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BORDER CROSSINGS

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THESIS

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Preface

This first collection of stories was written for fun and enlightenment and, in fact, might be considered a partial record of an early struggle toward some measure of light. Actually, I wrote them to make money and become famous hoping that, by focusing on tensions in my character, I might, with luck, cast some light on areas that were tension ridden for other people too.

Of course, none of the characters in the collection are meant to represent anybody in particular, except for Norton, Dagoberto and Fishback, who like being themselves. The other characters are all devious compilations of

truths quarried from the dark regions of my own sick soul. None of the events are true either. It's practically all horrid lies.

William Faulkner said that the basest of all things is to be afraid, and the stories are written in that spirit. This spirit, coupled with insistent naivete, creates the ludicrous attitude I find necessary to write or get out of bed.

The theme of the collection is simple: Except for the obvious dilemma of material greed, there are few pat answers and no escape. We live with our heads up our fundamentals and must usually do something we are afraid of, obey that wordless voice within, to push through ourselves and merge with a greater life. The characters in these stories push themselves.

In the first two stories I attempted to make evident the clash between intellectual and emotional aspirations--the need for the often painful fusion of the two. From the moment Mack pushes the motorcycle girl away in fear to his realization that he can't absorb the paraplegic's experience is an important transition for, though thwarted in these attempts to extend his sensitivities, he regroups and deepens his endeavor by listening inside himself, attempting to start with something closer to him, his grandfather.

He keeps pushing.

When his marriage results in emotional stagnation, he tries to buy his way out and enslaves himself to the Money God, becoming just like everybody else. Another character uses Drugs and Sleazy Sex in an attempt to burn out his frightened, security conscious puritanism and ends up just using drugs.

But they all push.

If there is a central epiphany, it occurs when the spider monkey, which had been shot through the heart during copulation, then stuffed with an erection, is rediscovered after the rainy season in the trunk of Mack's dope running Impala. Though albino pot plants grow from its snarling mouth and eyes and rotting flesh, its hairy arms still reach for heaven.

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The Baptist

Early in his final illness, sensing that he hadn't many friends and that God was not going to entertain him in the Nursing Home, George, a wealthy Baptist merchant from Boston, drew up a contract with his lawyers to pay a college student to come and talk with him for two hours a day, seven days a week. Ten years after the stroke which paralyzed him and made him speechless, the contract was still binding and the lawyers continued to provide the service, as a sort of scholarship. This turn of events enabled Mack to finance his college education, but it was an unpleasant way to make money. He hated sitting for two

hours a day in the death smell, surrounded by voices babbling from bodies which were almost corpses.

He began to suspect that this was the way things ended.

Through the Autumn he slowly drifted into the fantasy worlds of the inmates. Every day he agreed to "hitch up the team" and take brittle Maybelle Lumberfast to the "ferry," so she could go to the "big island" and do her shopping. Guiding her down brown hallways, he left her at the back door while he crossed the parking lot to get his car. She had been the wife of a Caribbean planter and, since his death, in her senile mind, she had never left the islands. So Mack pulled up to the back door, told her the "team" was ready, and helped her into the front seat of his English Ford. Her bright, bird-like eyes shot through the traffic as he drove around the block while she talked of sugar cane and croquet and servants. Then he'd pull up to the front door of the Nursing Home, tell her she was at the ferry and ask when to pick her up. Then he'd let her out, observing with bemused envy, her lighthearted reentrance into the nursing home. Sometimes, as he walked her down the musky hallways toward the door onto the parking lot, the sunlit cement radiated a shell-like brightness, like the white beaches. He longed to hear the surf himself.

