"Woodburn, Texas: A Study in Southern Gothic"

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Woodburn, Texas
Texas is a land of deep history and friendly people.

The Belt Buckle of the Bible Belt. Almost 700 miles wide, we’ve got deserts, forests, mountains, cities, villages, plains, and coast—anything we could want.

It is a land of extremes.

A land of blistering heat and bitter cold. Of old money and consistent poverty. Of droughts that last years and floods that destroy towns. Of men in three-piece suits with gold pocket watches and kids with dirty faces and empty stomachs.

A land of contradictions.
It is summer. Beads of perspiration are fingers following the curve of our spinal cords. The few people we see outside look so tired. Sanity sweats from our pores. Over the AC units’ hum, we barely hear the cicadas screaming. They scream incessantly. It’s a sound we’re so used to hearing, we no longer hear it at all.

With summer comes drought. Ironic that the air should be so humid when the dirt is so dry it cracks. Lakes retreat into themselves or disappear altogether. Grass crunches beneath our boots. Bugs invade our homes in a vain search for water. We scour the skies, looking for smoke, hoping if there is any, it’s heading the other way.

With summer comes thunderstorms. We’re one of few states that gets yearly tornadoes as well as hurricanes—lucky as all get out, we are. Clouds gather above our town. We wait for the sky to split open. Lightning is a creature, desperate to escape the roiling heavens. It snakes silently to the unsuspecting ground, the thunderous boom always calling its warning too late. Rain pours down until we forget what the world looked like when the branches didn’t bow beneath the weight of the downpour. We call relatives and friends to make sure they’re okay. It’s hard to forget it was only five years ago the flood killed three people. When the rain eventually stops, the air is even hotter than before the deluge. The cruelty of nature.

Churches here are common as click beetles. Billboards advertise salvation around every corner: “Come to Church or the Devil Will Take You Elsewhere!” “Hell is Real.” “He is Coming...Are You Ready?” and “Has Anyone Else Died For You?”

Our town lies at the intersection of three highways. How many people pass through without knowing our town’s name? How little our existence must mean to them. And we are desperate to mean something to someone, anyone.
We were a small town. Nothing happened here. A people few in number but rich in pride. Generations repeated history, like father, like son, like mother, like daughter. Land got handed down, and change was slow. Strangers were scarce; outsiders side-eyed and whispered about. Woodburn, Texas, was an idea to us as much as it was a place, nestled neatly in the heart of the Piney Woods. We were a people of black coffee mornings, sweet tea afternoons, and bourbon whiskey nights.

We knew who we were and where we belonged. We were farmers, ranchers, craftsmen. We were Baptists, Presbyterians, Catholics. We were acquaintances, friends, family.

Here, we threw nothing away; we simply repurposed it. Old and broken machines were taken apart, smelted down to become something new. Old pipes or buckles from busted belts became bullet casings. Cast iron harvested from disc brake rotors got made into skillets, dutch ovens, or griddles. Beer cans melted down into jewelry for wives and mistresses. Leftovers were composted and mixed with outhouse contents to fertilize our crops. Hand-me-down clothes—handed down until seams were barely holding on—became quilt patches. Nothing was wasted, and that wasn’t fixing to change.

Woodburn was split in two by the old train station: the older downtown which was mostly left to itself and the newer sector with shops and restaurants and doctor’s offices. We pitched a hissy fit when the mayor decided to expand, but then begrudgingly conceded to the luxury of not having to drive an extra forty minutes to
see a physician. Encircling the town like a snake, a loop of road at the intersection of three highways brought the occasional tourist to see what we had to offer.

Downtown was the most interesting to look at: Main Street lined with old buildings, each with its own story. Plenty of shops and restaurants had tried to make it in the downtown, but none could. Even The Cotton Gin—the only restaurant with a bar—had to move to the newer side of town. We came to hold superstitions that no business could thrive there. Downtown storefronts sat empty or abandoned, façades of prosperity.

