

**EITHER SIDE OF A LINE**

A Thesis

by

LOWELL MICK WHITE

Submitted to the office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2005

Major Subject: English

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**ABSTRACT**

Either Side of a Line.

(May 2005)

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This collection of original short stories with a critical introduction has been written as a summary and capstone of my study of creative writing at Texas A&M University. The introduction explores the nature and development of short fiction, the influences on my writing, and attempts to place my stories within the context of short fiction and Texas fiction. The stories deal with aspects of life in early 21<sup>st</sup> Century Texas – a complicated time of boom and bust, of love and fear, of dislocation and greater dislocation.

**DEDICATION**

To the Memory of Alan Gingras, 1947-2004

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

The great pain in our heart we are now trying to alleviate by following the mirages of new frontiers. On the broad flat plain of monotonous living we see the distorted images of our desires glimmering on the horizons of the future; we press on toward them only to have them disappear completely or reappear in different form in another direction.

—Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Frontier*

Texas has always been a neurotic place, a breeding ground for anomie.

—James Michener, *Texas*

*Either Side of a Line* is a collection of short stories, a collection that both summarizes and caps my study of creative writing at Texas A&M University. By pairing up and commenting in this introduction on the six stories collected, I shall attempt to discuss aspects of short fiction structures, literary influences, and regional influences.

Critic Randall Jarrell said that “Almost everything in the world...is too long to go into a short book of stories – a book of short stories” (8). Though attempting to cram everything in the world into a story is obviously a grandiose ambition, the short story is an excellent venue for catching at least special fleeting moments of the world. Then, perhaps, these moments can be scaled up in the mind of the reader to stand for “everything.” What I try to do in my stories – in this thesis – is to choose those moments to give a picture, a glimpse, of how we live in America, in Texas, and how we came to live this way. Though it is probably true that I miss the mark and fall short, it is my very own grandiose goal.

### **The Nature of Short Fiction: “Reliction” and “Mexican Brick”**

The distinctive aspect of a short story is its length – its shortness. Because of this brevity, a successful story needs to concentrate its effect in an effort to produce unity. Critic Brander Matthews describes unity in terms of singleness: “A Short-story deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation” (73). Most of the stories in this collection narrate a single situation, and most take place in a compressed period of time – a day, usually, as in “Reliction” or “Riff-Raff” or “Chitterlings,” though “Along and Twenty Miles...” covers maybe a half hour at most. The exception is “Mexican Brick,” which takes place over the course of several weeks, maybe two months, and presented some problems of cohesion for me..

Matthews says that singleness is a function of length: “The novelist may take his time; he has plenty of room to turn about. The writer of Short-stories must be concise, and compression, a vigorous compression, is essential” (74). The stories in this collection – and most publisher’s call for stories – run about 4000 words or fewer, a length that is comfortable to read in one sitting.

William O’Rourke describes the structure of the short story as having an exoskeleton similar to an insect (198), a structure that is a combination of character, emotion, and narrative, focused by length. I take this to mean that a short story is organic in nature, that its structure is not superimposed but comes from within, a fortunate result of the writing that has gone into it. I’ve often argued in classes or conversations that all stories are autobiographical (just to cause trouble, I’ve even held that seminar papers are autobiographical in nature), but that’s really an overly simplistic way of describing the

writing process and the ultimate structure of a story. The story “Mexican Brick,” began with a memory of a time when I lived next door to a drunk, crazy ex-POW (World War Two, though, not Korea) who told me that he could knock my wall down with one shot of his deer rifle. But that memory, that flash of autobiography, quickly changed: after a paragraph or two the character of Garza appeared, and then the ghost, the dog, Carl and Anita, and so forth. This didn’t happen in a linear fashion: there was a lot of jumping around, and starting over, and starting over again. The structure of the story emerged as the characters appeared and interacted with one another. I had no idea that Carl was going to kill Soldier, the dog, until the paragraph before it happened. And once it happened, once it had been written, it appeared to have been inevitable – of course Carl was going to do it, I should have known it all the time, from the beginning, and maybe subconsciously I did.

Douglas Hesse says of the short story that “[the] basic characteristics are...the possibility and seeming actuality of a one-to-one correspondence between the words on the page and some actual state of affairs in the world, relative brevity, and the dominance of narration” (86). Though I write “realistic” stories, I doubt that the “one-to-one correspondence between the words on the page and some actual state of affairs in the world” is or should be a hard and fast rule. Hesse’s comment about relative brevity and the dominance of narration makes some sense, though. Brevity has been mentioned previously. “The dominance of narration” I see – for my stories, at least – as a function of structure: the drive to get from the beginning to the end in a unified manner.

Ideally, a story's organic structure will eventually produce a coherent emotion in the reader. Raymond Carver says, "It is possible...in a short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow these things – a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring – with immense, even startling power" (275). Carver is describing the "objective correlative," a term coined by T. S. Eliot and further described by critic Charles E. May as a "detailed event that serve[s] as a sort of objectification or formula for the emotion sought for" (202).

May cites Anton Chekhov as a master of the objective correlative.

Significant reality for Chekhov is inner rather than outer reality, but the problem he tried to solve is how to create an illusion of inner reality by focusing on external details only. The answer for Chekhov, and thus for the modern short story generally, is to find an event that, if expressed 'properly,' that is, by the judicious choice of relevant details, will embody the complexity of the inner state (202).

In "Reliction," for example, I try for that in the scene where Bonnie finds photos of herself pasted to the dashboard of her ex-husband's car. The photos, taken twenty or so years earlier, could be a reminder of her own lost youth, or of the fleetingness of time. Her reaction, to pull the photos off and threaten to destroy them, is understandable in an everyday sense, but it also grants the photos a certain power as narrative representations of her past, of their past together, of something is ready to move beyond..

I also try to give my stories a sense of narrative verisimilitude by anchoring them with at least a few believable details. I try to give my characters jobs, for instance. I've always been surprised at the number of stories I read where the characters do...nothing. I also

seem to work animals into a lot of stories: many people share their lives with animals of one kind or another, and this can perhaps give an extra level of insight into my characters.

It wasn't until I had finished "Mexican Brick," and tentatively and almost randomly placed it in order behind "Reliction," that I saw that the two stories complemented each other. Carl in "Mexican Brick" is young, and enjoys being young at that time, but he is quickly moving beyond youth to a world of conformity and responsibility. (The ghost may be warning him to slow down). Bonnie, the protagonist of "Reliction," is middle-aged, and, like many old-time Austin residents, has never really accepted a traditional, responsible, grown-up life. She loves the past, she loves her collection of fossils (the fossils themselves are a projection of the past), and though she does not regret the passing of years, at the end she cuts away from the past and reaches out for youth – literally, though probably only for a night or two.

### **Influences on the Thesis: "Riff-Raff" and "Along and Twenty Miles..."**

There's no hiding the fact that the largest single literary influence on my writing is the work of Ernest Hemingway. I remember the first time I read Hemingway: an evening in late October, and I carried a blue-backed Book of the Month Club edition of *The Sun Also Rises* back to my bedroom, and opened it – and magic came out, and filled my life. I was 12 years old, and I went on to read all the Hemingway I could find.

Years later I wonder about the effect my reading might have had on my reactions to the world. Last summer I picked up a copy of *The Nick Adams Stories* (an unfortunate

collection that attempts to arrange the stories into a “novel”), and turned to a well-remembered story, “Fathers and Sons.” I read the opening, where Nick is driving along

...under the heavy trees of the small town that are a part of your heart if it is your town and you have walked under them, but that are only too heavy, that shut out the sun and that dampen the houses for a stranger...(256).

I thought of all the small towns I’ve lived in and passed through, and I thought – he nailed it. Yes. That’s just how those small towns are, that’s just the feeling those looming trees instill in me, a strange combination of love and nostalgia and oppression. But then I wondered if I feel that way now because I read that story so long ago, at such an impressionable age. Did the power of Hemingway’s writing not just capture the feeling of that small town (and of so much else) or did it in fact create it to begin with and proceed to drill it into my soul?

I’m not sure. I do know that when I wrote the story “Along and Twenty Miles Either Side of a Line,” I was clearly influenced by the Hemingway story “Cat in the Rain.” I’m not sure how that happened; it was, I think, I hope, an unconscious influence. The kernels of the story comes from the title, a lovely phrase to hear during storm seasons, and from memory: I was in a motel in Iowa, and an old biddy called me a dummy after I showed a lack of concern over a tornado watch. So I put a narrator in a motel room, and an old lady out in the hallway. Then what? After almost no pause for thought, I gave the narrator a wife, and I had them interact, and, like many if not most husbands and wives at the end of a long and tiring day, they squabbled. One thing led to another. The domestic spat in my

story has a harder edge than the Hemingway story, and my narrator, Bill, is much more of a wimp than almost any Hemingway character. By the end of my story I didn't really like any of the characters, not Bill, not Gloria, and I like to imagine them together always, torturing each other forever.

My teenaged Hemingway obsession was good in some ways. Reading Hemingway led me to writers Hemingway admired and that I too came to love, like the great Russians Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, and Chekhov, and James Joyce and Scott Fitzgerald, and writers that influenced Hemingway, like Sherwood Anderson and Mark Twain. But Hemingway disapproved of certain writers, too – William Faulkner, and Theodore Dreiser, for example, and almost anyone from Britain – and because of his influence, unfortunately, it wasn't until some years later that I got around to reading them. But I did get my foundational reading done, and in doing so I came across two other writers who taught me a lot: Flannery O'Connor and John Cheever.

Like many people, I love O'Connor because of the strange and creepy characters who inhabit her stories. I read "Good Country People" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find" when I was 14 or so and have never been able to shake them. Though I didn't plan him that way, I see the character of Miller in my story "Riff-Raff" as being somewhat O'Connor-ish – the weird pale complexion, the flat emotional affect, the mystery about his origin and ultimate purpose. "Riff-Raff" is a story of low-lives: Miller and Michelle, and the narrator, who, because of his drug addiction, has descended to a low life himself.

John Cheever is especially good at endings. I think of his work often when approaching the end of one of my stories; though, unfortunately, I've never approached the quality of

his work. Like this, from “The Country Husband,” where a procession of the story’s characters pass across the pages one last time:

...A miserable cat wanders into the garden, sunk in spiritual and physical discomfort. Tied to its head is a small straw hat – a doll’s hat – and it is securely buttoned into a doll’s dress, from which protrudes its long, hairy tail. As it walks, it shakes its feet, as if it had fallen into water.

“Here, pussy, pussy, pussy!” Julia calls.

“Here, poor pussy, here pussy!” But the cat gives her a skeptical look and stumbles away in its skirts. The last to come is Jupiter. He prances through the tomato vines, holding in his generous mouth the remains of an evening slipper. Then it is dark; it is a night when kings in golden suits ride elephants over the mountains (410).

The ending of that story holds a glimpse of the world that stands by itself. In fact, who needs the rest of the story? The whole world is right there.

### **The Thesis as a Regional Work: “Brindled Pit Bull” and “Chitterlings”**

A confession: the epigraph and title of this collection almost came from a very misremembered passage in a novel. For some reason, I have had a clear memory of a character in James Michener’s *Texas* saying, “Someday there will be a road through this wilderness!” I read that book for the first time in 1986, and for years I went around quoting the line in a sort of mock profundity. The wilderness could be anything – life itself. And someday, for better or for worse, there would be a road through it. Plain as could be.

When I started thinking about the writing of this collection I thought it would be a wonderful epigraph. I reread *Texas* to get the full context – and of course, I was disappointed, for the line does not exist. Oh, there are a couple of characters who talk about roads, and about Anglos who will come down those roads from the North and change things around, but nothing as pithy as, “Someday there will be a road through this wilderness!” So to use the phrase, which had over the years become very dear to me, I had to place it in one of the stories. Naming the sleazy motel in “Riff-Raff” the Wilderness Road Inn works almost as well, I think, for sleazy motels in an urban setting, full of prostitutes and druggies and low-lives and various forms of weirdness, contrast nicely with the concept of a wilderness road and imply the concept of a wilderness doomed.

Still, the rereading of *Texas* gave me an epigraph almost as good. One of Michener’s characters says, “Texas has always been a neurotic place, a breeding ground for anomie” (458). That struck me as being a very true statement.

A history professor I once had described the pattern of American history as “stasis to dislocation to stasis.” In the twenty-six years I lived in Texas, in Austin, I observed a pattern better described as “dislocation to dislocation to *greater* dislocation.” When I moved to Austin in 1978 it was not radically different from the place depicted in Billy Lee Brammer’s novella collection *The Gay Place* – a quiet, somewhat Southern city moving to its own pleasant rhythms. But Austin underwent such a vastly dramatic series of growth-induced upheavals that by the 1990s it had become an utterly anomic city, a neurotic place of continual emotional and moral dislocation. The stories in this collection try to capture

that dislocation. Five of the six stories are set in Austin (and the exception, “Along and Twenty Miles...” has characters who are returning to Austin from a trip),

“Brindled Pit Bull” is a story about the dot-com boom and bust. At the peak of the boom the Census reported that 71 people a day were moving to Austin, and it seemed like all the new people associated only with other new people, or at least with recently arrived people, and that the very history and nature of the city was being overwhelmed and lost. The city tipped to an incredible point where there were more sushi restaurants than barbecue places. People could (and can) live out in one of the new edge neighborhoods of Austin, and work, and shop, and though their address reads “Austin, Texas,” they don’t really have anything to do with the inner heart of the city. Marla, the protagonist of the story, a recent high tech immigrant from California, lives in an isolated world. For her,

...Texas wasn’t black people – Texas was cowboys. Texas was George Bush. Texas was the old frontier, where stupid white guys in pickup trucks would drive around and drink beer and brag about barbeque or football or something equally vulgar.

Marla’s Texas is a caricature of a real place, and her elite job and her home out on the edge of town lets her keep both the caricature and the reality at a distance. But all Texas booms go bust, eventually. Marla loses her job and her isolated, privileged, cocooned life is – dislocated.

The Texas caricature continues to be a popular view of the state, even among long-time residents. I was at a workshop a couple of years ago where just about every one of the

participants was writing stories or novels about colorful (but very white) small town characters – pages and pages of dully rendered Billy Bobs and Brenda Lees aw-shucks-ing their way though life.

I try to address this view of the world, and maybe subvert it a bit, in the story “Chitterlings.” The protagonist, Wes Leonard, is the newspaper “local color” columnist, whose life revolves around attending and writing about aspects of small town existence. (Well, actually, Wes’s life revolves mostly around drinking, but he does some other things, too). And though most of the festivals and events Wes attends (and derides) are the improvised creations of local chambers of commerce, there are actual people out there participating in them – people who stew chitlins and barbecue meat, train Frisbee dogs and run marathons, and do all sorts of oddball and lively things. I hope I’m able to show that these are real people, not curiosities, not cartoons, even though many might indeed drive a pickup truck or have an extra name or two.

