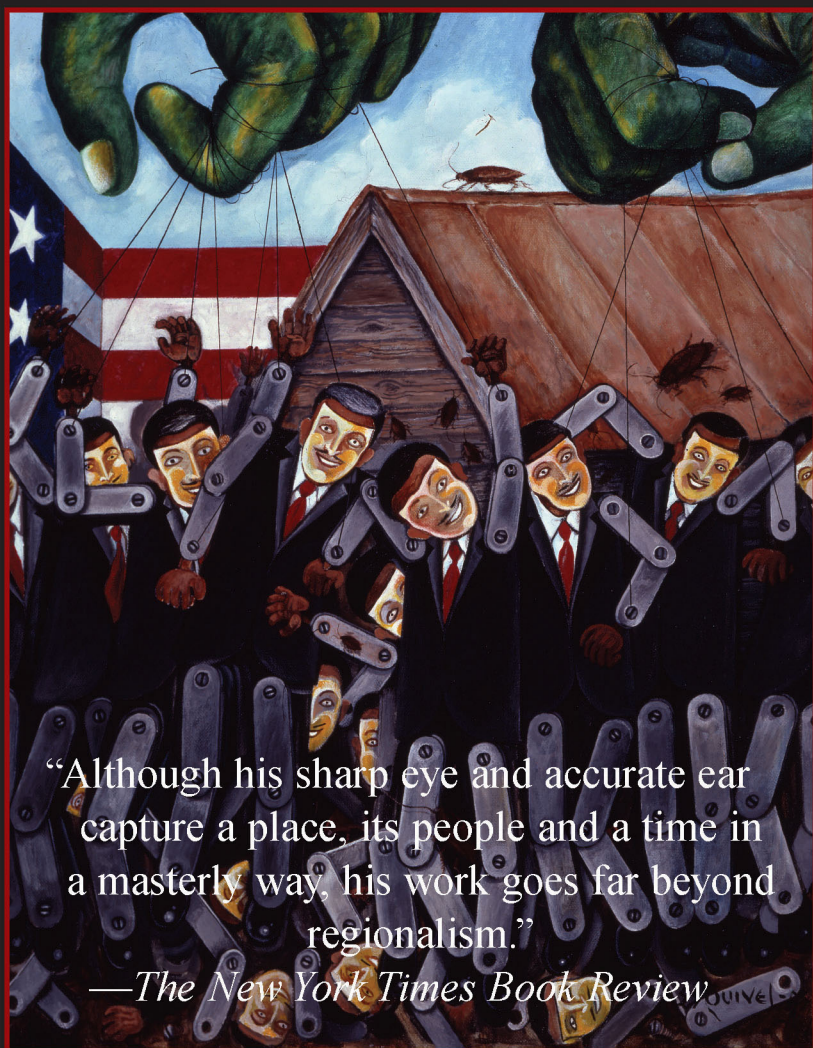


We Happy Few



Rolando Hinojosa

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by Rolando Hinojosa

THE KLAIL CITY DEATH TRIP SERIES



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Scene: Belken State University
Belken County, Texas

Time: No time like the present

This is a work of fiction; there is, then, no use searching for clues as if this were a roman à clef.

The grotesques that appear here are not the doubles of anyone dead, alive, or known to this writer; the action is likewise imaginary.

THE DEAN I

The head painter stepped back to admire his work while the assistant removed the canvas from the floor, picked up his paint cans and brushes, and placed them in the hallway next to a bench where a student sat reading a fat book.

“Waiting for the prof, are you?”

The youngster looked up and shook his head. “I sit here because all I have to do is go down the stairwell and walk straight into the classroom.”

“Pretty smart, sonny. This is Doctor Chalmers’ office, know him?”

The student continued reading and shook his head again.

“And you may not, he’s to vacate at the end of the term. We painted half of the office and we’ll do the rest later when he leaves in a month or so.”

Turning to his helper, he said, “You missed a spot there, Charlie. Clean it up. And what you reading there?”

The student shrugged and showed him the book: *Great Expectations*.

“Mostly about dreams, filled and unfilled, retribution, justice, memories, remembrances. . .”

“Wow. Too deep for me, kid. Ready, Charlie?”

He then nodded at the youngster, mumbled inaudibly to his assistant as they headed for the elevator.