Coming into town from the south side, we’d pass Blair Meadows, a park usually filled with kids when school was out or even when it wasn’t. Steven Blair founded Woodburn in 1834. His house, at the center of downtown, became Town Hall after his death, but no one really went there unless they had business with the mayor.

Everything changed when we found the body. Outside Town Hall, a crowd had gathered. The mayor, two years into his second term, shook with silent sobs as they unnailed his daughter’s body from the wooden doors. Her body was scratched up, dirty, and naked. The bruises on her neck told us enough of how she’d died.

Standing beside the weeping man was Seth Davison—such a sweet boy if a little slow, bless his heart. One hand clapped on the mayor’s shoulder while the other gripped a polished belt buckle won at the county rodeo a week before.
Her name was Harper Riley. We knew her as David Riley’s daughter—a spirited and smart girl, a little dramatic at times, but with parents like that who could blame her? She’d been missing for three days. Runaway, we’d assumed, maybe something to do with the boy—she had been going steady with the Davison kid for a while.

Our town never really worried about murder before. By noon that day everyone had heard. Theories ran through town like a scalded dog.

To anyone along his route who would listen, the mailman—none of us knew him that well—said, “It’s for the insurance money, I’m sure of it. Money is the root of all evil.”

“I heard it was to stop David from running for office again.” We listened to whispers from store clerks to customers.

“Someone told me it was David who did it,” the bartender and owner of The Cotton Gin told us as he passed out beers and whiskeys. “Gone mad, they say.” But Michael Barnes had long been a bitter man since his wife left.

Sympathy attached itself like a tick to every rumor. Poor sweetpea ain’t never done nothing wrong. I need to get to talking some with that family, we sniffled to each other.

But none of us dared say anything to David except how sorry we were for his loss. David himself barely spoke to anyone save for that holier-than-thou wife of his and the sheriff. An investigation was launched, but no real leads presented
themselves. We kept our daughters where we could see them, our doors locked, and our guns loaded.

Harper Riley’s funeral was meant to be small and private, but we all came – invited or not. David and Beth seemed unfazed by our mass attendance. Harper’s friends spoke of her beauty and kindness. Her teachers spoke of her intelligence and potential. Her pastor spoke of her faith and love for God. We all left a little sobered.

Town life went on, and while we didn’t forget about Harper Riley, we tried to keep her name out of mouth. We didn’t want this stain on our town. Moving on was for the best. We passed from Independence to Labor Day and almost let ourselves forget the sight of Harper Riley nailed to the wooden front doors of Town Hall. But when it was dark and we heard the horses spooked, we remembered. And we were afraid.
Fall is a time to celebrate the living. Harvest season. Amber waves of wheat, expanses of white puffy cotton, fields of tall corn ready to be mowed into mazes. Every garden overflows with tomatoes, squash, zucchini, and sunflowers. Heifers are growing round with calves but won’t give birth until spring.

The traffic lights change for empty roads, ghosts of traffic. People might stop, but they don’t stay. They never do.

Fall is a time to celebrate the dying. We gather with the rest of the town to look upon the leaves, colorful while they still hang. Gazing out on a sea of orange pumpkins, inspecting each one, we imagine which would look best gutted, carved, and displayed on the porch. The air is humid, but it begins to get colder, the sunlit hours shorter each day, a steely reminder of the approaching tribulation.

Fall brings deer season, the only season that matters in some households—most of us shot our first buck by age ten. Antlers line the walls of our homes. Kids skip school to hunt. Adults take off work. We wake in the dinge of early morning and dress in dark colors. Some drive to land leased specifically for hunting; others keep to the grounds their fathers and their fathers’ fathers hunted before them. Up in our tree stands, the world impossibly silent, a bird chirps just as the sun inches above the horizon—a hundred birds answer. The morning comes alive.

