

THE DEVIL AND AMBROSE BIERCE

Well met in Marfa
By Jacob Silverstein

SATAN, n. One of the Creator's lamentable mistakes, repented in sashcloth and axes. Being instated as an archangel, Satan made himself multifariously objectionable and was finally expelled from Heaven. Halfway in his descent he paused, bent his head in thought a moment and at last went back. "There is one favor that I should like to ask," said he.

"Name it."

"Man, I understand, is about to be created. He will need laws."

"What, wretch! you his appointed adversary, charged from the dawn of eternity with hatred of his soul—you ask for the right to make his laws?"

"Pardon; what I have to ask is that he be permitted to make them himself."

It was so ordered.

—Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

"Where is the grave of Ambrose Bierce?"

"It's behind you. . . ."

—graffiti in a toilet stall at Big Bend National Park

In Far West Texas, on the side of the highway that runs south from Marfa to Presidio and across the Rio Grande into Ojinaga, Mexico, there is a small green sign that reads, PROFILE OF LINCOLN. Under these words an

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arrow points west at the jagged foothills of the Chinati Mountains, where you can make out the sixteenth president's profile in the ridges of rock. He lies on his back, forever staring at the sky, his gigantic head inclined gently, as if on a pillow. The short brim of his stovepipe hat has afforded him little shade over the years, and his brow is black from the scorch of the sun. His lips, such as they are, appear cracked and turned down, his forehead wrinkled with worry, his gaze fixed ahead as if in contemplation of some profound bafflement. He seems to wonder, "How in God's name did I end up here?"

The term "Far West Texas" refers to that portion of the state that lies west of the Pecos River. It is a dry and sparsely populated portion. The urban centers are El Paso, a city of 600,000, which recently announced that it may run out of drinking water by the year 2025, and Midland-Odessa, a two-city metropolis of around 180,000. Midland's nickname is The Tall City. It is not tall, but the plains that surround it are flat and empty. Odessa's nickname is The City of Contrasts.

All three cities are located about three hours from Marfa, the little town where this story begins. On the road, you pass through vast cattle ranches, though you do not see many cows. This is the Far West Texas range-cattle business. Since the first boom, in the years after the

Civil War, it has been a business in decline. Encouraged by cheap land, and then discouraged by the never-ending drought, Far West Texas cattlemen went about setting up some of the largest and emptiest ranches in the West. As you drive south the situation worsens. Last year some ranchers in Presidio County, where Marfa is located, reported herds as small as one cow per 200 acres.

The human population throughout the region is as sparse as that of the cow. In five Far West Texas counties that cover as much ground as Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Jersey combined, there are barely 50,000 people, most of them clustered in small, dusty towns scattered over an emptiness that would be absolute were it not for the occasional thirsting cow. The scout W. B. Parker appraised the area thusly in his 1856 account *Through Unexplored Texas*: "For all purposes of human habitation—except it might be for a penal colony—these wilds are totally unfit."

Parker's appraisal was meant for the human settler, but there was another to whom this desolation appealed. His story is one you will not hear the civic boosters tell, but in the bars and fields you might ask a friend. When he was falling toward earth from heaven, the devil wished to prove a point. He searched the

globe for the least heavenly place he could find. Green valleys, cheerful streams, and lush forests did not interest him. With a sneer, he flew over orchards and farms. Too pleasant. Then he came to West Texas. There are numerous topographical features named for him here: Devils River, Devils Lake, Devil's Backbone, Devil's Ridge, Sierra Diablo, Diablo Plateau, Cerro Diablo. Many of the county's older residents believe that he still lives here, in a mountaintop cave with a nice view of Presidio and Ojinaga.

Four years ago I passed through Marfa as a tourist. I had read an article about an art museum there that sounded interesting. I looked up Marfa on the road atlas—a little speck in the blankness—and made my way there for a one-night stay. A year later, occupied with fantasies of the open range, I headed back. I left my home in California on the day after Halloween, my dashboard covered with leftover candy that melted in Arizona. I arrived in Marfa on a Saturday night. A crowd of girls asked me what I was doing.

"I'm moving here," I announced.

"You'll never make it," one of the girls said. "The boredom will drive you crazy."

