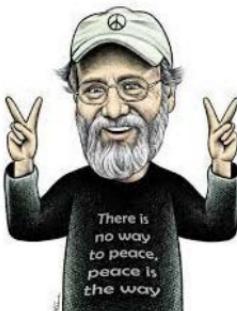


Broken Bridge

A SHORT STORY
MIKE PALECEK

ColdType



"Mike Palecek writes with passion, wit, and always with a strong social conscience." – Howard Zinn

"Terse and funny and dry as a dead Iowa corn snake baking in the sun. Palecek delivers a quick, deadpan slap to reactionary, mindless post-9/11 America. The sting is delightful." – Mark Morford, San Francisco Chronicle

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Minnesota

Cover Photo: Tony Sutton

Broken Bridge

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Writing Worth Reading
<http://coldtype.net>



An excerpt from the book,
Speak English!,
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BROKEN BRIDGE

“Niggers go long.”

Rick falls into the backseat.

A.C. reaches toward the radio.

“No, wait.” Rick puts a hand up and pitches an ear to hear if The Big Red could pull it out with a Hail Mary.

“Van Brownsen drops back,” says the announcer.
“He moves left in the pocket. The ball is up. … It’s … incomplete.”

“Okay … go ahead,” he says, waving his hand.

“Shit.”

A.C. cuts off the mournful announcers in Lincoln.

“Dream Weaver” buzzes in the dashboard. KSTP, Oklahoma City. Nothing around here except country and polka.

A.C. tunes it.

A little.

MIKE PALECEK

Fly me high through the starry skies. Maybe to an astral plane.

It still fuckin' buzzes. It's too early, got to be dark at least, best after midnight.

Rick sticks his face even farther into mine.

Oooo. Clearasil.

"Look at that," I say, looking out my window seeking a new smell.

I down-shift and look.

Out in the stubble a hawk stares at us, daring us to fight, like the boys from Stanton.

Under one foot a rabbit struggles with wide eyes.

It stops and asks us for help.

"Stop!

"Stop!"

Rick puts a hand on my shoulder and one on the shotgun on the floor.

I shrug hard to get his hand off.

I brake, and then go.

Fuckin' Corner.

His brother drowned yesterday.

Fucking yesterday and he's out road huntin' and drinkin'.

BROKEN BRIDGE

Tom Corner was out swimming at the new lake. Brand new lake they made. He was swimming around, out toward the middle. Guess he dived down and some sea weed shit grabbed his ankle and he couldn't get back up.

Makes sense to me. I can see how that could happen.

The whole town was out there watching the fire department in this rowboat, I guess the fire department rowboat.

They gaffed Tom in the thigh and yanked him up into the boat with the coffee thermoses and extra rope.

Blood spreading across the lake.

Rick was there, standing right there with me and A.C., and most of the other guys.

“Kenny,” says A.C. “PTTPRO.”

Power To The People Right On.

He hands me a fresh can of Schlitz, like some Zen bartender who just knew I needed one. He rolls down his window to toss two cans at a fence post. Left-handed.

The first can hits the top of A.C.’s window, spraying Shits all over the inside of my ‘57 Chevy.

I swear, holler.

“Oh, shit,” said A.C. He apologizes. We dab with

MIKE PALECEK

hunting jackets, gloves, stocking caps.

He finally nails the fence post. He played baseball up through Babe Ruth League.

I slide it up to second, arranging my hands to steer and drink.

I put my arm in my window and enjoy.

Black and white.

Bench seats, radio works great. All the metal thick, hard, quality. No rust. Everything original, except the tape deck, tires, gas.

A classic and I know it. I knew it the minute I climbed in after my dad brought it home for me. He found it by peeking in some old lady's locked garage.

I tore the mud flaps off and those metal reflectors by the front windows. What are those for?

Every shift, song, or corner turned is a joy in this car. And what's great is that I understand it. Maybe my dad made me understand, but I think I came up with understanding on my own. The mark a great teacher leaves is no mark at all.

They don't make cars like that now.

Ever hear anyone mooning over their old Lumina or Tercel or Accord?

Guys have dreams about these old Chevys, that they

BROKEN BRIDGE

wished they had the sense back then to appreciate, same as their first girlfriends.

The Schlitz is not cold. Maybe cool, if you squeeze. A.C.'s got sore knees because he's got the cooler on his side.

Rick's got the guns.

We're all wearing red or blue flannel. And Clearasil.

And the brown canvas hunting jackets are now everywhere. It's hot. Well, not really. It was hot. We walked one field and then we were thirsty and we started drinking. We were going to wait until it got really cold, almost too cold to touch the cans, but we didn't.

When we get up before dawn on a Saturday to go hunting we put on coffee even if we don't drink coffee, or maybe we're hungover, and we put on all these clothes, these big hunting boots when tennis shoes would probably be okay.

And then the guns come up from the basement or out on the porch.

It gives the whole thing gravitas. Well, it does.

And I think our dads think now we're getting down to something serious and we might amount to something. I don't know why they would think that.

For the past few hours we've just been driving

MIKE PALECEK

around.

We see a bird and we almost stop and jump out to shoot.

For the past hour it's just been Rick shooting out the back window.

There aren't that many pheasants or me and A.C. would be dead by now, from having our ear drums blown out. A big hole in our head from that.

