on earth, we have a tendency to ignore a lot of our problems because they don't immediately affect us. Histories are revised, misinformation is spread, and we blame the victims without confronting the fact that we have collectively built and maintained institutions that marginalize certain sections of our population. This is something we should all strive to do better, and the first step I think in being able to do that is awareness.

Heath Dollar

Book: *Waylon County: Texas Stories* (Sleeping Panther Press)

Original CJ Story (as Sterling H. Cash): "Broken Water" (Issue 1.2)



CJ: How did this book project evolve?

HD: My family has lived in Texas since the Republic, and though I should have written about my homeland from the start, until a few years ago I rarely did.

Granted, I was proud to be from the Lone Star State, but when I was younger, I was more interested in places far beyond the Red River. Honestly, it was my wife, Martina, a native of the Czech Republic, who suggested that I concentrate on writing about Texas. Martina, you see, has a deep appreciation for both the honesty and integrity of the Texas people and for the respect proper Texans show toward others. So I started writing stories about characters whose voices sounded like those I had heard my entire life.

Also, when I got to thinking about the Texas literary tradition, I thought of sprawling novels, and I liked the idea of writing very short stories about Texas, simply because I thought it was a medium that needed to be explored. The old saying is that everything is bigger in Texas, but that is not the direction I wanted to go. I wanted to create compact little universes that a reader could easily enter and exit in a matter of minutes.

CJ: What author or authors might your book remind readers of and why do you say this?

HD: There are authors to whom I owe a significant debt, though I would be reluctant to compare myself to them. Though I am not a folklorist, I am influenced by J. Frank Dobie, the great storyteller of the Southwest. I am also influenced by Flannery O'Connor, who was a master of pacing and point of view. And, well, being from North Texas, I am caught in Larry McMurtry's gravitational pull as well. But then, I am also influenced by the sense of the absurd found in Franz Kafka and Gunter Grass.

To be honest, as well as to answer the question, I will say that *Waylon County: Texas Stories* was compared to a work by William Faulkner in a *Lone Star Literary Life* book review, which was quite vindicating after struggling for almost three decades to get a book published. When I read that review, I was humbled, slightly embarrassed, and I damn near cried.

CJ: What do you want a reader to get out of your grit lit?

HD: Three generations of my family worked at a slaughterhouse in the Fort Worth Stockyards. They could tell you that every hog died different and every day was the same. They could tell you that silence sometimes says more than a river of words. These men, though they were not highly educated, possessed

a certain wisdom. I would like to share whatever kernels I could garner from them with my readers. Also, I think it is vital to understand that Texas is not a monolithic culture. Although *Waylon County: Texas Stories* is set in the present, there are characters who still speak the four most commonly spoken languages in Texas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What I would like for readers to get out of my work is that not all Texans are the same socially, philosophically, culturally, or even linguistically.

Dwaine Rieves

Book: *Shirtless Men Drink Free* (Tupelo Press, 2019)

Original CJ Story: “Red Birds” (Issue 2.2)

CJ: How did this book project evolve?

DR: *Shirtless Men Drink Free* evolved from road-trip Talk Radio, my thoughts percolating as the circus moderator behind the mic rounded up the callers. It was 2004, my mother slowly dying of cancer. At least monthly I flew into Birmingham, rented a car and, over the three-hour drive home to Mississippi, listened to political conversations that attributed the nation’s problems to homosexuals. Job shifts to foreign countries, Main Street business failures, terrorist threats, loss of school-prayer, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, even the 911 tragedies—invariably, hometown listeners blamed the homosexuals. And, because the incumbent president supported a constitutional amendment to protect traditional marriage, clearly, he deserved re-election. As did all other politicians willing to draw the line on immorality. Valdosta, you’re on the line.

I listened as I drove, my mind taking me back to 1994 and a sauna where I sat alone in the quiet with another man, both of us naked but for carefully placed towels. The gym was in a southern capitol city, the other man a major elected state official although at the time he was a stranger. The man poured water on the coals. Steam rose and outside in the hall the clock kept ticking. He was watching, stretching. Sometimes a yawn, the towel inching lower. What happened next is not so important, but back then the encounter was playing out in my thoughts as the beginning of a legitimate relationship. However, when fully clothed, the other man could have been a Talk Radio caller. He ignored

me. Had to, I learned—people said he was that important.

My sauna cruise-buddy was a good man, a good leader. Noble is the appropriate word. It angered me. Some grief perhaps, which I accepted because I was one with this world and its need for politicians. Silence, relocation and years painted over my troubled education in the naked yearning and fully clothed life of at least one good elected official.

Imprisoned, I thought of the guy as I drove through the nights toward Mississippi. My sauna cruise-buddy from a decade back had been caged in a world where fear, both for himself and our world, was essential to win an election and within that victory try to live. This was the hard world my mother was dying in, a world she loved tenaciously. Despite what this world had done to her body with chemotherapy and unrelenting cancer, she still wanted to live within it. I had trouble following that desire. I wanted her to be glad for death, the relief it would bring, the freedom from trying. But my mother kept fighting and my visits and listening kept coming. The callers would grow angry. Pervert was mentioned. The moderator could roar like a Harley.

My mother died, but I have no doubt she would return to this tough world if she could. My sauna politician later left politics for a fortune in business. Something within this mess had to be decent, something worth fixing. The question—*Why?*—prompted my novel *Shirtless Men Drink Free*. So, in a way, the Beekman family evolved as instruments of essay, three people-tools of exploration in a world where dead parents can return in ghostly ways that, as the Talk Radio pundits probably know best, act out with strong opinions on the traditional problems.

CJ: What author or authors might your book remind readers of and why do you say this?

DR: The Bundren family in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* loomed in my mind as the story of the Atlanta Beekmans evolved. It was the young Darl Bundren who suffered the most in Faulkner’s story. Yet it was also Darl who, I think, most vividly illustrated how we sometimes must live our lives under locked-away conditions, particularly if the life belongs to a successful politician.

Darl Bundren was the insightful but restless young man trapped within a world that, because of the nature it takes to be human, feared for its survival. Darl was a threat. He was obvious. He acted out. He worried his family. Darl was hungry for the truth, angry at any cover-up. Darl could have been, in the favorite words of Talk Radio callers, a homosexual. The world of the Bundren family was secured only once brother Darl was locked away in the state lunatic asylum. To quote the novel:

Our brother Darl in a cage in Jackson where, his grimed hands lying light in the quiet interstices, looking out he foams.

Because Darl was successfully locked away, old man Bundren could respectfully shovel the dirt over his dead wife, remarrying before the grass had retaken the dirt. Meanwhile, Darl foams quietly away in the barricaded place good politicians made for people like him, the world outside his window yielding to its grass and vines, as he knows it must to survive.

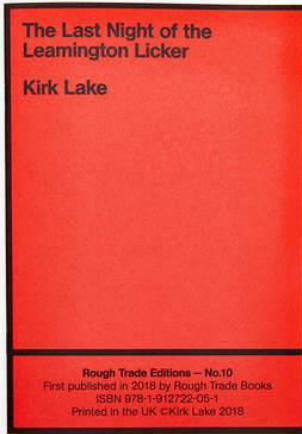
CJ: What do you want a reader to get out of your grit lit? (Or, what do you imagine they will get, if that's easier?)

DR: I like to think the gift of the Beekman family is a vision—troubled, but hopefully an ennobling vision. The novel closes on a moment when the world grows watery in a rain-drenched window, river birch trees glistening outside even as the vision blurs and reflects light back to the reader. I think of reconciliation, peace with the inexplicable. I think of sitting alongside a reader, both of us naked but for carefully placed towels. I think of the moments he or she may be fearing, the listeners calling into Talk Radio with strong opinions and fierce definitions of decent living. On some level, I think of all useful fiction as a freedom from top-of-the-hour deadlines and news of another take-over or take-down, the need to do laundry.

Having read the novel, I hope a reader will be prepared to speak back to the yeller on a Harley, to understand why shoveling the dirt over a body is sometimes the only way of handling a truth we're not capable of greeting in public. I want the reader to feel at home in the bar where *Shirtless Men Drink Free*, to take off her blouse or his shirt with the others and feel this world run liquid between nipples and those other

parts that serve as reminders we are animals. I want mothers and fathers to grace the bartender with mercy for having listened and, in response, continue working. I want the reader to think of the nonreader, to honor the difference with a clink of a glass and a swallow that leaves a taste in the mouth of the fine finishing tin metal a farmer smells when reroofing his barn to better protect his animals and the feed it takes to keep them living.

A Brit Writing Grit:
CJ's Adam Van Winkle Interviews Kirk Lake



Kirk Lake uses a piano top for a writing desk. At least, that's how I imagine it. How else could he possibly get all the work he creates in writing, music, comics and film? He must be in constant artist mode. Or he's just one really cool cat.

Kirk Lake first reached out to me after our special Harry Crews tribute issue last year and submitted the little trailerpark vignette, *Low Expectations*, that follows herein. I was hooked. I found everything I could of his to read, and it, like Crews, knocks me out.

I had to ask him some questions about his process, his creativity, and working with freakin' Nick Cave. Lake don't disappoint here, espousing on topics ranging from being a Brit writing American Grit to Crews, to the story behind the *Leamington Licker*.

AV: You mentioned that you found *Cowboy Jamboree* through our special Harry Crews issue. We dig talking about our grit lit heroes. How'd you come to Harry Crews?

KL: I think *The Knockout Artist* was the first I read. I would've bought it as a used book in the late 1980s. The yellow paperback with the boxer on the cover. I don't know if I'd have heard of Crews then. I was always into books about boxing so that's probably why I picked it up. Back then, pre-internet, it was harder to find books by people like Harry Crews. I'm not sure they were even published in the UK and so as imports they were either scarce or expensive. I was blown away by Crews and then bought his books whenever I found

them. With *Crews I* felt that this was somebody who was being honest with the characters he was writing about and that the style served the characters rather than the other way around. Now of course you can go online and watch films of Crews talking and you can see that the man himself is right there in his books. I'd have already read *Wiseblood* and the Flannery O'Connor short stories as they were easy to find but the more contemporary writers that are loosely in that Southern Gothic tradition kind of crept up on me slowly. Barry Hannah, Larry Brown, William Gay etc. A couple of years ago I bought an amazing anthology called *The Christ-Haunted Landscape*, which features stories by and interviews with people like Crews, Brown, Reynolds Price etc and that book kind of put the pieces in place as to how these writers fit together.

AV: "*Low Expectations*" feels so real, so authentic. How do you write a woman in a trailer park saying "ain't" as a dude living in London?

KL: Well obviously I'm English and this was the first time I've really tried to write something completely American. I've spent a lot of time in the USA over the past twenty years and much of that in California and often out in the desert. This particular story, the characters I wanted to write about, their situation, was born out of a long road trip and days spent in tiny desert towns. I've read American fiction my whole life. I figured I could tell this story and remain truthful and honest to the characters and write it without anybody necessarily knowing I wasn't American. I think for any writer once you get a handle on a character and you know how they speak and how they think and what they do and especially what they would be up to for all the moments during the time-frame of a novel when they're not actually on the page then you can create something that seems real and authentic.

AV: Speaking of how you do it, you're a musician, actor, writer, have created screenplays, books of fiction and poetry, and comics. So how do you do all that? What's your process for creating?

KL: With fiction, for me everything starts with a character and then a story develops. I conjure up an imaginary person and I put them in this imaginary place and I think well what would they do? What is it

that makes them tick? What are their dreams or their regrets? What would they say and who would they say it to? What things do they notice and what would they ignore? Then a world gradually evolves and some kind of plot. Though if I'm writing a novel I'll always know what the first scene will be and I'll always know what the last scene will be. The tricky part is navigating between the two. I spend ages just sketching out ideas, writing random scenes, bits of dialogue. A lot of this stuff goes unused but it's important for creating character and tone and in the process I'm identifying what my way into the novel is. Eventually I'll come up with an opening line. So in the *Still Water/ Neptune Blues* novel that *Low Expectations* is extracted from the first line is "It was one of those dogs that looked at you with sad bloodshot eyes through rolls of loose, creased brown fur like a drunk man trapped inside a thrift store fancy dress costume". And when I wrote that I knew I was good to go.

Film is very different. It's a collaborative medium which can be a nightmare for a writer if they are in any way precious about the script they've written. You have to know that everything you write is going to be changed somehow somewhere along the line. I wrote a feature film called *Piercing Brightness* that came out in 2012 and I came onto the project very late and I was working on writing a script that already had characters, location and plot fixed. The version that came out is very different to what I wrote. Entire scenes are missing that for me were vital in terms of character and narrative but the director had a particular vision. You have to realize that, even if the film gets made and a lot of the time even if you've been paid to work on a script it won't get made for various reasons, all these lines of dialogue you've written won't make the cut or it'll be edited in a way that changes the meaning or an actor will say something completely different to what's written... You have to just let that go for the good of the film as a whole. There's no point getting beat up about that stuff. Nick Cave described script writing as "dog work" and it often is just that. Sometimes though, you have a great actor and they can replace three lines of dialogue with just a look or a gesture and it's way more effective than what's in the script.

The most recent project I've been working on is a kind of film noir called *The World We Knew* which I co-wrote and appear in. I've been involved in this all the way through to the edit. It's a completely independent feature film that's due out next year.

We've been billing it as *Harold Pinter meets Poltergeist*. It's about a gang of men who are forced to stay overnight in an old house after the heist they have just pulled goes wrong. You're never quite certain if there are literal or metaphoric ghosts coming after them. We're using the tropes of film noir: the gambler, the boxer, the old timer out on one last job etc and playing with the form. I appear as a character called *Stoker* who fronts a night club for one of the gangsters. I don't act very often, other than *Stoker* the last thing I did was play an American journalist in a television comedy about the time Alice Cooper worked with Salvador Dali.

With film I'd only usually be doing it if somebody had asked me to. In other work it's usually a case of having the idea for a story or something to say at least and then figuring out the best form for that idea. I don't particularly differentiate between very short stories or poems. There might be stylistic differences if I'm writing a poem/story that is going to read out loud as there's things that work aurally that don't read well on a page and vice-versa.

In practical terms of actually getting things done if I'm actively working on a novel I'll work on it every day until it's finished. But that would be from the moment I consider I've actually started by writing the first scene and knowing it's the first scene. Before that, all the sketching and notes and dialogue snippets I'll just go at whenever I feel like it and I'll spend ages just thinking about it or maybe watching films that I think might be useful in getting the tone right or other bits of research. I always think of it as kind of circling around and around until I identify where I'm going to jump in.

AV: Your spoken word albums seem to enjoy a lot of acclaim. How'd this medium come to you, or you to it?

KL: The CDs and records happened because at the time I started writing seriously in the mid 1990s I was friends with a lot of musicians and somebody I knew from a record label suggested it might be interesting for me to read a few of the stories and poems I'd been writing over music. The music on the first album is provided by whoever was available. I ended up being given an okay publishing deal with a major music publisher and so I was able to put together a regular band. We made a few more records and played a lot of shows but it was always difficult to keep it going as there were up to eight musicians in the band plus we had

super-8 projectors to cart around. Just a hassle really and not a cost-efficient set up. I made a final album around 2001 and since then I've just done the odd thing here and there. A few guest vocals on other people's records, a few ultra-limited editions for boutique labels.

I'm not sure what I think about my records. At the time I wasn't particularly convinced that they worked other than on a few tracks. They were generally well received by the critics and I sometimes get messages from people that are just finding them now. There wasn't really anybody else making records like them at the time so I was never part of any "scene" and the gigs I played were with indie bands and I'm not sure their audiences really dug this kind of garage rock meets free-jazz with a man mumbling bleak stories over the top that we were turning up with. There was a zine-style book of lyrics, poems and stories from the records that came out a few years ago called *Most Things Don't Happen*. It's sold out but if anybody wants one they can email me and I'll send a PDF. All the rights to the recordings are back with me now and I haven't bothered releasing them digitally so other than tracks that have been uploaded by somebody else they're hard to hear these days without buying a physical copy from a bargain bin somewhere. With all that said I am actually working on something new for early next year which will be the first proper album since 2001.

AV: "The Last Night of Leamington Licker" is a brilliant story. The comparison to Crews The Knockout Artist is so apt. Randy's turn from signing the autograph at the opening of your story to wiping down a table is such a fantastic moment of character, and says so much about where Randy's been and where he's at. Tell me about Rough Trade Books. What are these pamphlets and how did you get involved? And how'd you know about Randolph Turpin?

KL: Well the Randolph Turpin story is kind of like folklore in Leamington which is where I was born. This dirt-poor kid from the backstreets of a small Midlands town beat Sugar Ray Robinson, probably the greatest boxer that ever lived, against all the odds and became Middleweight Champion of the World. He was briefly a national hero. But he lost the rematch and then began a slow decline that eventually found him broke and running a transport cafe. My story is a fictionalized account of his final few hours. I'd been wanting to do

something with this story for years but was never sure exactly how to handle it. When I was approached by Rough Trade Books to write one of their first pamphlets I looked at all the research I'd already done on Turpin and it all fell into place.

Rough Trade Books is founded by the people who were behind the original Rough Trade record label. Nina Herve is the driving force and is responsible for commissioning the pamphlets. So there are currently a dozen titles with a few more due soon. A real mix of things... the poet Salena Godden, a book of photos from punk historian Jon Savage, a short story from Joe Dunthorne, an art book from Babak Ganjei... They're all limited editions of 500 and print only. It's a beautiful, diverse series and I'm honoured to be in this first batch.

AV: Not to just jump around here, but I'm still so fascinated by the diversity of your writing. How'd you wind up writing for Nick Cave and acting in his movie?

KL: Around the time my first novel came out (1997) I met the artists Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard and we became great friends. We worked together on a few things. I scripted a film called *Radio Mania* for them which was this strange surround-sound 3D installation that was commissioned by the BFI in London. They started working with Nick on some promo films for the *Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!!* albums and the first of these were a series of viral videos where Nick played a fake medium in recreations of old Victorian era séances (these may still be on line somewhere). I was drafted in to fill in for one of the band who couldn't make it. I guess I was the closest person to hand who looked like he could be a Bad Seed. That was probably the first time I met him other than in passing after a show or something. So later I appeared in the *More News From Nowhere* video as a strip-club punter.

Then Iain and Jane and Nick had developed the idea for the film *20,000 Days on Earth* which is a kind of hybrid docu-fiction 'day in the life'. I don't think Nick wanted any actual actors as the idea was to make it seem real so I was brought in to play an archivist and spent three or four days in this elaborately constructed imaginary archive under the town hall in Brighton. I was given boxes full of Nick's actual archive and told I could ask him whatever I wanted so none of it is scripted. The bits you see on screen are obviously chosen as they fit the narrative arc and themes of the

film but we shot loads more. Anyway, after that, I was asked by Nick to write an essay for the sleeve notes of the compilation album *Lovely Creatures*. I don't know if he'd read my last book or had seen some of the films I'd made with Iain and Jane but for whatever reason he thought I was the man for the job. I went to Bordeaux for a couple of days and wrote the essay *All Hands on Deck! - The Bad Seeds Set Sail* and it appeared in the deluxe edition of the compilation.

