

# Prairie Ink

A Literary Annual



Issue Nine



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“There is a way to see inside by looking directly through to seed or marrow.”

-Joan Halifax

### **From the Editor**

Dear Readers,

My husband, Rick, and I try to get to Salina to the Smokey Hill Arts Festival every year, and this year was no exception. I found a print that I really wanted to take home, and when the artist gave me the background (below), I decided it would be perfect for the cover of our 9th edition. For me, the tree evokes my childhood, my roots, my memories, and the constancy of transformation in my life. Michael Vick's excerpt in this edition is another tale of childhood memories and how a boy comes to manhood. I hope you enjoy it and all of this year's submissions.

-Jaime Abel

-Cover art by Gregory Arth

About the painting:

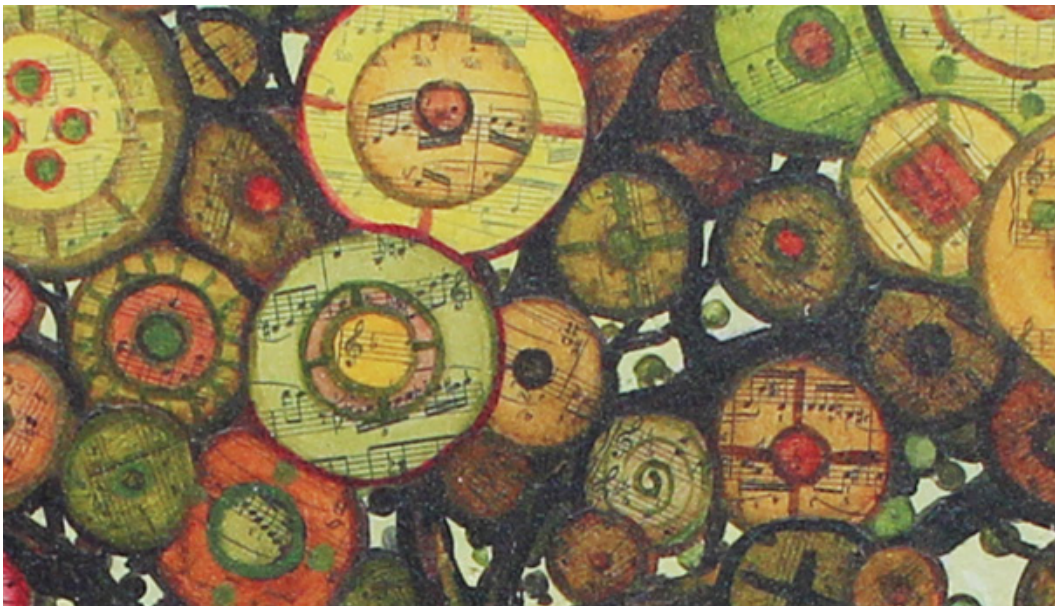
The tree series was inspired by the old oak trees on my property that surround my home and studio, some of which are well over 100 years old. Dream tree specifically represents the repository of our dreams in case we lose them. As a child I played in the woods, climbed trees and built tree forts. Like all of us I was filled with dreams of what I would do in life and I imagine that these dreams somehow remain among the leaves and branches of the trees and are available to reclaim in case we forget.

Arth currently lives in Colleyville, near Ft. Worth with his wife and frequent muse of 30 years, Claudia. Visit [www.gregoryarth.com](http://www.gregoryarth.com) for more artwork.

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## **All the Small Things**

By Kara Grosfield

This story is about a young man who's dark past and current hardships lead him to the edge of suicide. The show is Lynn's first-hand account of all of the small moments that piled up inside of him. This being symbolized for the audience by items brought on by the people that represent the moments in his life. It isn't till a single item is handed directly to Lynn that he begins to see a light and all of the small things that had built up begin to crash down.

### **Cast**

Lynn- Male looks 20-24 years old

Mother

Father

Bully- 8-15 years old

Teacher-Female

Therapist

Mark (best friend) - 16-20 years old

A single chair sits on the center of the stage

(LYNN enters and takes a seat in silence)

LYNN

I sometimes ask myself how I could've let it get that bad. Wanting to take your own life isn't something that just shows up after a small inconvenience or a single domino falls into an abyss. No, it's a thousand agonizing dominoes silently tumbling until you realize there's not a single part of your life that's standing up-

right. I know, what a downer. I hope you don't mind but I'm going to take this moment to answer my question. I want to look at all the small things that brought me here. Where do I begin?

MOTHER

It's your first day of first grade oh look at my big boy.

LYNN

Wow that was so long ago. I can't believe I can still remember that.

(Mother brings out a backpack and a liquor bottle and sets it at Lynn's feet)

LYNN

My dad got so drunk the night before he threw that at me. Mom never wanted me to remember that bruise I had on my forehead. She would always just bring up how much I loved that lunch box and how cute I looked in my ninja turtle t-shirt. I guarantee you there's not another human being in the entire universe that could find the bright side like she did.

MOTHER

Okay honey make sure to make lots of friends and eat your sandwich I packed. Oh, and Lynn, Mommy loves you.

LYNN

Life went on in a pattern for at least four years after that. I would go to school come home clean, Dad would get drunk, someone got hurt. I never slept like I should, and then I woke up and went to school. This was until Mrs. Greer, my

fifth grade music teacher, came into my life.

TEACHER

You look like a young man that would be a great trombone player. What do you say we give it shot?

LYNN

I asked my mom who thought it was a wonderful idea. Every day after school I would go in and rehearse with the band. I finally had an escape from my house and everything that happened in it. That was the case until we had our Christmas performance.

LYNN

Dad was so upset that mom and I were home later than he had expected. He broke this arm in two places. Of course the doctor thought I fell down the stairs again because, apparently, I was just that big of a klutz but Mrs. Greer wasn't so naive.

(Mother enters on the opposite side of Lynn)

MOTHER

No, you're mistaken. Lynn just has two right feet. He's always falling.

TEACHER

I know you don't want to see this happening to your son. I can help you, and if you don't accept my help, I'm obligated to call Child Protective Services

(Mother exits)

LYNN

Mrs. Greer changed my entire life.

(Mother carries out a suitcase, sets it down and exits)

LYNN

Mom and I moved to Burbank that same week. I never got to thank her for giving  
my mother the courage to leave.

(Teacher walks next to Lynn and looks him in the eye)

LYNN

Thank you.

(Teacher exits)

LYNN

On to the next part which is kind of funny to me. You would think after having  
to survive living with my father a bully, wouldn't phase me. Well, my eighth grade  
year this kid named Jack got me expelled from school for 3 days. When my mom  
took me to my therapist, she said I was mirroring my father's behavior. If they  
only knew.

(Bully enters)

BULLY

Even on the corner, your mom couldn't make enough money to get you  
a phone or shoes that don't have holes.

LYNN

Derrick had some problems at home, too. He actually died from alcohol poisoning his junior year of high school. His father expected a lot from him, and his mother was living with a new boyfriend. I didn't know about his life when he said that about my mom. I wouldn't have cared even if I did.

(Bully puts bloodied rag on ground)

LYNN

I broke his nose with one hit. He got out of school for a whole week while his dad tried to get a restraining order against me. Mom eventually just moved me to another school that was twelve blocks away. At the time, I didn't know this, but that school cost my mom four times the cost of the public school I had previously been attending. It was at this point I had begun to have this constant fear that I could at any moment become my father.

(Bully exits)

FATHER

WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?

LYNN

I wouldn't even leave the house; I was so terrified that someone or something could make me angry. No, not make me angry, make me him. You wouldn't believe it, but it was a very fortunate thing that I didn't want to leave my room that summer. June 23, all of my childhood dread came rushing back.

(There's a loud *KNOCK KNOCK*, and then the Father enters with a door knob.)



LYNN

I could hear the doorknob hit the floor. I called 911 and did what I thought was right and ran to my mother's aid. If I wouldn't have stepped in, he would've killed her. I know it. I still have two metal plates and three screws all over my body. He even broke my jaw, his own son.

(Father drops the knob with a thud and exits)

LYNN

He was finally arrested and taken out of our lives. At least he wasn't physically in our lives anymore. He was there in my nightmares, and even when I was awake, I would close my eyes, and he'd be there. I just thought it was something that would go away with time, but during lunch period one day, the football team came in shouting, and I had my first flashback.

THERAPIST

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Anxiety.