He could no longer tell if Joe, George's humpbacked roommate, who they kept strapped to the toilet because he pissed on the nurses, was insane, senile or sardonic. He was leaning toward 'sardonic' because of the packages that Joe made for women visiting the Nursing Home. He was beginning to pleasure in watching the unsuspecting, flattered little women gush thanks for Joe's present; he could keep a straight face as they unwrapped meticulously folded layers of paper until they came to the turd Joe had taken from his toilet. But as much as he enjoyed these moments, seven days among the dying was too much and, when he got to the point that he could keep a straight face after the women got to the turd, he figured it was time to leave. He wanted white beaches and surf and youth.

So he quit school, sold his car and caught a bus south.

Riding the bus made him horny. There was something sexual about tired young mothers in print dresses who stared vacantly out the window as though they were expecting nothing more than another cracked linoleum floor at the end of the ride. They were different from the college girls who were bent on dazzling the world with their cute minds; the bus women had a vacuous hunger he figured he could feed.

He was on his way to Mexico to live cheaply and write and, though he didn't know exactly what he wanted to

write, he had a vague desire to make people give up greed and fuck more. It had disturbed him to watch George (who had probably worked eighteen hours a day to get rich, who had undoubtedly denied himself many pleasures of the flesh) lie trapped in his chicken skin, his soul an oyster, his fortune useless.

As Mack looked over the top of the book he was reading--Childhood and Society--down the aisle at the resigned, numb citizens of the richest country in the world, he realized it was hopeless. Nothing he had to say would be relevant until the wealth was redistributed, until people could take time off to face their subconscious with the same grim determination they faced each ridiculous forty hour work week.

But this, he knew, would not happen.

The Pope would see to it that enough people were born every year so that thousands starved to death and bankers would arrange wars. But he would try. A lonely and noble effort would be made in Mexico to write a book so compelling, so devious, that mankind would be tricked into bettering itself, would bulldoze Detroit, L.A. and Houston, would reforest and depopulate, putting all the technology underground. Pleasure programs would absorb defense budgets and folks would live in a state of near orgasm, finally free to think about things other than

getting money or getting laid. The Mack Bob Institute for the Research of the Neurological Aspects of Pleasure and Harmony would explore the frontiers of consciousness with beautiful brains and bodies. On top of that, he wouldn't have to work in the Nursing Home.

He was excited; it seemed to him that travel was 'real' and he enjoyed staying awake as the bus flew across the night land and, as he was congratulating himself on quitting school, a frumpy fat girl and her baby sat down across the aisle. She wore a red, stained pants suit and gave him a hurt look as she stuffed a bottle into the infant's mouth.

She wasn't all that fat, he thought.

More stocky actually.

"Nice baby," he said.

She turned the crushed look on him again, and he thought she might not speak. Then, as though she had somehow decided he was not a pervert, she looked down into the baby's gobbling face.

"That's my little lover," she said.

Flat Texas miles went by and Mack caught her looking at him a couple of times. There was something about her that was different. Finally, he snapped the book shut and stretched noisily, checking her out as he settled into the next seat.

"Where you from?" he asked.

"Idaho." She let a wistful look crawl across her face; then she became serious again. "Going back to Mama now though." She looked sadly at the child.

"Why Brownsville?" He said it to mean he couldn't believe a girl like her in Brownsville.

"I'm leaving my old man." She shifted the baby. "You sure ask a lot of questions."

Mack shrugged his shoulders.

Her eyes hardened.

"I'm a Baptist, ya know. My old man ran around with the boys all the time, never coming home. Never spending time with the baby. So I left him. Now me and the baby are going home. Got any gum?"

"No."

She looked at him with disgust, then seemed to forgive.

"Whatya reading?"

"A book."

"Lemme see."

Mack handed her Childhood and Society and she propped it against the kid.

It excited him.

Maybe she was an earth mother.

"This a book about raising kids?" She fanned the

pages quickly, twisting in her seat.

"Sort of. It's more theoretical though. It says there are seven stages of development pretty much common to children everywhere."

"You a college boy?"

She couldn't have meant that facetiously, he thought, but he felt himself stiffen.

"I'm leaving college."

