

POSTMORTEN CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

By Turner Odorizzi

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A small time dealer, bruised and broken from his experience in the drug trade, embarks on an erratic road trip across the Texas burn that is both odyssey and pilgrimage. His sometime companion is as much his dilemma as his voice of conscience. Saturating emotional tonalities and a world fragmenting into a psycho-luminescent past and present becomes the dreamscape of delusion. The prose is full of spit, the dialogue glimmers like volcanic glass out of the mouths of ruined lives and the ending will bore a hole in your stomach. Sometimes we get lucky. Turner submitted a story that was snatched from under us by a competing publisher (drat!) and we liked it so much we asked for another—which he generously sent. And this one, IOHO a superior work of fiction, blew us away! It's hard to single out excellences when you're wading through a sea of superlatives. No two talents are alike and every writer is different, but great writing, is immediately recognizable. It's what we all strive for but few of us achieve. Five stars. Quote: We were behind a diner, some little place in Lubbock with SUVs and massive, hulking trucks in the parking lot, waiting on a dealer who had flaked twice already. Collin was tapping his feet and I, not wanting to start something, glanced over to get him to stop. His eyes were contracted, like the eagle closing his wings to chest in a steep dive towards the water. He continued to tap his feet, so I gave up. A car cloaked in a dingy grey pulled up, handed off a bag, and then twenty minutes later we were on the couch, chopping up rocky particulate into powder, preparing said powder into an infantry of lines. Spartan hoplites in proper phalanx form.*

It's been two days since digging the grave and fleeing that throng of trees. Collin comes back to me as I drive, lonely along the highways driving throughout Lubbock, forcing me to extricate myself to somewhere clearer. Occasionally, I spy him standing beside signs telling me how far until the next city, but more often I hear him inside of the music. He permeates the speakers.

He used to stare out of the window while the music drifted, always like there was some other, better place he needed to be. He was so quiet in those moments the air became morphologic sickness, every molecule feeling more and more misanthropic as we drove. I don't know if he knew that we were hitched to Death's galloping horse.

The road and lines in front of me transform themselves into corpses. The radio so hollow it's eating some of the matter in the car. I switch it off.

The first town I stop in is Roswell, fairly close to the Texas border and my first introduction to the New Mexico landscape. It's no different from the adjacent part of Texas (it has the same waving beige-green grass), but it feels different. People in Roswell have a claim to fame through some supposed alien crash, and every time I've been before I was just passing through with my parents. But this time, I'm racked with how simple it is to accommodate aliens. I could even make a brief detour to the crash site to see if there any willing beams waiting to extract someone.

I could use the break.

I can sense hunger and that, by my estimation, these are not people I could stay and ruminate with for long. But they'll do for now. I choose the first restaurant that I come to, a droopy diner with a big, homey sign up top, park on its side, closest to the building, and swivel my head to make sure they hadn't caught up to me yet. No sign.

"Do you serve beer?"

The waitress is off guard and just stares back at me with a tilted catch of her teeth. She works hard to get behind my eyes and see what kind of alien I am, sifting through a number of reasons. She's digging the way they all do in small places.

"It's only 11:30, hon. Are you sure?"

“If I wasn’t sure then I wouldn’t have asked. Please just give me the cheapest beer you have.”

She nods, takes the rest of my order, and then brings me the coffee, water, and beer that I ordered. I see her whispering something into her coworker’s ear over by the kitchen, cutting short when her eyes find me. A slow smile after, broken.

I notice, after burning my tongue on the coffee, there’s a paper hanging lazily on the precipice of the booth, a big coffee stain over the front page, but I could still make out Dallas Morning News toward the top. They mention Collin as “Texas 20 year-old Found Dead and Buried in the Woods” on the third page, but nothing about me anywhere. They’re hiding something, and they just don’t want to tell the public.

Escape velocity is important now.

The waitress put me in the front corner of the place, which I like, and had leaves me alone long enough to doubt myself and shred the paper before stuffing it carefully into my pockets. She doesn’t notice my hands or ask me about it, but instead asks me about food.

“Can I get you anything to eat? We’ve got a chicken fried steak on special today, mashed potatoes and green beans on the side. In my opinion, it’s the best damn thing on the menu.”

She chuckles.

“I’ll just have scrambled eggs. I don’t eat red meat.”

Her smile grows again, more plastic.

She scoops up the menu, “You might be in the wrong part of the country then, hon.” She looks over her shoulder twice as she walks away; I think she winks on the second turn, but that may just be the diner playing its movie in my head.

