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A Writer's Portfolio

Leather & Dust:

A Queer Outpost of Cowboy Poetry



CORY D. CART

HOT BUTTON PRESS: *Contemporary Controversies*

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An imprint of OPEN: *Journal of Arts & Letters* (O:JA&L.)

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Publishing since 2017 as OPEN: *Journal of Arts & Letters* (O:JA&L) and its imprints
BUTTONHOOK PRESS,

HOT BUTTON PRESS *Contemporary Controversies*, and

HIGH BUTTON PRESS *Contemporary Art*,

OJAL Art Incorporated is headquartered in Montana.

OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters
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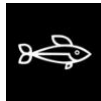
HOT BUTTON PRESS:

Contemporary Controversies

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Made available online and/or printed in the USA and elsewhere
as a novelty and commemorative document
celebrating the publication of Cory D. Cart's PDF collection of poems.

This project was made possible, in part, through support from Grayling and Wraith,
a growth marketing company.



Cover Image: *Por Jaripeo* (AI-assisted digital image) by O:JA&L staff creative. Proprietary image. 2025.

LEATHER & DUST:
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CORY D. CART

DEDICATION

FOR THE QUIET ONES on the fence line—the dreamers, the drifters, the ones who stayed soft in a world that told them not to. May these poems ride beside you.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I didn't write this book attempting to invent something new. I wrote it because I needed to see my queer self in what I already loved.

I grew up around cowboys and horse shows, Sunday boots and denim routines. Being neurodivergent, I loved the cadence of cowboy poetry; its music, its ache, its way of carrying so much with so little. It reminded me of the hoofbeats of a horse at the lope. But queerness? That stayed quiet. Too quiet.

Leather and Dust is where I let it speak.

Some of these poems are raw. Some are tender. Most ride that in-between place, like a trail not often taken. They follow a fictional narrator, Colt, but his story is stitched from real truths—mine and those I've seen in quiet glances across saddle shops and cattle auctions.

This collection is a thank you to the cowboy poets who shaped me: Red Steagall, Badger Clark, and others. It's also a call to the queer rural kids still figuring out where they fit. May you know there's room at the fence line for you, too.

—Cory D. Cart

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I. DUST AND SILENCE

ODE TO THE ONES WHO KEPT QUIET

For the cowboys who held it in so long, it became part of how they walked.

Praise the boys with shoulders square,
Who bore their truth like underwear.
Worn close, unseen, beneath the dust,
With boots that held more ache than trust.

Bless the chins that tipped in shame,
The smiles that never gave a name.
Who kissed like chores—efficient, clean,
Then rode out fast, left nothing seen.

Honor silence, hard and deep,
Where secrets bed down just to sleep.
They weren't proud, but they endured,
And learned to love with lines obscured.

And when the wind cuts through their bones,
It hums in pitch that feels like home.
Not loud, not bright, but strong as fence.
They never spoke. They made it make sense.

BOOTS DON'T MAKE A MAN (BUT THEY CAN HIDE ONE)

For the ones who passed at the feed store but cried in the barn.

I work four thousand acres wide,
Where sage turns silver come July.
Osage wind bends switchgrass low,
Alfalfa dust coats fence like snow.

Since ten years old, I wore those boots,
Hand-me-downs with prairie roots.
Too big at first, like most of me—
The want, the hands, the awkward knee.

My daddy's voice oak-hard and steel:
"Boys don't cry, and God don't kneel."
I swung gates stiff and never slipped,
Rode fence, kept cold sweat on my lip.

The boys at school would joke and spit,
'bout sissy hands and Wranglers fit.
I laughed it off, swung calloused fists.
Then cried in haylofts nobody missed.

At church in Fairfax, tie pressed tight,
They said I'd grow up strong and right.
But prayers dissolved in saddle soap,
I clung to men I couldn't hope.

I kissed the preacher's niece one spring,
Felt no fire, just fencing string.
I'd rather smell cracked leather worn,
Than touch a girl I'd never mourn.

One night in Pawhuska, motel dim,
I caught a ranch hand's sideways grin.
Our boots bumped quiet, cedar air,
Silence thick with secret prayer.

I left before the sun could rise,
With Redbird Hill behind my eyes.
Tires spat gravel, prairie sigh,
Whispers dust can't quite deny.

Something stuck, like thistle burr.
Not shame, but hope, a prairie slur
That said: I ain't what they expect,
But boots hold truths that they neglect.

So now I ride, still dressed just right,
In boots that crease with early light.
They don't make men, but they can hold
My tender truths left brave untold.