I got a job with the *Big Bend Sentinel*, Marfa's weekly newspaper. I covered the school board, the city council, the drought, the Border Patrol, crime, art, rain, the post office, the Amtrak line, the D.A.'s race, and anything noteworthy in Valentine, a flyspeck town nearby. I wrote a long story about a local man who spent six months each year working as a helicopter pilot in Antarctica. "Write that what I miss most is the chile verde at Mando's," he told me.

I found a position as a caretaker on a bygone cattle ranch at the edge of town. The new owners, a couple from Houston, were frequently out of town. It was my job to keep their flowers and fruit trees alive and their paths weeded. I lived in a small adobe building with cold tile floors. Behind my little house was an even littler house, a miniature built by the previous owners for their daughter to play in. It had a miniature broom and a miniature stove.

When I watered the pansies around its porch I liked to stick my head in the miniature windows, pretending I was a giant.

About six months after I started working at the *Sentinel* I got a phone call from an old Marfan who wanted me to find an article about him in the newspaper archives. He had been a war hero. He'd misplaced his old clipping, and it was getting yel-

cemetery then located southwest of the old Blackwell School and across from the Shafter road.

I knew a few things about Bierce—that he had written *The Devil's Dictionary* and *In the Midst of Life*, that he was considered a great misanthrope, that he had disappeared somewhere in northern Mexico, and that his disappearance had never been explained. I read on. The author of the letter was



low besides. He didn't remember the date of the article, but there was a big picture of him on the front page. Could I look for it? This sort of request was common at a newspaper that sometimes felt like a huge community scrapbook, and I had performed the same service many times before. On this day, though, I got sidetracked. In one of the giant archive books, I came across a letter to the editor from the December 20, 1990, edition of the *Sentinel* that contained, after some opening remarks, the following sentences:

[N]either [Pancho] Villa or his men had any involvement in the disappearance of Ambrose Bierce. Bierce died on the night of January 17, 1914, and was buried in a common grave in Marfa the following morning. In a

a man named Abelardo Sanchez, from Lancaster, California. He was born in Marfa in 1929 and lived here until he was sixteen, when he joined the Air Force. In 1957 he was driving from California back to Marfa on a Mexican highway when he picked up an old hitchhiker named Agapito Montoya in San Luis, Sonora. When Montoya found out his driver's destination he piped up, "I been there, during the revolution." Sanchez, who had a keen interest in the history of that war, encouraged his passenger's tale.

As Sanchez's letter explained, Montoya had been a soldier in Antonio Rojas's army, which fell to Villa's at the Battle of Ojinaga in January of 1914. Montoya survived the battle and with four friends began to head south, toward Cuchillo Parado.

Along the way they came across an old man who "appeared quite sick from a cold." He was trying to fix a broken wheel on a horse cart.

The old man asked the troops, of which Montoya, at seventeen, was the youngest, if they could help him find Pancho Villa, about whom he intended to write an article. They laughed at him and told him they were trying to get away from Villa. The old man's condition worsened through the night, which the soldiers spent nearby, and in the morning he shifted his aim and asked if they might help him get back across the border and up to Marfa. He offered to pay them twenty pesos apiece. The soldiers agreed.

Sanchez's letter continued:

During the trip they heard of different books he had written including one that my narrator recalled with the word devil in its title he said his name in Spanish was Ambrocio. My narrator also recalled that years later while visiting in El Paso, he recalled the name of a dairy milk that sounded just like Ambrocio's last name. On the second day after crossing the Rio Grande they were captured by elements of the Third Cavalry which was rounding up stragglers who had crossed the border. Bierce by this time had pneumonia and could hardly speak, my narrator recalls him repeating a doctor's name in Marfa that began with the letter D.

Neither the soldiers, whose English was poor, nor the old man himself, whom sickness had rendered almost mute, could convince the troops that he was an American, and he was loaded into a wagon full of wounded and dying Mexicans. Several days later, while interned in Marfa, Montoya and his friends found out from a cavalryman that the old man had died and was buried in a common grave.

I photocopied the letter. Later that night I reread it. It seemed entirely believable. Why would Sanchez make this story up? The next day I ran down some of the letter's clues. A Price's Dairy had existed in El Paso from 1904 until 1970. In 1908 a doctor named Joseph Calhoun Darracott moved to Marfa from Tyler and opened a practice.

