

Range Rider

I settled into the plush of the booth, turning my warm long-neck to catch a flare from a ray of winter sunlight struggling through the bar's long-unwashed front window, and I reflected upon my return to Archer City and Marlie: Was this just another in a long cascade of missteps or had I finally come home; was the urgency that pulled me here truly heartfelt or was I only responding to another strange, nameless gravitational attraction, centripetal, imploding, lost? I sipped my beer, squinting against the fading five o'clock afternoon, and tried to revive a memory of happiness, tried to feel something – true, authentic – for Marlie, something that had survived the shattering of years of tired familiarity, anything beyond my lust and loneliness, but nothing was summoned but the fear of despair. I slipped a dollar beneath my half-finished beer and walked stiffly out to Main, heading west to River Road and Marlie's place.

Marlie. I walked past her twilit singlewide two, three, four times, searching for courage, for something to say, for a way to reach back and pull us from the wreckage, to rewind past the crash and begin again, and I saw flickers behind the window blinds, random bits of her shape gathering into the promise of her forgiving arms. Braced against the cottonwood that protected her patch of cracked earth, I rolled a smoke and watched the beginnings of night pretty up her weathered trailer with glowing windows and the fragrance of something home-cooked. How easy this might be: a quiet knock, a cautious cracking of the door, a long pause as she seeks to recognize me, and then a thrown-open welcome: My god, Richie, my god, look at you, come in, come in, have you had your dinner? I was just fixing mine, come in, come in, it's chilly out ... my god, Ritchie ... oh ... my ... god.

But I knew that "motherfucker" and "cocksucker" were among the real greetings that waited for me inside that trailer, behind a slammed door. No amount of time or clarity of heart, not even a flood of pure intentions could scour away hurts as tenacious and immovable as boulders. My dream of redemption lay crushed. I leaned against the cottonwood until the prairie cold had numbed me and darkness concealed me. Empty, used up, tired beyond recovery, I walked slowly back to the HexSol'd bus station on Main.

Somewhere on the prairie, I awoke, my head rattling on the cracked upholstery of the empty seat next to me – decrepit 'Hound, reeking of diesel and a foul toilet – and I sat up, neck and back fused in stiff pain, a yellow fevered sun at ten o'clock, spilling across my lap through a window made slick by a rider's Brylcreemed pompadour. With great care, I probed my tongue into the swollen, weeping holes where two teeth had been pegged until last night – oh, god, last night! An empty pint of Beam in my coat pocket triggered a hazy last-stop memory: my pressing hard against a two a.m. truck stop floozy when – wham! – her boyfriend introduced himself; fuck, my jaw ... how battered, inside and out, how turned-out I am, dead to

hope and an unrecoverable past, dead to everything but the endless passage of dried-out prairie and the nauseating pitching of the 'Hound.

Standing, swaying in the fluorescent half-light of the bus lavvy – door forced open with my right boot to fight the stench – I checked the damage. Three days had passed since my strange twin had stared back at me from a mirror, and the changes were horrific, the right side of my face ruined, swollen, yellow-purple and caked with brown blood. I gripped the sink and looked away, the sludge and bile of Beam churning and threatening to rise. How had I fallen here, into the ghastly underworld of the lost, and so quickly, so quickly? In the thin stream of tepid bus water, I washed away the worst of the evidence, sponged my filthy windbreaker, freshened the greasy creases in my Stetson, tucked in my snap-button shirt ... but did not dare glance back into that window of the self. Once was enough.