The Texas caricature seems to be a continued grotesque reflection of the influence that J. Frank Dobie has had on Texas writing. Dobie’s insistence on describing a Frontier/Cowboy Texas, as opposed to a Southern Texas or Urban Texas – along with seventy-some years of Hollywood and Madison Avenue stereotyping – has those darn deserts and cowboys and cattle drives firmly and perhaps permanently cemented in people’s minds. I was at a conference some months ago and attended a panel on Texas Literature, where the only books discussed were historical novels set in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century by Larry McMurtry and Cormac McCarthy – cowboy books of a high order, but cowboy books nonetheless. I asked the moderator if he could name who anyone was writing

anything worthwhile about contemporary Texas, and he said I needed to read more about the Alamo.

Still, a generation or more of writers has been working against the myth – or, maybe, working toward a new myth. McMurtry, before he went back to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, wrote several good books set in urban Texas, and in two essays, “Southwestern Literature?” (1968), and “Ever a Bridegroom: Reflections on the Failure of Texas Literature” (1981), he attacked the old-time Dobie school of Texas writing and called for a Texas literature that would turn its back on the past and become urban and cosmopolitan in nature. Other contemporary Texas writers, such as Dagoberto Gilb, Shelby Hearon, Oscar Casares, Sandra Cisneros, Pat Little-Dog, and Lisa Sandlin have expanded the horizons of Texas fiction – particularly short fiction – and it may be possible that the caricatures and myths of the past may be finally transformed – or at least transgressed.

### **Telling Stories**

One of my favorite novels, Vance Bourjaily’s *Now Playing at Canterbury*, ends with this passage:

There’s a story you could tell to pass the time... So could we all, every man his own Homer, blind, caught in the endless wonder of the words, of the cries, of the shouts, of the laughter, of the tears of the things of the stories of our lives. There we go (518).

So, *Either Side of a Line*. Stories: fossils and possums and unlikely romance; betrayal, sucker punches, and domestic discord; drugs and depression; dead dogs, humping frogs, and hog guts. Here we go.

## RELICION

Looking back, Bonnie Chamberlain could see that she had always lived in a tortured world. Not just tortured through the normal heartbreaks of dying parents and stupid boyfriends and husbands, though, of course, like anyone else she had experienced those minor personal tortures, but tortured by time itself – vast, scary time, a span where mountains rose and eroded, oceans flooded and withdrew, where earthquakes and volcanoes went off, and strange creatures walked and flapped and swam.

She felt the pain of the world most of her life; when she was nine years old, some 45 million years after the last seas finally receded and the land that would become Texas emerged wet and steaming from the gunk, Bonnie found a fossil shark's tooth in the bed of a dry creek on her grandparent's farm. Long as her finger, black and gray and still sharp and scary-looking ages after being shed, the tooth was suddenly precious to her, a link to a hidden world – holding it in her hand, even as a child, she could almost feel the power, the mystery, the danger, the delight, the very life of the long-dead shark. Later she remembered looking up into the hills above the creek and being thrilled and scared to know that this had once been the floor of the ocean – and before that, a mountain range – and before that, and that, and that—*something* had always been there. She could feel the world spinning back, endlessly.

Thirty or so years later, hungover after a night of smoking pot and drinking wine, she had an idea: she could wear the past. She had boxes of fossils by this time: she'd spent many of her childhood weekends and summers searching for the remains of long dead

animals – sharks and snails, oysters and ammonites – on the farm or even along the trash-filled and dangerous creekbeds of Austin, where sometimes she would happen upon encampments of homeless men who would watch her hungrily.

By the time she was grown her collection was so large her husband complained about all the dusty rocks cluttering up their apartment. But, *wearing* the rocks. That would be something. So she began turning her favorite fossils into jewelry – wrapping strong gold-colored wires around the base of the shark teeth and tethering them to chokers filled out with blue or green glass beads and buff-colored bone spacers. They looked pretty good. Other people wanted them; she began to sell them and make a little money. She came up with other designs: earrings and charm bracelets made from fossil snail shells, and ashtrays she crafted from polished ancient oysters. But after a while Bonnie realized that her own fossils, the ones she found herself, were far too dear to sell, too precious, and she began buying her fossil shark teeth and snail and oyster shells from an Internet site based in Alabama.

Bonnie sold her jewelry at the open air craft market across the street from the university in Austin, a middle-aged white woman, hippie-ish and graying now but still fit and slender, sitting in the shade of an umbrella watching the kids go by, occasionally selling a clunky snail-shell charm bracelet or ammonite amulet to a giggling girl. She was sitting at her table one noon when she spotted Travis, a would-be boyfriend, a would-be boyfriend she was already tiring of, making his way toward her through the crowd.

“Oh, it’s you,” Bonnie said. She sat up straight in her lawn chair and squinted at him. She asked, “What do you want?”

“I’m on lunch,” Travis said. He worked in the bursar’s office at the university, had met Bonnie online and they had gotten together a time or two for coffee. Bonnie was pretty much content to leave their relationship at that. Travis said, “I just thought I’d come see you – I thought maybe we could go get something to eat.”

“But I’m *working*,” Bonnie said.

“Well, yeah.” Travis smiled nervously and made a show of admiring her jewelry. Then he looked up at her and smiled again. “Maybe I could bring you something?”

“I don’t know.” For Bonnie, the annoying thing about Travis was that he was well-meaning but boring. She didn’t necessarily want a bad boy in her life – her ex-husband, Larry, had exhausted those desires – but she did want a man with a little spark to him, a little life, something. Travis lived with his mother, drank only a little, didn’t smoke pot or do anything crazy or even eccentric, and he liked the way Austin was getting bigger and bigger. He didn’t mind traffic jams or shopping at Wal-Mart or eating at chain restaurants. He had a very anxious sense of humor, as if he worried that laughter was a bad thing, and Bonnie could picture him sitting nervously in a car with his aged mother, driving slowly from one gruesome big-box retailer to another, caught in traffic, afraid to crack a joke or even gripe. Looking at him now standing nervously in the warm spring sunshine, Bonnie wondered why she even bothered talking to him. Romantic pickings were mighty slim, she thought. She said, “You stand there twitching like that, people’ll think you’re crazy. Somebody’ll call the cops on you.”

Travis picked up a trilobite from her table. “Did you find this one?”

“I bought it,” Bonnie said. She pulled it from his hand and placed it back on the table. “It comes from Morocco – all the best trilobites come from Morocco anymore.”

“Wow,” Travis said, impressed. “All the way from Morocco. Just think.”

A blonde girl who had been looking at a shark’s tooth necklace stepped up to buy it. Bonnie smiled at the girl, noticing that Travis sort of wanted to check out the girl’s ass but was also sort of afraid to. She shook her head. When the girl left with the necklace, Bonnie said, “Travis.”

“Hey, you know, I just thought I’d say hello. I thought we could maybe get something to eat.”

Resistance was useless. Bonnie sighed and sent Travis up the street to get cheeseburgers. She sat back in her chair, waiting, watching people, watching traffic, when she saw a battered black taxicab go down the Guadalupe Street. The horn honked and the driver waved. Larry, her ex-husband. He drove by three, four, five times a day, and always honked. He was annoying, too.

\*

Later, at home, Bonnie was sitting by the window working on bracelets, waiting for Larry to come take her to her other job, at a used bookstore, when she looked up to see Larry’s cab pulling into the driveway. Bonnie lived in a garage apartment at the back of a fine house in Tarrytown, and she knew the rich old lady lawyer who owned the house didn’t like to see Larry’s dented black taxi parked out front. But the old bitch was raising the rent, so who cared what she didn’t like. Screw her. Bonnie heard Larry’s heavy steps on the stairs and then he appeared at the door and let himself in.

“Damn,” Larry said. Bonnie watched him look around: the walls were covered with skulls, cow skulls of unknown breed, mainly, though Bonnie did have one fine Longhorn spread on the wall over the door, and her prize, a massive, hollow-eyed, buffalo skull. There were two goat skulls on the kitchen table that she used for candle holders, three white-tailed deer shoulder mounts she’d bought at yard sales, dusty and shedding, and a mule deer hide on her bedroom door. Most of the skulls Bonnie had gotten after she had run Larry off; he stood looking at them now, bewildered. Her yellow cat, Bruce, walked over and rubbed against Larry’s legs. Larry asked, “Aren’t you ever gonna stop getting this shit?”

“No,” Bonnie said. She tied off the shark tooth and frowned. Then she said, “So, what do you want?”

Larry took a step back, bumped into the door. Always clumsy. He asked, “To take you to work?”

“You sure you didn’t come over here to give me a hard time?” Bonnie stood up and went into the tiny kitchen to get her purse and keys. She heard Larry mumble something like, “Oh, okay, no,” but she didn’t pay attention. She said, “Seems like all you want to do is give me a hard time. You drive down the street and honk at me – “ Bonnie came back into the front room and saw Larry still standing by the door, looking uncomfortable. “Honk at me, scare all the customers.”

“I’m just trying to be friendly,” Larry said. He had always been a big man, but he had puffed up and put on some serious weight in the year and a half since she had finally broke with him, and the bloated layer of fat over his muscles made him somehow even more

menacing. Bonnie knew he scared people – who would want to get in a cab with him? He looked crazy.

“You been drinking?” Bonnie asked.

“Naw,” Larry said. His graying hair was tousled and there were big cloudy bags under his eyes. He smiled, “At least, not since I woke up.”

“Out,” Bonnie said. She pushed Larry out onto the landing and shut the door behind them. “Why do you go honk your horn every time you drive by? It’s incredibly annoying.”

Larry turned and started clumping down the stairs. “I figure maybe I can get some business that way,” he said over his shoulder. “Get some attention. Maybe somebody needs a ride.”

“The only people getting into your cab are drunk or retarded,” Bonnie said. “Or desperate. I should know.” Her own car was in the shop.

“There’s desperate people all up and down that street,” Larry said. “Heck, there’s desperate people everywhere.” Larry sounded sad. He had tried to make it in the cab business as an owner-operator, and at one time had owned five cabs, but he always had trouble finding reliable drivers, and then accidents left him with wrecked cars to fix and crazy, usurious loans to pay off. Finally, Yellow Cab canceled his contracts. This was about the same time as things were coming apart in their marriage. Larry was drinking a lot, and was always very angry, though he never argued with her, never even raised his voice. Instead he would glare for a bit when she nagged at him and then stomp out to a bar and pick a fight with some other poor drunk. He had size on his side and usually won his

fights, except when he was fighting cops. Larry said he'd left Yellow Cab over a money issues, but Bonnie always suspected he was lying, that it had probably been over his temper. Maybe he'd beaten up a passenger or something. At any rate, he was gone from Yellow and now leased a cab from East Side, the city's sleaziest, lowest-rent cab company.

Bonnie got into the front seat of the cab and was confronted with a collage of photos taped to the dashboard and airbag of the car – photos of her. Larry was in some of them, but most of them were of her, alone. Photos from the old days, young Bonnie – Jesus, she thought – wearing short fraying cut-offs and t-shirts, holding beers or cigarettes, smiling, happy.

“Larry, stop it.”

“Stop what?” he asked.

“This!” Bonnie tapped on the photo collage laminated to the airbag of the taxi. She tapped again on one of her standing outside a music hall; there was a mural behind her with an armadillo on it. “This is *crazy!* You're crazy.”

“You remember that show?” Larry asked. “That was a good night.”

“Take these pictures and *burn* them.”

“I still care about you,” Larry said primly.

“Well, you shouldn't.”

“What – “

“Not like this, at least,” Bonnie said. “Jesus. You're totally creepy. And those drunk assholes you pick up will be *looking* at these – Larry, take these off!”

“C'mon,” Larry said, smiling again. “Look, you were so *hot* back then.”

“Larry – “

“I mean, you still are, but – “

“Just stop it,” Bonnie said. “Get these things off of here.”

“I still care about you,” Larry said again. He sounded like an old woman.

Bonnie stared out the window, silently. The cab crossed the river, heading south, moving slowly in pace with the traffic. The air was heavy and still, and storm clouds were building to the west. After a moment Bonnie began peeling the pictures off the airbag. Larry made a face but didn’t try to stop her. By the time he pulled the cab into the strip mall where Bonnie worked, she was holding the photos in her hand and was glaring at him.

“I’ll let you keep these if you promise not to put them back on the car.”

“Aw, baby,” Larry smiled.

“Otherwise I’ll tear ‘em up!”

Larry put the cab in park and rested his head on the steering wheel. “Oh, okay,” he sighed. He looked up and smiled at her again. “Bonnie, you’re so damn hard on me.”

“You try living with you,” Bonnie said. She opened the glove compartment to put the photos away, and a plastic flask of something tumbled out. She said, “Jesus.”

“Huh?” Larry asked. “What do you mean? I *do* live with me – and you don’t.”

It was too much. Larry was too much. Bonnie dropped the photos to the car seat and got out of the car. “I’ll call your cell when I’m ready to go home,” she said, and shut the door.

\*

The fossil jewelry of course didn't provide a living, and so Bonnie also had a part-time job working at a used bookstore on South Lamar. Twenty years earlier the building, a red-brick strip mall, had housed a dance club. Bonnie had gone there often with friends before she met Larry, and even after they started dating they had gone there a few times – Larry was too big and clumsy to dance but liked looking at all the girls. She hadn't seen any photos of the dance club on the dashboard of the cab, but there were probably some around, somewhere.

A young man – a boy, really, a part-time student at the community college – named Toby greeted her at the door when she came in.

“Hi,” Toby said, slowly, when Bonnie walked in. *Hhhh-iiiiiii*. He'd probably been out back smoking pot behind the dumpster. Toby worked with her most evenings, and he showed her lots of attention. He even tried ineptly to flirt with her, which Bonnie supposed was flattering though a waste of time for both of them. She wondered why he wasn't wasting his time hitting on the skinny little girl with the piercings who also worked at the store.

“Hey,” Bonnie said. She glanced back outside and saw Larry's cab still parked in front of the store blocking traffic. He was sort of bent over – was he putting the photos back up? That fool.. If he was, he was in trouble. He'd be better off taking a hit or two or three from the flask.

“We...got some books to...*unbox*,” Toby said.

“What?” Bonnie blinked and looked at Toby, and found him staring at her chest – maybe at the small trilobite amulet riding between her breasts, but probably not. He

smiled toothily at her. Bonnie had tried imagining Toby naked sometimes: scrawny shoulders, flat belly, muscular legs – he rode his bicycle everywhere. He had a pony-tail and a goatee and lively brown eyes and was in some ways totally revolting. Looking at him Bonnie was certain he had a skinny, crooked penis, though she was pretty sure she didn't really want to find out.

“Oh, good,” Bonnie said. Unpacking and sorting books gave her a chance to work alone. She headed for the back of the store.

\*

While she worked clouds built up and a thunderstorm rolled in from the west. She could see flashes of lightning and hear the patter of rain as the wind blew drops against the glass. When she took a break it was dark out, and sudden gusts blew sheets of rain and tumbled Styrofoam cups and paper foods wrappers across the parking until they lodged in a hedge. Larry's car was gone, of course: rain brought him business and money. Tonya, the girl with the piercings – eyebrow, lip, tongue, probably hidden areas – said, “I just love big storms!”

Toby said, “Yeah.”

Tonya held the door open while Toby and Bonnie pushed carts of sale books back inside. Bonnie could smell the rain – smell dampness on the wind.

Toby said, “It's – exciting, huh?”

Bonnie shrugged. “I guess.”

