With Whomever Will Have Me

An Okie makes peace with his rural roots on the dance floor of Austin's Broken Spoke

By Kameron Dunn

After my COVID vaccine reached full efficacy last March, I stepped through the door of the Broken Spoke in South Austin and ordered a Lone Star at the three-seater bar. Relatively new to town, I had been scouring the internet for country bars and landed on the Spoke, lured by its reputation as one of the last real honky-tonks. I settled into a tall chair facing the dining room and took in the myriad forms of Texana on display: a neon George Strait sign, a studded saddle worth tens of thousands of dollars mounted in a glass case, and a mustachioed mannequin stationed for photo ops. The space feels alive and ghostly at the same time, like having a party in your grandparents' house that's been frozen in time since your mom left at 18.

That night, there were about a dozen of us there listening to local act Lance Lipinsky, an ageless man with a pompadour, bang out some classics on his keyboard. A middle-aged woman with a flowering smile told me she came here just to see him. She sat at a round table near his little setup between the door and the pool table and elicited small shrieks every time he made a comment to the audience, some directed to her.

Charmed, I returned every night that week into the weekend, eventually stepping foot in what felt like a holy space: the dance hall in the back. Down the narrow corridor between a display of celebrity photos with the late founder, James White, and members of the bar staff, I stepped through a door into the massive space on the other side.

Illustration: Jason Stout

Illuminated by neon lights advertising Budweiser and Lone Star, the dance hall extends to a stage with old amps, flanked on either end with dozens of tables outfitted with the kind of weathered chairs I associate with church functions.

I now consider myself a regular and grab a table every other weekend to listen to classic country music played by skilled artists like Alvin Crow and Dale Watson, who have been performing their songs longer than I've been alive, songs I watched them play for months before I finally got the bravery to dance. The people who go to the Broken Spoke are either regulars who've been going there for decades—real country folk—or people encountering the culture for the first time in all its funky candor. When I go, I sip beer and two-step with whomever will have me.

The Broken Spoke is a quintessential piece of Texas history. Willie Nelson and Kris Kristofferson played here back in the 1970s, and George Strait famously cut his teeth beneath the low-hanging ceiling of the dance hall's stage before he hit it big in the 1980s. Starting in the 1960s, White, the Spoke's owner, cultivated a curious celebration of Texas at the honky-tonk. That hippie-cowboy blend has mostly disappeared in the city, but it nevertheless persists in this slice of old Austin.

I've become evangelical about the Broken Spoke and tell everyone new to Austin or visiting me for a weekend that it's the place to be on a Saturday night. Most of my Austin friends, especially the coastal-expat elites, huff and puff about it. They don't like country music, or they find the prospect of a bunch of old cowboys two-stepping to be hostile.

Outsiders often perceive the country world as hostile—in the realm of Bocephus and tiny white churches, in the bodies of cowboys who angrily return to their families after getting bucked off their horses early in the local rodeos, in the patterns of camouflage and sensations of felt Stetsons, sometimes even in the Southern drawl of the voices. My new friends in Austin are queer like me, and they're scared by the corner of America the Broken Spoke celebrates, at least what they know about the culture from TV, hearsay, and negative experiences.

I was born in the rural South—a part of the country where people say "howdy" in earnest, work on ranches, and wear cowboy hats to formal events—in a small town 10 minutes north of the Red River in Oklahoma. Homophobia is a reality I faced firsthand growing up, which

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has led to my complicated relationship with my hometown, its people, and its broader culture. When I moved to Austin, I wanted to strip myself of all that and do away with both the perception and the reality of my upbringing. But every other weekend I find myself helplessly, lovingly returning to its simulacrum—the Broken Spoke.

I relocated to Austin in 2019 for a PhD in American Studies at the University of Texas. The program is fully funded, meaning I pay no tuition and have a stipend for my living expenses. This allowed me—a low-income, disabled person—an opportunity I otherwise wouldn't have had to move to the big city. I've hit up many of the well-known spots by now: Hippie Hollow, the Drag, the Arboretum, Congress Avenue Bridge for the murmur of bats.

As an Okie, I've traveled between Texas and my small hometown in Bryan County for as long as I've been alive. I've been to all the major cities. The leather jacket I'm wearing as I write this I bought at an antiques shop in downtown Sherman. I've been way out west to the Permian Basin and felt the raw power of lines of wind turbines spinning in the darkness. I've sweltered through 5Ks in the heat of North Dallas. Walked through Beaumont's vacant downtown. Busked at Galveston Beach. And smelled the paper mills of Texarkana. Yet, nothing has struck me the way the Broken Spoke has, and few things have left me so conflicted.

The conflict is a familiar one. I grew up a queer person in an unaccepting community with an unaccepting family. Something had to give once my psychiatric disability—bipolar disorder, untreated at the time—began causing risk-taking behavior in my teens. That's when I told my family, to their disgust and vitriol, I was gay. After days of my father shouting Bible verses at me and a string of mental-illness-related self-harm, I was committed to a psych ward in Denton my senior year of high school.

