

# THE TEXAS QUINTET

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Microfiction by Craig Lancaster

*The Field*

*High Above Lake Travis*

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# THE FIELD

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WHEN QUINCE CAME ROLLING UP INTO MY FRONT YARD THAT MORNING, we were up to our neck in August, staring down a seventh-grade year that had crept perilously close when we weren't looking. I'm thirty-five years clear of it now, and I can still sense Texas on my skin the way it felt that summer, the heat bearing down, relentless. Quince would come up the street to my house sometimes to sit under the swamp cooler after his mama chased him out so she could sleep off another drunk.

"Derek...you gotta...come down...to...The Field." Quince squeezed the words out between gulps of air.

The Field, an undeveloped patch of ground on the northern edge of our neighborhood, came by its capital letters honestly. It was the perfect so-close-and-yet-so-far territory in our town. At the farthest edge of it, I was no more than a quarter-mile from my own house, but I couldn't see my street, couldn't cover the distance with any sort of speed, wouldn't have been able to call for help if I'd ever been set upon by older kids. It never did happen to me, but Quince and another kid we ran with, Danny Dutton, hadn't been so lucky. The previous spring, some high school guys from Meadowlakes, the subdivision on the far west side of The Field, had caught Quince and Danny walking their bikes through and had beat on them pretty good.

"I'm not going down there," I said.

"Derek, you gotta. Danny's down there. Burton, too. You won't believe what's happening."

"What?"

"You won't even believe it. Just come."

I slipped onto the saddle of my bike. "I'll follow you," I said.

WE CRESTED MY HILL AND RODE IT DOWN TO THE BOTTOM ON THE OTHER SIDE, where it terminated at a barrier fence sporting the most disregarded KEEP OUT sign in our town. We walked our bikes around the fence, found the well-grooved trail on the other side, and set to pedaling again. Quince veered right, toward a line of trees.

"It's by the pond," he called to me over his shoulder.

Ahead, I saw Danny Dutton and Burton Mayhew standing by their bikes, waiting for us. Danny stood a head taller than the rest of us, on account of his being held back in second grade for poor marks. I never saw him without Burton, a smaller kid who was continually getting into scraps with anybody who cared to entertain him. One time, after I'd come home

with a split lip courtesy of Burton, my father had said he had “short man’s disease,” said Burton’s own daddy suffered from the same affliction back when they were kids. He said Burton probably felt threatened by me, so from that day on, I tried to be understanding of the little shit.

Quince and I skidded to a stop. “What’s going on?” I asked.

Danny held a finger to his lips. Then, in a whisper, he said, “Do you know that older kid Darrell who lives over on Dutch Elm?”

I pictured the kid. Sixteen, seventeen. Tightly curled hair. Lots of acne. Smelled bad.

“Yeah, I know him.”

“Well,” Danny said, and he looked around suspiciously before he said this next part, “he’s down by the pond, bopping his bologna.”

“Huh?”

“You know,” Burton cut in. “He’s slappin’ little Johnny behind the ears.”

“He’s jacking off,” Quince said.

“I get it,” I said. “How do you know?”

Danny grinned like he’d swallowed a delicious secret. “I’ve been following him. I saw him a few days ago down there. I was hopping a fence, cutting through some backyards, and I walked up the ridge there, and there he was, whacking it. He didn’t see me. I started biking by his house, staking him out. I’ve seen him come out here three times in the last two days. He thinks he’s alone.”

“He ain’t,” Burton said. “We’re gonna get him.”

Danny lifted a canvas bag off his handlebars, dug around inside and retrieved walkie-talkies. One for each of us. He started handing them out.

“Let’s surround him and scare the hell out of him,” Danny said. I looked at the sweaty, dusty faces of my friends, and I saw three boys who wouldn’t be talked out of mischief, not that day. I held out my hand and Danny filled it.

The volume turned low, the walkie-talkie spat out words and static in equal measures.

“Quince, you in position?”

“Check.”

“Burton?”

“Check.”

“Derek?”