"Yea? Why?"

"I'm going to Mexico." He felt suddenly purposeless. You couldn't tell a girl like this you wanted to write; it would kill the conversation. So he tried to sound like he was rich. "I've got to stop off at my grandparents' ranch in Body and say goodbye." It was a small piece of land and his grandparents lived in town, but it sure sounded good.

Her eyes shone and she shifted the baby.

"What's your name?"

"Mack Bob Walker."

"I'm Jody Carlene May. Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise. That's a pretty name."

"Thank you. You can call me Jody. Your ranch is in a real pretty part of Texas."

"Yea. I like it."

"Then why you going to Mexico?"

Because I can't live for six months on six hundred dollars in the states, he thought. But instead he said:

"Restless."

"Uh oh."

"Why uh oh?"

"My old man was restless, the baby's daddy. See where my wedding ring used to be?" She stuck her puffy hand across the aisle; Mack held it as long as he thought he could.

It was a long time.

"Yea, he was always going out and getting drunk with the boys and never paying no attention to the baby. It ain't right. And it's specially hard being a Baptist."

"Why does being a Baptist make it hard?"

What was it about this girl anyway, he wondered, noticing he was getting hard. She had magnetism.

"All that drinking and running around is against our religion. You know that." She looked into his eyes as she pulled her hand away. As she brushed the baby's sparse hair off its forehead, Mack felt he should explain to her about religion.

"But sometimes you can't help it," she sighed, looking out the window. "Like that boy who got on the bus in Cheyenne. He just kept kissing me and kissing me and then we had a little Coors in back of the bus. He sure

was persistent."

Mack thought about the pint of whiskey in his suitcase.

"I think religion is basically bad. Look at all the wars it's started. People don't need religion to decide if they're being nice to each other. That's phony. I don't mean you're phony, of course."

She seemed awed.

"You're a strange person. It seems like you think a lot."

The baby had fallen asleep and Mack leaned over to look into its fat wrinkled face.

"It sure is a cute baby," he said.

"It's my little lover." Her breath was warm on his ear. "For a minute I didn't like you but, if you like babies, you can't be all bad."

Mack tried to control himself; he tried to shut up about religion and pull himself away from her. She was obviously in heat; on the verge of trembling, he settled slowly back into his seat.

He pretended to read.

The bus thundered along.

Headlights blossomed and passed.

"Hey Mack?"

"Yea."

"Would you do me a favor?"

"Sure Jody. What's that?"

"Could I lay the baby over there, so it could have two seats? I don't get many chances to put it down. . . You could sit over here."

"Sure." He was almost embarrassed by how easily this was working out. He tried to keep himself in an innocent state of mind.

Padding the seats with his coat, he lifted the baby, praying it wouldn't wake up.

"There," she said. "I hope the little devil sleeps a while."

She leaned back and looked into the dark and stroking land. He watched their reflections hurtling over the mesquite by the side of the road. Then they were looking into the reflections of each other's eyes; her features were soft in the dark glass.

"I think you're real honest," she whispered.

"It's my religion," he said.

"Mack?"

"Yes."

"Do you ever do that stuff? That kissing and everything?"

"Sometimes," he said. "I think it's good for you. It keeps you from repressing things." He felt righteous

and excited and he looked up at the luggage rack and tried to seem far away, lost in thought.

Outside the flatlands broke and some hills cropped up.

A man up front coughed.

"You're a strange person, Mack Bob."

"No I'm not."

"Yes you are."

"Why?"

"Because you think so much."

"Oh."

"I think you're O.K. . . I don't care what they think."

She leaned her head on his shoulder as he wondered who "they" were. Soon he was kissing her and her hand found his crotch; she covered them with her coat.

He was inside her before he knew it.

"Come dammit. Come deeper," she hissed.

Mack tried to hold her so she wouldn't kick the seats in front.

"Hold still. Go slower," he said.

