

Above the River's Edge

by Gary Justis

mitch1969

One of the Magnificent Farm Boys: My pal *Mitch Bock* Kansas
1969

And I had to run because Kansas goes on and on, in me, around
me, beyond my determined stride. Kansas is forever.

Greg Correll from *June Bug Boys*, Open Salon

There is no other place on earth where the sky bends so low, seeming to cajole us to rise up, within the embrace of softening vapors... back into a mysterious cerulean space. Heaven floats just overhead, where calmer mists form points of intersection between bits of matter, and amid the splendid tenants of unseen worlds.

On the green, open plain, the brawny winter made the surface of the prairie abysmal, under-wrought with a niggling sense of what most midwestern boys dream about: the mountains, the salty ocean, the wind swept cliffs that boast rocky edges.

Summer seemed also a dream at times, but it would come after months of suffering at unrealized daredevil stunts. Summer would return, beckoning us to make insoluble pacts with ourselves to test our mortal boundaries.

At those high rocky edges we envisioned so vividly, flight beckoned with prospects of glory... or unreserved failure. A miserable, stunted life was not a concept we could imagine. In those exotic high places, we imagined the air was finer, clear enough to see dangerous, outlying features, and close enough to enthrall... without any compromising details of firm order or even personal safety.

In the reality of our world, we had old cars and trucks, found at auction. We hauled them to our borrowed garages and out-buildings. With a cutting torch the top halves were removed. Engines ran long and powerfully enough for us to make the two-mile run to the hills and berms surrounding the *Little Arkansas River*. The river cuts across scores of private farms, creating a topography of activities, from hunting game, to crazed teenage parties in the evening hours.

It was the last place (for us) on earth where the agents of order might discover our commotions, and without inhibition, we thrived. We loved, hunted, partied, and risked our lives in ways that could never have withstood the unyielding logic at the other side of the adult world.

And *Flight*...the thing we constantly dreamed about, took on a few folksy permutations. On the plains there are no cliffs, no vast mountain ranges to persuade us that we were somewhere above the world. Yearning to escape the pull of the Earth was the big dream of a plains boy...with the pining desire subsumed by the details of motors and steel, we found a way to push the atmosphere out of the way, and with the cranky motors roaring underneath our not-so fragile countenance; with our lanky, work hardened bodies that had no real sense of mortality, we left the ground, thundering in broad arcs, a hundred miles from death.

Mitch had an old 1948 Ford pickup, with the top of the cab removed. The line of the torch-cut left a ragged edge, with areas of razor sharpness. We pulled onto one of the river's sandy berms. Mitch jumped out and let most of the air out of the tires. This kept us moving on the fickle sand, with more area of the tires making contact.

We both eyed a small rise on the dune, a natural ramp where we could charge our makeshift Dune Buggy towards, making a fine jump with the goal of getting all four wheels of the ground. We both hopped back into the seats, held our breath and roared towards the jump.

As we hit the edge, I knew I might be in trouble. There were no seat belts, but Mitch had the steering wheel to hold onto. As we thundered over the jump, I was thrown forward, extending almost

completely out of the passenger cab (or what remained of the cab) with my face nearly touching the top of the hot engine. My insteps caught on the under-side of the dash, and as we hit the ground, I was slammed back down onto my seat. The whole event happened with such speed, it took several seconds for me to realize how close to death I came. I imagined how my face could have been mangled in the exposed, spinning parts of the engine, with who-knows-what happening as my whole body was flung onto the motor.

Mitch was excited to total distraction. He hadn't noticed my near-fatality...we stopped to make a second approach.

"Wow! That was so cool! We were air-born!"

I was shaken and not so interested in riding anymore.

"Hey...I have to get out...Shit-fuck! I almost died!"

Mitch flared his nostrils, scrunching his brows. He was always incredulous about the physical limitations of most other guys.

"Goddamn! You're OK...you're not gonna pussy out on me are you?"

"Fuck Mitch! I almost got thrown out. Sonofabitch!"

My adrenalin was rushing. I was really pissed about his damn *Farm Boy* attitude. From their point of view, they were the only *non-pussies* in the world. They bragged about most things, carried heavy things in their teeth, jumped from high places, drove fast, and could, without hesitation drink any living person under any table anywhere, at any time, under any circumstances... But with all the bragging, with the nay saying when it came to the plans and ideas of non-farmers, with the mythologizing of their deeds, and with the way in which the folks in town adored them and hung on their every

word, these guys had grit and guts, the components for pitching in when someone was in need. Folks wanted to be near these guys.