Part of my excitement for moving to Austin was this idea that I could finally fit in and find queer camaraderie. I never had a partner in Oklahoma, and any of my intimate ventures were confined to Oak Lawn and various queer enclaves north of Dallas, a reasonable 1.5-hour drive south from home. I have always dressed distinctly straight, and I've never had an inflection in my voice that would give me away. When I moved to Austin, I wanted to forge my own community to make up for the friendship, family, and romance I'd been missing out on. The reality has been different and more complicated than I expected. Instead of abandoning my country roots, I've been seeking them out.

These roots still exist in the city despite rapid urbanization, outstretched beneath the edifices of new Austin and the influx of capital flowing into the downtown core. The oak tree outside the Broken Spoke has been there since long before White opened his place back in the '60s, when that part of South Austin was merely pastureland. The hip South Lamar apartments standing tall over the red, haphazardly constructed honky-tonk make it seem as out of place as a donkey at a horse race. It's hard not to feel the sentiment of how Austin is losing what makes it Austin. That's what I think about one hazy night while smoking and gazing at the old oak that looks more like a rendering than an actual living organism.

Since I was young, I've molded myself into an acceptable kind of masculinity. I wrestled with my guy friends, dressed in muted colors, and learned to speak with a deep tone whether addressing my peers and superiors or in prayer. In my adulthood, masculinity is a script I've memorized. It's the way of expressing myself that feels the most comfortable, and it adds a layer of security to my day-to-day social life. It's earned me a privilege I didn't realize I had until I started dating my ex-boyfriend, who is considerably more effeminate than me.

I met him, my first and only partner since leaving Oklahoma, through a mutual friend. We hit it off dangerously fast. It was the kind of infatuation I fantasized about in high school, the kind where we said "I love you" after knowing each other only two weeks. We bouldered at the same gym. We traveled to New York during Pride weekend. We spent almost every hour of every day together from when we first met until the day we broke up. The whole time, I wanted to love all over him, even in public. Through the course of our relationship, I learned more about my own privilege as a straight-passing gay man. I saw his guardedness when we talked to each other or showed any kind of affection out in the open. That is simply not on my mind most of the time, although I've had some close calls.

Two years ago, a fellow queer schoolmate and I made a trip to a bar in East Austin. I decided to put a spin on the Western look by wearing a pink cowboy hat an Okie friend gave me for Christmas. At the end of a long, crowded line, the bouncer, a tall guy with his own cowboy hat, accosted me. "What the hell are you doing with that *pink* cowboy hat?" he demanded. "You're appropriating my culture." Clearly upset with what he interpreted as posturing, I turned his attention to the state on my ID. "I'm from Oklahoma," I said. "It's my culture as much as it is yours." I didn't let it faze me that night, but the subtext was clear.

Any fear I thought would be assuaged by moving to Austin lingers in many of my out-and-proud encounters. I've opted back to masculine dress most of the time, sticking with Wranglers, Carhartt shirts, and trucker hats. At the Spoke, I'll wear a pearl-snap shirt and my ostrich-leather boots and a non-pink Stetson. My voice is low, and my mannerisms are masculine. My legs are never crossed, and my hands, if they move in conversation, swing wide and forcefully. I don't tell anyone at the bars I study queer communities for my doctorate program. When my female roommate joins me on a night out, we pretend to be a hetero couple. Just for kicks, of course. It's nice to move through the world without fear that a man will shout at me for some masculine infraction, for being a threat to his or my or all men's manhood.

The one discreet giveaway I allow myself every now and then is painting the nails on my left hand in black polish. Sometimes it's not as discreet as I'd like. At a dive spot in a strip mall in Pflugerville, a broad-shouldered man with a thick black beard asked me if I sold drugs. I asked him why he thought I had drugs to sell him, and he told me it was because of my nails.

Despite my enthusiasm for the Spoke, I've had rough encounters there, too. One bartender, an older woman who I haven't seen working there in months, noticed my nails and was suspicious. To deflect, I replied, "My girlfriend likes me to paint them." She countered, "Oh, does she make you wear lingerie, too?"

I now dress full cowboy for the Spoke to blend in and because it feels good. My friend calls my cowboy wear "drag." She says it as a joke, but there's truth to it. Drag refers to the practice of creating characters invented by, usually, gay men, some you may have seen on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. These men dress as drag "queens" in a ludicrous parody of femininity. Through gender-bending performances, they challenge widespread ideas of masculinity by showing the slippery nature of how presentation through manner and dress affects perception. For those unaware of the performance, they may not even identify these men as *men*. Don't get me wrong: My cowboy wear indicates a piece of me that's sincere. At the Broken Spoke, I'm not engaging in parody. I'm doing this for real and playing my part in the overall honky-tonk vibe. It is play, though, in a certain sense. It's a performance of a piece of my past I want to embody in my present.

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This jives well with the Spoke's atmosphere. One night, I approached a table with two young ladies who had just bought their first drinks. I asked one if she wanted to dance and she politely declined. Her friend's interest was piqued, however, and she said she wanted to dance with me but didn't know how. I led her out onto the dance floor bathed in lights, her long hair flowing in the wind of all the fans. I showed her the steps, and she really struggled with it, but I told her it was OK. I asked if she wanted to spin, and she nodded, so I twirled her. Then twirled her again. And again. I watched other men engage in the same steps as me, in the same clothes, and in the same space.

