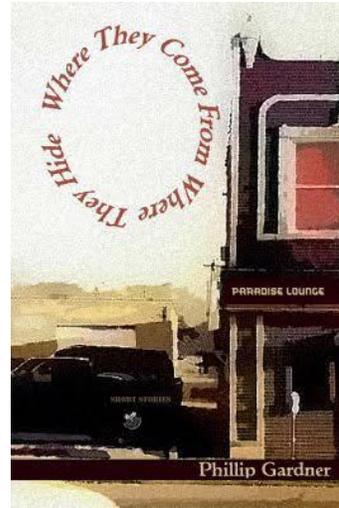


*Lamar University Literary Press publishes literary fiction, poetry, and nonfiction right here in Beaumont. The press specializes in Texas and regional authors and has won numerous awards. Check back for the latest news on publications and literary happenings in Southeast Texas.*

“The Paradise Lounge was part sanctuary part asylum where irreconcilables held hands and bellied up to the bar,” Gardner tells us as he invites us to pull up a stool at the local watering hole in fictional Darlington, South Carolina. For some of us, the world of this new short story cycle, *where they come from where they hide*, might feel familiar—a southern rural, working-class community with a beloved local bar that seems to be the place where everyone gathers. Gardner assures his readers, though, that the setting is entirely fictional. As a reader, it felt pretty darn real to me! The characters, those who inhabit this town, are what make this book stand out. Within these pages, you’ll meet Coach, a down-on-his-luck former high school football coach, Pete Humps, the local plumber who is hopelessly in love with his best friend’s wife, and Vapor, a mysterious man “without a face.” Darlington, and more specifically, The Paradise Lounge, becomes the backdrop for the intertwined epics that become each of these characters’ lives. In *where they come from where they hide*, the mere act of survival in this town that time and progress seem to have left behind, against the odds of poverty, stereotype, and violence becomes heroic. I’ll also state that this book has some pretty graphic violence. Gardner wants us to feel the grit and glory of his characters’ lives. You’ve been warned, reader.

Let’s start with Coach. He’s the crumbling pillar of this crumbling community. He’s married to a former student and cheerleader, B.B., and he loves her dearly. Their relationship becomes symbolic of the entire



town’s hopes and dreams— “And for a long time,” the narrator tells us, “Coach and B.B. had been everybody’s happiness, the kind of happiness you await and expect, the kind you want for

yourself and for others. The kind you believe will last forever.” But of course, in a place like Darlington, good things just can’t seem to last. Through flashbacks, we witness Coach’s numerous falls from grace. We’re not exactly sure why, but he was fired from the school, and it likely has something to do with some kid who peed on the state championship banner. Now he works part-time job at a hardware store, and it just doesn’t pay the bills. Because of this, his wife bartends, and she’s the heartthrob of just about every single man who comes through the doors of The Paradise Lounge. This means she’s the desire of every man in town, even those just passing through. Coach’s greatest flaws are his immeasurable love for his wife and his suspicions of infidelity which drive him to drink. But even with all of this weighing him down, he still manages to save the day when out-of-towners come into the Paradise Lounge and threaten to take away the last thing that really matters to him. In a heroic blaze fitting of such a guy, he rescues his beloved, though it costs him dearly.

Pete Humps, the local plumber, is another complicated character. He was one of Coach’s former football players, and he grew up and stayed in Darlington to start a small business with his best friend and teammate, Russ.

Unfortunately, Pete falls for Russ's fiery wife, Chloe. He risks his livelihood, his friendship, and even his life to be with her. "We were like brothers," Pete says about Russ, "Now we were the mightiest of foes, playing for the highest of stakes, the love of a beautiful woman." And oh what a fight! I won't spoil it entirely for you, but it involves a pair of jumper cables, a staged murder and rape, a trip to Graceland, and a sledgehammer. Who comes out victorious in the end? I'll tell you this—it's not Pete, and it's certainly not Russ. In the end, both Pete and Russ display true heroism in a final act that tugs at even the coldest of hearts.

Vapor is perhaps the most curious of character. His narrative, his voice, opens the book of interconnected short stories. He introduces himself as a "presence without substance," a face everyone seems to forget, from his childhood psychologist to his classmates in high school. Everyone that is, except Rosalind, a woman who went to school with Vapor and later became a theater teacher and local actress. She's the only one who's ever "seen" Vapor, or, rather, seen his face, remembered it, internalized it. Vapor reminisces about a time in high school when Rosalind touched his face, a moment of transcendence and recognition for his humanity after an extremely traumatic childhood. After this, Vapor obsesses over Rosalind—he threatens the men she dates (especially those who treat her poorly), follows her like a shadow, and vows to attend every single play she's involved in no matter what. Vapor's obsession leads him, naturally, to trouble. Throughout the book, Vapor makes appearances in different characters' narratives, too, though no one seems to know who he is. He ends up playing a vital, heroic role in the final tragedy near the end of the story cycle.

In *where they come from where they hide*, Gardner opens the door and invites us, as readers, to belly-up along with these characters at the Paradise Lounge and learn about the epics, joys, and tragedies of life in the rural south. These characters, though flawed, reveal difficult though vital truths about humanity. Even if the setting and cultural landscape feels foreign to you, you'll see yourself within the struggles and the triumphs of these wholly relatable characters. The book reads like a novel rather than a collection of short stories, really, because it's only through the interconnected nature and the relationships between these characters that we, as readers, gain a full understanding of who they are and the depth of their tales. Gardner is a true master of the short story, and *where they come from where they hide* is a rich collection of narratives that teach us, through all their grit and glory, what it means to be human.

*Where they come from where they hide* (Lamar University Literary Press, 2019) is available in paperback at Barnes and Noble, Amazon, and locally at Fleur Fine Books in Port Neches!



Photo of the author, Phillip Gardner