In the next few weeks I learned more about Bierce. There were various theories regarding his end. A writer named Sibley Morrill contended that Bierce had gone into Mexico as a secret agent, dispatched by Washington to spy on the Germans and Japanese, who were plotting a sneak attack with the Mexicans. Joe Nickell argued that the whole Mexico story was meant to give Bierce the privacy he needed to go to the Grand Canyon and shoot himself. The most popular theory had Bierce killed in the Battle of Ojinaga, his body burned with the other dead to curb an outbreak of typhus. What is certain is that he departed Washington, D.C., on October 2, 1913, with northern Mexico as his stated destination. "Don't write," he wrote to a San Francisco acquaintance on September 30. "I am leaving in a day or two for Mexico. If I can get in (and out) I shall go later to South America from some Western port. Doubtless I'm more likely to get in than out, but all good Gringos go to Heaven when shot." All his final letters had this macabre tone. He was seventy-one years old, and his health was failing. To his niece he wrote: "Good-bye—if you hear of my being stood up against a Mexican stone wall and shot to rags please know that I think that a pretty good way to depart this life. It beats old age, disease, or falling down the cellar stairs. To be a Gringo in Mexico—ah, that is euthanasia."

In 1861, about two months prior to his nineteenth birthday, Bierce had shipped off with the Ninth Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment. During the war he was promoted to second lieutenant and shot in the head by a rebel marksman. Without a doubt the fighting had a profound effect on Bierce, forever tilting his humor toward the dark. Forty-eight years later, along the way from Washington to Mexico, he visited all the battle sites of his youth. He toured Orchard Knob and Missionary Ridge, Chickamauga, Snodgrass Hill, Hell's Half-Acre, Franklin, Nashville, and Corinth. At Shiloh he spent a whole day sitting alone in

the sun. In New Orleans he let himself be interviewed by a newspaper reporter, who observed, "Perhaps it was in mourning for the dead over whose battlefields he has been wending his way towards New Orleans that Mr. Bierce was dressed in black. From head to toe he was attired in this color." From New Orleans he made his way across Texas. The final letter to his niece, dated November 6 from Laredo but sent November 5 from San Antonio, said, "I shall not be here long enough to hear from you, and don't know where I shall be next. Guess it doesn't matter much. Adios." For most of November and December he was silent. His last letter was posted from Chihuahua City, Mexico, on December 26, 1913. It was addressed to his secretary and outlined his plan to leave for Ojinaga the following day.

The gloom of Bierce's last letters would not have surprised his friends and readers. Death haunted nearly all of his work, from the war-mangled bodies in his Civil War stories to the mysterious demises in his collection of ghost tales, *Can Such Things Be?* He favored the *coup de foudre*. A man is buried alive, then dug up by two medical students, then bludgeoned to death when he sits up panting in his coffin. An inventor is strangled by his automaton chess player. A killer is pardoned, but the man carrying his pardon can't transmit the message as everyone in the capitol has left to watch the hanging. In "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," the reader is duped into believing a hanging man's fantasy of escape. In "Chickamauga," a little child wanders out to play in the forest. He comes upon a clearing where a plantation is on fire:

[S]uddenly the entire plantation, with its enclosing forest, seemed to turn as if upon a pivot. His little world swung half around; the points of the compass were reversed. He recognized the blazing building as his own home!

One of Bierce's many nicknames was "The Laughing Devil."

Sanchez's version of Bierce's end seemed so Bircian. It did not

swerve from the expected with quite the velocity of a Bierce story, but it did swerve. Bierce had high hopes for a heroic death before a firing squad or in the heat of battle. Was there not a certain devilish poetry in this unglamorous business with the horse cart and the soldiers, in the confusion of identity, in the common grave?