The pond sat at the bottom of an earthen bowl. I’d climbed across the outside of it, kicking up dust from that caliche baked hard in the sun, to a clump of oaks along the rim. From my perch, I could see Darrell’s supine bare legs, his blue jeans and white underwear down to his ankles. “Check.”

“OK, boys,” Danny’s voice crackled. “count to five and then run at him like hell.”

I must have counted slowly. I was at three when I heard that first banshee scream, and it chased me to my feet. As I rambled down the embankment, I tried to yell—I swear I did—but no sound escaped my mouth. It didn’t much matter; my shrieking friends were upon Darrell, beating on him with fists, wailing, as he tried to stand. He finally did get to his feet, but the tangle of denim and cotton around his ankles tripped him as he tried to scramble away.

I just stood there, watching, as Danny grabbed at the kid’s feet. Darrell kicked and kicked, and finally, the pants and underwear came off in Danny’s hands, and Darrell got away for good, scrambling up and over the rim, lighting out for home in a KISS T-shirt, orange-striped tube socks and Keds, and nothing else.

I WENT HOME ALONE. Quince asked if he could come, and I lied and told him my folks and I were going to be heading for Lake Texoma for the weekend. He’d see me the next day and ask what happened, I knew, but I felt confident that I could conjure another fib if I had to.

The cold air in the house hit me as soon as I walked in, and immediately, my breakfast decided to retreat. I stumbled into the hallway bathroom and expelled it, my body recoiling in waves of wet and dry heaves. When it was over, I stretched out on the tile and set my cheek against its cool surface, and I went to sleep.

# HIGH ABOVE LAKE TRAVIS

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WE CREEPT TO THE EDGE OF THE CLIFF AND STARED DOWN AT THE LAKE. In this alcove, out of the churn of the speedboats and pleasure craft, the water shimmered, impossibly blue.

“Didn’t you used to jump off here back when you were getting high?” Ryan said.

Edd rolled his head against his right shoulder in an ellipsis. “Yeah, man, but that’s a big part of my past, big part of my past. I don’t do that anymore. No more.”

I felt vertigo kicking in and shuffled backward a couple of feet.

“Scared?” Ryan asked.

“Nah, man.”

He turned back to Edd. “Jump, dude. Might be different sober.”

Edd fell back parallel to me. “No way, man. I’m done with it. Done with it.”

“I’ll buy you a carton of Camels.”

Edd tore off his shirt. “I’m there, dude, I’m all over it.” Whooping, he slapped me in the chest as he launched himself off the cliff.

Feet first, his body sliced the water like a knife—calves, knees, thighs, torso, head, all of him pulled underwater, the surface returning to calm in his wake.

“That crazy fucker,” Ryan said.

Edd bobbed back to the top, whipping his head in parabolas to shake the water from his white-boy dreads. He shouted up to us. “Don’t forget my smokes, dude. My smokes. Come on. Let’s go to 7-Eleven.”

THAT WE’D HOOKED UP WITH EDD AT ALL HAD BEEN UNLIKELY. Nearly half a million people in Austin, and we happened across one who’d shared a couple of AA meetings with my roommate a few years earlier, when he was an undergrad at UT. (I suppose we increased our odds considerably by posting up in a 6th Street pool hall.)

“Where you been, man? Where you been?” Edd said to Ryan after he ambled over to us. “Been a long time.”

“Edd, I live in Dallas now.”

“No shit?”

“Five years now.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“Well, man,” Edd said, his eyes bouncing wildly between me and Ryan, “that’s a bummer. A bummer, man.”

AFTER DARK, we headed out the Bastrop Highway to the airport. Edd said he knew how we could get up to the roof of the Hilton and watch the jets come in. I carried a six-pack of Cokes and Edd’s Camels in my backpack.

The hotel lay squat on the horizon, four floors stacked in the shape of a doughnut. Once outside and atop the hotel, we clung to the edge, lest we be seen through the sunroof by lounging guests below. Edd found us a spot facing the flight path, the perfect vantage point. The wind picked up, brushing our sun-braided skin.

“I come up here sometimes and sit for hours. Hours, man,” Edd said.