AV: Back to your CJ story: "Low Expectations" is excerpted from a novel, *Still Water/ Neptune Blues*. Can you tell us more about that project? And that title?

KL: Well I can't say a whole lot right now as the official announcement about publication date will happen later. But it's coming out in 2019. It's a story set in a desert town in California in 1986. The characters you meet directly in the excerpt are not the main characters. The preacher heard briefly on the radio is more important. It's basically a story about a teenage runaway who, while attempting to hitch from Los Angeles to Las Vegas, finds himself abandoned in this dying, dusty, near derelict place. In the novel the town is called Baron but its geography and history are loosely based on the real town of Baker in California. Anybody who's driven from LA to Vegas will have passed by that town but probably not stopped. It's famous for having the world's tallest thermometer. The title is the name of a blues record that one of the main characters once made, like A-Side "Still Water", B-Side "Neptune Blues". In terms of plot mechanics the discovery of this record is not a key point but in terms of theme and character development it's really important.

AV: Besides Crews, what writers have shown you the light? Who are your writing idols?

KL: There are just a few writers that I've read every single thing they've written, obviously not including those who've only done a couple of books: Charles Willeford, Jim Thompson, Hubert Selby Jr, Graham Greene, Denis Johnson probably a few more I'm forgetting now. Of those I guess Greene remains my go to guy. I've read most of his books more than once and a few of them many many times especially *The End of the Affair*. I was really thrilled when I found out that Crews had tried to teach himself to write by breaking

down *The End of the Affair*. It's such an incredible book and Greene is a masterful stylist.

Many years ago I was working freelance for a magazine and mostly I'd be interviewing generally quite dull musicians but I could suggest things to the editor and I managed to get a commission to interview Hubert Selby Jr. This would've been when *The Willow Tree* was coming out (1998). We did a phone interview and we talked about writing and his process and he was fascinating and inspirational. After the interview came out we spoke a few more times and I'd say he's had the most influence on me as a writer. I don't think I write like him at all but he taught me things about being true to your characters, about how to write prose the way a composer does music with tempo changes, crescendo, diminuendo, harmony, discord etc etc and I find myself thinking about this often. He was a lovely, generous, kind man and I always regretted not meeting him face to face. We were supposed to meet up one time I was in LA but he was ill and it didn't happen.

In the early 1990s I published a zine called *Twister* and wrote to Bukowski to see if he'd contribute some poems and he sent a few batches of, at the time, unpublished stuff. I loved Bukowski and the fact that he still bothered to send stuff out to tiny magazines just raised him even higher. This was maybe 1993, I know he was writing *Pulp* at the time, so he was a well known writer. And I still love Bukowski but I think he has been badly served by not being edited properly after his death. This is probably not a popular opinion. When he's at his best he is an absolute genius but this has been diluted by the sheer volume of work that's been published posthumously. Some of it is not very good at all. And Bukowski, like Burroughs and Hunter S Thompson, has been responsible for inspiring a lot of really poor writers who think they can write in his style. He made it look easy and it isn't. But I guess you can't lay the blame on Bukowski any more than you can blame Bob Dylan for Donovan.

AV: What are you listening to?

KL: I never listen to music when I'm writing but I have always referenced a lot of music. Sometimes if I've written in that a certain song is playing in a scene then I'll stop and listen to the song and work out how hearing that music might affect the characters or situation but then I'll switch it off and get back to

writing. In terms of what I listen to day-to-day... a lot of blues, a lot of jazz, a lot of reggae, always a lot of Elvis and all kinds of other stuff. Instead of trying to curate a list I'm just going to reel off the first ten CDs that are right now sat next to the machine; Bob Dylan - Live 1975, Alice Coltrane - Lord of Lords, Serge Gainsbourg - Vu de L'extérieur, Arvo Part - Passio, Billie Holiday - Giants of Jazz, Flying Burrito Brothers - Burrito Deluxe, John Coltrane - Afro Blue Impressions, John Coltrane - Ascension, Royal Trux - Veterans of Disorder, Tapper Zukie - Man Ah Warrior.

AV: What are you reading these days?

KL: I could do the same as with the CDs but the pile of books I have on the desk in front of me are all research for something I'm working on. It's all esoteric and occult stuff, conspiracy theories, ghosts... If I listed those I'd seem like some kind of nut so I'll try and remember what I read recently that's kind of contemporary. I enjoyed the new Willy Vlautin novel, I don't think it's a great boxing book which might seem an odd thing to say considering it's about a boxer but as a study of ambition, hope and failure I think it worked. I love Pascal Garnier who wrote bleak absurdist noir fiction, they're not new but they were originally published in French and the first English translations have been coming out fairly frequently. I was introduced to the writer Brian Jabas Smith who has a book of stories called Spent Saints which is worth checking out. He has a new book called Tucson Salvage due later in the year and he's coming over to the UK for that and we're doing a couple of events together. He's the brother of the musician I worked with most often back when I was making records regularly. The novel I just finished reading last night was Cain by Jose Saramago.

AV: What are you watching?

KL: I don't watch much television. The last film I saw at the cinema was The Apparition which is a French film starring one of my favourite actors Vincent Lindon. I can be somewhat less discerning in terms of film than I am with books and music. I can and do watch virtually anything. If it's something I'm not engaged with then I use the time to drift off and it becomes just light and shapes passing in front of my

eyes while I'm thinking about something else. Usually though, especially since I started working on films, there's something that you can take from even the worst movie. I'll find myself thinking about the editing, about the structure of a scene, the set design, the dialogue. Just breaking the film down and trying to fathom what's not working and why. I watch a lot of old film noir online as there are so many of them available to stream it's never difficult to find one I haven't seen and some of these really obscure, ignored B-pictures are just incredible.

For more information or to contact Kirk go to www.kirklake.net or via twitter @kirklake

The Last Night of the Leamington Licker is available at www.roughtradebooks.com or in various book stores, record shops and art galleries.

Low Expectations

an extract from the forthcoming novel

Still Water/Neptune Blues

By Kirk Lake

Rosie pulled the drapes across the window that looked out on the front yard and undressed down to her bra and panties. She switched on the air-con and it rattled into life and started sucking the day's baked air out of the trailer.

She looked at herself in the bathroom mirror, ran her fingertips along the creased pink lines in her skin where her uniform had squeezed tight around her waist then stood on tip-toes and reached for the ceiling in her own interpretation of the “sun salutation” that she once saw on a morning TV show. She thought she was looking pretty good all things considered. “Any man should be grateful to be getting a hold of this”, she said to her reflection as she unhooked her bra. “And most men are more than happy to just get what they’re given” is what she imagined her reflection would be saying back to her. One of her friends once told her she had the kind of breasts that men just wanted to lay their heads in. “Don’t I know that”, she’d said. “Problem is most times seems like all they wanna do is lay there and cry”.

She stepped out of her panties, climbed into the shower and sang as many verses of *Ode to Billie Joe* as she could remember in whatever order they came to her. And all the time her eyes were closed and the water ran over her skin and she was imagining it was midnight and she was outside in a forest and it was raining.

Rosie walked naked into the kitchenette, took some macaroni cheese out of the freezer and stuck it in the microwave. She poured herself an orange juice, sat at the kitchen table and smoked a cigarette while she waited for her food to cook. By the time it was done she’d decided she didn’t really want it after all and she dumped the container straight into the trash and lit another cigarette. She slipped into a blue satin dressing gown, turned on the radio and lay down on the small plastic couch and blew smoke up at the ceiling. The radio was still tuned in to the religious station that she’d found by accident the night before when she’d been searching for something maudlin to help her polish off a bottle of red wine. She wouldn’t have considered herself any kind of believer though she sometimes wore a small gold crucifix that an ex-boyfriend had given her. The crucifix and the clap, they were the only two things she’d ever got from him though she couldn’t remember which had come first.

The Reverend Rex Wright was talking about the word of God and how it was like a ball bouncing towards you and that you didn’t need to worry if you couldn’t catch it first time around because God was happy to keep tossing his love towards you over and over again until you grabbed it and held it and then passed it on. She liked the preacher’s voice, it was

soothing, reassuring. She stubbed out her cigarette and listened.

“...and the word might start small in the distance, so you can hardly read it, hardly hear it at all but as it comes towards you it’s getting bigger, getting bigger, getting **BIGGER** and **LOUDER** until finally you can’t do anything but grasp it and hold it tight to your heart and then you know, then you **REALIZE** that you **HAVE** to pass it on...” Wright’s voice rose and fell and in the background Rosie could hear people clapping and hollering and randomly shouting out Jesus and Amen. Wright whispered the last line of his sermon, his mouth close up to the microphone like he was actually sat there inside the radio - “Don’t play ‘monkey in the middle’ with the word of God. His love is for everybody. His love is for you.” Then there was some organ music and a pre-recorded message from a much calmer Reverend Wright explaining that his Church of the Holy Finger of St Thomas welcomed donations however big or small in order to carry out their mission for the love of God and St Thomas and that cash or checks should be sent to a PO Box in Beaumont, California. By the time he’d finished Rosie was almost reaching for her purse and if she’d had a pencil to hand she might have at least written down the address to use later on but as it was there was a tap-tap on the screen of the trailer door and she jumped up and snapped off the radio, slightly embarrassed that the person outside, especially because she knew exactly who it would be, had heard her listening to a religious station.

Ellen Dyer, with her bleached hair piled up high as an ice-cream sundae, was standing on the step with a cigarette dangling from her lips and a small white dog in her arms, “Rosie, are you coming? I made up a jug of Long Island Iced Tea”

“Yes, sorry I lost track of time. Let me put something on. I’ll be right over”

Rosie got dressed as slowly as she could, even taking time to dig out the crucifix from the plastic jewelry box on the bedside cabinet and then, when she couldn’t delay it a minute longer, followed after Ellen to her office by the entrance of the trailer park.

Ever since her husband Will had died in a road accident while he’d been visiting his sister in Arizona a few months earlier Ellen had taken over running the park. At first Rosie had felt sorry for her, thinking she might be lonely and she must be grieving even though she’d never seen her smile or laugh quite so much as

she had since the funeral. Then one night Ellen admitted that if her husband hadn't have died she'd most probably have killed him herself seeing as how he was a no good bum and incapable of keeping his hands out of other women's pants. "That drunk in the pick-up saved me a whole load of trouble is the way I see it" she'd said rattling the ice in her glass like she was giving him a round of applause.

Their weekly evening cocktail sessions had become something of a ritual and if Rosie couldn't exactly say she enjoyed them then at least they were a way of marking off the passing of another week of nothing much else.

The office was in an adapted trailer right by the road. There was a porch built on to the side of it with a couple of plastic lawn chairs set next to an old metal table. They sat outside and watched the light fade and the stars slowly emerging. Ellen poured the ice tea out of a big glass jug with a hula girl painted on it. Moths circled a bare light bulb hanging from the roof of the porch. Cicadas rattled in the bushes. The little white dog lay in the dirt and chewed on a frayed tennis ball.

"Don't you get lonely?" said Ellen pouring another drink from the jug, "You need a man in your life"

Rosie looked up at the sky and remembered a previous conversation they'd had about the probability of there being life on other planets, "With all those stars staring down at me? There must be a billion, billion people up there that are a lot worse off than me."

"They don't help you none. Down here you're on your own and you are definitely on your own."

"God's with me" said Rosie and she found her fingers were rubbing the tiny body of Christ on her necklace. Where had that come from? She didn't know for sure but she blushed slightly and told herself to slow down on the cocktails.

"Oh puh-lease," Ellen rolled her eyes.

"You go to church every Sunday. You must think so too"

Ellen lit a cigarette, leaned forward in her chair and tapped Rosie on the knee as though she was about to tell her some secret, "Well God is all well and good and I'm more than happy to jump into his ever-loving arms the very second that I get zapped off this planet but while I'm waiting I need some flesh and blood to get a hold of me... and just about as much flesh and blood as I can find". She paused, blew out a plume of

smoke for effect, "I'm a one man woman when it comes to God but while I'm waiting for him to show his face I'm going to try out a few of these men he created down here, in his image don't forget, just so I'm ready. Did I already tell you about the guy who came to rent a trailer the other night, now he certainly had the hands of God if you know what I'm saying..."

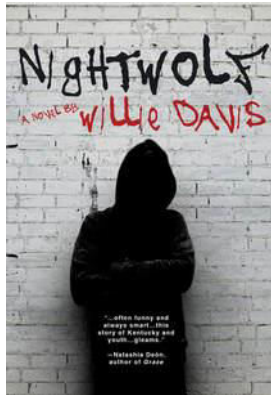
"You are outrageous"

"You should try it. You'll like it. I can't remember the last time I saw you with a man. There ain't nobody you're keen on in this whole town? Don't set your sights too high. Low expectations lead to less disappointment."

Thieves

Excerpted from the novel Nightwolf

By Willie Davis



I learned to steal cars when I was a teenager the way I learned to tell one color from another when I was a baby: through unquestioning repetition, I figured a way to see a shade that made the old world unrecognizable.

The summer before I started boosting cars, I was working at The Egan Rabbit, a downtown warehouse converted into a space for small shows and hard liquor. The boss, Egan Hopper, had me working as a mop-man. It wasn't an official job as I wasn't old enough to be a customer at The Rabbit, let alone an employee, but Egan paid me in booze to bus tables and empty cigarette butts from the ashtrays. After a month of that, he let me sling dimebags and scour the parking lot for unlocked doors with a purse in the passenger seat. That was my audition, and Egan and the boys at The Rabbit were my judges.

When I graduated to cars, Egan set Ollie Hallahan up to be my mentor. He pinched my cheeks when I did well and cracked my skull when I fumbled with the locks. Egan told me to follow Hallahan, ape his every move. If I made a mistake or showed up late, Hallahan treated my spine like a kid treats a sheet of bubble-wrap. Everything about him was enormous, even his dimples, and he tried to keep his face blank as a way of fooling you into thinking he wasn't paying attention. If a doorframe became sentient, and turned out to be an asshole, you couldn't tell it apart from Hallahan.

He pocketed my keychain. "Start with your own car," he said. "Jump it or walk."

"It's mom's car," I said. "Those are her keys."

"And if she needs them, they're right here." He patted his front pocket. "Shit, if she needs them, tell her to give me a half-hour warning, so I can be the fuck off the road. I wouldn't trust that bitch behind the wheel of a tricycle."

"All right," I said. My mom was sick to the point where her memories had the shelf life as an open carton of buttermilk. It was sad, but I heard sadder.

"Outside ambos and paddy wagons, she ain't been in a car since she made you."

"All right, already." Technically, Mom didn't drive and didn't lock the front door. In fact, apart from her spells, she barely went outside. Still, it felt wrong that a man could take your keys and rob you of nothing. So I swung for Hallahan's jaw, just below the ear. He leaned back fast, and I hit the wall. Before the pain could spread throughout my knuckles, he clamped down on my hand and bent it backward. He didn't stop until I was on my knees.

"I ain't your friend, and I ain't your daddy," he said. "You want to cry, I won't stop you. Sounds *fucking* gorgeous to me."

It taught me, I suppose. Hallahan believed in knowledge through desperation. The whole game was speed. After two weeks under Hallahan, my thinking became simple—what slowed me was wrong.

"Walk away," Hallahan told me. "If it ain't, it ain't. Force it, you fuck yourself."

Once I mastered my mom's car, he moved me to my friends. I'd take their cars for a couple laps around the block, and then park on the other side of the street to see if they notice. The idea was our friends wouldn't rat us out. Hallahan liked to study people, to see if they paid attention. Most didn't notice their cars were spun around or that the air freshener was missing. The thief's biggest trump card was that the mark blamed himself.

The best thieves, like the best dancers, tune their tongues to the surrounding rhythms. They don't so much taste the change as feel it sliding from gum to gum. It nestles in the back of the throat like the smell of an oil slick in the rain or the taste of a penny mixed in cinnamon and horseradish. Except while dancers use rhythm as a call and response, the thieves used rhythm as an endless harangue. A thief has the skill to dance, but uses his rhythm to bruise. These were the lessons first lectured to me, then screamed at me, then beaten into me. It occurred to me that I was learning

from the most pretentious crook since John Wilkes Booth stole the headline from *Our American Cousin*.

He had me move Shea Stanford's hatchback in front of her next-door neighbor's house. He took a Coke bottle from the passenger side cupholder with the label half-peeled off. "This you, man?" I always peeled the labels. People said it was sexual frustration, and I had no counterargument. "What you doing in this car, man?"

"Drinking Coke, apparently."

"You fucking Shea Stanford?" he said.

"Then I'm drinking a Coke right after, so I don't get pregnant?"

"No," he said. "I mean, you fuck a girl, and now you lift her car. That's—not ironic, it's, you know, it's what?"

"It's a Coke," I said. "In my friend's car, where I sometimes drink Coke."

"She catches you, she call the cops?" He put his hand on the back of my neck. "Say 'Officer, officer, arrest that evil man?'" He slammed my head against the steering wheel. "Buckle up for safety," he said. "Police see no belt, they pull you over to say hi. This is a girl's car, so they running your plates."

"You're the one drinking." His breath smelled like a rancid combination of vodka, menthols, and Mott's Apple Juice.

"Our thing is a house of cards." He licked the underside of his moustache. "You think you're just fucking yourself, but you fucking me, The Rabbit, the whole operation."

"A minute ago, you said I was fucking Shea Stanford. This sounds like a demotion."

That night, when I went home, I called for Mom, but she didn't answer. She still had a pot of egg noodles boiling on the stove, but the water had evaporated. For the last month, she'd left the same supper out for me every night—noodles and a can of tuna for me to make my own casserole. Normally, she'd stop at one pot of noodles, but sometimes she'd forget or think she had company coming and cook two or three.

We had four rooms in our apartment, so it didn't take long to search our house. I checked her room, and then my room, and then I spotted her out the window by the dumpsters by the side of our complex.

It was cold outside when I went to collect her, worse for her without her coat. She was circling the

dumpsters, and I thought for a second, she was putting lye around them to keep the raccoons away.

I put a jacket around her shoulders, but she didn't flinch. Even as she brought her hands up to her mouth to blow on them, she didn't meet my eyes. "Fuck's wrong with you?" I said. "If I stayed out tonight, you'd be green and frozen as a bag of peas?"

"Listen to the way you talk to me, like you're somebody big." She spat on her shoes. "If I'm late one more time, you know what they'll do to me?"

"Late?" I said. "Do you know if I want—if I so much as take a small walk and forget my keys for an hour—you'd be dead as an alley rat, remembered by nobody?"

She put the fat of her arm around the back of my neck, close to where Hallahan had grabbed me, except her touch was soft and cold. "You used to love me," she said.

"That's right."

She opened the jacket as if to invite me in. I put my hand on her shoulder, and we walked upstairs to the apartment. All the noodles had burnt because I'd forgotten to turn the stove off. This time, the house would've burned down, and it'd have been my fault. We ate cold tuna in front of the television.

