

Buffalo Altar

Story by Stephen Harrigan

Music by J. Todd Frazier

* = cue from pianist

"..." = slightly more time than ",",

*I been in the oil business for fifty-eight years, and I ain't tired of it yet... Oil could fall to a nickel a barrel, and I'd still be out there driving the back roads, trying to talk some old rancher out of his mineral rights. I guess when you think about it, it's the driving I always liked best. Godalmighty, Texas is a beautiful country to drive in!

*Sometimes I'll pull over to the side of the road, and turn off the ignition and just sit there, looking at things. At the moon rising over the Caprock. At a jackrabbit skittering across the creosote flats. At the birds flying high above me... I don't even know what kind of damn birds they are, but it gives me a shiver to watch them sailing over... wave after wave after wave of them, and to hear their voices calling out to each other across the sky.

*I got to be careful about driving these days, though... cause I ain't exactly legal no more. *They wouldn't renew my license last time I went down to the Department of Motor Vehicles... Said I was too old and too blind... Said I could take the bus... *Well I got news for them:... *I ain't never taking no damn bus!... *But if you think I'm gonna stand here and whine about things... you don't know C.L. Pettigrew Senior.

*I'm eighty-one years old, but I ain't about to give her up yet... I still keep an office in the Petroleum Building in downtown Midland, and I got a deal about to come together any day now up in Briscoe County... I been through every boom and bust you can name. I was here for the Goldsmith strike, I watched them drill the discovery well for the Spraberry Field, I made a million dollars in the Scurry County Boom til I lost it all in a dry hole up near LaMesa. But it was pert'near as much fun losing money as making it, back in those days. Because we were young it seemed Texas was young too. And every time a well came in it was like the land itself was whispering a secret in your ear.

I seen tornadoes and flash floods and ever other damn thing. I seen a man get struck by lightning on the 8th hole at Lions Club Municipal Golf Course in Sweetwater, dead as a biscuit and his clothes on fire too. I was there in forty-eight when they opened up the Shamrock Hotel in Houston. That was a party! I remember there was a riot out on the streets that night... everybody trying to get inside and see Dorothy Lamour. It broke my heart when they tore that old hotel down. What the hell are they going to tear down next? The Alamo?

But like I said, I ain't complaining. I've had my share of fancy hotels and wild parties and two-inch-thick ribeyes and cold Mexican beer. It's the driving I can't give up: roaring down a Texas highway in a big old Oldsmobile, with the windows open and the bugs splattering on the windshield and me feeling as wild and free as a Comanche Indian. I guess those were

about the best days of my life... those lease-buying trips when I was a young landman with a big car and an expense account.

*But when I think about those old times now, there's one day that stands out as special, one day I won't ever get out of my mind as long as I live. This would have been way back in the forties, right after the war. I'd been to the courthouse in Floyd County and got the name of this old boy who lived alone on a hardscrabble ranch that the geologists had told me was sittin' on a pool of oil as big as the Gulf of Mexico... They warned me at the courthouse about this fella... said to honk all the way up to the house cause he was the sort that didn't like being taken by surprise... But he was friendly enough... just an old, old man... with a bad eye... and a missing thumb he said he'd lost in a roping accident when he was a kid driving cattle up the Goodnight-Loving Trail.

*He wasn't half as ornery as the people at the courthouse said he'd be. Just lonely, really: his wife dead and his children scattered and nothing for him to do except listen to the stock report on the radio... We sat out there on his porch drinking orange soda pop and I listened to him talk on about cattle diseases and the neighbor who'd been trying to steal his riparian rights for forty years and whether Jim Bowie had really hidden all that silver over in San Saba County like people said... Then he showed me his arrowhead collection... I'd never seen a collection like that. He kept it all in shoeboxes, and there must have been three hundred shoeboxes

stacked up on the floor of the front room alone... and every one of them filled up to the top with arrowheads... and spear points... and scrapers... and I don't know what all.

*Every one of these things, he said, had come from his land... He even had a rusty old sword from the Spanish days, and you could still read the writing on the blade. On one side it said... "Draw me not in anger..." and on the other it said... "Sheathe me not in shame."