Rick also shoots at squirrels, crows, stop signs.

Poor guy. He just wants to kill something so bad. You can't blame him. But I'm sick of that gun goin' off in the car.

My dad would fucking kill me.

It's fucking loud.

I speed up whenever there's anything running around.

It's like it went off right by your ear.

It's fucking loud.

I turn left to go to Broken Bridge.

By now it was getting almost dark, that's how I remember it.

It's a gravel road, with most of the gravel pushed off toward the sides in a long hump so you have to stay toward

BROKEN BRIDGE

the middle, and it's kind of a narrow road anyway.

Broken Bridge is one of the places we would go swimming.

There's a beach, sort of, and in some places the water, it's called Spring Branch Creek or maybe North Fork. The water is deep in some places if you kneel down to piss.

It's mostly a place where you can ask some girls if they want to go out to Broken Bridge or something.

"Party at Broken Bridge," something like that.

It might work.

If it's night, maybe you can bring some beer, but if it's a Sunday it's pretty boring no matter what.

There's rocks on the path, and stickers too, and glass, and most girls know that, so it's not a great place.

The bridge back then was wooden, with high, old iron arcing over the top. It creaked and you could see the water through the cracks in the boards. There was barely room for two cars to pass.

Graffiti decorated the flat iron.

Fuck this. Fuck that. Fuck him. Fuck her.

Way up on the flat angle iron facing southward traffic, way up where someone would really have to want to get up there, in smeared, thick, red, blood, was the legend.

MIKE PALECEK

A legend is an old story. It's also an inscription, a title, a motto, or a caption, or an explanation.

It's all of that.

They would have to be shinnying way up and along, hugging with both knees, not looking down. Maybe. Maybe they were the curious type.

Carrying the bloody arm in their teeth.

Then he'd grab the iron with one hand and lean way over to smear the blood words with the arm paintbrush.

There are stories about escaped lunatics.

He'd take it in one hand and write upside down. All those people who write on bridges for cars to see are writing upside down. I'm not sure people understand that. Perhaps it'll just take time.

They said the man who wrote on Broken Bridge was escaped from the state hospital on the other side of town.

He would have strained with all his might and wrapped his legs tight.

And if he was afraid of heights that goes to show how bad he wanted it.

He wrote in big, thick, bloody letters.

I actually visited the state hospital on a Catholic grade school tour once. There were lots of people around, in

BROKEN BRIDGE

nurse's uniforms, with droopy eyes and cigarettes hanging on their lips. Industrial women, that's mostly what you get around here.

They had a farm where the inmates could milk. The milk barn was clean and smelled like fresh hay. I remember one guy in there, he was big, with big, really dark black hair.

He picked me out of the group to come over and milk the cow. I didn't want to, but I did it. The girls and everyone else giggled when I grabbed the things.

And if he was escaped, and it was night time, then how did he get out there.

That's a lot of miles on foot, through a xenophobic, nosy town, with nosy, provincial police officers looking for him, who haven't been to college or anywhere, just driving around.

And a lot of those people aren't from around here. How would he know about Broken Bridge anyway.

And to climb in the dark with a bloody arm in his teeth.

Well, he really was into it.

All by himself, a crazy, lonely man in a strange land, playing his crazy game.

With sirens in the distance.

MIKE PALECEK

I always wonder if they know they are crazy. Like if a kid with Down's Syndrome knows what he's got. I'm fat. I live on Sixth Street. I'm crazy. Or don't you know?

He's up high on a jagged, rusty piece of iron.

He hears the pitter patter.

He stops. Eyes wide, he looks down and gets a little dizzy. He grips tighter with his knees.

His heart pounds.

He bites down on the arm, tastes the blood, feels the bone, swallows, lets it run down his chin.

He sees a coyote trotting down the middle of the bridge.

It trips along kind of sideways, tongue out, looking about two feet in front.

It passes under him without looking up.

By the light of the orange full moon over the trees and the river and the retards the wild man swung down, sweat stinging his eyes and he wrote.

With all his heart, his soul, he wrote.

He felt those words, dragged them from the first memories of childhood to that very moment.

Like Solzhenitsyn, Dickens, Steinbeck, Faulkner, Dostoyevsky, he wrote.

Behind enemy lines, like King in the Birmingham jail

BROKEN BRIDGE

on used toilet paper.

He wrote.

Fuck You.

We headed on toward the bridge.

It was dark by now.

A.C. climbed up into his window and sat on the ledge, howling, screaming, shit like that.

“Stop,” said Rick. “I gotta piss.”

I pulled over, leaned forward for him to get out my side.

A.C. stayed in his window howling.

“Owww!

“Owwwoooo!”

Rick pissed on my back tire. I could see him in my side mirror.

“Hey!”

“What you lookin’ at, homo?”

“Owwooo!”

Rick quit pissing on my car.

I snapped off the radio.

A.C. jumped inside.

“Owwoo.”

MIKE PALECEK

The door opened and Rick pushed me up, then sat down, then he stuck his face up front.

“Owwoooo.”

We all opened our eyes wide to listen to this matter-of-fact statement. Kind of in-your-face, sort of. Like a tough guy standing outside the bowling alley on a Friday night, leaning against a dark blue Challenger, a cigarette in one hand, staring down all the jocks as they come out.