There was a crack of thunder and it began to rain harder. Tonya went back inside the store. Bonnie and Toby stood out of the rain, under the awning, and watched the storm.

The walkway around the store was paved with flags of limestone, stone that was pitted with the shells of small ancient bivalves. The store, she thought, the dance club, the farm that was probably here before that, when Lamar Boulevard was the main road to Fredericksburg and points west, the grasslands that were here before that – and everything else that had stood here, or lived here. It made Bonnie sad, for once, the passing of time. Nothing to do about it, though.

Bonnie turned away from the wind and lit a cigarette. Toby pointed across the parking lot at a restaurant and bar, and said, “We ought to play pool sometime.”

Thunder rolled and Bonnie didn’t quite hear him. She asked, “What?”

“Play pool.”

Through the rain Bonnie looked across the lot and saw two couples, two boys, two girls, playing pool. One of the boys shot carefully and stood up apparently smiling after a missed shot.

“Yeah,” Bonnie said. “Right.”

“Really,” Toby said.

Bonnie smoked her cigarette and watched the rain. The pits in the limestone were filling with water blown in by the wind, and Bonnie flattened back against the glass windows of the store to stay dry.

After a while Toby asked, “Are you coming back in?”

Bonnie looked at him. “Why the hell are men always asking me what I’m gonna do?”

Toby took a step back. “Sorry,” he said. After a moment he turned and went back into the store. Bonnie felt guilty: it wasn’t the poor kid’s fault that he was – a kid. Still, all the

questions were a bit much. What did she know about what she was going to do – about anything? Of course, all her life she'd been asking various men what they wanted, and not a single one had ever been able to give her a satisfactory answer. Not really.

Bonnie didn't feel like going back inside to mess with the books. She stood on the limestone walkway smoking and watching the heavy rain, occasionally looking across at the bar to check on the kids playing pool. After its peak the storm tapered off quickly and blew on to the east. Bonnie lit another cigarette and walked around to the back of the building. Water was still dripping from the eaves and from the leaves of the live oaks, but the sky was clearing – in the upward-reflected lights of the city, she could see the shining clouds tearing apart and reforming as the wind pushed them east. Occasionally the bright spot of a star or planet would peep through the milky slashes and once she looked up to see the flashing strobes of an airliner making its approach to the airport before it was obscured.

At the bottom of the parking lot there were two large concrete settling ponds, basins to catch and slow the runoff from heavy rains. The ponds were filling now, water and litter from the parking lots pouring in. Just as Bonnie turned to head back to the store, she saw something bobbing in the dark water, something – alive.

Bonnie stepped closer and looked down into the pond. The surface of the water was some three feet beneath the lip of the concrete rim and was covered with a skim of crud and trash, clots of leaves and sticks and an appalling number of Styrofoam food containers. But some sort of creature was swimming around in the water, too, and when it pushed between hamburger boxes and paddled into a shaft of light from a streetlamp she saw that it was a possum. She thought, Poor possum. The possum paused, as if sensing Bonnie's

thought, and looked up at her for a moment, bobbing amid the Styrofoam trash. Then it went back to swimming along the concrete walls of the holding pond. There was no way for it to get out, and the water in the holding ponds would often stand for days as it slowly drained back into the aquifer. The possum was doomed.

Bonnie stood up. There had to be a way to get the possum out of the water. She thought about calling Animal Control or Wildlife Rescue, but it might be the next day before they got out – too late for the tiring and bedraggled possum. It would drown. The dead possum would decay on the muddy bottom of the pond, buried by debris. Maybe at some point the pond would be scraped out and the dreck trucked off to a landfill somewhere – the body of the possum preserved, perhaps, in a bed of plastic coffee cups. No go, Bonnie thought. The future world would have to find its fossils somewhere else. She walked past the pond and along a chain-link fence, under a line of dripping trees, looking for a stick or something. Eventually she found a long strip of  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch plywood, six or eight inches wide, maybe four feet long. She thought maybe she could sort of *flip* the possum out of the water.

Back at the tank Bonnie leaned over the concrete lip – it came up to about her knee – and reached down toward the possum with the board. The possum swam away from her, paddling briskly to the other side. Bonnie said, “Come back here.”

The possum tried climbing the wall opposite from her, scratching at the concrete, bobbing amid the trash. Bonnie went around to the other side and tried herding the possum into the corner. Twice it ducked away from her, but the third time she pinned it and it wasn't able to swim away. It looked up past her and blinked. Bonnie said, “Hold still.”

But as she tried to slide the possum up the wall, it jerked or something, and when Bonnie lunged after it she lost her balance and tumbled into the water. *Oh shit*, she thought – the water seemed to come at her very slowly, and then she was under it, and her head was up, and all she could think of was to get away from the goddamn possum. She lurched backwards, feet finding purchase on the muddy bottom, and then her head was above water. She slipped and sat back down with a tremendous splash.

“Fuck!”

Sitting down the water was up to her chest or shoulders or neck – it was hard to tell with all the goddamn waves roiling back and forth – but she managed to scramble up, and the water was only about halfway up her thighs. Bonnie spat water and said, “Shit!”

The possum was back in the corner, trying to climb the wall. The strip of plywood was floating next to her. What the hell. Bonnie took the plywood and splashed over to the possum. It tried to swim back the other way, but she stopped it with the board and pushed again to the corner. “Hold still,” she said again, and she managed to get the end of the plywood under the struggling possum and quickly flip it up and over the lip of the settling pond. She heard the possum hit the wet ground outside and scramble off into the soggy weeds. “Shit,” Bonnie said again, and threw the strip of plywood into the water.

The lip of the pond was about at her chest level, and Bonnie managed to pull herself up and over it, and into the mud on the other side. When she stood up she was able to see to the bar, see the people playing pool as if nothing had happened. They must have had a few drinks, for as she stood there, dripping, watching, three of the kids in a row missed shots

and cheerfully danced back to the bar. Dancing – laughing. Oh, the kids. Dry, happy. Lucky! Bonnie had a sudden dread of going home alone to her cat and the skulls.

Bonnie made her dripping way back up and around to the bookstore. Inside they were getting ready to close. Tonya was shelving some books, and Toby was standing at the cash register. Dry. Bonnie went to the front and opened the door and went in. Toby looked up at her – shocked, Bonnie was happy to see, shocked, and concerned.

“What happened?” Toby blurted – shocked into almost normal sober speech. “You’re all wet!”

Bonnie walked over to the younger man. The boy.

“You’re going to have to buy me a drink after work,” Bonnie said. She ran her hand through her hair and muddy water ran down her cheek. She noticed that her shirt was opened another button, and that her trilobite amulet was askew. She looked up to see Toby staring at her chest, and she smiled at him. Bonnie said, “Maybe three or four drinks. And then you can take me home.”

## MEXICAN BRICK

The summer after John Garza graduated from college was a quiet one, at least at first. Years later he would remember how gentle the air seemed in Austin, how the trees in his neighborhood seemed to loom protectively over the houses and muffle sounds of traffic from the streets and from the expressway, how the clouds were so often low and gray and fuzzy. It rained a lot that summer, he would remember. The weather was damp and hot and soft. He remembered the outside so much that summer because he spent so little time at home indoors, for his apartment was haunted.

He first encountered the ghost – encountered, saw, felt, experienced *something*, whatever it was – one night when he jolted awake and saw his dog, a white mutt terrier named Soldier, dancing down the hallway toward the living room. Above the dog was a pale blue light, fist-sized and fuzzy in the darkness, bobbing just above the dog's head, high enough that Soldier's dancing leaps could not quite reach it. Soldier seemed frightened and excited at the same time, circling around backwards with his butt on the carpet, then jumping forward as high as he could and snapping at the air. Garza sat up and watched the blue light move down the hallway into the living room where it rose up toward the ceiling fan and slowly faded. Soldier crouched on the floor looking stupidly at the ceiling.

“Hey!” Garza called – not at the dog, but at the light, at the thing.

Soldier raced back to the bedroom and jumped up on the bed and cowered next to Garza. After a few moments Garza got out of bed and went into the living room. Soldier stayed close by Garza's feet. There was nothing – the usual mess, of course, beer cans and

magazines and newspapers and pizza boxes piled everywhere, discarded socks and underwear and junk mail tossed around – but nothing strange. Garza opened the back door and Solider raced out into the night. Garza looked around the dark living room – still, there was nothing. He turned on the ceiling fan to disturb any filaments of the ghost light, and then sat on the couch and smoked a couple of bong hits. Soldier dashed back in and plopped on the couch and leaned heavily into him.

“Whoa,” Garza said, “big guy, big guy. What was that, huh?”

\*

Garza’s apartment was in the downstairs of a two-story reddish-brown brick four-plex that was nestled in the joint of a larger, L-shaped complex of efficiency apartments. Separating the two buildings was a dense, hard-packed earth courtyard shaded by three immense live oaks. On rainy days the courtyard would turn to yellowish mud, but there were awnings on the apartment side to keep the walkways dry, and graveled pathways that led across the courtyard to the four-plex and to a little wooden shed that housed the washers and dryers. Weekend evenings Garza and his friends, Carl and Anita Chang, who lived on the second floor of the complex, facing the courtyard, would have barbecues in the courtyard. Garza and Carl and Anita would sometimes be joined by friends of theirs from school, or sometimes a neighbor or two. One neighbor was Rand Kelly, an old drunk who had been a prisoner of war in Korea. He owned the big silvery drum barbecue grill, and so at least hung around even if he wasn’t exactly invited.

“That building of yours is made of Mexican brick,” Rand said to Garza one night. “I don’t know if they brought those bricks up from Mexico or not – they probably made ‘em

in Elgin or some place close – but we always call that red-brown brick Mexican brick, you know what I mean?”

“I guess,” Garza said.

“It’s weak brick,” Rand said. “It’s sandy. They used to make those bricks by hand, you know? I could probably get out my deer rifle and take one shot and knock your whole goddamn wall down.”

“Please don’t,” Garza said quickly.

But Rand showed no inclination to get out his deer rifle. He sat sipping his Weller, staring at the coals in the barbecue grill, still glowing beneath their layers of ash. Wisps of grease smoke wafted around. After a while Rand picked up his guitar and sang.

catfish pie  
cornmeal turds  
in my gumbo

“I don’t think those are the words,” Carl said.

“Those are *my* words,” Rand snapped. “What do you think about that? You don’t know everything, do you?”

“I guess not,” Carl said. He backed down – they all backed down, always, when Rand said something. Rand was a good thirty years older than any one of them, and drunker, and crazier.

A feral cat they all called Squawker strolled up the walkway, yowling.

“Somebody needs to do something about that cat,” Anita said. Squawker was always chasing Anita’s gentle little tabby.

“Oh, he don’t mean any harm.” Rand took a piece of brisket off his plate and tossed it to the cat. “Poor Squawky.”

“He’s mean,” Anita said.

“You think you know everything,” Rand said. He looked at Carl. “So what you’re in college? I was in college too, before the war – before the *Korean War*.” He always specified the Korean War. Garza thought that might be so that he wouldn’t steal honest glory from the heroes of The Big One, or be identified with the losers of Vietnam. “Hell,” Rand said, “I was going to be an architect before everything happened.” Rand nodded at Garza, porch lights from the apartments softly reflecting off his sweaty bald head. “That’s why I know all about them Mexican bricks.”

\*

Carl was Chinese, and he was sure that Rand hated him for that.

“So the fucker got starved when he was a prisoner,” Carl said later when they were at the bar playing pinball. “So he got beat up. My mom didn’t do it, my dad didn’t do it – *I* didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“He’s had a tough time,” Garza said.

“Fuck him,” Carl said. Carl was broad and strong-looking, with wide, powerful shoulders and a big round head. He gunged the machine – slammed it with his hips – and the silver ball hesitated, then rolled over to meet Carl’s right flipper. Carl shot it back up

through the gate to the top of the machine. “He doesn’t like it that I’m married to Anita, either.” Anita was an Anglo, tall and slender and blonde. “That asshole.”

Later when they staggered home from the bar, Garza waited in the courtyard while Carl went up the rattling metal stairs and around the wooden walkway to his apartment. He went inside and came out with a potato and a broom.

“Don’t do it,” Garza said.

“Fuck Rand,” Carl said, coming down the stairs. “Fuck his car.”

Rand owned a beautiful cream-colored 1959 Pontiac Catalina, a massive, flamboyant machine studded with fins and chrome, and Carl had been threatening for weeks to vandalize it – to key the paint, to put sugar in the gas tank, to ram a potato or two up the tailpipe with a broom handle. Garza had laughed at Carl’s threats before – they sounded funny, maybe, when they were down at the bar playing pinball or sitting around watching TV and smoking dope, but now, in the middle of the night, with Carl standing there with a potato, grinning drunkenly, there wasn’t anything funny at all.

Garza went back to his apartment. Part of it was that he was chicken. Sure, he was a coward, he didn’t want to get in any trouble, but also he didn’t have anything against Rand’s car, or against Rand himself. Rand was just old and crazy and drunk – and racist, too, probably, of course, but what the hell. Soldier was waiting inside by the back door and Garza let him out, then fell back on the couch, staring at the ceiling. He heard Soldier yelp happily, probably at Carl out in the parking lot. Soldier loved Carl. Garza was fond of Carl, too, for that matter: they had been best friends for over a year, and did guy things together – drink beer, play pinball, shoot guns, go to football games. Garza had been best

man at Carl and Anita's wedding. Except for his weird grudge against old Rand, Carl was friendly and cheerful, a nice guy, a good friend. After a while Soldier came in carrying a big pine cone. He dropped it next to Garza, wanting to play, but Garza lay back on the couch and soon fell asleep.

The next day Garza was dozing with a hangover and heard a series of popping blasting backfires and then Rand cursing in the courtyard. Soldier stood at the window and barked. Garza got off the couch and stumbled to the bedroom and pulled a pillow over his head and slept.

\*

The previous fall and winter the apartment at the top of the stairs had been rented to a girl named Becky, who had gone to high school with Anita. One weekend just before spring break, Becky skipped the courtyard barbecue, and went out to the lake, and she never came back – she was killed in a car wreck. Her death cast a minor pall over the apartments, and over the end of the school year, and over Carl and Anita's April wedding. In June, a couple of months after Becky's parents had cleared out the apartment, new people rented the place, an older couple who had lots and lots of booze. It turned out they were married, but not to each other, and had just rented the apartment to have a meeting place for their drunken trysts. One day while Carl was at work – he had a part time job at the library – the couple invited Garza and Anita up to the apartment for drinks, many drinks, and then Garza was helping Anita back to the apartment she had with Carl, and then Anita was vomiting, Garza standing behind her with a hand on her shoulder, saying, "It's going to be all right, you're going to be fine."

“Oh, John,” Anita gasped, “if only I’d met you before I met Carl.”

Then Anita was brushing her teeth and Garza was standing behind her, his arms around her, cupping her breasts, kissing her neck, and then they were on the bed rolling around naked. Garza was drunk, too, but he was still able to think, *Damn*. What the hell am I doing? He didn’t stop, though, and for the rest of the summer he lived with somewhat mixed feelings about screwing his best friend’s wife four or five times a week.

