

Cow cow boogie

Mid summer a few years back I worked as a temp for a check collection agency occupying the entire third floor of a converted warehouse between Main and North Streets, five miles east of the river opposite an old cemetery which spread out raggedly behind a sagging chain link fence paralleling Main for maybe half a mile and whose above ground crypts, decrepit leaning structures, imitated the tattered Section 8 houses surrounding it on three sides. The lower third--river side--of the sprawling cemetery grounds was bisected by a railroad track servicing the huge refineries in the city's northern part by providing endless links of slow-moving tank cars rocking noisily past the only section on the line that didn't care how loud they were. Our warehouse, resembling a huge red brick sepulcher, sat next to the track--actually, astride it, the tracks were spanned by a building cross-over--but through its thick walls we neither heard nor felt the heavy cars rumble by, not even those fifty car trains pulled by two or three monster diesels in tandem, spitting noise like Parvorotti farts.

The job itself is fading from memory, hardly worth remembering: calling people at home, people whose checks have bounced, who don't want to talk to you, they lie, are evasive, insulting, sometimes pleading, they threaten, argue, cry, remain stonily silent, hang up. Its a wonder everyone there wasn't temporary, put off by work's built-in revulsion, but, naturally, some thrived. Vernita was my boss, a tall, thin, fast talking woman with straight mousy gray hair, fidgety, always in motion, walking or waving for someone to come or go, her face showed little, just a smooth innocent expression that seemed cultivated to put you off guard. Chewing gum with a rhythm that never varied, chewing steady as surf, reliable as quartz, she wore the confidence of a Caribbean dictator controlling a small populace that couldn't run away. The collection room was massive and abnormally quiet for housing so many people, all talking at once. The noise, I imagine, collected high up near the ceiling, thick as cigarette smoke in a blues bar, gathering in corners, out of hearing range. Once a week Vernita walked the aisles handing out critiques without comment or eye contact, like an overworked teacher delivering doleful test scores, dropping one casually into each cubicle, a list of faults and highly recommended areas of improvement: two sheets of tractor paper sketched over in florescent high lighter with her versions of open circles, five pointed stars and broad, quick underlines, drawn in crisis red, the precise meaning unknown, perhaps representing guttural sounds made by the originator of prehistoric cave glyphs inspecting wall art. In any case, we dared not ignore them or be distracted by anything, we worked steadily until eleven o'clock, no one stayed late or left early,

no bells rang or alarms went off, the hum of endeavor simply decreased steadily ten minutes before the eleventh hour until everyone on shift simply rose more or less simultaneously, clocked out amid much bumping and shoving, then queued by the elevators waiting for the brushed gold-aluminum doors to slide open then entered quietly into the latent freedom of its dimly lit interior, twelve at a time. A few individuals talked in the elevator, but mumbling, perfunctory talk, *...depressing heat..., ...'mhungry..., ...jezuz, I'm beat...,* not until the doors opened again did we begin to feel really emancipated and speak to one another in a way which, if not more articulate was considerably more effusive, walking as a group toward the parking lot: an acre of the blackest possible asphalt, passively absorbing, at this time of night, the full load of garish orange light pouring out of lamps clustered twenty feet in the air, light which pushes aside the night like wind chases dust, in order to insert its own peculiar hue, transforming the huge flat empty asphalt into a space that imparted a feeling--not like a parking lot--but something akin to being stranded in an airport's docking ramp after the last plane has landed, unloaded and cooled.

None of us locked away in that deadening vault knew when it rained, but surfacing at end of shift, finding the cement lustrously dark with moisture, water puddled everywhere and low clouds racing overhead, air so laden you could feel the lungs accepting a heavy ration of soggy molecules, common after violent storms, the kind coming often to south Louisiana on summer afternoons or late evenings with theatrical touches we like to consider harmless but enjoy best from a well protected vantage point: under a porch, just inside the garage door, abed in a dark room watching the clouds open, noiselessly or explosively, *swhoosh*, water crashes down in a wild surge for half an hour, thunder booms, lightening strobos, then...nothing, the show moves on to entertain residents further east, but what's left behind is almost as good as the theatrics it precedes, especially in extremes of night with shadows impenetrable as granite, light honed sharp and seemingly faster than usual, steam rising from cooling streets, dirty water pushing twigs and leaves through culverts and into ditches, or running wildly--wildly enough--along gutters sluicing through grated drains, splashing down sewers, flooding front yards and a few low slung automobiles. A night like this is pleasure to linger awhile, attempt to experience what was not experienced as it happened, reconstruct the storm, sense it, smell old rain, hear the tires of passing cars tearing water from road with the sound of parting Velcro, expecting a momentary breeze to brush across your cheek, expecting at any moment dripping tree crickets' raucous chirp resume.

