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Carol Reeves
Butler University, creeves@butler.edu

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The Beige Place

BY CAROL REEVES

WHEN JIMMIE DALE Gilmore played his first gig here in Indianapolis, he claimed he was from Austin, never guessing that someone in the audience knew he had grown up in Lubbock, someone who had lived there in the '70s, listening to him, Joe Ely, Butch Hancock and Terry Allen cut their musical teeth at Main Street Saloon, Stubbs BBQ, and Fat Dawgs.

For some reason, Gilmore's reluctance to claim Lubbock as the place he was really from annoyed me. So, I yelled out some well-known Lubbock hot spots: "The White Pig! Fat Dawgs! Prairie Dog Town! Taco Village!" He looked down on the dance floor, empty except for me and my partner, and quipped in his typically metaphysical style: "A person from Lubbock! Well, Indianapolis is a good place to be from Lubbock."

I know what most of you in Austin and San Antonio and Dallas think of Lubbock—you think it's an armpit. You laugh at the billboards along your freeways advertising "Lubbock—For All Reasons." ("For what reasons? For all reasons if you happen to like monotony.") You can't imagine anyone choosing to live in Lubbock or being homesick for an armpit.

You've observed how those who have chosen to live there maintain a certain defensiveness when they visit you in Austin. As you sit in a traffic jam, they'll remark—"No such thing in Lubbock, why you can drive around the loop all by yourself if you've a mind to do such a thing." Or when you take them to crowded Sixth Street bars in Austin with no room to dance, they'll remind you that up home, people don't sit around looking cool; they dance. A Lubbock friend gives the following homily every time I talk to him: "Life is so easy and simple. You don't have to drive forever. You have plenty of time to think. People are closer. The air is dry and clean."

You think this is all psychological justification for living in an armpit? Well, it's not, and I'm here to tell you why.

Lubbock is space to fill up. A beige land-

scape needing some color. It's an itch that needs scratching.

It's an atmosphere full of negative ions and fundamentalism, itchy results of hovering low pressure systems, one physical, one spiritual. Sandstorms, tornadoes and fiery sermons all seem to take their energy from that interminable, taunting, brown flatness, that empty space that seems to want filling up. It's easy to give in to the flatness, to settle into beige, treeless plains so that when the wind blows through, you have burrowed far enough in to avoid the pelting sand.

But it's also possible to resist that flatness, to take energy from it, and to make your own turbulence—joyful creativity as well as sorrowful depression. It's a place that makes you want to fill it up, color it up, itch to create and to leave—all at the same time. I've known Lubbock folks who, like swaying willows, can go all directions at once. They have a metaphysical bent, only they wouldn't call it that. Anyone who grows up in this flat, beige universe will have a gift for filling empty space, ferreting out color and scratching metaphysical itches.

Every Sunday, I'd ferret out the color as I sat with my family in church. Just behind the red-faced preacher, hanging over the mildewed water in the baptistery hung a painting of a green valley filled with flowering trees, a blue pond and grazing deer—a picture of heaven for us flatlanders. Then, of course, there was my mother's lipstick—bright copper—which she bought from the mustachioed Avon Lady who carried a huge carpetbag full of mysterious jars and lovely smells and colored up our lives once a month.

When there's nothing much to do, you learn to turn everything you notice into an object of study. Where else but Lubbock can you make a study of these questions: Just how high were the hairdos at the Red Raider Inn Nightclub before it burned down and is there some connection? How do they get gravy to turn out that color at Chandler's downtown? How many cases of Coors can be consumed between the "wet" strip and Avenue Q by a good ole boy from Idalou driving a '67 Ford pickup and pulling a load of steers—in the middle of a

dust storm? How would you build a mathematical model of a cyclist peddling with the wind, between Pinkies and the Loop, with a case of Coors strapped to his or her back? How much wind would it take to swoop this person off the highway? What happens to the psyche and one's clean underwear during a St. Patrick's day snow dirt storm?