LYNN

I remember thinking, oh my God, that's so long it's making me anxious. I have what? What does that even mean? It was a rough time for my mom and I, but like I said, she always had her bright side.

(Mother and Therapist enter, Therapist carries in pill bottles and sets them right in front of Lynn)

MOTHER

At least we know what's wrong. It can only get better from here. (Therapist and Mother leave.)

LYNN

Getting my medication wasn't the only great thing to come out of me losing my mind in front of the entire freshman class. My fit caught the attention of Mark, another weird loner who was diagnosed with bipolar not that long after I was diagnosed. On weekends, Mark and I would stay in all day and play video games.

MARK

Watch out! No behind you! MOVE, MOVE, MOVE!

LYNN

I know it was my fault what happened to him. Do you remember what I was saying earlier about the dominoes? Mine had been falling down since the year I was born; no matter what I did, my life was destined to fail, but Mark had good parents and two younger sisters. Lily and Sara were so devastated.

(Mark enters with keys and a beer bottle.)

LYNN

I just wanted to be numb and not have to deal with the constant punches. I told him I didn't want him to be a part of what I was doing, but he insisted that we do everything together. We didn't die together. There was a lot of small things that led me to the breaking point, but losing him because we wanted to numb the pain, that wasn't small. He drove home drunk from a party and hit another car head on. It was our senior year-- 3 months before graduation.

(Mark sits down with all of items on the floor)

MARK

Dude you can't blame yourself.

(Lynn, unable to look at Mark, tears up and continues)

LYNN

That's when I stopped going to therapy. My future plans for college started to become less and less important to me. There were a millions times when I thought about taking this pain and putting it in a bottle. Then I would think of what it would do to my poor mother who couldn't take any more tragedy in her life. Without a crutch or my only good friend, all of my past and present problems began to bubble. This added to the fact that it was time for college.

(Random people come out bringing random belongings and setting them down.)

LYNN

All of my things torn from their places and moved around. I was torn from my place and plopped into a dorm room. Luckily, my mom thought it would be best to get me a singles room, so no human would terrified of any emotional outburst.

LYNN

Being alone had its benefits. It gave me time to think. I remembered that time I got kicked off the baseball team because my dad shattered my bat when I missed a ball.

(Father enters laying down a bat and going to stage right.)

LYNN

Or when Mark asked Lydia Hill out on a date, and she poured her soup on him.

(Mark stands up and walks over to stage right)

LYNN

Or when Mom got sick.

(Mother comes out and lays down a cancer ribbon.)

LYNN

Or every day when people walk by and say nothing. When I need a friend and no one's there.

(As many extras as possible enter and walk to either side, not noticing Lynn)

LYNN

I remember now. It was June 23rd, the anniversary of Mark's death. It was planned for the same time-- 12:54 pm. You look worried. Don't be. I don't die on that day. Something happened that changed everything.

(ARIA in a beautiful dress carries a single flower)

ARIA

(Walking right up to Lynn)

Hi, I hope I'm not bothering you.

LYNN

You can see me?

ARIA

Of course I can, and what I see looks like a pretty sad person.(Aria hands Lynn the flower she has in her hand)

ARIA

I know I don't know you, but you can always talk to me.

(Music begins playing as Aria and Lynn pantomime a conversation during which the rest of the cast slowly gather their baggage, and walk away, smiling, looking back at the couple. When the stage is empty, the father removes the chair, leaving Aria and Lynn standing alone.)

LYNN

Aria

(Mother enters and hands Lynn a ring, smiles, then exits. Lynn gets on one knee.)

LYNN

Will you marry me?

ARIA

Oh my. Yes. It's beautiful.

LYNN

It was my mom's.

(Aria and Lynn embrace and Aria exits looking at her ring.)

LYNN

My dominoes kept falling no matter how hard I tried to stop them. I believe that was because the world was out to get me. I thought I would never have a place here. What I didn't realize was, as they fell down, they created the path that led me here. No matter the size of your dominoes or duration of your wait, never give up.

(Aria re-enters)

ARIA

Honey come on. My mom's waiting.

LYNN

I've gotta go. Thanks for listening.



## **Academic Exchanges – Visiting the USA**

By Don Gaeddert

If you have ever visited a foreign country, you have probably brushed up on ist cultural practices and differences so you did not insult anyone and embarrass yourself. However, it seems inevitable that a situation will come up for which you are unfamiliar and ill prepared to deal. Accordingly, you put your best foot forward, using the good manners and behavior you were taught growing up, but sometimes good intentions just make matters worse.

While living in western China, my wife and I became friends with a young couple both of whom were professors in our medical university. HuTang and his wife ShiYu. Our medical university shared an exchange program for professors with a university in the Midwest, and our friends were chosen to spend a month in the USA.

When you hear their stories about what they experienced during their trip, please keep in mind a couple of things about Chinese Society in western China. First, the game of golf is not a popular sport and most Chinese have never watched it much less played golf. Second, when you eat at a restaurant in western China, there is no tipping of waitresses. Whether this is the reason why waitresses only give minimal service thus seldom coming back to the table to fill drinks or ask if you need anything, I don't know, but finding a waitress after they have taken your order can be a challenge.

When HuTang and his wife ShiYu returned from their one month visit to the Midwestern university, we got together with them, and they shared their experiences of visiting the USA for the first time.

HuTang began, "We were taking a walk along the edge of a park which seemed to border another park which was well maintained with beautiful mowed grass of different colors and landscaping with ponds and low areas with white sand. While walking, we noticed a man with a stick who was far away from us, and it looked like he was hitting something. It turned out to be a small white ball. He was very good, and I was amazed at how far he hit the ball. Well, that little ball landed close to where we were walking.

ShiYu and I were concerned that the man would have difficulty finding the ball, and, wanting to be helpful, I went over to the ball, picked it up, and started walking toward the man to give it to him. By this time, he had gotten into a little car and was driving toward me, and it appeared that he was shouting something. When he got out of the car, he started yelling at me like he was mad and used words I did not understand. I gave him the ball, and he told us to get out of there. I found out later that the man was playing a game called Golf."

HuTang continued, "And there was another time when we were at a restaurant to eat a meal. This was our first time eating in a restaurant after we arrived in America. The waitress kept coming back to our table and asking if we needed anything and refilling our water glasses even though they were still pretty full. I got the impression that she thought we would leave without paying which is why she kept such a close watch on us. I finally decided that I needed to do something which would convince her that we would pay for the meal, so I stood up, took out my wallet, and gave several of the waitresses two dollars. By this time, many of the people eating at the other tables were looking at us and some were laughing. It was embarrassing."



Both my wife and I tried to assure HuTang that the waitress was simply trying to give them good service by checking on them frequently, and, even in the Midwest where there may be very few Chinese people, the waitress wouldn't have had any thoughts that they would not pay for the meal.

Funny how these cultural exchanges can result in such significant misunderstandings and leave people feeling embarrassed with hurt feelings.

One final event on the day before HuTang and ShiYu would leave to return to China might be considered a result of Murphy's law – things that can go wrong will happen and at the worst time. Or maybe the moral of this story is not to teach visitors from other countries to take risks and break the rules.

ShiYu, "We had a wonderful neighbor lady in the apartment building in which we stayed for the month we were in the USA. She was not Chinese, but tried to help us as much as possible. The woman told us the best place to find the things we needed to buy and at the best prices was COSTCO. She said it required a membership card but that we could use hers. We went to COSTCO several times while in the USA, and our neighbor was right, we were able to find most everything we needed, even Chinese foods. HuTang tried many American foods, but he missed Chinese food so much that we cooked only Chinese food in our apartment."

She continued, "We never had a problem with buying things at COSTCO so we decided to buy a lot of things the day before we would be flying back to China. We wanted gifts and memories to bring home. We filled up our cart and went to the cashier's checkout. When I handed the female cashier the membership card, she looked at the picture on the card and then at me and said, 'This isn't you.' I

didn't know what to say, so I looked down at my feet and said, 'Yes it is.' She looked at the picture and then at me again and shook her head, 'No, it isn't you.' I said, 'Yes it is.' The cashier then turned to another customer standing in line, a man, showed him the picture, and asked him, 'Is this her?' He looked at the card and then at me and said 'No.'

“So what happened?” asked my wife excitedly.

“The cashier would not let us buy anything, and we left. It was very disappointing. Why didn't the cashier let us buy things when other times there was no problem?” ShiYu was still visibly upset about what had happened. Obviously this particular cashier decided to enforce the rule that membership cards cannot be loaned out to other people.