I quietly sip the coffee, water, and beer, all three equally bitter on the tongue. Collin hated coffee. He loved red meat.

We were behind a diner, some little place in Lubbock with SUVs and massive, hulking trucks in the parking lot, waiting on a dealer who had flaked twice already. Collin was tapping his feet and I, not wanting to start something, glanced over to get him to stop. His eyes were contracted, like the eagle closing his wings to chest in a steep dive towards the water. He continued to tap his feet, so I gave up. A car cloaked in a dingy grey pulled up, handed off a bag, and then twenty minutes later we were on the couch, chopping up rocky particulate into powder, preparing said powder into an infantry of lines. Spartan hoplites in proper phalanx form.

“Hand me that twenty-dollar bill; I don’t want to use a five.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to argue with you, I’ve waited all day for this coke and I don’t want to fucking argue.”

I handed him the twenty and, like an illusion, the lines vanished. He fell back to the couch, smiling for the first time in something like forty hours, sniffing harder every few seconds. We looked at each other for a little bit, breaking silence with a stronger silence and bridging gaps with cocaine.

He frowned, "Why do you look so scared?"

The sky is fine and the wind mild as I step out of the little cafe. I'm sure I saw an eagle, though the two little girls standing on either side of their grandpa shout about flying saucers. He laughs, explains to them that God made humans, and only humans. They seem to take him at his word, because they look up at him and grin.

As I pat myself down to find my cigarettes and the lighter, I formulate the next stage of my flight from the law. I could make a fast break towards Colorado and the mountains or a beeline to the coast and Californian sun.

But then, like it was fated, a car cloaked in a familiar dingy gray passed at a relatively low speed for an empty road. Oh, what fucking luck. Good fortune is ripe here.

I'm sure that it's the same car I had met with Collin. The same peddler's car, the same peddler who sold him the fatal bag.

My car's quicker, and he doesn't seem to notice that I'm following him, even as I hit a few of the same exits and pull the same routine of changing speed.

Hmm.

He doesn't drive like a drug dealer. New Mexico's slack speed limits help. Within half an hour, I'm in hot pursuit, hopefully towards clean, American vengeance. Collin's voice tramps around my head telling me "Do it, do it. Kill the fucker!" I step harder on the gas, coming within the buffer zone of about two feet, right up on the bumper. Suddenly, I brake and swerve as his

tire explodes; the black shreds throwing back like fingers outstretched from a grave. Most of them missed, but one of the largest, longest smashes one of my headlights.

The commotion threw my cigarette down to the floor, next to the pedals; It slowly burns the plastic piece in front of them.

Collin was never one to hide himself or his problem. Every time he was driving, his eyes narrowed, and, like he took it as a challenge, he sped up to meet another car and lingered long enough for me to clumsily grab the wheel. He then proceeded to take a large bump of coke as they looked at him like some hyena. He was a hyena in the car.

“Good god, you see that guy? He was trying to lecture me through the glass.”

I met eyes with the man. An older guy. His brows were crunched eyes pleading, even in the glare between us. He looked, to me, like he was concerned. Collin lapped at the window and threw as much of his bag that he could manage up onto it. He was a spectacle and he was central to the experience. The car was his pack, and, with it, he was spreading across the Texas plains.

The old man broke right then. He must have seen the two tires rolling towards us looking Machiavellian before we could even be bothered. He must have anticipated the fact that there was something very tense about the air at that moment and that a profound dread had caged us in. The left tire clipped the front headlight and left it fractured, but still functioning. The right hit dead on with the steering column, denting the hood like a crater. Six inches of the black rubber had broken the shield wall of the glass; Collin’s nose was broken, but only slightly.

“Goddamnit. I paid forty fucking dollars for a broken nose.”

I watch through the rear view mirror as an older woman, probably sixty or so, slumps in awe near the back tire.

Had I chased some kind of ghost simply because a dead man demanded it of me?

Maybe the drugs weren't only his problem but mine too. Maybe it was possible for a thought-osmosis to occur in which I started to imbibe the paranoia and frantic neediness. I run my hands over my face a few times before deciding to continue on. My sureness split, my hands shaking, I'm in desperate need of the Sunday paper.

As it turns out, I'm on my way back to Texas. His voice fills the car quick as I pass the café from earlier, growing virulently until his hazy projection materializes in the passenger seat.

“So it wasn't him, big deal.”

“Yeah, well, that's easy for you to say. You get to be dead, and I have to deal with this shit.”

“Not my choice, friend. Don't you want to just leave all this shit though? We always wanted to drive to the coast and live there. I feel like you might really be limiting yourself because of your dead friend. You have options, you know.”

