

LIAR !!!

By Curtis Harrell

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... *Curtis Harrell's "Liar" is as if Denis Johnson and Stephen King had gotten together to smoke a cigarette with Cormac McCarthy and George Saunders. This work is gritty, calculated, and cold, yet, for me, only truly terrifying when you realize the inherent mysticism and hatred peppered throughout.*

Neddy Powerline is a borderline recluse laying claim to a patch of land somewhere in the woods of Northern Arkansas. He is quiet, resourceful, content with the quietness of small living, and he is also a hunter. He hunts the bikers that travel North as the weather turns to shit in the South and, in turn, head back down South when the weather gets to uncomfortable in the North. A back and forth of never-ending geriatrics who have wrapped themselves so much up in playing biker that our protagonist has taken it upon himself to rid the world one by one of these actors – these liars.

The power of Harrell's prose is what drive this piece home. His language is as down to earth as the ground that his characters walk on. Hard hitting yet descriptive, sensitive yet murderous, craft is one of the biggest stars of this piece:

Once truth became subjective, all Neddy could do was abandon the peopled places to the biggest and best liars and carve out a homestead where neighbors gave him a wide berth because of rumors of missing meter readers or pollsters or hunters with a lousy sense of direction. Having a skull wash out of a stream at the edge of his property never hurt anyone.

Without any internal consternation, without any moral objections, without any remorse, the prose captures and then releases you like a fish in the river.

Curtis Harrell's, "Liar" is most certainly one of those stories that you should read. There are a lot of stories out there that never deserve to be read, and I can guarantee you this is not one of those stories.

Five Stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLES *(for the love of language)*...

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Liar

A grizzly drowsing in the spray of the trout-leap was Neddy Powerline, the migration's vibration crawling on the wind and under his skin. Jumpstarted by the Huge Twitdom, that dark era of American history where truth was daily mauled, the Great Migration drove hundreds of thousands of elderly hedonists rumbling northward each spring, encased in designer leather and straddling Harley tricycles like bobble-headed fetishing wannabees. They followed backroads through the great river valleys—the Mississippi and Arkansas—flooding north and westward toward the summer tent roosts that were cheaper than one bedroom flats on the beer-soaked outskirts of New Orleans and Memphis, the dreadfulness that became Shreveport. The Migrationers made do in flapping canvas, their bony asses luxuriously reclining on inch thick foam rubber mattresses unrolled on concrete slabs with a cooler full of lite beer icing in the

corner, the false bottoms loaded with cash. They nightly hooted along with classic rock and excited themselves with wild mockings of the truth, litanies of shit that never happened, tales too tall to walk through a door without bending over drastically and farting. And then these ancient bikers fled back south at the first hint of winter's tooth in their decrepit bones. So Neddy preyed on them. Neddy dozed in his hammock within earshot of the road as March thickened toward April.

Neddy thought of himself as a conservationist. He harbored black feelings against consumers glutting up the economy, and he found it his duty to thin the herd. He liked to use stealth and ten gauge wire cable. A mostly peaceful life in the far-out-of-town satisfied Neddy after the Huge Twitdom made suburbia a nightmare of property line disputes and discrimination lawsuits. Eventually no one could stomach the relentless carping and litigial expense over whose fence was on whose side of the line or whether brassieres blown into the side yard were on purpose or just accidentally hurtful. City-dwelling drove apartment owners to agoraphobic safe rooms for fear of squatters and their loud Puerto Rican attorneys, but they were still victims of the porch pirates and metalheads with earsplitting stereos. Once truth became subjective, all Neddy could do was abandon the peopled places to the biggest and best liars and carve out a homestead where neighbors gave him a wide berth because of rumors of missing meter readers or pollsters or hunters with a lousy sense of direction. Having a skull wash out of a stream at the edge of his property never hurt anyone. Most of the liars had just bought three-wheeled motorcycles and lemminged along.