Such are the trials of visiting another culture. My wife and I could empathize with HuTang and ShiYu as can most people who have traveled and lived abroad. We brought back our own stories of misunderstandings and embarrassing moments. Maybe as Americans, we can be a little more welcoming, forgiving, and helpful when we see visiting foreigners having trouble here in the USA.



## **Gift or Curse**

Lee Miller

The bell sounds and echoes.  
Pictures cast onto the back of the eyes,  
Glowing, burning, penetrating deep  
through and into the creative lobe of  
the brain.  
The vision swells and expands,  
Ballooning out, sucking up the center  
of imagination and concentration  
Forcing pressure on the vulnerable  
structure until it finally engulfs the  
sense of consciousness.  
Fighting for focus is futile.  
The image has a plan of its own.  
It wants to be born, to live, to breathe  
the air through the pen that has been  
stuck up its nose  
Pumping ink into its body, inflating its  
lungs.

The design throws itself out and onto  
the paper.

The artist, with what seems to be little  
control, guides the pen around the  
page

Extracting the daydream.

Letting it run out of the ears, eyes, and  
fingertips of the puppet.

Now, finally off ventilation, it speaks  
for itself and allows the servant to  
return to the duties of servant-hood

Until the bell is rung again...ring.



## **Life**

Michael G. W. Gaynor

Life is filled with pain; it's what you  
make of lessons learned that gives  
Life, life.

If I could change but one thing in Life,  
I'd terminate Death. No matter what  
you do... Death is watching; waiting  
to make its move. When the price of  
Life has been paid, Death will come  
on swift wing's to claim what truly  
belongs to it, Life.

Myself... I wish to be something more  
than just dying slowly. Education gives  
me Motivation, Courage, Happiness,  
and Life. I am on the brink of losing  
everything, hanging on the edge of  
Hope. Am I too numb, or too blind to  
see what Hope has done to me?

The beautiful sky and the light  
Knowledge brings shines on me.  
Education in my world is the light of  
Life.



## **Caliphate**

By Michael Vick

### The Nightmare

“Micah, I think you have a fever,” Karen placed her soft hand on Micah’s forehead. Micah had no appetite and had been vomiting for two days. Now a fever set in, and Karen and Tommy feared the worst.

“Open your mouth, Micah. I’m going to take your temperature.” Karen slid the thermometer under Micah’s tongue with the blue colored tip first.

“Ok, now gently close your mouth.” Karen sat on the bed while Micah lay his head on his mother’s lap. She waited the required three minutes and then removed the thermometer. A temperature reading of 103 F. Karen secured a table spoon from the kitchen, and Micah choked down the Vick’s Formula 44 with Codeine. That should do the trick, Karen thought.

“Now Micah you get some sleep, and I will have you a nice warm bowl of chicken soup ready when you wake up.” Micah began to slip off into a deep sleep, and a nightmare framed his mind.

Armies of black masked killers swarmed down on the innocent bystanders, hacking them to pieces, blood all around. They were everywhere. They wore black robes and covered their faces and heads with the black cloth...swarming through his blood stream and in every part of his body. He could see one of them carrying a black flag with strange writing...writing that he did not recognize. Their intentions were clear. They intended to exterminate every living, peaceful inhabitant in Micah’s body. The only thing that showed were their evil eyes. They

were infectious invaders streaming through every living cell and neuron in Micah's body, blood, and brain. Micah prayed and persisted, determined not to fall to the enemy within. He gave hope to the battered and beaten white blood cells and strengthened the reinforcing antibodies to mount a counter attack on these foreign invaders. His body shivered and he broke into a sweat as he awakened from the nightmare. The fever had broken and the massacre had ended. Déjà vu! Behold the prophecy.

As Micah grew older he experienced this same nightmare within his body when he became sick with a fever or infection. He never understood it, but he feared it. There was nothing in Micah's life that scared him more than this dream.

### The Hunt

The red ants crawled about the light alkaline limestone laden soil, working tirelessly to feed the mother queen deep in the underground kingdom. Like soldiers marching in lines, they moved in and out of the hole in the ant mound. The hot West Texas sun beat down on Micah's back as he leaned over and used a mesquite stick, allowing the ants to crawl up the stick and quickly shaking them into the mason jar before they reached his hand. After gathering a hundred or so, he decided this would be enough to defeat the black ants on the other side of the field. He walked over to the black ant mound and leaned over and dumped the attacking force onto the enemy stronghold. The fight began. The red ants fought ruthlessly to defeat the black ants, chopping off legs and heads, but the fighting subsided with the black ants winning the battle.

"Micah! You need to take care of the garden before it gets dark," Mike's dad yelled from the double wide trailer house front door.

“OK Dad, I’ll take care of it.” He walked over to the garden and looked proudly at the rows of corn, tomatoes, okra, jalapeño peppers, watermelons, and onions. He had used a grubbing hoe to till the garden in the spring because Dad could not afford a gas tiller. Typically, Dad would visit the flea market and buy used lawn mowers, weed eaters, and chainsaws. Micah and Jake learned how to use the tools and repair them to keep them working. They asked Dad for bicycles, and he showed up the next day with four used and broken bicycles. Yep, he had stopped by the flea market on his way home from work. He pulled out the tool set and said, “make two that work.” Micah and Jake learned how to survive with what they had. And with the garden, the old manual method, swinging the grubbing hoe, up and down into the hard soil made Micah and Jake’s muscles grow strong from the work which would benefit them when football started again. Micah placed the water hose at the front end of the first neatly tilled rows with the tomatoes and let the water flow.

Early the next morning, Tommy woke them early, “Boys, you need to get up. I need you to get an early start on your chores and go get a deer or some rabbits. We’re out of meat.” Jake and Micah climbed out of bed, sleepy-eyed and put on their Wrangler work jeans and boots. Tommy turned the knob to start the gas burning stove, and he place the large 12-inch cast iron skillet over the flame. He whipped up the homemade pancake batter and pored the first pancake that measured almost the full 12-inch size. The bread-like smell of the pancakes, Aunt Jemima’s syrup, and coffee filled the air. Dad sat at the table drinking black coffee and enjoying the Juevos Rancheros that Karen made him. Tommy always liked making the pancakes. It was 4:30 am, and Tommy’s railroad work crew would arrive soon. They would roll out in the big orange railroad truck for another hot day of work on the tracks.

Jake and Micah loaded up the Winchester .243 and .22 rifles and set out for the hunt. Jake posted himself on the high ground with the .243 mounted with a Weaver scope, and Micah walked the low ground with the .22 in hopes of running the deer out of the brush. Tommy taught the boys this tactic, and it often worked. Jake stretched out in a prone position and looked through the scope, searching carefully along the ridge line and spotted a small buck. The buck ran out into the open and stopped to assess the situation after Micah had disturbed his nap. Jake took a careful aim at the deer's neck with the .243 and slowly squeezed the trigger like his Dad had taught him. Although a more difficult target, a neck shot always proved to drop the deer in his tracks. A behind-the-shoulder shot (in the heart) like most people liked to take, almost always resulted in the deer running a few hundred yards, or even miles, before dying. The boys would have to track him, and Jake didn't feel much like walking that far. Many times, the deer would lay up somewhere, still not dead. If you walked upon him too soon, he would bolt again and this could go on for a few miles before he would finally die. In the past, the deer that they shot behind the shoulder would leave a good blood trail, but the deer that was heart shot would take longer to die. Best to wait them out before tracking and let them die. A neck shot prevented all of this.

The shot rang out, and the deer fell in his tracks, the solid tip bullet passing right through his neck. Micah sat down and remained in the low ground until he was sure Jake had finished shooting.

"Hey Micah, I got him," Jake approached. Micah fell behind his big brother as he led him up the hill to where the deer fell. They approached the approximate location but did not immediately see him. They did as their dad had taught them and began circling outward until,



“Hey, Jake, he’s over here.” Jake jogged over to view his kill.

“Well I shot him, so you get to gut him,” Jake snickered. Micah rolled his eyes as he reached into his pocket for his knife.

## Football

At four-foot, nine-inches tall and 130 pounds, Micah was no match for most of the other boys on the football team. But he strapped on the pads like a warrior’s suit of armor and made his way out onto the practice field. It was his first year playing football as a ninth-grader, joining the boys most of whom had been playing through junior high.

