

The Borderline Poet Returns to Borderline

By Michael McGuire

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor JOEL PAGE writes...*

“Now I’m not from the part of Texas that could tell you much about the frontera, but I know a buckin’ bronco when I see one, and this sucker’s a bucking bronc. Take that back — it’s a herd of them. Every sentence is going to do its goddamndest to throw you off before you get to the end, and it’s not going to end when you think it will. Grab the nearest metaphor and clutch, reader, because every one of these lil mustangs has a life of its own and it’s none too keen on saddles. And then the herd of them, the piece as a whole, it’s not taking you the direct route either. Don’t get too comfy in the present, because you’re liable to get thrown back 50 years, or forward, or into another head, or across the rio bravo. And here’s the wild part; maybe this is a spoiler alert, but I don’t think so, because I don’t think this is a spoil me piece; when it’s all said and done, they’re gunna leave you where they put you. That’s what riding broncs is like; shit, that’s what life is like; you flail like a madman, hanging on for dear life, praying it will end, only to find you ain’t gone anywhere. But goddamn if you don’t have a story. The piece says it best: “How the story ends isn’t the point. It seldom is.”

Five stars.

(Spacing and font size are author’s own.) Eds.

The Borderline Poet Returns to Borderline

I wrote a little book of poems and put it on the shelf.
 I made up a little song and sang it to myself.
 But when it came to dance, I changed things by a hair.
 I choreographed some steps and danced them in Times Square.
 I was Fred—and Ginger!—when I stepped off of the curb,
 but the body beneath the bus didn't even rate a blurb.

In short, after a year or two—if not a generation or two—back east, whether or not our principle, who never danced the dance they dance in our neck of the woods (known to its aficionados as the shitkicker) or, indeed, whatever the latest light fantastic may have been in the Big Apple, was crushed beneath the wheels of time, our borderline poet returned to Borderline—or Badhand, as hard luck towns are sometimes known to those unlucky enough to be born in one—where he settled down to share the life that was left with someone very special. But last things first, as we say in Badhand (or Borderline) for, if you look hard, you can see them coming up—fast. So let us begin at the end...

La fiesta.

The fiesta does not begin as planned for, if truth be told, it isn't planned at all. The surviving family is seated out back under *la ramada* as day draws to a close when some nameless *tiá* or *tió* finds the words that haven't yet been spoken.

“Let's eat!”

This is followed by general agreement and one of the boys begins by starting the fire. Half an hour later, wood smoldering, someone goes to the icebox and someone else throws greasy strips across bars thick with the grease of time past. Fat fills the air as day darkens and there is general agreement that hauling the grill out from under *la ramada* might help. A group

effort that makes some difference, but the determined gusts of the night are producing a regular wind tunnel.

La fiesta, as only one just across the border from Borderline can so utterly be, is at risk of being blown away; of coming to, in a word: nothing.

Another of the boys finds a tarp and, standing on a chair, nails one edge along the last beam. Now the swelling, snapping canvas plasters itself against those seated with their backs to the blast, but the situation might be considered passable—more rarely being hoped for hereabouts—at least until the night of all out-of-the-way, barely accessible *ranchitos*, even when not that far from the remains of the river, closes in.

Intense, impenetrable night.

Smoldering sticks, mercifully downwind, offer little light. One of the boys goes round tacking up a long yellow cord which he plugs into one just like it and then another very similar that stretches to the shed housing the ruin of a generator which coughs and wheezes a little life into the hours of darkness: the no-nonsense illumination of half a dozen work lamps.

And there you have it, a gala event, at least as near as you can get to one just a little bit this side of nowhere, which is to say: in Punto Muerto.

But what's going on, anyway? Is Calliope's family celebrating her half century with Tex? Tex, of all people? Not only a *tejano* from the upside of the river, but a poet! A poet? Well, so it is said, for in the pistol packing state, a poet is generally considered, if not an actual target, at least a laughing matter, at which point let's have a hoot at one of his lesser limericks...

The man who slept upside down
was considered a bit of a clown.
When he got out of bed, he stood on his head
to turn a smile into a frown.