THE PRAIRIE DOESN'T ASK

For the ones who speak their truth without saying it out loud.

The prairie don't ask what's wrong;
It hums through hills the whole day long.
Where rose rocks bloom in chest-high loam,
And scissor-tails stitch sky and home.

It holds the thunder herds' deep call,
Where buffalo bones mark each drawl.
Osage whispers, hands now gone,
But land still sings their mournin' song.

It watches me swing gates and ride,
Boots creased deep, dust brushed aside.
Silence blends with rollin' grass.
No judgment here, no need to ask.

It knows the spots where hearts might ache,
Where want walks fence-lines, slow to break.
Dawn comes cold, a chill I keep,
My truths stir soft where coyotes sleep.

I set a rose-rock on the sill,
Worn smooth by wind and prairie chill.
Not polished bright, rough as my hand,
Still figurin' out just where I stand.

I breathe wild horse and kettle springs,
Feel echoes stir from deeper things.
No words exchanged, just wide sky dome,
And prairie silence callin' home.

Cottonwood whispers, willow sighs,
Where prayers float soft and truth unties.
I ain't said names, nor claimed a crown—
But on this land, I'm finally found.

HE SHOWED ME HOW TO WELD

For the ones who held steady what others let fall apart

Ray came late one August year,
Sweat-soaked flannel, smile sincere.
Fixed more gates than most could break,
Rust-stained hands, his jokes opaque.

He showed me weldin' one fall day,
By the stall, under sun's slow sway.
Sky flat blue, metal fire-bright—
Smell of diesel, sweat, and fight.

Sleeves rolled high, his arms like oak,
Voice like embers, low and smoke.
“Don't rush it, boy, let metal run—
Heat's like a horse, just gentle some.”

I watched knuckles scarred and sure,
Black from years, each weld pure.
Helmet dropped, my world turned flame.
Inside the spark, I saw his frame.

First arc flared wild, sparked and danced,
His palm firmed up, my wrist entranced.
“Steady now,” he whispered low,
His breath hot, my heartbeat slow.

Boots firm-planted, dirt floor ground,
Chest brushed mine, silence profound.
Torch hissed soft, steel turned clean,
Heat between us, felt unseen.

That's when I felt it—hard and true,
The ridge pressed where his jeans wore through.
A shape so sure, it stilled my breath,
Not crude, but carved, like stone 'fore death.

He didn't flinch, and neither did I,
Just let the weld hold our reply.

That ridge, that heat, that silent vow—
A truth I bury even now.

Gate swung straight, rail true set,
His brow wiped clean of weld and sweat.
Two beers cracked, porch light cool,
Stars strung out like silken spool.

Since then each weld carries grace—
A quiet man's remembered face.
He showed me how fire makes new,
How hands can hold what hearts say true.

II. THE BUNKHOUSE CHURCH

ODE TO THE ONES WHO SHOWED UP ANYWAY

For the queer hands who crossed fence lines just to breathe

Bless the ones who rode in quiet,
With bedrolls stitched from threadbare pride.
Who walked past gates that never opened,
And built their worth in rope and hide.

Praise the boots too soft for stompin',
The shirts too bright for county fairs.
The ones who braided all their longing
Into cinch knots, fence-line repairs.

Hats tipped low and hearts beat higher,
They didn't ask to change the song.
They just stacked hay and held their posture,
And made a place where they belong.

Bless the calloused, tender-fisted,
Queer as limestone, wild as drought.
They didn't knock. They came in working—
And never once were counted out.

They came with oil on denim thighs,
And cedar sweat beneath their eyes.
The sun caught glints in earring hoops,
Like promises hid deep in loops.

Their hands still bear the ranch's grace,
Ink tattoos smudged with balin' twine.
Each breath they took was quiet proof
That queers belong where stars align.

THE GOSPEL OF GREASE AND GRIT

For the ones I didn't ask questions of, and never had to

They come quiet, dust on boots,
Lookin' for work, carryin' roots.
Not always blood—more like bone,
The kind that aches when left alone.

I don't hang signs or speak too loud,
A ranch don't need to draw a crowd.
But word gets out in boot-worn ways,
That I take in what others raise.

Not kin by name, or church-born clean,
But men who carry what ain't seen.
The ones who flinch when preachers yell,
Who ride real soft, and don't rebel.

They show up broke, with eyes like dusk,
Hope hid deep in flannel husk.
I point to feed, or hand a rope;
Don't press for names, just leave 'em hope.