“You fall in with the running backs,” Coach Foster said. He trotted over with this group of boys. Javier was the Quarterback and would be practicing hand-offs to all of the prospective running backs. Another group of boys trying out to be defensive linebackers lined up opposite the running backs to practice tackling the running backs after the quarterback handed them the ball. Micah’s loose-fitting helmet wobbled around his head as his turn came to take the ball.

“Down, set, hike!” Javier dropped back two steps as Micah stepped off to take the ball. He felt the leather ball slide into his grip as he ran forward...momentary darkness flashed in his eyes as the linebacker stuck his helmet straight into his jaw and drove him to the ground. His eyes came clear, and the bright Texas sun blared in his face. He felt the sweat on his body, and the heat was overwhelming. He rolled on to his knees and slowly rose to his feet and trotted back to the end of the line. He would do better next time.

“You’ve got to keep your head up, lean forward, and drive through the tackler

or spin off. Use your legs. Keep them moving all the time.” Things went about the same for the first few weeks, but Micah did not quit. Every day he hit the weight room with his team mates. His body began to grow stronger. He went home every day bearing the scars to his nose and arms from driving his body head first and forward, while always gripping the ball tightly with the point of the football in the palm of each hand, cradled closely and tightly to his body so as not to fumble.

### Mojado

Jake, Micah, and Eli crawled into the bed of a brown Ford F250 pickup truck for the two-hour ride to Langtry for the dance. Tommy cranked up the truck as Teresa and Karen climbed into the cab and the Hank Williams tunes blared from the eight-track player..”We’ll go honky tonkin’, honky tonkin’ We’ll go honky tonkin’ ‘round this town.” Teresa was happy to cuddle in between her dad and mom in the front of the truck and not have to hang out with the boys in the back. They rolled down the dirt road of Black Brush Ranchitos leading out to the main highway. Micah looked over the side bed of the truck bed and watched the sage brush, mesquite trees, and prickly pear cactus pass by as they moved down the narrow country road at a slow pace. Tommy turned West onto Highway 90 and sped up to 60mph. Jake, Micah and Eric stood up against the cab rear window facing forward. The cool morning air blew in their faces creating a rippling in their cheeks. It was a nice feeling as they anticipated the hot July day that was to follow, hoping not to catch a grasshopper in the teeth. They were teenagers enjoying the summer off from school. The two-hour drive passed quickly as they laid back down in the bed of the truck and fell asleep to the humming engine. Tommy pulled the truck up to the front of the old Langtry school house that had

since closed as a school and now was used by the local ranching folks as an event facility. Once or twice a year the ranch folks organized a country dance and all the ranchers and their families traveled in from miles away. Tommy Valcourt and the Country Gold would be the star attraction with their Texas swing and honky tonk tunes. Bourbon whiskey and beer would flow freely. Tommy, Karen and the kids arrived early to help set up for the dance. Jake, Micah and Eli jumped out of the back of the truck excited about venturing down to the river. The water of the Rio Grande River snaked its way south of the small old-west Langtry town on its way to the Gulf of Mexico. Langtry was the original homestead of Judge Roy Bean, law west of the Pecos River. The Pecos River converged with the Rio Grande a few miles west of Langtry. Bean's hangin' tree rose up from the limestone ground in the old downtown area. The local town folk proudly displayed the original Judge Bean building that served both as bean's bar and courthouse. Inside the old saloon and court house, the town folk proudly displayed the stuffed two-headed sheep and rattle snakes.

Micah, Eli and Jake set off on foot toward the river. They approached the steep limestone cliff drop-off overlooking the Rio Grande River valley. They stared in amazement, imagining Apache Indians, Texas Rangers, Cowboys, and Comancheros roaming about. All the stories they had heard of shoot outs between Poncho Villa and the Texas Rangers...the lost gold...were coming to life in their imagination. They walked further down the river to a place where they could climb down to the river. It was a steep and dangerous climb, but the boys had no fear. After reaching the bottom, they walked among the few trees of any size in this barren land, the Cotton Woods and Willows. Each of them picked a Willow tree and then quickly scaled to the upper most branches at the top of the tree. The wind caused the trees to sway back and forth, serving as a country boys

carnival ride. Micah smiled in enjoyment as the tree swayed back and forth in the wind and he held on for his life. He could see Jake and Eli swaying in nearby trees and they all let out loud yelps of enjoyment.

They climbed down out of the trees and ventured down by the Rio Grande River. Micah looked upon the similar limestone cliff faces on the Mexico side of the river.

“Hey, let’s swim across the river and see what we find,” Eli said.

“I’m not so sure that would be a good idea. We might get into trouble,” Jake complained. Micah dove into the river and began to make his way across as Jake and Eli quickly followed. Soon, they waded up on the other side about a quarter-mile down river from where they started. They began to explore terrain close to the river with a feeling of adventure. In a brushy area, a white-tail fawn deer lay sleeping in a hearth bedding of grass. He was barely old enough to walk with the small white spots covering the brown fur skin.

“Let’s take him home,” said Jake. “Yeah, let’s do it,” Eli and Micah agreed.

They carefully secured the fawn in their arms and carried him back to the river’s edge. They walked back up river until they found a shallow crossing to allow wading, and they made their way back to the other side, back on US territory. They decided to name the fawn “Mojado,” (slang for illegal alien).

Meanwhile, back at the old school house, Tommy strummed a G chord on the acoustic guitar to start off the first song of the night, “Honky Tonkin” by Hank Williams. The band kicked in with the sound of the fiddle, drums, and steel guitar. And Tommy sang...”If you are sad and lonely and have no place to go,

just come along sweet baby...” The ranch hands shuffled out onto the saw-dust covered dance floor with their wives and girlfriends in tow and began dancing the two-step. The boys found Teresa and they made a sleeping place in the back of the truck. They all cuddled up with the baby deer and slept.

Over the coming months, the boys took turns feeding the deer milk from a bottle until such time that he was old enough to eat grass, feed, and other vegetation. He grew to be a healthy buck deer and remained around the Vicksville farm. Micah would frequently and playfully butt heads with him until such time that Mojado’s horns appeared.

### Value Judgments

Micah loaded his two green duffel bags into the bed of the deuce-and-a-half ton Army truck and sat on the bench next to the other privates. He fastened the safety strap that dangles across the back end of the truck above the tailgate since he was the one sitting closest to the rear of the truck. “Safety” strap, he thought to himself. So, this strap will keep me from being thrown from this truck in the case of an accident? I think not. The truck rumbled down the road, leaving his temporary basic training home to a new home across the street at 4th battalion, 4th Field Artillery (8-inch). He was now a “real” soldier after graduating from basic training and would have the opportunity to serve in a “real” field artillery battalion. The battalion consisted of three line batteries and one headquarters and support battery. In each battery, there were three platoons made up of three howitzer sections. Micah’s job would be with one of these gun sections. The M109 (8-inch) Howitzer fired a projectile that weighed over 200 lbs. It could fire High Explosive, Illumination, and nuclear rounds. The United States created this

weapon to fight a war against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), likely a nuclear war would prevail. After the defeat of the Nazi's in WWII, a stalemate began between the allied forces and the Soviet Union, a cold war that could heat up quick.

After boot camp, Micah moved into the barracks at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. He was a young enlisted soldier and he would frequently venture out to the local town with his buddies to check out the girls. Once, they found themselves at a party on the wrong side of town. There was plenty of tequila, beer, and women, so they were feeling their oats. A few beers after they got there, he found himself in a situation where two dirt-bags began beating up this girl. She was a little weathered with bleach blond hair and tight jeans. The guys had long hair and their jeans had holes at the knees. Instead of calling the police and attempting to settle the matter peacefully, as the army had taught him (duty, honor), he did what his Dad or John Wayne would have done: he clocked one of the guys over the head with a beer bottle and knocked out the other guy out with a few punches. He saved the girl, but when the police arrived, they arrested him, right along with the two dirt-bags. Fortunately, these guys had extensive criminal records while he had none and the judge released him. But, his First-Sergeant took him back to the barracks and after standing him straight up in the position of attention, he gave him a stern lecture. He said,

“Soldier, you’ve got to get your act together.”

“Check, First Sergeant.”

“Your appearance is despicable. You have blood all over you. Your hair needs to be cut.”

“Check, First Sergeant.”