Summer nights outdoors in Louisiana--outside in marginally cool air when sleep isn't the intention and mosquitos have retreated to muddy puddles and grassy ditches, and a soft breeze carries the muffled, flickering dialogue of all-night television--creates an excitement of sorts,

puckering flesh, being outside inside a Louisiana night, so late, for no special reason, without the need to sleep or even rest slightly, and knowing late nights and restlessness is not normal or routine but feeling comfortable within it, no fear or apprehension, not through a sense of belonging but rather the opposite, feeling like a tourist, and the air slightly clammy, a palpable night where sounds are different, clearer yet indecipherable because they are foreign, hard-edged, a car driving by sounds sharp as breaking glass, and nocturnal smells come separate, like dry, scurrying leaves, distinct, particularly after rain where the reek of different muds are as discernable and often as heady as the bouquet of wines.

After work I usually drink, usually at *M's*, *M's* because it's always open after work even when I'm the only customer, which sometimes is the case, not often. On summer nights the french doors at *M's* are pushed flat back against the bricks and latched into screw eyes wedged into the grey, crumbling mortar that somehow holds the dusty, slope-shouldered bricks together to make a wall. *M* is a bar but also woman, Marion, one of the few women I knew at that time I felt perfectly at ease with because there was nothing I want from her, a confession I don't make lightly, who knows where it'll end up. Marion is acceptably coarse and loud. By that I mean, once you get used to her personality you no longer remark upon it, her devastating laser-bomb sarcasm is aimed at anyone, anything, anytime, she's often hilariously funny when she's meanest, and, if you haven't already guessed, physically Marion is not very attractive (which if she were would make up for a lot, in my book) however, she *is* ambitious, determined to succeed the way a mud slide succeeds, and leading a busy life, with acquaintances galore--friends too, of sorts: because every body knows her, everybody wants to know her, and, I admit it freely, in her own way Marion is very, very cool and mysterious: her mystery is: she goes through lovers like an oyster sifts sand: volumetrically and where they come from or where they go no one knows or tells.

Marion smiles only at night, when she's making money, which turns her into a softer version--approximately feminine--and she seems to smell good, or almost good, like patchouli: something strong you might put upon your body instead of bathing before company comes. Unfortunately, many nights are slow nights, like this night, but *M* hangs on with elemental self confidence, or unenlightened ambition, or blunting, helpless lassitude. But if the bar is filling up and customers buying steadily, and she has help behind the counter, she swells like a country boy screwing his first pig and her shyness emerges, she retreats to better observe the action: facing forward from a position near the cash register, pushing the well padded small of her back against the rounded counter edge before the mirror and gradually slides to her left toward the kitchen end of the bar where the swinging door is edged with steam and harsh light, and, arriving there,

slumps her shoulders in supple contentment, mounts a foot on the bottom rung of a black Naugahyde clad stool edged with rusted, pitted chrome, puffs on an already lit cigarette, flings back her head to send her exhale ceilingward, elbows cocked back like a gangbanger in slouch position, then, poised for enjoyment, watches the show with empty eyes, an indecipherable frozen-in-place smile.. Marion seldom laughs, but it is a remarkable sight: her mouth actually turns down at the corners, chin out Mussolini-like, accompanied by a brief but energetic choking sound. But M's was Marion: behind the bar, smoking, in her spotted green scrub top tightly embracing her stomach like a reluctant lover and showing a large portion of wrinkled cleavage.