Two hours earlier, Elliott Chalmers had received a call from Associate Dean Blanche Weatherall that Dean Brothers wanted to see him. Unable to keep a secret—and for the glory of momentary awe—she added that the Dean had a nice surprise for him. Would eleven o’clock be okay? If not, he, Dr. Chalmers, could choose the hour.

For his part, Elliott—mind in a bit of a whirl, wondering what the nice surprise would be—said that yes, eleven would be fine. Dean Weatherall said she would brew a special pot of coffee for him.

A nice surprise . . . the previous month, on the 22nd of December, he remembered well, the English Department had voted 7 2 1 against forwarding to the College of Liberal Arts' Promotion and Tenure Committee his application for consideration to Associate Professor, and accordingly, as was the custom at Belken State, tenure. That magic word. He knew who the two who voted for him were: Mark Levy, Restoration Drama, and Naomi Sorensen, a Miltonist as was Elliott. The abstention?

Abraham Lincoln Bennett, who else? Good old Abe, non-committal to the last, and here he was a year into his third decade at Belken State and approaching retirement. A retirement which would be followed by a sigh of relief from the two Shakespeare specialists. But, they were willing to hold and suspend their belief until after the farewell party. The gift—God and the Chairman alone knew what that would be—and the hearty congratulations led by the Shakespeare specialists: Tom Morgan and William—not Will, and never Bill, just plain William—Chadwick.

Elliott moved some of his book-packed boxes to make room for the painters. He then partly opened the window; the master painter had said they were applying quick-dry paint, and he could move in anytime after lunch.

Five minutes later, his phone rang. He took off his glasses and placed them in his Out basket as the phone rang again. His answering machine picked up the message. "Elly? This is Mark. Could we have some coffee after your three o'clock? See you."

Glancing at the machine briefly, he dialed Mark Levy's number. "Hello."

"It's me, Mark. Coffee's fine. How're you doing?"

"Ted's assigned me to head the Guest Lecturers Committee. Want to be on it?"

Elliott grinned and said he'd be happy to. "By the way, the Committee on Committees usually selects who's to serve, what's up?"

"Ted owes me a couple. See you at three."

"Right."

The Guest Lecturers Committee. A soft appointment, but something else to be listed on one's Annual Report. Two more committees coming up, but that seventh year, the year of grace. . . He stopped thinking for a second; pursing his lips, he said to himself he would be damned if he put in for consideration again. He'd use the year to expand the article on the *Areopagitica* to a full-blown ninety-page monograph, loaf some and read some and work on that third book. That, he said to himself, was my year, not the university's.

Ten forty-five. Although the walk to the Dean's office was but five minutes away, there was usually someone he'd run into and delay the walk. The green expanse on the Quad was full of students chatting, reading, taking in the sun, and the usual hacky-sack players dodging the Frisbees amid the occasional yell of "You blow away that Calc. class, Joe Bob?" or the more common, "Conjugate and decline this, my man."

Life on the Quad.

Not the best not the worst of students. Well-mannered with their usual "sir" or "ma'm" after each sentence, and most of them working twenty, some thirty hours, a week. Someone had termed it a fourth-rate school but his Dean had said, "Second-rate," knowing some of the liberal arts students could compete with anyone, anywhere. . . Not many, but not a few, either. Engineering? Business? Education? The sciences? All accredited.

His dean, Dean Brothers, had fought hard for Liberal Arts. Most were first-generation college students, and their parents wanted them to go into the professional schools, law, for one, and medicine, for another.

Fine. But the first two years belonged to Liberal Arts. The

Dean here: “We’ll teach them to read, to write, and to think.” To think critically would come later. It didn’t matter, but thinking was called for, and his college was responsible. And yes, he had fought for Lib Arts, and at the state level, too. (Although administration did not want their deans to talk to the state reps and senators.) Nevertheless, he managed to reduce the teaching load from four classes per term to four and three and, finally to three and three.

No, this wasn’t the monster in Central Texas, but he had Ph.D.s who wanted to publish, who’d earned their terminal degrees, and he would give them the chance to publish, to carry on research.

Elliott knew this and wondered what the Dean would want with *him*? They’d not met, although Elliott had seen him around campus and at a college reception five, six years ago. John Brooks, a biologist, said, “He’s a hard nose.” And Elliott, nodding, had reserved judgment, but coming from Brooks, that was a compliment.