\*

The next time Garza saw the ghost he came awake to find Soldier standing over him on the bed, stock-still, quivering. Garza followed Soldier’s gaze across the room and froze. A girl was sitting in the chair – it seemed that way, at least. A blonde girl, a young woman, with freckles, wearing shorts. Garza could see her thighs shining from the streetlights outside the window. She was there, really there, sitting in the chair *looking* at him as if she knew him. Garza’s chest felt constricted – he was scared, he began to pant – but before he could move or yell, the girl unfolded and rose up toward the ceiling until she was looking down at him. Then she began to fade. Her blonde hair, her fleshy thighs, her strangely impassive face – all faded away, and Garza was left in the dark with his dog, feeling that something important was happening – something, he didn’t know what. Maybe just the possibility of something. Maybe. After a while Soldier plopped down onto Garza’s chest, and soon they both fell back asleep.

\*

At the next barbeque, Garza asked Rand about the ghost.

“You’ve lived here a long time,” Garza said.

“Twenty-three years,” Rand said. “I been living here twenty three years.”

“And you’ve never seen anything?” Garza told him about the blue light, about the girl sitting on the chair next to his bed.

“You were having a bad dream,” Rand said. He hook his head. “Trust me – I know all about bad dreams.”

“I don’t know,” Garza said. “I think – I think she was trying to tell me something.”

Rand snorted. “Your dream was trying to tell you something.”

“No, I was awake. I know I was.”

“It was a dream,” Rand said. “*Era un sueño.*”

“Huh?” Garza asked.

“*Era un sueño* – it was a dream. That’s Spanish. You don’t speak Spanish?”

Garza shrugged. “– No.”

“Oh, bullshit.” Rand was looking at him like he was crazy.

“I took German for my language,” Garza said. He shrugged again. Now Carl and Anita were smiling at him. What was the deal? Garza’s mother had always been big on assimilation – she wouldn’t ever allow Spanish in the house, not even when his grandparents came to visit. Later Garza thought German would be more helpful if he wanted to get into grad school. He said, “*Ich spreche Deutsch.*”

“Yeah, but you’re supposed to be speakin Spanish to me. Speak some Spanish to me!”

“*Ich spreche Deutsch,*” Garza said again. “Jesus.”

“¡*Hablamelo!*” Rand was starting to get pissed. He stood up and threw an empty beer can at an oak tree. Squawker the cat took off running. “*Hablamelo, dammit!*”

*“Ich spreche Spanisch nicht,”* Garza said. “Give me a break.”

“Really,” Anita said. She winked at Garza and poked Carl on the shoulder. “What’re you laughing at? You don’t speak Chinese!”

“Yeah,” Garza said. He had been sitting with Carl once on the bus from campus, and an Asian student of some sort said something to Carl in a language that might have been Chinese. Carl just sort of shrank back from the Asian and looked confused. “You don’t even speak Chinese.”

“So?” Carl asked. “My family’s been here a hundred fucking years.”

“My family’s been here, I don’t know, *four* hundred years,” Garza said.

“Yeah, and they were speakin Spanish the whole time,” Rand said. “Fuck all y’all!” He kicked over the ice chest full of beer and stomped back to his apartment and slammed the door.

Garza and Anita and Carl sat quietly at the picnic table. Finally Garza said, “Well, that was dramatic.”

Carl said, “That asshole.” He got up and began putting cans of beer back into the ice chest. He chunked a piece of ice at Squawker, who once again ran back around the corner of the building. There was still half a brisket sitting cooling on Rand’s grill – part of it, at least, was Rand’s, for he had kicked in some money for the meat. Carl forked it onto a big piece of tinfoil and rolled it up. “If he doesn’t want it, I’ll take it.”

“John can come over and have lunch tomorrow,” Anita said. She was sitting in the shadows but Garza could tell she winked at him.

In the night Garza woke up, but this time not by a ghost. It was Rand out in the courtyard, screaming.

“Where’s my beef? Who the fuck took my beef?” Rand was standing right below Carl and Anita’s apartment. “Carl Chang, where is it? Carl Chang, you’re a yellow peril motherfuckin Chinaman! You’re a beef thief, Carl Chang! *A beef thief!*”

\*

Garza couldn’t figure out who the ghost was. He wondered if it might be Becky, Anita’s dead friend from high school, but he couldn’t think of a reason she would have for haunting him. He hadn’t known her very well, anyway. The only real memory he had of her was one evening out in the courtyard when she was sitting with Anita, telling stories about guys they knew in high school, and Carl sat there getting madder and madder every time another old boyfriend was mentioned. He asked Anita about that once, asked why Carl got so mad, and Anita said, “Oh, he always thinks I’m screwing around. He doesn’t like to hear about when I really *was* screwing around.”

As the summer wore on, Garza began expecting to see the ghost every night. He would sit with Soldier in the dark, in the deep night, and sometimes a light would flash blue, or newspapers on the floor would rustle, or a book would flop over. Only one other time did he see the ghost in human form: it appeared in the door of the hallway leading to his bedroom, a vaporous but clearly female form. It turned and went down the hall, and Garza and Soldier followed, only to see it fade silently into the wall.

Still, the ghost made him happy – just about everything that summer made Garza happy. The ghost and Anita and Soldier – Carl, too, for that matter, and old Rand, and the bars and

the beer and the barbeques, and the freedom he had, freedom to do nothing, and everything. It was a big life.

\*

A week after Carl ran off with the beef, Anita asked Garza to come over and help her put up a bookshelf. When he got up to the apartment he found six concrete blocks and a few planks sitting in the middle of the floor.

“I got these blocks over on the side of the building,” Anita said. “They were just sitting there.”

“I think they’re Rand’s,” Garza said. “He was going to build a fireplace or something.”

Anita said, “Oh, come on! Does everything around here belong to Rand? Rand’s beef, Rand’s barbeque grill, Rand’s mean old cat that yells all the time – “

\*

Later, Anita asked, “So why’d you get a degree in History?”

“I like history,” Garza said.

“So? What’re you going to *do* with it?”

“Teach, maybe.”

Anita snorted. “*History?* That’s what they give assistant football coaches to teach in high school! That’s what they give stupid people to teach – that’s why everyone hates history.”

Garza lay back quietly and stared at the ceiling. He felt kind of hurt. Annoyed, too – Anita sounded a bit like his mother, who was all the time asking him what he was going to do with his life. When was he going to get a real job? When was he going to go to grad

school? Garza had a part time job working at a Shamrock Station down the street. The job, along with what was left of his student loans, was enough to cover rent and food and beer and pot for the rest of the summer, and that was just fine.

“Look at Carl,” Anita said. “He’s getting his degree in Electrical Engineering. He’s going to get a *good* job. We’re going to have a *good* life.”

Garza asked, “And I won’t?”

“You should go back and get a degree in engineering.”

“Maybe I’ll go to grad school.”

“*Grad* school.” Anita rolled over and put her head on Garza’s chest. “Well, maybe law school would be okay.”

They lay silently, listening to the whir of the ceiling fan. Outside faint barking began – Soldier was excited about something. Then they heard Rand out in the courtyard.

“Hey! Who stole my concrete blocks? Who the hell stole my concrete blocks?”

Anita sat up, laughing. “Busted!”

Garza laughed, too. “You know he’s going to blame you and Carl for anything that ever happens around here.”

“Oh, who cares?”

They dressed quickly. Anita opened the door and peered out into the courtyard. “He’s gone,” she said. One by one, Garza quickly carried the concrete blocks over to the railing and threw them down. The last of the blocks sort of bounced when it hit the earth and banged into Garza’s building, just outside his bedroom. A chunk of the red-brown brick broke off.

“Hey, wow, Rand was right,” Garza said. “It *is* soft brick.”

“Who cares?” Anita asked again. “Get back in here.” She grabbed his arm and tugged him back inside the apartment and shut the door.

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One day Garza came home from work at noon and let Soldier out, and the white dog raced out into the courtyard. From the kitchen window Garza could see Soldier at the base of the metal stairs eating something out of a dish. Rand usually put out cat food for Squawker. Garza went to the door and yelled, “You leave Squawker’s food alone!” Soldier ran back grinning to Garza, then took off again around the side of the building. He came back in a few minutes, and lay down with Garza in front of the air conditioner, and they napped.

Garza woke up from an uncomfortable, bright dream, feeling that something was wrong. His head hurt. He sat up and rubbed at his eyes and then saw Soldier on the floor under the kitchen table. Soldier was lying stiffly next to a puddle of frothy red vomit.

“Big guy?” Garza asked. Soldier looked up at him and started shivering. Garza crossed the room and pushed the table away and sank down on the floor next to Soldier. “What happened?”

Soldier looked at him. Garza gathered Soldier up and put him in the car – he didn’t even bother to put on his shoes – but by the time they got to the emergency vet clinic over on Lamar, it was too late. Soldier died just after they got there.

“Poisoned,” the vet tech said.

\*

Garza couldn't figure out why Rand had put poison in Squawker's food bowl. Rand liked Squawker – he liked Soldier, for that matter. Was he just so goddamned drunk he didn't know what he was doing? He wasn't there when Garza got back to the apartments – probably he was out golfing or drinking. Carl was at work, Anita's car was gone from the lot, too. There wasn't anyone to talk to.

Garza went inside and once he saw Soldier's red sick he broke down crying. Later he cleaned it up and then took a shower and got dressed. It was dark by then. He drank a beer, and then sat out on the back steps to wait for Rand to come home. It was a quiet evening: most of the apartments had been vacant all summer, and were dark and still, and only a little sound from the streets filtered in through the trees.

He heard a car door slam, and then Carl came around the corner. Carl was wobbling a bit; probably he had stopped off at the bar after work.

“Hey,” Garza said.

Carl stopped and squinted at him. “John – what's up?” Garza didn't say anything and Carl crossed the courtyard and stood in front of him. “Yeah, I was down playing some pinball – you should've been there, I rolled the machine and got six free games, it was great.”

After a moment Garza said, “I've been busy.”

“Yeah,” Carl said. “Are you okay?”

“Not really,” Garza said. Then he looked up at Carl. He didn't want to tell him about Soldier. He said, “Just feeling down, I guess.”

“Oh, yeah. Well. Okay.” Carl stood uncomfortably, then said, “I guess I’ll see you later.” Carl walked back across the courtyard. When he got to the stairs, he paused and looked at Squawker’s food bowl. “Hey, it’s empty.”

Garza got up and walked over to him. He asked, “What?”

Carl giggled and lowered his voice. “I put a bunch of rat poison and roach poison and shit in the cat food – and four or five poisoned hotdogs, too.”

Garza stared at Carl. “That was a lousy thing to do.”

Carl shrugged. “Well, that cat – you know?” When Garza didn’t say anything Carl laughed again and turned to head up the stairs to his apartment. Garza quickly came up behind Carl and sucker-punched him with his right hand, blasting him right behind the ear. Carl collapsed onto the metal stairs.

“Goddamn dog killer,” Garza said.

Carl groaned and tried getting to his feet. Garza hit him three more times – a right, a left, a right – in the face and head, and Carl fell down again and stayed there. Garza began kicking Carl in the ass.

“Killed my dog, motherfucker – *killed my dog!*” Garza kicked Carl until he was winded and then stopped and leaned on the railing, panting. “And I fucked your wife, too, you piece of shit.”

Carl didn’t move or say anything. Garza suddenly realized – Carl knew. Carl knew the whole time. Garza kicked him some more.

“You piece of shit,” he said again.

Garza spat on Carl, then turned and stumbled across the courtyard to his apartment and went in through the back door. He got a butcher knife from the kitchen and went out the front door and around to the parking lot. Carl's car, an older green Taurus, was parked at the edge of the complex. Garza stabbed and ripped at all four tires and when they were flat he dumbly dropped the knife to the asphalt. He went back around to the courtyard and yelled, "Go ahead and call the cops on me, dog killer!"

Carl was still lying at the foot of the stairs, curled up. He raised his head to look at Garza, then ducked and hid behind his arm. Garza spotted the fist-sized chunk of brick that had broken off of his building. He picked it up and stepped back so that he had a clear shot at Carl and Anita's apartment on the second floor. He pitched the chunk of brick up, a good throw, and it busted through the apartment window with a crash.

"Dog killer," Garza said. He went back into his apartment through the rear door. He got a can of beer from the refrigerator and looked out the kitchen window at Carl sprawled out on the stairs, then went into the living room – empty and lonely without Soldier hopping around – and smoked some pot and drank the beer. Then he realized that when the cops came to arrest him for beating up Carl they'd arrest him for the pot, too, so he went and hid the bong under the bathroom sink. Then that seemed stupid, because the cops would likely look there anyway – it was no use. He was going to get arrested for something no matter what. He carried the bong back to the living room, noticing that his right hand was bleeding. Then he heard voices out in the courtyard.

From the kitchen window Garza saw Rand, back from golfing and drinking. He was helping Carl to his feet. Garza heard Rand say, "Goddamn, boy, you got your *ass* kicked!"

What the hell happened?” Rand put his arm around Carl and they made their way up the stairs and around the walkway to the apartment. Garza got another beer and went to the living room and sat in the dark, waiting for the cops to come.

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The police never came. The next day the apartment manager put a new window in Carl and Anita’s apartment, and later in the week Carl borrowed someone’s car and came back with three tires. Old retreads, as best Garza could tell as he watched Carl work from the corner of the window. Carl’s face was still bruised and swollen.

Garza ran into Anita out in the laundry room one afternoon, but she looked at the ground and brushed by him without saying anything. No one said anything, and Carl and Anita moved out of the complex at the end of the month. No one said anything, except for old Rand, who once drunkenly chuckled, “Hey, you sure kicked that Chinaman’s ass. You know that?”

In the fall students came back to town and the complex filled up again. Garza began dating a journalism major named Sherry. He got a kitten and named it Skyhook. He was made manager at the Shamrock station, working full time now, but he came to realize that it really was a stupid job, so he went and took the civil service exam, thinking maybe he could get on with the government. It wasn’t until Christmastime that Garza realized that he had not seen the ghost in some months – in fact, he couldn’t remember the last time he had seen it, only that he *had* seen it, that it was real, and that it had tried to tell him something.

## ALONG AND TWENTY MILES EITHER SIDE OF A LINE

I could hear the distracting mumble of people talking in the hallway outside our motel room. Mumbling, and then someone would laugh, and there would be a pause, and then the mumbling would start again. Every time someone laughed I looked over at Gloria but she was intent on the television, frowning at an old movie, *Samson and Delilah*. I was trying to read a book and the laughing people and their whispered talk were disturbing me. Finally I asked Gloria, “Don't you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Gloria looked over at me. It was easy to tell that she was tired. Seven months pregnant, and a long road trip to a friend's wedding in Minneapolis, and a visit to her parents had all been hard on her.

“Those people out in the hall,” I said. “All that talking? It's like they're having a party out there or something.”

“It's Saturday night,” Gloria said. She looked back at the television. “So they're having a party. You always told me about the motel parties you used to go to when you were in college.”

“Yeah,” I said, slowly. But maybe not. I looked at the door. It was an awful quiet party, if it was a party. Just that annoying mumble-mumble-mumble and the occasional laugh. No breaking glass, no shouting or screaming, no fire alarms going off, no one racing up and down the halls. If it was a party, it was an awfully boring one.