One morning I called Sanchez at his home. He did not demonstrate much familiarity with Bierce, referring to him repeatedly as "Bryce" and to his masterwork as "*The Devil's Advocate*." He said that before his conversation with Montoya, he "didn't know Ambrose from shinola." Even after that, he had no idea that Bierce's death was an unsolved mystery. What prompted his letter to the *Sentinel* was the 1989 movie *Old Gringo*—starring Gregory Peck as Bierce—based on Carlos Fuentes's novel of the same name. Sanchez told me how his letter was briefly picked up by some local historians and then dropped. "But there is no question in my mind," he said, his voice rising: "Ambrose Bryce, the author of *The Devil's Advocate*, is buried in Marfa."

Archaeologists say the desert is one of the best places to dig for remains. In the arid soil, clothing may remain intact, free of rot and rain, for hundreds of years. The only preferable places for grave digging are the Arctic Circle and Mt. Everest, where even bits of flesh stand a chance against decay.

Sanchez's letter stated that Bierce's grave was southwest of the old Blackwell School and across from the Shafter road, which runs down to Ojinaga. But how far southwest of the school? Past the trailer park? Before Jerry Agan's house? Under Jerry Agan's house? And what did "across from the road" mean? A horse pasture that ran along the west side of the old Shafter road looked promising, but my late-night investigation there yielded nothing. Across the road from the horse pasture is a Mexican restaurant without a public rest room called La Carreta, which means The Cart. Was this a clue?

A friend of mine named Michael



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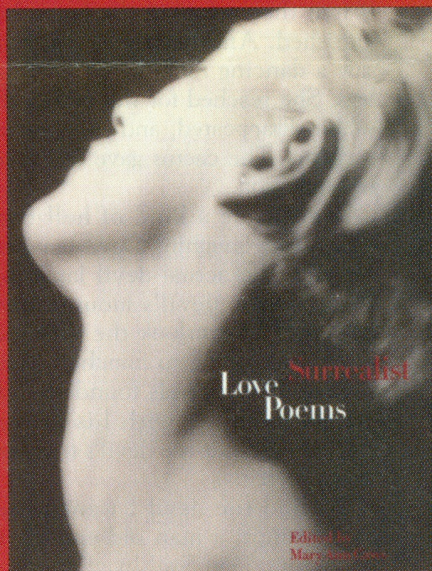
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Roch said that he had heard I was looking for a graveyard near the Shafter road.

"Oliver Cataño took me down there once on horseback," he said, "and I remember my horse stepping over a grave. There wasn't much there. I don't know if I could find it again, but I could try."

We drove down along Alamito Creek and parked the car. Alamito is a dry creek that runs beside the Shafter road. If there has been rain in the Davis Mountains, it gushes a brown torrent for a day or two, but that is a rare occurrence. A few months before, a man had inadvertently drowned his horse in the creek. He had gotten into the habit of staking the animal at various spots along the creek bed where there was something to graze. During that same rain, I saw a telephone pole go flying past on the current, pursued by a live goat.

Michael and I walked down the dry bed. I had thought about carrying my gardener's trowel but decided instead on a wooden stake and some orange surveyor's tape. The desert soil is corky and dense; a trowel will barely scratch your initials. If we found anything, we would need to return with picks and spades and a bar. Michael stopped and scanned the horizon. "It was somewhere down this way," he said, climbing up the east bank of the creek.

We walked through a field of abandoned cars and other weathered artifacts. The junk thinned as we walked. We ducked through a barbed-wire fence and into a large dusty field, then through another fence and into another field. Two horses wandered around listlessly. It was quiet and hot. Discarded bottles had filled up with dust. Michael looked disoriented. "I think this is the spot," he said. We scanned the field before us. It was wide and empty. Michael said, "I guess it could be another field, but this field feels right." We walked up and down, running our eyes over each contour of the ground, each nub of desert grass and greasewood bush. I looked underneath a mesquite tree. Michael snapped a bean pod off a *largonsilla* bush. We looked at each other. "It's

strange," he said. "I really thought it was over here."

None of the other Marfans I talked to seemed to know exactly where the old cemetery southwest of Blackwell School was located either. Some of them seemed to think it had been moved.

Talk of graveyards led to talk of devilry. A friend of mine named Frank Quintanar told me about the time, thirty years ago, that a stranger showed up at a Marfa dance. This stranger was handsome and well dressed, and he quickly found a girl to take his arm. Laughing and shrieking, they spun around the floor. As the dance wound down, a boy in the crowd noticed that the stranger had the feet of a rooster. The boy screamed and pointed. The stranger vanished in a puff of smoke. It was the devil.

