

Winter
Dance
Party

Advance Praise

“*Winter Dance Party* is a wild and wise collection of fever dreams set in an ailing Iowa. Brett Biebel’s down-and-out denizens are compelling kooks you can’t help but love. These are short stories bursting with big lives.”

—Ryan Ridge, author of *New Bad News*

“Brett Biebel’s debut collection, *48 Blitz*, called to my Nebraska heart, and I’ve followed him ever since. He’s upped the ante with his latest collection, *Winter Dance Party*, where he deftly answers two fundamental questions: Why do we cling to history, and is progress always a good thing? Always present in these 59 stories are the ghosts from that night in 1959, when the music died in Clear Lake, Iowa. The characters we come to know in *Winter Dance Party* feel the spectral pull of the past in their bones, as they love and fight, give the middle finger to big business and big developers, and often struggle simply to find something or someone to hold on to. Biebel masterfully weaves parentheticals throughout many of these stories, paying homage to how many middle-America oral storytellers constantly interject seemingly insignificant bits of exposition in their tales. But they’re not insignificant. We meander, we divagate. But pay attention, because we’re connecting the dots of our intersecting lives, culminating in the human collective. East and West Coasters think there’s something different, something a little off, about those of us in Flyover Country. Biebel is here to tell you we’re not so different. In fact, we’re just as aimless and disconnected, yet always grasping for more, as the rest of you.”

—L Mari Harris, editor of *Trampset*

“Brett Biebel’s *Winter Dance Party* is an incredible glossolalia of haunted voices. His characters speak in tongues and dance in the flames of a still-burning plane crash—each of them febrile, sweating, panting—and his prose is as psychically infectious as rock & roll. This is the Midwest as you’ve never seen it, and Biebel’s sophomore collection is better than you can possibly imagine.”

—Barrett Bowlin, author of *Ghosts Caught on Film*

“*Winter Dance Party* encompasses the Buddy Holly plane crash, the roadside attraction, how it affected people in the surrounding area, and how it continues to do so. The characters are your neighbors, the people you see around town, learn about through gossip, or encounter one strange night in a bowling alley or empty field. You get to know them throughout the loose ties of the stories, weaving your way through the cornfield and the parentheticals inside of parentheticals that read like whispers in your ears. In this book, Biebel’s deft writing captures the obsession and mystery surrounding pop culture history.”

—Allison Renner, author of *Won’t Be By Your Side*

“In *Winter Dance Party*, Brett Biebel takes us on a nostalgic 1950s musical journey through the Midwest in prose that sparkles with the melody of sunsets over cornfields. These flash fictions take us back to an era of optimism cloaked in ash and chemicals. Biebel writes with urgency and pathos, putting us in the boots and tuxedos, the aprons and hairnets of these humble characters, risking it all for another kiss, inhale, drink, or soft touch between hours of manual labor and the desperate yearning to live well or die trying. Biebel moves from satire to realism, to the wacky and uncontrollable, with stories pulsing with life and verve! I know these people, and still I read to find out their secrets. Biebel in language and craft doesn’t disappoint!”

—Tommy Dean, author of *Hollows*

Winter Dance Party

Buddy Holly's Crash Site in Flash

Brett Biebel



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Buddy
Holly

Field of Dreams

When Royal Treatment Properties bought up the Buddy Holly crash site, they said nothing. Refused to send out a press release. They left untouched the big novelty glasses out on Gull Avenue and paid an old farmer more money than he'd ever seen to pull weeds near the makeshift memorial, to make pleasant conversation with tourists and locals and whoever else happened to come on past, and the whole idea was to keep things quiet. "Keep it normal, keep it quaint," they said (in intraoffice emails and after-hours conversation at HQ in Minneapolis), though that didn't stop a few Cerro Gordo County busybodies from catching wind of the whole thing, and you know how Iowans are. The old ones, especially. Soaked in nostalgia and ready to resent any kind of change (particularly one involving deeply rooted local traditions), and it wasn't long before people started asking questions.