How do people who live in "cool" places ever learn to be good critical thinkers? How do they ever become ambitious? We all know that the itch to leave a place is, in itself, a source of energy and ambition.

FOR A WHILE, my Lubbock friends and I ignored that itch to leave, vowing to stay in Lubbock where we'd grown together out of desperation and remained together out of love. In places where there are few things to do, strong bonds of friendship are forged out of necessity. We planned to spend the rest of our lives eating chili rellenos at Taco Village (now Taco Pueblo), dancing to the Maines Brothers, and waiting for Ely and Butch and Jimmie Dale to come back and play for us once in a while. We'd watch the playoff games together while outside, blowing sand pelted our pickups, and in the summers, we'd sit on our porches in cool, dry evenings. We hoped to watch each other's children grow up. But Joel's girlfriend, Donna, just had to move to Austin, and naturally, Joel just had to move with her. Then Paul followed. Then Brenda. Then everyone else. Like thirsty Herefords rushing for the creek after a little shower. They'd pull their U-Hauls up to my house on their way out of town: "Now, you come on down, too. It'll be the same old group but in a better place." I'd give them a smile and a hug, all the while thinking that it was this place that had made this group.

When I visited my friends in Austin, I found them living exactly as they had lived in Lubbock. They were still gathering together, still watching the playoff games, still searching out the best *heuvos con chorizo*. (They never found *rellenos* as good as those we got at Taco Village in Lubbock.) The main difference is that they had a view of Lake Travis, more than one good choice to make about anything, and no sandstorms.

Carol Reeves teaches English at Butler University.

Of course, the attraction of a place is all relative. What Austin was to my Lubbock friends, Lubbock was to me as a child growing up on a farm between Floydada and Silvertown. Lubbock was the big city, the cultural Mecca. For me, taking a trip to Lubbock once a month was like taking a trip to another planet. Dad's handmade boots from San Angelo and his shrink-to-fits stood out like careless weeds in the line at Furr's Cafeteria where "city" men wore suits and ties instead of Levis, and the women seemed to have arrived from Paris. Even though she regularly combed Vogue magazine at Betty's beauty shop to keep up with fashions, mother would stand there, checking herself against the women in the line and suddenly notice, much to her horror, that her hemline was longer or shorter than it should be or that her fingernails were dirty from pulling up a weed in her petunias that morning as we walked out to the car.

And to Gerry Berkowitz, my friend from Long Island, New York, living in Lubbock rather than New York and studying agriculture at Texas Tech rather than medicine at Brandeis was not just a way to make his mother crazy. It was also a place for stories he could collect like arrowheads and take back with him to civilization. One of his stories is this: On the day he arrived in Lubbock, he took a taxi to a boot store where he bought a new pair of bright red, roping-heeled Justins. While walking gingerly toward the campus, his pants legs stuffed into the boot tops, a pick-up full of rednecks offered him a ride and took him out to a cotton field where they stole his new boots and beat him up. "You just don't look right in those boots with your curly hair and fat butt," they yelled at him as they drove away. Whether this story is true or not—and it is most likely not—the point is that Lubbock inspires such stories. You can't leave Lubbock without one.

THIS IS ONE OF my Lubbock stories: On the morning of my wedding, I jumped into my Volkswagen Rabbit, deciding to make a break for New Mexico. I figured I could get to Fort Sumner by noon and call from my uncle Homer's motel. I'd say: "I'm sorry, but I just can't go through with this thing." Everyone—all the relatives who'd driven days, all the friends who'd flown in from brighter places—would just eat cake and go home. I could wait out my embarrassment in one of uncle's dingy motel rooms and have conversations with his parrot, Pete. Then I remembered that both Pete and uncle Homer had died. The motel had been demolished to make way for a Taco Bell. So I drove around and around loop 289, a lonely circle built after the tornado hit Lubbock in 1971. There I was, sweating in my white wedding suit, driving with the windows down, the entire freeway to myself. I

used up a half tank of gas, then drove to the church, a little late, a little windblown.