A branch snaps. A doe steps from the tree line, but we’re looking for bucks—only a bastard goes after doe. We’ve brought along antlers from old scores, and we clatter them together hoping to attract a male. A ten-point buck ventures from cover, perhaps interested in a doe that was worth fighting over. The muzzle of the rifle rises slowly. Center the buck in the crosshairs, finger on the trigger. Breathe in. The buck swivels his head, searching for the doe. Breathe out. A cool morning wind blows, but we’re downwind of the target. Breathe in. No one forgets this moment, right before the kill.
Elise Farris didn’t show up to first period on a Friday morning. She was such a sweet girl, only fifteen. Our held breath was painful in our chests as we searched surrounding forests and abandoned buildings. She had last been seen on Thursday at The Cotton Gin with the other cheerleaders, celebrating. Elise had been named JV Captain that afternoon.

A day passed. Our local police force teamed with those of surrounding towns. Cops stopped everyone coming in or leaving Woodburn, searching cars. Two days passed. We didn’t go out after dark, and we never went anywhere alone. Jordan and Laura Farris offered thousands of dollars for their daughter’s return, a loan from Lone Star Bank. Three days passed. We kept a watch on Town Hall, afraid to look, but unable to look away.

We found her body on the fourth day, displayed similarly to Harper’s: arms wide, head bowed, naked. We watched the police take her body down from Northside Baptist’s front doors. Her neck, too, bore bruises.

Woodburn was a good Christian town—churches on practically every block. We didn’t want to imagine that one of us could do something like this. But everyone was suspect. Friends, family, teachers, the waitresses at the restaurants where we ate our after-Sunday-Service meals. No one was above suspicion.

When the police brought in the high school biology teacher, Trevor Vance, for questioning, we watched through narrowed eyes. We saw the clean-up crews move
in on the church’s door. When Mr. Vance didn’t leave the jail that night, rumors spread like butter on toast.

“I reckon they must’ve found his DNA on Elise,” Michael, the bartender, said to his drunken audience.

“Sheriff Anderson said someone heard Vance bragging in the teachers’ lounge about not getting caught,” Deputy Bernhard’s wife told folks wherever she went.

A Woodburn High alumna, Marquee Webber, swore she was almost positive she’d seem him creeping on the dance team at some home game.

When another day went by and Mr. Vance didn’t leave the county jail, we were sure he was the one—no doubts. At least, not until another girl went missing.

“Our LeAnn never came home from school,” John and Gwen West announced desperately. LeAnn was Elise’s closest friend. We hoped she’d run away, just like we’d hoped of Harper, maybe distraught over Elise.

But we found her body the next day, hung like a scarecrow on the door of Lone Star Bank. Her arms stretched out like Jesus on the cross.

Mr. Vance was released, but he quickly and quietly packed his bags and fled town, escaping the people he’d known his entire life, we who’d been so willing to put him away. His wife followed shortly after. Our watchful eyes turned elsewhere for the killer. Our children—especially high school girls—were monitored to and from
school each day. Only a few children minded; we all knew the consequences of not being careful enough.

The Wests and the Farrises held a joint funeral. We watched as their mothers wailed, holding each other, next to their stoic husbands. Some of us thought it strange that the fathers didn’t seem to express their grief, but others of us saw the way their jaws clenched, teeth grinding. They were trees struck by lightning, burning from the inside out.

Several days went by. Nothing remarkable happened. We wanted to forget, to put it behind us, but we didn’t know how. Woodburn’s air had changed. We had changed. Every day we didn’t find a body was a blessing. Mornings were tense until we knew another girl hadn’t been crucified in our town.

Lone Star Bank’s business had so faltered after LeAnn was found on their front door that they weren’t able to host their usual fall festival. No one celebrated anyway; only a few ventured out to enjoy the leaves and the pumpkins. Dread lingered in the air, everyone on edge. Halloween is a bleak affair when everyone knows that monsters are real.
When winter trudges in, with its early nights and bitter winds, life slows to a crawl. Yanks think our winters are mild, but we know severity of a different kind. Color leaches out of the landscape leaving us with nothing but gray, the color of bones that litter our pastures. The trees are skeletons of their former selves, branches scraping against each other in the biting winds. Only the pines and the cedars remain deeply green, as though they're better than the other trees.