Another night, I chatted with a middle-aged man from rural Arizona. I asked him how he liked the place, and he told me in his parts the Broken Spoke was regular fare. I told him I felt the same way, and that's why I liked coming here. He asked where I was from. "Durant," I said, "Oklahoma." He replied, "Ah, y'all grow a lot of peanuts out there." Exactly right, at least back in the day. Now, the lawn in front of City Hall features a statue representative of the "World's Largest Peanut"—which was never grown there, by the way. But the recognition felt good, a shared connection to the place and how it related to our backgrounds.

These days, I'm all about the Broken Spoke: the music, the dress, the dancing. It's where I can fit in. The honky-tonk offers two-stepping lessons to those new to the art. I like to get there early on the weekends to hear the teacher—the late founder's daughter, Terri White—instruct the beginners. She gives little speeches about the glory of the Broken Spoke, Texas culture, and her father, of whom she always speaks so highly.

One evening, to a crowd of a few dozen couples learning in the dance hall, she stated plainly that the men in attendance would never measure up to her dad. She explained that he was so many things: a great father, fiercely passionate about the things he loved, and strongly accepting of people from all walks of life, races, and sexual orientations. He was a real man by her construction, not merely tolerant but voracious in his appetite for new people no matter their differences.

Armed with this knowledge, I feel buoyed in my continuing love affair with the Spoke. It's country in the way I want country to be—authentic in its roots and progressive in its ideals. By going there, queer people may be able to reconnect with a piece of their small-town upbringing. The conflict of being a queer person in a non-queer world will never be fully resolved for me, but at the Broken Spoke I enjoy strumming that tension like a guitar.

My rural origins are a feature of myself I can never let go of, even if I tried. When I drive up Interstate 35 and cross over to US 75 in Dallas, then through the fields of Melissa, Van Alstyne, and Howe, eventually crossing the Red River bridge back to Oklahoma, I bring that part of myself back. When I drive through Austin and move among its people, I likewise bring my Oklahoma self to those spaces, too. Negotiating my queerness and my country roots is no longer the chore it was when I was younger. Now, I endeavor through this ongoing conflict with optimism. It's a whiskey-bent evening at the honky-tonk, a conversation with disillusioned country folk in the throes of urban life, a longing gaze into the eyes of a lover. It's a song I two-step to, a cheap beer I drink to get buzzed, the butt of a cigarette I toss into the sand-filled bucket by the door before going back inside for one more dance.

Getaway Driver

A grandpa's tall tale sends a Panhandle native back to the scene of the crime

By Lauren Hough

I'm in a doll museum in Shamrock, and I am not prepared to face down the hundreds of ceramic figures staring at me from every shelf and corner. I can't believe the curator just let me in here, told me a little history of the place, then wished me luck in my research—leaving me alone to deal with the ghosts. She's out on the porch talking to a couple old-timers, probably about the fall weather or football or whatever you talk about on porches. But I'm convinced they're talking about that writer from Austin who was, as my grandpa used to say, raised on concrete. They've given no indication they think this of me. But the second I stepped out of my car, the wind grabbed my Red Sox hat off my head, as it does, as anyone from the Panhandle knows it will. I imagine they enjoyed the slapstick spectacle of a city kid who doesn't have the sense to hold onto her hat and now must chase it down the sidewalk.

This is already one of my favorite museums, and I've been to my share—in London and Berlin and Osaka and Rome and Cairo, and to the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum down the road in Canyon. It's always irked me when other tourists show up on the day I visit to block my view and laugh inappropriately and talk too loudly. It's not that I think I'm special and should be allowed to wander freely, unperturbed by tourists. No. It's exactly that. I enjoy history. I'm here to learn. They're here to take a few selfies for Instagram. I should have the place to myself.

So, when Raquel Riggs, the curator of the Pioneer West Museum, gave me a quick briefing on the place and left me to explore, I couldn't believe my luck. I was finally touring a museum the way I'd always intended—alone. The museum is housed in the Reynolds Hotel, a stately brick Mission Revival structure built in the 1920s, during the oil and railroad boom, and named after local attorney Marion Reynolds. Each of the 25 rooms in the museum focuses on a different subject or era—fossils and arrows; barbed wire and the railroad; the pride of Wheeler, astronaut Alan Bean, the fourth man on the moon—with every conceivable surface chock-full of artifacts. There's a fort, a chapel, a barbershop, a general store, a dental office. Hard to believe they've fit this much into one little hotel on what used to be a main street.

Illustration: ©Hokyoung Kim, 2022

According to Raquel, everything in the museum was donated by locals. From what I can tell when I get up to the second floor, someone in town had a habit of collecting dolls that bordered on the maniacal. I'm so discombobulated by the dolls—yellow hair in ringlets and complicated braids, hoop skirts, velvet coats, tiny white aprons, delicately painted bow lips and blush, and eyes that follow you—I've forgotten why I'm here. I hope they host a haunted house in October.

Downstairs, in a hallway, are the framed newspaper clippings to remind me why I'm here—Bonnie and Clyde and Grandpa Chuck. My grandpa, thankfully, isn't mentioned in the clippings. He wouldn't be. From what I can tell, if his story's true, he was just a little kid.

