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on Ralph Beer

Craig A. Holden

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Ralph Beer, *The Blind Corral*; Vintage; New York, 1986; 12.95

In the face of a society which seems to constantly and randomly change for the worse, in the face of money-hungry corporations and broken bones and love that evaporates, and in the face of death itself, something has to matter, to endure, to anchor us. *The Blind Corral*, Ralph Beer's first novel, tells a story about what matters, what endures, what anchors. It tells a story about a family, a story about the land, a story about coming home.

Jackson Heckethorne comes back to his father's western Montana ranch from a distant army hospital where he has been recovering from a military accident that shattered his jaw and left him weak and prone to nightmarish flashbacks. His girlfriend is in Canada recovering from a hip replacement. Jackson wants only to spend a few weeks at home and then to join her so that they can eventually hit the rodeo circuit again together. But his father, Smoke, wants Jackson to spend a little time on his grandfather's ranch helping the old man, Harley, with the fall roundup. Smoke has bought Jackson a roan gelding to break and use as a cow horse. "...give you something to do while you get back on your feed," Smoke tells Jackson. And so even though he claims he won't be around long enough to do anything, Jackson is gradually drawn back into the life that he ran away from after his older brother was killed in Viet Nam.

Some horses his size tend to be slow, even awkward. And some aren't. As I put my hip against his left shoulder and twisted the stirrup around, my stomach turned. What came up was bitter, and I tried to spit it clear. The big horse took a step. I held the stirrup and reached for the horn. He farted and backed up. I pulled myself on, hit my right foot against the corral rail and tried to push him away from the fence. He settled his weight on his hindquarters and backed another step...

I wanted that right stirrup, but not bad enough to put my leg between him and the fence. The sky was very blue and there were geese headed north toward lake Helena. I reached down and pulled the bandanna away.

The sky was very blue, and when I landed it fell on my chest. I tried to roll to the right toward the fence, but a hind foot landed there beside my ear. I watched the roan twist away, reins going straight in the air each time he came down. I got to my knees and threw up, hard this time. The roan stopped bucking almost as sudden as he'd fired up. He looked back at me and shook his head.

But things are not as they were. A corporation is trying to buy out all the old local ranches. Smoke is seeing a woman who obviously knows little about ranching but a lot about a lot of men. Harley sits transfixed in front of his television set. And the city, Helena, has changed. Old buildings have been replaced, old haunts have come under new management and had their leather and dirt personalities changed to plastic.

Beyond a stone office building called the Power Block, the gulch looked like an artillery impact area. Holes with foundation footings and open stone basements showed where buildings had stood. Some of the holes had been filled in and were parking lots. Most of the cheap hotels and derelict bars were gone too, and though Dorothy's cathouse was still there, it now stood like an aging outcast, exposed and alone.

The barbershops and bar fronts where I had seen the sheepherders and hard-luckers, the bums and healing rodeo riders when I was a kid, had been leveled, leaving once again the gravel that had held the gold that had made the town. I stopped beside a man sitting on a bedroll. He was about Smoke's age, maybe younger; he looked stiff and cold and dry.

"What's going on here?" I asked.

Beer's prose, like the land and the people it describes, is rich and multi-faced. It describes many fine details and a host of colorful minor characters from Amy and Annie, who are oldtime neighbors of Harley, to a strange transplanted Texan named Carlisle and his dog-faced sidekick dwarf named Bean. There is pain and despair and hurt and outrage and frustration, but there is also the land and the stock. In his descriptions of the latter, Beer's prose is at its finest.

Autumn had been on a long, sweet roll. In the meadows along Jackson Creek the aspen had completely turned; their dry leaves quivered in the light morning breeze like spotted tinsel. Withered alsiki clover sparkled each morning under melting frost, and when the frost burned away, it turned the bright green of Annie's eyes. Stripped by the first storm, the alders rattled, stark and silver among the reds of wild rose and willow which had overgrown neglected portions of the meadows. And in the timber, pine tags turned an inviting warm tan.

The novel spans a year or so and with the change of seasons we see a change in Jackson. As he works his body and his grandfather's land back into shape, he