For myself, I wanted the courage and audacious strength, without the other insufferable bullshit.

Mitch was one of the elite from that group of *Farm Lads*, admired by everyone for his vigor, skill and good looks. I admired him as well, and part of me wanted to emulate his manners, so it was hard for me to step out of that ragged death trap and watch him try to cheat Death. My fear in all this was buffered slightly by the confidence in him that came out of a fiction I had created, and the story we were painting as friends didn't allow for failure, injury, or death...

Well, maybe a small injury or two was OK.

I stood twenty or so feet away from our tattered dune buggy, holding my ears as Mitch raced the engine, slammed it in gear and cranked the wheels in a tight circle. This thundering mass of rust cut a wide arc with heavy river sand flaring from beneath the rear tires. He straightened out and roared towards the jump with greater speed than the first attempt. A giant covey of quail exploded from an adjacent bush, terrified from the rumbling blur shooting by.

As the driver and buggy hit the edge of the jump, I could see at once the front of the car might double back over on itself in a reverse flip. In a second instant, I imagined the image of digging Mitch's corpse out from under the craft before it caught fire.

But the force was not directed as I imagined...car and driver followed a sweeping trajectory that seemed to be a full ten feet off the ground. The engine snarled with two unrestricted wheels turning freely in the air. Mitch was weightless, holding the gigantic old steering wheel to resist the catapulting effect of the force of flight. The wheel turned to the left slightly, rolling Mitch's body with it.

The vision of seeing a half-ton of steel trailing gasoline fumes in a dusty curve so high off the ground was both fascinating and horrifying. I always marveled at the way large objects seemed to move slower once they left the ground, even with the points of reference lying just a few feet below, the free-air flight of airplanes, bikes, motorcycles and cars seemed to exist in a slower time frame, without the reverberations of the ground, smooth...beautiful.

When the vehicle crashed down, the side of Mitch's head struck the jagged edge of his driver side door and he looked slightly dazed as he drove off along the river, narrowly missing the saplings and dips in the sandy edge. I ran behind, sensing I could catch up and jump into the cab, turn off the key and coast to a stop before we hit the river's edge.

Mitch slumped forward, then, just as I grabbed the sharp, top edge of the passenger's door, he seemed to startle slightly. He straightened, and accelerated, with the resulting force throwing him back against the seat. He was unaware I was about to enter the cab. He drove off into the din of the young forest that lay to his left, with the edge of the river to his right. I watched him disappear into the trees.

After a moment, I noticed a large cut on my hand. I put the flat surface of my open palm to my mouth. I could hear the rumbling engine. It was getting further away. I strained to listen until there was silence. Mitch was far up the river and I could no longer see or hear the buggy. That concerned me, but I imagined a vision of him bounding back, as he always had, and that put me at some ease. He was the most inscrutable, indestructible, guy I knew.

I took a few twigs of varying sizes, broke some of them, and laid them out according to length and girth. With my hands, I scooped down into the sand and made a small fire pit. With the twigs, I built a small, inverse pyramid, placing some dried grass under the little

structure. I took out my lighter, and lit the grass. A gentle flame licked the small bottom twigs, encircling them with a petite, orange flame. I took out a cigarette and lit it on the mini-fire. There were a few larger pieces of kindling lying around. I collected them. I gently laid the pieces on top of the small blaze. Soon the fire was large enough to throw heat, make some smoke, and get some attention. The day was still light, and the cracking of the fire seemed to be subsumed by the serenity of the riverside.

Along the quiet dunes of the Little Arkansas, the wind casts diversions with the creatures that live amid the grasses and small trees. The atmosphere makes kind embraces on the soft fodder as the lizards and small birds contend for title of the soft, sandy meadows. The Meadowlark makes an occasional song, competing with the Quail for small insects and the finest vantage points from which to visage prey and danger.

A hiker can affect a feeling of safety and contentment, with the downward incline of the sandy surface holding the river below the openness of the greater prairie. One is contained within a different world, so dissimilar from what thrives above, yet faultless in a way that makes time move slowly, in effortless patterns of light and trifling motion.

After I had smoked about a quarter pack I began to worry that Mitch might have run into some difficulty. With the way he had driven off, I had assumed he was ok, and he would be driving up within a half hour. It was close to sundown, and I decided to follow the trail, hoping to run into him along the way.

