Writing Texas



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Edited by John Schulze

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Writing Texas contains some of the best fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction presented at the annual meeting of the Texas Association of Creative Writers. We appreciate the contributions to this volume made by our members and their students.

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K.P. Davis

Brothers

"What do we do with 'em?"

"Who cares?" Billy scrounged through the box looking for chocolate and cookies. Canned vegetables he set off to the side, impatient. He'd go back for those later.

"They're kind of pretty." Joey rifled through the pages. Whoever left the box of goodies had stuck the books in too, but they were mostly just words he and Billy couldn't read.

"Whoa, Billy! Look at this!" It was a drawing of a naked woman. She was holding a piece of fruit and talking to a great big snake hanging down off a tree branch.

Billy stopped his rummaging in the box to look and whistled. "Nice one!"

"I know, right?" Joey was running his hand over the image slowly and smiling.

Billy reached for the book, but Joey snatched it away. "It's mine," he said. "There's another one. You have that one."

Billy grabbed the other book and flipped through the pages looking for pictures. When he was sure there were none, he threw it down in disgust. "Nothing. Gimme that one."

"No."

Billy grabbed at the book, but Joey held on. Elbows and knees jabbed and poked as the boys rolled and tumbled, the book between them. When they pulled away from each other red-faced and panting, Joey still held the part of the book that contained the drawing, but Billy hadn't come away empty handed. He puffed out his chest as he stood up and sneered, saying, "I got more pages than you!" He wagged a big handful of tissue-thin, gilt-edged pages under Joey's nose.

"So what?" Joey caressed the drawing.

"Don't ask me for any next time you want to wipe your butt."

Joey stuck his tongue out.

K.P. Davis

Sunny Side Up

There was one car in the parking lot of Annie's Kitchen when I pulled in. The front end of the little PT Cruiser looked remarkably like my 1950 Chevy truck, though my baby was a damn sight prettier with her flashy paint job, varnished floorboards, and custom upholstery. I'd restored her myself while my mother was sick. Having something outwardly beautiful to show for that miserable time made it a little easier to think about. There hadn't been much else to do for those long rainy months while Mom wheezed through an oxygen tank. I always knew when she was sneaking a cigarette because I got a break from her shuffling around behind me talking. Now that she was gone, the silence was too quiet.

When Karen first got her car, I'd teased her about driving a knock-off, and she told me, "Honey, when you live out here in the sticks, you take what you can get and praise Jesus."

On another day, I might have kept on rolling rather than stop for breakfast where I knew I'd see Karen, but I was starving, and it had been a rough day already. The trouble was that chatting with Karen took time. For her, conversing was an art form, and you always knew she'd tell everybody in the six neighboring counties everything she managed to drag out of you. I liked her fine, but gossip got to me.

And I was grouchy because at six o'clock that morning I'd skidded across the floor and busted my butt when I stepped in dog puke. Bullet ducked behind the sofa looking guilty and I thought, I knew that turtle was gonna make him sick. I ought to put him outside like a dog. But I couldn't do that. Bullet was my one friend, my emotional pillar of strength. He understood me and he never looked at me with that judgmental hairy eyeball so many of the folks around here favored.

Once I'd cleaned up the mess in the house, I went out to find Mom's old mare was down, so I hauled grain and a bucket of water out across the pasture to where she was lying. It was time to have the old girl put down, but I was struggling with it. She had been Mom's pride and joy. They'd won an American Quarter Horse Association Championship together. When I was a little boy, she'd always been the one I could jump on anywhere, no bridle or saddle required. One day we'd ride the range in search of cattle rustlers, and the next we'd head out to scalp some white-eyes wearing war paint.

By the time I finished cleaning the stalls, it was eight o'clock. I was in the shower when the phone rang, but I got out and answered it because I couldn't afford to miss a potential paying job.

"Is Jeanette there?"

"No, she isn't. Who's calling?"

"I'll just call back." Click.

Another damned bill collector. The bastards were relentless. I told them if they gave me a chance—that my mother was dead. It was time to change the phone number, but there was precious little work coming in as it was, and folks up here still preferred the phone to email. I could lose the few clients I had if I changed the phone number. I decided I owed myself a breakfast I didn't have to pour out of a box.

The gloom of the restaurant settled around me as I walked in. It was big and open with a high ceiling and plenty of windows, but even on a sunny day it felt like you were sheltering from a thunderstorm when you were inside it. Dark film on the windows kept the air conditioner from running twenty-four seven, but the oppressive atmosphere was a poor trade-off.