The next night, I sat in Hallahan's Grand-Am, eating fast-food burritos and staring at a line of cars at a wedding party. Weddings were low hanging fruit for carjackers as about forty percent of cars get left behind like sinners after the rapture.

"It won't hurt much. Not like you think." We were talking about what it felt like to die. "Trust me, I've been as far as you can go." He took a swig from his flask. "Mammoth Cave Massacre," he said. "I was on the bus."

He was referring to a bit of Central Kentucky lore. On a field trip to Mammoth Cave, the bus carrying Mrs. DiFresca's fourth grade class suddenly jackknifed off the highway and flipped over. Fourteen kids were injured and two died. The bus driver was sober, and seemingly had perfect recall of what had happened. A flash of madness overtook him, and without reason, he turned the wheel all the way to the right, angling himself into national notoriety. He never claimed he blacked out, never claimed he couldn't remember—he as stunned as everyone else. The story spread and they soon called it the "Mammoth Cave Massacre," which seems slightly disrespectful of massacres. According to my uncle, they originally

called it “Mammoth Cave Mania” but there were too many local sponsors of the news that had the word “mania” attached to their sales. Ollie Hallahan, five years older than me, was on the bus as it flipped over.

“I know what it’s like to be dead,” he said. “It’s peaceful, man, trust me. They say it’s like sleep, but that’s not it. Don’t got to worry about bad dreams, the cat crawling over your chest, the alarm. All of that, all of you, you’re just somewhere else is all.”

“You were a nine-year old who got in a car wreck that 98% of the people survived,” I said. “Tell me, O Lazarus, about the mysteries of the deep.”

“Not just that,” he said. “I had pneumonia when I was four, almost drowned once in the Outer Banks. Everything leading up to death hurts like a motherfucker, but when you get close, it all has a purpose. It leads us to something.”

Two women with their arms around each other’s shoulders, holding one another up, made their way to a black Studebaker. The working hour was coming soon.

“Mom forgets everything an hour after it happens,” I said. “It doesn’t hurt her much.”

“That’s different,” he said. “She’s losing stuff. Losing doesn’t hurt. You lose your beard, lose your fingernails. That’s what memory is. Not like losing a toe. When that happens, you’re gaining pain. That’s what hurts.”

I suspected he was right. Every morning when I wake up, I try like the devil to hold onto my memories of last night’s dream. Even when it works, I know it isn’t honest. Maybe that’s what the Mammoth Cave Massacre bus driver thought as well. He saw another world, so similar to ours it would’ve been accessible by a sharp rightward turn. It only takes a second to lose your balance—less than that to question what’s kept us upright for so long in the first place.

“The Escalade,” Hallahan said, nodding to a car parked diagonally over one and a half spaces. “Only kids and drunks park like that. Either way, they won’t miss it until the morning.”

I took a swig from his flask. Moonlight was a starter’s pistol back then—it meant I had another night of risking my skull under Hallahan’s knuckles. My work made me fearful, and my fear made me learn.

Hallahan’s father worked as a wholesale supplier, and he ate brined fish for every lunch. In most ways, he was a meticulously clean man, but when the beatings took place between lunch and suppertime,

you smelled a hint of the fish oil on his fingernails. His punches were sharp and precise, and he swung with the fervor of a Pentecostal elbow deep in snake. I was his practice canvas, though I suspected someone else would one day be his masterpiece. If he’d been born weak, we would have been friends.

**Night-Writer: Willie Davis, Nightwolf, and Kentucky
in Literature**

Interview by Adam Van Winkle

As I read Nightwolf, I felt fully borne to the street grit of Louisville, Kentucky. As I read, I began to find a very kindred spirit. An author that lingers on the behaviors I do, whose characters are defined by their ticks and anxieties more than anything, whose violence is so real and so passive it punches you in the gut too—that is a writer truly worth his salt.

Read “Thieves” here and you’ll get what I mean. Hallahan will instantly churn your stomach if you’ve ever tried to learn from or please a naturally violent

and bombastic person. Davis nails that persona over and over again in a hopped up urban southern novel, come art commentary...maybe.

As for the rest of Nightwolf of which "Thieves" is excerpted, just order it. Read it. You'll see.

Who was this writer who'd hit the mark so well for me? He must dig some of the same street art and music and literature as me. I like his writing too much for it not to be. With a name like Willie Davis, I hope he digs the blues too.

I was partly right, though as you'll see here in what he says about art and music and literature he's as complicated as Kentucky literature itself.

AV: How'd the story in Nighwolf evolve for you?

WD: The acorn of this book came from when I was killing an afternoon with a friend in a local bar. We saw a sign on the back that said, "YOU ARE BEING FILMED FOR YOUR OWN SECURITY!" Something about that phrase--the faux helpfulness, the casual way they assume they own our interactions, how they want our gratitude for spying on us--cracked us up. It felt like it could be the America's motto (this was maybe 2013, before we all decided to make it worse). My friend works in TV and film and was looking for a project, so we kicked around an idea called "You Are Being Filmed For Your Own Security," about a group of friends searching for fame in increasingly desperate ways. They were performative and self-conscious people, but they wanted to film themselves for their own security. Knowing they were being recorded is the only way they can feel secure they exist. Shortly afterward, my friend lost interest or got busy, but I dove into it. I wrote a short story about these people that eventually found a home. They weren't actively seeking fame at this point, but were still knowingly performing. Like any group of friends, they share stories about themselves that they all remember. The problem was that those stories had a lot more life to them than the main story I was telling about them in their thirties. So I decided to root it when they were kids. At the time, I figured I would use that as prologue and come back to tell the story of them as adults.

Only after I committed to writing about them when they were teenagers did the story of Nightwolf come to me. It wasn't a story about fame, but about obsession. Most people who achieve fame do it through absolute obsession and dedication. That's not Milo's desire--his obsession is with his brother, with having a quest in the first place. Though almost none of the original plot remains, these are people who know they are performing and, if they came of age a few years later, would likely put a lot of that obsessive energy to becoming famous.

AV: I love street art, been teaching a unit on street art a few years. Why'd that become a focus, a motif for your story?

WD: On a practical level, I know nothing about street art. One of the inspirations for the character Nightwolf was the DC tagger Borf. Borf was this absolutely relentless tagger who would write his name on every flat surface in the DC/Maryland/Virginia area. When *The Washington Post* did a story on him, it turned out he was a kid whose friend committed suicide, and this was his way of absorbing that pain. I felt tremendous empathy for him, though, no doubt, he'd tell me to cram my feelings up my urethra. Street art is both showy and anonymous, which is kind of where these characters are.

Also, when I started writing this, I was living in a cramped apartment in Baltimore, sleepless for too many nights in a row. One morning, I walked outside to see someone wrote "Let's Be Friends!" on the sidewalk. For a minute, I thought the city had come alive and was talking to me. I regained sanity soon thereafter, but that feeling stayed with me. I wanted that feeling to animate Milo, so hopefully the closer he gets to Milo, the reader could share my stress and relief in his opinions.

AV: Reading the novel, it felt so many times like I was in a Crews-esque hypermasculine world where any sort of pleasure, accomplishment, belonging to a group involved a kind of physical endurance of pain. In the opening, the narrator is hurt by Hallhan while Hallahan is helping him. In "The Best Thieves" you write "When I graduated to cars, Egan set Ollie

Hallahan up to be my mentor. He pinched my cheeks when I did well and cracked my skull when I fumbled with the locks. Egan told me to follow Hallahan, ape his every move. If I made a mistake or showed up late, Hallahan treated my spine like a kid treats a sheet of bubble-wrap." I recall a question asked early in the novel of how many fingers one can have broken and still play bass. Why so much physical abuse, or nods toward it?

WD: Violence is the young man's performance art, and though the bruises are real, these kids are definitely performing. They talk awfully big about how they're going to stomp each other to death. When they're alone, they can admit these very obvious truths: their bodies aren't made for what they put them through. They're scared, and starting to suspect that mortality is real. But in a crowd, they put on shows, even if it costs them their well-being. There's an awful lot stupid about that mindset, but something beautiful in it as well. Because they are at the age when getting punched in the face feels righteous, and when the body can bounce back from abuse. In the second section, when they're in their early twenties, a lot of them have already started to shy away from it. Maybe it's because they've started to spend more time alone and less time in crowds, so they can be more honest with themselves. Still, even at that age--honestly, at any age--the call to theatrics is pretty irresistible. If you want to cultivate a violent image, you strike a threatening pose and you'll do it. The face calls the tune, and the brain dances.

AV: There's a lot of Biblical and religious language in *Nighwolf*. The opening claims a miracle. There's a character Thomas the Prophet. I've written two novels with heavy biblical allusion now, and for me it comes from growing up in a heavily Southern Baptist area and is mostly tongue-in-cheek. Where does this come from for you?

WD: I grew up in a bit of a religious hodgepodge. My mother was raised a fairly secular Jew in Pittsburgh. My father was raised Christian in small-town Appalachian Kentucky. They both seemed to half-believe, but they didn't bother with services. I frequently called myself a "Heeb-Billy" and then, later, after I married an

Episcopalian and baptized our son in the Episcopalian church, an "Episcopagan." All sides of my family knew the Bible very well as literature, philosophy, and to varying degrees, spiritual truth.

I'm comfortably agnostic, and while I suspect God exists, I neither believe nor disbelieve. I have no faith in my faith. If anything, I'm a belief maximalist. I think anything we can think of is true in some way. Dreams exist and are therefore real. Humans approach those spiritual truths through stories. These characters care about miracles, spirits, and ghosts because they care about their stories--their Gods are their stories.

AV: Backing up a little bit, we really dig our literary heroes at CJ. Who are some of your literary idols?

WD: While my writing does not resemble his at all, I love, love, love James Joyce. I love the way he experiments with normal forms, but what I find far more rewarding is the way he describes human interactions. People focus too much on the shiny bits, but ignore the grits and gravy of what he actually writes about. It's all about our flawed human interaction. I'm blown away by the stories of Mark Richard, who depicts the world of children better than anyone else I've read. He makes it seem both magical and unsentimental.

AV: Tell me about your experience with Kentucky in literature--how it's been depicted and how that influences you, maybe even depictions you don't care for? We really dig Justified and Elmore Leonard's Raylan Givens stories, though our good writing friend Sheldon Lee Compton has assured us the TV show misses the mark some on Eastern Kentucky depictions...

WD: Appalachians get pretty bristly about our depictions in the media. Our accent is often used as shorthand to show how stupid or racist a character is. We're called southerners though Morgantown, West Virginia is closer to Boston than it is Atlanta. I used to date a girl who lived in Boston, and her friends would say "What part of the south are you from?" I'd say, "Oh, I'm not from the south, I'm from Kentucky." And they'd look at me the way a dog looks at television.

Actors playing Appalachians (or really anyone from south of Cincinnati and east of San Antonio) do a strange slow accent that no human has ever had (think Foghorn Leghorn after going on a date with Bill Cosby) and everyone calls them brave. I don't begrudge actors doing this, by the way--actors are supposed to act. But if an actor plays a guy from Queens with a Brooklyn accent, they get pilloried by professional wiseacres for years. It's completely explicable (you're more likely to hear nuances of people and places you're familiar with and most of the media is based in large cities) and it's rarely intentionally mean-spirited. But you could very logically decide that poor, Appalachians aren't worth accurate reflection.

I love Elmore Leonard, but I'm unfamiliar with his Raylan Givens stories. I've seen a few sporadic episodes of *Justified*, and I thought they were pretty good but I felt no real urge to keep going. (Though it's worth noting, I thought the actresses in that show did a good job with the accent. The men were a little too southern). I really like Sheldon Lee Compton. Sometimes the Appalachian literary scene can try to expel one if their own for being insufficiently Appalachian. It's a tiresome process I call "Holler Than Thou", which seems determined to make sure no one gives a shit about us.

All that being said, *NIGHTWOLF* isn't an Appalachian story. It takes place in Lexington, which is a flatland city, kind of an overgrown college town. The city of Lexington (both the real one and the one in my novel) is full of Appalachians who have left home. They form Appalachian communities as a way of reconnecting with their roots. (Detroit, Baltimore, and Chicago have huge Appalachian communities as well). That's what my characters are doing with these big, wild parties. They feel slightly displaced and are searching for home. I grew up with one foot in Lexington and one in Appalachia (my mother and father lived three hours apart from each other and I split up my week in both places).

The best Kentucky literature reflects this complexity. Gurney Norman writes these brilliant stories about Appalachia, and about the (very sizable and almost completely ignored) place where hillbilly and hippie culture overlap. Ed McClanahan has written hilarious books about the Kentucky experience. Wendell Berry,

Bobbie Ann Mason, Rebecca Gayle Howell: I love all of their work because it doesn't try to distill all of the Kentucky experience in one flash. And because so much of it is funny. A lot of the literature that tries to prop up the region by showing how virtuous we are is insulting. They create an Appalachia I've seen on PBS of chair-caning and apple-butter, and reading it is a goddamn chore. If you want to show a positive depiction of Appalachians, make us funny. Make it seem like an fun place to live. You don't have to shy away from the poverty and the pill-heads, but it is a fun place in spite of that. I love Appalachia. (Though, to be honest, we vote like assholes).

AV: What's your process for creating? How do you get words on paper, turn an idea into a novel?

WD: I tend to write very late at night and I try to write in noise. So music, news, sports on TV: I want to hear all of it when I first put things down. Then after a long time (sometimes a very long time) the story will start to form, and then I need silence. Almost always, the story ends up wildly different than it was when it started. *NIGHTWOLF* was originally supposed to be a light comedy. I was a few hundred pages into it before I realized the light comedy plane was headed for the "everybody hurts each other" mountain.

AV: Back to *Nightwolf*. Art is a big thing in this novel. The graffiti of course. *Nightwolf* then becomes a comicbookstyle vigilante hero ala Batman (and then not of course). I was thinking while reading as with Wily Vlautin's *Motel Life* that you were a writer metaaware of the art in your story. We've got a heavily illustrated issue this time, and you can probably see where those influences come from (Shel Silverstein, Kurt Vonnegut, Nate Beatty). What role has art or comics or illustration played for you?

WD: Just this morning, I was reading my son a book called *Mars Needs Moms* by Berkeley Breathed, the same guy who wrote *Bloom County*, and I realized I owed him a huge debt for *NIGHTWOLF*. My narrator, Milo Byers, is not consciously named for *Bloom County's* Milo Minderbinder or *Mars Needs Moms* protagonist, but it's not a complete coincidence either. Breathed creates a world that is instantaneously familiar and foreign, and I wanted to be part of it. As a child, I loved comics in the newspaper

like *Calvin and Hobbes* and *The Far Side*, and really most of them. It went beyond the jokes on the individual days and down to wanting to join their world. The DC and Marvel Comics that have now taken over the world never meant much to me, and I think the dominance of Superhero movies taking over our culture has helped lead us to this political nightmare we find ourselves in. I have nothing against their art, but it never moved me. But something like *Bloom County* was its own functioning universe.

AV: Covering more of the arts here, what do you listen to? Music like Nighwolf depicts--the Violators, "respectable punk"--I'm thinking? With a name like Willie Davis, surely you listen to the blues...

WD: My favorite singer--really my favorite artist of any stripe--is Bob Dylan. I was in, I think, seventh grade, when my brother came back from the library and said, "Hey Willie, listen to this." And played "Desolation Row." That song just marked a gigantic bright dividing line in my experience. Once I heard it, I couldn't go back. Twenty-five years later, I'm no closer to understanding it, but it feels satisfying and bottomless in a way practically no other song does. I love pretty much all Bob Dylan. Even when he goes down a road I don't understand or I think he's made a misstep, I find myself re-evaluating that same work a few years later, and I love it. In that way, he's always ahead of me on the path.

I tend to like the songwriters in music. I know that that is an unfair genre because Cole Porter, Phil Spector, Hank Williams, and Sam Cooke are incredible songwriters that nobody puts in that genre. But I guess I mean people like Tom Waits, Lucinda Williams, Otis Redding, Steve Earle, Dwight Yoakam, The Clash, Townes Van Zandt.

I love a band like The Pogues, so steeped in Irish folk tradition that they could have been a straight folk band and had immense success, but they not only had these incredible original songs but this willingness to be a Molotov Cocktail in the face of folk expectations. It showed this great punk attitude and their songs were undeniable. Maybe my favorite musical story of the past ten years is that Cadillac used their song "Sunny Side Of The Street" in their commercial. It's a bouncy, catchy, hard-driving song, but it's about being addicted

to heroin. In the commercial, this peppy suburban family is loading the kids into their overpriced car, while the lyrics behind them are saying, "As my mother wept, it was then I swore/to take my life as I would a whore" and "With a heart full of hate and a lust for vomit/I'm walking on the sunny side of the street." Sarcasm has become so mainstreamed that no one knows who's subverting who anymore. Those commercials help remind me that the artist still has one up on the marketer. And the song remains undiminished.

As for the blues, I don't want to be a traitor to my name, but a lot of the blues is just lost on me. I like Mississippi John Hurt, Elizabeth Cotten, and the folk blues a lot. But that nightclub twelve bar blues feels boring to me. I'm sure part of it is that I'm not an accomplished guitar player who can hear the complexities of the sound. I'm similar with the Coltrane, Miles Davis style of jazz. These are musical geniuses operating at peak power, but, I'm just looking at my watch, waiting for the song to end. Of course, it's more fun to dislike jazz because jazz fans are so pretentious.

AV: What's a reader gonna get from your art, from Nighwolf?

WD: I sincerely hope that just one person, somewhere, gets from this book, a screenplay that turns into a movie that makes a billion dollars, netting me the ability to never work again. Short of that, I'd like for people feel the energy of youth, feel the value of telling stories, to understand there are no villains in life and no real endings, just a bunch of flawed people in the middle of the most important narrative of their life. And that there's tremendous humanity in telling jokes, especially to people you don't like or respect. We all struggle, and we all want to laugh. When we lose ourselves in laughter, we remember we're all on the same road.

Laser Wolf
by Jon Berger

Laser Wolf ate happy meals because he thought they would make him happy. He ate them after lifting weights. He read online that old-school body builders ate fast food because they said it gave their body's everything they needed to pack on muscles. Laser Wolf ordered 20 happy meals at a time and he gave all the little toys to his junkyard dog Jaeger to chew on.

Laser Wolf lifted weights at the gym and when Laser Wolf lifted weights he made a scene. His workout routine consisted of all the benches: Flat Bench, Incline Bench, Decline Bench, military press and then a bunch of other free weight stuff. Laser Wolf bench pressed 425 pounds and curled 185 with a barbell. Laser Wolf deadlifted 650 pounds and squatted 750.

Laser Wolf never had sex before but if he did he thinks that the shooting star feeling of lifting a huge amount of weight would be like having an orgasm with a hot chick who felt the same way about him that he did about them.

He liked to be in the weight pit for 3 hours at least 4 times a week. And if Laser Wolf couldn't get his workout in then Laser Wolf would get madder at the world than he already was.