"And that is why Marfa will never be prosperous," Frank said. We were at the bar.

In another of Frank's stories the devil appeared as a little red demon with horns. He stood outside the kitchen window of one of Frank's friends, steaming. Then he drifted off. Neither of these little episodes seemed very devilish to me, but I was missing the point. This devil was not interested in death and mayhem. He liked to play games with people. He once appeared to a group of Presidio children as a burro with no tail. The children ran to tell their parents. When they returned the burro had vanished. Another time, a woman saw a dancing rabbit with no front legs. She reached for the rabbit, the rabbit disappeared, and she grabbed a cactus. The cactus gave her a minor infection.

It all made a kind of hell-born sense—the Laughing Devil bungling his end, the actual devil laughing. Was not the devil's mountaintop cave said to overlook the very spot where, according to Sanchez, Montoya and his friends found the old gringo fumbling with his broken cart? Would not the devil's trail lead me to Bierce?

To find the devil I went to see Saul Muñoz, a man old enough to know him. Don Saul lived down on

the border, in a blink-and-you-miss-it town called Redford. Many people say that Highway 90, which runs east-west through Marfa, is the real border, and that everything south of it might as well be Mexico. Redford would not dissuade you from this notion. I found the small crumbling house perched on a crumbling hill.

Don Saul was born just across the river in El Mulato. Most of his life he was a shepherd. On the mammoth ranches to the north and east, he would spend up to eight months at a time wandering with a herd of sheep. He worked alone, slept in caves, and now and again he would slaughter one of his own flock to feed himself. In later years he was a ranch cook. Around the time I went to see him, he was spending much of his time at home, watching a black-and-white television with a broken contrast knob and smoking pack after pack of Fiesta cigarettes.

He was happy to have the visit, and we sat in his dark, cool kitchen, drinking water from chipped coffee mugs, talking softly in Spanish. Then I brought up the devil.

"What?" he said, surprised.

I repeated my question. Had he ever seen the devil?

"There is no death and no devil," he told me, speaking slowly so I could understand. "We make death and we are the devil."

He started talking about water—how important it is, how to find it, what to do when there isn't any. He rattled off a series of maxims about hydration: "Water brings work." "No water means no life." "When it rains on a man's land, he's got everything."

Why had he been so quick to change the subject? He cursed the drought awhile longer and lamented the slipping away of the old ranch life. What did any of this have to do with my question?

"I was once a cook for thirty men," he sighed. "Those days are over." As he spoke, a polite young man stuck his head in the room. He was tall, with a friendly smile. Don Saul got up to pour him a mug of water. The young man nodded his thanks and sat on the bed in the corner. Don Saul fished another Fiesta from his crumpled pack and sat back down.

"What about animals?" I asked him. There were many folktales in which the devil took the form of an innocent creature. Perhaps I could help him to remember. "Have you ever seen an animal that seemed strange in one way or another?"

He thought about this for a while, burning down his cigarette with long, slow intakes of smoke.

"Owls have their own language," he said, as if he had finally found something that would interest me.

The young man nodded.

I knew that it was common for witches to take the form of owls in local folktales. I asked if he had ever seen one.

"A witch?" he said.

"Yes," I said, glancing sidelong at the young man. Why was he smiling at me?

Don Saul gave me a disappointed look, then launched into a long argument about how every supposedly extraordinary phenomenon has an ordinary explanation. I could understand only about half of what he said, since in his eagerness to make me see his point he had begun to speak more quickly, his hands gesturing wildly. The last thing he said was, "An owl is just a bird." A silence fell over the room, and we listened to his dry tobacco crackle. I sat back in my chair. The young man was still smiling at me. What did he know?

"A friend of mine did see a witch one time," Don Saul said after a while, exhaling a large cloud of smoke. "She was flying around in front of his campfire."

"A real witch?" I asked, sitting up.

"Of course not," he said. "It was his hair hanging in front of his eye. We are the witch. We trick ourselves."