Irony had lately consumed Neddy in a way that woke him at 3:14 in the morning when every empty room listened to the demented ticking of the grandfather clock. His workflow was a perfect circle. He waited for the second week of the migration, when the three-wheeled hordes

were a near-constant rumble on the horizon, and then, on a stretch of asphalt within walking distance of his house, he set up a cable between trees on opposite sides of the road—big trees, hundred-year-old oaks that had stood through ice-storms and tornadoes. This spot was at the end of a mile-long straightaway that suddenly swerved into several serpentine switchbacks. Neddy had perfected a triggered cam sprung with leaf springs and baling pulleys to instantly stretch a cable across the road at exactly four and a half feet off the roadway, the average height of the Adam’s apple of both the rider and passenger on a Harley trike. Depending on the speed of the unlucky *migrateurs*, the trap would either clothesline them both off the back of the machine or loose their heads better than Robespierre had ever dreamed, their helmeted heads scooting and bouncing down the asphalt like leaky footballs. All Neddy had to do was collect their rides and their corpses before another wave of the elderly liars roared past. Then he would spray the gore off the motorcycle gear and stock it in the little shop he had set up at the other end of the straightaway. The sign out front of the log cabin saloon proclaimed “Last Chance Supplies,” and Neddy, with a punny relish, told all of the truthless coots that he *recycled* clothes and jewelry, parts, and engine liquids. All of these wrinkly truth-killers were both supply and demand.

World War I intrigued Neddy—particularly that brave son of Tennessee, Alvin York. Neddy had read that Sgt. York, as he waited in ambush for the German infantry to wind their way single-file to a good position, would pick off the last soldier in line, the way he had hunted turkeys back in the piney woods of home. The turkeys and the Mauser-toting soldiers wrapped in their winter coats, trench mud on their spiked helmets, never noticed their comrades fall behind them. Neddy would wait, hiding in the ditch-brush, until a great wave of bikers blew past, and then he would spring his wire on the last trike. Because the road immediately swung hard right, the last bike, now riderless, simply disappeared into an overgrown holler. In his first few

seasons, Neddy kept a secret hidey hole ready in case there returned a search party, but none ever had. He retrieved his winch and waited for dark.

Archeology was another of Neddy's wonderments. He would collect the belongings and memorabilia of his victims and note the quality of the goods, try to sleuth out their origins and worth. Turquoise was a tell-tale clue, filling whole display cases with rings and bracelets, bolos and belt buckles. These trinkets had come off snowbirds wintering in blustery tent cities on the crumbling concrete edges of Albuquerque and Tucumcari, whipped-up sand delicately coating the soft-serve above their cones. The leather was mute, all Chinese—produced, Neddy imagined, by short squinty cowboys who fed the cattle on formaldehyde and drywall—but t-shirts blabbed their hometowns. In the long off-seasons, Neddy alphabetized the shirts by the name of the motorcycle shop on the back logo. The names were mostly awful word plays like Horny Toad Harley, The Hog Farm, The Rowdy Beaver, and the artwork depicted lightning bolts and bosomy wenches having sex with skeletons. Neddy duly noted that his inventory of women's boots had more lefts than rights.

This attention to detail one afternoon darkened Neddy's thoughts. He realized, as he examined an engraved pendant, that he had seen it before. Last year he had placed this same piece, a pitted sterling silver oval with a winged wheel embossed on it, on this same display tree. He flipped the pendant over and read the inscription, "Until the bitter end, be the last one in the wind." Biker doggerel. But Neddy chewed on the mathematical improbability. He harvested this necklace last year, sold it, and just harvested it again. For successive years, the last rider in a line had worn this piece of jewelry. Neddy's head was suddenly under a wave of paranoia, his ears and nostrils submerged in thick dread. Somehow this fact *connected* Neddy to these rolling

falsifiers. These fibbers on wheels *shared* an event, however insignificant, with him. He grabbed his Sharpie and marked the price on the tag up 200%.

And so the Migrations came and went. Neddy, like all competent traders, plied his skills as routine and weather allowed. He neither overspent himself in greed nor permitted want to pinch his lifestyle. His store stayed stocked with harvested parts. He invented Liar Day, a holiday to celebrate the end of the fall exodus and relieve the monotony between Labor Day and Halloween. But one day always dawned innocently and by evening washed him in serious distress—the day he reaped the pendant. For two decades now Neddy had yearly removed the pendant from a withered neck, or what was left of it, and restocked it in the back corner of his showroom, facing the wall in a spinning plexiglass display case. The damned thing was now priced at \$500, but it sold immediately. Harpies obsessed with the flatness of the world pressed hundred dollar bills into his palm to have the pitted metal sway between their scrawny teats.

Neddy listened to the radio as he waited for a convoy of prevaricators to thunder past. The airwaves had also fallen victim to the death of truth. One of Neddy's choices was news shows trumpeting the virtues of the mouthbreathers in the government halls, passing raises for themselves while gutting rights for women. Every one of them raped a bit. The alternative was international pop with hideous synthesizers and Asian tongue yowling. On a clear day Neddy could twist in a pirate oldies station out of Brownsville, a megawatt station broadcasting ZZ Top

and Warren Zevon's grisly literate humor—can't you just imagine digging up the King, begging him to sing.