My grandpa has always dressed like a farmer. He favors overalls or Wranglers strung up by suspenders, pearl-snap shirts, boots, and a short-brim Stetson. When he went to church or dinner, he'd wear what he called his "uptown" suspenders, slimmer and printed with paisley or little flowers. When I was little, he smelled like pipe tobacco, and he'd blow smoke rings for me to slap apart before they floated to the ceiling. That smell has always reminded me of him. There were years I didn't know him at all—divorce and remarriage, different states and countries. I didn't know, for example, he was from Texas, not Denver, where he lived in a split-level and ran his own barbershop. I didn't know, until recently, that he's always wanted to rob a bank.

When my grandpa needed some extra help, he moved in with my dad here in Austin. When I moved to Austin, five years ago, I'd watch him in the afternoons so my dad could run errands. He didn't always know who I was. Alzheimer's is a hell of a disease. But I noticed if I got him talking about the old days, his mind was sharp and full of stories. I'd pour him a Lone Star and every time, like a ritual, he'd ask me if I was interested in robbing a bank. I told him I could be the getaway driver. He said, no—he's driving. My grandpa's legally blind. I picture us making a getaway at 12 miles per hour. He told me we needed one more guy. "Let's go tomorrow," he said.

At first, I thought he was kidding about the whole bank-robbing thing. But I asked, once, if he was serious. We were sitting on the porch, watching the dogs wrestle, drinking the beer I'd snuck in for him. My dad doesn't like him to have too many—bad for his cholesterol. I think being in his 90s is probably bad for his cholesterol. So, I sneak him a beer on occasion. He's earned it. That afternoon, I asked him if he was kidding about robbing a bank. He wiped the condensation off his glass then used it to flatten his wispy hair. He said, "Oh, no. I'm serious as judge. And they've got it coming. They took my horse."

I asked, "The bank?"

He said that was back in Texola. He mixes up town names occasionally. Sometimes he tells me Shamrock is where he had the horse. I do know, in the mid-1930s, the bank took the ranch in Shamrock and his family moved to Texola, just across the Oklahoma border, on what's now Interstate 40.

I'd been asking him about the Dust Bowl, an obsession of mine. I like writing Dust Bowl stories, and he lived through it. That my grandparents survived it and told these stories when I was a kid may be the root of my obsession. We had to listen to the stories until someone told us to go play outside, but don't get dirty. I was always only half listening back then. Now, stories need detail, and my grandpa has all the details—how to catch a bunny for dinner by jabbing a strand of unraveled barbed wire in the hole, how his job was to herd the chickens into the house to ride out a duster, how his mom papered the walls with newspaper in a desperate attempt to keep the dust out.

He'd often wind up talking about his horse named Eagle he rode to school. When school got out, Eagle would be waiting for him. Didn't even have to tie him up. But until that afternoon in 2018, he'd never mentioned the bank. He said they took the farm, and maybe they had a right. But they had no right to take his horse.

I thought that was it for a moment. Stories end like that sometimes, drift into nothing, and he'll ask about supper. But my grandpa grabbed a tissue from his chest pocket, and I saw he was crying. He said there wasn't anything they could do. The bank took the farm, and then they took his horse. They had no right. "Never trust a bank," he said.

I wanted to change the subject. I'd never seen my grandpa cry. I asked about Shamrock, and he said, "Bonnie and Clyde." Like he'd been trying to remember the name of an actor. But we hadn't been talking about movies.

"What?" I asked.

"Bonnie and Clyde. They were hiding in the barn."

"Bonnie and Clyde?"

He laughed and I knew he was well aware of the bomb he'd dropped. I asked, "Oh, they were bank robbers, right?" I was trying to remember what I knew about Bonnie and Clyde and came up with, *I think Warren Beatty was in the movie.*

He said, "They robbed banks, all right. Were pretty good at it, too."

I thought, well, at least we're not talking about the horse now. Maybe this was a story he'd heard. Then he added, "They gave me a box of chocolate bars."

I nearly spit my beer. He laughed and took another sip of his and said it again. "Bonnie and Clyde." I waited. He was enjoying this.

"They were hiding in the barn," he said. He was looking off into the middle distance like he could see the barn now.

"Bonnie and Clyde?"

"Yep, I brought them their supper," he said. "I was only 7 at the time."

I waited for him to continue, but when he didn't, I asked, "And they gave you a candy bar?"

That perked him up. "No, a whole box of candy bars. Chocolate bars. Hershey's. A whole box," he repeated. "Like this." And he held out his hands and formed a shoebox. He added, "My older brother—and this was really his deal—he showed them a way out of town, to avoid the sheriff."

My grandpa still enjoys a beer, but he doesn't know who I am. He no longer tells stories. All I've got is what he told me on those summer afternoons.

And that was it. I asked him again and recorded part of it on my phone. I don't know why. I think now I just wanted proof.

When my dad got home and I told him the story, he said, "No, that was Dillinger." Like this was a story he'd heard a million times as a boy and hadn't thought about since. He was sure it was Dillinger. I told him, "Dillinger was Chicago, Dad." He shrugged and said maybe he mixed it up. This was driving me nuts. I Googled "Bonnie and Clyde Shamrock" on my phone. All I could find was some info about a chase that ended with their car in the Red River and some locals helping them. The write-up said someone was shot.