Jimmie Dale is right, though. To be from Lubbock in Indianapolis or most any place but Texas is to be considered exotic. When they hear the word "Lubbock," most people up here in "Naptown," as we call Indianapolis, have a list of impressions that includes Buddy Holly, desert landscape, oil wells and gun-toting cowboys. They assume people from Lubbock must be interesting characters, especially if they speak with the correct slow, nasal, tight-lipped twang. You could be the most boring person in Lubbock county and come up here and be the hit of a party just by saying "Hi. I'm from Lubbock." A friend of mine thought my accent was thick until he visited Lubbock with me and heard an undiluted version. One afternoon, we sat in a tiny, dark bar on University Avenue, listening to the conversation between the bartender and one customer: "Weeeeeel, Ah thaaank Ahhhhl haaaave ah-hhnother wuuuun ahhhh thozе Currzz." My friend thought these people were just hamming it up for his benefit: "People really talk like that! Amazing."

INDIANAPOLIS IS IN some ways a larger version of Lubbock, only without the wind, the sand, and the brown. There are trees, color, and water here. The landscape here often reminds me of the picture of Heaven over that baptistery. The people are friendly and trusting; the politics are conservative. Dan Quayle lives up the road. Like Lubbock, the artistic space is open, uncluttered. No well-worn tracks. Unlike some places, everyone here is not writing books, making movies, or cutting CDs—or feeling compelled to lie and say they are doing such things. Creative or restless people are caught in the "Lubbock Dilemma": to leave—to take that job in Austin or Los Angeles or Manhattan where you would not be the only songwriter or publishing fiction writer or painter and where your audience might be larger, more knowledgeable and more critical—or to stay and keep telling yourself that simplicity is all. Like in Lubbock, in Indianapolis, you may miss the atmospheric intensity and verve of a critical mass of creative minds crammed into one place but, then, you won't miss the competition. People who live in places like Lubbock and Indianapolis are like party guests who don't mind sitting in the corners, who don't flock to the kitchen just because it is full of people.

Despite what he might have you believe, Jimmie Dale Gilmore and the rest of the flatlander musical entourage inherited a metaphysical bent while hovering in the cultural corner of Texas, itching to leave for Austin. What is more metaphysical than living in a place whose observable features make you want to leave so desperately that

you push yourself to outgrow it? It's realizing later, after examination, that you can't outgrow a place. You can only outgrow yourself in that place, the place that gave you the unseen energy, the itch, to move on.

But you haven't really outgrown that self if you can't pay your debt to the place you had to leave.

METAPHYSICS examines things independently of what observation seems to tell us. Lubbock is the quintessential home of the metaphysician. Heidegger would have loved the place. Observation seems to tell us that we are surrounded by dry and dusty cotton fields and dry, slow-talking flatlanders. We can only see monotony. But what we can't see when we look out over that flat plain but what we can examine metaphysically are the flatland's invisible seas—one a secret, underground river in the Ogallala formation and the other a sea of wind that blows up an occasional dust devil. And what we can't see when we sit with tight-lipped flatlanders in a dark bar on a hot, windy afternoon in Lubbock, Texas, but what we can examine metaphysically, is their secret energy that comes from swimming against a river of electric winds running through that vast expanse of sky.

We might actually get to see this energy if there happens to be a dance floor in this bar.

You know the kind of thing that really gets me homesick for Lubbock? The last time Gilmore played up here, after he had finished his fourth song of the first set and noticed an empty dance floor, he said, "Now, y'all come on down here, fill up this empty space." I interpreted this as an invitation to dance, but when my partner and I went down to dance, there was no room. Hoosiers were sitting on the dance floor where they remained all evening. Lead butts, I thought. "This would never happen in Lubbock, Texas," I commented to a man standing next to me. "Well, this isn't Lubbock," he said.

I suddenly got a flat, dull, beige feeling in the pit of my stomach. □

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