But please, ladies and gentlemen, reserve your critical judgment until, as we say in Badhand, the chips are down. Moreover, we're getting a little ahead of ourselves. Time was, back when, when our principals, each complete in his or her self as it was possible for man or woman to be, hardly knew each other and, to be honest, had not even met. For that reason, the better to acquaint ourselves with both, let's take a look at each, one at a time.

Tex first.

But what do you say we back up to the beginning—assuming the instant in which Tex began to consider abandoning the borderline borough that birthed him was, in fact, his beginning when, for a man not without talent, if a talent unsuited to his time and place—when the moment was upon Tex when he must see for himself if things were different elsewhere?

For, in Borderline, or Badhand—where, as we who live here say, “yuh play th' cards yuh've been dealt”—poets were fewer and farther between than fenceposts in the spread down the road a ways known to the natives as Blownaway, where the head had wandered off in search of less toxic topsoil about a hundred years ago.

However, like the rest of us, Tex was born and even raised and as soon as, running down his doggerel in the dust at road shows when—for lack of a more miserable venue—they came to Borderline, which pastime was, he had to admit, less hazardous than riding bulls but, as soon as Tex realized the extent of his uncommon, at least for Badhand, talent, he knew he'd better hightail it on out of our particular dead end.

But...a word about names. Not Tex's, which was simple enough, if not quite the one he'd been handed at birth.

Calliope's.

As a handle from the friendship state—where some folks are known for telling others to go back where they came from—it wasn't nearly as vulgar as it might have been. Three syllables, gulped in a way to warm hearts from the wrong side of the river up to the sooner state, where God and Mammon share power even more intimately than in Lone Star to the south. But her given name said little, if anything, about her, for...

Calliope was a border girl.

It didn't much matter which side of *el Río* she'd been born on, for she had spent her young life, or a good part of it, wading the dregs of it: family on one side, work on the other. But it was after a day as a speck upon the labor intensive fields of Texas that she learned to sing. Not while working—that would have been a tall tale of underpaid yet blissful field hands as told by the Chamber of Commerce—for the heat and pesticides, not to mention the pace forced upon those bent double, legal or not, left folks winded, stuff up their noses and down their throats, wheezing sharp, agonizing breaths that fell somewhat short of song.

As for Calliope's name, well...

But to return to Tex.

Now Tex's old man was one of those atypical Texans whose favorite page turner—even if he hated day laborers (*jornaleros agricolas*) as much as the next man—was *I Got it from María* (or *One Man's Love Affair with Mexico*), author best left unnamed, but his favorite rotgut, correctly enough, was Old Alamo. His other half, from Deadpan, never cracked a smile, not even when the old horse's ass kicked the *campesinos* off the land (the bug killer had devalued their man-hours) and burnt the shacks he'd kept them in.

But this is not Ma's story or Pa's. It's Calliope's. And Tex's. And the time came, long before he met Calliope, when Tex had had enough of whatever you've had enough of when you've had enough, when he packed his bag and left.

Now Tex had already sent his jingles down the road apiece, and more than once, but his killer couplets always came right back. "Try us again, just not right away" was the nicest note he'd got. When, at last, he found his way to the Last Chance Bookstore—"last chance to buy a book," the sign said, 'you won't find one west of here'—he got a firsthand look at those pussy-whipped periodicals, and realized he wasn't the only word slinger ever born in a backwash of *el Río*—in this case Borderline—but...limited as his verse, and theirs, might be...some of the stories he skimmed were only half bad.

Though not actually labeled "YA" which, he was soon to learn, meant "young adult," most were trapped in post-adolescent (PA?) first-person, kiddy litter glorying in such words as "mom" and "dad," or the even deadlier "parents," with hardly an adult in sight and she or he only to be mocked, but they weren't as appalling as the puerile poesy and he decided to ignore a masthead that, in most cases, could have been three or four pair of silken unmentionables flapping in one of the more predictable winds that blow round these parts, editors whose own tales were generally one-woman with a number of peripheral, if not satellite, males with questionable motivation, and, for a change, enjoying the prosaic, Tex stood there in the stacks half the night, reading.

