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Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

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Old Henry

Jamie Spears

Research Scholar,
University of Sunderland, UK

Every day's more or less the same now. The wind blows in; the dust blows in. The cicadas chirrup at dawn; the crickets at dusk. And Old Henry sits at the bar, nursing his whisky, telling how it used to be.

I remember, he says, when this town had three, four hundred people in it. Over there was the blacksmith. And over there was the grocer. And over there was where Clem Patterson shot Wolf Duggan. Or how 'bout the time Father Leary got tipsy 'fore a baptism and near enough drowned the baby Williams. Or how 'bout the time them Sullivan boys chased that new schoolmarm outta town 'fore she even slung down her carpet bag. Or how 'bout the time...

Henry'd moved out west back in '41—or was it '43?—and there wasn't nothing left in the world that could surprise him, so he said.

The boys used to ask him about the war. Surely the war musta surprised him some. Old Henry said no. Nothin' new about brother fightin' brother, he said. Men never change, he said; men is exactly how they was from the days of Adam. And didn't the son of Adam fight his brother?

The men used to ask him about the railroad, and weren't he surprised when it appeared, with its steel tracks criss-crossing the Texas desert leaving its angry black scars in the sand. Henry said no. Said men was always innovatin' and discoverin'. Men never do change, he said.

Of course that was back when people was still here. Nothin' here now but dust and wind and agarita growin' wild.

I says to Henry, Henry even you must be surprised seein' the west dyin' like it is. I says the land is dead—everything good in it has been taken out and sold. The cattle drives is dead; the Injuns is dead.

Henry just shrugs his shoulders and puts on his hat. Hat's near enough old as he is, and just as covered in alkali dust.

Everything dies, says Old Henry. Everything 'ceptin the desert.

She lives forever.