No flags out here, no Sunday grace,
Just socket sets and workin' space.
If you can haul and mend a rail,
You earn your bunk, you drop your tale.

One came from out near Enid way,
Didn't talk, just worked all day.
But by the week, his hands rang sure,
I left my boots outside his door.

Another boy from Cimarron,
Cried when mules dropped dead at dawn.
I let him be, just fed him hay.
Next noon he laughed and sang all day.

Folks ask why I keep takin' in
Boys too soft for rodeo men.
I grease the gears, just nod my head—
Been makin' room since Mama's dead.

See, out here, we bless with twine,
With diesel sweat and hands that bind.
I don't preach love or pride or sin;
Just make a space to breathe again.

This ain't a church with books or steeple,
But sacred ground for work-worn people.
Where queer boys learn to stand up right,
And hold the land that grants 'em light.

SHE AIN'T RIDIN' AWAY

For the cowboys who ride forward, even when the trail's uphill

He came from out near Snyder way,
Built like work and late-mown hay.
Called himself Luke, hands worn and slow—
Did his job, didn't talk or show.

Weren't young, but not past prime,
Moved like dusk through barbed wire time.
Drove posts deep, held cattle line,
Kept to himself and worked just fine.

At first, he ducked the bunkhouse glass,
Changed shirts quick like slip and pass.
But some mornings, still and pale,
He'd watch his frame like a liftin' veil.

Caught him once in mirror light,
Hands paused mid-shirt, jaw held tight.
Didn't speak, just turned away,
But truth, like rust, don't ever stay.

Out here, land don't call things wrong.
It stretches wide, just hums along.
Silence ain't shame, it's breath before
The first step out some inner war.

Then one spring day, air sweet with hay,
The bunkhouse door creaked just his way.
She stepped out bold, boots black and neat—
Wig pinned tight, her walk complete.

Hat tipped low. Said, "Mornin', boss."
I nodded slow, took in her gloss.
Ash now stood where Luke had been,
No askin' proof, no need to spin.

From that day on, she rode as her,
Ash in saddle, fierce and sure.
No one said much, we passed the reins.
And, let her ride free without the chains.

The boys? They roped their pens and stayed,
You learn out here who earns their pay.
A name's just wind if you can ride;
And Ash rode proud with quiet stride.

Me? I felt a post drive deep—
Not shame, not fear, but ground gone steep.
Like what I thought was stone for good
Was dust and want misunderstood.

Always lived in grit and jaw,
Brim pulled low, and quiet law.
But seein' her claim her name that day,
Lit a match I ain't tucked away.

She didn't ask for songs or cheers.
She stepped on out, shed all her fears.
And in that walk from porch to sun,
She showed me: truth gets things done.

A BARN BIG ENOUGH FOR TWO

For the men I watched find each other in a world built to keep them apart

I found 'em one night near the tack,
Lights off, just voices out the back.
Not loud—no whoop, no dirty dare—
Just low like prayer, like hush-hung air.

The barn thick with cedar and dust,
That smell of sweat and leather rust.
I'd come for tools, to end the day,
But stopped when I heard hush that way.

Two men, too close in that dim light,
One braced the other, not for fight.
At first I froze, my jaw drew tight;
But what I saw reset my sight.

It wasn't fear, nor shame, nor sting,
It was the start of some real thing.
That grip was gentle, worn and wide:
Not to control, but to confide.

The tall one's brow bent low to meet,
The smaller leaned like wind through wheat.
And just like oxen yoked and bowed,
They held the weight of want out loud.

They breathed like horses in the rain,
With boots still on, and hearts gone plain.
The taller bent, the smaller rose,
And kissed him soft, like no one knows.

I backed away like I'd been caught;
Not shamed, but full with reckonin' thought.
What I had seen, I couldn't name,
But deep inside, I felt the same.

I'd kissed in shadow, fast and rough,
With girls who laughed, with boys half tough.
But not like that—no hush, no grace,
No sacred fire behind the face.

I don't know if they're still a pair.
Men like that don't boast or share.
But I'll be damned, they lit a flame,
Not lust, not envy, just reclaimed name.

Two men like that, so full and still,
Found how to love past law and will.
It stirred in me an old, slow ache;
Like somethin' true had come awake.

And now, when dusk crawls through the beams,
When barnlight cuts like splintered dreams,
I think of them and how they stood—
And wonder if I ever could.