My dad said that didn't sound right, that my grandpa would've mentioned the river or someone getting shot. He said he was pretty sure it was Dillinger anyway. I didn't show him the Wiki page for Dillinger.

My grandpa's older now than he was then—that's how aging works. He still enjoys a beer, but he doesn't know who I am. He no longer tells stories. All I've got is what he told me on those summer afternoons. Maybe that's why I got it into my head to drive up to Shamrock and find out if his story was real.

The drive from the Hill Country to the Panhandle might be one of those drives one can enjoy only if they're from the Panhandle. And I am—Amarillo. Which is to say, when the road flattens and widens, when the mesquite-dotted hills are replaced by flat brown fields of prairie grass, when the dirt turns red and the sky never ends and I swear I can see all the way to Colorado, I'm someone who'll pull over at the first Allsup's and fill a vat with Dr Pepper and order two burritos—yes, please, to the offer of hot sauce. It's a strange thing, driving up this edge of Texas—the High Plains and the Llano Estacado to the left, the canyons and the hills to the right, through one-street towns of close-built shops, many boarded up nowadays. I can still picture horses tied to the rails out front.

Outside the museum, Raquel asks me what I'm writing about. I tell her my grandpa's story, the main points anyway. She asks his name and says she doesn't know any Houghs around here. The old-timers chime in—don't know any Houghs. I say my grandpa's people weren't here long. They moved to Texola when the bank took the ranch. The old-timers say that's how it often happened. I think my grandpa's probably not the only one with a grudge against banks. Raquel asks if I've been to the U-Drop Inn.

If you Google "Shamrock, Texas," the Conoco Tower of the U-Drop Inn is the image you'll see, and for good reason. It's a beautifully preserved art deco building. If you wait in front of the tower longer than a minute, you'll see tourists get out of their cars and stand long enough to make sure their legs still work after hours in the car—that sprint from Oklahoma City or Albuquerque, maybe Amarillo if they allowed themselves the rest. They take a couple pictures, check their screens, take a couple more. The tower's turquoise neon looks amazing on Instagram. This part of Shamrock, the road that used to be Route 66, still looks like 1955. The drive-up motels and auto repair shops. The hand-painted signs scrubbed dull by the wind. The ancient Chevies and Fords still glistening, polished by those who treasure these artifacts of the time before I-40 bypassed the town. The tourists take their photos then drive away.

The smart ones go inside before they hit the road again. Inside the U-Drop Inn, you'll find an info center in the large lobby of the old gas station—the shelves now lined with pamphlets, books, and local art. Through a door to the right, a small café. At the U-Drop, you get to meet Hazel and Oleta.

Oleta Stone looks so familiar you're sure she's a distant aunt you met at a family barbecue a few years ago. You just can't quite place if she's on your dad's side or your mom's. She's warm like that. Like she knows you might be a little uncomfortable meeting all these new people, and she'll fix you a plate and introduce you to some cousins who'll play with you.

When I arrive at the U-Drop, Oleta's showing a couple tourists a mural on the back wall of the Pixar movie *Cars*. She's telling them how the scenery and buildings were all real places on Route 66. I wander around looking at hats, T-shirts, a mannequin of a sheriff with handcuffs on his hip. The tourists leave, and Oleta asks if I need any help. I tell her I'm working on a story about my grandpa and ask about Bonnie and Clyde. She says I ought to check out the museum. She assures me Raquel will welcome me. I say I've been, and she says if I want to know more, I really should talk to Hazel.

Hazel Janssen's at the register and rings me up for a couple Route 66 bumper stickers. Oleta tells Hazel I'm a writer, and I swear I can hear the pride in her voice. Hazel's proud of me, too. I want to stay awhile and soak up all this warmth. Maybe I miss my grandmothers. Hazel asks why I'm interested in Bonnie and Clyde, and I say I'm not really. I tell her about my grandpa. I tell her about my grandparents and how they survived the Dust Bowl and used to tell me stories. That the Dust Bowl—this disaster no one talks about—is an obsession of mine. For nearly 10 years, most of the 1930s, the entire middle of the country looked like the Sahara Desert. And anytime I mention it, all I get is a blank stare. Hazel says she was born in '35, the middle of the worst of it. Her mom used to cover her crib with a wet sheet so she wouldn't choke on the dust. I say this is what I mean. These details. We hear about those who left. We never hear from those who stayed. And people did stay. She locks eyes with me and says, "Some people couldn't afford to leave."

I tell her about my grandparents and how they survived the Dust Bowl. That the Dust Bowl—this disaster no one talks about—is an obsession of mine.

Hazel says she knew the lady Clyde shot. Her name was Gladys Cartwright. The Cartwrights and another family, the Pritchards, had seen the Barrow gang's car go into the Red River. The Pritchard and Cartwright men rescued the passengers from the sinking car—two men and a woman. Clyde and his brother, Buck, were all right. Bonnie suffered burns to her leg. They all wound up at the Pritchard farmhouse, where the gang held the families hostage while they treated Bonnie's wounds. Gladys, only 19 at the time and holding an infant in her arms, had reached for something above a cabinet, and seeing a threat, Clyde shot her hand. A newspaper clipping from the time says Buck shot her. In any case, her hand took a load.