Don Saul walked me outside into the scorching midafternoon sun. I thanked him for his time and asked if we might take a photograph. The young man took my camera, lined us up against the remains of an adobe wall, and silently shot two pictures of us squinting into the sun.

I began to look for area historians who might be of some help. It seemed unlikely that I would have

been the first to investigate Sanchez's letter. I needed the guidance of a trained professional.

After two annoying conversations ("Don't chase fireflies," one man told me), I found my way to Glenn Willeford, a professor at the Center for Big Bend Studies at Sul Ross State University in Alpine. He referred to himself as a "Bierce-chaser." I made an appointment to see him the next day.

Alpine is twenty-six miles from Marfa. Most towns in Far West Texas are about thirty miles apart, since they were water stops on the railroad before they were towns. Alpine has a population of around 5,800, a two-screen movie theater, a lumber store ("We Put The Pine Back In Alpine"), an Amtrak station, and a state university. The university's mascot is the *lobo*, or wolf, but a cast-iron longhorn with a gigantic rack stood at the campus gate, calling to mind a passage I had just read from Colonel Richard Irving Dodge's account of life in nineteenth-century Texas:

Every bush had its thorn; every animal, reptile, or insect had its horn tooth or sting; every male human his revolver; and each was ready to use his weapon of defense on any unfortunate sojourner, on the smallest, or even without the smallest, provocation.

I parked in the visitor lot. A teenager was picking cigarette butts out of the university's flower beds with a spearlike implement. I tried not to provoke him.

Willeford's office was in the basement of a brick building, in a corner of a large storeroom full of archaeological artifacts and office supplies and boxes of brand-new novels from a Westerns series with titles like *Pony Express*, *Carry My Message*, and *Across the Crevasse*. His desk was wedged between two crates. "No one bothers me down here," he told me. Willeford was first drawn to Bierce by the Civil War stories. "I think his experiences in that war embittered him," he said. "But they made him think about the hereafter, and what men are like, and God. Vietnam did the same thing to me." Willeford had just finished writing a short paper on the Bierce mystery, and

one of his central projects had been to refute the Sanchez letter. He handed me a copy. Mortified, I accepted it. Three things became clear in rapid succession: 1) Sanchez's letter was full of holes, some of them serious, some minor; 2) It was unlikely that Ambrose Bierce's bones would ever be found; and 3) I would make a terrible historian. The historian must develop an immunity to the poetry of coincidence. But has he no use for intuition?

I put this question to Willeford, but he dismissed it and proceeded to annotate the errors in my copy of the Sanchez letter: "One week after the battle? Pneumonia kills a lot faster than that." "This was \$10 U.S. at the time. Not much inducement." "Unlikely." "Contradictory." "Impossible!"

"I don't think he'll ever be found," he said at last, "but I'm not going to quit looking. You don't know anything until you look."

By the time I left Alpine, night had fallen. Where the road comes down out of Paisano Pass, I pulled over. This is where tourists come from all over the country to watch the sky over Mitchell Flat for the so-called Marfa Mystery Lights. The lights streak across the horizon; they hover in the air; they have, on occasion, approached certain viewers like friendly ghosts ("The Lights of God," Capt. Manuel Pedro Vasco called them in 1617). Science has never explained the lights, and many people who have lived in the vicinity their whole lives have never seen them. I sat on the hood of my car. Some tourists had parked an RV nearby and set up for their all-night vigil. "Do you see anything?" I heard one ask another. I knew that the odds were against them getting any more out of the experience than videotape of the headlights on the Shafter road. Yet every week more tourists came, fooled themselves, slept in their cars with binoculars, bought T-shirts.

The prairie before us was empty and black. Willeford could annotate till dawn; I still believed Sanchez.

It was noon when I arrived in Mexico, and after a quick lunch and some sketchy directions from the woman who had sold me the lunch, I got in

my car and drove toward the mountain on which, legend told me, I would find the devil in a cave. I turned right at the decrepit Hotel Ojinaga and rumbled along a terrible road, past the military *campamento* and the *tortillería* and over the railroad tracks. The outskirts of town were a mess of sad old adobe houses, satellite dishes, chickens, and faded political slogans painted on cinderblock walls, with shards of broken glass in place of barbed wire. At the end of the road I could turn either right or left. My lunch lady's directions did not include this fork. The mountain was straight ahead, a small white cross shining from its summit in the fierce sun. I stopped in at a small market called Abarrotes "Nellie."