Owooo.

A big, white owl swooped right in front of us, turning its head, looking right in at us, its eyes wide and unblinking, probably seeing the same by the dashboard lights, big eyes and mouths, white knuckles on the hard, shined metal.

The owl swooped right straight up about three stories of an elevator shaft to sit on the telephone pole.

We all sat back and breathed.

“Owwooooo!”

This was a low growl, from the woods.

We sat up and jammed our fingertips into the black, shiny, Chevy, metal dashboard.

Something came out from the woods.

You look and you don't know if you are really seeing

BROKEN BRIDGE

something.

On our right, next to the river, on the other side of the cut corn.

A shadow tall and straight.

He, it seemed like a he, walked right up to the bridge.

“Put on your lights,” A.C. whispered.

I had shut them off for Rick to piss and then he pissed on my car.

Rick pulled away and disappeared into the darkness in back.

I stared straight, squeezed the big wheel with my right hand and reached for the knob with my left.

Rick slammed three shells. You could hear the springs.

I pulled.

I punched the foot button for bright.

We watched it — him — climb the bridge, by hands and by knees, just like in the old story.

Up the side, like a P.E. rope to the ceiling.

Across by two hands, scooch, then grab with the knees.

And then it was like he had just seen our lights and our car. He stood straight up, now with perfect balance.

MIKE PALECEK

He howled like Allen Ginsberg.

“Owwoooo!”

He raised his hands over his head and shook them, like a gorilla.

My nose kissed the steering wheel as Rick pushed out.

“Phasers on full-stun,” he said.

I honked and it made the guy shake and holler even more.

Rick waved his hand back at me to shut up.

“Let’s go!” said A.C., even as he climbed back to sit into his window to get a better look.

“No,” I said, low.

I pulled the shifter toward me into first.

A.C. jumped down, then right back up, and popped the top on another, holding it toward the ditch to let the foam run out.

The owl flopped and glided away.

Rick stepped up into the light.

With my toe I punched the lights to dim then back to bright.

We all stared at the guy on the bridge.

Like a skeet shooter Rick put the twelve-gauge to his

BROKEN BRIDGE

shoulder and fired.

Boom!

The flash filled the night. A light saber.

The man threw up his arms again, trying to fly on his back.

He fell into the dark.

The boom echoed across the black chill.

I punched the brights off.

We stopped breathing.

Rick's running steps crunched over the gravel.

I smelled powder.

I shot forward. My nose hit the wheel.

The horn blared.

"God!" said A.C., grabbing my shoulder to throw me back.

We sat in silence.

The gunshot echoed around the world and came back.

We breathed.

Hard.

We felt our hearts pound.

We let them pound as much as they wanted.

Well, I floored it.

We skidded out.

MIKE PALECEK

I headed straight for the bridge.
“What’re you doing!”
Rick screamed and grabbed my shoulders.

I head-butted him backward ‘cause I was past sick of that shit. He flew back and we heard pissing and moaning in the back seat.

Apparently he was bleeding.
“What’re you doing?” A.C. screamed.

I didn’t have time to explain that I couldn’t see to turn around and we didn’t want to be stuck in the ditch when the police men arrived.

And we didn’t want to be heading back toward town to welcome the arriving police men.

The boards buckled as we rolled over the bridge.
A.C. stared into the dark, down over the side of the bridge, at the moon sparkling in the river.

We rattled across, throwing up loose boards.
I punched the lights off.

We hurtled into the night like Apollo in dark space.

Rick and A.C. had a fit.

I lied and told them I could see, barely, by the light of the moon.

I told them we absolutely needed to run silent, deep as

BROKEN BRIDGE

a submarine without sound, into the darkest parts of the night we could find, down, down, down.

I had an idea and headed for Stone Road, no relation to A.C.

I turned left and right and right again, onto the lush dark dirt road, more of a path, up a hill, closer to an incline.

The path went on about a mile, maybe less, on a steady rise.

I stopped at the top, next to the little cemetery.

I did a drivers ed. three-point turn-around and we sat there.

The road, or the land, or the cemetery or something belonged to the family of a girl we knew from school — like I say, no relation to ol' A.C.

We often went drinking out here.

You could sit up here and see the lights from town and the highway. You could see the stars and the moon, and sometimes you would get to thinking about things and talking about things you didn't talk about in town.

Deep thoughts.

And you would forget about them just as soon as you turned left off Stone Road toward town and start talking about tits and wieners and football, like the hypnotist at

MIKE PALECEK

the after-prom party had just snapped his fingers.

And if a car turned onto the road, way down there, you had a long time to get your pants on and climb into the front seat, or to throw the beer into the cemetery.

But you could not escape.

A few times policemen had caught kids up there. I suppose they knew about it and checked it out once in awhile. It's a chance you took.

"It was just a shot in the dark," said A.C.

We were sitting in the pitch black, the quiet, watching a few cars on the highway, probably, oh, two miles away.

"Just a shotgun in pheasant season.

"Nobody's going to care."

"The cops aren't gonna come," said Rick.

He slapped my head pretty hard. I heard him snuffing up blood and snot, so I just rubbed it.

They were right.

"We are in trouble," said A.C.

That was also correct.

"You think?" said Rick.

Through our open windows we smelled manure. We heard a semi blow its horn a long ways away.

