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Camp Houston

by Kathleen Johnson

Midsummer and hot as hell
in the farmhouse,
though the water cooler rattled
its noisy air across
my grandmother's kitchen,
sending the aroma of fried chicken
through all the rooms,
and on out
the lace-curtained windows.

Even hotter in the pickup,
but we'd take any excuse
to go to Camp Houston for
chocolate bars, or beef jerky, or Fritos,
while Grandad fueled the truck.

The Coca-Cola cooler waited,
a gleaming red treasure chest
against the back wall.
A wave of cold
met your face
as you lifted
the lid. Slick bottles
of Dr. Pepper, RC Cola, orange
and grape soda nested
in a glistening bed
of ice. God
that first swig
tasted good. So cold
you wanted to hold the bottle
against your flushed
cheek, then your sweating forehead.

Next to the cooler,
a tall wooden box topped with glass.
A sign just above read
Baby Rattlers.

On tiptoes
we cousins peered in
to see the pink and blue plastic
baby rattles.



We knew the joke,
but had to look
every time.

Twenty-five years later
I bring my husband, two children,
back to see the family farm—acres
of canyons and wheat fields,
barbed wire and rattlesnakes.

In the car
I silently count
years—twenty-two since
Grandad was committed
to the state hospital, twenty
since Grandma's fatal heart attack,
ten that Dad has lived
blind and brain-damaged by booze,
just three
since my younger cousin
was found hanging
from a necktie
in his city apartment.

On Highway 64, just west
of Freedom, we pass
White Horse Creek, then Red Horse Creek.
From the highway I see
the farm's red-dirt road rolling off
into pastureland
and up and over hills
like a piece of Christmas ribbon candy.

We drive on.

For miles I think
it must be over this hill, then the next,
until I finally spot Camp Houston,
and we stop for gas.

I urge my children to come in
and see the baby rattlers.

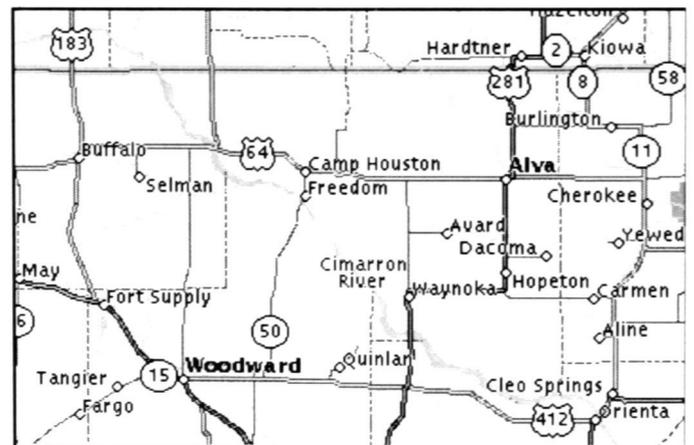


Photo by Joel Kendall



They are still there.

The kids look, to humor me,
but are not amused.

The woman behind the counter is not
that good-hearted-
but-rough-around-the-edges one
who used to call my dad
Junior when we stopped in
back then. This woman
smiles weakly, says
there are snakes
in a pit out back
if the kids want to see them.

We walk behind the building,
through sun-scorched weeds
crawling with red ants,
to a rectangular pit made of cement.

That familiar
dry ticking sound
as we step closer.

And deep down
in the shade,
in heavy coils around each other,
twelve western diamondbacks
hiss up at us
from dark corners,
flicking their forked tongues,
rattles straight up, fangs ready
to strike.