Long before reputable musicians lined up to play at Marion's bar there was no lack of local musicians working for ego and beer, assembling early like D-Day paratroopers, slouching in the booths like yesterday's lettuce, four or five of them, sometimes buying mostly not, waiting impatiently for their turn to shine or at least glow, four chord amateur guitar players with voices like slapped clay and serious expressions, draping the booths at M's like stranded jelly fish, pretending to listen to the guy playing but worrying inside over fingering, practicing nonchalance, especially if girl friends were supportively present--or boy friend, the women musicians looked more serious, more studious because women try harder to be harder.

Just after work, after a rain, I drove slowly to M's, unwinding very slowly, the car seat pushed back to the stops allowing me to stretch out Laz-y-boy like with left foot up on the dash by the mirror adjustor, low-rider-like, except that my left arm, cocked half in half out the opened window, wind ballooning my shirt sleeve channeling the damp air across my chest, up the neck opening to my chin, feeling it and, leaning my temple against the jamb, hearing the car touch the road, the schhhusssh sound of tires sucking on wet asphalt, the wheel's heavy, hollow thumping over every little bump and depression, across the rough railroad crossing, the one close to work with loose ties that stutter when rocked and which is built up into a steep little hill, past which, if taken too fast or shocks a bit worn you'll bottom out on the other side screeching like tearing tin and, on dry days mostly, not tonight, throwing sparks like stampeding fireflies. Thickly foliated oak and gum trees line Laurel Street to the Interstate underpass, after that it's cement office buildings and desolate, useless parking lots all the way to the river, seven or eight blocks. Under the trees night is blacker, cleaner, its mystery more obvious when surrounding, here and there, a lighted window.

I parked under a broad tree in front of the old Post Office cater corner to Marion's, turned off the engine and, to finish my cigarette, sat there in the dark listening to a rock station turned low, looking inside the bar which was wide open as usual this time of year, both French doors

tied back, I could see directly inside, down the entire length of a darkly over-shellacked mahogany bar, past the stifling kitchen to narrow, peeling restroom doors edged with light, to Marion herself visible against the far wall in front of a large mirror gradually losing its silver, holding a cigarette like a referee calls a penalty in football: right hand straight up, elbow supported by the left wrist lying horizontal across her round, sloping belly. I watched her nodding her head slowly, seriously, in the direction of a skinny guy in a tee-shirt and a mesh see-through baseball cap with the bill pushed up forty five degrees, leaning forward with both elbows on the bar, cradling his head in between the palms of his hands, a cigarette burning in one, while his ass pushed out behind him, balancing on the stool's back legs as far as he could without toppling over.

When I walked in, Marion continued her conversation, barely glancing in my direction, talking through exhaled smoke, breaking it up into fuzzy dots and dashes before sending it on its way with a sharp, sudden huff. It was warm inside so I picked a table by the door hoping for a cross draft, as far from the kitchen as I could get. To my left, by the open French doors facing Laurel Street sat a middle age cowboy on a stool, a large black hat pushed to the back of his head. With one hand he held a yellow guitar casually by its neck, away from his body, with the other he sipped two or three times from a Dixie cup before carefully setting it down on a second stool next to him. He looked about fifty, tanned, his face a map of wrinkles, khaki hair and eyebrows over faded brown eyes like dust clouds above a drying Western puddle, a straight nose, thin lips, a two day beard grow. He sat quietly, intermittently sipping his drink or obsessively straightening his hat just to push it back again, and not paying attention to me or Marion or the skinny guy about to fall off his stool, just staring at the dirty floor in front of him, at a grimy pattern of grey and white vinyl tiles, scuffed, torn and dented, it covered the floor as far back as the kitchen. I recalled last night's music, an earnest white blues singer named Half String, tall, muscular, with a tight, Muppet mouth, close cropped hair, a serious almost threatening look, Half String was a regular at M's, singing Skinhead Blues, and popular because of his obvious need to please, his whole upper torso blushed when he heard applause. Half String was last night; tonight is cowboy music.