III. NIGHTS OFF THE RANCH

ODE TO THE MOTEL BIBLE

For the nights when salvation came in other forms

Gideon left it by the bed,
Tucked in the drawer where ghosts get fed.
But I don't pray in Tulsa rooms;
I pull the blinds and chase old fumes.

Neon flickers like a psalm,
Buzzin' soft, not bringin' calm.
No sermons here, just bed frame creaks,
And sacred grunts in shadowed peaks.

This ain't no place for vows or grace,
Just musk and hands and breath-paced space.
Still, every time I wash and leave,
I feel a page I didn't grieve.

Bless the towel with stubble ghost,
The door that shuts with muted boast.
The hum of ice, the bed unmade,
Where men like me lie down and fade.

Bless the cologne that clings to dusk,
The diesel scent, the skin, the musk.
The flinch of belt loops unhooked fast,
The half-named face, the echoes passed.

And bless the book I never read,
Still whisperin' beneath the bed.
It ain't my road, nor fire nor flood—
But Lord, I've knelt here in my blood.

It holds no judgment, cold or clean,
Just ribbon-marked what might've been.
I thumb its spine and close it slow;
Then walk back out in shadow's glow.

TULSA ROOM 207

For the nights when even your own name feels borrowed

Room was clean—too clean to trust,
Queen bed wrapped in motel dust.
Mini-fridge hum, the mirror cracked,
Remote stuck firm with something black.

I locked the door and dropped my belt,
Laid it soft, like home once felt.
Boots by the bed, just like at dawn,
Still smelled like hay and saddle gone.

I didn't bring a name that night;
Just hunger hid beneath the light.
He said, "You ready?" I said, "Suppose,"
And watched him strip with practiced pose.

He knelt, his breath warm diesel steel,
Condom fought like truth too real.
Latex tugged, it choked and snapped—
Even the rubber knew I's trapped.

His hands were rough, his mouth ran dry,
I closed my eyes and let time lie.
Saw Ray again in weld-lit flame;
The night he carved me down to name.

Welder's hands, the iron shed,
Salt he licked from skin I bled.
"Let love in," he'd whispered bare;
A prayer hung thick in torchlight air.

But this? This was a cold exchange;
A need met fast, a lust prearranged.
No Ray in him, just echo skin,
An empty room where ache begins.

He left soon after, zipped and gone,
Leaving musk, motel and dawn.
The scent of men, of dust and need—
And under that, my mother's creed.

Her eyes when I was barely ten,
Caught starin' too long at other men.
That silence sharp as rusted wire;
Not hate, just fear of townfolk fire.

I showered long, let scalding burn,
Each ache that touch could never earn.
Let soap wash down the cracked tile floor,
And wondered what I'm aching for.

I made the bed, I tipped the maid,
Left no trace of where I'd laid.
But in that mirror, gold-trimmed, bare,
I looked like someone wantin' care.

RIDING DOUBLE

For the way a shared saddle can say what words can't

Saw two hands ridin' double today;
One broad, one slight, in saddle sway.
No shame, no talk, just workin' ground,
But something in it shook me down.

Their legs brushed close, like porch swing chain,
One reached to steady through the rain.
Not love, not lust, just leanin' near,
But it hit me deep and plain and clear.

Took me back near twenty year,
To a ride I still hold near.
He called himself Twig, thin as a rail,
But clung on tight like he'd prevail.

I was sixteen, scared and proud,
Not loud, not bold, not city-bound.
Held reins firm with his chest on mine,
That shared heat felt near divine.

No words were said. Just leather creak,
Hoofbeats hummin', saddle squeak.
His breath against my neck so bare,
Like summer dusk stuck in my hair.

It weren't no kiss, it weren't no sin,
But damn if I ain't felt it since then.
A yoke I wore and never mind,
Felt like truth you never find.

Next day we mucked and fed in hush,
Didn't speak of saddle crush.
But every time I pass that trail,
I feel his arms, the hush, the gale.

Funny how it's not the wildest fucks
That settle deep beneath your guts.
It's the silence pressed in leather tight,
That stirs you slow through prairie night.

Watched those boys today and knew,
There's nothin' wrong in ridin' true.
Just two men sharin' reigns and dust,
And me rememberin' old, soft trust.

HE WATCHED ME RIDE

For the men who learn that love and lust bend harder than steel

Wes led me in past homestead dusk,
Tallgrass swayin' like whispered lust.
His broad chest still, hat brim low—
A cowboy watcher in the golden glow.

For tonight, tradition lost its spine,
In barnlight hush and knotted twine.
Wes said, "He needs release, real true.
I want him free. Can you be that too?"

