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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 mildewed water in the baptistery hung in the painting of a green valley filled with flowing 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 mustached 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... 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 sweep this person off the highway? What happens to the psyche and one's clean underwear during a St. Patrick's day snowstorm?

F 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 Maineys 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, Dona, 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 Hereford's 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... and no sandstorms.

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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 Siverton. 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-fit stood out like careless weeds in the line at Furr's Cafeteria where "city" men wore suits and ties instead of Levi's, 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, ropering-heel Justin's. 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.

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 CD's—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 yourself 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 monotonous. 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.