Laser Wolf liked to watch anime. He liked the heroes and even the villains that were also like heroes only they were their own heroes for their own reasons. He wanted to be one of them. He watched them on the couch with Jaeger while drinking beer. When the characters in the show screamed to power up and shoot powerful energy at their enemies Laser Wolf felt a nice little comforting hum in his heart that vibrated throughout his chest and shoulders and down his spine.

Sometimes Laser Wolf screamed like this when he lifted weights.

Laser Wolf couldn't go to college. But he wanted to prove everyone who called him stupid wrong so he tried to go to a community college. He took the easiest math class the school offered and failed it three times in a row. He took a speech class and failed that too. He was contacted by an employment agency and they set him up with a polysilicon whacking job. He put on this suit that was like a hazmat suit and he was given a big hammer and stood in front of this conveyor belt and these big rough globs of hard silicone came down the conveyor belt and Laser Wolf whacked them with a

hammer to break them up so they could be grinded up in a machine further on down the conveyor belt. Laser Wolf did this for 40 hours a week, swing shift.

Laser Wolf lived in a small house that he inherited from his grandma. It was across the street from an old cemetery where his grandma was buried. On the left of his house was just woods and behind his house was woods too. To the right of his house was this foreclosed machine shop covered in weeds. But that got bought by this landscaping company called Titan. Titan pulled out all these big rusty machines from the building and hauled them off on an oversized trailer.

Then Titan started moving in all these bulldozers and trailers full of tractors and stuff.

At first Laser Wolf said: "Hey, these guys are like me and they need jobs too. Besides, it will be nice to have neighbors and friends."

So Laser Wolf would wave at them and some would wave back. A lot of the guys had arms covered in tattoos and they yelled and threw stuff around. Titan welded their equipment late at night, the blazing blue light would flash into Laser Wolf's bedroom all night. This made him tired when he had to go to work and whack polysilicon all day. He even missed some globs of silicone and it fucked up the grinding machine. The Boss was pissed and sent Laser Wolf home early.

When Laser Wolf got home he noticed that Titan had car parts scattered all over the place. Some of the parts were on his property too. A loud grinding sound was coming from the garage. Laser Wolf walked over. A guy was crouched over an open car hood grinding at something that caused a wave of sparks to fly. Laser Wolf tapped him on the shoulder and the guy gave Laser Wolf an angry look and just kept grinding.

Laser Wolf unplugged the grinder cord from the wall.

"What the fuck, man," said the guy with the grinder. He stood up and got in Laser Wolf's face, but then noticed how big he was and back stepped back.

"Stop it. I need to sleep and you guys are making a big mess."

An old man that looked like a goblin and had thick grey hair came walking out of a small office, rubbing his dirty hands with a blue rag. "Can I help you?" he said.

"Yeah, you need to stop making so much noise." Laser Wolf pointed at the guy holding the grinder.

“Okay then.” The old man nodded.

The man introduced himself as Chuck and shook Laser Wolf’s hand. He acted like they were old friends and Laser Wolf left the garage feeling good and thinking: wow that went better than I thought it would.

Laser Wolf pulled in his driveway after working out. There was a giant semi-truck without a trailer stuck in the mud driveway of Titan. Its back tires buried with big boards underneath them. You could tell that they had been trying to get the semi unstuck for a while. A bunch of dudes were huddled inside the semi-truck, the windows open and tattooed arms hanging out with cigarettes. Jaeger was sitting outside the semi-truck barking at the men inside.

“Yer fucking dog broke through your screen door and has been trying to eat my workers for the last three hours,” said Chuck, who was sitting on the roof of the semi like a monk.

Jaeger saw Laser Wolf and trotted over to him wagging his tail.

“Just keep that dog inside and let us get the truck unstuck and we’ll be done for the day. How’s that sound?” said Chuck.

Laser Wolf nodded and said, “Okay.”

He took Jaeger by the collar and walked him back to the house. He watered and fed Jaeger and tied him to a long leash on a tree so he could repair the screen door.

But that night the grinding and the welding started again, traffic was in and out of the shop all night long with music playing and the men were shouting. Laser Wolf couldn’t sleep and was too tired for work the next day. He was talking to Tom at lunch. Tom pounded silicone with Laser Wolf and Tom said that Chuck was a crook and had a landscaping front that he used to chop shop stolen cars with. He’d just gotten out of jail and Titan was his new company.

When Laser Wolf came home Jaeger was gone. Jaeger was never gone. Laser Wolf started to panic and was walking around the woods shaking a bag of treats but never found him. Laser Wolf felt like he had a rock in his stomach.

Jaeger always slept on the foot of Laser Wolf’s bed.

The next day Laser Wolf took a walk across the street to visit his dead grandma. He saw Jaeger lying near his Grandma’s small grave stone.

Laser Wolf knelt beside him and Jaeger was dead with open eyes and dried blood coming out of his

mouth and his tongue hanging out. He had a small red bullet hole in his side. His lung.

Laser Wolf clenched his teeth so much that his whole body shook and he thought he might go to another dimension. He screamed at the ground like the characters on the anime TV show. Laser Wolf felt Jaeger’s death in this moment. He felt a never-ending fire starting to burn in the center of his brain.

After crying for a while and starting to realize that he was now all alone in the world Laser Wolf got a shovel and dug a grave right next to his grandma’s. It started to rain and the sky got dark with thunder and lightning. Laser Wolf dug deeper in the muddy graveyard, his muscles felt like explosions. He wrapped Jaeger in his favorite afghan blanket and placed him in the grave. It was pitch dark by the time he buried him and walked back to his tiny old house across the street.

Laser Wolf called into work to stay home and make a wooden cross for Jaeger’s grave.

He found a werewolf mask in his closet from Halloween a few years ago. It was a nice one that covered his whole head and had perfect eye holes to see through. Then he waited until dark when the bright welds and grinding started.

Laser Wolf walked to one of the work trucks hooked to an enclosed trailer full of lawn equipment. He stuffed a rag into the gas tank and lit it on fire. Then he walked around the back of the building and waited for the truck to burst into flames and all the guys to rush out to the parking lot before he broke the back door open with a crowbar.

Once inside Laser Wolf stared down a dark cinderblock hallway with heavy white doors. One of the doors opened and it was some skinny dirty guy with a beard. He looked at Laser Wolf at the end of the hallway, mouth opened and eyes widened, cigarette falling to the ground. Laser Wolf closed the distance between them in a few strides and punched the guy in the face, but when Laser Wolf punched him he imagined himself punching through the guy’s head, like his fist would come out the back of the guy’s head along with a bunch of the guy’s teeth and brains.

This is basically what happened. The guys face crunched, his feet lifted from the ground, the back of his head smashed into the cinderblock wall, Laser Wolf’s fist pinning him there. When Laser Wolf pulled his giant arm back the guy slumped to the ground, his face a red and closed mess.

Laser Wolf walked into the room and saw Chuck standing up from his desk.

“Holy shit,” Chuck said.

Laser Wolf yanked him from behind the desk and lifted Chuck up by his shirt and Chuck saw Laser Wolf’s raging eyes behind the werewolf mask. Laser Wolf dragged Chuck out of the office and down the hallway and to the warehouse. Chuck yelling and squirming about Laser Wolf being a crazy bastard asshole motherfucker.

The warehouse was all cement and metal with benches full of tools and car parts piled up around the edges. A brand new truck was being parted out in the center.

Laser Wolf saw a plasma cutter sitting on a big wooden bench. It was the same type that the welder guy at his poly whacker job used. Laser Wolf dragged Chuck over to the table and lifted him easier than he lifted weights and slammed him onto the bench like a sack of meat and flipped the switch that powered up the plasma cutter.

Laser Wolf grabbed both of Chuck’s arms with one hand and held them out over the edge of the bench, above Chuck’s head like he was being crucified. He took the cutter, it was sparking and sizzling with power now. He pulled the trigger and ran it across Chuck’s wrist, his crispy hands plopped to the floor. And Chuck screamed just like Laser Wolf screamed when Laser Wolf found Jaeger dead with a bullet in him.

Laser Wolf left the machine shop the same way he came in.

Chuck’s crew found him on the floor crying next to his smoking hands, holding his charred stumpy wrist in the air.

Chuck wasn’t bleeding. He didn’t need to go to the hospital. The plasma cutter cauterized his wounds. His crew buried his hands out back and stayed quiet about it. Chuck just took some pain pills and drank bourbon. He stayed quiet about it because he had a record and didn’t want to deal with the police.

Chuck got hooks or metal nubs or something for hands. He couldn’t move his operation somewhere else. He had too much invested. So they just did everything they could to not bother Laser Wolf. They didn’t work late or make a lot of noise. They were careful of the life that Laser Wolf had, the life that he lived and did not want interrupted.

If someone from Chuck’s crew left or got locked up and they had to bring a new guy on to work, usually someone’s old prison bunkie or a family/friend who needed money, they told them the story about the Laser Wolf living next door.

One day, in the fall, Laser Wolf went to the dollar store to get groceries. He was walking up to the store and a guy was selling puppies out of a cardboard box. The man was loud and crazy and yelled about God almighty a lot. Laser Wolf looked down into the box to see a sleeping puppy pile. They looked too small to be away from their mother. But Laser Wolf didn’t know the difference and neither did the puppies. He searched through the puppy pile and at the bottom was the littlest puppy with his eyes closed and sleeping. Laser Wolf picked him up with one hand and the puppy yawned, looked up at Laser Wolf and went back to sleep making a little piggy noise. Laser Wolf’s heart relaxed from this. He gave the guy \$50 and walked into the dollar store with the puppy cradled in his big calm hand and he bought everything he needed.



The Yards By Annaka Saari

Those tight-lipped, blue-collar, corn-on-all-sides towns have the best record bins to sift your fingers through. I love the dig through the old milk crates. The shuffle through the stacks haphazardly strewn on plastic card tables. The flipping through the binders of sleeveless 45s. You can hear the flies buzzing when the wind dies down and the sun's beatin' on your back but you feel like some sorta' explorer kneeling among all that music. A sailor stumbling upon an island that wasn't sketched on the taupe paper of your map.

You can almost always tell if a sale's gonna' be worth it on the winding drive in. You don't want slaughterhouses, you want a bloody axe and a kill-nicked stump. You want dirt instead of asphalt. You want shoddy shingles, a truck out front, and a vegetable garden out back. You want the old man running the sale in a white-paint-peeling-off wicker chair with a skinny dog at his feet. You want his forearms grazed by an oily t-shirt. Muddy baseball cap. Dry lips that he dampens with his tongue between every couple of sentences.

These are the yards where you find the Bob Dylan. The Johnny Cash. The Woody Guthrie if you're real lucky. Records that've been spun by hands cracked by work and wet and cold. Records that make rhythm with the beads of sweat that the Michigan sun'll run down your face. Records for a hard-workin' man. A daddy's girl, rip a fish straight from the hook record. A first fuck in the bed of a '97 Chevy record. A menthol cigarette at 2 AM in the Oak Tree Tavern parking lot record.

I was still a little girl when I started hitting the yards. The woman who watched me during the days loved herself a good deal. She'd give me a couple

quarters to run with while she looked at the glassware and rusty tools and gaudy costume jewelry. I'd pick through boxes of stuffed animals, tables of books, and whatever else I could search with my curmudgeonly five year old palms. She encouraged me to barter. To ask for more than I was given. To realize that the rickety old men and women curating the sales love a girl with a bit of grit. To use my mouth to flirt and fight for what I want.

It wasn't 'til I was fifteen that I started looking for vinyls when we went out. 'Til grandma and grandpa bought me a turntable for Christmas all those years back. I remember pulling the red and gold paper back from the box in their little, mint-colored living room. I remember how big they smiled when they realized how happy they'd made me. How quickly I cleared a place on my dresser for my gift. How soon I started looking for ways to add to the collection of LPs my father had lying around and the pile of rejects my friend Garrett had thrown my way. I found a lot out there those first few sales. Jim Croce. John Denver. Sinatra. So many rock records that I can't even think to count - stacks of black scattered in boxes all around. I spun them nonstop in my bedroom, hushing the speakers as days turned darker. The soundtrack to my life is usually preceded by the familiar scratch; each flashback begins with the needle's drop.

I play my records and remember waking up in my bright green room with the floral trim. Remember playing them for the boy I let touch me on my bedroom floor. Remember shaking the dreams from my frowzy head while rays of light crept in the shades. Remember the two apple trees out back and the wasps that swarmed 'em in the summertime; how sweet the juice, how harsh the stings. Remember the day Mama told me she was ashamed to have raised a girl like me. The cloudy day I first took a steak knife to my wrists. The knot in my gut when I pulled the bottle of Absolut from the back of the cabinet for the first time. The night I mixed half of it with a bottle of cough syrup and prayed the cocktail would stop my heart. Remember the way I lit incense sticks and cried into the smoke.

And now I'm twenty years old. It is 7:11 PM on a Saturday. The last time I spoke to my mother I told her it'd be best if she didn't call me anymore. I haven't eaten since Thursday and I've been trying to write the same poem for the last week. But I flip open my laptop and type "vinyl records" into the Craigslist search bar. I watch the pages for 'villes and 'burghs and 'fields and

whatever the fuck else sounds like it doesn't have more than a hundred or so folks to fill the pews on Sunday. For sample pictures with silos and clotheslines in the blurred background. For listings that run from sunup to sundown. For an excuse to drive my Ford 'til the pavement runs out. To set the speakers to screaming:
Hey Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me.

Mud Under Glass

By Dorothy Rice

Louise dusts the shelf of photographs on her dresser. Star as an infant, a boyish toddler with clenched fists, then in her ragamuffin stage, the year she insisted on wearing a flannel granny nightgown and cowboy boots to school most days, wispy pigtails no thicker than knitting needles. That would have been kindergarten. Or first grade. They hardly saw Star anymore, not since she got her GED and moved to Reno.

Star was four when Louise and Bennie married. After the "honeymoon" in Florida, where Star burnt so bad she had sun blisters on her bony shoulders, they moved into Bennie's cobbled-together house. What he called the "family room" was a subterranean space alongside the basement with the washer and dryer in it, an old glider instead of a couch, a big-ass TV and a shellacked slab of redwood for a coffee table—it had a whorl in the center so deep it cratered through to the other side. Star liked to poke things through the hole and watch them hit the floor.

Louise always hated that bunker of a room. Yellowy light from a bare bulb, ceiling too low, molting lichen-green wallpaper, damp seeping through the industrial carpeting that humped up in the corners, cardboard boxes from Bennie's failed business ventures, their bottoms dark from the damp. But in the hot summers it was cool down there.

After the settlement they bought a doublewide in a nice park. All that was left of those early days was the redwood coffee table, in front of a real couch now, a tasteful blue velour. And the glider, it was outside where it belonged, on the cement slab.

Louise picks up Star's third grade picture. She'd gone angry by then, stony eyed, those thin,

expressionless lips drawn tight. Louise clasps the photo to her chest.

She remembers that one time. The three of them side by side on the glider in the family room. Star in the middle with her hands in her lap, those pink cowboy boots bobbing over the cushion edge. Ben still in work slacks, snug so his dick showed against his leg. A beer sweating on the coffee table. It had happened so fast. Star placed her little cupped hand around Bennie's cock. Rested it there. Easy as you please. And Ben, eyes on the TV—some show about the Equator—picked it up and set it back in Star's lap. But not right away.

Louise had just sat there, head swiveling like a puppet on a stick. Pivot to the left, there's her daughter's hand on Bennie's thigh. Pivot straight ahead, there's the Amazon, snaking through the jungle, mud under glass. Pivot back, Star and Bennie serene as stones, watching the river flow, as removed from Louise as South America. She'd shivered, ice in her veins. But she hadn't said anything.

"Can you walk on the Equator," Star had asked, in her serious little girl voice.

"Don't see why not," Bennie had said. "It's a line, ain't it?"

Louise had thought to say she didn't think so, that the earth wasn't smooth like that, and that there were oceans to cross besides, but she hadn't said that either. She hadn't said anything at all. Bennie didn't like to be corrected. He would have made her grovel for forgiveness later. But that was years ago. His temper was much better now.

The front door opens and whams shut, shaking the aluminum siding.

"Where you at?" Bennie calls out.

He finds Louise in the bedroom. Pries the photo of Star from her hands. Tosses it on the bed.

"You need to stop mooning about that girl," he says. "She has a permanent hate on for the world. That's all it is. All it ever was." His hand sweeps over the dresser, toppling several of the framed photographs. "Look at that face. Star always been a sour puss. Born that way."

But Louise knows he's wrong. She pictures that evening, the three of them like lumps on a shifting log, her daughter's little hand, so deft, so sure of itself, the ruffled hem of her gown, those pink boots dangling off the glider's edge. It wasn't the first time Louise had fretted, half-knowing she ought to say something, do

something, but for the life of her never quite finding the will, the words.

"What's for supper?" Bennie asks. "I don't smell nothing."

"Thought I'd pick up a bucket of that chicken you like."

Louise rights the framed photos on the bureau, angling each one so the sunlight from the one window shines on their glass faces.

The Lizard Woman of Okamassee County By Joey R. Poole

Mort Accardo was finally ready to admit that he was lost. For a solid hour he had driven what seemed like the same dark highway on an endless loop, his mind reeling to come up with an excuse for why he'd be late meeting his producer, Erika, who hated his chronic tardiness almost as much as Mort hated disappointing her. The sun began to spill over the tops of the trees as he pulled the van off the side of the road to look up directions on his phone, but of course there was no cell service, as was often the case in the places where he made his living and earned his modest fame as host of TrueLife TV's *Modern Day Monsters*.

Just a few minutes later, he stopped at a crossroads. At one corner was a caved-in building that had once been a gas station, still advertising gas just over a dollar a gallon, a sun-faded Pepsi machine seemingly the only thing that survived from its hey day. Under the awning covering the ancient gas pumps, from which hung a wind-tattered banner proclaiming the site to be *LeeBo's Produce and Paraphernalia*, a young man was unloading watermelons and bushel baskets of tomatoes and squash from the back of a truck, arranging them around the pumps.

He parked the van alongside the ruins of the station and got out, putting on his tv face, the one he hoped conveyed that he didn't expect people to recognize him when really he both hoped and dreaded in equal measure that they would. He was about to ask for directions when he saw something flapping in the breeze that told him he was exactly where he was supposed to be. It was a tee-shirt hanging from one of the pumps, emblazoned with a scaly green face that was perhaps more simian than reptilian, *The Lizard Woman of Okamasee County* written in what looked like knockoff Star Wars font beneath it.

"You got this in an extra large?" Mort asked, pointing to the shirt.

The man, who'd turned out to be younger than Mort figured, was skinny and sunburned, wearing an Outkast tee-shirt and baseball cap set just off to the side, and didn't look up from his work at first. He was in the middle of cutting a watermelon open to display its pink heart and rows of black seeds like teeth, bobbing his head to a skittering beat just loud enough to leak out of his ear buds. When he was done he gazed up at Mort. "Holy fuckin shit," he said finally. "Mort. Mort from *Modern Day Monsters*."

Mort smiled and tried his best not to look like a self-satisfied prick.

"Pleased to meet you," Mort said. "What's your name?"