“Did I ever tell you about the time I ended up in the same motel as an all-woman roller derby team?” I asked.

“I don’t want to hear about you having unprotected sex with – circus freaks,” Gloria said. “I don’t want to hear any of it.”

“I’m just teasing,” I said. I put my hand on her big belly and kissed at her neck but she pulled away.

“Bill, leave me alone,” she said. “I’m trying to watch the movie.”

“I’ve seen it,” I said. “Samson gets pissed off at the end.”

“I want to *see* it,” Gloria said. She took the remote from the nightstand and turned up the sound. “These people have just incredibly primitive ideas about women.”

“Patriarchal,” I said. “Sort of like your dad, huh?”

Gloria glanced at me and then back at the television. After a moment she said, “Don’t *you* talk about my father.”

I picked up my book and tried reading again, but even though it was interesting – Alvin Josephy’s history of the Civil War in the Far West – I couldn’t get into it. Even over the sound of Samson I could hear the murmur and mumble of people in the hallway. It disturbed me. I wanted to know what was going on out there.

I got out of bed and crossed the room to the door. I peered out the peephole into the hallway. I could see a black man standing off to my left, sipping something from a Styrofoam cup, and I could see an old white woman sitting on the floor across the hall from me, leaning back against the door of Room 122. There were more people down the hall from the old woman; I could see that she was talking to someone. A blond boy of perhaps 10 or so passed by and said something to her. The black man watched him, and said something to someone standing behind him.

I am not by nature a voyeur or a spy, and so I felt kind of weird, watching these people. And yet they were compelling in a strange way and I wanted to know more about them.

I went and took my shorts off the back of the chair and put them on. Gloria was watching me. I sat on the edge of the bed and pulled on my sneakers.

“Where're you going?” Gloria asked.

“I'm going down to the Coke machine and get a soda,” I said. “I want a better look at those people in the hall.”

“The people in the hall aren't bothering us,” Gloria said. She looked back at the television: Samson was beating up on some people I assumed were Philistines.

“I just want a better look at them,” I said. “I want to see what they're doing out there.”

“The caffeine in the Coke will keep you up all night.”

“I'll save it for tomorrow and drink it then.”

I stood up and crossed the room and unlatched the door and stepped outside. Conversation in the hallway stopped. The old lady on the floor looked up at me, squinting, the ceiling lights flashing off her glasses. I looked past her up the hall. There were about 15 or 20 people in the hallway, most of them young and white. They were all looking at me.

“Hey, there,” I smiled.

The black guy nodded at me and took a sip from his cup of coffee.

I stepped around him and went down the hall and passed the vending machines and went on out to the parking lot. It had rained a bit since we came in: dribbles of water were beaded on the hoods of cars, and the pavement was damp. The motel was new, built just

off the interstate on an old, two-lane farm road, cornfields rose up at the edge of the parking lot and ran off into the darkness. I could smell the earth, strong and alive, and in the distance I could see the lights of a farmhouse or two and on the horizon, a flash of lightning. It was a pretty night.

I walked up the parking lot to our car. I was trying hard not to feel trapped by everything, by life, but I did. I didn't see how else I *could* feel. A cattle truck was parked across the road at a small gas station. A single steer in the back of the truck lowed over and over.

"Tell me about it," I said.

Our car was fine, locked and safe. I looked at all of Gloria's stuff filling the backseat. There wasn't anything to do but go back to the room. The steer mooed again, and I turned and went back to the motel, stopping at the vending machines for sodas. Outside our room the hallway was still full of people talking quietly. They fell silent as I approached.

"Awful tame party for a Saturday night," I said.

"Not a party," the black man said. "There's a tornado watch on. This hallway's supposed to be the safest place in the building."

"Ah," I said, and nodded. "I didn't hear about any tornado watch."

"It's been on TV," the old woman said. She had the kind of ugly, grotesque, nasal-y accent that I've always associated with people from the Midwest. It made my flesh creep. "It's been on TV all night. There's been a tornado watch on all over this part of the state. You don't want to get caught in your room when a tornado hits."

"I guess not." I opened my door and stepped inside. "Night," I said, and shut the door.

I heard the old woman say, “Dummy.”

I put the Cokes on the desk and crossed the room and took the TV remote from Gloria.

“Hey,” she said. Samson was kissing on Delilah.

“I just want to check on something for a minute,” I said.

“Give me that,” Gloria said.

I searched up through the channels until I came to the weather channel. It showed a radar picture of our area. I could see a big storm – it was colored yellow and red on the radar, with evil-looking black spots – heading off to the southeast, toward Missouri. I figured it was about 75 miles or so away. Our immediate area was clear, though there were spots of green – light rain – scattered here and there around us, and it looked like another storm might be building to the west. The voice over the radar said something about a tornado watch twenty miles along and either side of a line extending from Sioux City to Omaha – a line well to our west, and if it kept tracking to the southeast it wouldn’t even come close to hitting us.

“There’s no tornado out there,” I said.

“Huh?”

“Those people in the hallway think a tornado’s going to hit the motel.”

Gloria frowned at the TV. “Are they right?”

“No way,” I said. “Look – the storm’s way far away.” I thought of the old woman calling me a dummy when she thought I couldn’t hear, smug and sensible behind her thick glasses – in that way she reminded me of Gloria’s father, a rich man but a smug old maid nonetheless. Sitting in the hallway to wait out a tornado watch. Not even a tornado

warning, either, just an ordinary tornado watch. “Call *me* a dummy, that bitch,” I said.

“Those people are stupid.”

“It's not against the law to be stupid,” Gloria said.

“Well, it should be.”

Gloria shrugged and took the remote from my hand and turned the TV back to Samson. I watched for a moment and then got undressed and got into bed next to her. I picked up my book and tried to start reading again.

“You know,” Gloria said, “I'm really, *really*, tired.”

I put the book down and looked at her. “I know, honey.”

“Don't patronize me!” Gloria turned off the television and looked over at me. “I'm tired of traveling, and I feel like shit I want to go home, and I want to lay in my own bed under the ceiling fan in the dark and feel like shit there.”

“Hey, I know,” I said. I took her hand. I was trying, at least. I didn't know what else to do but try. “Don't worry. We'll be home day after tomorrow.”

Gloria pulled away and rolled to her side, facing away from me, and put her hands under her head.

“I want to go home and lay in the dark, and I want to get this baby over with, and I want to go back to work as soon as I can.”

“Okay.”

“And I'm tired of all your selfish bullshit, and I'm tired of you just doing nothing but talking all the time, and I expect you to at least try and fucking help me.”

I took a moment to catch my breath. Finally I said, “Okay, so what else do you want?”

“I want to go to sleep.”

“Okay.” The light switch was on the wall above us, and I reached up and turned it. The room was suddenly dark but my eyes quickly adjusted to the light from the parking lot as it filtered in under the curtains. I slid my book to the floor and rolled over, throwing my arm around Gloria's belly. I kissed her on the back of the neck and her hand came up and pushed at my face, as if she was swatting away an insect. Out in the hallway people were waiting for a tornado that would not come.

## RIFF-RAFF

I was no longer a drug addict, though I was still a drug user — an important distinction to me at the time. I was trying to stay sane. I was working every day — every day — trying to, at least, driving a damn cab, fired from Yellow Cab because I missed paying my lease a few times, reduced to driving for Alamo Cab, ferrying scum and riff-raff around the city for 12 hours every day. In the evenings I would go back to my room at the back of a seedy motel, sometimes with a rock or two, sometimes not, and I would sit in the gloom and smoke my crack if I had it, and listen to the motel rottweilers bark at children and whores, listening, sweating, shaking, getting ready for the next day.

I was making an effort. I was trying to regain my sanity. Every day. This is something that few other people know about: when you hit bottom you don't just hit and go *ker-splat* — you bounce, like a basketball. Of course you hit bottom again, and bounce again, and again, and again, every bounce up a little lower than the previous one, every smack against the bottom duller and longer than the previous one. But still the process can go on for a long, long time.

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The cabs had computer terminals in them, little black boxes that received the dispatch information. It was a Sunday, near noon, and my terminal beeped and I was directed to go pick up someone named Miller, at the Wilderness Road Inn, a seedy motel just up the street from my own seedy motel.

The Wilderness Road was actually a little nicer than my place, though much of a kind. The rates at these places were the same at the chain motels along the highway — the Red Roof, say, or the Ramada or the La Quinta — but at the sleazy motels you were not paying for comfort, you were paying for privacy, the privacy to roll around with a whore, or smoke some crack, or do whatever it was that you didn't want anyone else to know about.

I parked the cab outside the room where Miller was supposed to be and honked the horn. Company policy dictated that the drivers were supposed to get out and knock on the door for customers, but I refused to do that. In some parts of town — at the sleazy motels, for instance — it could be dangerous. It is illegal for cab drivers to carry firearms, so instead I carried a long, black, heavy steel flashlight. It was okay for bashing drunks over the head with but of course would not be weapon enough to take on a maniac with a pistol. I waited for a few minutes, then honked again. I put the car into gear and was getting ready to turn around and leave when the door to the room opened and a man came out. Miller.

He was pale, almost an albino, pale and dressed in black, with a red baseball cap on his white hair and mirrored sunglasses. He had a fax machine under his arm. He came down the stairs and got into the cab.

“You want to buy a fax machine?” he asked.

“No,” I said. I started the meter.

“I need some extra cash,” Miller said. “I need to get rid of this fax machine.”

“But you have enough to pay *me*, right?” I looked at him in the mirror, but I could not see his eyes behind the sunglasses.

“Hey, pal, you think I'm stupid enough to get in a cab without any money? Of course I have enough to pay you!”

“It happens.” I adjusted my flashlight.

“Hey, pal, not from me. Just stop worrying and start driving, okay? I need to get rid of this fax machine. Let's try this pawn shop up the street.”

I pulled out into traffic and went three blocks or so to the World of Pawn store. It seemed like the kind of fare that cab drivers dread: driving some fool to the pawn shop for \$3.50, no tip. But Miller was in the World of Pawn only for a moment or two, and he came back out with the fax machine.

“Fuckers wouldn't give me enough for it,” he said. “I'm gonna have to take it back to the store — it's on the north side. I still got the receipt. You think that's a good idea?”

I thought: The north side. Twenty or so dollars up, twenty or so back, maybe. Two rocks.

“That's probably your best bet,” I said. “These pawn shops don't pay anything.”

“Then let's go.”

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The city was quiet and traffic was unusually light. I drove north and found the Office Depot. Miller disappeared into the store. I sat there glumly, hoping that he would be quick. The meter ticked up once, and then again. No Miller. Then an old fat man in a gray jumpsuit came out of the store. He leaned on his cane, looking at me in the cab, then walked over to the Cadillac parked next to me and opened the door. He looked at me again. No one else was in the parking lot — it was as if the streets had emptied and

everyone had gone home. No cars, no people, no nothing except the fat old man who was staring at me. I stared back at him. Finally he walked around his car — slowly, slowly — and came over to the cab. I rolled down the window.

“You know, you're parked in a handicap parking space,” he said. He had a big bald head and round glasses.

“Yeah,” I said.

“And you don't have handicap plates, or a sticker.”

“No, I guess not.”

He planted his cane carefully and leaned over. He had a huge round head. “Well, you know, I'm kind of an activist for handicap parking rights — my friends call me the Ralph Nader of handicap parking rights.” He chuckled and looked at me — proud, I guess, of being the Ralph Nader of handicap parking rights — but I didn't respond. After a moment, he said, “So, I guess I'll have to ask you to move.”

“I'm just waiting for a customer,” I said. I looked away at the store. “It'll only be a minute or so.”

“Well, then, I'm afraid I'll have to call the police.” He turned slowly, pivoting on his cane. “I'm going to have you arrested.”

“Wha-aaat?” I couldn't believe it. I drive some maniac around for an hour, and then I get threatened by an old bald man.

“You're parked in a handicap zone! And you don't have authorization!” The old man took a step back toward me. He wasn't chuckling now — his face was turning red with anger, or madness, and spit flew out of his mouth when he said the word “authorization.”

“I worked for years for handicap rights in this city and I'm not going to have my rights taken away by some damn cab driver!”

“Hey, pal,” I said, and stopped. When did I start calling people ‘pal?’ Miller. Jesus, you drive riff-raff around all day, you *become* riff-raff. “I'm just waiting for my customer, okay?”

“I don't give a damn about your customer. I'm not going to have my rights taken away by some damn cab driver!”

I remembered another driver once telling me that cabs could park in handicap spaces if they were waiting for a customer. So I said, “Fuck you, call the cops.”

“What did you say?”

“Call the cops.”

The old man's bald head was turning redder and redder. “No,” he said, “*before* that.”

“Fuck *you*, I said, *call* the fucking cops.” The old man staggered backwards with a shocked look on his face. I hit the window button and the glass rose quickly, and I looked hopefully toward the door, willing Miller to appear. That's how bad my day had turned – I was praying for a maniac to get in my cab! As for the old man, let him call the cops. The worst that would happen would be that the cops would write me a ticket that I would stick in the glove compartment and forget about.

But then there was a *bang* on the rear of the car — and another. I looked around and the old man was beating on my left rear fender with his damn cane. Bang! Bang!

I pulled my big, black flashlight from beneath the seat and got out of the car. Bang!

“Hey, cut it out!”

Bang!

“Hey, pal, leave my car alone!”

Bang! The old man didn't even look over at me. He was just glaring at my car, red-faced, grimacing, swinging his cane like an axe. Bang! Bang!

I dropped my right shoulder and took two quick steps forward, swinging the heavy flashlight tight and hard, and I popped the old man right on his collarbone, right at the juncture of his neck and shoulder. *Bang!* His fucking dentures flew out of his mouth and he dropped like a dead piece of meat, cane clattering to the asphalt, his glasses askew, eyes pale in his head. I looked around. The parking lot — the store, the street — was still and quiet, silent, empty, as if under some spell. There was no one around. I looked down at the old man. He was still breathing, I think. The black flashlight was heavy in my hand

“Hey, pal, what the fuck is this?”

I turned and there was Miller. The red baseball cap was pushed back on his head and he had a big astonished smile on his white face. I could see a blurred reflection of myself in his mirrored sunglasses.

“What the fuck did you do?”

“He attacked the cab so I hit him.”

“He *attacked* the *cab*? Oh, man!” Miller laughed. “So let's get the fuck out of here, you dumb shit.”

I hesitated.

“C'mon — get in. Let's go!” Miller got in and shut the door.

I tossed the flashlight onto the seat and got into the car. I put it into reverse and backed up, careful not to run over the old man. Miller scooted over to the window and looked out at him.

“Man, you drilled the fucker. He's droolin and shit. He might die or something.”

“He won't die.” I pulled onto the frontage road and then quickly darted across three lanes and onto the highway.

“You *hope* he won't die. Jesus! I'm in a cab with a killer cab driver. Maybe I should be scared, huh?”

“He was hitting my cab with his damn cane,” I said.

“So you killed him.” Miller couldn't stop laughing. “Oh, man.”

“Like I'm supposed to let him beat on my cab with his cane?”

“Fuck no! Kill the piece of shit!”

“I'm glad you think this is so funny.” I kept looking in the mirror, expecting a fleet of cop cars to come chasing me. But there was just the usual light Sunday traffic.