The waitress greeted me. "Coffee, Babe?" she asked before I'd even chosen a table. She knew where I was gonna sit. I always sat in the same place. I could never quite remember her name, but she called me and everybody else Babe, so I guessed she didn't mind if I called her Sweetheart. She didn't slap me, just brought my coffee and I ordered my usual: eggs, sunny side up, sausage, and hash browns.

While I waited for the food to arrive, I looked around the nearly empty room. Karen was at a table in the corner with her family. That was unusual. She was usually in the big middle of things, and it was an odd time of day for them to be out together. The two younger women had full-time jobs, and I'd have thought they would be working by nearly nine on a weekday morning. Karen should have been at work, too. She was the secretary at the First Church of God. She wasn't very good at it, but she could talk up a storm on the telephone. Her husband was a deacon, so her job performance was never an issue. I don't like to seem ungrateful—Karen got me the website job for the church—but she refused to learn how to work the dang thing. She always called me when there were several other people in her office, and she'd put me on the speakerphone while she multi-tasked and blabbed about unrelated things. She finally quit that after I dropped an f-bomb while the pastor was standing there one day, but it still took hours for me to explain whatever it was she called to ask about. I never could bill the church for the actual time I spent because I didn't want to get Karen in trouble.

I was caught between that old rock and the hard place. As the only web designer within a hundred miles, I should have been making plenty to live on, but I let my clients walk all over me. They couldn't pay what the city firms charged. They wanted websites because they'd heard they needed them, but they

preferred to do business face-to-face. I should have been able to pull clients from all over since there was no real reason to meet website clients face-to-face. They could contact me from Timbuktu by email, and I could give them a beautiful website at a reasonable price, but that wasn't how it had worked out. Most of my referrals came by word-of-mouth, and my clients could barely check their e-mail, and they wanted to meet me in person, because you never knew what kind of crazy foreigner you might get if you did business over the Internet. The irony of their wanting to do business online was lost on them. So, I took pictures of their tractors and their jewel-encrusted flip-flops and put 'em online. Then I trained and retrained their after-school help to update the websites as year after year the brightest sparks left town right after graduation never to be seen again.

I was thinking, I wish I'd never been seen again, when my breakfast arrived. I sprinkled salt and pepper on the perfect eggs and looked over at Karen and her family. She had on a gray sweat suit, and I thought she must be sick because her hair was hanging limp, and she wasn't wearing any makeup. It was the first time I'd ever seen her without both hands clicking with over-sized rings. The scuffed paint on the concrete floors didn't do much to muffle the sound in the big open room, so even though Karen's family spoke with their heads close together, I caught the occasional "she" in their conversation punctuated by a sniffle.

Uh-oh, I thought. Something's up.

I focused on getting the egg-to-sausage-to-hash-brown ratio just right on my fork and tried not to pay too much attention to the discussion at the other table. Karen's husband, a man in his sixties, sat quietly, his straw cowboy hat screwed down tight, his gaze fixed on the tabletop.

The waitress refilled my coffee, and I said, "Thanks, sweetheart." Then I watched some country and western singer mouthing a song on the silent TV across the room. I stood up as Karen and her family pushed away from their table and Karen walked toward me. Her eyes were puffy and red.

"Morning, Karen. What are you doing away from your desk?" It was all I could come up with. I mean, how do you politely ask somebody why they look like hell?

She took a shuddering breath and said, "We lost our granddaughter—buried her yesterday."

It felt like she had slapped me.

"Sally?" I asked, knowing it wasn't Sally. That was the girl that had just gotten up from the table, but she was the only granddaughter I knew about. I'd asked her out once—she looked easy and I'd been desperate, but she'd turned me down. I was too short to attract the girls in this place where there were plenty of long-legged cowboys to choose from. I knew how to groom a horse and clean a stall, but Mom had never let me mix with the real rodeo crowd. "Too wild"

she'd said. I left for college, a scrawny kid with no friends, and I'd stayed gone until Mom got sick.

Karen finally replied, "No, her sister, Alice."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," I mumbled in her ear as I gave her a hug.

"It's alright. You didn't know."

I just nodded and tried to look sympathetic.

"I've been meaning to call you." She hesitated, trying to remember why. "I forgot how to update my events calendar, and I don't want to get off in there and mess somethin' up," she finally said.

"Any time, Karen. You just holler when you feel up to it." I slipped into a drawl to match hers. It's easier to fit in if you sound like a local.

I sat back down with my coffee when she left.

"You ready for a refill, Babe?" the waitress asked.