The butcher in the back of the store was mindlessly working some sort of awful-looking meat product in a huge tub. His arms were bloody up to the elbows. I couldn't take my eyes off him as the woman behind the counter (Nellie?) gave me directions. From the look on the butcher's face, you would have thought he was icing cakes. When a girl walked into the store he raised one gore-encased arm and waved.

Following Nellie's directions, I took the right turn and drove along a road far too wide to be a real road, kicking up a cloud of dust that had completely obscured the store by the time I was a hundred feet beyond it. Past the last house, the road turned left and crossed half-buried train tracks. A small cemetery, overgrown with mesquite trees, marked the beginning of the way to the mountain.

The road began to fork continuously. What looked like flags marking the route to the mountain turned out to be white plastic bags blown into the thorny *ocotillos* along the road, and although their distribution was by no means uniform, one seemed to appear before me each time I thought I'd picked the wrong fork, as if some unseen hand had called together wind, trash, and flora to lead me straight to hell.

I parked at the base of the mountain. The parched prairie spread around me. A breeze blew, but it blew hot and dusty. I started up the trail, which split

into two trails, which split into four trails, and although each trail led to the same place, the one I chose always seemed to take the most difficult ascent. I clambered up a steep devil's slide, kicking loose rocks that crashed violently down the mountain to settle in the talus below. I grabbed a root and pulled myself over a small cliff on my stomach. All I could hear was my breath and the wind. I had come alone because I thought these terms would suit my host, but in the emptiness and silence I began to fear that they would suit him too well. When I reached the summit, I sat at the base of the twenty-foot cross and caught my breath. This was a serious cross, designed to protect a lot of people from something very bad. Pieces of cinderblock kept the votive candles around it from falling down the mountain.

The wind picked up. Chinati Peak looked across from the other side of the valley. They say the devil used to string a tightrope between these two summits and prance back and forth, tormenting the villagers below. I gazed down from his perspective. There was the gully where the gringo writer's cart broke; there, the clearing where he found the soldiers, the thicket where they slept; across the river, the hillside where they were captured by the cavalry and loaded into the wagons.

It was all very devilish, but where was the devil? I searched the summit for his cave. The spines on a cactus pointed me in opposite directions. From the dust, an old Fanta bottle cap stared up at me like a dead eye. I did not find the cave.

I got back to Ojinaga just as the stores reopened after siesta and went looking for Bryant Eduardo Holman. Holman was an old mud logger—an oilfield hand—who had moved to Presidio from Roswell, New Mexico, years before, married a Mexican orthodontist, and opened up a native crafts store in Ojinaga called Fausto's. He always kept a close eye on local politics, and I was in the habit of stopping in on him to hear the newest plot he had uncovered; on occasion they held enough water to warrant an article.

"You want to find the cave?" he said. "Sure, no problem."

We took his car, a brown Isuzu Trooper. He drove as fast as he talked, spinning another outlandish tale about municipal corruption and swaggering drug kingpins, and in what seemed like an impossibly short time we were back at the base of the mountain.

"It's just up here," Holman said, waddling up the path.

I had been all wrong to head for the summit. Only a quarter of the way up the mountain, Holman veered off the left side of the path, climbed down a rock to a sandy ledge and announced, "*This is the cueva del diablo*," in a spooky voice. He then jumped down inside the cave and launched into a confusing account of the devil legend, which involved Cabeza de Vaca, Pancho Villa, the Aztec god Smoking Mirror, and John Reed, "the father of American journalism." He hopped while speaking.

"To really understand what's going on here," he said, rubbing his hands, "you need to know about the four unlucky days and the powerful syncretism that De Vaca brought to this region. But even then, this is really ancient stuff. It goes back to the Uto-Aztecs and their tales about spiders in caves. Before that even."