"Lee Bowen. Call me Leebo," the man said, taking out his ear buds and turning off the music.

Leebo, Mort thought. Viewers are going to eat that up. He couldn't wait to tell Erika he'd already found her some local color for the episode, the kind her ratings metrics showed the viewers liked: intriguing, unassuming rubes and quirky salt-of-the-earth types they could both look down on and admire.

"You gonna find him?" Leebo asked. "Or her? Personally, I think it's a she. Just felt like a woman to

me. Maybe laying eggs or some shit. Or maybe they give live birth. Who knows? I guess if she's laying eggs maybe there has to be a male one around, too. Maybe not though. Might be some kind of asexual reproduction going on. Read about it on the internet. Parthenogenesis, it's called. Happens all the time with squid, some kinds of amphibians, shit like that." Then he stopped and took a sidelong look at Mort. "You ain't gonna kill it, are you? I mean, if you find it?"

"No. I just want to get it on camera, is all," Mort said. He liked this kid; Leebo was a wiry, caffeinated little fucker, and he was a fan. Mort didn't mind talking to fans. It was selfies and autographs he hated. And derision, like the asshole in New Orleans who mistook him for the host of *Finding Bigfoot* and cracked that it would more accurately be called *NOT Finding Bigfoot*, the same asshole he'd punched right in the nose and who'd later settled out of court, causing Erika to decide that Mort needed anger management classes and yoga. "So... you saw it? Her?" he asked.

"Hell yeah I saw her," he said. "Twice. Plain as day both times. It was night, but you know what I mean. Figure she's nocturnal. Was big, too. Man-sized. Ain't gonna lie or exaggerate like people do when they see something like that. Wasn't like, you know, giant or anything. Bout the size of me, I guess. Wouldn't want to wrestle her, though. She was thick, you know? And stank, too. Good lord she stinks."

"Stinks? Like what?" Mort began to wish he'd gotten his camera out of the van so Erika could see what good reconnaissance he'd done and be pleased with him.

"Swamp," Leebo said. "She smells like swamp. And shit, too. Like hog shit, but, I don't know, earthier or something. And with some sweet smell kinda underneath it. Musky or something. Like maybe it's pheromones. Reckon if you was a *Lizard Man*, that might be sweet as perfume, make you wanna rut. Make you wanna make some babies."

"Can you show me where?" Mort asked.

"Sure thing, boss man," Leebo said. "We can go right now. Just lemme pack this stuff up."

Mort put a hand up. "I just got into town," he said. "Let me get to the motel, get my bearings, maybe some coffee, talk to my producer. Let me get your number and I'll call you later or maybe tomorrow."

"Kinda between phones right now," Leebo said. "But I'm right here every morning except Tuesdays til noon. Or come to my place. Just take the first left back

where you came from, then the first right on the dirt road and another right on Black Creek Road. I'm the only house on it. Can't miss it. If you're in the creek, you went too far."

"One more thing," Mort said. "The River Star Motel? Where's that?"

"That thing still open?" Leebo asked. "If so, it's about three-four miles up the road on the left. Watch out for crabs, though."

Mort forced a laugh though he was terrified of anything resembling venereal disease. He could stare down a lake monster or a chupacabra or a Lizard Man—if he ever actually found one, that is—but the thought of pubic lice made him itch all over and want to puke. He began to back away toward the van, the sinewy Nessie-like creature that was the *Modern Day Monsters* logo shining in the golden morning sun.

"Oh man, I almost forgot," Leebo said. He retrieved a tee-shirt from a box in the back of his truck and tossed it to Mort. "It's on the house. I got mugs and pens and stuff ordered too. I got this idea for Lizard Woman bongs—I mean *tobacco pipes*, you know what I'm saying?—like, you know, a big three-footer with her face on it. But the police around here, man, they funny about that shit, so I'm a definitely have to sell those on the website once I get it up and running. Maybe we can talk about that on the show?"

"Sure thing, pal," Mort said, painfully aware that no one ever said that to a real pal.

Then he got into the van, smiling a little to himself because *The Search for the Lizard Man of Okamasee County* was off to a fine start. Erika would be pleased that he'd already gotten the lay of the land and found someone to put on camera. The kid was so brilliant they might even lead with him. With any luck, they could start filming that very night.

* * * * *

What a stroke of luck! Mort fuckin Accardo right there at his produce stand. In the flesh, as they say, but that was stupid because how else would he have been there? Astral projection? Hologram? But there he'd been, right there, in the flesh, his own flesh. He'd come to look for the Lizard Man, which Leebo would insist he call the Lizard *Woman*, partly because he'd seen her and knew she was a she, and partly because it was better branding for his merchandise. This search wasn't going to be like the *Modern Day*

Monsters episodes about the Jersey Devil or the Moth Man or any of the others that had turned up a whole lot of nothing. This time, Mort was going to find what he was looking for. And Leebo, was going to help.

He sat at the stand all morning and sold only a half-dozen or so watermelons and a basket of tomatoes. If he had better sense, he thought, he'd get the fuck out of Okamasee. All these people wanted to buy was tomatoes and watermelons. Maybe cantaloupes if he'd remembered to plant them. Couldn't hardly even sell collards and yams anymore. These people would rather eat the cancer burgers at the new Wendy's in town than cook something that grew out of the dirt right here under their feet. None of his other wares were exactly flying off the shelves, either. The artisanal glass pipes he bought wholesale from Asheville had sat untouched in their cases until Yancey, the town cop, had made him stop selling them. No one was interested in his authentic Indian artifacts. Even his reclaimed and repaired yard implements and power tools, which all came with a six-week money-back guarantee he was sure would separate his products from the stolen ones for sale at the flea market, just sat baking in the sun. He stayed there until noon, the day so humid he felt like he'd stood in a hot shower with all his clothes on. Nobody was buying Lizard Woman tees, and most of them scoffed at the notion.

He thought about what he'd seen as he packed up his merchandise. It had been almost a month ago, about two weeks after the first sighting, which was really the sixth sighting, if you counted back to the ones from decades ago. He'd been with Jessica the night he saw the Lizard Woman. She'd been home for the weekend from college, and there was a party at her grandfather's old creek place a mile upstream from Leebo's house, or what was Leebo's house now that his daddy was in prison again and this time he wasn't getting out. He'd hoped that maybe he and Jessica would get drunk on PJ and they'd rekindle some of what they'd had in high school, but she'd brought her boyfriend, who turned out to be a bona fide pecker-neck, so that was out. Leebo stuck around the party for a while, thinking that maybe she'd realize the boyfriend was a pecker-neck, but of course she didn't, and the party was no fun anyway, just a bunch of turds he hadn't liked much in high school—guys with *Salt Life* stickers on the back windows of their expensive trucks when their real life was fresh water, fresh black water like the water in his creek—sitting around the dock and talking about a

bunch of bullshit. They were, like Jessica, home for the weekend, as if the place they'd all grown up, the place where Leebo was still inextricably rooted, was some kind of low-rent vacation spot.

He left early, and he was back home, sitting on his own dock by midnight, listening to the noise of the party wafting faintly up the creek to him, trying to convince himself he wasn't sad over Jessica screwing some pecker-neck, when he saw the Lizard Woman. He'd taken the spotlight his daddy used to shine deer, and was shining it out over the water, looking for nothing in particular, just enjoying the way the beam of light penetrated the darkness. He was also smoking a blunt, but he had to remember not to tell that part when Mort interviewed him for tv because it would only give skeptics a reason to dismiss his story. He made a pass along the far bank with the light, and saw the yellow glint of two eyes. At first it didn't register, but when it did he shined the light back at them and there she was, standing on the opposite bank underneath the hanging branches of a moss-shrouded cypress. She was nearly the same color as the Spanish moss, just a tinge greener, and human-shaped, but with rough skin like a gator. There was a note of sadness about her posture somehow, and he was sure somehow that it was indeed a feminine presence, though there was nothing in the way of curves about her body. She stood there, frozen seemingly not by fear but by curiosity, for a moment, and then she slipped into the water, smooth as a turtle sliding off a log.

That had been two months ago. He'd looked for her every night since then, had been up and down the creek in his canoe, had sat wistfully on his dock waiting for her, all in vain. There'd been one sighting since, but it was from Wayne Daniels, who in quainter times would've been the town drunk but was now just one of its meth heads. No one believed him, and the cop hadn't even filed a real report. The consensus around town was that the ladies at the church picnic who'd reported the first sighting of The Lizard Man in over twenty years had either seen a mangy bear or been victims of a hoax and the migrant workers who'd ran away from picking bell peppers were really running from ICE and had simply concocted the Lizard Man story as a front. No one believed.

But Leebo knew better, and all that was going to change, as were his fortunes in business, for the Lizard Woman—and she *was* a woman, he just knew it—was his ticket. Soon his Lizard Woman merchandise

would be flying off the shelves. He might even have to quit the produce stand to have time to fill all the online orders. He was sure of it now that Mort and *Modern Day Monsters* was in town.

When he got home from the produce stand, he went straight to his closet and found the suit he'd been working on. He pulled it out and admired it even though the way it shrank when he wasn't wearing it brought to mind pantyhose hanging, shriveled, over a shower rod, an image that made him shudder a little. When he stepped into it, it clung to his naked, AC-chilled flesh like it was his own skin. He turned to look at himself in the mirror, admiring the crest of soft spikes crowning his head and the rows of scales the color of copper gone bad running down his belly and covering his groin like a fig leaf. He was going to lure her out of the swamp. He was going to be her Lizard Man. And if he couldn't find her, if she had been just a hallucination, which he was sure she wasn't, but if she was, he was going to play the part for Mort's cameras. He was done sitting around waiting. It was time for action, time to take things into his own hands.

* * * * *

The River Star Motel was, predictably, a real shithole. But Mort had stayed in worse, and it didn't matter because Erika was coming and he had work to do. He skimmed the newspaper articles she'd emailed him about the Lizard Man, the first ones dating back to the late 60's, another couple of them in 1989, the ones from just a few weeks back. He entered the directions to Leebo's house onto his phone, just like Erika had shown him how to do. He went online and read CryptoWatch's write-up about the Lizard Man, which weakly theorized that it could be something as simple as an alligator evolved to stand on hind legs like a bear or that perhaps it was of alien origin, noting that its appearance coincided with UFO sightings in at least one account. But in the end, it concluded that the Lizard Man was, most likely, a combination of hoax and rural mass hysteria.

If the guys at CryptoWatch, who were devout in their belief in the Sasquatch and claimed to have actually seen Champ, the Lake Champlain monster, thought it was probably a hoax, it was definitely a hoax. This was the part of his job Mort hated. He liked giving people hope and mystery. He hated lying to them, though he was good at it. Erika probably wouldn't want

to frame this episode as a *Lizard Man Debunked* kind of thing. She'd want to leave it open-ended, let the viewer decide, so she'd have the camera man go out and shake the bushes while he was filming his night-searching segments, which the focus groups said were their favorite spots. He'd have to transform from what he wanted to be, a kind of David Attenborough of the American Myth, narrating his little documentary series on the creatures of local legend, to what he hated being more than anything else—an actor. But he was good at acting, at least as far as it required him to act a little scared and a lot intrigued, hopeful yet fearful that the thing shaking the bushes was a Sasquatch when he knew it was just Zeke the camera man. And *Modern Day Monsters* was no documentary series, at least not since the network had put Erika in charge of retooling it and the ratings and number of people streaming his little show had exploded.

He closed his eyes and thought about all of this as he sat and waited for Erika, and suddenly she was there. He barely had time to pull the laptop back on his lap to feign that he was hard at work doing research before she strode into the room without knocking.

“Did you get the show notes?” she asked, dispensing with the pleasantries and small talk, as was her way with him.

“I did,” Mort said, peering over the top of the computer at her. He smiled, trying to make it both warm and genuine but with a little bit of teeth. He waited.

“And?” she asked, taking off the top of her trademark tracksuit. “What'd you think?”

“Oh, the show notes. No, I guess I haven't. I was just sitting here lining up an appointment for an interview. You're gonna love this guy, says he saw the thing.”

She gave him the sideways look she gave him whenever he had disappointed her and announced that they would talk about the show notes in a minute, but that first she had to piss like a racehorse. She was mad because he hadn't read the show notes even though she'd probably sent them five minutes ago. It was a little unreasonable, but it was alright. It was always business with her, but he never felt more close to her than when they were bickering over the show. He listened to her peeing, barely audible over the rattle of the bathroom fan, reveling in the casual intimacy of it, and when she was done she came to sit down beside him and told him to pull up his email.

He did, and they talked about what they had to do over the next four days. “So when are we meeting this Leebo guy?” she asked him. “I want to start filming today, at least get all the exteriors and scenery cut shots out of the way.”

She'd been leaning into him a little as they sat against the head of the motel bed, pointing at the screen as she went over her notes, and he didn't want her to move away, to stop touching him, but she did.

“Whenever you want,” he said. The pull to touch her again was so strong and so subtle that he didn't know he was putting his hand on her thigh until he was reaching out and doing it. For a second he was horrified at what he'd done, but she didn't flinch or move it away, and his hand rested now on her thigh, the flesh firm and real just beneath the fabric of her track pants. He thought about the bubbly keloid scar on her knee, leftover from the surgery that had ended her basketball career just as it began, and he wanted to stroke it with his finger, to thank it for changing the path of her life and delivering her to him.

“Morty,” she said.

“Mmmm hmmm?” he asked, turning toward her and seeing the warm brown space where just above the v-neck of her white tee-shirt. He wanted to put his face there and cry into it.

“So, I love you and all,” she said. “I mean, we're friends. And we'll still be friends when I leave this show and get me a show where I can stay in one place for more than a week, maybe a Kardashian spin off or something about some horrible women making their babies do pageants. But you're more like ... not a brother, not like that. More like an uncle. A fun, drunk uncle, but an uncle. And I'm not going to sit on your lap.”

He moved his hand away, feeling rebuked.

“And, listen, if you put your hand on me like that again—I mean anything other than, like, a hug because we just got a Bigfoot on tape or a high five because our ratings beat the shit out of *Real Housewives*, it's going to get all hashtag-me-too up in here. You got that?”

He nodded, marveling somewhat at the military brusqueness with which she conducted herself, handed down from the Air Force staff sergeant father who was the only man she'd ever truly loved, which she'd told him the one time they got drunk together, when they were snowed under in the Yukon. “Erika, I just...” he began, and he started to tell her he was sorry, that he

was missing his ex-wife a lot lately, that it wouldn't happen again, that he didn't know what had come over him, but she cut him short with a knife-like gesture of her hand and stood up, zipping her tracksuit over her Kentucky Wildcats Basketball tee-shirt.

"So when can we meet your guy?" she asked.

"Any time you want."

"Good. How about now?" She asked, and he just sat there on the bed, gut shot.

* * * * *

Erika had to admit that Leebo was gold when they finally tracked him down the next day and got him on camera. She knew within five seconds of turning the cameras on that she would lead with him and put him in the episode teaser and make him the face of the episode, which she was already turning around in her mind not as *The Search for the Lizard Man*, but as *The Mysterious Lizard Woman of Okamasee County*. Leebo's faith in his lizard woman was so electric that it almost made her believe even though she was pretty sure he was, like most people, especially most of the people she dealt with for this job, full of shit. She could sell the idea of a Lizard Woman to the audience, and there should be, she thought, better representation of women among the ranks of crypto-creatures.

There was just one little thing that bothered her, something that made her consider flipping the script on the show. What would the viewers think (or feel, since that was more important) if she approached it as *The Lizard Man of Okamasee County Revealed*. Or maybe *Busted*. Better yet, what would the network think?

"Mort," she said as they reviewed the raw footage in the back of the van. "I'm not sure this shit doesn't piss me off."

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that," Mort said. "I just...I'm sorry. I just got so much going on. And, I mean, I've just been so, I don't know...lonely, I guess, lately. I mean, I'm staring down fifty here. And I always thought getting married and having kids and all that was a crock of shit, but lately I've been thinking..."

Unbelievable, Erika thought, but then corrected herself, because it was imminently believable that Mort would make a wildly inappropriate pass at her in his bumbling, ham-handed way—really, the unbelievable part of it was that it had taken him this long to do it—and then turn his apology into a therapy session with

her as his counselor. She let him ramble for a minute but cut him off just as he was getting around to talking about how he was afraid he was going to die out in the woods one day, looking for something that didn't exist, with no one but Zeke the camera man at his side.

"I'm not pissed off about *this*," she said, gesturing at the space between the two of them. "That shit's over and done with. No harm, no foul. I'm pissed off about *this*." Here she pointed to the screen on which they were watching the tape they'd made on the first day of filming and then widened her gesture to include everything surrounding the Lizard Woman, Okamasee County, and maybe even the whole wide world.

"Pissed off like in the Yukon when the camera battery died in the woods and we had to stay an extra day to shake the bushes again? Or pissed like in New Orleans when Zeke got lost trying to pick me up from the bar and I punched that guy?" Mort asked.

"Pissed off like am I the only one who sees the racial shit that's going on here?" She waited for his reaction, betting on skepticism, betting that Mort, who had once willed himself to believe in the Moth Man flitting around the backwoods of West Virginia prophesying everybody's personal tragedy, would rather believe there was a lizard woman swimming in the swamp than believe there was racism in the world.

He blinked. Twice.

"Mort," she said. "Look at it. The first appearance of the Lizard Man was in the 60s. Which would've been like the 1860s if you were black living in this country-ass place. Who saw it? Buncha poor -ass black folks in a field picking cotton. Next it was the 80s. You lived through the 80s. There was some fucked - up shit going on in the 80s. Next time somebody sees the thing, it's last month, and who sees it? Buncha Mexicans picking watermelons. And then a week later, old black ladies trying to have a picnic at church. There's some kind of Ku Klux Scooby-Doo shit going on here."

"Erika," Mort said, shaking his head gravely. "I don't think Leebo's a racist."

"Of course you don't. White people don't think anything's racist. But that's not what I'm saying. I'm saying that somebody *else* is running around in the woods pretending to be the Lizard Man" she said. "Leebo's great. Salt of the Earth. Quirky. Thinks about things. Open-minded for a redneck boy living in the swamp. He's got a beautiful soul. But Mort, the kid is

crazy. I mean *touched* in the head. And he saw it because he's trying to sell tee-shirts. Which, hey, it's better than selling crack, but still. Or maybe—and this is what I think—he saw it because he *wanted* to see it. Either way, I'm telling you, this Lizard Man is nothing but some country-ass motherfucker with nothing better to do than try to scare black and brown people half to death."

For once, maybe the first time since she'd started working with him, Mort was quiet. He did that thing he always did when he was trying not to seem nervous, which was to look her directly in the eyes. She did not look away, because she knew that around guys like Mort, bless their hearts, you always had to remind them that *producer* meant *boss*.

"Good job finding that kid," she said, knowing that if he thought she was proud of him, he would do whatever she asked.

* * * * *

"Mort, come here," Zeke said, shining his helmet light over to the edge of the creek. "You gotta see this. It's the biggest fucking moccasin I ever saw. Swear to god it's big around as my leg."