With no crops and dead yards, the game population—squirrels, hares, doves, and the like—dwindles, too. Some hunters still venture out, but there are so few bucks left this late in the season, and they are all so afraid. The coyotes are hungry; we hear their cries in the dark. The stars at night are big and bright, and so are the eyes glowing out from the dead brush of our backyards. We hope the coyotes won't be bold enough to snatch a chicken.

When deer season ends, there's unofficial hog season. We can shoot them all year round, but wild hogs, like everything else, are hungriest in winter—and as anyone will tell you, pigs'll eat just about anything. They overpopulate our lands—damn pests—so it's a downright service to society to shoot as many as we can aim our guns at. Make for good eating too.

Our grandparents tell us stories of winters with barren pantries. Of winters so long and cruel people resorted to horrors they wouldn't wish on any family. Farmers tend to have large broods of children—cheap labor and the like—not all of whom live to adulthood. Best to assume it's a joke only meant to scare us as kids. We don't want to think about what we would do, given the same choice.

Texas winters are dry like bad cornbread. Our hands and lips crack, leached of moisture. Fields are empty, pastures vacant. Times like these, it isn't hard to picture how this used to be a dust bowl. The land doesn't let you forget that it was dust from whence you came and to dust you will return.
December, normally filled with festivities, was bleak. We didn’t have the heart to celebrate. No caroling, no good Samaritan deeds, no Christmas spirit.

Winter passed slow, like an overloaded train. Some waited in terror, others in morbid fascination as to what might happen next. The town was an inhale caught in the throat.

When school reconvened in the new year, and principals assured parents they were being as safe as possible. No one in or out during school hours. No car pickups, all students bused to and from their homes. All after school activities either cancelled or under strict supervision from law enforcement. This did little to put us at ease, but it was better than nothing.

All those precautions, those carefully nuanced protective measures, and still Emma Bedford went missing. We watched police patrol with religious rigor. Emma was a smart girl, but we had little hope.

One day passed. Some of us oddly felt safer, thinking the killer would not likely be on the hunt, but no one would speak such blasphemy aloud. Another day passed.

Then a girl came running, frantic and manic, naked through the town, and a small ember burned inside us. A lieutenant brought her in, and when she was identified by her parents as Emma, that ember flared into a flame. She was being kept in the sheriff’s office, word had it. We all had stories of how we’d heard. From our sisters, our neighbors, our friends.
Cole Keller, the lieutenant who’d spotted Emma and brought her in, quickly became a town hero, perpetually surrounded by those wanting to hear the tale. He was just a kid, only twenty years old, not used to all the attention, but he adapted quick, telling his story animatedly.

Emma said she never got a good look at the guy—“mostly flashes”—but she did her best, and a sketch of the suspected killer’s face was soon released to the town. A man in his late twenties to early thirties, with dark hair, heavy lidded eyes and neatly trimmed eyebrows. Emma was sure of his eye color: “dishwater green”. Some thought his face almost wolfish, though that could have been subjective: high cheekbones, thick browbone, defined jaw. He had a thin mouth and slight stubble spreading across his cheeks—the artist had taken obvious liberties. He didn’t look like anyone we knew. He looked like everyone we knew.

Along with the sketch, the police released a notice that the suspect would have deep scratch marks on his left hand. Valentine’s Day passed with little celebration but no further kidnappings. We kept up all the precautions that hadn’t worked yet. It was all we knew to do.

A call came in: someone reporting seeing a bandage on the left hand of mailman Hank Benson as he was handing them a package. News of his arrest spread quickly. We tried to recall our interactions with him, but hardly anyone could remember even talking to Benson until after the first murder. He’d accused Harper Riley’s father of killing her for the life insurance money. Most of us learned his name for the first time when the paper announced his arrest.
He was new to town, had only been living here for about two years. We’d never seen him at a barbeque, a football game, rodeo, or church service. He almost didn’t exist. The post office said he’d been working for them a little over a year, mostly kept to himself, never late or troublesome.

He immediately denied it, of course. Claimed he’d been backpacking alone in Davy Crockett National Forest back when LeAnn was taken—and the post office confirmed he’d taken the days before and after Thanksgiving off. The day itself, we all knew, was a postal holiday. When asked for proof of his whereabouts, Benson had none—typical. He lived alone except for every other weekend when he said he had his daughter—his ex-wife brought her in from the DFW area.