"Sure." I didn't want any more coffee, but I needed a few more minutes to sit with Karen's grief. I really had no idea what it might feel like to have a loving family to care about me. It's no wonder I hadn't heard about the wreck that killed Karen's granddaughter, though. Our joke of a newspaper only came out once a week, so it was easy to miss a funeral unless somebody called you, and nobody ever called me except clients and bill collectors. Besides, I was too broke to subscribe to the paper just to keep up with the obituaries, the FFA, the PTA, and the Sons of the Confederacy. I didn't honestly care about much of anything that went on here. I hated the place, but I was stuck—couldn't afford to stay, couldn't afford to leave.

The move back was only supposed to be temporary, but my mother lasted nearly three years on a lung and a quarter. Then when she died, the trap snapped shut, and I couldn't leave. The medical bills had eaten up every last nickel either of us had. That left me with a tumbledown horse ranch in such a pitiful state I couldn't sell it. The few remaining horses were so old nobody wanted them, and you couldn't give land away in this county.

My dog and my truck were all I had that meant anything to me. My web design business never quite paid the bills, and I had zero prospects of meeting a woman. I could have tried trolling the churches for unmarried daughters, but I couldn't quite bring myself to do that. I always remembered my old granddaddy saying, "Those mealy-mouthed sons-of-bitches are nothing but a bunch of hypocrites."

I was in a funk when I eventually paid for my breakfast and left. I took a deep breath and wished for the bright day to improve my mood. I drove down the road and pulled in under the feed store's crumbling awning. Mom's old friend Buddy was standing at the counter wearing his breakfast on his prominent belly. He was a jolly man, always ready to chew the fat.

"Hey Buddy, how you doing today?"

"Can't complain," he said, waiting for me to pick the topic.

I shuffled and turned the idea over in my head one last time. "If I wanted to have Mom's old mare put down, how would I go about it?"

"Call the vet."

"I mean, who could I get to bury her?"

"Well, you could haul her off to the glue factory."

"Come on, Buddy. You know I can't do that. She meant too much to my mother."

He scratched a phone number on a stained notepad and said, "This old boy has a backhoe. He's planted one or two of mine."

"Thanks Buddy. I also need six bags of horse and mule feed."

"You planning to fertilize this year?"

"Is it already time for that?"

"If you want any hay it is."

"What's it gonna cost me?"

"Depends on what you want to spread, but your momma used to put out nitrogen and sometimes she'd seed some clover or vetch. Lemme look up what she paid last time . . ."

While Buddy rummaged around in a filthy notebook, I wandered through the dusty shop examining the hodge-podge of weed killers, feed supplements and farm equipment.

"Here it is, thirty-eight acres. Five dollars per acre for the nitrogen a couple of dollars more for the seed, and you're looking at . . ." he punched at a tiny calculator. "Two hundred and sixty-six dollars."

"Oh man, Buddy, I know it needs it, but I'm broke."

"Son, you can't really afford not to do it. You planning to try and sell that old place?"

"Who'd have it?"

"Well now, you might be surprised. If it was me, I'd buy me some paint and get to work. Springtime is the right time to sell."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"What do you think I can ask for it?"

"You get it cleaned up and get the grass looking pretty and you ought to be able to get thirty-five hundred an acre for it plus whatever the house and barn appraise for."

"You think I could get that for it?"

"Won't know till you try."

I don't know if it was Buddy's no-nonsense optimism or the sunshine, but

it started feeling like there might be a way out of my purgatory. Grief and difficult decisions just needed to be got through. I stopped at the hardware store and bought half a dozen cans of the cheapest exterior latex they had. Buddy's "Won't know till you try" kept repeating in my head. It couldn't hurt to act like I was going to sell, even if I wasn't, right? I'd never know what I might get for the place unless I put it on the market. I phoned the guy with the backhoe when I got back to the house.

"Yello?" barked a brisk voice.

"Mr. Atkins?"

"This is Bill Atkins."

"Mr. Atkins, Buddy, down at the feed store gave me your name and said you might be able to help me with an old mare I need to have put down."

"That's right. You got some land where we can bury her?"

"Yessir. I haven't called the vet yet. I wanted to talk to you first. The old mare has been down for a couple of days now, and I really don't think she can get up anymore."

"Can we dig a hole right there beside her?"

"It's okay with me."

"I'm free tomorrow afternoon. Where are you located at?"

"I'm out on highway twenty-seven—'bout six miles east of town. I'm Jeanette Bowen's son."