The cave was L-shaped, opening out to the valley and up to the sky. It was about ten feet deep and ten feet tall. *Hello? Devil?* Here was the mountain; here was the cave. Where was he? I had come for the devil and found a folk-art dealer. When I turned back to him, Holman was explaining his decision to become a pagan. *Should I check his pant cuffs for chicken feet?*

Down at the Trooper a police truck had pulled up. The road was a dead end, miles and miles from town, but the two fat cops in the cab were not interested in us. They were looking for a stolen Mustang with doors that were a different color from the body.

Several days later I was sitting at home reading a story of Bierce's entitled "The Stranger." In the story, the ghost of an old prospector visits the campfire of a group of "gentleman adventurers." This is in the Arizona

desert. The men do not know he is a ghost straightaway. His behavior is strange but they take him for a "harmless lunatic," driven crazy by the solitude of the desert. The narrator observes,

We were not so new to the country as not to know that the solitary life of many a plainsman had a tendency to develop eccentricities of conduct and character not always easily distinguishable from mental aberration. A man is like a tree: in a forest of his fellows he will grow as straight as his generic and individual nature permits; alone in the open, he yields to the deforming stresses and tortions that environ him.

Is this what had happened to me? Once I left Marfa would I care where Bierce was buried? Outside my window a work crew from the local nursery was toiling away, installing an automatic irrigation system for my landlords that would fulfill all my watering duties with the flip of a switch and the punch of a code. The sound of their work punctuated Bierce's sentences with clangs and grunts. As I read, I let them supply each grammatical mark—a clang for a comma, a grunt for a period.

Suddenly a cry went up from one of the crew: "Hey! Get over here! Tony hit something!"

I peered through the blinds. The crew gathered around Tony as he pointed at the ground and gestured with his bar. A younger man with a shovel began to dig; the rest stood around with their hands on their hips waiting to see what he would uncover. In no time the young man was standing in a hole that obscured the bottom half of his legs. He dropped out of sight completely, and from the instructions I saw the others giving I understood that he was on his hands and knees, sweeping dirt off something down there. In time he stood up and stepped out of the hole. The whole crew then stood, it seemed, in silence and beheld what he had uncovered. One man crossed himself. Another said something that made the whole group laugh.

It was evening before they left. I had spent the afternoon pacing my room. When the work trucks had fi-

nally bounced off the property, gravel crunching beneath their heavy tires, and rolled smoothly onto the blacktop toward town, and when the music from their radios had faded into the night, I stood outside on the open plain.

The wind blew. Along the northern horizon, at intervals, great flashes of silent heat lightning surprised the sky. Swirling over the path, the dried leaves rasped out a greeting. One window of the miniature house had been left open, and the white curtains behind it fluttered softly, hung still, and fluttered once more, like a lady being seated at the theater.

I crossed the yard to the area where the hole had been dug. The practical foreman, blind to the potential historical import of the discovery, had directed his crew to cover it back up. But I had no trouble finding the spot where the digging had been done. In the center of the dirt yard, by a tree stump, a multitude of boot tracks pointed inward, as if the men had stood there for a moment before turning away.

I fell to my knees and began to dig. The dirt had been shoveled already, and once I had broken it up with the trowel it came away easily in my hands. The dirt pile grew at my side. The moonlight brightened. Finally, my fingertips met with that which would not give—a wide, flat stone. I scooped out the dirt to find its edges. It was a large rectangle, made roughly from cement, three feet wide and six feet long. I swept the surface clean with my hands and, bending low, blew down on it, my cheeks filling and emptying with air, the dirt particles flying up off the stone and into my face and hair. I staggered to my feet and stood on the stone. The wind died. The plain was quiet. The stone was blank.

In Far West Texas, on the side of the highway that runs south from Marfa to Presidio and across the Rio Grande into Ojinaga, Mexico, there is a small green sign that reads, PROFILE OF LINCOLN. Under these words an arrow points west at the jagged foothills of the Chinati Mountains, where you can make out the sixteenth president's

profile in the ridges of rock. It is not so easy to see—the vast sameness of the landscape's color confuses the eye—and many travelers who stop fail to find the accidental monument. Sometimes I pass them on my way up and down the Shafter road. Their cars are parked along the shoulder, fifty feet past the sign, in positions that testify to the abruptness of the stop; cameras hang idly by their sides; they stare for a while, squinting, furrowing their brows, their lips curling into profoundly baffled grins. ■

February Index Sources

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