“Killer, hey — get off here at 11th street — I need to check out something on the east side.”

I got off at the next exit and turned left, crossing the highway and heading to the East Side.

“I need a woman,” Miller said. “Some black chick — no white chicks. You get these white chicks out on the street, after a while they get dirty, you know?”

I drove slowly east on 11<sup>th</sup> and turned left into Crack Alley and went slowly up the block. There were some sullen looking young black men sitting around on the curb

watching traffic. Then a drug runner I knew, Wayne, stepped out from behind a car and waved at me. The windows were up but I could hear him yell, “Hey, stop!”

“Friend of yours?” Miller asked.

“I don't know,” I said.

“Make a right here and cut over to 12th,” Miller said. “There's no chicks here, just a bunch a crack dealers.”

I made the right and went up to 12th and turned right again. We went east past Chicon and then Miller told me to make a left. There was an ancient barber shop with a “No trespassing” sign in front, and a pair of old black men sitting in chairs. They glared at my cab. Miller rolled down the window.

“Hey! Where's the chicks?”

“Get the fuck out of here,” one of the old men said.

Miller rolled up the window. “Dumb pieces of shit,” he said.

I made another block and there were three girls sitting on the curb on front of a church.

“Stop!” Miller said. He rolled down the window. “Hey, Michelle, get over here!”

One of the girls — tall, very dark, with short tight hair — got up and walked over to the car. She looked in the window at Miller.

“I remember you.”

“Then get in and let's go!”

Michelle turned to her friends, “See you!” and got in the car.

“How you been?” Miller asked.

“I been okay,” Michelle said. “Where're we going?”

“Over to my place,” Miller said.

“I want a rock.”

“Hey, I don’t blame you. That’s cool. My driver here, Killer, he’ll take us to get you a rock.”

Michelle looked at me. “I know him — I remember him.”

“Oh, man!” Miller laughed. “You know Killer?”

“I remember him from some house, somewhere.” Michelle got up between the seats, almost resting her head on my shoulder. The product she put in her hair smelled like coconuts. She asked, “You remember me?”

“Sure.” It was hard not to remember her: long, fine features, beautiful warm brown eyes.

“Who was the last back girl you slept with?”

That I didn’t remember. I glanced at her in the mirror. She was confused. Still, I said, “Uh, you?”

“Yeah!” Michelle was pleased. She sat back next to Miller. “Right in the back of the cab! Yeah, you’re the one!”

“Oh, man,” Miller said. “Killer, my man, I’m learning all sorts of things about you!”

“He’s a good driver.”

“Man, you should’ve seen him pop this old man a few minutes ago — he drilled the fucker!”

“He beat up an old man?” Michelle frowned.

“The old man was fuckin with him. Killer didn't have a choice. He just drilled the fucker!”

I stopped paying attention. It was like they were talking about someone else — it was just noise. I drove aimlessly — going a block, then a right, a block, then a left, a block, a left, a right down an alley, wherever, whatever. I had been a drug addict long enough that I knew this part of town fairly well, at least at night. But now, in the daytime, I could see that there were some nice, well-kept homes tucked in along the street, homes probably inhabited by some decent, well-kept people. I also passed three places I knew to be crack houses, full of riff-raff, and a couple more that looked to be full of riff-raff. Finally we came to the house that Michelle wanted, the house I'd seen her in before or something, a big old place with peeling paint and trash bags in the yard. Other trash bags were stapled or taped to the windows and there was a broken tricycle on the front porch. The house was on a hill and you could look west across the highway and see downtown — the capital, the neon-fringed buildings. Civilization. Miller and Michelle went into the house and I sat waiting for them in the cab, the meter ticking up every now and then, ticking up, ticking up. I sat there looking out at the city, the orange sun sinking behind the hills, the people driving up and down the highway in ignorance. It all looked so far away.

## BRINDLED PIT BULL

After she moved to Texas from California, Marla Hayden decided she needed some Western Art on her wall. She found a Charlie Russell print online and bought it – a painting of a haggard, miserable, freezing steer caught out in the middle of a blizzard, surrounded by hungry wolves. It was called “Waiting for a Chinook,” a Chinook being a warmer wind that would sometimes blow across the Northern Plains for a few winter days. Marla had the print professionally framed and she hung it over the couch in her living room. Though she liked the cool, soothing blues and grays of the painting, she mostly liked it because she saw herself as one of the wolves – an alpha bitch, perhaps, successful and fearless. But when the software company she worked for, Innitech, laid off 500 people, including her fiancé, who worked in the finance department, and shipped another 300 or so jobs to India, Marla took the print down and put it the back of the utility room and hung drying clothes off the edge of the frame. Maybe she wasn’t a wolf, after all. Six months later her boss told her, very casually, that her own job was also going to Bangalore.

The next day Marla called in sick.

For most of the morning she lay on the couch watching television, gazing solemnly at a series of bad comics on the comedy channel. She hadn’t had the heart to tell her fiancé, Jim Lueckert, about her job the night before. He had been telling her for months that her job was in danger – even before his own layoff he had been telling her that Innitech was in trouble, that sales were lagging, that the officers had been spending far too much money. But that seemed absurd: even after the great boom of the late nineties it was apparent that

growth, slower growth, sure, but growth would go on forever, forever, everybody knew it, you only had to look around Austin. Seventy or so people a day were still moving in – the streets were jammed, new housing developments were going up everywhere, new strip malls, new buildings downtown, in the three years she had been in Austin the city had been transformed – it was a totally different place, and was still changing, still becoming. And Innitech was a strong young company, an innovator, Innitech hired the smartest kids from the best colleges in the country and they were putting out the best systems management software in the world. Nothing could stop them.

Her cell phone rang. Marla glanced at the displayed number – it was Jim, calling from his new job. She punched the button to answer.

“Hi,” she said.

“I called you at work,” Jim said. “They said you were sick.”

“Yeah, they were right.”

“Marla – ”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Marla said. “I’m just tired – my stomach’s messed up, too. I just figured I’d take the day off.”

“Poor baby,” Jim said. “You want me to bring you something?”

Marla looked at the wall where Charlie Russell’s doomed steer had been. Where the successful, hardy wolves had been. In its place she had put up a corny painting of Texas bluebonnets, a horrible painting of a happy dog romping in an endless field of cheerful blue flowers in the spring sunshine, a painting so ugly and bad it was actually kind of cool. If you had a sense of humor.

“No,” Marla said. “Maybe later – I think I’ll go back to sleep.”

Jim worked in the billing office of a big law firm downtown and considered himself lucky to have found a decent job. Where was *she* going to go? Who wanted programmers any more? Who wanted front-line managers any more? India was taking all the jobs – everybody over there in India was a genius, and they worked for nothing. It wasn’t fair. Marla dreaded having to break down and tell Jim that he had been right about Innitech the whole time.

Fucking Innitech! Goddamn corporate culture! Greed, idiocy, short-sighted foolishness. The big managers had ruined everything. Jim had told her that the canceling of the cab perk had been the first outward sign that the company was in trouble. The cab perk: Innitech’s recruitment brochures talked about the company’s “work hard, play hard” philosophy, but the company also frowned on drunk driving and so had offered free cab rides – unlimited free cab rides – to all employees. Jim told her the cab perk cost the company almost \$30,000 a month. Really, they all took cabs all the time, everyone, all the employees, all the young people from the best colleges in the country, all of them new to Austin, new to Texas, new to each other, taking cabs down to the Sixth Street nightclub area two, three, four times a week, maybe stopping to get sushi on the way downtown, then milling with the vast crowds along the street, partying along with students from the university, other high tech workers, some locals, everyone drinking and laughing. On some corners, mostly toward the east end of Sixth, there would be knots of hard-looking young black men and they always sort of shocked Marla: they scared Marla, though she knew she wasn’t racist – California had lots of black people, of course, and lots of

Mexicans and Asians, too, Marla got along with everyone, she treated everyone the same – but these young men, they scared her with their open shirts and flat rippling bellies, and they disturbed her because they weren't supposed to be there. Texas wasn't black people – Texas was cowboys. Texas was George Bush. Texas was the old frontier, where stupid white guys in pickup trucks would drive around and drink beer and brag about barbeque or football or something equally vulgar.

In a group with Jim and their friends from work, Marla would sometimes circle Sixth Street in the bright flickering neon night, shot bar to shot bar to dance club and on and on, and she felt safe in her group, even though when a hard young black man might try to get their attention – “Hey, can you tell me what time it is?” – no one would answer, they would fall silent, and they would all keep walking silently until they crossed the street and went up the block or whatever. Generally, Marla and her friends kept to the west end of the street; it seemed safer, and the bars were just as fun. Later, going home in the free cabs, taking long trips to their homes in the far Southwest or far Northwest sides of town, everyone would be laughing and making calls on their cell phones, gossiping about work, telling each other how wonderful Austin was, with restaurants and Sixth Street and music and all the cool people at work, but how weird and crude and out of it the rest of Texas was – Texas they had seen only from car windows as they drove in from San Diego or wherever, or looked down on from a mile up in the air as they flew in from Seattle or Boston – and the cab would speed by neighborhoods where the locals lived, the ones they saw on the TV news for winning chili cook-offs, or going on killing sprees, or getting in car wrecks, all those would-be cowboys sitting in the night in their camped little houses

drinking beer and cleaning their guns and admiring their Confederate flags while their girlfriends snorted crank and their kids rolled around squalling in dirty diapers – a whole class of left-behind losers that no one would ever take seriously. The cab driver if he was cool would laugh along with them, knowing he was getting a good fare and a good tip, and it had all been such childlike, endless fun, one long party, it was never going to stop, the jobs would get better and better, and pay more and more and more – but, no, now it had ended.

The idiots who ran Innitech had totally screwed everything up. They cut the cab perk, and that was the first sign the company was in trouble. Then they downsized, and downsized again. They still made money and the stock went up, so they went ahead and outsourced. Marla wondered, What did those fuckers over in India need her job for? She had house payments to make.

After she told Jim to call her back later, Marla rolled to her side and found herself gazing into the eyes of Ginger, a sleek long-haired dachshund. She scooped Ginger up onto the couch and hugged her tight.

“Oh, baby,” she whispered, “what’re we gonna do?”

Ginger didn’t say anything and snuggled up close to her and they drifted off to sleep.

\*

When Marla awoke she saw from the clock on the VCR that she had slept some three hours. It was early afternoon. She had placed the TV on mute when Jim called; it was still on, showing a movie or something with a car racing around banging into things. Ginger was scratching at the patio door to get out. Marla found the remote and switched the TV

over to a news show, where people were screaming at each other about something. She didn't want to know what; she kept the television muted. She got up and let Ginger out into the back yard, and went to pull a Diet Dr. Pepper from the refrigerator. Then she heard angry barking coming from outside.

“Baby!” she yelled.

Marla dropped the Dr. Pepper on the kitchen counter and went to the door. Ginger was at the edge of the yard, frozen, staring at the privacy fence. Barking was coming from the other side of the fence; a nasty brindled pit bull lived over there.

“Ginger! Get in here!”

Ginger didn't move – growling, maybe. The barking – more than one dog, Marla could tell – went on.

“Ginger!”

Marla went out and crossed the yard in her bare feet. The afternoon was hot: even the grass felt hot, and the peonies planted along the back of the fence were wilting under the gray hazy sky. The barking beyond the fence was growing – snarling, growling. Ginger's teeth were bared and she stood trembling staring at the fence until Marla yanked her up and held her tight.

There was movement on the other side of the fence – it sounded like a dog fight. Marla stepped over to peer through a knothole but a giant pale shape – a dog? – slammed into the fence and she jumped back. Ginger was wriggling in her arms.

“Hey!”

The dog on the other side of the fence sounded like it was trying to chew through the fence – to attack her, to get Ginger. Then it sounded like there was another dog over there – and maybe another. The anger radiating through the wooden fence was incredible. Marla took another step back. Ginger was growling.

“Be quiet,” Marla said. Ginger struggled to get down out of her arms and so Marla turned and went back to the house and dropped Ginger inside. The little dog tried to shoot out but Marla blocked her with a leg and slid the patio door shut. Ginger looked out at her.

The dog noise from next door grew – two or three dogs – a dog fight. Marla slowly crossed the lawn and stood next to the fence. It was shaking. Marla placed her hand on the rough wood: she could feel the vibrations of snaps and growls transformed, not just hearing them now, but feeling them. She looked through the knothole: nothing. Marla put her foot on the bottom of the fence and pulled herself to the top and looked over. She saw two big, strange dogs, a white one and a brown one, savaging the brindled pit.

“Stop it” she yelled. “Hey!”

The brindled pit was in a corner trying to protect itself. The two other dogs – also pits, Marla saw, big ones – were going after the brindled dog, the brown one at its flanks, the pale one going for the throat.

“Stop it!”

The dogs ignored her. Marla dropped down from the fence and ran to the gate at the edge of her backyard. It was locked. The fighting dogs sounded like they were going crazy. Marla crossed to the patio and went inside – pushing Ginger out of the way – through the house and out the front door. She ran next to the house next door and rang the

bell. There was no answer, so she banged on the door with her fist and yelled. The house was dark – she was pretty sure the people were away. She didn't know their names, had only seen them occasionally, dark people in nice clothes, with a nice Mitsubishi and a big Ford Explorer. They had that brindled pit bull, too. But a lot of people had big dogs, sometimes when Jim went running in the neighborhood rather than down by the lake, Marla could tell what block he was on by where the dogs were barking at him – though now, someone's big dogs were loose and had gone after the brindled dog – they could have gone after a child, if there had been children in the neighborhood, or if one had been on the street.

Marla looked around. All the houses on the block were blank-looking, closed off, with small windows on the front and recessed doors, big houses of stone or brick that almost filled their lots and seemed to push forward with six- or seven-foot wooden privacy fences crowding up behind them. It was a good, new neighborhood, people had to have good jobs to live out there on the far edge of town with their cars and big dogs, and apparently everyone was off at their jobs now, for nothing was moving.

The dogs were still fighting. Marla ran back to her own house and went inside. Ginger was waiting for her by the front door. “Stay!” Marla said as she crossed the house and went out the back, but Ginger followed her through the house to the sliding patio doors and stood and watched. Marla went to the side of the house and began pulling at the water hose – she'd maybe spray water at the dogs, get them all wet and make them stop – when there was a quick pause in the dog noise from next door. Then a growl, a snap, and then silence.

Marla dropped the hose and went over to the fence and listened. She thought she might be hearing the panting of tired dogs. She pulled herself to the top of the fence and saw the brindled dog dying, sprawled out in the sun, bleeding, trailing guts, a hind leg twitching. The brown dog and the creamy one were in the shade next to the house, resting, panting, pink tongues lolling, looking over at her. The creamy one had what looked like blood on its face and neck. Marla watched the dogs for a long time before she dropped off the fence and went back inside her home.

\*

In the evening, after work, Jim came over and let himself in. He brought her a bottle of wine, and cans of chicken soup, and a couple of movies to watch. Marla was still drowsy – disturbed – as he was unpacking, getting herself a glass of water, and she almost didn't notice when Jim stepped over and opened the patio door to let Ginger out.

“No!” Marla jumped over and slammed the door shut, almost catching Ginger in it.