Though folks who peopled these pages, he realized, must've never walked down a road or up it, which can be somewhat harder, much less worked for a "livin"; must've sat bolted in rows "gawkin" at those basket cases Tex remembered from his student days who passed their lifetimes backed up to blackboards looking back at you with terror deep in their eyes.

The young things—somehow it reminded him of girls' baseball—were writing about what they knew, which was not very much; in short: themselves. But some of the yarns, even if they weren't as tall as Tex, being a border boy, liked his tales, weren't all about #1, but someone else—the winds they leaned against and the rains they walked through, not to mention the dust that settled on them long before they were through.

Now we could tie all this up quite tidily if Tex had met his true love in the doomed stacks of the Last Chance Bookstore, but it wouldn't be true for a good story is never neat and, in actual fact, Tex met Calliope back in Borderline before he ever left: that is to say on one of nowhereville's innumerable empty lots briefly come to life as a kind of homegrown fairgrounds where—in pursuit of a buck, no matter how filthy and frayed—he was trumpeting metrics to a small crowd and, somehow, their eyes—Tex's and Calliope's—as they say, met, and—slam/bang—there they stayed, which might, or might not, bring to mind one of our poet's less significant three-liners, if of no particular relevance to the case in hand...

The man who moaned and the woman who groaned
were known as a difficult pair; you could hear them coming,
though he was only humming and occasionally patting his hair.

Now Tex is a tall lean fella—at this point in time, his pockets stuffed with poems—and Calliope is short and smooth, not fat; her voice soft and sweet, not full, but always changing, as if running up and down the scales on a wind instrument far outclassing the one carried on the bony hip of your run-of-the-mill 21st century lonesome cowhand.

Now when Badhand lucks out and finds itself with one of those once a year fairs within the limits, Calliope works one of the stands where she hands baseballs to wannabe pitchers and they throw a helluva fastball at a lever that drops a black man from the wrong side of town (if any side of Borderline can be considered such) in a barrel of water. She doesn't like the work—

the black man doesn't much either—but sometimes there's little else in Borderline, or even up the road in Backwater, where the remains of a river attempt a halfhearted turn and respectable ladies sing the sacred verses and flash a “Return to Sender” sign at those on the other side who might be thinking of wading their way to a living wage.

Calliope's parents crossed the river as children to work the fields and managed to survive, parents about as different from Tex's as floodwaters from a dust storm.

After work her father watched CNN advertising CNN in their shipwreck of a trailer and her mother was usually out in back feeding a collection of footloose oddballs with nowhere else to go. She charged just about enough to make ends meet, less than her unfortunates would pay for cotton candy on nights like these, which wouldn't carry them very far up the road or even down it. Sometimes there were half a dozen bull riders and sideshow hawkers set round the table set up in the dust of some passing rodeo, past and present, all of them “tuckin' into” whatever “mom” could rustle up.

Now don't get the idea Calliope's mother is any bleeding heart. She isn't. On the contrary, her mother, that is Calliope's grandmother, like any south of the border *ama de casa*, was determined to keep at least one daughter home. Forever. And you can just guess who was targeted to suffer that fate, which might remind us of another of Tex's near triplets, if even less relevant than the last...

The woman who turned on men,
turned and turned again; when she was spinning,
she thought she was winning, the woman who turned on men.

That first night, the night Tex met Calliope or Calliope met Tex, depending on your point of view, our young man—you guessed it—burbled some of his best jinglejangle into her ear and she—not to be outdone—sang to him. Now the songs Calliope sang weren't your ordinary ones

or, if they were, she made them special. Calliope favored oldies like the one about not forgetting a certain river valley, sang them to bring tears to the eyes, something Tex had never deigned to do for any devotee of his dime-a-dozen doggerel, though sometimes, maybe only when she had to, Calliope would make up melody and words all by herself.

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But now, meaning at this point in time—that's right, folks, the night of the aforementioned fiesta—the borderline poet known as Tex is just back from the big city.