Growing bigger as I come toward it, there's a sign detailing the friendliness of New Mexico. According to this sign, New Mexico is the Land of Enchantment. I don't need enchanting but do need bigger, and everything is bigger in Texas. It's the unofficial state motto and mentality.

The headlines are bigger.

“We both know that you didn’t kill me, bud.”

“Fuck off.”

The welcome sign for Texas finally pops up.

Collin’s gone when I look over.

As soon as I see the first diner on the outskirts, my hands break into a fit, moving without themselves or without my control. I need another drink if I’m going to keep myself propped up. I haven’t come within inches of sleep in somewhere over 35 hours, and there’s a peril that places its hooks deep into your eyes. It’s a tigress who can’t seem to mate, yet can’t say no. It’s a blank stare that, instead of being snapped to focus, continues, parallel to reality, ad infinitum.

The hostess at the restaurant bubbles at me with a similar demeanor to that of the lunchtime waitress. Different state, but the same calculated smile. She forces a frown out of me.

“Is it just y’all?”

Did she just address me as if there were two of us standing there? I look around; she’s confused. Then I sort of back away, fearful that it’s some kind of trap or something.

“Did you just say y’all?”

“No, hon. I asked if it was just you and then you went all loopy on me.”

“Oh, okay,” I’m not convinced in the slightest. “Can I have that table over there, in the corner?”

“Just y’all?”

“Just us”

Collin responded and smirked, receiving one back. He asked for the corner booth and she led us there, a slight hesitation in her arms as she laid out the menus. She looked back to Collin.

“Let me know when you’re ready.”

She walked away in triumph and Collin made sure to lean back and spread his arms over the whole booth. The diner where we found ourselves was dimly lit, like most Texas diners, and smelled fried. We sat there and stared at the menus for a few minutes before saying anything else.

Collin never looked at a menu that long. As I followed his eyes, I could see there was something hindering him. There was a resolute wall that constructed itself there, train of thought halting. He blinked too much and grew a confused, unfunny smirk on his face.

We ate, left the place, and then made the choice to keep driving even though it was completely dark now. We had agreed on making it that night, no matter what time it was.

I stood against my door with a cigarette and feeling full, complete, while Collin was rifling through the glovebox, hoping to find the bag he had stashed there a few miles back when he shouted at me that he could *smell* the cops.

After finding the bag, he poked his head up and swiveled around to look for said cops. He didn’t take any from the bag and continued to banter with himself. He never talked to himself.

Finally, he turned to me.

“Let’s go out to the cabin. Lee said he would meet me there and we can’t really go home anyway.”

“I know, we already agreed we would keep going. Are you okay? You seem...manic all of a sudden.”

He snarled as he replied, “I am FINE. Do you have to ask every five hundred feet? Jesus fucking Christ, I told you before that I was fine, and I’m telling you again. I’m fine. Just get in the car now, I think I saw some suits outside before we went in to eat.”

I hopped into the passenger’s seat. There weren’t any cars in the lot except for a beat up Ford truck and a red Pontiac Sunfire that seemed to have recently been pulled from mud. There weren’t any other cars or people, and I began to feel like we were heading towards something morbid or strange. When the chips are down, dastardly feelings infect the blood supply like an abscess tooth, and they shoot you in the foot before you can even see the gun.

The car started fine, but chugged as it sat near idling, like it was drained of willpower. The blackness that took over the whole window was matter-less, smooth and, as I rolled it down, nothing but silence to be heard from every direction.

“Didn’t Lee say this is where junkies go to kill themselves?”

“No, I don’t think so. At least not all of them.”

The waitress brought me a water and a coffee, but scoffs when I ask about beer, saying they only have Lone Star and Coors Light. She backs away when I almost snap; I was clearly shaking in the hands. I slump into the corner and throw my hands over each side of the thing,

feeling very close to something. There's a newspaper on the table that I didn't notice at first. This one's out of Austin. The front page is clean of coffee, but surreptitiously spread fear through me, becoming my entire nervous system as I look at a smiling portrait of Collin. This is *not* a real picture of him. No mention of a killer anywhere. I can't help but think there's a massive conspiracy at play, and that I'm stranded at the center of its web. Over and over again I scribble notes in the margins decrying the cops and the drugs, and slowly my scrawl begins to look more posed.

“You always did have some killer handwriting.”

He seems bigger than when he was drug-slumped in the passenger seat, also happier without black pillows underneath his eyes.

“Do you think they will try to say I had something to do with it? You put it up your nose, so I don't feel like taking the fall for that. I'm not a goddamn killer, Collin.”