But a distant roar, just on the edge of Neddy's hearing, stopped him from fiddling with the transistor box. He quick-stepped, in a rehearsed and efficient parade-move, into his burrow in the ditch. He placed his right hand on the tape-wrapped handle of his liar de-rider. The grumble of motors slowly crescendoed until he could begin to hear individual bikes as they revved out of corners and burped and backfired into sharp turns. The awful Doppler of stereo speakers burbled Jagger complaining about not getting what he wanted. Then the first flash of chrome swung into view, and Neddy could feel the ground tremble with plentitude and bloody commerce. Neddy watched the horde glide toward him in its odd and stately fashion, practiced and precise as fezzzy Shriners in a doomsday parade.

The lead trike rushed past, its backwash dangerously flattening Neddy's camouflage, and then another and another, the frenzied rip of rubber on asphalt mixing with the plexus-pounding of straight-piped V-twins. Neddy flinched as a gravel bounced off his goggles. He internalized the flow of the riders moving past in his diaphragm. He breathed their rhythm and let his lungs and the pistoned assault on his heart guide his trigger hand. If there were no apehangers, no Captain America sissy bar, he waited until his elbow's reflex smoothly loosed his mechanism; he watched, in the intimacy of the moment, the wire rise up from the roadbed; he followed the apex of the wire's whip gently deflect the tip of the windshield backward; he saw the cable flick down and catch between the rider's beard and collar; he saw the rider rise from his seat, arms spread Christ-wise, and he saw the rider strip the passenger off the back as they both vacated their sweaty ass-scented seats.

The trike, freed from its fact-raping endorsees, sped faithfully forward, riderless, until it disappeared in the Queen Anne's lace and low dogwood branches on the holler's edge. The couple lay motionless on the asphalt, somehow side-by-side and supine as if they were waiting poolside for some dapper Cancun waiter to bring them a margarita. Neddy lassoed the rider's ankles in a quick motion with his drag-strap, pulled him out of sight into the ditch. Neddy returned for the passenger, her right boot AWOL, and slid her behind him like a 55 gallon Glad bag full of styrofoam peanuts. She was a puff of nothing, completely hollowed out by disease or dessicated quietly by the wind, liar jerky. Neddy flapped open the body bag for the rider, rolled him in, and zippered the job done. Neddy knelt beside the passenger's body, unfurled another body bag in the pollen of the ditch bottom, and sneezed.

"Bless you."

Neddy found himself quickly on the edge of the ditch, a half-dollar-size pee-damp on the flap of his underpants. He looked down and saw the woman squinting at him through rheumy slits.

"What did you say?"

"Bless you, and thank you," she enunciated despite a bleeding and tipless tongue.

Neddy gritted his teeth and swallowed the impulse to bring his heel down between her eyes.

"You're the boatman."

"No."

"Yes. You're the one who takes us to heaven."

"Wrong."

Neddy stepped back into the ditch and listened intently. The rush in the pines' arms was a strong west wind.

"Sometimes we call you the Taker," she said. "We know you will take us quickly when we are ready to go."

"Shut up."

"The really old ones call you the Angel of Death. They say 'I Am hath sent me unto you.'"

Neddy palmed her skull and thumbed open her left eyelid.

"Look! I am completely pain-free. I am ready to move on to the pearly gates."

"Your neck is broken. You're not out of pain; you're paralyzed."

Neddy leaned down within whiffing distance of her rotting teeth and saw the pendant.

"Why are you wearing this?"

"That is the mystic neck piece, the sign that summons you, my ticket to the afterlife."

Neddy seized it, yanked it free, and shook it in the old woman's beatifically raised face.

"This is nothing. This is some Mexican junk you elderly dipshits spend your pensions on every year."

"It brought me to you. You've released me from the soul-searing pain I've vomited daily like a starving dog for seven years. You are a holy man."

"And you are a liar. You are confusing grace with homicide. You are like an old cat I once had. It wanted nothing to do with me until it got stinking, vile sores all over its belly, and then it wanted to jump up in my lap and ooze pus on my crotch as it died."

"Bless you that you've found me at last."