He didn't introduce himself, just straightened his hat to shadow his eyes and started picking out a tune while humming, nodding and toe-tapping, alternately watching his fingering and staring at a space on the floor. When he sang it was low and incoherent at first like a sound climbing from a gutter filled with debris, but a song and a couple of sips later to he began a loud twanging verse about nothing I particularly remember, not cows or whores or whiskey, just singing. I sat directly in front of him, ten or twelve feet away, far enough back to take all of him in

and tired enough to hear but not listen. Though I watched him, once he got started I didn't really see him, he became background. Eventually Mamie broke free, walked over while lighting a cigarette and sat opposite me. *Dismal duck fuck weather*, she said. We talked bull shit and I forgot the cowboy who continued to sing to the floor for about half an hour, then Marion left to pour a drink and I began to notice him once more, ignoring everyone around him--me--, not speaking, indifferent to everything except whiskey in the Dixie cup which he sipped regularly after songs or verses of songs, with exaggeratedly pursed lips, as he continued to keenly watch the vinyl tiled floor like he was afraid it would escape and which seemed to me, at least, was changing, becoming greyer and noticeably more cracked. He wore a long sleeved cotton print shirt with pearl headed snaps, four up each cuff; pink, curlicue pocket trim; dirty blue jeans rolled twice at the cuff and scuffed, abraded cowboy boots of light brown leather, both pointed toes rain splattered, staining them black. He looked like a cowboy and sang with a nasal hiccup drawl that reminded me of horned toads and prickly pear, yet he had a prissiness about him, his nail particularly didn't fit his image, they were white, shiny and, polished, the ends trimmed and clean to the quick, his fingers were long and effete like a concert pianists', but weather beaten and bronze colored and a mass of wrinkles from Panhandle winds, and even twelve feet away he smelled of something inappropriate, Armani or Channel or Paco and too much of it, while tucked into his dirty jeans his shirt was crease-pressed and spotless.

He took a break without a word or moving from his stool, just turning as he sat, nearly the end of a song, to face the street, locking his guitar between ribcage, thigh and right arm, finishing the rotation by bringing the cup smoothly to his lips for a long pull, smacking his lips silently in exaggerated pantomime and just waited, like he was the audience and the stage lay out there on the empty street, and he waited patiently for the show to start. His eyes looked closed, but he could have been staring down at the wet, black street. He lit a cigarette and inhaled so deeply that from across the room I thought I could hear his lungs creaking open. Like him, I waited for the show to start. He turned back in, replaced the cup with his guitar, crossed one leg over the other and strummed scratchy chords aimlessly, shaking his head slowly, bending over the instrument's neck like he was about to kiss it. When he finally started a song it came out the jumbled prelude of chords, building sculpturally rather than logically--as a child playing randomly with clay discovers something familiar within. He found eight notes, five sweeping upward, three descending, then paused. Covering the strings with the palm of his hand, he stopped. Still minding the floor he repeated the same upward-downward curve, this time playing slow, jangly chords that made him throw his head back and close his eyes tight in pain or pleasure before he stopped completely to sip once again from his cup, which seemed to calm him down

considerably. When he began to sing it was with a just audible twang, so hushed the words could easily have been mistaken for others.

*Freude, schöner Götterfunken,
Tochter aus Elysium.*

Quite unexpectedly he looked at me, eye to eye, for a second or less. The action gave a furtiveness to his singing, or maybe it was a quick flash of pride at fooling and startling me, his only audience. He continued:

*Wir betreten feuertrunken
Himmlische, dein Heiligtum
Deine Zauber binden wieder,
Was die Mode Schwer geteilt;
Bettler werden Fürstenbräuer,
Wo dein sanfter Flügel weilt.*

It was crazy, the familiar melody common enough but almost incomprehensible here...and the words? Did he sing this song at home, at the local bar in some small dusty, baked-over town near Abilene or Waco or where ever? His accent was west-Texas, blocked-sinus drawl, words slithered together indecipherably, or rattling against each other like leathery snakes, sometimes clearly enunciated as a warning sound, but hard and foreign. He nodded in cadence to the clang of his chords, eyes again tightly closed, shutting out me and Marion's, even the Dixie cup. He sang on and on in German without giving a clue that it was German and not west Texan. And there was me listening and Marion and a guy glued to the bar talking in another world twenty feet away.