"Shooting star," said Rick.

"Why don't you shoot it," said A.C.

BROKEN BRIDGE

I waited for the “fuck you morphodite asshole bitch” from the back seat black hole. A moo pierced the night and we all jumped. A pasture gate creaked and we looked for the cop lights at the bottom.

“Who was it?” I said, probably not loud enough for anyone to hear.

A.C. turned around.

“Who was it?” he said. “Who did we kill?”

“We?” I asked.

In the mirror I saw Rick looking away, out his window. The moon shined right on him. His eyes were wet looking.

“Alien,” he said.

“Riiight,” I said.

“What?” A.C. said.

He jumped around to glare at Rick.

“What?”

“A Mexican?” I said.

A.C. said, “Oh, shit.”

“A space man,” said Rick. “You know.” He put his fingers behind his head like My Favorite Martian antennas, then let them droop.

“What?” I climbed around onto my knees.

MIKE PALECEK

A.C. shoved Rick's shoulder, hard.

"What!"

He shoved him again.

"What!"

Rick pushed A.C. with both hands. A.C. slammed his back on the dashboard and started squealing, trying to reach his back with his hands.

"Fuck off!" said Rick.

"A space man?" I asked. "How do you know? Are you sure? What'd it look like?"

"That's just what it looked like," Rick said. "It just seemed like that. I don't know."

"Then why'd you shoot it?" said A.C. "You idiot."

I shot a look at A.C.

Rick slumped way down in his seat. He was crying hard now.

"We need to go back there," I said as I turned around to stare down the dark road.

"You stupid shit!" said A.C.

"You fuckin' asshole!"

Rick kept crying.

"We need to lose the guns," said A.C.

We sat still for a minute, staring.

BROKEN BRIDGE

The lights of some tiny town were off to the right. I'd never noticed those before. And I think the flashing lights off to the left were from the airport, and then there was the slow moving traffic on the highway, all kind of like a moving painting of night.

And in the foreground...

If you will all just gather around over here, we have the black and white 1957 Chevrolet, with the boys inside who have just murdered an innocent alien being.

And just behind them we have the Stone Family Cemetery, dating back to 1859.

Notice the big moon, the shadows of cows let loose in the cornfield after the harvest.

There's a hint of understated looming gloom, of despair and four lives ended abruptly.

And fathers screaming, mothers crying, grandmothers punching stomachs with both hands.

"Is there a God?" said Rick in a whisper.

"Some people say aliens are God," said A.C.

"Don't say that," I said.

Another shooting star.

"That's the aliens lookin' for their friend," said A.C.

"Shut up," I said.

MIKE PALECEK

And another. Asteroids getting burned up in our atmosphere.

Or an alien posse, maybe.

It's true that this is an alien hot spot, for some reason. Lots of people have sightings, or they say they do.

It could be because there's a regional collector country school called Area 51. It's west of town, big playground, really tall flagpole.

I think kids from three counties go there.

"I think there's a God," I say.

Headlights are coming. It looks like they're right down on the road.

Oh, shit, we all think.

I start the car.

"Shhh," Rick barks.

If I have to, I'll try to get past it.

That's all I can do, is try.

We'd get caught.

But what else can we do? Sit here and let ourselves be arrested for murder?

"It's not really murder," A.C. says.

The headlights come to the mouth of our road and go past.

"It's an alien. Really."

BROKEN BRIDGE

He turns toward us, pulls his feet up to his chest, presses back against his door.

“Like killing a Mexican.”

“Ohhh,” Rick groans like he needs to vomit.

“If they don’t have papers, it’s not like they’re real,” says A.C.

“Where’d you hear something like that?” I said.

“My dad.”

“Your dad,” I said at the same time.

“Was he dead?” I turned to ask.

“Blood flew,” Rick said. “Every-fucking-where.”

“He fell backwards — that’s all’s I know.”

“He might be alive,” said A.C.

“We need to go back there,” I said.

“It was an alien?” said A.C.

“It had arms,” I said.

“And legs,” said A.C.

“Aliens have those,” said Rick.

“How would you know?” said A.C.

“Cuz I saw them on the guy before I shot him.”

“Ohhh,” groaned A.C. “That don’t make sense.”

“Yeah-it-does,” said Rick.

I turned around.

MIKE PALECEK

“Why did you shoot?”

I turned around more.

“You were going to shoot no matter who it was.

Why?”

“No I wasn’t.”

“You were too,” said A.C.

We both stared back into the dark. We couldn’t see Rick. Too fucking dark.

“I don’t know. I’m sorry. I’m fucking sorry!”

He pounded a fist into the seat and slammed an elbow into the back.

“Shit! God-dammit!”

A.C. and I turned around.

We sat.

We might sit there forever, for a long time.

“What’s it feel like?” said A.C., so quiet.

Rick groaned.

“Let me out,” he said.

“Let me out!

“Hurry up!”

He fell on his knees, into the ditch.

You could hear him puking.

“If it’s an alien, nobody’ll ever know,” said A.C. while

BROKEN BRIDGE

Rick rustled in the weeds like a wounded pheasant.

That's true, I thought.

"How can it be an alien?" I said.

"Maybe it's The Escaped Guy," he said.

"From NFSH," I said.

"I don' know," said A.C.

Rick got in and he smelled like puke.