“It’s awesome,” Ryan said. He stood at the edge, hands fused to his hips.

The scream of an approaching jet shattered the peace, and light flooded the field to guide it in. I stood up to get a better view. Once the wheels were on the ground, the field went dark again.

“Awesome,” I said.

“YOU STAYED SOBER THIS WHOLE TIME?” Ryan asked.

“Yep. Yep,” came the answer from Edd. “What about you, man?”

Ryan looked past us. “One stumble, but otherwise, yeah.”

“When was that, man? When?”

“Last year around this time.”

I sat up. I hadn’t known this about Ryan. Truth was, I didn’t know much about him at all. Five months earlier, I’d answered his ad looking for a roommate and moved into the two-bedroom place he had on Lower Greenville. We worked opposite schedules, and on days off, I spent most of my time down in Huntsville, where my girlfriend, Elise, was wrapping up her last semester at Sam Houston State. When she went on a two-week mission trip to Mexico, it freed me up to say yes when Ryan asked if I wanted to mess around in Austin for a weekend.

“Jesus, man. Jesus,” Edd was saying. “What’d you do?”

“Called my sponsor when I got on the other side of it, got my ass back into treatment right quick.”

I tugged at a corner of the roofing material. A rubber piece, cooked rigid by the sun, came off in my hand. I whipped it side-armed off the edge of the hotel.

“It fucking sucked, man,” Ryan said. “Came out, started at zero. You know the drill, right? ‘My name is Ryan and I’ve been sober twenty-eight days.’ Shit, man. I’d been three years clean and I blew it. Back to square one.”

Edd took a drag off his cigarette. “One day at a time. All you can do. Desire, man. Desire. You want sobriety for a day, and you go get you a day. Then you gotta want it for another day. Desire. Another day, man.”

“Yeah,” Ryan said. “I know. But listen. Let me ask you a question: What did it feel like, jumping off that cliff again? Anything like before?”

Edd considered the question a while. A faint smile gathered at the corners of his mouth.

“Didn’t feel like nothing, man. Nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

Edd mashed out his cigarette and flicked its carcass over the edge. “Man, it’s like this. Used to be, I’d get loaded and climb up there and jump, and it was like I was flying, man. Flying. I went in there all kinds of crazy ways, man. On my head, on my back, on my face. I’m lucky I survived some of them, man. There’s rocks down there, you know. Rocks. I never hit ’em, and I always found my way out. I was crazy, man. Crazy.

“But today, man, all I could think was, dude, this is a pretty stupid way to get a carton of smokes, man. Pretty stupid.”

The field lit up again as another jet pointed its nose toward home. Edd lit a fresh cigarette, his contorting face illuminated by the match. Ryan sat in a heap, boring a thousand-yard stare through the roof.

“Yeah,” he said. “Flying, that’s it exactly. That’s what it feels like. That’s what I miss.” Edd opened his mouth as if to speak, and then I heard him swallow his words.

I pulled my collar up against the night and shoved my hands in my pockets.

Without warning, Austin had turned cold. So, so cold.

# ALWAYS, ALWAYS OTHER GIRLS

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COOPER AND I DIDN'T LEAVE HIS HOUSE UNTIL DUSK. It was an easy decision to stay buttoned up that long. Inside: Atari and IntelliVision, as much ice cream as we wanted and no chores, on account of Cooper's parents were loaded and had a maid. Outside: Texas in full-throated July, ready to pour humidity over us like so much syrup. We'd have stayed in all day and night had Cooper's mom not finally tired of us ping-ponging from room to room, agitating, our fast-twitch teenage muscles wanting to move even if our brains didn't. She came to us, gin and tonic in hand, and told us to get out.

I flung the basketball at the hoop and Cooper shagged the ball. He was the luckiest bastard I knew. A rubberized half court was rigged up in his backyard, with a fiberglass backboard and breakaway rim and netting all the way around to keep errant balls from escaping. I coveted that whole setup. The previous summer, before Cooper and I became friends, my old man had mixed cement in a rusty wheelbarrow and posted a particle-board hoop he'd found at a flea market. It stood twelve feet tall astride our driveway, which was at a slight downhill angle, and while I appreciated the old man's effort, once I met Cooper, I never used it again. A few years later, the old man took it down and jackhammered out the concrete. We never talked about that, and now, seventeen years after I saw him into the ground, I startle myself sometimes when I think that if I could speak to him just one more time, I'd tell him I wished I'd played ball with that hoop more than I did. I don't know. It just didn't seem like a big deal at the time.