“You’re hanging out with the wrong crowd. The people at that party ain't nothin but trouble. And if you keep hangin out with'em, you’re gonna find yourself in a whole lot of trouble. You better leave behind your old ways, Private Valcourt, or you’re gonna find yourself out of the army and back to whatever po-dunk town you came from. Now, you’re restricted to the barracks for the rest of the weekend and you have two weeks of extra duty.”

“Check on that, First Sergeant.”

He slammed the door behind him and as he left the room, Micah knew that he must change. He lay back on his bed and began to think back to that “po-dunk town” he came from, Del Rio, Texas.

He remembered a time when his brother, Jake, was swiftly swinging an ax, splitting mesquite logs. He split three logs perfectly. Then Micah took his turn under the hot South Texas sun. He swung as hard as he could and the silvery ax blade ricocheted off the side of the log and sunk into the dirt along with his pride. He tried a few more times with little success.

Dad said, “Micah, you gotta keep your eye on the log.”

“OK Dad.”

Dad felt Micah was not going to be a “man” because he could not keep up with his fourteen-year-old brother Jake, and he tended to be a “mamma’s boy.” Micah’s brother was more like his dad. He had brown hair, brown eyes,

and a darker complexion. Jake was the first-born and not only received Dad's name, Tommy, but he got Dad's nickname, "Jake." Their father's fellow Mexican American railroad employees referred to Micah as "Juedo," "Blondie" in Spanish. Two years younger and twenty pounds lighter than Jake, he was closer to his mom. He must have received the recessive gene, because he looked much like his mom, with pale milky skin, blue eyes, and blond hair.

"All right boys, that's enough for today. Get a good night's sleep 'cause you got school tomorrow."

"OK!"

Jake and Micah got up early the next morning and loaded up on the bus for school. They rode the bus fifteen miles to town and got off at the public school on the south part of town. Micah walked out to the playground of Garfield Elementary. He was one of the few blond-haired white kids in the public school. His parents could not afford to send him to the private Catholic school.

"Tu quieres combate, juedo (Do you want to fight white boy)?" the large Hispanic boy asked Micah on the playground. Two of the bully's cowardly friends stood behind him.

"No, I don't want to fight. I just want to get on the bus and go home," Micah said. The larger boy stood in his path and would not let him pass. Micah showed fear and the larger boy sensed it. He pushed Micah again and again, but Micah would not fight. He was an easy target for the bully. Micah did not know what to do and before he could do anything, he felt the hard knuckles strike to his face. Blood began to gush from his nose as the bully punched him a few more times.



One punch landed to the sternum and Micah sank to his knees out of breath, in tears and blood.

“Gringo (damn white boy),” the bully taunted him, trying to get him to fight. Micah stayed down on the ground and cried. The bully and his buddies walked away. The bus ride home was a long one. Micah would have to face his father and tell him the news. He stepped off the bus at the 15-acre farm and walked in the house.

“What is the matter son?” Tommy asked.

“Dad, these Mexican kids keep picking on me at school, and I don’t know what to do.” Tommy walked him outside where his mother could not hear and looked Micah deep in the eyes.

“If you come home again, whining about getting beat up, I’m going to give you a real ass-whipping you’ll never forget.” Micah felt hopeless and confused.

“Let me tell you something son. Those boys will continue to pick on you as long as you let them. You have to fight back.”

After school every day, Tommy began to teach Micah how to box. Micah always knew his Dad and uncles were huge boxing fans. He spent many nights watching reruns of Rocky Marciano, Joe Louis, Mohamed Ali, “Smoking” Joe Frazier, and George Foreman. Tommy showed Micah how to protect himself with his hands.

“Keep tight fists all the time. It will land harder when you connect. Keep your hands up in front of your face to block your opponents punches and your elbows in tight to protect your sternum.” He taught Micah how to jab, “You’re right

handed, Micah, so you want to use your left to jab, and your right to throw the big blows.” He instructed Micah to use the jab to set up the big right-hand blows.

“Now, when you throw your big right, you want to aim for his nose, but make the target behind his nose. Punch through the nose.”

Every day after school, Micah trained on the techniques his dad taught him. He punched a vertical standing railroad tie over and over until his knuckles bled and toughened up and became calloused. He tilled the ground with a grubbing hoe. He learned to swing a hammer to drive nails. He learned to swing an ax to chop wood. Every day, he worked on the small farm, strengthening every muscle in his body. All the while he practiced his boxing. Micah sparred with brother Jake and his friend Eli.

“Now listen Micah. When this boy begins to push you again, do not wait for him to punch you first,” Tommy advised Micah.

“You get the first punch, and then continue to punch him until you knock him out, or someone pulls you off and breaks up the fight.” He told Micah not to worry about the other guys if there is a group of them. He told him to determine who the bully is, the one that thinks he’s the toughest and the leader. Fight him and win or draw, and the other cowards and followers will never mess with you again. And the bully will know that from this point on, you will fight him back and it will not be worth it for him to pick on you any longer. You will gain his respect.

The day came again. On the playground, the bully and his friends approached Micah. “Tu quieres combate, gringo?”

“No, I don’t want to fight,” Micah said and begin to walk away. The larger boy pushed Micah down from behind. Micah calmly rose to his feet and faced the

larger boy. He watched the larger boy's eyes and waited until the boy glanced away, and when he did, he swung that big right as hard as he could at the target behind the nose. The larger boy stumbled back and fell as Micah dived on top of him and continued to swing, alternating his left and right hardened fists into the larger boy's bleeding face. The larger boy pushed Micah off and got to his feet. With both hands up, Micah blocked a left and a right. The boy kept his hands down low, allowing Micah an open target to the face. He jabbed the boy in the face again and again and set up the right. In came the crushing right hand to send the boy to his knees. He felt someone grab him from behind and pull him away. It was Miguel Zamora, one of the toughest and biggest boys in the school. A large group of Hispanic boys began to gather around Micah, some just to watch while others wanted a piece of Juedo. Miguel stood in front of Micah and said loudly in Spanish,

“If you want to fight Micah, then you will have to fight me.” The crowd began to dissipate not wanting to face Miguel. Micah thanked Miguel and they became friends.

Meanwhile Mr. Rodriguez, a teacher, approached, “You boys follow me.” And he led them to the principal's office. The larger boy's nose gushed and his face was battered and red. The principle scolded them and informed them that their punishment would be ten licks with the paddle. Before that, he made them call their parents and explain to them what happened.

“Hey Dad, I'm in the principal's office for fighting, and he's going to paddle me.”

“Did you win the fight and do what I taught you?”

“Yes sir,” Micah said, respectfully.

“OK, good job! Go ahead and take the paddling and get back to class.” Micah began to fully understand what his dad taught him. He had to be strong and stand up for himself. He had to except responsibility for his actions. From that day on, Micah knew what he had to do. He could never back down from a fight.

Tommy said, “You go back to school and when that ‘Mescan’ kid pushes you again, you hit him in the nose as hard as you can, and don’t stop hitting him until he’s knocked out or someone pulls you off.”

Whimpering, Micah said “OK Dad.”

So, from that day on, that was what Micah did, and he soon gained the respect of most of the kids in school. They at least knew they could not push him around without a fight.

He was determined to live up to his father’s definition of “manhood” when he won these fistfights at school. He never backed down from a fight and his dad was proud of that. He felt that he had to live up to his father’s expectations. Later, he became a fullback on the football team and earned a letter in track and field. These accomplishments were more important to his dad than his grades. He was satisfied if Micah simply passed his classes, and he had no college expectations for Micah.

While Tommy worked on the railroad tracks all day, Karen stayed home and devoted her life to ensuring the proper care of her children. After a long day’s work, Tommy enjoyed a cold beer and a country music jam session with the guys. Karen preferred quiet family gatherings, home cooked meals, and peaceful

walks in the country. Karen was diagnosed with terminal cancer at the early age of thirty-four. She used to tell the kids after her first surgery, “Kids, I prayed God would let me live long enough to see you raised, and old enough to take care of yourself.” Karen encouraged them to attend college.