"Time is it? I got to get home."

"Home?" shouted A.C.

A.C. was right.

We didn't have a home anymore.

No more wars promoted in textbooks.

No more meeting the guys at Arctic Ice every Friday and Saturday night. Maybe sitting in the parking lot all night, or driving around.

You ever wonder why we've got all these military bases overseas?

Nobody wonders. I wonder. The empire.

Ay Yi Yi Yi. I am the Frito Bandito.

Aliens. They would never make a commercial making fun of blacks or Jews or Catholics or Italians. Or Germans for that matter.

I was talking about Area 51 school ya know?

MIKE PALECEK

The Walters have this mega Christmas display on their lawn every year, up in the development by the lake. Only rich people celebrate Christmas like that.

Last year somebody put a stuffed alien doll in the sleigh and took Santa out.

No more construction work.

That's a good thing.

We all worked construction in the summer. I tended for some brick layers last year. Rick worked on a bridge crew, dawn to dusk, for \$2.20 an hour. That's what they paid back then. Some guys got \$1.60. The bricklayers I worked for got four-something, and I wondered what they did with all that.

My mom works at HomView Nursing Home. It's famous, or infamous. We all know we're headed there.

It smells like urine the minute you step in the door. Whenever I have to go pick her up I wait in the parking lot.

She knows I'm out there. She should.

My dad works for Husker Ford.

He's a pretty decent salesman, for all I know, but he wants to be a writer.

He's got an idea for a whole line of books, how-to books, explaining to the common guy how to do things.

BROKEN BRIDGE

How to wire your home, how to learn Spanish, how to understand economics.

They would all have the same name, the “For Retards Series.”

Spanish For Retards. Electronics For Retards, like that.

Bob Seger’s on the radio, KSTP, clear as a bell.

He wants to dream like a young man, with the wisdom of an old man.

We live in a newer part of town, on the west side, called Sunset Addition.

Lots of Catholics out there. They’re even building a new Catholic Church out there, in addition to the old one downtown.

He wants his home and security. He wants to live like a sailor at sea.

Rick lives way the fuck over on the east side. That’s also an addition with a name, Prairie Park.

Lots of young families out there, same as Sunset. The dads in Sunset sell cars and insurance and are in the Knights of Columbus. The dads in Prairie Park work at the steel mill a couple miles away.

A.C. lives in town, in one of the neighborhoods. You

MIKE PALECEK

think of cities having neighborhoods, turf, well, a town our size does too.

You wouldn't have a clue where they are if you weren't from here, but we know. They aren't drawn out. You don't get beat up for stepping over the line, but you can just kind of feel it.

I don't know. I can't explain it.

The neighborhoods are two, three, four blocks. Sometimes they have their own neighborhood grocery store, neighborhood elementary school, their own legends. Maybe there's a famous difficult intersection, or even their own football and baseball team. That's if two neighborhoods each have some organizational genius who has the energy to call everybody.

In A.C.'s neighborhood they have Hartwig's Store. In the next neighborhood there's Braasch's. Hardwood floor, place smells like cherry popsicles, the people always smile when you come in like you are some big addition to their life just by coming in to buy more baseball cards.

There's also A.C.'s neighborhood, childhood home of Joe B. Larson, on the west side of the railroad tracks that eventually run past the downtown Catholic Church and through the downtown.

Joe B. Larson is on TV, late night talk show.

BROKEN BRIDGE

Ten-thirty, that's late for some people.

I'm not sure if it's Joe B. Larson or if it's just me, but I have this feeling somewhere inside that the whole world is waiting for special me. I also have the suspicion that this feeling is some kind of special psychosis somewhere in me, waiting, growing, fermenting, flowering, waiting to bloom just as I step up to accept my award for Best Man.

Did I mention our family is very Catholic? There are several breeds of Catholics, like sheep. Ours is Midwestern Very.

Dad has personal license plates on his new Ford-something: GOBGRED.

We create enemies because of fear due to propaganda on purpose.

We had this one nun who taught Religion II in the high school. She came from China or Zimbabwe or something. She wasn't white.

Sister Weem-Oh-Way the guys called her.

She said things like that.

That tour of the state hospital we had?

That was in grade school.

Sister Weem-Oh-Way took us out there once too.

MIKE PALECEK

She pointed to each one of those big brick buildings as our class walked by in front.

World War I, she said, World War II, Korea, Vietnam.

She said she didn't understand why all those military bases overseas. And that was thirty-something years ago or some shit.

An owl hooted.

Maybe it's the same one from the bridge.

We aren't the only murderers in town.

Back in the 1950s or '60s some Negroes from Omaha came through in an Olds — robbed a bank, shot some old people, raped some young women. They were killed in "a hail of bullets" on a side road in Iowa by some of our guys and Iowa farmers in pickups.

Out at Prairie Park some Mexicans just came up to a house on a bright summer Tuesday morning and started screaming.

You know how you can talk loud to make people understand another language? Maybe it was like that.

There were a bunch of women at the house, having their regular young women's Tuesday coffee meeting I think.

And they all got up from their table and started

BROKEN BRIDGE

screaming back at these little Mexican men out by the front door.

“Speak English!”

“Speak English!”

“Speak English!”

They screamed and stomped their feet and pulled at their own hair. They might have thrown things.