“No!” she said. “Ginger only goes out with a leash now – only with a leash.”

“Baby?” Jim asked slowly. “Are you okay?”

“Fuck no, I'm not okay,” Marla said. She pulled Ginger's leash down from a hook and fastened it to the squirming dog's collar. She noticed her hands were shaking, and she frowned up at Jim. “Don't just stare at me – go fix some soup or something.”

Outside the evening was quiet and warm. Car sounds came from the distant expressway. Marla walked Ginger past the yard's sole tree, a lonely mesquite, tugging Ginger at times, the stubborn small dog not used to a leash in her own back yard, and then led her over toward the fence. Marla touched the fence. The wood was warm and

motionless. No sound came from beyond it. Marla pulled herself up and looked over the top.

She saw a black lump in the center of the yard, a dark lump where she had last seen the dead brindled pit. There was no sign of the cream-colored dog or the brown one. The house beyond was dark. All the other houses in the neighborhood were dark. Nothing moved.

“Marla?” It was Jim, standing out on her patio. “Marla? Are you okay? Is something wrong?”

\*

The next day Marla went to work. Innitech’s headquarters were in an office park located on top of a canyon on the far west side of town, and from the parking lot Marla could look down at the flooded river below, Lake Austin, and the Loop 360 Bridge crossing it, and beyond the bridge to the towers of the city. There were two boats down on the lake below her towing water-skiers, and a few golfers strolled around at the country club course just downstream from the bridge. People at play in the hot Texas morning, she thought, Texans at play, and the thought made her angry: she sensed the play was just a gloss over something incredibly crude and vulgar. Above her vultures rose floating on the updraft from the water, and grackles strutted around the parking lot picking at bits of trash.

She turned her back on them and went inside. Marla passed the security desk and the silent, newspaper-reading guard and took an elevator up to the third floor. She walked down a long, open room, passing several empty, sterile, office cubicles, and other cubicles occupied by bored or depressed-looking people, cubicles that were soon to be empty. Her

boss, Conrad, was standing outside his office door – he had a real office instead of a cubicle, an office with a door and a window – and he said “Hello” to her but she walked past him, like a zombie, and took her chair, at her desk. Some time before Jim had given her a half-dozen little plastic frogs to put on her desk, to cheer the place up, and three days earlier, in a playful mood, Marla had arranged the frogs in a long, humping daisy-chain of sexual frolic. Now, though, Marla looked at the happy frogs and sighed and said, “Well, shit.”

## CHITTERLINGS

Wes Leonard sat at the bar, leaning back a bit and looking out through the dark, tinted glass of the door. Outside a city street crew was pouring asphalt into a pothole. There were three Mexicans and a black man on the crew, and they were sweaty and dirty, and they looked tired. They looked *hot*: even through the thick glass of the door Wes could see the air boiling and shimmering, shimmering and boiling not just from the heat of the asphalt but from the very heat of the sun itself. Wes watched the workers for a long time. Maybe there was a story there. But maybe not. It was sometimes hard to tell.

After a few minutes Wes took a sip of his beer and looked across at Jillian the barmaid.

“It's 105 degrees out there,” Wes said. “How they expect that asphalt to get hard in weather like this?”

Jillian shrugged and smiled. She was sitting behind the bar on an empty Budweiser box, and she stood up and reached across and took his empty beer pitcher.

“Want another?” she asked.

Wes looked at his watch. He had another three hours.

“Yeah, I guess,” he sighed.

Wes watched Jillian draw the beer and bring it back down the bar to him. She took five dollars from a pile of money on the bar and went over to the cash register. She brought back a dollar and sat it next to Wes's notebook. Wes was staring at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar.

Jillian looked closely at the notebook. She turned it around and looked at it again.

Across the top line was written the word GUTS.

“Guts?” Jillian asked. She arched an eyebrow. “Just – guts?”

“Just guts,” Wes repeated. He poured beer into his mug.

“I see,” Jillian said. She sat back down on the beer box and looked up at the television.

Men were playing golf.

“*Bad* guts,” Wes said.

Jillian looked back at him and blinked. “Oh, of course,” she said. “Bad guts. I haven't seen any *good* guts around here in a long time.”

“No,” Wes said. “I'm serious. These are bad guts. I'm going out to Pflugerville this afternoon to be the celebrity judge at the Greater Southwest International Chitlins Cookoff and Jamboree.”

“Oh,” Jillian said. “Chitlins – that's like sort of like menudo, right?”

Wes thought for a moment. “Menudo is tripe, I think. Beef tripe. Chitlins is chitterlings, or something – it comes from pigs.”

“Chitterlings?”

Wes shrugged. “Guts, I guess.”

“So what are hog maws?”

“They're hog – oh, hell, I don't know. Hog somethings.” Wes glanced at the television – men playing golf on cool green grass, lucky men – and then looked back across the bar at Jillian. “Why don't you go on out to Pflugerville for me and find out?”

“I have to work,” Jillian said. “It'd be fun, though.”

“No,” Wes said. He shook his head and looked down at the bar. “No, it wouldn’t be fun. It’s not going to be fun. You know? It’ll be deadly out there. It’ll be hell. It’s 105 degrees outside and I’m going to be up to my armpits in hog guts.”

Jillian said, “Poor Wes.”

“No kidding,” Wes said. He looked at the neon beer sign hanging behind Jillian – a rainbow trout leaping for a mayfly – and felt like weeping. There would be no cool water in Pflugerville – no fame, no fun. Just heat and hog guts, chitterlings or chitlins, menudo or hog maws, or whatever that stuff was, and who wanted to write about any of it? In the fifteen years the newspaper had been running his column he had written about barbecue (chicken, sausage, ribs, brisket), country music, tractor pulls, pro wrestling (he had a fondness for old school wrestlers like Ivan Putski and Mad Dog Vachon), ice cream, fraternity hijinks, sorority snootiness, the color orange, rodeo, Juneteenth, Confederate Heroes Day, the NAACP, the Ku Klux Klan, beer (local beer, imported beer, cold beer, the meaning of beer), homosexuals, lesbians, zoophiles, necrophiles, Aggies, airports (airports in general, the old airport, the new airport, funding for the new airport, the land scandal surrounding the new airport, and why the old airport was better), light bulbs: incandescent versus florescent, thunder, lightning, tornadoes, hurricanes, ice storms, floods, droughts, cold, heat, rock’n’roll, nose rings, nipple rings, navel rings (he wrote a penis ring story, too, but the editor said it didn’t belong in a decent family newspaper), motorcycles, skateboards, in-line skates, pogo sticks, dogs, cats, parrots, grackles, ostriches, golden-cheeked warblers, fire ants, millipedes, cockroaches, mosquitoes, carp, trout, bass, catfish, bats, mice, rats, raccoons, possums, lions, tigers, bears (grizzly bears, black bears, and

teddy bears), old cars, new cars, art cars, pickup trucks, and diesel mechanics. He had attended the Budafest, the Wurstfest, the New Highway Fest, the International Barbecue Fest, the Aquafest, the Cedar Chopper Fest, the Sorghumfest, the Pecanfest, the Cotton Pickin' Fest, the Very Best Fest, the Locust Fest, the Big Ol' Bull Fest, the Chiggerfest, and the Crappiefest, along with Catfish Days, Frontier Days, Cicada Days, Buffalo Days, Pioneer Days, Prickly Pear Days, Crazy Daze, the Rattlesnake Roundup, the Chilympiad, the White Bass Run, the Mesquite Burn, the Skunk Wallow, and Spamorama. He had been to dozens of county fairs and stock shows – dozens. Three times a week for fifteen years he'd written about colorful, folksy stuff – all kinds of colorful, folksy stuff – and he was popular, he won awards, people actually read his column, and all it got him in the end was a spot as the celebrity judge at the Greater Southwest International Chitlins Cookoff and Jamboree in Pflugerville.

“My God,” he asked aloud, looking into his beer, “what kind of monster would schedule a chitlins cookoff for the middle of August?”

“People who like their chitlins hot,” Jillian said.

“Don't be cute,” Wes said. He took a long drink of beer. “I know it's hard for you, but don't be cute. This is going to be the worst day of my life.” He thought for a moment.

“The very worst day.”

\*

When Wes finally left the bar the heat hit him like a hammer. His eyes watered, and he squinted and quickly put on his sunglasses and squinted around. The workers who had been filling the pothole were gone and all that they left behind was a black patch of

smoking asphalt. He suddenly envied them: all they had to do was work all day in the heat – which was probably very healthy, something that rich women would probably pay to do if it was promoted properly – and then go home at the end of the day and drink beer and sit in front of the air conditioner and watch TV and beat their wives and children or whatever else it was the newspaper said working people did to pass the time. They didn't have to worry about deadlines – there were so many holes in the city's streets that filling one hole more or less per day made no difference at all. And the public – the public – who hated *anyone* in the media, even folksy award-winning columnists – loved the guys who filled potholes. A humorous, folksy column about a chitlins cookoff could not prevent a flat tire, but a formerly nine-inch deep pothole newly filled with hot black asphalt surely could. People appreciated that.

It wasn't fair.

Wes heard the door open behind him.

“Hey, Wes,” Jillian said. “You forgot your notebook.”

She stood in front of him holding the slim reporter's notebook in her hand. Wes took it from her and looked at it, not sure at first if it was really his own.

“Huh,” he said.

“Drive careful,” Jillian said.

“What?” he asked.

“I told you to drive carefully,” Jillian said. She opened the door of the bar and leaned on it, holding it open, smiling. Wes could feel cool air rushing out of the bar.

Jillian said, “Bring me some chitterlings.”

“Chitterlings,” Wes repeated. He felt doomed.

Jillian laughed and disappeared into the bar. Wes stared at the heavy glass door for a moment, looking at his reflection. He looked like somebody else, like a ghost; it frightened him. He turned away and carefully made his way down the steps – he'd tripped and fallen down them more than once – and went across the street to the gas station. Wes had once written a column about the little Nigerian guy who worked at the gas station – his name was Francis Something Something, Wes sort of remembered – and how hard he worked, and Francis had loved the column – one of the few people Wes had ever written about who approved of what he'd said. Francis not only loved the column, he'd made dozens of copies to send back to relatives in Lagos.

“How you doing today?” Francis had the air conditioning in the store turned on to the max, and was wearing a sweater over his gas station shirt.

“I'm going to Pflugerville to eat chitlins until I collapse,” Wes said.

“Yes!” Francis smiled. “That's very good!”

“You're way wrong.” Wes went to the back of the store and pulled a 12-pack of Busch from the cooler – frigid air came spilling out of the beer case, and Wes wished he had something like that at home, a tomb-like walk-in freezer that he could move his bed into and sleep in and freeze and never have to wake up and write folksy award-winning columns ever again.

Wes paid cheerful, sweater-wearing Francis for the beer and left the store. The sudden change in temperature made his sunglasses fog, and his eyes again began to water. His face pulled back in a grimace. The image of a steaming pot of chitlins entered his mind,

and he gagged. He stopped and ripped open the cardboard box of beer, pulled one out, and popped it open. He took a long pull from the can – and looking past it, saw that people in the used bookstore next to the gas station were looking out the window at him. Too bad. What were people doing inside a bookstore on a day like this, anyway? There were potholes to be filled, televised golf to be watched, chitlins to be judged – and beer to be guzzled, too. To hell with them. He finished the beer and dropped the empty can to the hot pavement of the parking lot, and went over to his car.

The inside of the car was like a furnace, of course. Wes expected that, but still, the physical force of the heat came as a shock. He tossed the box of beer across the seat and sat down and started the car as quickly as he could. It fired up immediately. He turned the air conditioner on full, then bent over and squinted to see if it really was on full.

“Air conditioning!” Wes barked at the car. Sweat already was beading up his face and rolling down his neck. “*Air* conditioning!”

A woman herding her two children down the hill to the neighborhood swimming pool looked incredulously at Wes yelping in the front seat of his car, but he ignored her. Wes reached across the seat and pulled a beer from the box and opened it, and took a swallow. Still cold. Good. After a moment or two cool air began spilling from the vent, and he sat squarely behind the wheel and shut the door. He took another gulp of beer and placed the can between his legs.

“On to...uh,” Wes said aloud. Then he remembered. “Pflugerville.” Pflugerville. Chitlins. Pflugerville. Chitlins. Hell.

\*

His right front tire blew out just past Manor. By this time Wes had drank most of the twelve-pack (along with three big pitchers back at the bar) and his reflexes were a tad on the ragged side, and though he fought to keep the car on the road it ended up in the ditch. Wes got out and stumbled around to the front and looked at the tire. The shredded remains were smoking and hot. Wes smiled. Saved from the chitlins!

A boxy little SUV pulled up on the shoulder of the road, and a short, chunky blonde woman in sunglasses got out and leaned over the hood. Passing cars blew her flat hair around.

“You okay?” she asked.

“I got a flat tire,” Wes said.

“Yeah, I saw. Can you change it?”

“Huh-uh,” Wes said. He took a step backwards and almost fell. “I’ve been driving on the spare for about six months now.” That stupid little donut spare: he’d already gotten two columns out of it. Now maybe if he had time it would be good for a third.

“I can give you a ride on into Pflugerville, if you want,” the woman said.

“Well....”

“It's not a problem.”

“Okay, I guess,” Wes said. “As long as you stay away from the chitlins cookoff.”

The woman shook her head and frowned and got back into her car. Wes went around and got his notebook and the remaining warm beer from his car, and locked it, then clambered up out of the ditch and got into the blonde woman's Suzuki.

“I'm Wes Leonard,” he said. “I work at the paper.”

“Yeah, I know.” The woman glared at him. “My name's Barb Krause.”

“Hi.” Wes managed a loopy smile. “You read my column?”

Barb shrugged. “Only when I have to.”

There was silence in the car. Wes steeled himself for some sort of attack; it was obvious the blonde woman didn't like him, for some reason.

“I work there, too,” she finally said.

Wes looked at her. “At the – paper?”

“Yeah,” Barb said. “They sent me out to be your photographer.”

“Oh.” Wes thought for a moment and decided he had never seen her before. He opened a beer and studied her from the corner of his eye. Short, fat, angry, blonde women were usually more noticeable than Barb was. He finally asked, “So, how long you been there?”

“Six years.”

“Oh.” Wes took a gulp of beer and said, “I never see you around.”

“You're drunk,” Barb said.

“So? You'd be drunk, too, if you had to go to a stupid chitlins cookoff.”

Barb said, “I *am* going to a chitlins cookoff.”

“Oh, that's right,” Wes said. “You want a beer?”

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A wisp of smoke hung on the horizon, marking the location of Pflugerville. As they got closer, Wes could see the town itself rise up out of the pastureland – houses, stores, a barbecue place (closed for the chitlins cookoff), a cotton gin. The smoke itself was coming from the high school football field, home of the Greater Southwest International Chitlins

Cookoff and Jamboree. After Barb parked her truck next to the school, she went around to the back to collect her gear and Wes took the chance to flee – anything, even a chitlins cookoff, was better than hanging around with Barb. He dropped his last empty beer can to the ground and wobbled off as fast as he could toward the football field, feeling his stomach turn over and rumble – he really hadn't had anything to eat all day, just a bag of pretzels with Jillian at the bar – and the scent of wood smoke and bubbling pork guts actually smelled...pretty good.