Hazel says Gladys used to play piano, was pretty good at it, too. The gang's car is still there, under the river, swallowed by the quicksand. But Gladys never played piano again.

I tell her I'm pretty sure that wasn't my family. All my grandpa said was they were hiding in the barn. Hazel says it's likely. The Barrow gang was all over town for a time. They even ate in the café next door.

"I'm not sure I'll ever know if it's true," I say of my grandpa's tale. "Why wouldn't it be true?" Hazel responds. "It's his story." I agree and say maybe I just wanted to honor a little part of his past. He's my last grandparent. I wonder now how many other stories I've lost.

I resist the urge to hug them when I leave.

Next door, at the café, I order a cheesecake and a bottle of Coke. I'll regret the sugar crash later, but I can't resist a bottled Coke. The place is so well preserved—a low café bar lined with short chrome stools, an ornate tin ceiling, soft pleather booths under the windows—you'd think they wrapped it in plastic 70 years ago and just unwrapped it last night. The story goes, Clyde asked the waitress here about a slot machine. She told him it was just emptied, in case he was thinking of robbing it. They bought lunch and paid. I wonder which booth they sat in. I wonder how my grandpa's family escaped unscathed so the only story he's got is about a box of candy bars, while a few miles down the road, a woman who played piano never got to play again.

I'd never been off the highway in Shamrock. But I have a video of my grandpa telling me a story about Bonnie and Clyde. I thought this essay would be a fun way to check out the town and find out more. Turns out, I found a way to honor my grandpa. Charles Hough was born in 1927. He died in Austin on Jan. 14, while I was finishing this story. And I believe every word of it.

Too Wild To Love

A multigenerational Texas family leaves the state for a new life on the East Coast

By Elizabeth Bruenig

Like most everything concerning Texas, leaving the place is too vast a thing to comprehend all at once. I was standing at my kitchen window in New England the day I realized I had finally left the state, some dozen years after my departure. My mother had called to say she and my father had finally packed their things, pulled up stakes in Fort Worth, and set out for their new home in the mid-Atlantic. It was March: buttercups and jonquils among green tufts in the drainage ditches there; icicles peeling the gutters away from the eaves here.

For a moment, the bleakness ahead of me—a dull rattle of freezing rain on the windowpane—seemed a certain sign from the universe that none of this was meant to be. More than 200 years of family history, most of it consigned to the front matter of family Bibles and photograph inscriptions, now traveled unsteadily to some new home as my folks drove toward Maryland along the broad highways of North Texas. The remainder of it, written in the bones of all the people who came before me, stayed in the red earth they left behind.

I wanted to call and tell them to turn around and go back, but it wouldn't have been any use. They wanted to be closer to me and my children on the East Coast. People can be heliotropic, their faces turning toward the future the way flowers lean to the sun. They were always going to follow their grandchildren, and I was the one who'd spirited them north in the first place. I had been the one to end our family's history in Texas; they had only been late to accept it.

I have always loved Texas, as much as any Texan is given to love Texas. The beauty of its peerless landscapes blazes in my memories even now, brighter than the day before me. I think of calamitous slate thunderheads hulking over a green afternoon parking lot hissing with

Illustration: Jan Feindt

summer rain; fields of cobalt bluebonnets ridged with paintbrushes the color of umber and fire; the crisp, clear, neon perfection of a single Sonic Drive-In square in the center of some interminable grassy plain on a shadowless, starry night. But I have also been transfixed by Texas' brutal counterpoints. I remember a heifer I saw lying at the bottom of a creek with an eye as milky pale as an opal; a garter snake my mother hacked in half with a hoe in our garden at sundown; every steer skull and cowhide a reminder that death is nearby in pitiless, harsh places, which can also be beautiful, even sublime. My constitution has been shaped by the home I loved, so maybe I had neglected to accept that I had walked away.

It wasn't until after I left, with my parents trailing behind me, that I understood what Texas meant. The eye barely opens wide enough to admit all the light she radiates, and it was only in shades of gathering dimness that I began to see what it meant to have left her, long after I was already gone. The land chose my ancestors over many scores of burning summers and storm-blasted autumns, and in that way it had whittled our blood down to my cousins, their children, my children, my brother, me. Texas had made us for herself, and so there were things we took with us when we left.

A decade ago, at college outside Boston, my friends from the eastern seaboard would grin in surprised awe at my mother's check-in voicemails, occasionally aired on speakerphone.

Hey, sugar, she would say, *I'm just checkin' in on ya...Up here at Kroger's fixin' to make a pot of chili. Cowboys're on later, so the boys'll be watchin'. Well, y'all just gimme a call if you wanna yak. I won't be up to much.*

By then, through a process I still don't entirely understand, I had lost my accent. But my mother's accent remained: not a drawl but a twang, not a slow lyrical hush over scads of too-harsh consonants, but a quick, lilting slur of vowels and wanton truncation, all arranged in a complex tone halfway between earthy warmth and high skepticism.