Micah remembered once when Karen walked gracefully out of the house onto the back lawn as the sun set over the Sleeping Lady Mountains in Mexico. These mountains were shaped like a beautiful lady lying down on her back sleeping. It was always so nice in the back lawn with the green lush grass and the mesquite trees. Micah was thinking of a time when he walked with his mom out to the garden to help his dad pick fresh okra and squash. He could smell the aroma of the pinto beans cooking on the stove in the house. They carried the vegetables in the house and his mom served up the pinto beans, venison, and squash for supper. He asked his mom if he could go talk to Salvador. She said “sure.” So, he ventured out to the back part of the property to visit Salvador. He was a Mexican immigrant, “Wetback” as they commonly called illegal immigrants at this time, and he worked for their family. He taught Micah to cook homemade tortillas and goat meat tacos over the campfire. He enjoyed hanging out with Salvador. It was always sad to see him go when he had to return to his family in Mexico. He could earn a lot more money working in the U.S. than he ever would in Mexico, so he would make the long walk every few months. He set off walking towards the Sleeping Lady Mountains.

Mom returned to the house that evening to complete preparation of the meal. He came back from talking to Salvador, and he lay in the green grass of the back yard and thought about how his mom had told him that she wanted more for him than a minimum wage job, or self-employment with no insurance. She would

always say, "Micah, you can do anything you set your mind too." He remembered how hard she worked to earn her GED at the age of thirty with three kids in tow and how later she earned her real estate broker's license. Her main purpose was to earn extra money to help the kids get through college. Micah knew that Tommy never really wanted her to work. He felt the woman's place was in the home. Karen was a generous person. She had placed a poem in her bible by an anonymous writer. Micah always thought this poem defined his Mom's selfless and caring attitude:

### **OUR LIVES**

Can you today in parting  
With the day that is slipping fast,  
Say that you've helped a single person  
Of the many that you have passed.  
Did you waste the day or lose it?  
Was it well or poorly spent?  
Did you leave a trail of kindness?  
Or a scar of discontent?

As you close your eyes in slumber,  
What do you think God would say?  
You have made the world much better

For the life you have lived today?

Karen was never too tired to help the kids with their homework or take them to their friend Ely's house, even though it was on the other side of town. Ely was their best friend. His grandparents, Leo and Grace, had raised him. His father, David, seemed to always be away working or at the bars, many times with Tommy. Jake, Ely, and Micah spent the extremely hot summers between

high school years exploring the West Texas canyon country looking for Indian dwellings. One canyon Leo often mentioned was Eagle Nest Canyon. Micah could still hear his raspy voice, sharing tales of the Indian dwellings in Eagle Nest Canyon along the Rio Grande River.

“Boys, that canyon is about two miles from Langtry not far from the old Pecos High Bridge. It’s about a mile high. Them Indians used to run buffalo off the side of that canyon where they’d fall to their death at the bottom of the canyon. There’s a great paintin’ of a Panther in one of those caves. Old man Skiles ain’t likely to let you go down in there. He’ll run you off with a shotgun.”

Jake, Ely, and Micah would listen to Leo’s stories and believe everything he said. They knew little about the world outside Del Rio. Most of what they knew, they learned from their fathers. Both men were typical of West Texas men. They listened to the melodramatic tunes of Hank Williams, watched the John Wayne movies, wore white, long-sleeved button-down shirts and cowboy hats, sipped bourbon whiskey, and drove pick-up trucks. Like many teenagers, the three boys revolted by listening to the strumming, hard rock guitars of Van Halen, Led Zeppelin, AC/DC, and Boston.

They loved the Hollywood Westerns of John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, but Micah had sympathy for the “underdog,” the Indian. When he played cowboys and Indians, often he wanted to be the whooping and hollering Indian.

This sympathy is arguably a result of the change in the western movies that he viewed as a child and teenager beginning in the late 1960s. Richard Slotkin, author of *Gunfighter Nation*, points out that, “From a political view, the most important of the alternative types were the ‘counterculture Westerns’ that

comprised the new Cult of the Indian.” These movies, such as *The Return of a Man Called Horse*, gave Native Americans a personality and showed sympathy for their demise. As a result of these movies, Micah did not view the Indians as evil savages, but rather as victims. Because their ancient dwellings existed throughout the landscape where he walked and explored, Indians were much a part of his childhood life.

Micah remembered once when Jake, Ely, and he decided that they would drive to Eagle Nest Canyon to explore the ancient Indian caves. They explored all the Indian mounds in the immediate area and found many artifacts. Harry J. Shafer points out in *Ancient Texans* that the oldest artifacts of this ancient culture were from hunters and gatherers who had lived in this marginal desert since about 7000 B.C. Once, when Micah caressed one of the arrowheads he had found with the tips of his fingers, it created an image in his mind of a brown-skinned, bare-chested Indian with a bow, in position to loosen an arrow on a rabbit. His skin shivered with excitement at the thought.

This canyon must have been the nucleus of the culture that once lived there. Its vast limestone walls extended upward for over three hundred feet. Ely had explored the canyon and agreed to guide Jake and Micah down into it. There were only a couple of ways to climb down into the canyon. If not careful, you could fall to your death as the bison once did in ancient times. Ely hunted Indian artifacts more than Jake and Micah. He had many perfect points: spear points, bird points, and arrowheads. David knew all the ranchers and took Ely with him to repair the windmills, where he would venture out and hunt for artifacts. Most of the ranchers did not mind if Ely hunted on their ranches.

They loaded all of their gear into the car, including plenty of water and



food. Their parents gave them permission to stay the night down in the canyon. They learned to dress in long sleeve shirts to protect their sensitive skin from the hot Texas sun. They wore hats to protect their faces. As the sunrays touched the exposed skin of his neck, Micah envisioned himself as a Native American warrior. He daydreamed—I saw myself running swiftly across the rough terrain, en route to the beautiful canyon that was my home. My people had lived in this land, this canyon, for centuries, but would soon have to move northward to follow the bison and mammoth, the main staple of our diet. The river below seemed to be drying up and our enemies lived to the south where the other river ran. We would have to leave behind our cave shelters with the burial sites of our ancestors, the art, the baskets, and many of our tools. Maybe one day we could return to this beautiful canyon. Micah's romanticized daydream dissipated with his thoughts of Spanish conquistadors and priests riding into this land to impose their will upon the indigenous people.

The stories they heard about of the Native Americans encouraged them to explore the countryside in search of their ancient dwellings. Throughout their childhoods they walked, eyes ever downward, searching for artifacts that made them appreciate the ancient cultures that lived in the land before them. Sometimes on these trips they ate prickly pear cactus.

Numerous times, they stopped and looked up, so as not to fall into those thorny, prickly pear and mesquite trees. Hanging from the mesquite trees were long thin desert green beans, at least that is what they looked like to Micah. They began plucking them from the trees. Alongside the mesquite trees were green, thorny prickly pear cactus, shaped like discs that are jointed and attached. They carefully plucked the red thorny fruit from the discs and placed them in their

gunnysack with the mesquite beans. The mesquite bean and prickly pear served as a primary source of food for ancient man. They happily ate the bland-tasting beans and prickly pear fruit while basting in the hot hundred-degree Texas sun. They took off their shirts and tucked them away, hoping their skin would bronze like real Indians. Rather, it turned a bright red like a tomato.

Small valleys converged on larger valleys with creeks that eventually emptied into the larger river, the Rio Grande. Their mission this day was to walk to one of these creeks and search for artifacts along the way. They carried .22-caliber rifles to kill rabbits for dinner. The ancient warriors killed these animals with bow and arrow. They were not that skilled, so they used the rifles. The rabbits served as a tasty source of protein. Upon arrival at the creek, they quenched their thirst with the pure spring water. The springs formed a natural bathtub in the limestone, surrounded by green grass. They stripped down to their underpants and splashed into the water. It provided cool relief on a hot summer day.

After their return journey, they built a camp on the backside of Tommy's property. They placed the prickly pear fruit over the fire to burn away the thorns. After they cut it into pieces with their pocketknives, the fruit became a hearty meal for a few want-to-be Indians. Once they consumed the appetizer, they skinned and prepared the rabbit for cooking over the mesquite fire. True Indian warriors stalked and killed great animals such as the bison and mountain lion. They were not so successful, but they did manage to slay a sparrow and the rabbit. The little bird was a hearty feast after they cooked it over the fire. They were true Indian warriors now.