Maybe the Mexicans wanted directions or someone was hurt or they needed food or they had to pee, but they got angry, too. They rushed the front door and raped all the women on the kitchen floor.

Then they left, even though they had to pee, were hungry, and didn’t know where they were going.

The women went back to their coffee and cookies and cards, and when their husbands all came home from the steel mill and asked how their day was, they told them they were all raped by Mexicans, and they found hamburger at Safeway for \$1.19 for Friday night, and tonight was going to be TV dinners, chicken, apple crisp, and mixed vegetables.

And all the men met over at The Lonely Bull, got to drinkin’ and decided to find those Mexicans. They went drivin’ all over three counties on dirt and gravel roads, shootin’ shotguns out the windows at shadows. And they

MIKE PALECEK

never did find them because there never were Mexicans around here back then.

‘Course all these are legends.

It’s not possible anymore to tell if they really happened. But in a way they did happen, even if they’re not real, because people believe in them, put their trust in them, just like they believe in Big Red.

You know, you think you know what the world is, that the edge of the world is what you can see in your peripheral vision. That’s it.

You think that what you’ve heard or read or experienced is what there is.

And then when someone shows you a book or information or something that you just had no idea about, you fight it, say that can’t be true.

But then you are forced to expand your peripheral vision.

That has happened to me. I think what is wrong with our town is that most people don’t get confronted like that, don’t come up against this other shit.

“What’re we gonna do?” says A.C.

He’s slumped down and tired and might be gonna fall asleep.

“The cops are comin’ and the aliens are lookin’ for us.”

BROKEN BRIDGE

Rick still cannot talk without it sounding all whiney and shit. He is turning out to be by far the whiniest murderer that I know.

“We go back, like I said,” I said.

A.C. has his head all way back and his mouth open and somethin’s gonna land in there. I could give a shit.

His hat fell outside awhile ago. I’m not gettin’ it.

He’s about half bald already. He’d be an old man by the time he’s out of college, but he’s probably not going anyway.

Rick is snoring, stretched out on the back seat. His legs are curled to his chest ‘cause it’s gettin’ cold out.

So now I’m all alone and I wonder what we should do. I watch the bottom road for lights. I watch so hard I can’t see a thing.

You know, they say you shouldn’t drink, but we’ve actually had some good times out drinking.

There’s lots of stories about us.

Legends in our own minds.

I might write a book some day.

One time A.C. and Roy were out riding around with an ear of corn dragging behind their car saying they were

MIKE PALECEK

out trolling for hogs. That's funny to us.

And Mr. Twede pulled up next to some girls and asked them if they liked eggs then threw an egg that broke on the driver's forehead.

And then everybody was in Mark's dad's pickup, coming back into town from fishing at the sand pit, sitting on folding chairs, drinking quarts of Schlitz, driving down Main. Crosby had a fishing net. A car pulled up alongside and he starts beating on the car with the net. They found out the next day that was Mark's dad's boss.

There's lots more.

None are funny to anyone else.

But to us, we talk about them every time we get together.

Just the mention of Jim holding onto an ice cream cone and that big U-boat steering wheel on the '50 Ford one night, and jamming the ice cream cone into his face as he turned right, sends us flopping on our stomachs.

Or disconnecting Mr. Twede's coil wires, or him driving around Main the whole night with his dome light on.

But everyone got back safe, driving home blind drunk hundreds of times probably, sometimes not remembering

BROKEN BRIDGE

the night before.

Well, there were a couple of guys got killed, but only guys we didn't know that good. So they didn't matter. It doesn't take that much to not matter — a couple of blocks, a social class, couple of years.

You only go to the weddings or funerals you can't skip.

There weren't any wars for us. Vietnam ended like the day before we graduated. Some hippie put his head into English class and said, "The war is over!"

We're like, what war?

We would have gone, fought, died, killed, but we never talked about it. That's crazy behavior. I wonder if our whole class was crazy. We talked about sports and girls and drinking.

Nothing about Vietnam. Not Bobby Kennedy. Not Leonard Peltier, nor Fred Hampton or Dan Berrigan. Nobody talked about that stuff — not parents, teachers, priests, ministers, editors, or retard. Nobody.

And if anybody saw any aliens, they sure weren't saying.

And this one girl's dad, out in Sunset, when the Catholic Church started communion in the hand, committed suicide by jumping off the roof of their ranch

MIKE PALECEK

style home twenty-seven times.

We laughed about that. I wonder if she did. We didn't care. I care now, a little.

Oh, God, they just keep comin'.

One more.

You know how you get those sheets of hundreds of pictures of yourself every year that you are supposed to give out to everyone? One year, somehow, somebody got ahold of Isaac Doherty's pictures. And you would start to see them everywhere. We called them Izzy Doherty handouts.

You'd see a couple in the trophy case, squeezed in between the glass and somehow landing right side up.

And they would be on the bulletin board in the office with the photos of the principal's family, or on Mrs. Gleesen's front desk in English.

I saw one on the bulletin board at Safeway downtown, by the coupons for ice milk — and in the holy water font at church. A.C. said he saw one attached to the ear tag of one of the cows at the auction barn, another inside a plastic menu at Pizza Hut.

Doherty never got mad as far as I know.

BROKEN BRIDGE

That time Weem-Oh-Way took us out to the state hospital and pointed at the buildings — remember she said World War I, World War II?