"Oh hell, son. Why didn't you say so. I know the place. Been there before. Is it that old sorrel mare?"

"Yessir."

"I've been expecting you to call about her. Give old Doc Grooms a call. Tell him I can come tomorrow afternoon."

When I hung up, I felt like the sunshine was starting to get inside me. I put on some old clothes, hunted up a paintbrush and went outside. I was about to get started when I looked out at the old mare lying in the grass. She was sitting up and the other horses were congregating close by. She's probably thirsty. I set my paint bucket down and walked out with a water bucket. Bullet stayed close to my heels. He'd learned the hard way what happens when you mess with the horses.

The old mare nickered as I got close, and I sat down by her head and scratched between her ears while she drank from the bucket. She was a good horse. She'd led a charmed life for a horse. I wanted to tell her what was going to happen, but I just sat there. The knot in my throat wouldn't let me speak. It smelled of early spring grass, and the weather was still cool enough that the bugs hadn't come out yet.

When the fertilizer truck turned up the next Tuesday, there was a patch of bare earth out in the pasture where the old mare was buried, and I'd managed to scrape and paint two of the four sides of the house. I was sunburned and tired, but I felt better than I had in a long time. The phone rang and I went in the house to answer it.

"Michael, what's going on out your way?" It was Karen Wilkins.

"Hi, Karen. You back at work?"

"You betcha. Feeling better, and I need to get your help with this dang website."

"You want me to come in there, Karen?"

She said the magic words, "I'll buy you lunch if you've got the time."

I knew it was coming, so I wasn't surprised when Karen started the inquisition over a fried shrimp basket.

"So, I see you're fixing the old place up. Buddy Ferguson said you're thinking of putting it on the market."

"Thinking about it."

"I don't blame you—young man like you. You could probably make a decent living if you went back to the city."

"Maybe. I haven't really looked into that yet."

"Well, why not? You going to sell your home out from under you with no place to go?"

"I don't know, Karen. I'm just making it up as I go along. I don't really want to go back to my old life in Dallas."

"How come?"

"It's been too long. There's not really anybody I miss."

"I think if you'd find a job with other people around, you might just make some friends."

"You're probably right. I don't see many people in person around here."

"Well, wherever you end up, you'll still be able to help me out over the phone once in a while, won't you?"

"Always, Ms. Karen."

That evening I dusted off my résumé. I figured it might take longer to find a job than it would to sell the property, I wouldn't know till I gave it a try. Bullet put his head on my lap while I worked. He looked up, concern in his eyes. "Don't worry, boy. You're going with me. We're a team."

Six weeks down the road, it was feeling like summer when the real estate agent pulled up without an appointment.

"This is Mr. and Mrs. Richards. Would you mind if I show them around?"

"Sure. I'm on the way out, but you can just turn the lock when you leave."

I whistled for Bullet, who hopped into the bed of the truck and rode, ears and tongue flapping in the breeze all the way to the post office. Among the bills was a check or two and I heaved a sigh of relief. I didn't want to get back to the house till the real estate lady and her clients were gone, so I stopped by the feed store.

"Afternoon, Buddy."

"Afternoon, young man. What do you know good?"

"Not a lot."

"Your grass looks mighty nice. 'Bout time to cut some hay."

"I can cut it, Buddy, but I need somebody to bail it."

"I know an old boy. He'll do it for a percentage."

"I need to put some of it up for the horses."

"How many horses you got now?"

"I'm down to four."

"Why don't you get shed of 'em? You're not doing anything with 'em."

"Who wants those old nags?"

"Bless your heart, boy. Your mother would roll over in her grave to hear you talk about those horses like that. Them's pure blooded Quarter Horses. Your Momma spent her life breedin' the best. Make a few calls. You'll get something for 'em. Might not be a fortune, but it's better than a poke in the eye."

I went home with a list of names and numbers. Once again, Buddy had solved my problem before I knew I had one. He scribbled the contact info on his dirty notepad and two hours later I had not one, but two people interested enough to come take a look at the horses.

I sat out on the porch and watched the sun go down over the sea of grass, and a big lump formed in my throat again. Bullet rested his head on my lap. Damned old place. I was going to miss it. I'd spent my whole life hating this place, now I didn't want to go.

Bullet glued his butt to the passenger seat in the truck three weeks later. He wouldn't even get out to pee, afraid I might leave without him. The new people had showed up early that morning with two trailers full of scrawny Appaloosas.

I thought, Mom would be disgusted to see all those spotted horses eating her grass as I pulled out onto the highway.