My gut pulled tight, but pride stood down,
Felt like a prayer without the sound.
He wasn't askin' for me to control,
Just trust in hands that could made him whole.

So I stripped off slow, boots to skin,
The barn held breath as dusk poured in.
His man lay bare, eyes wide with grace.
And I stepped near, took up my place.

He opened easy, hips spread wide,
Like land that's broke but still got pride.
I pressed in firm, not hard, not rushed—
The way you touch a horse you trust.

Wes watched it all, his eyes gone soft,
His own breath caught, his hand aloft.
No jealousy, no shame or claim;
Just reverence for a shared new flame.

I rode him slow, a steady grind,
Flesh to flesh, but more than rind.
Felt my heart slip from the stirrups clean—
Into a man I'd never been.

The man beneath me gasped, then sighed;
A moan like wind through oaks gone dry.
And Wes? He touched the fire in me,
The one Ray sparked, now clear to see.

When I came, it weren't just lust;
It was legacy, trust and dusk.
The barn held still, the night didn't flee;
It wrapped us all in something free.

Now when I saddle Smokey slow,
And watch the cottonwoods bend real low,
I think of Wes and his lovers smooth hide—
And, the night he watched me buck and ride.

IV. LOVE AND DISCIPLINE

ODE TO THE HANDS THAT ASKED FIRST

For the ones who let want wear a name

Bless the hands that didn't grab,
But hovered soft above the hide.
Who asked with silence, not with force,
And let the answer swell with pride.

Praise the flogs laid down like scripture,
Not to bruise but to define.
For every strike was not just sting—
It mapped the soul in braided line.

Honor the boys who knelt in mud,
Who called me Sir with open chest.
Not for shame, but for the mercy
That comes when rough hands know what's best.

Tip your hat to the ones who bind,
Who kiss the cuff, then beg for more.
They ain't weak—they're steel turned tender,
Built for love in quiet war.

And bless the men like me who change;
Who learn control ain't just command.
It's knowin' when to tighten slow,
And when to drop the rope and stand.

LEATHER AT THE GATE

For the collision that happens before words can form

He showed up late, dusk bendin' light,
Thin as fence-line, pale with fight.
Stood at the gate, no words, no claim,
Just hunger hangin' off his frame.

Didn't speak, just met my eye,
Like prayers too old to dignify.
I tipped my brim, said, "You come far?"
He nodded once beneath the stars.

Then dropped down slow, no shame, no haste,
Like kneelin' was his rightful place.
His eyes said more than mouths could trade;
He knew the shape I'd never made.

My voice came low, near broke with want:
"Cross your wrists, son, don't you daunt."
He lifted hands like open gates—
And I stepped through, settin' weights.

Leather belt looped tight with care,
A gospel wound 'round wrist laid bare.
Didn't flinch. Didn't fight.
Just trusted dusk and cowboy rite.

My ridge pressed sharp 'neath worn-down jeans,
A map of want in shadowed scenes.
He breathed like wind against the barn,
And I felt grace in grit and harm.

He was open, raw and new;
But I was settin' somethin' too.
A tether 'tween what I'd denied,
And what could bloom with hands that guide.

I traced the buckle, let it sway,
Gave him breath, then took it away.
Not as punishment, not to prove—
But to feel where leather moves.

He rose slow, the dusk turned gold,
No shame clung tight, just story told.
I cupped his jaw, not with command,
But reverence only hands understand.

Leather at the gate, warm and worn,
A bond not forced, but prairie-born.
He didn't worship—just believed—
And I, for once, felt fully received.

COLLAR THE NIGHT

For the first time I wore power as a promise, not armor

Hired him on a rainy noon—
Tate was quiet, built in tune.
Did his chores with grit and grace,
Kept his eyes on dirt, not face.

He mended cinch and mucked the pens,
Spoke in gestures more than lens.
But each time our shoulders brushed,
I felt a stir, a slow-banked hush.

One night I found it, tucked up neat—
Leather collar, clean and sleek.
No note, no dare, just laid with care,
Like prayer coiled tight in saddle air.

He didn't flinch when I held it up,
Just said, "If you know, then that's enough."
No shame in him, no act, no bluff;
Just quiet hope carved outta tough.

That night he stood by bunkhouse light,
Boots off, hands down, posture right.
Didn't beg, didn't boast;
Just looked at me like I was host.