“Of course not. Believe me, I'm aware of the fact that I made my own bed. I don't think they would have half a mind to question you, honestly.”

“Either way, they're coming. Do you see that white SUV out there?”

He pauses, calmly searching the lot before locking onto what I had seen. His head goes back down, neck stiffens.

“I see it.”

“They're already here.”

The waitress peers over the counter, craning her neck at buzzwords like ‘killer’, small town intrigue and gossip painted over her. She sees that I'm *seemingly* talking to myself and

makes her way to what I assume is the back office, her phone clutched tight as she shuffles. Collin and I make her for it, waddling like she's fleeing something. My vision bores down into a tunnel. She's a rat; I'm marked.

“You better get her before she makes that call. Wouldn't this be a horrible place to get arrested?”

I make a run for the back, tripping over myself but steady and running firm through the hallway, confused when I reach its end. No phone or waitress. To my left, there's an office. Somebody hums inside. Papers shuffle, and I hear the click of a landline phone, the kind that nobody uses anymore.

When I kick in the door, the waitress spins around and shouts once before I can slam it shut. She's not alone. The man at the computer isn't scared, but his eyes look down before he rises.

“I don't know what you just told him, but I can't let you call the police. I...I didn't do anything; I didn't kill him; he did that himself, so I ran, which I shouldn't have, but I did.” I pull my knife from my boot; it wobbles in my hands, and I wave it at them like a cornered animal. The knife isn't mine anymore.

The old man speaks first: “Son, I don't think you know what you're doing. You're from Texas, aren't you?”

“Yeah...yes sir. Born and raised in Lubbock.”

“Then you know that, like most Texans, I have a pistol strapped to my side here,” he motions toward the hulking mass on his hip, “and I'm in no way afraid to use it. Please, just put

that thing down, boy.” I’m done. Whatever resolve that props me up is not mine, and I am stuck pondering death in a diner. But then, everything else in the room comes back into vision, and I’m no longer stuck looking down a tunnel.

I’m staring at two people who have that aforementioned American vengeance about them.

Obliteration. No sense of the knife or myself.

“I’ll put it down when I know you aren’t going to try and put me in jail for something I didn’t do!”

Collin now rests himself with both palms flat on the desk, taking an overview of the situation. He shakes his head at me and laughs, cackling.

“You aren’t going to let this redneck shoot you, are you? Holy fuck, you’re an idiot. Is this really how you want to die? I guess it’s better than going with the suits in the parking lot.”

“Shut up! Shut the fuck up! You put me here! You are that bullet, and you’re laughing...oh god...you fucking junkie shit!”

“This just makes you look insane.”

The older man cocks his head at me, but his tone softens.

“Son, this is the last time I’m gonna ask you. Put it down, or I will shoot you.”

In my own blindness, I didn’t notice that the man already has the hammer back and ready. There’s a hint of chicken fried steak; my brain runs through some kind of checklist.

Collin, my life, every single shitty thing I've done, that makes up my composition. Hundreds of bags of blow. Two beers in two diners, one with and one without Collin. Chasing an old woman like a raging devil down the New Mexico highway.

I almost capitulate, but hit a wall when, again, I see Collin perched over the man's holster-side. Sullen now, no hope in the awkward frown that holds his face together. Above the frown, he raises a key to his nose and falls back, dragging cords and family pictures away from the desk as his body slumps into a kidney-shaped miasma.

The old man's wrinkled forehead grows lower and lower, ready for quick movement. He's poised; I'm shaking and faltering, my vision going in and out while Collin flashes dim and then bright at the far corners of my mind. I focus on the man's face and force the knife back down into my boot.

“Please. Please just fucking shoot me.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story was to be an exploration of what I thought my friendships were like when drugs were involved. I wanted to show what loss can become when it morphs into paranoia or fear, and with the cultural conversation we are having about drugs and drug-related deaths, I felt these were especially important things to try and make sense of. You can feel the void Collin has created in the narrator, especially in the scenes without him, and I thought it was important to emphasize that in a story of loss and drugs. In terms of influences, I would attribute those to the Gonzo style of Hunter S. Thompson, Ernest Hemingway, Donna Tartt, and Jorge Luis Borges.*

BIO: *Turner Odorizzi is a writer from Austin, TX who graduated from the University of Texas at Austin English and Creative Writing programs. He is as of yet unpublished, but has been writing for a number of years now. In addition to graduating from UT, he worked as an Intern for the managing editor of Bat City Review, UT's main literary journal.*