Wes went up to one of the men sitting at the football field gate, a big black man wearing a cap that was embroidered with the word “Chitlins!” There was a purple ribbon on the man's chest that read BEN HENDERSON: COORDINATOR.

“I'm Wes Leonard,” Wes said. “I'm supposed to be, like, a judge here or something.”

Henderson was wearing mirrored sunglasses and he looked at Wes for a moment, breathing deeply.

“Like a judge or something?” he asked. “You mean, sober?”

“No – “

Henderson was laughing, his big belly jiggling in and out. Wes looked over his shoulder. Barb was crossing the parking lot toward him, also smiling – not a friendly smile, either. Her teeth looked very sharp. Wes felt lost and all alone and feverish hot. He felt his lower lip pulling down. He was suddenly afraid he might start crying.

“I'm just here to judge the guts,” Wes said. He was blinking behind his sunglasses.

“Okay? That's *all*. I don't want a hassle or anything. I just want to judge the guts.”

They went through the gate and under the bleachers and out onto the asphalt track that ran around the football field. There were four or five dozen booths set up on the sidelines of the football field, facing the track, each booth with a big pot of chitlins, the people in each booth in crazy costumes, music blaring from jam boxes, smoke rising into the pale hot sky. A band had set up under the north goal post and though Wes could not clearly hear or understand the music he did see a few fools jumping around, dancing in the hot sun. Some sort of Frisbee dog contest was taking place on the football field itself, stupid people hurling plastic disks in the air, dogs jumping and barking and panting. Four or five joggers were doing their laps around the track, going pretty fast up the far side of the field but slowing and fighting their way through the chitlins crowd on the near side.

Occasionally the wind would shift and clouds of chitlins smoke blew down the track like a smoke screen; runners and chitlins people in costume would come bursting through the smoke at unexpected times, screaming, attempting to sound like fog horns. There were collisions: Wes saw one runner hurdle a baby carriage and slam into a old man wearing a DeKalb Corn hat, knocking him down and disappearing around the bend of the track. The senior in the DeKalb Corn hat staggered slowly to his feet and headed in the direction of a booth proclaiming “Department of Public Safety Hog Maws.” Then he vanished into the smoke. The baby was left unattended and began to cry. All up and down the row of booths people were chanting “Chitlins! Chitlins! Chitlins!”

Once again Wes felt doomed.

Henderson pinned a hog-shaped badge to Wes's shirt that read "CHITLINS JUDGE." Wes didn't say anything; he felt sad. It's come to this, he thought. I am at the end of the line. I am a chitlins judge.

"There you go, Wes," Henderson said. "I suppose for right now you can just wander around and look things over. Remember, when you get around to do the serious judging, you judge on taste, texture, and showmanship."

Wes said, "Showmanship."

"Yeah, the costumes, the booths, the music."

Wes took a deep breath and looked at the mob of chitlins fans. He said, "I'll need drinks."

Henderson laughed and disappeared. Wes looked around. Barb was fifty or so yards away down the track, making photographs. A cloud of smoke obscured her. Wes was glad: he wanted to stay as far away from her as possible. She was scary. He started down the row of booths.

The first one was run by a multiracial group of people in pirate costumes. They had a sign over the booth: WALK THE PLANK FOR OUR CHITLINS. They had a Jolly Roger flying over the booth. Wes smiled; he liked pirates, they seemed to have interesting lifestyles. Ride around in a boat all day, sleep till noon, drink free rum.

"Har, shipmates!" he said.

The pirates looked back at him blankly. A little boy pirate waved a sword and screamed wordlessly. Wes didn't feel comfortable.

Henderson appeared with a six-pack of beer. "Here you go, Wes."

Wes quickly slammed one of the beers, then opened another. He left the unfriendly pirates and wandered along the row of booths, dangling the beers from the plastic six-pack rings. Not everyone was in costume, which made things less confusing to look at, though there were enough mad cowboys and soldiers roaming around the field to make a movie – or a war. But now that he was here, and had some beer, he felt he could relax.

But maybe not. Ahead was a booth manned by a bunch of people in clown costumes. Her stopped and stared at them. All his life Wes had been afraid of clowns – he loathed them, he feared them, he wished they would all go far away and die miserable deaths. They were awful beings – along with dwarves, nuns, doll-babies, and puppets, they were the scariest things in the world.

“Have some chitlins,” a clown called to him.

“Leave me alone,” Wes mumbled.

“Hey, Wes,” Henderson said quietly, “you gotta start judging the chitlins sometime.”

“Clowns frighten me,” Wes said. In 15 years he’d never written a single clown column. He never would.

“C’mon,” Henderson said. “Just go on up and taste their chitlins.”

Against his better judgment, Wes took a step toward the clowns. A female clown with cat whiskers on her face – and she was a pregnant clown, Wes realized with horror – they're breeding! they're breeding! – aimed a squirt gun at him and fired.

“Argh!” Wes yelled and jumped back, tripping over Henderson and falling to the ground. The asphalt track was hot and dirty and Wes yelled again. He tried scrambling back to his feet – tripping over an untied shoelace and falling twice more – fleeing the

clowns, flailing, trying to get away, when he looked up and saw Barb aiming a camera at him. He could hear the whirring of the machine.

Henderson finally steadied Wes and handed him his four remaining beers.

“Sorry about that,” he said. He looked over at the clowns. “You oughta be ashamed, shootin’ the Judge.”

“I’m sorry,” the biggest, scariest clown said. He was a sad clown with a big drooping yellow mouth and red tears. “Please, come on over and have some chitlins.”

“Clowns suck,” Wes asked. “You guys are disqualified.”

A runner came through the crowd and knocked Wes aside and went on up the track.

Wes staggered a bit again, but Henderson caught his arm and held him straight.

“Are these kamikazes part of the show?” Wes asked.

“We’re sponsoring a marathon as part of the Chitlins Cookoff and Jamboree,”

Henderson said. “One hundred and four laps around the high school track.”

“A marathon,” Wes said. He watched a pair of runners dodge through the crowd and vanish into a cloud of smoke.

Henderson looked down the track, squinting. “I’m not sure who’s in the lead,” he said.

“Why don’t you guys just have a marathon like in the old days?” Wes asked. “You know, have some fool run around out in the country for 26 miles and then drop dead. It would be a lot more convenient for everybody.”

Watching the runners made Wes feel a tad woozy. I’m the fool, he thought. Out here in the sun. Out here with the guts. It wasn’t the sort of thing he would admit to a co-worker, like Barb, or a Chitlins Coordinator like Henderson, but there it was: a spot of dizziness hit

him every now and then, dizziness, breathlessness, a brief fade and then a return. Actually, Wes thought, the return – the reality – was so awful that the fades were rather pleasant, sort of like taking three or four Xanax with a tumbler of vodka. Still, it was probably unsafe to get dizzy at a chitlins cookoff – there was no telling what could happen. It was the damn heat, and the smoke – maybe, too, all the beer, but that was really just a minor detail. It was the heat that was the killer. He wiped his hand across his forehead and noticed that he had ceased sweating. A bad sign. He thought, I need more beer.

Wes popped open another can. It had been knocked around pretty good when he fell, and when he pulled the tab beer foam sprayed all over his shirt.

Wes heard Henderson ask Barb, “Is he okay?”

“He's fine,” Barb said. “He always works this way.”

“How would you know?” Wes asked. Through a gap in the smoke he saw an attractive dark-haired woman at a chitlins booth. He stumbled off in her direction, Henderson and Barb trailing along after him.

Wes wheeled around, knocking over a little blonde girl carrying a plastic bowl of chitlins. Spilled chitlins splashed on Wes's chinos but he didn't notice.

“I wish you people would just leave me alone and let me get on with my chitlins judging,” he said.

“You need a photographer,” Barb said.

“You need *something*,” Henderson said. He squatted down and helped the little girl to her feet. She looked angrily at Wes.

Wes shook his head and began walking rapidly up the track into the smoke. He spotted the dark-haired woman behind a chitlins booth and headed in her direction, dodging two runners and a fat white woman with a tired Frisbee dog on a leash, all the while keeping an eye on the sign above girl's booth: HENRY'S MACHINE SHOP CHITLINS.

"Today's the day!" Wes smiled as best he could and pounded his fist on the booth's table. "I'm in the mood for some machine shop chitlins!"

"Huh?"

"Chitlins," Wes said. He was aware that his speech was a tad impaired, somewhat slurred on the 's' sounds – it was that horrible heat – but felt that the girl ought to be able to understand him well enough. "Chit-lin-sh."

The woman looked around for help. She was darkly tanned and wore neon pink gym shorts. A pink tulip was tattooed on the inside of her forearm and another tattoo – a parrot, it looked like – was half-hidden by her black tank top. The booth was decorated with a drill press and a tool and die set. A sign said, "Henry's Machine Shop, Hutto, Texas." There was a photo of the tattooed woman sitting on the lap of a bearded fat man – Henry, no doubt.

Wes nodded at the drill press. "While I'm here I might as well get some holes drilled, too, please."

She asked, "What?"

"Holes." Wes smiled at the woman. He thought he might be falling in love with her – he had always been attracted to women with tattoos, and this woman had both a tulip and a

parrot etched into her body. She was wonderful. Wes tried to enunciate clearly. “I need hole-sh and chit-lin-sh. Thank you.”

The tattooed woman shook her head. “I – I don't know.”

Henderson stepped up and put his hand on Wes's shoulder. “He's okay. He just wants some chitlins.”

“Exactly,” Wes nodded. He had an urge to run his finger across the girl's tulip tattoo but restrained himself. “I'm here to judge the chitlins and to drill some holes.”

“Oh yeah?” the woman asked. But she got out a pink paper plate (embossed with the words HENRY'S MACHINE SHOP, HUTTO, TEXAS) and scooped a dipper full of chitlins onto it. She pushed it across the counter to Wes. “Here.”

Wes frowned at the plate of chitlins and looked up at Henderson. “Am I supposed to make notes about this stuff or something?”

“That's the idea.”

“Hmm.” Wes looked at the plate of chitlins for a moment. Steaming hog guts in some sort of stewy sauce with bits of celery and green peppers oozing around. He'd eaten worse-looking things – he just hoped they didn't taste of machine oil. He took a plastic fork and lifted some to his mouth – and heard Barb's camera whir.

“Stop that!”

“We need to document this moment,” Barb snickered.

Wes turned away so that they would not be able to see him eat. All his life he'd disliked having people see him eat. He took a step out onto the track, holding the plate and the fork, when something hit him from behind.

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There was a long period when there was nothing except heat, and the heat was actually rather pleasant. Then he felt someone hauling at his shirt collar and Henderson was looking into his face and saying something.

“I’m fine,” Wes tried to say. But Henderson shook his head. Everything was very warm and damp.

Henderson let go of the shirt collar and Wes again flopped over and went face-first into the asphalt track. All Wes wanted to do was go to sleep.

“Roll him over,” someone said.

Several hands grabbed at Wes's arms and he felt himself being pulled over onto his back.

“Wow!” somebody said.

Wes opened his eyes – something wet in them – and sat up. “I’m fine,” he tried to say. He noticed the tattooed girl was kneeling next to him, holding something to his forehead. The tulip on her forearm touched his cheek. He smiled at her and she grimaced and looked away.

Henderson said, “We got a medic coming.”

Wes braced himself on the tattooed woman’s shoulder and tried pushing himself to his feet – the woman collapsed backwards, though, and Wes flailed around and plopped down hard on her belly. The woman gasped.

Wes tried to say, “I’m fine.”

The woman said, “Get – “

“Really, I’m fine....”

“Him – *off!*” The woman’s eyes were bugging.

“Get him over in the shade,” Henderson said. Wes felt hands grab his shoulders and – drag – him over to a nylon lawn chair. He couldn’t move – maybe he didn’t want to move. He sat limply in the chair and watched the tulip woman get up from the track, specks of black asphalt stuck to the backs of her tanned legs. She disappeared behind the booth, and he noticed that he was bleeding.

Henderson said, “Don’t worry, Wes, we got a medic coming.”

Barb nudged aside Henderson and came in for a close shot of Wes's battered face.

“Go – away,” he whispered. He felt somehow congested and was having trouble breathing.

Barb just laughed. She said, “Hey, man, you caused that runner to blow his knee out. He's gonna sue your ass big time. So is that chitlins chick you were hittin’ on.” The camera whirred and whirred.

Wes kept trying to breathe. Behind Barb loomed the pregnant woman clown, her cat whiskers running a little from the sweat and heat.

“Here’s Becky,” Henderson said. “She’s a nurse.”

The pregnant cat-woman clown pushed Barb aside and looked into Wes's face. He shrank back in the chair as far as he could, eyes wide with fear. She peeled away the paper towel that someone was holding to Wes's forehead and a trickle of blood ran into his left eye.

“Can you hear me, Wes?” she asked.

Wes shut his eyes and tried to escape, he tried to fade away, he tried to wipe his mind clean and go home. Still, he could hear: the bass thump of the band at the far end of the football field, the growl of an enraged Frisbee dog, the compressed murmurs and rumbles of the chitlins people. And he could smell: woodsmoke and burning pork, chitterlings, hog maws, chitlins, the soft sweat of the nearby bodies. Wes felt weak, and he sighed.

“Can you hear me?”

Wes couldn't open his eyes. He heard the clown say, “Call 911,” and he wondered, why. He wished he was back at the bar, the cool dark bar, watching televised golf with Jillian. He wished he had another beer – maybe two more beers, or three. He wished – something. Something. At the very last Wes heard someone say, “We're losing him.”

## SUMMARY

These stories deal with aspects of life in early 21st Century Texas—a complicated time of boom and bust, of love and fear, of dislocation and greater dislocation. More stories need to be told, of course, many more. Texas is a big place—geographically, mythically, emotionally. The six stories comprising this thesis cannot even begin to cover what goes on in the state. *Either Side of a Line* might well be expanded into a book dealing with issues of race, religion, the environment, music, drugs, gender, politics; broad issues but human ones, issues that can be addressed through fiction, through story, through character—humanly.

I think it is worth returning to the epigraphs for a moment. In the second of two epigraphs, I use a line from James Michener's *Texas*, where a character says "Texas has always been a neurotic place, a breeding ground for anomie" (458). While I feel this is true—the Austin I lived in for so many years is an extraordinarily neurotic place—there is more to the city and the state than mere neurosis. The first epigraph, from Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Frontier*, balances with the Michener quote by approaching the Texas dilemma from a different, somewhat more romantic, certainly more tragic angle. Webb speaks of Westerners (I apply his words to Texans) as people looking for a new and better life that does not, will not, exist. That better life, of course, is a hallucination. It is a mirage. "...[W]e see the distorted images of our desires glimmering on the horizons of the future; we press on toward them only to have them disappear completely or reappear in different form in another direction" (527).

I placed Webb quote first because amid the anomie and dislocation of Texas I have also always sensed an optimism, a hope a faith in the future. In a dry, historical sense they are perhaps foolish feelings—mirages— but nonetheless they exist. In these six stories I have attempted to portray both the hope and the anomie that exist entwined in contemporary Texas

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## VITA

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