We knew there weren't any soldiers in there, but nobody wanted to hurt her feelings since she was from Africa or something. The men walking around and standing in the windows were in nightgowns and grotie pajamas, crazy people.

A.C.'s mom used to work out there. I think she's a nurse or some shit.

That's how he got his nickname. His mom works a lot, weekends and stuff. Every year when it was time for his dad to put in the window air conditioners in the house, A.C. got roped into helping.

We'd see him up there on a ladder, or leaning out a window helping his dad. We'd go by and honk, and you could just see the look on his face like he had to shit.

One year he came home and he saw the window units lined up in the driveway. We were going to play football at Central Park that afternoon and he decided he wasn't going to miss it.

So he didn't even go inside. He just piled the air conditioners into his car — front seat, back seat, trunk — and drove over to the park.

MIKE PALECEK

In his mind he said he would just tell his dad that he was going to do it after the game. He was just getting all the units together to get ready to do the job.

We started the game.

We were all sittin' around on the grass, resting, talking about shit, and we see a figure coming across the middle school lawn.

It's wearing a white T-shirt and it's walking tall and straight and fast — straight toward ol' Benedict. When he saw it was his dad he took off running.

His dad ran after him. Benedict ran all the way downtown, through Woolworth's, came out the back and took off for the church.

He hid in one of the confessionals. His dad came into the church and went right for where Benedict was. Drug him out of church and kicked his ass all the way back to the park.

We drove by his house later and there was ol' A.C. up on a ladder, not looking down.

The bridge writer was from there, the state hospital, like I said.

That arm he had?

Nah. I wish I did know where he got it. Nobody

BROKEN BRIDGE

knows. Everybody thinks they know, though. If we knew how he got it, whose it was, that would answer a lot of questions.

Actually one question.

There's more.

There's still the overseas bases question, and Big Red. And I wonder why you can't say certain things. And why does KSTP come in only at late night. It does make it cooler, more mysterious that way.

And aliens. There's a question.

And who is the dead guy back in the river?

And what is prison like? What is your whole life in prison like? What is forever and ever in heaven or hell? How can something never stop?

If he even is dead.

I know there was somebody that Rick shot. I saw that part. And I saw him shoot and the guy fall backwards like he was shot.

But I don't know who or what he was.

An alien. Right. That would be better though. We wouldn't get the electric chair for that. Because aliens don't exist.

You can't even talk about them. Not at Thanksgiving

MIKE PALECEK

Dinner or on the TV news or in the paper or at coffee break. Try doing it once. You can't.

You can't talk about overseas bases at any of those things either, not that anyone does.

And you can't stand up when some important person is talking in an auditorium and ask him what's on your mind.

If you do, somebody will come and smile and show their teeth and take you by the arm. They would end up doing that too, probably, at Thanksgiving Dinner, if you kept it up.

I wonder what "he" was doing howling out there in the night.

And why did he crawl up there, like we were seeing the re-creation of the stump scribbler without the bloody arm?

I think Rick was just scared.

Or maybe he thought for a flash that he would be famous for nailing the Broken Bridge Writer, or maybe he did it because he was sad for his brother, or he might not have thought anything at all. Maybe those kinds just see and shoot.

There weren't any more shooting stars.

No moos.

BROKEN BRIDGE

Or semi's.

No hoo-hoos.

The cemetery was right behind my left shoulder. And there was like some kind of newspaper stuck in one of the evergreen trees and it kept flapping.

I could sort of see the headstones in my rearview mirror, which was pitch black.

I couldn't stop looking.

Rick had stopped snoring.

"Rick."

A.C. was trying to curl up in the front seat.

I put my nose almost to the windshield to see down the road. I saw nothing and every-fucking-thing.

I started the engine and pulled on the lights, carefully.

"I'm going," I said.

I pulled away, slowly, and heard A.C. and Rick moaning and rolling around and hitting their heads, and shit.

I looked straight ahead and behind me and on both sides.

It's like the weeds and trees and barbed wire fence were alive, watching, commenting.

The moon was bright. Not like when there's hard-packed snow everywhere, but pretty light out.

MIKE PALECEK

“Roundabout” was on the radio. I forgot the band.
I put the clutch in and coasted down.
Twenty-four-before-my love, You’ll-see, I’ll-be, There
with you.

When you have participated in the killing of an alien
it sort of shrinks your world, kind of compresses things,
brings everything closer together.

You kind of look up at the sky like it’s real, there, like
the stars and planets are real.

It used to be like looking up at Christmas lights all over
the sky. Nice, but fakey, not really real. Not something
that affected my life, more for little kids and shit.

I got down to the bottom and punched on my brights
and then slammed on the brakes.

Shit!

And then I started punching the steering wheel and
silently cursing, whisper-swearng.

Some dumb farmer had put one of those stupid
scarecrows from their front yard right across from the
entrance to Stone Road. Not a scarecrow, one of those
things they make, that you put different clothes, costumes
on, for different seasons and holidays.

Fucking idiots.

“God-dammit!”

BROKEN BRIDGE

I toed the brights off.
God-damned shit!
Jesus, that scared the shit out of me.
The gravel mumbled under my tires.
I just kept going. Didn't see anybody.
I took a deep breath and turned left onto the dirt road
for the bridge.