I was working around the world— hitting shots on the periphery of the court—when Cooper made an audacious observation.

“We need to get us girlfriends this year.”

I let fly with another shot that rattled through the hoop. “Good idea. How we gonna do that?”

Cooper gathered in the ball and whipped a chest pass to me at the top of the key. “I don't know.”

I stopped shooting and slipped the ball under my arm. “Got your eye on anybody?”

“I was thinking about it.”

“Who?”

“You know that girl Marci who lives up on Donerail?”

A hazy picture of a short, milky-skinned blonde popped up in my head. “She younger than us?”



“Yeah, she’ll be a seventh-grader.”

“I think I know her. Marci Barnes, right? You like her?”

Cooper held up a hand, calling for the ball. I gave it to him and we switched places. His first shot caromed off the side of the rim. I chased down the ball.

“There are a few nice girls in that neighborhood,” I said. “Anne Irving, she lives around the corner on Montrose. And then there’s Brianna. She lives on Manuel.”

“Brianna,” Cooper said reverently. Never in a million years could either of us hope to get Brianna Odell as a girlfriend.

Cooper was finding the range now, and I promptly retrieved three shots in a row that passed through the net unmolested by the steel hoop.

“Nice shooting.”

Cooper caught the ball in stride and dispatched another perfect shot. “Thanks. What about the aforementioned Anne? Do you like her?”

I corralled the ball and held it. “Aforementioned?”

“Yeah.”

“How does a word like that even come up?”

“What’s the big deal? You mentioned her before. Aforementioned.”

“Yeah, but...”

“But what?”

I threw a baseball pass at him, hard. “I’m just saying, it’s a pretty weird word to just say. You do that all the time. Have you ever noticed that?”

Cooper put up another shot that found the bottom of the net.

“Noticed what?”

“Come on, man,” I said, throwing the ball back to him. “You’re always using big words in class and stuff.”

Another made shot. I threw back the ball.

“Like what?”

I didn’t much care for this who-me act. “OK, here’s one,” I said. “Defrenes... defenstrated.”

Cooper laughed. “Defenestrated.”

“Whatever. I looked it up. Why can’t you just say ‘thrown out a window?’”

He shot again, another make.

“Why does it bug you?”

I tossed the ball back to him. “It doesn’t bug me. It just seems...”

He pitched the ball at the hoop again. It swished through. “Ostentatious?” he said.

“Yeah. Goddamn it.” I grabbed the ball.

“Well, Ben, I’m sorry to be so polysyllabic.”

“Whatever, man. I don’t care that you made that last shot. It’s my turn. Get out of there.”

I HADN’T THOUGHT OF THAT NIGHT IN YEARS. Today, I was headed to my mom’s house—my house, long ago—after Cooper’s funeral, and I had to turn right on Donerail and then left on Montrose before crossing Manuel into our subdivision. It all came flooding back.

Cooper never did tell Marci that he liked her, I don’t think. By the time a new school year rolled around, there were other girls—always, always other girls. A few years after that, Anne Irving and I went to senior prom together, but she ditched me for John Courtney and I ended up drinking hooch in the parking lot with the guys from auto shop. The next morning, I woke up in an alley off Rosedale, my shoes, wallet and cummerbund gone, and I had to call the old man collect to come fetch me. We never talked about that, either.

We stayed friends, Cooper and I. We were as close as we could manage, what with my living in Fresno and his staying in Texas. Our kids are close, like cousins, and we’d occasionally take vacations together—usually somewhere he and I could play golf while Deborah and Natalie did whatever the hell it was that they did. After I lost Deborah to cervical cancer six years ago, Cooper came and stayed with me for a couple of weeks when my grief was still inchoate (his word). He pulled me through that awful shit. I never imagined that I would lose him, too.