When questioned about the bandage on his hand, he showed half-healed scratches he claimed had come from his ex-wife’s dog. We had no proof other than the wound, but that did nothing to stop our suspicions. Few knew the details, but that didn’t stop anyone from talking.

“I can’t believe our post office employed him. A real snake in the grass, that one,” Mrs. Farris said to her quilting circle.

“Did you hear he was divorced?” the pastor’s wife asked after church with a tsk of a tongue click.

“Sheriff Anderson told me he’s from Oklahoma,” Cole Keller said, disgust thick as honey in his voice.
Three days after his arrest, it was announced that Hank Benson would be released: lack of evidence to charge him. The town burst into uproar. We seethed in righteous anger.

A mob grew outside the jail, but officers grudgingly prevented anyone from getting to Benson as he was escorted from the premises. His house, however, had not received the same protection. Windows were broken, and someone had painted a message on the south wall: HELL IS WAITING AND SO ARE WE.

That night, we met at Mount Zion Baptist Church. David Riley stood with the other fathers at the altar, facing us sitting in the pews with a steely look on his face. Almost the whole town was in attendance. When he began his speech, despite the barely contained rage simmering behind his words, his voice remained steady, reminding us why he’d been mayor for six years.

“We all know why we’re here. Three of our daughters, including my own, were stolen from us. A fourth daughter was taken, but God blessed her family and she was returned to them. Emma, we’re thankful you’re here. This man, Hank Benson, is once again loose into our town, amidst our families, our daughters,” he said to us.

Our voices joined in from around the sanctuary. Ain’t right. Ain’t safe. Law done nothin’ but meddle. David raised his hand, and we quieted.

“Y’all know where I stand. Will? Got something for us?”
We watched as Sheriff Anderson stood from the front pew and said, “My hands are tied. I done what I can. Reckon it’s better for all y’all if I keep my nose out of whatever y’all’re cooking up here tonight.”

All our eyes turned to David, who said, “Go on then.”

Sheriff Anderson nodded and—being the tall, heavily built man that he was—lumbered up the aisle and out of the small church. David looked out among us and asked the question we’d met to answer.

“What should we do about him?”

As if we had shouted into a ravine, our unspoken answer echoed through the pews and sanctuary.

We kept Hank Benson’s house under constant surveillance. Almost twenty-four hours passed with no movement we could see. Jack Bedford—Emma’s dad—knocked on his door. No answer. Jack called out into the house. No answer. Then he broke the door down and went in looking. No one home. A frantic call to Sheriff Anderson, and the manhunt began.

Later that evening, the radio David Riley wore clipped to his Levis erupted into a flurry of noise: Mrs. Wilson had let out her dogs and they’d gone right to barking at her hay barn. Upon closer investigation, she’d noticed footprints leading up to the closed barn door.
We flew down the roads, covered twenty miles to the Wilson farm in no time at all. Mrs. Wilson was waiting at the front door. David let out one of the blood hounds with the command to be silent. The hound sniffed and ran for the barn: the target was behind the closed door. Ten minutes later, the crowd outside the Wilson’s had doubled in size, filling the backyard.

David Riley stood with his wife, and the Wests, the Farrises, and the Bedfords. We knew if we called Sheriff Anderson and he rearrested Benson, the outcome would be the same. He would be allowed to continue. We couldn’t take that chance. These were our daughters’ lives. We knew what we had to do.

We surrounded the barn to cut off any escape. Cole stood close behind David; both with weapons drawn. We saw David throw open the barn door. The wood clattered. The smell of damp hay wafted out.

We heard scuffling and shouting—no God please no!—the racking of a pistol and for a moment, silence. And then—one, two, three—four shots rang out.