"This right here, this is why I don't go in the woods with y'all," Erika said in Mort's headset. She was back in the van, watching the live feed from Zeke's camera. "I don't mind Lizard Women and Bigfeet and Hogzillas, but I'm not messing with no snakes."

"Dude," Mort said. "You're going to scare him away. *Her* away, I mean." Erika had told him to always refer to it as the Lizard Woman.

"You serious? All the time we've spent shaking the bushes and you still expect a Lizard Woman to roll up out of this creek?" Zeke said, shooing his moccasin back in the water with a long stick.

"Wait, get some better film on that snake," Erika said. "Try to get it slipping back in the water or something. Make it hiss at you maybe."

Zeke knelt down to focus on the snake and Mort took a knee on his spot. For the intro to the woods segment, Erika wanted him with just a little slice of creek and plenty of bushes in the background. When Zeke was finished and had shooed the snake back into the creek, he turned the camera to Mort and gave him the go with a wag of his finger.

"I've been a lot of places looking for creatures that just might exist," he started, but Erika chimed in his ear wire.

"Mort," she said. "We can ad-lib this stuff, especially since you can't say lines worth a shit, but stop making it about you. This is about the Lizard Woman."

"Take 2," he said, looking at Zeke.

"Being out here at night, here in the edge of Okamasee Swamp, just downstream from where Leebo Davidson saw the Lizard Woman, it's easy to believe there just might be something living in this swamp." He was about to continue when Erika interrupted.

"Much better," she said, "but do it again in more of like a stage whisper so it sounds more dramatic."

When Erika was finally happy with his intro, she wanted film of Mort sitting patiently on the bank, watching the creek slip by in the moonlight, and Zeke positioned him for the shot. Mort dipped his hand in the water and gazed across to the other bank, trying to look like a scientist.

"Hold on, Mort," Zeke said behind him. "I gotta change the battery pack. Fuck. And spray some more DEET on my ass. Fuckin mosquitoes eating my ass alive. Gonna be a minute."

While he waited, Mort watched the other bank. Of course he'd never *really* believed in any of the creatures he searched for, but there had been a time when he'd at least entertained the notion. There was nothing supernatural about them—a real Bigfoot wouldn't be some kind of Wookiee Leprechaun, just lonely ape from a species they'd never been able to stuff and put on display in a museum. And there was something beautiful, something alluring in the notion that there was still room for the unknown out in the places where you could still look up into the sky and see the stars. He wished that Erika would come out here into the woods with him. Of course Zeke would be with them, but it would still be nice, just sitting with her like this in the moonlight.

He was thinking about Erika and Bigfoot and his ex-wife and all the things he wanted to be real but weren't, when he saw it. Her. He'd trained himself to be a skeptic, if a wishful one, because that was what set him apart from the *CryptoWatch* guys and *Finding Bigfoot*, so at first he thought that it was a deer moving along the other bank. Then she emerged from the shadows and came down to the edge of the water and looked right at him and he knew that it was her. The Lizard Woman cocked her head as if she was studying him and then abruptly slipped into the water in a

motion that was, if not exactly graceful, efficient. He stood, beckoning silently but frantically behind him for Zeke to get the camera, but he was still fumbling with the battery as her head and shoulders emerged from the water in the middle of the creek to gaze at him again. And then she was gone.

* * * * *

Leebo had been in the creek at night before, but this was different. He stood about hip-deep in the water, halfway between his place and where Mort had set up the cameras, watching the reflection of the moon waver on the black water. He'd been in and out of this creek since he was a baby, but going in at night had always made an unnamed dread well up inside of him, as if nightmares slithered in the dark water around him, and usually he couldn't stay in for long. But now, wearing the Lizard Man suit, he felt positively in his element. Like he wasn't so much standing in the creek as he *was* the creek, and he could stay here forever. He scanned the bank, wondering if she was there among the trees, watching him. Maybe she was as lonely as he was, prowling the swamp, longing for someone to swim with.

He pulled the mask back over his face. It was sheer, and he could breathe easily in it, and he could even see somewhat, the fabric making everything seem somehow gauzy and ephemeral in the moonlight. He stood for a long while, just letting the creek slip around him, thinking about his next move. It would be ridiculous to go back and perform for Mort's cameras again tonight. It would strain the boundaries of credulity and the more film they had of the Lizard Woman, the more debunking the scientists would do, analyzing every movement he made until they were convinced it was just some guy in a suit like the lumbering Bigfoot in that iconic footage. He had to give Mort just a glimpse, just enough to make people believe in what he *knew* was real, and he couldn't overplay it.

Maybe, though, there was something else he could do tonight. Another sighting to coincide with the one Mort got on camera. One that would hit the local news station and drive people to his stand, clamoring for Lizard Woman merchandise. He could go out to the highway and wait for a passing car. He'd run across the road in the headlights, pausing just long enough to

let the driver get a good look, and tomorrow it would be in the papers, another sighting of the Lizard Woman. It was a good plan, and he sank into the water to let the current pull him toward home.

* * * * *

They'd stayed in the swamp for two more hours, filming the creek, until storm clouds covered the moon and thunder began to roll in the distance and Erika had made them pack it up. Mort's heart was still drumming in his chest when they got back to the van, and he wanted more than anything in the world for Erika to believe him, to believe in the Lizard Woman. "I'm telling, you, Erika, I saw it," he said.

"I didn't see anything, didn't hear anything but mosquitoes big as buzzards buzzing in my ears" Zeke repeated. He was packing his cameras into the back of the van.

"He wasn't looking," Mort said, seeing Zeke and Erika share a look he didn't like one bit. "He was putting a battery in the camera."

"It's just..." Erika started. Then she looked at Mort, and it was the softest look she'd ever given him. "I mean, I believe you saw something. But I'm not willing to bet it was her. Not yet."

"I've never bullshitted you, and I'm not bullshitting you now."

"You've bullshitted me plenty, Mort."

"Not about something like this. Not about the creatures or the show. I'm telling you, I saw it."

"Okay," she said finally. "We'll do two more nights of filming in the woods. But I'm going to get them to FedEx you a scuba suit, and if we don't get anything on film, you're going in the water to look for it. Viewers are going to eat that up."

Mort knew he would never find the Lizard Woman that way because she was too elusive, but he'd do it for Erika even if she would never let him do what he really wanted to do—go into the swamp alone, with just a handheld camera and without Zeke—because she said his footage was always unusable. But he'd seen it, he'd seen *her*; and it was real. Finally something was real.

The rain began to spatter on the windshield just as Zeke was finished packing up the cameras, and Mort drove away, back toward the River Star Motel, where he knew he would not be able to sleep. Erika was up front with him, scribbling notes to herself on her tablet.

He turned to look at her, and she was beautiful in the light of the screen, completely absorbed in what she was doing.

He was still staring at her when he felt the front wheel of the van slip off the shoulder of the highway and Zeke yelled from the back. He looked up just in time to see the Lizard Woman, washed out gray-green in the headlights, and he slammed on the brakes, but not before he hit her. For an instant she rolled up onto the hood, her head smacking against the windshield, making a spider web of cracks across the glass. He stopped and got out of the van, the poison of what he'd done seeping into his guts, but also the realization that at least now Erika would have to believe him. He thought at first that she'd run away, but he found her with the beam of his flashlight, lying crumpled in the ditch. He went to her, hoping she was still alive, fearing deep down that he'd gone and killed the only real miracle he would ever see.

He knelt to touch her there in the ditch, and knew immediately that something wasn't right. A patch of very human-looking skin showed through the green near the Lizard Woman's neck. As gently as he could, he removed the mask. It was Leebo, a tiny river of blood flowing from his smashed nose.

Mort was sure the kid was dead, but he gave a shuddering breath and winced against the glare of the flashlight. "They're never gonna believe me now," Leebo said and began to blubber.

There was something so honest about the grief in Leebo's eyes that Mort could not bear, and he looked away. In the edge of the woods saw something, just the impression of movement, something skulking in the dark just below the threshold of his vision. But when he panned the area with the beam of his flashlight, it was gone. For a second he thought he heard something rustling in the woods, the sound of something big slipping away, but then there was no sound except the crickets and the frogs and Leebo's ragged breathing.

"You gotta believe me," the kid was saying, then stopped to spit out a bloody tooth.

"Hush," Mort said, trying to sound reassuring. "I believe you." But he didn't, and he knew once and for all that there really was nothing worth looking for in the whole wide world.

END

I'll Still be Here Long After You're Gone By Daren Dean

Every day after school I met Ed-the-Head in the front yard under the pine and oak trees and we would start to throw punches. We stripped off our shirts and circled around backwards like Ali or Sugar Ray and then we took bare-knuckled shots at each other's chest and kidneys. Ed-the-Head was Mom's boyfriend and she was worried that I wasn't tough enough for a fourteen-year-old. Ed-the-Head was going to toughen me up so I wouldn't grow up to be a pussy, though no one ever said that to my face.

We fought for as long as we could or until Ed-the-Head needed a cigarette break. He would hold up his hand like an Indian in an old western signifying peace. Then he would go lean on the top rail of the back porch gasping to catch his breath, smoke a Kool, and give me a progress report on my technique while I put my photogray glasses back on. "Make us some Kool-aid," he would say in a way that made it sound like somehow it was his Kool-aid or that he was the one making it. I found the cheap cherry packet, ripped it down the middle, dumped what had recently made me

think of powdered red blood into a plastic pitcher, added two cups of sugar, turned the water on full blast, and when the pitcher was full I stirred it with a wooden spoon. I filled a couple of green canning jars with ice because he had a thing about drinking out of cups, poured the Cherry Kool-aid into the glasses trying to avoid slopping it on the counter so Mom wouldn't get mad when she came home after her shift at the Flaming Pit, and handed him the bigger jar.

Usually, until his first smoke break, we went all out with slapping body blows. The only rules we agreed on at first were no hitting in the face, and no fists. After awhile, the rules began to evolve. I had to be careful to not let him hurt me to the ribs too bad. I also had to watch that I didn't hit him too hard. If I popped him a good one on the neck or accidentally poked him in the eye with a finger, he might get pissed and retaliate by laying me out flat on my ass with his fist. He favored round-house punches to the jaw when he lost it. He'd already let me have it a couple of times.

In the beginning it was exhilarating despite the pain and bruises. One of Mom's boyfriends was actually paying attention to me. Although Ed-the-Head never took me to do anything fun like bowling or riding go-carts at the Lake of the Ozarks, he didn't try to be my daddy like some of her other boyfriends pretended just to score points with her. It was easy to see through those guys. There was a time about three of these losers in succession warned me never to hurt her. I'd never hurt her, would never do that, because I loved her. I began to wonder if she told them that she was afraid of me because now I was bigger than her. *Besides*, I told a guy named Terry, *You're the one that's going to hurt her. I'll still be here long after you're gone.* All Ed-the-Head had to do was take off his ring and his watch and I knew it was *go time*.

"I'm not going to hit ya," Ed-the-Head would drawl like John Wayne. "I'm not going to hit ya . . . the hell I'm not."

After awhile Ed-the-Head began to hit me harder. One day he hit me hard in the side of the neck and before I could think about it I balled up my fist and nailed him square in the chest with my fist. He backed up, rubbed his hairy sternum, and gave me a manly nod of acknowledgement instead of becoming outraged like I expected. The look was one of new-found respect that gave me some satisfaction. "Sorry about that," he said, "I slipped." We both began to "slip" as a tactic rather than just a way to end the

exercise. It didn't take long for me to notice that while Ed-the-Head was several inches taller than me he wasn't much heavier and it gave me more courage to dig into his ribs with pronating left hooks. In fact, the fighting was the only thing I really liked about him.

Early on I was tentative about hitting someone, but over time we started to "slip", hitting each other harder with bad intent. When I caught him with a good one he would give me a mocking sneer and say, "You punch like a pussy." But I knew I'd caught him with a good one because his skin would have my hand print on it surrounded by the pinkish color of a sunrise. And I don't remember when it got started, but we agreed to start punching with our fists. Punching in the face was still against the rules.

Like I said, the rules went out the window if I pissed him off. Once I hit him harder than he expected after he turned his head listening as the kitchen telephone rang and then he turned slowly, dropped his arms to his sides, and suddenly punched me in the mouth like a quick draw artist. Blood gushed out of my lip, ripped open against my own front teeth. I fell down cowering in the floor in fear of his grown-up anger at me for accidentally hurting him. Cowering was more of a way to ask for his forgiveness the way a dog will. It was embarrassing to lay there like that but like he always said, "You have to choose your battles." I had learned that if I had learned anything. A short guy like me would always have to be willing to fight he told me or there would be hell to pay every day of my life. I believed him too. I'd already moved around quite a bit and being the new kid every year had taught me I'd have to fight if I didn't want to get picked on. The fact that all things being equal that I could hold my own with him, almost, at fourteen lets you know just how tough Ed-the-Head really was.

We began to compare our battle scars. We listed up our shirts and showed our bruises off to Mom. Black and yellow bruises all over our torsos. We fought with demonic intensity and Mom said we must hate each other. I guess she thought he was making me into a man. We would stop for a smoke break panting and sweating and drink Mountain Dews, Gatorade, water, or a PBR. Even though I told him I didn't smoke he'd insist I smoked at least one cigarette with him. Besides drinking it was another thing a man needed to know how to do. Ed never lost an opportunity to warn that he was going easy on me, because he was by his own evaluation too tough for me.

He had been in the Army when he was younger, stationed in Germany, and he had boxed then. I doubted it. Every word he uttered seemed to do violence to the truth.

We laughed about these brawls—the fierceness itself exhilarating. My mother gave us both a look of concern on her way out the door to her job at *The Flaming Pit* where she worked as the head waitress and sometimes bartender. Toughening me up had gone farther than she had anticipated. I wasn't so sure I was any tougher. In fact, I had attended four different schools in the last three years and I was beginning to give up trying to make friends with other kids even talking to them seemed useless. I liked reading books and watching old movies. I wasn't a violent person though I did have a bad temper. I effectively went mute with other kids, it naturally made me strange to them and probably unnerving. What I didn't realize was that I didn't really know how to talk to kids because I'd grown up around adults. Mom said I used big words and the other kids found this strange. "You have to learn how to talk to kids your own age."

Around this time my cousin, Rusty, moved in with us. He was having problems at home and in school so he convinced Aunt Ginny and Uncle Shorty, and my mom that he should live with us. They were probably relieved to get rid of him. For his part, Rusty was sick of being stuck out in the country with nothing to do all the time. He left his own half-brother and sister at home. Each of them had different fathers, but I had never met them and neither had they. I thought Rusty moving in was great because I would finally have something like a brother. My own brother had been born mentally handicapped and was in a foster home in Hannibal. We visited Lonny every so often at whatever institution or foster home he had been moved to but he did not know us. He was like a baby in his awareness it seemed to me. Mom swore he recognized us, but I wasn't so sure.

Rusty was fifteen and usually went off somewhere with his friends. His best friend Kenny went to high school and drove a Chevelle. They listened to RUSH, Boston, Black Sabbath, KISS, and AC/DC cranked up on Kenny's Pioneer speakers. Rusty was gregarious and I was his negative, so withdrawn from everyone I didn't know for awhile that I picked up a moniker among his friends which smacked of an patent dismissive pronouncement: Rusty's Cousin. Not only was I overlooked by adults, I

didn't even have my own name or an identity with kids. I was effectively invisible. Kenny played guitar and they started talking about forming a band. It didn't take long for Rusty to decided he didn't like Ed-the-Head either, and that was when we nicknamed him Ed-the-Head behind his back instead of just Ed. Luckily, Ed hadn't moved in with us yet.

What was it that was so hard to like about Ed-the-Head? Nothing at the time. He looked like a lot of other guys then. A kind of greasy-haired Jesus in a Levi jacket and work boots. I'm talking Jesus in a less than holy sense; more young Charles Manson, or Jesus Christ Superstar than the white-robed Jesus teaching the beatitudes on the Mount of Olives.

Ed-the-Head talked out of his neck when he started drinking beer. His eyes were beady black creek stones. He once told us he was on the roster of the 1969 Yankees. When we looked at him more than a little incredulous, Ed-the-Head jumped out of his seat and told us to look it up at if we didn't believe him. I told him, I didn't doubt that someone with the same name, Ed Harris, was on that roster, but that I didn't believe it was him. I told Rusty we had to take everything he said with a pound of salt.

One afternoon Rusty came home just in time to watch Ed-the-Head and me taking turns at putting the hurt on each other in the living room. Rusty stood in the corner smiling appreciatively. Before Mom started dating Ed-the-Head, Rusty and me had watched a rerun of Rocky together on television and stuffed balled up socks into the end of our tube socks to create poor man's boxing gloves. But this was nothing like that. Ed-the-Head and me were tagging each other hard. Rusty decided he wanted to join in so he stripped off his shirt and to his credit, he went right for Ed-the-Head and Ed feinted with his left, stepped to his right, and doubled Rusty over with an uppercut to the stomach. Not any worse than he gave it to me, but Rusty was stung by it at first like it was a personal insult. He went after Ed with a few slaps, but it was nothing compared to what we had graduated to over the weeks beforehand. After about five minutes he had enough. Ed-the-Head called him a *big pussy*. Rusty gave him the bird and disappeared for a week.

This all happened in Missouri. Living in the same place for very long seemed to overwhelm Mom as if she felt buried by the vast expanse of land only to move out West where the expansiveness was made even more grand by desert vistas and sky-blue tableaus

that only emphasized the insignificance of a 5'1" girl from the Show Me state and her young son. Eventually, we always returned from out west. It felt like failure we never discussed when we inevitably returned, as if we just couldn't make it out in the real world, far away from family. And, make no mistake about it, we couldn't make it either. We were always just barely holding on.

Back then Fulton boasted less than ten thousand souls where Sir Winston Churchill made his famous Iron Curtain speech; the state mental hospital (where my grandfather tried on numerous occasions to dry out) and employed many of my relatives as orderlies; A.P. Greens brick factory; all dominated by the ominous penumbra of the nuclear power plant that had set folks teeth on edge in the wake of the infamous three mile island fiasco when it was first built.

Mom was always looking for a man to team up with, rather than searching for true love, or so it seemed to me. Sometimes she teamed up with another woman with kids to help pay the bills. Either the men she met sensed her practicality and were turned off or it was just the subpar kind of man she attracted to begin with. There was a part of her that she reserved for herself and would never give away to someone else. Maybe men could sense this. While she was looking for a man, I was already feeling nostalgic for the kind of family situation with a mom and dad I would never have. I never knew what kind of man she would bring home next—a woman beater or a kid beater? The kind of man who would try to re-enact some perfect father routine sitting at the head of the table at dinner time, having a catch with me afterwards, like a daddy in training only to disappear from my mother's bed at the first sign of trouble. I just wanted her to find someone to love her the right way.

Rusty had never actually met his real father. We both wondered what a real father was supposed to be and we watched movies starring Clint Eastwood, John Wayne, and Sylvester Stallone, where the heroes were always too tough for words and would never leave a good woman and her kid in the lurch. Heroes and fathers—weren't they supposed to be the same thing? Only the insular families of the older generation, my great aunts and uncles, seemed to have escaped messy divorces and financial instability. Maybe they were happy or content to suffer in silence.