And Neddy thought about that. As in his sweaty dreams, individual faces rose up out of memory, seamed and toothless, the odor of Ben-Gay and Pearl Light stifling his nostrils. He

considered them pathetic felons, their ignorance condemning them to capital punishment. He inventoried the thousands of liars he had laid hands on like they were unwanted pets, their faces in his hands cold as kittens in a bucket of water. Sometimes the wind in their hair as they lay dead on the asphalt brought him tears. He remembered holding them, but they were the ones who would not let go. Suddenly Neddy loathed the human body's aggravating tenacity. This fortunate witch was the first one he had ever spoken to, and a sudden desire to interrogate her loomed in him along with a need to cover her face with a shop rag.

"How did you get this?"

"You gave it to me," she said.

"I did not. Tell me exactly how you got this."

"My sister bought it at your store. Last spring. She's got the cancer too."

Panic and rage quarreled in Neddy's gut. He was obviously part of a plot where he was more appreciated than implicated, and the notion sickened his large bowel.

"Two weeks ago my sister wore this pendant," the old woman continued, "but she made it all the way to Spokane. She mailed it to me last week. I was hoping to have better luck."

"Luck," Neddy chortled, "you are a victim. You don't know how this whole monkey works."

The old woman welled up, her eyes shining with betrayal.

"Yes, I do. The poem tells it. You *know* the poem tells it. If you want to end it all, then be the last bike in the line. You'll be taken somewhere in this ten mile stretch of road if your dream comes true."

"Dream? That's some sick liar joke."

"You have taken away my pain. For that, I love you Neddy."

Neddy's rectum puckered as he remembered the long arm of the law, the sheriff's big dumb moon face at his front door, so he reared back and slung the pendant as hard as he could across the road.

"No," the old woman screeched, "no, no, no! You have to put that back in the store! You have to. You *have* to! There are others depending on you."

Neddy studied how she sobbed and wailed in the ditch-bottom, motionless save her ratcheting jaw and rolling eyeballs.

"Please put it back," she pleaded, blood dribbling her chin, "please. *Please.*"

"It's gone."

The elderly suicide queen burst forth with a new volley of shrieks. She keened like a virgin in labor. She made the dead-center of Neddy's brain hurt, and he thrashed about on the roadside.

"Shut up!"

"Please find it and put it back. Please!"

"It's nothing."

She said, "It's all we've got."

And, those words spoken, she quieted. She looked like a plastic baby Jesus kidnapped from a crèche then abandoned by stray dogs.

So Neddy knelt beside her and slid her onto his lap. Far away he heard the next wave of bikers swarming. He cradled her head against his chest. He listened to her breathing steady toward sleep as he held her, and then, as she started to gently snore, he hugged her hard into his chest until his arms trembled and she was completely silent in his embrace.

Neddy burned down his store on Liar Day. He watched the flames frolic and lick, and the smoke billowed so thick and black that the yokels from the volunteer fire department eventually showed up in their pickup with the half empty water tank sloshing in the back. Neddy watched from the woods as they surveyed the job then shrugged their shoulders and went back to the station to kill caged possums with a nail gun.

The brush hogs might have flung it anywhere; a raccoon could be miles away washing it at the mouth of some cave-stream; a local nerd with a metal detector may have given it to his one-armed sister. It could have washed out to sea.

Neddy was through with harvesting. The next time a growling knot of hoary motorbikers passed, they saw Neddy walking the road edge, his head down and studious as Walt Whitman hunting aluminum cans.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The idea for "Liar" came to me one morning as I hunted for a hatchet to kill the giant wood rat that lived under my porch and was having its way with the wiring of my Christmas lights. Not finding a hatchet, my murderous thoughts fell on the media and politics. Though politically motivated, I wanted the story to focus more on one character's spiraling slide down the rabbit hole of current events and explore the gray area of human interactions more than the black-and-white cacophony of "us vs. them" that pollutes almost everything. I wanted to tell the truth about lying to get that taste out of my mouth. My main influences are Charles Portis and Barry Hannah, both fellow U of A alumni, as well as the great Southern Gothic writers like Faulkner, O'Connor, and McCullers.*

AUTHOR BIO: Curtis Harrell writes and teaches in northwest Arkansas where he also busks with the banjo and sometimes leads tours through a cave in the summer. He received an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Arkansas and has recently had poetry and plays published in *The Cave Region Review*, *The Healing Muse*, *Allegro Poetry Magazine*, and *riprap journal*, where one of his poems was nominated for inclusion in the *Pushcart Anthology*.