

**Thomas McNeely**  
**from *Ghost Horse***

Last day of fifth grade, Houston, Texas, 1975; the time before *Star Wars*. At Queen of Peace, there are piñatas and sugar cookies frosted unnatural pastel colors and too-sweet fruit punch, mammas in sunglasses chatting with priests, white boys and brown boys making summer pacts. But this is no concern of theirs, of Alex Torres and Buddy Turner's, already hurrying home along the White Oak Bayou, to Alex's house. It is Buddy's last day at Queen of Peace. Next year, he will go to a new school across the city where everyone is white; but he and Alex won't talk about this. They won't talk about what will happen when Buddy's father comes back at the end of the summer. They have known each other too long to talk about such things. They are hurrying home, now, anxious to catch the three o'clock movie on Channel Thirteen.

In bare-dirt yards along the bayou, dogs bark, pulling at ropes and chains; and Alex seems to fade, to disappear. Both of them, Alex and Buddy, have heard the story that the dogs' owners teach them to bite Mexicans, a story that they know probably isn't true; and yet, Buddy can't help but feel glad that he himself will be safe; and as soon as he thinks this, he's ashamed. It has been like this since he found out about the new school, as if he is watching himself in a movie.

In Alex's backyard, Ysrael barks. Alex checks his watch. With a sideways glance as he opens the heavy glass storm door and jabs first the deadbolt, then the knob lock with his keys, he lets Buddy know to get the snacks, to warm up the TV. Then he yells at Ysrael in Spanish to shut up, before he barges out the back door. Buddy stands in the particular silence of Mr. Torres' empty house, breathing its smell of cooking and furniture polish, as close and tight as a shoeshine box. He doesn't go to the dark hall that leads to Alex's room, papered with drawings, almost as familiar to him as his own. He doesn't go to Mr. Torres' room, which he has glimpsed only a few times. He stands as long as he can, listening to Alex in the backyard, almost seeing

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him unlock Ysrael's cage. From atop the dark wooden TV console, huge and weighty as a ship, Mrs. Torres, dead in a car crash before Buddy met Alex, watches him, frozen in black and white, a wedding veil like a crown on her dark hair, inside a silver frame.

All of this lasts only a moment. Already, he is clicking on the TV, hearing it crackle and hum as the faint hair on his forearm lifts as it brushes the screen. Already, he is turning a corner of a beaverboard wall into the kitchen (all of it, the kitchen, living room, dining room, actually one single room, unimaginably small when he remembers it years later, after it's lost to him; at the time, it is capacious, teeming with mystery); already, he is recovering from various stashes in various cabinets, a system known only to Alex and himself, the tube of Pringles and bag of Cheetos that will stain their fingers orange and turn them shiny with grease. Later there may be candy peanuts, as cushiony as Styrofoam, or peanut butter cups, whose edges they will bite into starlike shapes. But for now, he tucks two cans of grape Nehi under one arm, listening to Ysrael bark as Alex lets him out into the yard, as he himself sinks into the wraparound couch, as Alex crosses the screen and drops into the corner, one cushion away, pulling the Cheetos onto his stomach. Buddy can still remember when they didn't think of where they sat, when sometimes they would end up slumped on each other's shoulders, asleep, when Mr. Torres came home. He knows what the boys at school call them – *gorditos*, *maricones*, *fatasses*, *faggots*. Alex and he have told each other that the secrets of the three o'clock movies, and the movies they will make, will protect them from what the boys say, though of course, they haven't exactly said this. If they had said it, it would now be even more flimsy than their silence, belied by the careful distance they keep on the couch.

Of course, they do not talk about this. They sit, tensed, waiting, for the three o'clock movie: Vincent Price, stop-motion monsters, Godzilla flicks, Hammer Horror, the original *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* and all the remakes. And there are other movies, ones that seem too strange, and sometimes too dirty, to really be on TV – silent films with hurdy-gurdy music like *Nosferatu* and *Metropolis*; or the split-second in *Vampire Circus* when they were sure they could

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see the vampire girl's bare chest; and even in the movies that are supposed to make sense, like *The Pit and the Pendulum*, scenes that don't, like the one when the woman is tied to an altar, screaming, as she's circled by a kind of witch-doctor, a scene that seemed to go on forever, because it made no sense, because the woman seemed to be laughing as well as crying.

What is the joke?