A lot of people came to say goodbye to Cooper, a lot of people I didn’t remember and hadn’t seen in nearly twenty-five years. Think about that. A quarter-century goes by so fast. It wipes away your youth, your looks (if you had any to begin with) and a good deal of your memories, but maybe not the most important ones.

Brianna Odell was there. She told me she’d moved back to that house on Manuel after her parents passed on. Her kids are in college now, her husband down in Itasca with some hot piece of ass he met at a chili cook-off. The whole thing sounds like the worst cliché ever, which is why I’m going over to Brianna’s place tonight with a bottle of wine. Maybe that’s a dumb thing to do, but I’m doing it just the same. I’ve about had my fill of these aforementioned regrets.

# LINGUA FRANCA

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WHEN RUSTY SAYS TO ME, “Look, Ronny, I want you to know that my interest in you isn’t strictly prurient,” I’m certain of two things.

First, I like him. I really, really like him in a way that I don’t like guys, not anymore, not after all the dirty lies to get into my pants, the dirtier lies to get out of them later, the indignities and the humiliations and the disappointments. Which isn’t to say that I’ve lost interest in guys. Guys are wonderful things in moderation, or so I hear. I haven’t yet mastered moderation in much of anything, and certainly not guys, but there’s still time, I think, which is why I try not to like them, Rusty aside.

Second, he’s lying, just like so many guys before him, which surprises me exactly not at all. The thing is, I can’t tell if this is the sort of lie that will lead where so many other lies have led, to my feeling broken and used and tossed aside, or if there is something more to this lie, some glimmer of belief on Rusty’s part that there is something in me worthwhile, something he wants to get closer to before he has to tell the truth and admit to me that, yes, his interest in me is strictly prurient but that I’m also an awesome chick and he knew it all the time. I would be OK with that, and somehow, I have to let him know.

He looks a little bit like Jeff. That was what I noticed when Rusty first talked to me last week here at the Libertine. It’s the way his jaws come together in a perfect point at his chin, as if the pieces of his face are locked together like Legos. I didn’t want to talk to Rusty at first because of this, because Jeff was horrible to me, and Rusty reminded me of him. Jeff threw an alabaster vase full of potting soil at me, directly at my head, and only because he can’t even get something like that right did it miss and shatter instead against the refrigerator. It fell to the linoleum in my kitchen, a debris trail of broken glass and dirt and plant life heading for death. I left it there for a week, long after Jeff left for good, because it was the only vestige I had of him. It took me a long time to get over that, and Rusty looking like Jeff was a mark against him from the start. But then he smiled, something Jeff rarely did, and I saw that he didn’t look so much like Jeff at all. That was good, and so I smiled, too.

Rusty told me that he was an obesity researcher at the Southwestern Medical Center, and I believed him, and I never believe guys. But come on, obesity researcher? Nobody would make up something like that. I pointed at a fat bitch at the end of the bar and suggested that he talk to her instead, and he laughed and said it wasn’t like that, and anyway, something called Occam’s Razor told him that if she drank light beer and avoided the Hog Wings, her problem

would probably be less acute. I asked him what the fuck Occam's Razor was, and he laughed again and told me that was a tool of deduction, whatever that is.

Anyway, tonight, he came back to the Libertine, and he remembered me and I remembered him, and we've been chatting—chatting, what a silly word—for a few hours and now he's telling me that his interest in me isn't "strictly prurient." I still think he's adorable and I still think he's lying, but I don't need to sort any of that out tonight, do I?

"What is your interest, strictly speaking?" I ask.

"To walk you home," he says.

"It's a long walk."

"No, it isn't."

"How do you know?"

"You told me, last week. You said it's two blocks away, right here on Greenville. Were you lying?"

"I wasn't lying," I say.

"So are you ready to go?" he asks.

"I am," I say.

November slaps us dead in the face as we leave the Libertine, and he asks if he can put his arm around me seeing as how it wasn't this cold when he came in and he didn't bring a jacket to offer me.

"Yes," I say.