Oh yes, the Big Apple is behind him, tossed with only a minimal morsel missing, nothing nobody would notice for, as Tex well knows, a few before he had attempted that first bite; perhaps even a nibble slighter larger, less tentative, than his. But he comes back with a few of his best in his back pocket, such as...

The man who lost his head felt a little bit better in bed.
He lay down with a will and lay very still,
but when he woke up he was dead.

And which is, perhaps, more important, Tex, on the bus back from said city—an odyssey that may have taken fifty hours or fifty years, you name it—wonders, not if it makes sense for the poet to go anywhere if he isn't appreciated in the hole he crawls out of, but where the poet in a man comes from and what happens once he decides to climb Parnassus for himself...

The man who climbed the stairs
was eating nuts and pears.
The man who slipped and fell
was on his way to hell.

Now when he comes to know the life south of the border a bit better, Tex will know that distillation is an indispensable part of the process and, if you hope to get a healthy 38% out of

your trickle of experience, you better start with 100% blue agave, distil it once and, if it doesn't work out the first time, maybe once again.

But the incident on the dirt road of knowledge that comes to mind on the bus back from the Big Apple was the time he was making his way up—or down—a third class track on Calliope's side of the river known as *la terecería*—the only track, incidentally, leading our lovers from Borderline to Punto Muerto and back again, not to mention the unforgettable fiesta we are on the point of returning to—when a cow gave birth practically in front of him.

There she was on a rise, some five meters or so overhead, and the newborn slipped out through the barbed wire, popping the cord as he went.

The calf came to a stop at Tex's feet, struggled to his own like a gifted young man with nowhere to go, and the cow hollered at Tex to hand her calf back on up for his first taste of milk and those indispensable antibodies. Clearly, the calf had never seen anything like Tex, or anything else for that matter, and flinched as Tex reached out to him, but the moment he felt the hot hand of the poet he relaxed, and Tex did his best to pick him up, but his best wasn't good enough, the thing slipped through his fingers and, even if it hadn't, there was no way he could carry a healthy calf five meters up that grade. He did try though.

Once, and once again.

How the story ends isn't the point. It seldom is. The point is that carrying a slippery slimy newborn, who'd be too heavy for you dry, up the steep slope of understanding is likeness enough for the poet's view of his impossible task: to make what he can out of what he is given—not to mention that which is taken away from him—even after he'd given up on the big world or the big world had given up on him, and he'd come home to see if there wasn't someone, or something, he might not give up on...ever.

In short, to see what there was he might try again, and then again.

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Now Calliope's story couldn't be more different from Tex's. Her grandmother, otherwise a gentle, caring creature, would never let her lastborn daughter study with her friends, some of whom went on to try that which, for them, was the big world, on the other side: in short, to sign away their souls to one of those for-profit playschools that leave you in arrears the rest of your life: God's next best gift to venture capitalists after for-profit prisons. Years later Calliope's mother could still hear her mother's voice...

"They won't be studying, they'll be babbling. I know your friends, you're better off without them. Clean these vegetables, when you're done, get the baby's sheets, and then..."

Ah! The mothers of Mexico, mushy as they may be slapping tortillas in "latina lit," quote/unquote: slap, slap, slap...

There were, for example, two mothers right in the cheek-to-cheek block of Calliope's mother's *parroquia*, both of whom were resolutely determined to keep their daughters forever chained to the cash registers of their respective *tienditas*. Daughters who had intelligence, if not talent; ambition, if not focus; daughters, anyway, who ought to be given their chance. But when told the other side was not for them—those entrepreneurial institutions of "higher learning" least of all—that they must minister to their mothers unto death, they, both of them, the daughters, bowed their heads in silence...

The better to hear the years passing.

How strange that, in the country where *machismo* is accepted as the natural order of things, it is the mothers who tie their daughters down. Oh, they try to keep their sons within reach—unless a run at the river will bring a predictable flow of *remesas* from *el norte*. But even

for them, the sons, education—especially the overpriced bargain basement brand—is known as the river of no return.

But daughters are another matter.