It was difficult, though they were turned like spoons toward the window. She grew exasperated.

"God. I've got to have you. Come with me to Brownsville."

"What about your mother?"

"Piss on her."

He'd never heard a girl talk about her mother like that. He came, already feeling guilty about seducing this poor Baptist with a fatherless baby. But she wouldn't let him pull out. They rode along in silence while he firmed up his excuse for getting off alone in Body.

He'd say his grandmother was dying.

The baby started crying.

"Here. Take this." Jody handed him a bottle without turning around, without dislodging him. "Put that in his mouth."

He reached the bottle across the aisle with his free arm, blindly seeking the baby's mouth. Soon it was quiet. A soft slurping filled the silence and he realized that everyone on the bus must have heard them. But he couldn't move. Jody held him tightly and, if he let the bottle go, it would probably fall. Up the aisle, a woman looked over her shoulder at him and shook her head.

"Mack?"

Jody's voice had a whiny tone in it that tensed him up; it meant she wanted something.

"Yes?"

He looked at the luggage rack, trying again to seem far away and lost in thought.

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"I lied to you about something."

"Well, we all tell little lies now and then, Jody." He relaxed, happy she'd lied to him. "The main thing is to work toward the truth."

"I'm not really a Baptist, Mack."

"Well, you know how I feel about religion. That's O.K. Why'd you lie in the first place?" Suddenly he wasn't feeling so guilty anymore, but his arm was tired of holding the baby's bottle.

"My old man's in a motorcycle gang called the Machitos. You never know what strangers will think about that, so I always tell 'em I'm a Baptist. It's safer."

"A motorcycle gang?"

Life Magazine had just done their first feature on the Hell's Angels and that was all Mack knew about motorcycle gangs. In general, he felt about gangs like he did about religion.

"I don't like gangs."

"Me neither, no more."

"Why?"

"My old man made me fuck all those guys. And then, when he'd sober up, he'd get jealous. Had me fuck guys from the Bimbos too. Then, when I did it onc't by myself, he got mad and kicked me out. That wasn't very nice was it?"

Mack's hardon withered into a brussel sprout.

"Nope," he said.

He twisted away from her, as though checking on the baby. The bottle was empty and the child was fast asleep. When his arm was free, he pulled up his pants, wondering how many cases of clap he'd just bought.

She wrapped her arms around him and gave him a long deep kiss.

"You're different Mack," she said. "There's something different about you. Would you bring me some toilet paper?"

He remembered he had penicillin in his overnight bag and took it with him to the restroom; there was also some after shave lotion which was mostly alcohol. He swallowed the pills and poured the shaving lotion over the brussel sprout, doubling up in pain as some alcohol seeped into the opening.

When he got back to their seat, Jody was staring at her hand, opening and closing the fingers.

"You were gone a long time," she said. "There's come all over the seat."

"Shh."

"What's that smell?"

"Nothing."

The bus smelled like a barber shop and, after he sat back down, she snuggled up against him.

"You spill your shaving lotion, silly?"

He stared at the luggage rack, for some reason thinking about George, lying paralyzed in his bed in the nursing home. Mack too felt trapped, like he'd rather sit up front. But if George could lie in the same bed for ten years, Mack could sit in the same seat until Body.

He relaxed when she started to snore. Then he too fell asleep, dreaming he was opening one of Joe's packages. It was one of those dreams about infinity he'd had as a child, like taking off a hat and finding another one under it. And one under that. And under that.

But this time it was not hats. It was one of Joe's presents and he knew it. But he couldn't stop peeling off the layers; if he got to the bottom he'd be free. Working faster, he felt he himself was suddenly the package, that he was peeling off his clothes, his skin, his lies. Then he was Jody, tearing away the final layer to find a Mack Bob fetus shining in her hand. He tried to scream but his tongue seemed to have curled down his throat, choking off the air. When he woke up, she was kissing him and he just managed to stop before pushing her away in fear.

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