I caught glimpses of my own father around town. Every so often I would go to my grandmother's

little yellow house on Opal street and see him with his latest wife and sons. At the time he owned a furniture store, but he had built houses with his brothers, worked for the brick plant, and probably dozens of other jobs I didn't know anything about. He had been a mechanic at the local Ford dealership working for old man Williams, but he never stayed anywhere for long because he had a quick temper. When she wanted to put me in my place my mother would say, "You've got a temper just like your father's."

Once, years earlier, I saw my dad at the Wal-Mart service desk talking to a mousy young woman. I only saw him about every two years so it almost like spotting a bigfoot in the wild. My mother had dropped me off to live with my aunt and uncle for awhile. She had to "get her life together" she later told me. Dad wasn't wearing a shirt. He was solidly built and had freckles on his back and his hair was jet black. I later learned his hair was evidence of the Dean's Cherokee descendents back in Harrah, Oklahoma where he was born or so he said. His older brothers were taller and their complexions were of a reddish tint that made the story more believable. His black hair and light complexion seemed to be a combination that caused women to throw themselves at him.

My great aunt said, "There's your daddy." So I walked up to him like you would walk up to any mythical creature, one that was sighted only once every couple of years, until I stood at his elbow. He looked down at me and said casually, "Hey there, DJ." That was it. I expected more somehow, but that was it. I hadn't seen him for a couple of years at that time so I thought maybe he would pick me up, set me on his shoulders, parade around the store at joy of being reunited with his son "Hi," I said. He turned away to continue his conversation with the woman behind the counter and I wandered off to find my aunt looking at bras in the women's department.

We went back to "The Hill" so Rusty could visit his family at his mother's request. It had recently snowed and everything was sloppy with snow and ice. His sister Jenny was a scrawny nine year old with blonde hair like straw. Even for a kid she had a crazed look in her eyes that caused her teachers to have her put on a regiment of Ritalin to keep her calm otherwise she would go out of her way to irritate her teachers like a smiling assassin. They called kids like her hyperactive back then. She took pleasure in torturing her brothers by breaking their 45 records, tearing pages out of their

books, blaming them for her own dirty deeds like eating Aunt Fran's Twinkies and drinking her disgusting Tab--only 1 calorie, no kidding. In turn, Rusty and Liam punched, kicked, and tormented Jenny in retaliation, but teasing and insulting them was the only way she knew how to show how desperately she loved them. At least, that's how I prefer to look at it although I admit it's possible she took extreme pleasure in the things she did and maybe she enjoyed their anguish when she destroyed something that belonged to them.

In school Jenny would get a hall pass for the restroom and stop by every class on her way like a royal giving the masses the opportunity to genuflect to their cruel monarch until she was eventually sent to the principal's office. She would do anything to get attention which usually meant something negative as if the conventions of normal communication were beyond her comprehension, but she confounded her teachers by making excellent grades. Years later Rusty, Liam, and Jenny would all be diagnosed officially as bipolar.

Liam was twelve after we moved back from Columbia. We were all attending Hallsville schools together which housed K through 12. On the bus each morning a boy younger than Liam, Dale Chenoweth, teased him every day. At first, Rusty and I agreed Liam brought it on himself. His mother made him wear black horn rims with an eye patch to correct his lazy eye. He was missing a couple of ribs on one side as the result of a congenital birth defect. All he ever wanted was to be liked by us older boys, but we often teased him ourselves or ran away when we got bored with humoring him.

When we were feeling generous we let him play war with us out in the pastures running from tree to tree or pretending to sneak up on the enemy. The enemy compound was their Uncle Floyd's house. Their cousins, Billy and Johnny, were sometimes our allies but more often than not our enemies. We would crawl on our bellies trying to avoid cow pies and get as close as we could before the dogs detected us and started barking like hellhounds.

On Saturday nights we liked to watch reruns of Star Trek on Channel 13 after Dick Preston anchored the news and the next day we would play Star Trek and beam down to strange new worlds. I was usually Captain Kirk, Rusty was Spock, and we made Liam play the role of Dr. McCoy or at best Mr. Scott. There

was no glory in being McCoy or Scott, but he was happy to get a role in the drama.

Liam wasn't as strong as us because he was younger and smaller and had a hard time keeping up, but the one thing he could do that we wouldn't dare was to climb higher in the tallest trees that made us want to lose our cookies just watching him sixty feet in the air in the swaying branches of a birch. For the most part avoiding contact with the adult Crowleys was our main goal and they were only too happy to oblige.

Dale Chenoweth sat directly behind Liam on the bus and thumped him in the back of his head with the palm of his hand. The Chenoweths were big lumbering corn and soybean farmers with furry unibrows. We'd sighted the elder Chenoweth down at the Trading Post convenience store and his no-nonsense burr haircut. A haircut he had evidently insisted that Dale get as well. Most boys had long hair then, but not Chenoweth. By the time Dale made it to high school he would tower over us like a Wookiee. There was something animal about the Chenoweths as if they were part bigfoot. Even the women were towering blond beasts. Dale's mother was taller than his father just over six feet, and her torso looked like she regularly foaled ponies to bankroll her husband's financial ventures.

Liam told Chenoweth to stop in a whine that only encouraged him to continue with more vehemence. The next time he smacked my cousin so hard his chin nearly touched his own bony chest. The torment went on for over a week, getting worse as time went on, and Liam refused to stand up for himself. Before and after school, the idea of riding the bus began to terrify him so much he looked like he wanted to pee his pants. He often smelled like he had done just that anyway because he refused to take his weekly bath. We had all been picked on by older, bigger kids. Nobody expected you to do anything about that. But it seemed wrong to see a younger boy picking on Liam. It was as if he didn't have any self-respect even if that kid was one of the beastly Chenoweths. One day we watched the situation playing out behind us and Rusty said he was going to kick Dale's ass.

"Don't do it," I said.

"Why not?"

"Liam needs to fight his own battles," I said. "He needs to stand up for himself. What's he going to do if you're not around?"

We started a regiment of sparring and fighting to show Liam what he needed to do to take care of Chenoweth. I showed him feints, jabs, undercuts, and right crosses. Rusty encouraged Liam to punch his relatively futile jabs into the palms of his outstretched hands. Rusty kept giving him advice he could remember Burgess Meredith giving Rocky or stuff he remembered from Kung Fu reruns. "Don't be a bum, grasshopper."

"Who's the man?" Rusty asked. "Who's the man?"

"I don't know," Liam looked down at his holey Keds.

"You're the man! You!" Rusty said. "Got it? Get it? Good."

"I guess."

I even let him practice throwing body punches into my midsection so he could see what it was like to hit someone. Then we walked to the bus stop before school throwing punches to the Rocky theme all the way there. As soon as the bus driver let us off the bus in the afternoons we would do the same thing all the way home. I showed him how to do the famous Rocky shuffle that he does when he finally makes it to the top of the stairs.

Two weeks later we got up out of our blankets on the floor and ate hot oatmeal for breakfast. I put on a yellow t-shirt I'd inherited from my last step-dad, the truck driver whose CB handle was Bear. Bear was Mom's third husband at that stage. The shirt featured a giant pot leaf on it that read "Marijuana Picker #5." We walked down Crowley hill and up the gravel road to the bus stop in our cheap vinyl winter coats. The trees were naked, dark black and purple in the dawn light. This was the day. We could feel it. Liam was as ready as he was ever going to be. We made Liam sit between us, and Dale still hit him on the back of his head and looked over his shoulder at the older boys in back he was trying to impress. They were only mildly amused, but a schoolbus can be a terrible place. A place where any cruelty is seen as entertainment like feeding Christians to lions was entertainment in Rome. It was a place where kids learned about violence, cruelty, obscene language, and even sex.

"Hey Liam," Dale said. "Why are you such a fag?"

"Liam," I said. "Are you going to sit still for that?"

"What are you? A pussy?" Rusty said.

"No," Liam said. "But he keeps on bothering me."

"That's because you're a pussy," Rusty said.

"The next time he bothers you," I said. "I want you to stand up to him. You're older and bigger than him. I want you to kick his ass."

"Kick his ass!" Rusty said.

The bus pulled into the school parking lot to let us out near the path. I had my hands on Liam's shoulder like a trainer with his charge massaging his shoulders. Looking over my shoulder I gave Rusty a nod and a wink. If he was ever going to stand up for himself this was it.

"Okay," I said. "The next time Dale touches you, or even looks in your direction, I want you to let him have it."

Liam didn't say anything but I could tell by his breathing his eyes were filling with tears, not of shame, but of pure rage.

"Don't forget to eat fire and crap lightning," Rusty added just like Meredith.

I clapped my hand hard on Liam's back and watched him go to his doom. Out the window of the bus I could see Dale was already waiting for him. We let the other kids file on by and we each opened a window and started singing the Rocky theme. Dale flipped us off which was a ballsy thing to do since he was so much younger than us, but he was the kind of kid that was going to grow up to be a bully like his older brothers that had already graduated with diplomas as corn-fed assholes. His head of wild unkempt dark hair disappeared as he descended the steps of the bus. I couldn't help remembering all the ways we had teased Liam, maybe even caused him to become the boy he was, making up silly rhymes: *Liam Squeal ate a pill and fell into a bowl of oatmeal*. No one ever accused us of being poets.

As soon as Liam emerged from the bus he began to walk away from Dale and toward the school. It was like watching Kung Fu, like Cane he would do anything to avoid a fight. We stopped singing Rocky. Shook our heads in disgust. Dale was approaching Liam from behind and he gave him a good shove in the back causing him to stumble forward into the concrete. Much to our surprise Liam turned, eyes brimming over with tears, his eyes were like twin volcanoes of hate. He charged at Chenoweth and began punching him in the head with wild roundhouse swings. His fists seem to catch the boy like a pinball

between two great flippers that refused to release him. His breath belched out into the cold air like a dragon's.

Chenoweth seemed to recover for a minute to realize he was catching a major ass whipping. Finally, a grade school teacher lumbered over toward the combatants telling them to cease and desist while her woolen cap rang a little jingle bell embedded in its yarn as if she feared she might become lost in a herd of free range school fourth graders. The boys rolled together on the snow like lovers in their heavy nylon jackets and mittens. The teacher did her best to pull Liam off of Chenoweth and finally held them away from each other.

"Okay," the teacher huffed, worn-out from the action. "We're going to see the principal."

"I didn't do anything," Chenoweth said although his nose had exploded with snot and blood. "Look what he did to me! Just look!"

"Yeah Liam!" We shouted. He turned back to face us at the moment through his tears triumphant, wrecked glasses, and eye patch torn off to flash us the smile of the undefeated.

"Who's the man?" I said.

"I am," Liam said. "I'm the man." He threw his arms in the air and did the Rocky dance as snowflakes began to fall lightly around him.

It was time to move again. Mom's inner alarm clock went off. Rusty was going with us. We loaded up what little we could fit in the U-Haul trailer behind the car and we headed to Boulder, Colorado. We hit terrible thunderstorms in Kansas. It seemed like we were driving underwater at one point and later that day were driving straight into the gale of a cyclone. My Uncle Jake owned his own business called Night Owl Plumbing not too far away in Longmont. We could stay with him and his wife and kids until Mom found a job and a place to rent in Boulder. Ed-the-Head was going to meet us in a few weeks. On the Interstate we were in awe when we saw the flat irons of Boulder. Just driving through town we could feel that Boulder was the place we had always been meant for.

In June Mom found a job as a waitress in Boulder. She was excitedly smoking her Merits and explaining that she had found a place to rent just outside Boulder. It turned out to be a nice KOA campground. A green sign with white lettering read: River's Bend Campground although there was no river but there was a tiny lake, hardly bigger than a pond, with bright yellow, orange, and green pontoon boats for

a fee. She'd rented a tiny little silver trailer that had bunk beds, a tiny kitchen area, and a little breakfast table and, most noticeably, no restroom but there was running water for drinking and washing dishes. We would have to hightail it up to the campground facilities to shower and use the toilet. It was not meant to be permanent, just until she could save enough money to get an apartment in town.

Across the road from the campground was a rocky outcropping like a little mountain rising up out of the plain. It was criss-crossed with hiking trails and Rusty and I couldn't wait to climb it. At the top there were treacherous boulders, rocks, and bushes. If a hiker lost his balance, it was a long way down. It seemed like you could see for miles from the top maybe even into the future if you squinted your eyes and held your mouth right. We roamed the foothills and one afternoon we followed a wide but narrow streambed as it crooked around town and chased a herd of Elk downstream. The white water splashed up into great sparkling arcs. I felt more alive than I ever had running at full tilt down the stream as the Elk ran from us. An osprey flew overhead when we finally stopped. We looked up blinking into the golden sunlight, tracing the flight of the great bird with our fingers, and breathed the clean air wafting off the Rockies. Rusty kept talking about wanting to visit the Center for Atmospheric Research, but all I wanted was for us to drive up together into the mountains. Uncle Jake was beginning to talk of moving his family to a little place called Pine Cliffe, not far from Nederland, to manage some cabins not far up into the mountains.

We were giddy with excitement. We were in a new place. Things might be hard for now, but the weather was great. Some mornings I sat in our broken down Monte Carlo and read horror novels by V.C. Andrews and Stephen King; the White Indian series by Donald Clayton Porter Bear had introduced me to; and my old standbys, Tarzan and Conan. Mom was getting rides to work from a waitress we heard her talk about named Shelly. If we hardly had any possessions, in truth I only cared about being with Mom.

Mom came home one day and said, "Ed called to say he should be here any day." Rusty and I looked at each other doubtfully. Ed-the-Head the head, he mouthed. I was plenty happy without Ed-the-Head around. He was just coming to sponge off Mom and we didn't have much to share. Just eating square meals was a plus in my eyes. Sometimes she brought food from

the diner for us in Styrofoam containers. Besides, I didn't have to share Mom's attention with Ed-the-Head at the moment. Whenever she was with a guy, which was often because she couldn't seem to stand being alone, she got lost in his world. I didn't understand her loneliness until years later. I imagined she felt alone and insubstantial. Her own mother died from complications giving birth to a baby girl when Mom was only seven. She was pregnant with my brother by fifteen. Later, her own father died when she was in her early twenties. Were those the reasons she had to have a man in her life even if she knew he was no good? Ed-the-Head didn't have that much going on other than avoiding work and drinking PBR. He thought he could get on as a lineman in Boulder.

When Ed-the-Head arrived he gave Rusty and me buck knives. He bought Mom what was clearly a faux diamond. He spent the better part of a day working on the car until he got it running again.

A few days later we drove up into the mountains like I had been wanting to since the whole time we'd been there. The mountains seem to rise up to heaven and it seemed like paradise to me seeing the snowy caps up close, the pines trees leaning against the hillocks, and rivers and streams thundering down the mountain as the warm weather began to melt the snow in the highest elevations. Even though it was late June we drove up one peak until we were stopped by an avalanche of snow that blocked the road. "It's about fifteen feet high over the road," Ed-the-Head said just as I hit him in the back of the head with a snowball which triggered an all-out war between Ed-the-Head on one side and Rusty and me on the other until we wore out by the thin mountain air.

A week later Rusty and me were sleeping out in the Monte Carlo. There was a ragged copy of *Flowers* in the Attic I'd been reading in the car since it was more comfortable than the orange foam benchseat in the trailer. I slept in the front seat and Rusty took the back. Ed-the-Head wanted to be alone with Mom in the trailer, but things were beginning to go to shit between them again. I woke up the next morning and forgot where I was and hit my head on the steering wheel. He couldn't find a job as a lineman or a mechanic. He ended up using Mom's tip money to go into town to some bar and drink most of the day away. Mom even suggested he apply for welfare, but he said he was too proud for that.

"You better keep in mind it's about your mother and me, DJ," Ed-the-Head told me. "You better stay out of our way. The only time I fight with Irene. It's always about you so watch it."

I tried to stay out of Ed-the-Head's way. I didn't like to fight. I was just a kid who wanted everyone to like him, but Ed-the-Head seemed crazy. Somehow he blamed us for his problems. Shelly pulled up in her station wagon and Mom got out Ed-the-Head started toward her. There wasn't much food in our place except peanut butter, macaroni and cheese, dry cereal, bologna and ketchup but no bread to eat it with. Rusty and I went around and talked to older folks who were vacationing at the campgrounds who sometimes fed us grilled burgers and hotdogs as they talked about their grandchildren and bragged about their RVs. "It must be nice to own two homes," I said, almost without guile.

Ed-the-Head grabbed Mom by the hair and took her in the trailer.

"I'm not putting up with this, Eddie!" I heard Mom scream in a fearful voice and then the sound of a loud smack.

"Shut up," Ed-the-Head said. "I'm the man. You listen to me! Give me some money. Give me some money, now! I'm getting the hell out of here."

"That money is all we've got until I get paid next week."

"Your money, my money, it's the same thing!" Ed-the-Head said.

"We ain't married!"

"That's all you women ever want," Ed-the-Head said in a mocking falsetto. "Get married. I want to get married and live happily ever after. I'm Cinda-fuckin-rella!"

"I wouldn't marry you if you got down on your knees and begged me."

The next day a rusted out Skylark showed up outside our trailer. Ed-the-Head sat on the passenger side smoking his menthols. The driver had Ed-the-Head hair and a beard. Ed-the-Head looked almost like his old self again. He even smiled like when I first met him.

"Is your Mom around?"

"She's at work."

"She's always at work," he said it like it was a character flaw. "I guess I'll go by there and talk to her."

"You're leaving aren't you?"

"Afraid so," Ed-the-Head said. "Clifton's giving me a ride back to Missouri. I should only be gone for a

couple of weeks and then I'll be back. There's a guy that owes me some money."

"Okay."

"Okay what."

I couldn't think of anything to say back to him.

"Okay, I'll see you when you get back."

He reached through the window and punched me in the arm. It was the only thing between us that we had ever shared. A kind of violent kinship, but instead of taking it as an endearment it felt like an insult. I leaned back on my heels and put my weight into a wallop to his shoulder. Ed-the-Head looked hurt or maybe it was guilt, "Sorry, I slipped." His mouth was slightly open as if he were incredulous about this goodbye. If there was one thing I hated, it was getting left behind even though I had no desire to go anywhere with him.

The Skylark turned around and disappeared and took him out of the KOA exit. The sun was beginning to set behind the front range burning orange in the evening sky. It was the end of the world. I was used to saying goodbye to people in my life. It seemed like a relief to see Ed Harris leave for good.

The heat was settling down and finding all the cracks in the ground. It was August. Storms came off the mountain quick. It had flooded up in Estes Park. Mom said we didn't have much more time to live at the campground. When winter hit we had to leave. The trailer didn't have heat. Rusty was disappearing more and more often. He said he wanted to move back to Missouri. Mom pointed out he was only fifteen, but he had a friend whose dad was an engineer. They would take him in for awhile. One day Bear's National appeared out of the blue. Mom had asked him if he wouldn't mind taking Rusty back with him if he went on his way through Colorado.