There is, of course, always something to do in the family business. Even if there's only one customer an hour on miniscule markup, there isn't even that if the roll-down door is not rolled up and the doomed girl not tied behind the counter where she belongs when that pitiful palmful of *pesitos* passes by. But, against all odds, Calliope's mother, as a child, waded the remains of the river and proceeded to meet Calliope's father, who was also a child though, at the moment, he was shouldering a bucket of produce way too heavy for him between the rows.

Now both are dead, carried off fairly early by something in their bones acquired, they say, in those early years. Gone as Calliope's grandparents, whose *ranchito*, being basically worthless, is still in the family and the preferred location for once-a-year gatherings of the undestroyed oddments of that particular lineage.

The critics may debate whether Tex dashed off his last ditties during his stint in the Big Apple or after he got to know that south of the border world a bit better, where you're lucky to get that 38% of your trickle of experience, even with that newborn calf in both arms, which might bring to mind one of those sagas, Tex felt rather strongly, had to be of creatures other than yourself...

The woman who sat in the park
was only waiting for dark.
When the pigeons had flown and she was all alone,
she stood up and sang like a lark.

Or even the epic...

The man who went nowhere fast
just didn't want to be last;

somewhere in the middle would solve the riddle
of the man who went nowhere fast.

But so much for the *prólogo* and, once more, back to our fading lovers...and the unforgettable night of the fiesta when Tex and Calliope might well celebrate fifty years of endurance, celebrate it on the not quite abandoned *ranchito* of her long dead grandparents and the not quite endless trail of their descendents for, you guessed it, dear reader: Tex and Calliope are childless.

The night the wind comes up and the wind tunnel under *la ramada* fills with smoke. The night night falls. The night Tex, fresh out of couplets for the occasion, tells a story not that unlike the ones he'd skimmed that night so many years ago standing in the Last Chance Bookstore.

And it goes like this...

De vez en cuando, which is about as near as you can get to 'once upon a time' south of the border, there lived a tuneful young woman appropriately named Calliope and, just across the ruin of *el Río* from her, a young man known as Tex to those who couldn't get their tongues about that early American handle he'd been handed at birth. As may have been said, they met at an excuse for a rodeo, which is to say their eyes met. The rest is history, but since the best tales are not only told, but retold, and more than once, we'll just let Tex retell this one; if not in post-adolescent first-person, then in the ever-popular present-tense.

Anyhow, here we stand, at some distance, this no longer young woman and this even older man for—as you can see, the speaker, like the subject of his speech, is nearing the end—anyway, as you know, the lady in question has just sung one of her sadder songs and the

gentleman is in the process of declaiming an even humbler epic. But—I know you’ve been waiting for it—this is the event.

Our poet’s not halfway through his pastoral on the origins of poetry—a.k.a. the chronicle of the cow, not to mention the calf and the word-slinger-to-be—when suddenly the words just won’t come. Yes, for some reason, ladies and gentlemen, I too—forgive the first person—at this particular point in time, can hold forth no longer.

But to return to our cliffhanger: at this point Tex abruptly sits, picks up a half chewed rib in one hand and a plastic cupful of Herradura, Squirt and—believe it or not—real ice from the unassailable iceberg of time in the other, while Calliope, to cover for him, steps up to bat, her old behind to the fire failing behind her, the wreck of a ukulele hot in hands that, these days, are uncomfortably cold when not actually twisted in pain. Her voice, it may be remembered, is soft and sweet, not full, but always changing, as if running up and down the scales on an instrument that would put to shame the best hurdygurdy at the county fair of your dreams. Anyhow, her melody, understandably, goes over better than her words.

In Borderline, they do tell,

Where some folks stay and go to hell,

And some do leave and never return,

For just about anywhere’s a place to burn.

Suddenly, she sits, but not before she whispers in an ear she’s whispered in before.

“That’s it, my love. That’s the best I can do right now.”

Anyway, everyone knows it’s Tex’s turn and the recovered poet returns from his prosaic interlude to share what turns out to be the very last poem of all, one that, for some reason, we assume, just didn’t fly in the Big Apple but, as you might see, in spite of its relative obscurity,

does do some justice to the talent that, for whatever reason, never did blossom quite as it might have if something—God knows what—might have been just a little bit different...