He knelt slow, a trust so bare,
My throat near closed beneath the air.
I took that collar, smooth and wide,
And buckled dusk to what he'd hide.

Didn't rush, no cowboy show—
Just circled leather, sure and slow.
He leaned in, breath warm and right,
And I felt peace in takin' night.

In that hush, no voice but skin,
No light but stars slidin' in.
He didn't need a rope or tie;
He needed me to see and try.

We didn't fuck, not that first time;
We just stood there, breath in rhyme.
And in his eyes, like open range,
I saw my power learn to change.

Collar snug, no chain, no yoke;
Just bond that needed no one spoke.
He wore it proud, and I stood tall,
Finally more than leather and brawl.

WHAT THE HAND FORGIVES

For the warmth that comes after every strike

Night hung thick as barn dust still,
Leather coiled on windowsill.
Tate knelt quiet, back straight, bare,
The kind of trust that fills the air.

My hand rose slow, calloused, taut,
With every lash a line I thought.
Not for pain, but for the past,
The ghosts that silence never cast.

T
he first strike snapped like frozen wire,
He shivered once, but didn't tire.
No cries, no flinch, just breath held deep;
A prayer not made for churches steep.

Red bloomed like sunset on his hide,
My palm read every scar he'd lied.
Not with words, but years he wore,
Now etched in pink and nothing more.

I paused between like bridlin' rain,
Let quiet settle 'round the strain.
His eyes met mine—no shame, no test—
Just hunger waitin' to confess.

Each strike that followed softened bone,
Till all that stood was truth alone.
He swayed, he sighed, he didn't plead;
And I gave only what he'd need.

When I was done, I laid him down,
Quilt beneath him, dusk spun brown.
My hands, once rough, now traced the red;
A map of love not often said.

He whispered, "That's what I required."
And I, near tears, felt less expired.
Forgot the world beyond that stall;
There were no names, no pride, no wall.

Spankin' done, forgiveness clear,
His body hummin' peace sincere.
And me? I learned in open skin
That discipline lets love begin.

Leather, cuffs, and cowboy grace—
A world reborn in one raw place.
Where hands once hurt, now gently mend,
And power knows how far to bend.

DUST ON THE BOLO TIE

For the parts of me I outgrew with grace

It hangs behind my closet door,
Silver clasp and stone once sure.
A bolo tie I used to wear,
Back when I still chased county fair.

Wore it Sundays, brim held high,
Pressed my collar, lived that lie.
It whispered, “Cowboy. Keep it clean.”
But never sang what lived between.

These days leather hangs instead;
Harness worn and cuffed in red.
My jock still damp from dusk-long play,
My chest bare-bold come end of day.

Tate never asks about that tie.
He sees my truth when I untie.
In how I guide, in how I hold,
In how I let my want unfold.

It ain’t shame that left it hung;
It’s that I’ve found a deeper tongue.
Not church-clean pride or feedstore nod,
But sweat-soaked prayers and leather god.

The bolo stays—dust-covered grace,
Like spurs you hang but still embrace.
A relic, yes, but not regret—
Just part of how I ride truth yet.

Someday maybe I’ll take it down,
Hold it up like passing crown.
But for now, I wear what fits;
And what I’ve found in tethered bliss.

V. THE LOCKED ROOM

ODE TO THE THINGS I NEVER SAID

For the doors we kept shut long after the hinges rusted

Bless the words I swallowed whole,
Rough as bridle, dry as coal.
The names I never dared to speak—
Tucked in drawers, year by week.

Praise the hands that shook, not struck,
When keys turned slow through shame and muck.
Who opened rooms not meant for light,
And stood inside without a fight.

Honor the sweat on binding rope,
The prayers we mouthed in place of hope.
Not loud, not proud, just barely breathed;
Still holy 'cause they were believed.

Tip your hat to the hidden selves,
Stacked like tack on shadowed shelves.
They waited long in quiet dust;
Not for permission, just for trust.

And bless the man who found my key—
Who looked and didn't turn from me.
Who saw the dark and stepped inside,
And never once asked me to hide.

BEHIND THAT DOOR

For the trust that turns keys, not locks

The key sat heavy in my palm;
Brass worn down like saddle calm.
That door had waited, years gone still,
No hinge disturbed, no window sill.

Tate stood barefoot on the floor,
No boots, no words, just breath and more.
He didn't ask. He only stayed,
Like dawn waitin' to spill and fade.

I turned that lock like twistin' fate,
Slow as dusk through pasture gate.
The door creaked open, musk spilled wide—
Old leather, sweat, and things I'd hide.