They feasted on the sinewy meat, lay back under the shade of the mesquite

trees, and dreamed of another time. They hiked down the steep pathway into a narrow smaller canyon that led into the deep cut Eagle Nest. The hot and dry winds whistled through the mesquite and the jutting limestone crevices leading into the canyon. The thump of their running feet slowed to a soft walk as they began making their way down into the other world. Reaching the bottom of the canyon, they began searching the dry riverbed. They knew the ancient people once fished the river with nets made of woven sotol or lechuguilla and weighted by stones. There, Micah reached down and grasped a neatly rounded stone with a smooth hole in it with sharp crevices made by the string that was once tied to it. Micah's mind raced back to another time as he began daydreaming—Again I was a native warrior. I could hear the stream ripple around my legs. I reattached the stone to the net and the other warriors and I began a process of dragging the net through the water to catch the fish. The weighted stones were frequently lost in the swift current, never to be recovered. Jake's familiar voice brought Micah out of his daydream, "What did you find?" asked Jake. Micah showed him the stone weight and he stared with admiration. "You lucky dog!" he said. The weighted stones were a treasured find. They learned about these ancient tools from books, their parents, and their rancher friends.

They entered the mouth of the large cave that rose a hundred feet above the riverbed; they froze in place and there was silence, staring in awe at the pictograph of a panther on the cave wall. Micah could imagine the growling beast frightening the warriors as they ran for their lives. As he sifted through the ancient ashes of this forgotten culture, a voice came thundering down from above. They froze. "You boys come on out of there." It was old man Skiles. He was the rancher who owned the land that they were trespassing on. He led them out of the canyon, and back to the '67 Chevy. He told them that they should not be

trespassing and stripping away the last remaining artifacts of this ancient culture.

He told them that they were ruining the remains of an ancient culture that lived there thousands of years ago. At that time, Micah's understanding of "Indians" and "Mescans" was scant. Old man Skiles' words had a strange impact on him, and over the next few years, Micah began thinking about prejudice and reexamining some of the values his dad had taught him. He began discovering why those Mexicans who were part Indian resented white kids. Their ancestors were indigenous to this land and they lived there as far back as 7000 B.C. Now, Anglos, who did not arrive there until the 18th century, treated them as second-class citizens.

In Del Rio, prejudices often existed between Mexican Americans and Anglos. Tommy used to say, "When I grew up, at night, the 'Mescans' didn't come north of the railroad tracks." Tommy distinguished between "Mexicans" and "Mescans." The former he defined as the good citizens of the Mexican population and the latter as the prejudice, ignorant majority. Although Tommy sometimes criticized Mexicans, he was actually quite friendly with many of them. He spoke Spanish, and almost everyone he worked with was Mexican. However, he attended the same public schools as Micah did. He also was the victim of discrimination by Mexicans. He learned to defend himself, just as he taught Micah to do.

The "Mescans" that Dad referred to, primarily lived in the south part of Del Rio, in the barrio known as San Felipe. This was the home of the descendants of the Indian and the Spanish, or Mexican Americans, Chicanos, or Hispanics. Their skin color and features were more like the Indian. They were caught between the confused world of white Texas, and brown Mexico.

Gloria Anzaldua, in *Borderlands La Frontera, The New Mestiza*, explains her experiences as a Mexican-American living on the border. Her words ring true when Micah thought about his life in Del Rio. She writes, "This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity-we don't identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don't totally identify with the Mexican cultural values." In Del Rio, with the younger generations, the brown and white began blending to form a shade of Mexican. People, such as Micah's friend Theobald Hess (T.H.), whose father was German and whose mother was Mexican-American, were affected by the prejudices of both Anglos and Mexicans. T.H. struggled with his dual identity. The Mexicans would not completely accept him because of his white father, and the Anglos would not completely accept him because of his Mexican mother. Micah could see that knowing T.H. challenged him to question some of his dad's assumptions about "Mescans." The younger generations in Del Rio were crossing cultural barriers. Intermarriages were becoming more common and he accepted this blending of cultures.

Tommy and his friends grew up in this wild town hanging out in honky tonks, on both sides of the border. Some of their forebears were ranchers, Texas Rangers, and Tommy worked for Southern Pacific Railroad. David, Ely's dad, drilled water wells and repaired windmills on the ranches. The hands of both men were like leather and they could work all day under the hot Texas sun. They were strong and lean. They would fistfight anyone, anytime, and like it.

Their distant ancestors came to Texas during the 1800s, when laws were few, and justice came from a short rope tied to a tree. They were all familiar with the legendary stories of Judge Roy Bean. Bean was a famous lawman in nearby Langtry in the 1800s. He served as the sheriff, judge, and jury for the law west

of the Pecos River. His hanging tree still stands in a street in Langtry. He has become a part of the romanticized image of the old west and is even mentioned in Louis Lamour's *Streets of Laredo*.

Tommy and his buddies hung on to these old ways. These men struggled in a modern world that imposed laws on them. They did not agree with laws that did not allow them to hunt year-round, or dig in the Indian caves, and they were opposed too much of the Civil Rights movement, such as desegregation. Fences did not mean anything to them. They crossed over them at will and killed the animals or hunted the Indian dwellings. Most of the old-time ranchers knew them and did not care if they came onto their land; however, times were changing. Many of the contemporary ranchers and property owners did not want these people trespassing on their land. They believed the wildlife had to be preserved, or it would soon disappear. David and Tommy never understood wildlife preservation or the need to preserve the ancient Indian dwelling of the Pecos River Valley.

Their greatest hero was John Wayne. They watched all his movies three or four times each. Scholar Richard Slotkin, in *Gunfighter Nation* (Slotkin 512-520) explains how John Wayne influenced men like Tommy. Through his western and war movies, John Wayne became an American cultural icon. Tommy emulated the John Wayne persona in his personality and presence. He owned numerous rifles and pistols and became an expert marksman. These were not modern weapons, but wooden stocked, lever-action weapons like in the John Wayne movies. He glorified his ancestors who were Texas Rangers in the early 20th century. He played guitar and sang all the western and gunfighter ballads, such as Marty Robbins "Big Iron" and "Mr. Shorty."

Richard Slotkin refers to a 1972 article by P. F. Kluge, which explains

a lot about Tommy and his values. Kluge says that John Wayne exemplified an authentic cowboy in the Old West representing 19th century values. John Wayne's characters were tough men, living in remote locations, complaining about how "everything has gotten built up so, it's hard to find distant locations for roughing it, like we did before." Tommy was much like John Wayne and he also longed to live out in the country.

Tommy insisted that the family move out of the "city." He wanted the kids to learn John Wayne values like their forebears. He wanted them to learn how to shoot guns, hunt, and fish. Therefore, Karen, through her connections in the real estate business, found a bargain on fifteen acres of land butted up against a large ranch, twenty miles from town. The nearest neighbor was two miles away. Tommy wanted his children to learn how to survive in the wilderness. They cleared the land and dug their own septic system and water well. David obliged Tommy with his drilling rig and expertise in explosives and heavy equipment. He and Tommy used dynamite to blow a hole in the ground for the septic tank. Tommy, David, and a couple of other buddies used the heavy equipment to clear the broken rubble from the hole.

They lived in a double-wide trailer with a single swamp-cooler for those hot summer days and nights; however, that swamp cooler never seemed to make things cool enough, and sleeping outside with the dogs just wasn't very comfortable. Micah overcame those hot nights when one day Dad brought home these long, thick cardboard tubes that he gathered from a train wreck, for what purpose Micah did not remember. He made good use of them by linking them together and putting one end in the vent of the swamp cooler, while the other end delivered fresh, cool air to his sleeping area on the living room floor.

While living in the country, Micah learned to work and grew physically and mentally strong. Tommy had them clearing brush and building fence, chicken pens, and dog kennels. They planted a large garden with beans, squash, okra, watermelons, greens, peppers, potatoes, and tomatoes. They harvested deer and rabbits from the Bushant. A typical meal at the Valcourt household was fried deer meat, baked potatoes, green beans or turnip greens, and pinto beans. They had no television or telephone for about a year. Micah couldn't complain about the years living in the country. Without a television, he spent much of my time walking about the land, feeding the animals, and working in the garden. He learned to appreciate the simple things in life. Tommy may not have been perfect and did not always make the best decisions, but he taught Micah that he must work hard to earn things in life. He taught him to never quit and to be physically strong and determined.

Micah chose to retain these values and they benefited him throughout his entire life. He learned not to quit when times got rough. No matter if it was 103 degrees, hands and feet grown blistered from tilling the garden and walking the countryside, he did not quit until the task was completed. Later, his hands and feet grew calloused and he learned determination and persistence as his fathers before him.