We watched David and Cole leave the barn, holding the ends of a lumpy tarp. It was too dark to be sure, but it looked like Jordan Farris was smiling. We watched them put the tarp in the bed of David’s truck. John West shook David’s hand. We watched David drive around to the Wilson’s pigpen. The swine squealed loudly, followed by wet crunching. Unspeakable noises. As the sounds faded, we left. Some drank. Some wept in relief. Some praised God for answering our prayers. The rest of the night was quiet.
The next morning’s sunrise was breathtaking. *The Good Father’s blessing for our good deeds,* we said to each other. Steaming black coffee filled Styrofoam cups. Porch swings creaked as we sat. The morning dew shimmered as cool wind swirled the fog on the ponds. Cows were fed, and a rooster crowed.

Morning passed into afternoon. Ice cubes clinked in glass jars of sweet tea. Errands were run, chores finished, and casseroles baked. The word around town was Hank Benson was missing, seeming to have fled like Vance had. *Truly, a right shame,* we hummed to each other. The whole day was a long exhale of a breath held too long.

Evening ushered in night before long. Bourbon was poured into crystal glasses saved only for special occasions. We sat on still squeaking porch swings, closing our day much in the same way we had begun—complete satisfaction.

The ex-wife showed up about a week later—a fly in the soup of our hard-earned peace. Deputy Bernhard told us she stormed into the station demanding to know why Benson had been arrested. He said Sheriff Anderson asked her to meet him at The Cotton Gin in half an hour so they could talk off the record.

The waitress set the coffee pot and mug on the table in a way that was polite yet unwelcoming. Michael, the bartender, said the sheriff came in with his pistol on his hip but without his badge. They talked for a few minutes—too quietly for anyone
to hear—before the woman had gotten hysterical. Started yelling and interrupting
the sheriff and the like—her momma should’ve taught her better, bless her heart.

The ex-wife insisted that we were wrong. That Sheriff Anderson was lying to
her. That Benson wouldn’t have hurt anyone. She said to call the rangers at Davy
Crockett, or she’d tell Dallas Times Herald our Podunk town was covering
something up.

Sheriff Anderson radioed to have a deputy call Davy Crockett National
Forest’s office—the ex-wife sat across him at the table, waiting. The deputy’s voice
crackled over the radio a while later. Everyone in the place heard him recount the
conversation. The ranger had said they’d had three groups camping and one
backpacker during the Thanksgiving holiday. The deputy paused for a long moment
before continuing. He said the ranger had confirmed that the backpacker was Hank
Benson.

Crystal glasses shattered on the linoleum floor behind the bar.
Winter fades into spring, often before we realize it’s here. Frost retreats and little wildflowers poke their heads out of the grass. Like in summer, it pours and pours, drowning the budding forests, but there are few, if any, thunderstorms. Only rain, as if God Himself is crying.

Easter Sunday brings out little boys and girls dressed all in their pastels and frills. Some pastors say a dogwood tree was the wood used for the cross Jesus hung upon to die for our sins. We don’t know about all that, but they sure do look pretty blooming in pinks and whites.

We can restock our pantries, chop more wood for our piles, and patch the drooping sections of roof. But that doesn’t put food in the bellies that went hungry, warm the nights filled with shivering families, or undo the mold growing in the attic.

Spring doesn’t change what happened in winter.
Though it seemed impossible, town life went on. The ex-wife came back with the daughter and packed up his belongings. Officially, Hank Benson remained missing. And it would stay that way.

David Riley didn’t campaign for mayor, but no one else ran, so he was reappointed anyway. Woodburn Post Office hired Alexander Webber to fill the vacant position. There were three moments of silence at Woodburn’s high school graduation.

Seth Davison got accepted into Texas A&M, and none of us were surprised when he proposed to Emma Bedford less than a year later, though some had expected Cole to do it first. The Wilsons tore down their barn, claiming it was time to renovate. Their pigs were sold at auction in the neighboring county, and they didn’t buy any more. The Cotton Gin was sold to new management. Cole Keller transferred to a different precinct.

No more girls were killed. No one talked about it. We had silently agreed to wipe the past months away like a drunk’s vomit. Plenty had changed, but at least one thing was the same.

We were a small town. Nothing happened here.