*After I'd admired his arrowheads for an hour or so... I finally worked the conversation... around to his mineral rights. *I told him I'd come out there to make him a rich man. He said he guessed he wouldn't mind that, since he'd worked hard all his life and figured the Lord owed him a little money for his trouble.

*So we went over the contract and argued back and forth about royalties and bonus payments and such. When we got all that worked out I handed him a pen, but just before he was about to sign he looked up at me and said... "There's one place you can't drill." And I said, "Where is that, sir?" He pointed to the map. "Right here, on top of this bluff..." Well, that was a problem, because that bluff was the same place the geologists had told me the first well was supposed to go. I asked the old man why we couldn't drill there. He gave me a squinty look, took a sip of his soda pop' and said, "I'll show you." So I said "All right, let's go." But he shook his head and said, "Not now... *You got to wait til sunrise."

*There wasn't no use to argue with an old man like that... not if I wanted his signature on the lease, so I spent the night on an old army cot in that room with the shoeboxes. And then way before daylight he woke me up and put me on a horse and we rode for an hour or more in the dark till we came to that bluff... Sitting on his horse... that old man looked about twenty years younger.

*We tied the horses to a mesquite bush and then I followed the old man as he walked along in the dark, down through a big crevice in the rock and out on the floor of Yamparika Canyon... Then we climbed up to this cave sitting there on the canyon wall.

*The cave wasn't deep... It just went back about twenty feet or so, and when we turned around... we could see the sky growing light... way out to the east.

"I can't see nothing in here," I said to the old man. "What is it you wanted to show me?" *He turned around with a perturbed look in his eyes and said... *"Hush up and wait."

*So I hushed, and I waited... and pretty soon the sun started to slip up over the horizon... *I could hear mourning doves calling, and there were swallows flying in out of their mud nests at the top of the cave. Then this one ray of light started to travel across the plains, moving across the grass and then along the floor of the canyon like it was looking for something... Finally it came into the cave and settled on a

pile of rocks a few feet behind where we was standing and lit it up like a Christmas tree... It was then I saw it wasn't rocks... it was bones.

*It seemed that somebody had taken a bunch of old jawbones and set them up on end so that they made a kind of platform... *And on that platform was a skull from some animal I'd never seen before... The skull was big... and thick... and flat... and prehistoric-looking... and it had two horns that swept out from either side like a longhorn steer's... The skull's eye sockets were as big as my fists... and they were staring out toward the plains... I had this strange feeling that those empty eye holes were watching the sunrise just like I was... "What the hell is that?" I asked the old man... "By God, son," he said... "that... is an altar."

*The old man said the skull belonged to an old buffalo. Not the kind of buffalo we know about, but the kind that died out thousands and thousands of years ago. Way back in those times some fella had climbed up to this cave with this buffalo skull and very carefully set it up on these jawbones so that it was looking east... across the plains...

*"Why do you suppose he did that?" I asked the old man. "Why do you think?," he said, looking out to where the sun was rising and the hawks were circling in the sky. "They didn't have no First Baptist Church back in those days. Where else were you going to go and do your worshiping? Besides, a sunrise up here is a pretty sight... and I guess that old boy

wanted the buffalo to see it."

*He never would let us drill on that bluff. We tried all around it, but all we ever got was dry holes, and that old man died without any royalty at all.

*I come to this cafeteria for lunch pert'near every day, except for once or twice a year when one of the kids might fly in to visit. The girls behind the counter all know me and they treat me pretty well. They all pretend to flirt with me, but I tell 'em I ain't interested in any woman that wears a hairnet... And then I take my tray over to the same table by the window. I eat my lunch and then my Jello and then usually I'll take out a geologists' report or a survey map and study it for a while. You don't want to get behind in this business... But my mind sometimes drifts, and these days it drifts mostly to that buffalo skull sitting there in that cave out in Floyd County. I keep thinking about the old boy who built that altar... He was a Texan like me, I guess... though it was a hell of a different place back then.

*Or, maybe it wasn't... Maybe it's the same. Maybe all these cities and Taco Bells and Dairy Queens and outlet malls don't have a thing in the world to do with what Texas is. Texas is what connects me and that prehistoric fella and that old rancher and that dead buffalo... It's not just the place we live in, it's the place that lives in us... even after we're dead... and looking toward the sun... with empty eyes.