They were proud that they were the "sons of the pioneers" who first came to this land. The values passed down from Micah's forebears to him were the values that eventually got him thrown in jail in Oklahoma. They were values he now questioned as a US Army soldier. Scholars have rewritten the history books his dad studied. They learned about the Trail of Tears and other atrocities committed by their Anglo ancestors. They studied the Civil Rights Movement and



began understanding the meaning of equal rights.

They learned that the ancient ancestors of the Mexican kids Micah went to school with in Del Rio were the American Indians that he dreamed about as a child. They were the ancestors of Gloria Anzaldua, T.H. Osteen, and the young Mexican boys he fought with in school. His European ancestors had pillaged, plundered, murdered, and enslaved their ancestors. He understood why many Mexican kids harbored so much resentment for “Juedo.” He understood how he, “Juedo,” was a symbol of white oppression in a predominantly Mexican environment.

After High School, Micah decided to join the Army. He arrived at the army’s reception station and was herded like a cow to slaughter. He was surrounded by unfriendly people who seemed to have no emotions and who shaved away all his hair and boxed up all his civilian belongings. His only possessions from that day until finishing boot camp were government issue: camouflage battle dress uniforms, dress green uniforms, combat boots, “dog” tags, brown T-shirts, brown underwear and green socks. The screaming voices of the drill sergeants became very familiar for the next three months. “You get off my cattle truck before I kick the living shit out of you. What are you looking at? Do you wanta go home to Mamma? Get down and beat your face private (do push-ups).” Micah was around all ethnic backgrounds. He became friends with young men from every part of this nation and abroad: Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, Samoans, inner city Blacks, former gang members, and Appalachian back-wood whites. Some of these guys had values totally opposite of Micah’s. They hated John Wayne! But, they learned to trust and depend on each other. They understood that their lives depended on each other. It was clear to him now that he needed to let some of

his dad's values go. He could retain his father's values of hard work and physical and mental determination; but, he could not be prejudiced against people that he might have to depend on in combat. He could not punch first and ask questions later.

After he completed basic training, he returned home on leave. He drove out to the old homestead, at least what was left of it. Tommy had since moved away, and he wanted to reflect on old times and just think about what to do with the rest of his life. The old double-wide trailer was falling apart and needed repairing. The soil in the garden needed fertilizer and tilling. The chicken pens were in a state of disrepair. For so many years, his whole mission in life had been to take care of this place and now it was decaying back into its original form, before they cleared the brush and dug the septic tank. He stared at the Sleeping Lady Mountains as the sun sank, and he realized that things would never be the same. He drove back to town and began to search for Dad among the various bars.

A couple of days later, he loaded his bag in the back of the brown Ford truck and Tommy drove him to the train station. As he looked at Dad's brown chiseled, aging face, he saw tears of sadness and knew things between them would never be the same. The red lights of his mind and the train-signal turned to green, as the train pulled away from the station, and he returned to Fort Sill. After his confrontation with the local guys at Fort Sill and his first Sergeants lecture, he settled on a firm foundation of values, synthesized from both his father and the Army. He decided to go to college and fulfill his mom's dream for him.

His life changed forever shortly after seeing his mother on her deathbed and his first-year college grades plummet. He walked into the hallway and melted down in tears on the hard-tile hospital floor. He had lost his mother, but he would

also lose her support and encouragement; he would need to pursue his dreams on his own. God answered her prayer, and she lived long enough to raise her kids. They were old enough now to take care of themselves. She peacefully drifted out of their lives forever and left them to find their way through life's many obstacles. Tommy could not bear the memories of living at the old fifteen-acre homestead that they had built from scratch. As his mind grew hazy in the dimly lit bars, Jake and Micah left for work and college, away from Del Rio and the memories.

A year later, the hot wind blew through Micah's blond hair as he drove his Mom's green Ford LTD through the ranch country of West Texas on his way to college in Abilene, Texas. He thought of his Dad in his cowboy hat and pick-up-truck visiting his rancher friends in the bars in Del Rio. He could easily turn south to Del Rio and leave college behind forever. He pulled the car off at the crossroads and contemplated his life. Part of him wanted me to go south, take the easy way out, to the hazy bars of Acuna, Mexico and Del Rio. However, he knew his mom wanted him to take the tough road north back to college and that is what he did.



## OUR NEW RELIGION?

By Esther Saylor

It was waiting on the doorstep when I arrived home- -a big box labeled Septic Savior. I was taken aback. Somehow it seemed a bit too sacrilegious, too incongruous. To me, "savior," is a powerful word steeped heavily in historical Christianity. A born-again, goin' to heaven, personal word. And, anyhow, does a septic system need saving?

Apparently so. My husband, Arthur, was taken in by a very perky telephone evangelist touting the values of Septic Savior. Without it, our lives would certainly be destined for hell- - an everlasting (and smelly) damnation. Other products, she claimed, might seem to have the answer for our septic woes, but only Septic Savior is the real entrance through the pearly gates to an eternity of sewage peace and harmony.

So, Arthur bought a lifetime supply. It came with a sacred script of how to administer the rites of the Church of the Septic Savior, and how often and with what anthems of praise when partaking of its saving benefits. The ritual is to be performed monthly, with incantations, and with the pouring of water. While Arthur is but one steward of the product, he has taken on full status as lay leader and Deacon of Decontamination. How tithing, offerings, sacrifice and ceremony will come into play, I have not yet witnessed- -and I'm just a little afraid to think about it. In fact, I may return to a life of prayer and meditation (or medication) myself if the testimonials get any more glowing.

And not only is he a true believer but also he has now begun to proselytize. He took a sample to our daughter along with the holy writ of instructions and

begged her to accept it as her new way of life. I suspect Art would send it to our son, Max, overseas in Germany if he thought it would pass through the German postal and customs workers. I know for a fact that the full WRATH OF MAX would descend upon us like the galloping horsemen of the Apocalypse if our son had to go before the humorless European customs agents to claim the package. These stern, unforgiving officials could well deem the chemicals contained in the box to be weapons of mass destruction, --or is that weapons of Mass desecration? And, of course, with a Ph.D. in Physics, Max probably could turn the "Savior" into something lethal.

In my husband's defense, I will admit that the wages of septic sin are dire. I remember a past experience with the satanic sewer gods. I was giving a bridal shower for my niece. In my living room were 20 women, dressed to the hilt, drinking some fruity punch and getting ready to observe the opening of beautifully pastel wrapped presents, when the future Mother-in-Law came thundering into the room announcing loudly that the potty had overflowed and water (?) was running down the hall. In my defense, I have always suspected there had been some vast ecumenical movement there, but it was not the time or place to raise up her sins before the multitude. It was my duty to just clean up and add stronger ingredients to the fruit punch. (Lighting the altar candles helped as well.)

I suppose I can hope that our personal Septic Savior will help us pass through the valley of the shadow of waste products and lead us unto the still waters. I am pretty tolerant about other people's religious practices. But if you see Arthur knocking at your door, pamphlets in hand, you might think twice about answering.

Amen.



## David's Philosophy

Lee Miller

Circles, circles, circles...

Perspective of Truth, of Reality

Knowledge – Ignorance

Is Ignorance truly bliss

or is knowing what keeps you up at  
night?

Do definitions make things more  
defined –

Real, solid, tangible enough to make  
our lives a little less chaotic

or does the illusion we live in allow us  
to live at all?

Define Reality, define Gift, define  
Curse, define Life, define Death,  
define, define, define...

Perspectives, Definitions,  
Interpretations, Theories, Beliefs,

Philosophies,

Words.

A philosophy is an individual  
perspective created by a personal  
belief defined by theories through  
words that have a relative meaning for  
everyone.

Circles, circles, circles...

What is your perspective?

How do you define?

What philosophies do you live by?

Is it the truth because of what you  
know

or is it an illusion because of what you  
don't?





### **Submission to Prairie Ink**

We are a literary annual that welcomes fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry, drama, literary criticism, and those graphic narratives that can be successfully reproduced into black and white photography.

We serve as a vehicle for emerging writers who attend Barton Community College or reside in one of the seven counties within Barton's service region.

The editor of *Prairie Ink* encourages submissions from Barton students, alumni, and community members from Barton's seven-county service area: Barton, Pawnee, Rice, Rush, Ellsworth, Russell, Stafford; and from students enrolled at the Barton Fort Riley Campus and Grandview Plaza Outreach location.

To check out submission guidelines or to submit your work, please email the editor at [prairieink@bartonccc.edu](mailto:prairieink@bartonccc.edu)

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**There is a way  
to see inside**