It is singularly Texan in all the ways the linguists specify and in ways I now privately catalog and treasure as fragments of a native tongue borne out of a native place. The abrogation, for instance, of the *a* in the Texan-inflected days of the week—Sund'y, Mond'y, Tuesd'y, and so on—lends an almost archaic feel to the words and shifts the words' stress almost entirely to the first syllable. The days are made familiar in diminution. They sound less like the stern measure of a lifetime and more like another element in the Texas wild.

My mother inherited her accent largely from my grandfather Norman, who tallied his early days in the Panhandle during the inhospitable Dust Bowl, when durability of character was a necessity of life. He was born in Childress in 1936, one child of five belonging to Horace and Vera Musick, who raised and processed pinto beans, okra, peppers, wild plums, pecans—whatever the dead land yielded and the wind left behind. They preserved what they could and ate the rest in soups and stews not much more than a mess of pottage. When he was 16, Norman joined the Air Force and became a mechanic. That trade saw him through the rest of his life. By the time I knew him, he was a tall and lean, potbellied Texan grandfather with tawny, leather-worn skin, a salt-and-pepper mustache, an omnipresent pair of cowboy boots, and a standing offer to take me fishing. He wore shirts with Western piping, and smoked cigarettes. He played the banjo and had no use for religion or politics, both of which seemed to him corrupted in their institutional forms.

Nature, as he revealed it to me, was no less vicious but much more beautiful. When I was a little girl, we would go down to the dock to catch catfish in Lake Arlington, part of the Trinity River basin. "Look here, honey," he would say when he reached into the bucket of live minnows, spears of quicksilver in mid-July. There was a hook, glinting. Then the sunlight shattered over his hand and one of the fish writhed in his fingers. I couldn't watch him bait the hook, nor nail the catch to trees to gut them. The older I became, the less sensitive I was to the manifest brutality of the natural world. I realized, in a way that Papa Norman knew more acutely and intimately than he ever stated to me directly, that human beings are as subject to it as any living creature, especially in Texas. What seemed frightening nevertheless seemed fair in a place where the natural world and civilization are never too far apart.

This occurred to me most acutely when I learned to ride horses, no older than 6 years old, the age my eldest daughter is now. At the time, I was surprised to discover that my father, a man who appeared at home late in the eve-

nings in a suit and tie and five o'clock shadow courtesy of his accounting job in Dallas, had once ridden horses with his grandparents in Hillsboro. If my dad—the pinnacle of Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex professionalism—had also been initiated into the ways of animals and the seasons and life and death, then the spirit of the place *did* infuse its furthest reaches.

My father taught me that a horse must take a saddle and bit and must be broken to ride. Your dear one will scrape you; your beautiful one will throw you; your sweetheart will startle at a gunshot and bolt for its life. In each case, the animal could kill you, all without much warning or ill intent. Horses are noble but nearly ungovernable. It isn't by sentiment that they're inducted into human designs, and sentimentality only obscures the relationship between the animal and its rider. It is possible to look at a creature in all its glory and majesty, innocent as it is pitiless, and say: *You are too wild a thing for me to love.*

I never intended to leave Texas. It happened slowly but steadily. I fell in love with an upperclassman two years ahead of me at our public high school in Arlington. He was my debate team captain, and he lived just down the street. When he accepted a full ride from the University of Oklahoma, both of us were too far-flung from New England to realize his grades and scores would easily have qualified him for the Ivies. All the better for us: He drove home from Norman on the weekends, or I rode the Heartland Flyer from Fort Worth to his stop, and we never put an end to our high school romance. In the bare room he rented in Oklahoma, we planned the future.

I would go to undergraduate school in Massachusetts—a serendipitous choice inspired by a woman I had met—and he would graduate and join me in the north as a rising law student. Then we would marry. When the time came, we stopped only at a Subway for lunch on the drive from Dallas to New Orleans for a courthouse wedding and dinner on Bourbon Street. After that, we followed work, and by the end of a seven-year whirlwind, we found ourselves in a basement apartment in Washington, D.C., with one paying roommate and dozens of rats.

More than any patch of suspicious mold or upturned corner of linoleum tile, the rodents represented the conclusion of so much careful planning. All our best efforts had led us here, and yet the fruit of a good deal of human ingenuity hadn't accounted for rats. We had been nomadic for so long that I had never had to deal with vermin. They augur permanence, colonizing stores of unused food or swept-up garbage, all the debris of settled civilization. We searched for humane rat-traps. My mother suggested we buy a cat.

That a cat was the obvious solution to the infestation occurred to her about as naturally as the cat took to his appointed purpose; she's always been canny and matter-of-fact about that kind of thing. With speed and alacrity, Pepper dispatched the rats and put the fear of God into the scattered remainder. In so doing, he became a companion of ours, sketching out the shadow form of a nascent household far away from home.

My mother had also told me that as soon as we set up housekeeping, we'd get pregnant. This was another bit of wisdom evidently derived from the intersection of nature and culture. It never took her anything more than hanging her laundry too close to my dad's on the line, she would tell me, always in grave good humor. She wanted things to be easier for me than they had been for her; that this is either desirable or achievable is the central mythology of parenthood. I didn't listen to her, and I was visiting home in Arlington in September of 2015 when it caught up with me.