And we're walking, and his arm has pulled me in closer, and I can smell him now, can smell the Irish Spring he scrubbed onto his body this morning. I like it. I like him. He's beautiful and he likes me back. Still I'm cold, and Rusty says he heard there's supposed to be an ice storm coming.

And I think, ice storm or not, I'm not bringing the plants in tonight.

# PONZI

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**I**N SEPTEMBER OF THAT YEAR, our neighbor Wayne had this idea that he could get rich by selling groceries Amway-style, and he booted his twelve-year-old boy out of his own bedroom and put up shelves loaded with packages of spaghetti, cans of roast beef, soda pop by the case and other non-perishable goods.

Soon after, Wayne came over to our house and gave my folks the pitch, showed them how, if they just signed up a few friends and those friends signed up a few friends, and so on, they could make as much as \$10 million a month, all by making a little bit on every transaction.

“Everybody needs groceries,” Wayne said, mopping sweat off the folds of blubber on his neck. “It’s the perfect plan.”

My pop liked Wayne, liked going out with him occasionally and tossing back some suds, and he paid the ten-dollar membership fee and accepted the tabbed folder that contained the list of goods and prices, as well as several pages of helpful hints for enrolling friends in the program.

“We’ll see what we can do with it, Wayne,” Pop said, showing him to the door. “It’s an interesting idea you have here.”

The old man had said something similar a few times before. We still had a shed full of cleaning chemicals that Wayne had foisted on Pop in an earlier scheme. The stuff was supposed to get rid of deep grime on contact, and sure enough, it performed as advertised. It also ate a hole in our carpet. Pop put the stuff in the storage shed because, I think, he didn’t quite know how to dispose of it, and he didn’t want to hurt Wayne’s feelings. A similar sensibility had driven him to sneak out of the house one night and open the door to the pigeon coop Wayne had insisted he build. The next morning, the flock had flown away, and Pop went across the street and told Wayne that they wouldn’t be making that killing on squab.

“You’re a soft touch, Leonard,” Mom scolded him, and Pop mumbled something about how it didn’t hurt anything. Mom often said that the old man “enabled” Wayne’s irresponsible behavior; most of Mom’s vocabulary came from the self-help books she consumed with the fervor of the newly touched religious. That idea never seemed to resonate with Pop.

Mom thumbed through the folder. “This isn’t going to work.”

“Why not?” Pop asked. “Seems like a decent idea. Like Wayne said, everybody needs groceries.”

“Yeah, but look at this.” Mom thrust the folder at him. “Now just look at that: Cheer

laundry detergent for \$2.49. I can get it for a dollar less down at Skaggs. And \$1.50 for a two-liter bottle of Coke? I got it for 99 cents yesterday!”

It went on like that for another half-hour or so. After the first few broadsides by Mom against Wayne’s plan, Pop looked for an escape. He tuned in to the Texas Rangers game on the radio, while Mom sat at the kitchen table and lingered over the list of products and prices. Their interplay was a series of exclamations in one room and knob adjustments in the other.

“Two-ninety-nine for Sanka!”

Pop turned up the volume on the radio.

“A buck eighty-nine for Doritos!”

Pop flipped over to Bill Mack on WBAP.

“A dollar-ten for a can of tuna!”

The old man turned off the radio and went outside.

“RANGERS LOST,” I said. I held open a lawn bag so Pop could scoop a load of early fallen leaves into it.

“Figures,” he said.

I shook the bag to settle the leaves and then tied off the top. Pop fished his smokes from his front pocket and lit up.

“I guess Wayne’s idea has a few flaws,” I said.

“Guess so.” The old man exhaled a string of smoke from the side of his mouth, upwind of me.

“You know, he kicked Ethan out of his own bedroom so he could put food in there.”

Pop didn’t say anything, but I could see his jaws clench. He was chewing on something that was giving him trouble. Whatever it was, I knew I’d never hear about it.

“Men sometimes lose their way, Jon.”

He crushed the cigarette into the brick of the house, behind the hedge where no one would see the mark.

“Come on,” he said. “It’s getting late.”