Outside I heard a sighing noise and saw the wind pick up bending the slim limbs of the Altheas lining the curb by the French doors, siphoning from out the blossoms their lightly sheltered moisture and shaking the leaves free of rain drops which drench the table nearest the cowboy, knocking over the Xeroxed wine card describing in glowing terms six or seven mediocre, sour wines sold high and, his song now finished, distracted the now drunk cowboy for a moment from looking at the floor, maybe striking a spark: *If music is a language, where are the obscenities?* he slurred for no apparent reason, to me, I guess, his speaking voice pitched higher than his singing voice and oddly modulated, like he wasn't comfortable using it. He stood up glanced around, removed his hat and bowed shortly in my direction, a little unsteadily, and I saw his eyes again, the irises so pale they made me wonder if the same sun that tanned his face bleached his eyes almost the color of his hair combed straight back which was streaked with tarnished silver like geological strata along a canyon wall. I nodded back and smiled at him and was about to wave a thank you when Marion sat heavily in the chair opposite mine blocking my view. *Buy me a drink*, she demanded, *I'm going broke.* *Sure*, I said, considering the cost of the drink a cover charge, *who's the*

singing cowboy? But she wasn't interested in my question, *Thanks*, she said, rising to pour a shot of bourbon as the cowboy sat in profile quietly once more sipping his whiskey, gazing past the Altheas into the night. I said, *That's a great song*. He turned his head a little in my direction, half facing me, squinted, pursed his lips and nodded several times before turning back to the view outside.

Marion returned and sat crosswise on the chair her body twisted to the bar, her face to me, pretending to listen to me, an ear cocked for the phone, her lack of manners so obvious I was irritated and weary of it, but I knew that was Marion's way and my irritation couldn't alter it so I let her talk, listening for reply clues. *Larry should'a called by now*, she complained, looking speculatively toward the skinny guy leaning on the bar. The phone rang while she was inhaling deeply and a mass of smoke accompanied her expletive, *'Bout fucking time*. When she left I noticed the cowboy was gone. I hadn't registered his departure and felt a twinge of guilt: I didn't even applaud at the end of his song, Marion stepped in too quickly. I rose from my seat to reach into my pocket for money to pay my tab when I saw the cowboy through the opened kitchen door leaning against a metal table eating from a bowl. I thought about going over, maybe shake his hand, but I didn't, I didn't think he cared whether I was there or not, whether I liked his music or him or anything about him. I watched him dunk a piece of bread into the bowl. When he brought it to his mouth gravy spilled down his chin which he wiped with a neat shirt cuff studded with pearl snaps. Outside, a car whooshed by, inside, Marion, talking on the phone, presumably to Larry, flirted shamelessly with the sloucher, both now comfortably, cozily occupying a back booth. I was ready to go home.

From the driver's seat, under a dark tree by the old library, the bar's interior seemed much brighter. The inside/outside contrast gave it a brilliance of theatrical light and I could see deep inside the building, clear back to the restrooms. Lit up like a stage, there was no hint of life, it looked abandoned as the library. I yawned. Yawned again, and yet again, then couldn't stop yawning, one after another. I hadn't realized I was so tired. I was exhausted without knowing why, the day passed with usual meaninglessness. I was glad it was over.

The radio came on when I started the car, loud, raspy rock sounding more like static than music. Automatically I increased the volume before beginning a wide u-turn to head back the way I came, skirting Marion's corner slowly for a last glimpse of the cowboy, but he remained out of sight--I was already beginning to forget him, anyway. But not his song, surprising song, his joke song. The song remained clearer than the man. I was close to remembering where I heard it before, and, really, I couldn't decide if I liked what I heard, and what was the point, anyhow? Revenge on an audience of one? And didn't it sound spurious? Or can a cowboy sing anything?

The melody was there, just out of reach, drowning in full throttle electric guitar, not yet on the tip of my tongue--those eight notes, five swinging up, three down--did they repeat or did something else follow? The melody, it wasn't good, too cloyingly familiar, annoyingly unforgettable--if I don't get rid of it, it'll keep me awake tonight. I searched the dial for something saccharine to replace it and drove home like I came: windows open, wind washing off the last traces of Marion--until tomorrow. The streets were still wet, the air just as fragrantly heavy laden with humidity as before; the same alien orange glow flowed from lamps along the way partially revealing what lay inside bordering shadows while etching newer, deeper ones where real night began.