Harness hung like Sunday coats,
Cross and sling like gospel notes.
Everything clean, each cuff aligned,
A church for men with truth confined.

He stepped in like the barn was hush,
Touched the bench with hands gone flush.
No fear in him, just sacred pause;
Like walkin' up to break old laws.

I dropped my jock like settin' weight,
The buckle clanked like iron fate.
He didn't flinch, just held my gaze—
And knelt like prayer in midnight haze.

His breath was still, his touch was steel,
His tongue asked things I couldn't feel.
But when it met that stainless ring,
I felt what names can't always bring.

He didn't bow, he didn't beg—
He stood in full, not one damn leg
Shakin' from who I used to be—
He saw the man I let run free.

No shame, no guilt, just light and door;
A room I'd locked, now somethin' more.
For once I wasn't hidin' pain;
I'd found a place to wear my name.

LETTERS I NEVER SENT

For the men I loved too quiet to name

I wrote 'em in my head for years,
In glovebox dust, in bottled beers.
Never mailed, never signed;
Just scattered thoughts the wind would find.

To Ray, the welder with hands like stone,
Who sparked more than just iron alone.
I never said, "You saved my youth;"
I just held heat and hid the truth.

To Wes, who watched me take his boy,
And called it grace, not lust or ploy.
I never said, "You made me whole;"
But I still feel your steady soul.

To Tate, with collar soft and worn,
You let me bloom where I was torn.
I never said, "You taught me peace;"
But every breath with you found lease.

To myself at seventeen,
Starin' too long, afraid to be seen.
I never said, "You'll make it, boy;"
But here I am, still findin' joy.

Each letter sits in muscle tight,
In boot scuffs, ropes, and quilted night.
No stamp, no seal, no formal close,
Just leather-scented, prairie prose.

I carry them like fence-line wire,
Coiled in heart, barbed with desire.
And when I ride, alone or not,
I feel the words I never got.

Some men need books or prayer to weep—
I just recall what I don't keep.
And let these unsent letters ride
In saddle bags I'll never hide.

VI. FENCE LINES AND FIREFLIES

ODE TO THE BOYS WHO STAYED

For the ones who didn't run when the fire got close

Bless the boots beside my bed,
Scuffed and muddy, stories said.
The hands that hauled without askin',
The eyes that stayed through every maskin'.

Praise the ones who patch the wire,
Who ride out storms, then stoke the fire.
Who share their last beer without name,
Not for show, just 'cause we're the same.

Honor laughter in the bunkhouse dim,
The hymns we hum when nights grow grim.
The quiet touch that means, "I'm here;"
More truth in that than preachers fear.

Tip your hat to chosen kin;
The ones who let the soft back in.
Who watch the stars and know you're tired,
But never say a word 'til required.

And bless the fireflies on dusk's long line—
The way they flicker, brief and fine.
Like love that don't demand or stay—
Just lights the fence and finds its way.

ONE SADDLE, TWO SHADOWS – REPRISE

For the ride that never really ends

I saw him once more at winter's yawn,
Ray backlit by the rime-touched dawn.
Didn't speak, just took the reins;
Like men who've shared both fire and chains.

We rode out past the cotton rows,
Past fence lines choked in frostbit blows.
Snow whispered soft beneath each hoof,
A hush that held more than plain truth.

Our breaths rose slow in barnyard hush,
No need for talk, no need to rush.
The sun cracked low across the scrub;
Like light still caught in old backrub.

He turned to me, his jaw gone slack,
And said, "You still carry me on your back?"
I nodded once, said, "You still ride me,
Even in dreams I can't set free."

That ridge returned, that welded ache,
Pressed 'tween us in each stirrup's quake.
But this time soft, not burnin' raw—
Just shadow long in early thaw.

We didn't fuck. We didn't cry.
We just rode close 'neath paper sky.
Two shadows long on frozen land;
Both holdin' reins with calloused hand.

It weren't goodbye, it weren't a start—
Just proof he still rides in my heart.
One saddle worn, two shadows lean—
A cowboy love not always seen.

PRAIRIE BOYS LEARN TO STAY

For the ones who held fast when the wind begged them loose

They said I'd leave, like dandelion seed—
Too soft for storms, too bent for creed.
But I grew here, thick in clay,
Where boots don't budge and boys don't sway.

I've loved in shadow, kissed in barns,
Branded want in quiet arms.
I've watched desire turn to dust,
Then rise again through need and trust.