I could see it up there, all big and wooden and foreboding, like the bridge and moat to a medieval castle. Or, maybe just a really old bridge.

My heart started to pump and pound and I kept going.

I stopped when I got to the bridge because I didn't know what else to do. The moon still shone in the water. Everything was quiet like nothing ever happens around here.

I pulled up slowly onto the wood, over the first board. Everything bounced and creaked and squeaked and moaned even though I was barely moving.

I kept going.

The slower I went the more noise I made, all creaking and moaning, groaning. Jesus.

The sleeping beauties never woke up.

MIKE PALECEK

We passed over the water and I stared down, toward the water, by the water.

I stopped right under where the guy had been standing.

It could have been a girl.

I almost had to puke because of that flash thought of us killing a girl alien. I stuck my head out the window and the cold air helped.

I looked down to where he would have landed on his back. It couldn't have been far from the bridge, maybe in the sand, maybe the water.

I looked for blood, red, green, on the boards or the metal.

I turned off the key. The car relaxed, at-ease.

I thought about it for a second and then I got out.

I stood by the bridge edge and I gulped and looked down, straight into the doe-like dead eyes of Alfred the Alien.

He wasn't there.

I leaned way over.

"Hey."

"Hey!"

"Owwooo."

"Owwwoooo!"

BROKEN BRIDGE

I stood to listen.

Nothing.

“Owwooo, motherfucker.”

I shot around and saw A.C. sitting in his window, looking at me over the top of the car.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“Shut the fuck up.”

“I need to get home,” said A.C. “Time is it?”

“Don’t know,” I lied.

“Where’s Rick-dog?”

I pointed to the back seat.

“Sleepin’.”

“What’re you doing?”

“Whatta you think?”

“Lookin’ for the space man?”

“Uh, huh.”

I looked back, down into the water, into the woods, to the sky.

“Hey.”

I dived inside to the glove compartment at A.C.’s knees and pulled out the flashlight Mom had stashed there for just such situations.

I aimed it into my eyes to test it and blinded myself.

MIKE PALECEK

“Niiice.” I heard A.C. from the cheap seats.

I moved again to the railing and shined the light at the sand, the water, the trees, gaining confidence, into the sky, way down the river, up at the bridge metal.

I moved around and shined it on the most famous “Fuck You.”

“Maybe he flew,” said A.C. “No, really.

“He got hit and flew away, like a wounded pheasant. And he got into the trees down the river, buried himself in the dirt to hide, and died, with just his legs sticking out. They can do that.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I said, still walking my light around.

“What’s goin’ on?”

Rick’s head showed in the back, like a portrait of some kid half drunk waking up in the back seat of a black and white ‘57 Chevy.

“Hungry,” said Rick.

“Paul’s,” said A.C.

Sometimes after a night of riding around drinking Boone’s Farm or Schlitz or Schmidt Big Mouths or Bud Tall Boys we’d go out to Paul’s Truck Stop.

It was open all night.

They had Indian waitresses from the south side, and old people who had been out doing old people stuff,

BROKEN BRIDGE

and Vietnam Vets who were always there smoking and drinking coffee.

We'd order big meals: biscuits and gravy, hamburgers, fries, pancakes, donuts.

Each guy would eat as fast as he could.

Whoever got done would act like he had to go to the bathroom, maybe say, "I got to go to the bathroom," and then go out the side door and sit in the car.

The last guy at the table was on his own.

Then he comes running and we take off.

"Somebody's coming," A.C. stated.

We looked down the road at the headlights coming our way.

"Get in," Rick told me.

I hurried in as A.C. hopped down from his window seat.

"Go," said Rick. "Ahead."

We moved off slowly toward the lights.

I heard Rick pushing shells into one of the shotguns. Then six more into another one.

"Gimme one," said A.C.

"What're you doing?" I hollered. I looked at them in the rearview and out the sides of my eyes, keeping my eyes on the lights coming.

MIKE PALECEK

Rick passed one of the guns up between the seat and the door.

“Ram ‘em,” he said.

“What?” I said, keeping my eyes on the bright lights in my face.

“Ram him. We’ll kill him and move to Canada.”

“Do it,” said A.C.

The thing kept coming.

I shifted into second.

Rick and A.C. pumped their guns.

A.C. put a hand on his door handle.

I threw my visor down.

“Jesus!” I said.

I punched my brights.

“Sonsabitch!” said A.C.

“Fucking cops,” said Rick.

“Blow him the fuck away,” said A.C.

I toed my brights again.

Again.

Again.

I took a deep breath and picked up speed.

Fifteen, twenty.

The whatever dimmed its lights.

I flicked mine down at almost the same time.

BROKEN BRIDGE

We passed.

“No cop,” said A.C.

“No shit,” I said.

“What was that?” said A.C.

“Mmm,mm,” I shrugged.

I drove across town, out on the state hospital road, past the junior college and the state hospital to Prairie Park.

I stopped and Rick shoved me up against the steering wheel.

He loaded his arms with two of the shotguns and the rest of the twelve pack.

He ran around behind and stuck his head in A.C.’s window.

“Don’t be saying nothing,” he said.

He looked A.C. square in the eyes and then me.

He walked across the grass then turned around.

“It never happened.”

THE END

WRITING WORTH READING



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