We had stopped by an old friend's house in the Near Southside of Fort Worth for ceviche and Coca-Cola, and as I climbed uneasily into the boiling heat of my mother's SUV afterward, complaining of aches that struck me as insignificant at the time, she fixed me with a sideways stare. Her stillness was frost in the mesquite-dappled shade, and it sent a chill racing through me. She said I was pregnant, and I argued with her reflexively. But she was right.

Jane, my full-blooded Texan daughter, was born in Washington, D.C., in the summer of 2016. I think of her as Calamity Jane, arriving as though by invitation in that city at that time, when everything was set to implode. I had taken a job as an editor in *The Washington Post*'s now-defunct newsroom essay section, Outlook, after the magazine I'd been blogging for was unceremoniously put up for sale. I thought of the *Post* position as temporary, en route to professional magazine writing, though it didn't obviously constitute a direct path to such a livelihood.

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I assured myself there would be a road between them if I kept making progress.

Slowly, my future began to manifest before I could conceive of it. Possibilities are ruled by circumstances, and each set of circumstances consists only of other possibilities realized. All the unrealized options, not chosen, wither on the vine. The choices I had made beget their own sets of decisions and excluded others. Jane grew, and my editing role indeed gave way to writing. I witnessed this in happy apprehension, glad of it all and hoping I was making the right decisions.

I wasn't surprised when my parents sold the house I grew up in, though I briefly lost my breath one night when curiosity possessed me to look the place up on Google Maps. I discovered a still image of my brother halfway inside the front door, his car parked in the driveway. In time, the photo was replaced with another, and the ghost of my brother vanished.

My second daughter, Clare, was born in the summer of 2019, not long before I took a job based in New York City, spurring our move north. We bought our first house, huddled through our first winter, and settled into the rhythms of life. Everything now seemed to have unfolded so certainly, so naturally—from the point where it all began—that I overlooked the disappearance of the road back to Texas.

Now I call my mother in Maryland from my home four hours away in Connecticut to ask her questions about cooking or parenting.

Inevitably, she is assembling care packages for us, mostly from the bounty of her garden. Her father taught her to grow fruits and vegetables and to store them in sundry ways. She preserves lemons for escabeche, cans fresh salsa when her tomatoes are in, and dries lavender and basil in twine bundles strung up in her kitchen all season long. In the spring and summer, she collects stone fruit and berries and turns out 8-ounce Mason jars full of jams, preserves, and jellies, which glow like gemstones as they disappear one by one from my back porch pantry. What was survival for Papa Norman is second nature to her. But it is only merely familiar to me, and I regret it, as much as I appreciate never having needed to know it.

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When mom visits our house, I implore her to tell me stories, write down recipes, remind me of fading memories. The world here is narrower, more provisional: Dense legions of black birch and white pines frame the horizon and mute the sun. There seems to have been, at some point, an agreement made in New England about the places humanity and industry would maul for use, and the places that would be left to the sugar maples and hemlock trees that have grown forever along these rocky hillsides. The opposing camps meet at their borders, with no uncertain ground between them. The ivy grows right up to the eaves, the granite cliff meets the road at a roughly chiseled right angle, and the parallel universes carry on side by side. The nights here are dark. In some places, hidden beneath boughs and behind ridges, the darkness gathers into an almost primordial shade that supplies some clarity as to how the Puritans, faced with their long-sought refuge, might've occasionally concluded that the devil walked among them.

What I remember about Texas is the night is brilliant there. Far from the cities the uninterrupted belts of stars glitter in the heavens like diamond chips on a disc of lapis, memorialized in song. Where people gather, they build monuments to light in their cities. In mine, on the wide-open plains, neither woods nor the hills interrupt their glow. In some sense, all of this was beautiful, magnificent; in another, I was always something of a fugitive from Texas' equalizing light.

Can a person be turned by disposition against the daylight? And did I spend almost half of my life squinting against a sun so blisteringly white it pinched my pupils to pinpricks and spangled prisms in the sweat of my eyes? It must only have seemed that way, both because I was young and because I experienced the metaphor in a more material sense. Texas was always too extreme for me, somehow. The heat, the brightness, the wildness of the place—honestly and prominently presented—overwhelmed me in their charge. But it must have taught me what beauty is because I still search for it everywhere I look.

Papa Norman died at 61, having smoked a pack a day since he was roughly 12 years old. I loved him though I knew him little. More than two decades hence, my memories of him—his ash-smudged voice and oil-stained hands, his lonesome bluegrass music and wandering gait—have faded down to these impressions, which resonate in my thoughts when certain notes in my mother's voice ring out. Norman's mother, Vera, who was to me a little woman called Grandma Musick, survived three of her children. She lived in a neat, low-slung ranch house in Fort Worth, where my mother and I would go collect paper grocery sacks full of unshelled pecans she had gathered from her garden around the holidays. As elderly as she was by then, Vera would fill the bags to the brim and store them in her laundry room, where every surface was shopworn, efficient, bare. I wish I could take my daughters by the hand and lead them there, to show them they're made from hard people built up from wondrous places and difficult times; that they're stronger than I hope is ever tested; that there's beauty in the beginnings of things and even in their ends.