The lady with the broom assures me that there's room
in the closet where she keeps her little things.
There's a bucket and a mop and for all the things that drop
there's a blackbird who almost never sings.

And so, in the fullness of time, things changed and changed again and went on changing, only without our principals, who were long gone, though it's said that at least one other masterwork, *una obra maestra*, was found in the dead poet's pocket, the pocket of the man who, some say, never returned to Borderline at all, never came home to Calliope and never stood up to recite his last, but not least, at the fiery fiesta at *el ranchito* where the wind is always blowing and, at times, the smoke is fairly thick...

I met death coming in the door.
I got right down and crawled along the floor.
I don't think he saw me, he didn't say.
That was one time I got away.

Or perhaps the one that might bring our tale of our borderline poet full circle, at least halfway...

The man who was hit by a bus
declined to make a fuss; he lay on his side,
his eyes open wide, and left the rest to us.

But whether Tex stood up—steadied, of course, by Calliope's old hand—to recite these lines or they were only found in his pocket long after might be arguable one way or the other but, in either case, I wouldn't want you to think this is the end of the story.

Oh, no.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Don't ask me. I just work here,*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Michael McGuire was born and raised and has lived in or near much of his life; he divides his time; his horse is nondescript, his dog is dead. He is rumored to have bent an elbow once or twice in D.F. with B. Traven; but the facts in this case, as with so many in the writer's journey, are uncertain. Naturally, McGuire regrets not having passed his life in academia, for the alternative has proven somewhat varied, even unpredictable.

*"McGuire's writing is hauntingly thoughtful, inexorably true."
--Publisher's Weekly*

A book of his stories (*The Ice Forest*, Marlboro Press, distributed by Northwestern University Press) was named one of the “**Best Books of the Year**” by *Publisher's Weekly*.

McGuire's stories have appeared in *Guernica*, *J Journal*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Paris Review* (x2), *Hudson Review*, *New Directions in Prose & Poetry* (x2), & etc. His plays have been produced by the New York Shakespeare Festival, the Mark Taper Forum of Los Angeles, and many other theatres here and abroad, and are published by Broadway Play Publishing. *The Scott Fitzgerald Play*, University of Missouri Press, a Breakthrough Book chosen by Joy Williams, has been published as an Author's Guild Backinprint edition. Both books are available on Kindle.

A Day in Which Something Might be Done

Winner: Lamar York Prize for Fiction, 2018, *Chattahoochee Review*
 “A beautiful story reminiscent of the magical realism of Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Laura Esquivel. What captured me from the start was the confidence of the narrative voice and the lushness of the dream-sentences, which then give way to a story about love and healing, the inequities of indigenous life, and the prophecy of dreams. Gorgeous writing and masterful storytelling.”
 --Alexander Weinstein, judge

The Night of the Day of the Dead

Winner: Terrain.org 2019 fiction competition
 “I chose this evocative short story as the winner of *Terrain.org*'s fiction contest because of its many layers, which help to reveal a unique story of love and loss, death and extinction. The prose is melodic and intelligent, distant but empathic,

and the plot encompasses many different ways in which we are all now living. Set in a small “Old Town” in Mexico, the villagers are struggling with multiple universal themes: loss of culture, loss of opportunity, loss of environment, loss of family members, and loss of self. Through Nadia—a masked, half-dead girl—we take a brief journey through celebration of the Day of the Dead, and wind up the richer for it. Read this story more than once. Each time you do so, you’ll gain more appreciation for what the writer accomplished and more insight into who we are as human beings and the challenges we all face.”

--Tara Lynn Masih, judge

EDITOR’S BIO: Joel Page lives in Dallas where he works as a public defender, writing appeals for federal prisoners. He is the fiction editor for the West Texas Literary Review, even though Dallas is not arguably in West Texas. His fiction has appeared in *The Fabulist*, *Thimble Magazine*, and *Word Machine Magazine*. His story **Ex Nihilo** was published in Issue 4.