I had walked a few hundred yards when I saw him walking towards me. He looked tired, and he was carrying the steering wheel from the truck. The side of his head was caked with mud, and I could see a slight red trickle running down the front of the mudpack.

“Mitch, what the fuck? Are you OK man?”

He stopped just short of where I stood and he sat down in the sand.

“It was the strangest thing...I hit a tree, but I don't know how I got out there. I woke up and the buggy was on fire! When I knocked the door open and pulled myself out, using the wheel as a handhold, it broke off in my hands. I kept scooping sand onto the engine, but no good...I heard this swooshing sound and I ran back. The damn shit blew up!”

I carefully peeled some of the mud off his head and I could see the injury was shallow. He had scrapped some skin away from just above his temple.

I looked at him straight on. *“Tell me your name!”* I had seen someone on TV do this when a guy had a concussion.

“Fuckin' 'A' Justis! I'm Mitch!” he rose to his feet and we walked back to the fire pit.

*“Man, you made this fire while you waited...you **are** a friend...Hey man, I'm sorry I almost killed you today. I understand some things now.”*

“You can put that steering wheel down and relax for a while. We need to get back to the house pretty soon and call Dr. Leese. You might have some internal stuff in your skull.”

“I'm OK man.” Mitch just seemed content to lie on the sand, watching the fire in silence. After a minute or two, he spoke again.

“Hey Justis, you ever think about there being a God?”

He had never mentioned anything about God or religion before. It was odd, but with the circumstances of the day, giving him and myself a sharper glimpse of mortality, I was not as surprised as I might have been otherwise.

“Why are you asking me that?”

He waited for about a minute, then he spoke in a soft voice, one I had never heard before.

“I think I touched a face around the time I passed out...It was like a really clear dream, ‘cept I couldn’t see at first. I was feeling a nose, and an ear, but it wasn’t like feeling real skin, softer, downy...then I heard a voice:

‘Stop! Go back, but make your actions good and just.’

Then I opened my eyes and the colors were so bright... I was hovering over that south alfalfa field, looking down. I could see the river snakin’ off towards the west with a thick mist covering a few distant spots. It made me think about those times we talked about jumping off mountains.

The green and sandy loam of the river turned to an aqua, then washed out to white. It was unlike any sight I’ve seen...there was music... I got scared and felt gravity again, then I felt mud on the side of my head...”

I’d never heard anyone speak about a real vision before. At least that’s what I thought it might have been. I felt a slight tinge of jealousy at the thought that he had seen and felt things that we always dreamed about, vision or not. I helped him get to his feet and we headed towards the path, up over the dyke to the farm road.

"Justis, I always meant to tell you that if I had a brother, he would have to be like you. A little brother of course! I'm an asshole sometimes, and no one but a brother would put up with my shit."

I felt a swelling in my chest.

"I'd have to be out of my mind to be your brother. I suppose I'd do it if they paid me enough."

He chuckled. *"Who's they?"*

"I don't know. I guess the ones who are dumb enough to suck up to your dirt-farming ass!"

We both chuckled. I began to feel a stinging on one of my shins. I pulled up my pants leg and discovered an impressive scrape from below my knee to mid shin. Wet blood squeezed out of the fabric of my jeans as I bunched the pant leg.

"OK I got hurt too, so I'm no pussy. But you're still an asshole."

He laughed as he surveyed my damaged leg.

"Man! It's like a goddamn movie script!...two sorry assholes!"

"No, me non-pussy, you asshole!" I bellowed in a mock-Tarzan voice.

Mitch crouched and began to imitate a chimpanzee, loping ahead as he scrapped the sand with his knuckles. He was hilarious. He was still an asshole, *truly*, but he was also one who could be relied upon (like almost all the farm guys) in the most urgent and difficult of circumstances, and this was his greatest attribute.

Despite all the immature clowning, in the space of a few hours, by a separate grace, we stumbled onto another level of understanding. Neither of us could see into the future, surveying all the issues that would cause us to eventually grow apart, but for the moment, we walked in the same line of urgency and sentiment. We knew we were blessed to be whole, and totally alive, ambling along at the delicate division between sand and endless prairie.

Endless Prairie

Many Thanks to Greg Correll for the use of his quote
Prairie Photo by L.J. Douglas 2008

This post is dedicated to Mitch, and all the fine fellows who tirelessly worked the land alongside their families and

brethren, feeding both the obliged, and the ungrateful in our hungry world.