"Hey DJ, I heard about this Ed-the-Head character," Bear said.

"Yeah," I said. "He smokes menthols too."

"What kind of a man smokes menthols," Bear adjusted his western belt buckle.

"He's a jerk," I said. "I'd like to kick his ass."

"He'd still be an asshole."

"True."

"How's your Mom doing?" Bear asked as Rusty packed up what little he had into the sleeper of the diesel.

"I don't know," I said. "She works all the time. I don't think she's been able to save up any money. I wish I could get a job and help out some."

"You let your mother worry about the money," Bear stroked his dark beard. "Once you start working, you never stop. Besides, you're just a kid. We're going to stop by the restaurant. I owe your mama some money anyway." I knew it wasn't true.

"What happened to you two anyway?" I asked.

"Oh, I messed up," Bear looked up into the blue of the sky as if there might be an explanation up there in the heavens. The sound of the truck idling absorbed the silence between us.

"Things were at least a little better for us when you guys were still married."

"Well," Bear said. "I made some mistakes. I can't really say much more about it. I hope you understand?"

I nodded, but I didn't know what to say.

"Take it easy, DJ," Rusty gave me a quick one-armed hug.

"See ya, man."

"Oh," T-Bear let his hand rest on his beer belly. "I've got something for you up in the cab." He went over to the truck, pulled on the bar, and lifted himself up. When he turned back again after a moment of rummaging, he jumped down like a much lighter man. It was a paperback. "I just finished this. It's the latest book in the White Indian series. Donald Clayton Porter."

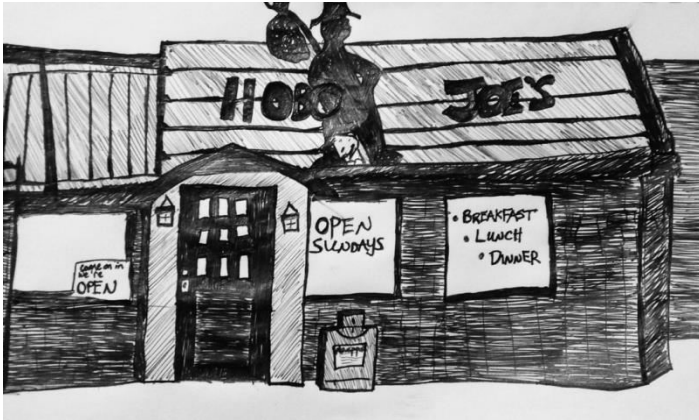
"Thanks," I said. "I was out of stuff to read." I'd read Mom's *Flowers in the Attic* three times and it had freaked me out. I would have killed for some Ray Bradbury.

Off they went. Driving down the road Rusty rolled his window down, stuck his fist in the air and started singing the part of the trumpets in the Rocky song. "See ya boy, and I did say BOY," Rusty yelled.

"You're the boy!" It was a dumb old joke between us.

I always felt good on the highway so I envied the fact that they were going to be back on the Interstate in a matter of minutes. It was easy to imagine something great was about to happen as long as the windows were rolled down and music was blaring. If other people weren't leaving, we were usually. It was getting old. Where would we be next month? Watching Bear's powder blue National navigate the narrow lanes of the campground made me feel empty.

Bear gave the air horn a pull. People were comically poking their heads out of their campers to see what was going on. The hydraulic brakes hissed mournfully. It was like the sound of the big rig crying. It was always best to be the one leaving instead of getting left behind.



Hard and Harder by Jay Halsey

“Where’d you end up last night?” Jake sits near Lyle on the white paint-peeled bench around the corner from the back door. “Figured I see you before I left here. Was gonna buy you a beer.” A hard December gust whips from the north as Jake attempts to light a cigarette. “Jesus Christ!” The flame finally connects. “Got it?”

“Think so.” Jake puffs until the end burns even.

“The L-Star.”

“What?”

“That’s where I went last night.” Lyle flips his butt into the air, watches the wind smash it against the block wall. Orange ash spreads like fireworks. “Up there on Main, just a couple blocks up near...What’s the bar?” Lyle turns his sharp chin upward and squints into the sun. His face glints with specks of red in his mostly-grey stubble.

“Goldie’s?”

“That one. Anyway, it’s only thirty-seven a night.”

Jake spits, laughs and says, “*Nice!* Sounds *real* nice!”

“Ha! Yeah... Beats the alternatives though.” Lyle turns toward Jake, half-grinning and meek, “And the guy working the counter, man... As bad as the folks staying there. Almost nodded off flat looking for the room key.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah, I thought, God dang, son! Didn’t your mama teach you to pull out the needle before work!”

Jake crows until tears blow sideways into his hairline, lifts his left boot up and over, straddles the bench to also let the mid-morning sun bathe his face. He sucks two drags from his cigarette and exhales a white plume that vanishes as soon as it crosses his mouth. “You staying there tonight? The motel?”

Lyle growls, rests his face in cracked palms and weighs his options. "Nah... I should save my money and stay at the shelter. See if any new jobs are up on the board." They sit in silence in sun and relentless wind. An argument in Spanish breaks on the other side of the fence in the parking lot. Glass breaks. Jake whistles to pad the tension, snuffs his butt on the bench between him and Lyle, leaving a worn black groove where he has extinguished hundreds of cigarettes. "So what's to do up there all day? At the shelter?"

Lyle stares at nothing, finally answers after several seconds. "They kick us out in the morning to clean and do whatever else they need to get it ready again for the evening." He coughs hard, snorts up a thick ball of mucus. "This infection is lasting longer than all my marriages combined." He leans forward, careful to spit low so the drafts don't carry it. "I hole up all day in the truck, read the news. Read the classifieds, try and stay warm."

"Dude, the library's right there." Jake points over the fence, across the alley. "They'll let you relax so long as you stay small. Invisible."

"Nah. That place is full of bums." Lyle winces as he slugs a hot mouthful from his coffee. "I get guilt sitting in that place."

"Guilt?"

"You know, 'cause I'm seen the same as the others. I'm just like all of 'em as far as anyone's concerned and I don't want anything to do with it."

Jake lets the words hang not knowing what to say.

Lights another Marlboro, stares at the hole on the right knee of his pale blue jeans as the sun inches higher in a pale blue sky. "Sounds more like pride than guilt to me."

"Ha! Well fuck you too, man!" Lyle pinches Jake's arm to bruise.

Jake yanks back, cringes. "Hey, you get a phone yet?"

"Huh uh." Lyle hacks again between his threadbare tennis shoes. "You can always call the shelter in an emergency, but..."

"No emergency, just... You know. Shit." Jake feels foolish, flips his smoke like it's contagious against the concrete, pulls another from his pack.

"Yeah..." Lyle bites a hangnail. "Well, I'll be up here again next week, Monday probably. I'll make it." He throws back his narrow shoulders, stretches his long, thin arms like crucifixion, slowly extends a crooked middle finger inches from Jake's face paired with a devious smile.

Jake sniffs and hangs his head, sighs. "Alright, man."

Two squirrels tangle overhead in the swaying pine tops. "Good to see you. I mean it." He cocks his head straining to catch the commotion above them.

"Absolutely. Didn't want you guys thinking I was dead in a ditch or something out on 52."

"Yeah. Well thanks for coming by. And not just to help with the food, you know?" Jake lights his cigarette, raises his brows searching for words. "We've all been thinking about you and how you're doing and all that shit."

"For sure. Been thinking about you guys, too. Just trying to get it back together and stay away from the junk. And the people who have the junk." Lyle pulls the hood of his tan Carhartt over his head and stands in the building's shadow. "Well fuck, guess I'll get first in line before the lunch rush then get out of here."

"Pff! You don't have to wait in line. You cooked it! Help yourself!"

"Well I got an appointment with Sandy at twelve-thirty so I need to get to it either way."

"Sandy?"

"Case manager at the shelter."

"Ah."

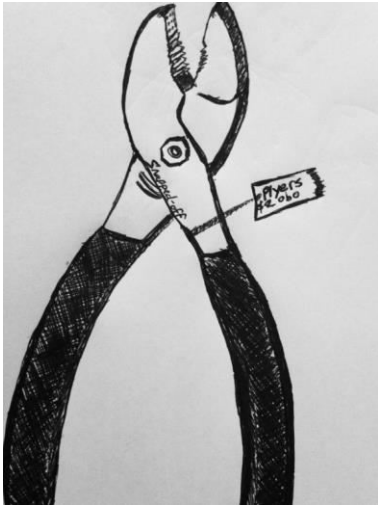
Jake stands, short compared to Lyle. They hug without ceremony. "Peace, dude. Be safe."

Lyle puts a guarded Bic flame to a fresh Pall Mall.

"You too, man. Get some rest. You don't look so good."

"Gee, thanks." Jake watches Lyle stalk off against the blank sky—all the trees naked and leaning south. "SEE YOU NEXT WEEK!" His words are drowned beneath the roars of numb air.

Lyle rounds the corner. Cigarette smoke like an apparition lingers in his place. It hangs on longer than what seems possible.



**Confessions of a Lovesick Garage Sale Queen,
a Faux Memoir
By Amy Susan Wilson**

I love garage sales in July, rural central Oklahoma style, and begonia-pink Revlon lipstick, two for one, Walgreen’s summer sales bins, and men. Ones who are in possession of jobs, teeth, big hearts, a deer stand or two stashed in the garage, and ex-wives whom they don’t call “crazy.”

Yet, forty-four, I focus instead on the three-day preparation for the annual Market Street garage sale. Fueled with the devotion of the zealous and religious, I arm myself with a fat black Sharpie, to mark “what will sell” from “what goes to the trash.” This proves a nine hour project.

All other Saturdays, I roll my Honda from my driveway 6:00 a.m. to be exact, to roam the tri-country garage sale territories: Midwest City, Meeker, Cushing, Shawnee, Chandler and Davenport. I’m game for garage sales anywhere in the sprawling plains.

Any neighbor who wants to throw a boxful or two or three or four into my next door neighbor Lillian’s garage sale can do so. You can donate sales money to the Big Pin Wheelchair Bowling League, Children’s Division, (they’ve made regionals tourney, Altus),

or keep the sales in full. Yet, the neighborly neighbors of my neighborhood chip in half or more to the wheelchair bowl league. That’s why in April you

start to hear questions such as, “Lillian gonna have her wheelchair bowling sale thing this July? I have a microwave I can throw in and an old weed-eater with a still-good motor.”

Lillian’s son, Richard, fifty, stops by after his work ends as shift leader at the ball bearing manufacturing plant to help set up tables. His wife of twenty-nine years, Rayleen, hops out of the white Chevy 250 with a plate full of brownies covered with aluminum foil, a Love’s Country sack populated with Diet Coke, some Ozarka lemon-flavored water. She wears hot pink flip flops, lavender pedal pushers, a heather gray tank-top that reads, *Not Today Satan*.

I tell her that her shirt is very cute.

Richard pecks Rayleen on the cheek, says, “You made your good kinda brownies, with nuts. Lotsa nuts.”

“But no sugar. NutraSweet,” Rayleen explains as she snaps on a pair of turquoise garden gloves.

I squirt Clorox on the dusty tables and she paper towel wipes metal legs, white plastic tops. Next, we plop a cardboard box on the newly cleaned “Music Table.” A plethora of vinyls: Linda Ronstadt, The Clash, Ray Charles, Brubeck, Three Dog Night, Hank Williams. Another box loaded with DVDs, transistor radios and Sony Walkman’s piled like cars in a junkyard. There’s eight of us working like demons in 94 degree heat to get this sucker set up. Humidity index jumps us up to 102 Fahrenheit.

Anchored to the “Home Knick Knack Table” nests one laundry basket that’s chalk full of figurines, Dollar Store Hummel knock-offs. Lillian tapes a sign: “\$2.00. NO RETURNS!”

“I always start high. I could go down to seventy-five cents but let’s keep that under hat.”

Other knick-knacks: a clock in the shape of a battleship. Mushroom shaped salt and pepper shakers, tea kettle ones, and one pair, two police cars with sirens thimble-big.

Rayleen exclaims, “I can’t believe how much stuff people bring to Lillian’s. People just opening their hearts. \$1,900.00 last year and I bet more this year. I bet \$2,300.00 could come in. Gosh, these wheelchair bowlers are so blessed!”

We are not perspiring, but sweating like the two girls we once were back in junior high gym class. The year that Floyd Junior High School gym did not have air conditioning and the windows open full-fledged

didn't cut it. We keep working. Rayleen and I both remembering that year, 1993.

"No way Lillian can keep hosting this whole neighborhood garage sale on her own each year. Six months before the sale, Lillian storing boxes in the hallway, kitchen of her home because she accepts donations year round. Me and Richard, we keep telling her, "Don't take donations until a few weeks beforehand. Set yourself a boundary."

Richard'll say, "Whoa, Mama, ya gotta slow down."

I nod, agreeing. Lillian seventy-six, diabetic.

Mid-afternoon, Rayleen and me take refuge in two silver aluminum lawn chairs, mint green webbing, and gulp Ozarka water. Lillian polishes her coin belt that she wears when on "garage sale duty," which is why we all call her "Sonic Mama."

Dusk, Richard and Rayleen drive two blocks over to Tower Street, where they own a brick ranch. I can almost smell the Hamburger Helper Rayleen will cook up with ground turkey—Rayleen is on a "permanent health kick" she says. Sliced green tomatoes, backyard okra fried in virgin lite Clover Valley olive oil. Pulling corn on the cob out of the oven, Rayleen bent at the hips, Richard will tell Rayleen her butt is "less big" and she'll laugh and know to overlook that comment because all in all, he is a good, good man.

Black tarps draped over each table, Lillian's garage looks not unlike a makeshift morgue with bodies covered in a refugee camp. Richard aims a motion detector light at the closed garage door, but no one ever steals. Neighbors know to eagle eye Lillian's the night before. "It's the dopers and scammers you gotta watch out for on the day of sale," Lillian reminds.

Night falling, all of the remaining helpers, five garage sale elves, skedaddle home. I meander the ninety feet to my quaint daffodil yellow bungalow, vinyl sided, complete with begonias sprouting a good three inches above each pine green window box. My red lipstick, hence, lips, match my flowers.

Inside my kitchen, Theodore Spencer demands Fancy Feast so I pop open a can of shrimp and dutifully pour Brita-filtered water in his "skipper bowl," which is what I call his water bowl yet I have no

idea why. There is not an anchor or maritime motif decorating the bowl's circumference.

Pooped, I could watch Kerry Shook on Daystar network after a hot shower. Graze on a pita-hummus veggie sandwich or five tons of Ding Dongs—*have a secret food - media night*. The cat does not give one whit about human thigh gain. Or I could stop feeling sorry for my single self, age forty-four, and call Richard, Rayleen, take them up on their offer they made this afternoon. Attend the Heartland Family Picnic Rally with them next Saturday. "Never heard of them," I said. My divorce, as of next Tuesday, two weeks shy of eight years. "Families come in from Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, to Oklahoma. There's women's adult Bible study, Bar-B-Que, talks on how to heal the country. Lotsa good decent divorced men with great values. Family values. These men know how to respect women," Richard counsels and Rayleen nods.

Rayleen and Richard standing by me all through my divorce. Tommy getting online and finding a girl, nineteen, who looked like Mary Ellen Walton. Tommy draining our accounts, moving all the good furniture from the house when I was in Tulsa at a workshop. I came home to a spare den, TV gone, sofa and lamps—thought I'd been robbed and called the Floyd Police.

"You shouldn't be alone, come stay with us. Use the day bed in the sun room." They insisted and I stayed three weeks. Some days, all I could do was go to work, flop down on that day bed, no appetite.

I told them both, "Well, heck, I never heard of this group you're in, but after dating the guy for a whole two weeks who said he was a college teacher in Tulsa but kept saying, "he was" and lotsa "they was" then called collect, county lock-up, well, I could use a little 'decent man' action!"

I imagine this Heartland Family thing, a three day-long festival, bursting at the seams with the kind of families who visit the Pie Barn at the county fair and stock up on apple butter for the next time they're down to bring a dessert item to the church potluck, which is always around the corner.

Those Bible studies would use those peppy Joel Osteen workbooks that are interspersed with New Testament verse—and in turn, ignite my endorphins, hence, ending this man-drought mini-crisis.

A Tom Selleck look alike from "Blue Bloods" would appear after the women's Bible Study I'd attend.

He'd be outfitted in khaki LL Bean shorts, own a canoe, have provided a good home to a rescue dog, a big sturdy Australian Herding one. He'd open doors and offer to take corn or green beans as I served up dinner in a potluck line at the rally. "Just put on my plate whatever is easiest," he'd declare.

This fine man would hail from northwest Oklahoma City and not mind the fifty-five minute drive to my small Okie town, even find it charming I'm a small town upper elementary science teacher, devoted to Floyd, Oklahoma youth. He'd say my home is all "cozy-like" and mean it. Tom Selleck look-alike fellow would understand my lack of cosmetic surgery and appreciate my "not trying to hide I look forty-four" body, yet appreciate I walk-jog four days a week and yes, respect a non-botoxed forehead. This man would know how to bake pecan pies *and* swing an air hammer.

One other thing: When I'm not teaching school, I help my eighty-four year old Daddy with his house rentals. The day before the festival, one of the renters, Gerald, passed away. Denny's, where he had washed dishes, called my Daddy seeing if he knew where Gerald was. Daddy went by the Louisa Street duplex and there was Gerald, reclining in his La-Z-Boy, TV running John Wayne on the Cowboy Movie Channel. Heart attack. Fifty-two.

When the duplex cleaner did not show up I took on that role after the body was removed. The guys who help Daddy with his rentals hauled out the furniture, and we added the not cruddy nightstand, the new TV trays, all the decent, not rickety stuff to the garage sale along with Gerald's board and card games: Parcheesi, Monopoly, Go Fish.

But first, I cleaned out Gerald's nightstand. Top drawer, the normal stuff: Vick's Vapor Rub, an Atwood's pocket knife. *New Testament* paperback Bible. Then underneath the old *Fish and Stream* mag, drawer two, pamphlets. I recognized that cross. A fire eating wood cross, The Klan cross. Scads of those pamphlets. One, a list of rallies, four circled with green pen ink. Gerald circled in pink gel ink, the rally I was invited to go to.

Two Saturdays back, I came up on a car wreck on Highway Forty, and there'd been a fatality. Traffic backed up for miles. When we got near the accident, I couldn't look. Then I half-glanced and couldn't let go of the sight of that Suburban flipped upside down,

flames shooting out of that busted up windshield. Just like staring at that wreckage, I could not stop staring at those pamphlets. *Heartland Americans for Family, Faith, and Country*.

I slipped two of them into my knock-off Vera Wang backpack with purple and orange butterflies. Then I buried them in my car's glove box, underneath the extra McDonald's napkins. When I go to the Suds 'n Duds carwash, I won't pitch them out because one day I'm gonna read the pamphlets through and through, even though I know exactly what they'll say.

I'm good at avoidance. Summa Cum Laude in that department.