This land don't hold the ones who drift;
It anchors those who build and lift.
We mend our fences, brace the gate.
We ride through hail, and call it fate.

So when the world says men like me
Can't ride the storm or rope the sea,
I tip my brim and hitch my pack.
My truth's not gone. It's just set back.

Prairie boys don't float away—
We stay. We ache. Then learn to stay.
With leather worn and hearts made true,
We ride 'til dusk, and ride on through.

ABOUT THE WRITER:

CORY D. CART is a neurodivergent writer, folklorist, and former newspaper publisher whose work explores queerness, rural life, and the myth of masculinity in America's heartland. A lifelong horseman and storyteller, Cart's poetry and prose bridge the space between the feed store and the queer bar, where dust and desire share the same language. His work has appeared in both literary and journalistic publications and draws influence from cowboy poets like Red Steagall and Badger Clark. Cart is pursuing his MFA in Popular Fiction at Emerson College.

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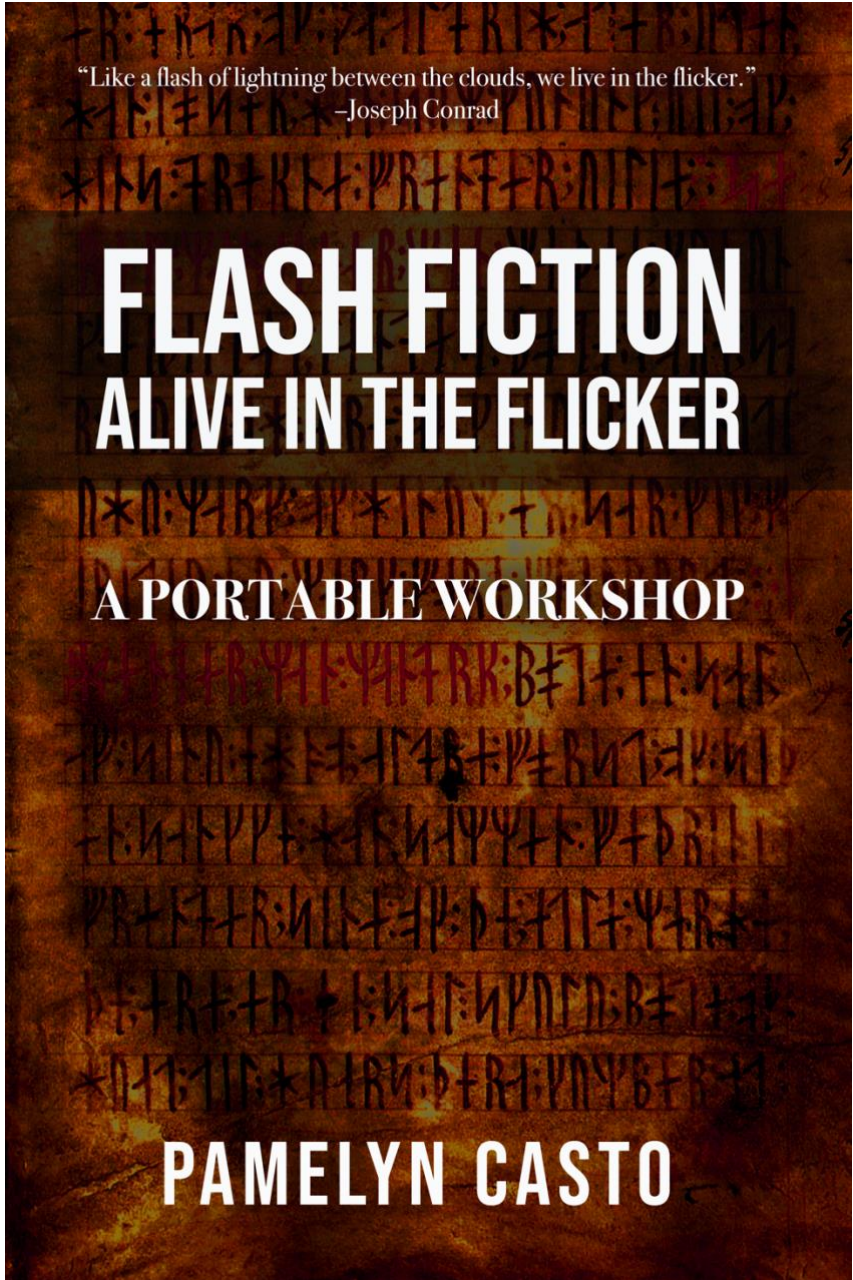
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