Mostly, they wanted to know what use a development firm (with resorts all over the Great Lakes) could possibly have for an empty field miles from anywhere, and they figured it had to be something awful (a suspicion that only got heightened when some disgruntled ex-RTP employee leaked a memo talking up "the next Midwest vacation destination" (or, as some in the C-suite referred to it, "The Dells in the Dirt," or, in one case, "Disneyland for Death Nuts")), a nightmare high-rise or swimming pool complex or waterpark, and one of those "concerned citizens" groups (which always include the nosy neighbors and small-time

thinkers and crazies out to lunch (as well as some (presumably) decent people)) passed around fliers that claimed RTP wanted to build a sprawling and “basically sacrilegious” tourist trap on the very site of the plane crash, complete with chalk outlines in the lobby (for Buddy Holly himself), at the bottom of a proposed waterslide (Valens), and in the middle of the ground-floor Honeymoon Suite (with the Big Bopper’s feet sticking out from under the bed). Only part of that was true, of course, but that didn’t prevent the formation of a groundswell of concern, enough that some 400 people showed up to a meeting of the county zoning board, and the courthouse was so packed that they (meaning the entire board) had to reschedule, to move the whole thing to the Surf Ballroom itself, and they (meaning the entire board) promised to let every interested party speak before reaching any decision, which meant the whole thing lasted nearly nine hours. They had to take breaks. Dispatch volunteers for cookies and lemonade. Every so often, they’d fire up low-key (50s era) background music, and people would discuss commercialization and economic development and pieces of history. Someone (who smelled like vodka and wet dogs) said he’d never seen any of these people at other meetings, and maybe they were all from Des Moines or St. Paul and only bused in to make the whole thing look controversial, and then someone accused him of being the out-of-towner, of being on RTP’s massive payroll, and this was the moment of highest tension, the moment of physical confrontation, when two strung-out guys (neither of whom was part of the initial dispute) in a booth sponsored by the Clear Lake Super 8 swung wildly and then wrestled around on the floor. A girl (who couldn’t have been older than 20) asked about a rare species of cricket and the importance of environmental protection. RTP chose a woman to close the meeting on their behalf, and she wore leggings and reading glasses and said nothing could be more in line with the spirit of Iowa than this very

project. She locked eyes with each board member in turn. Gestured (on the advice of a well-known consultant) all around the room. She looked like a young Susan Sarandon, and she said people would be desperate. That they'd make pilgrimages. Play license-plate bingo and count cows and horses and graveyards, and, when they arrived, they'd hand over the money without a first thought, let alone a second, and you folks are already on the map, but this is going to make you a destination, and all we have to do is build it, and people will come. People will come, Ray (and here she made sure to stare at the ceiling and look open and steady and glazed). People will most definitely come.

Lighthouse Inn #6

Days I spent at the Surf Ballroom, waiting around for girls. Sometimes I read books about war or football or how to succeed in business, and sometimes I just sat. I'd find some booth in the corner or off to the side, and the booth was always sponsored by Community Bank, or maybe the Clear Lake Super 8, and the only time it ever worked was Lydia. Or Lauren. I can't remember. She must have been 37, at least, and dancing to Tommy James and the Shondells, and when we got back to the motel, she made me wear these Buddy Holly glasses and said I should call her Peggy Sue while we rolled around on the floor and found each other's tongues. Hers tasted like coffee grounds spiked with casino liquor, and when the clothes came off and it still wouldn't work, we ordered pizza from this place called Uncle Angelo's or Cousin Billy's and sat there using the carpet as an ashtray and talking about car wrecks and ice cream and whether we had any kind of a future.

"Maybe," I said. "Probably. As long as you don't leave right this second, and let's just go ahead and see what comes."

"What's so great about a future, anyway?" she said, and so I told her, I said, I don't know, but I was always gonna end up all full and floppy beside some nowhere interstate, and maybe that wasn't so bad, and what did she think? Maybe this one could be just good enough.

Races Run

Uncle Bernie had this cat named Bronco, and he used to let it ride around in the cab of his pickup, and sometimes I'd be back there, and every time he hit a pothole, the cat would jump and hiss and sound like this woman who lived above us back when we were at the apartment, this 40-something Missus April, who drank cases of Mello Yello and smoked while sitting cross-legged on the balcony, and it was like Uncle Bernie was happy, like it was the ride of his life, and this one day, had to be around Thanksgiving, it was 15 degrees, and we pull up to that OTB used to be out past the mall, just off 35, and we leave old Bronco behind because Uncle Bernie says he's got a little birthday present for me, and I can either take it now or let it ride, and of course I want to let it ride, and so we go in and bet 50 on Rows Hoed to win in the sixth at Hialeah because this is back before it closed, and the whole place smells like tobacco and getting older, and when the sonofabitch finishes second, we scrounge together a dollar or maybe 89 cents in pocket change and get one of those fried fish sandwiches, and Uncle Bernie rips up the ticket and puts all them little scraps under the bun and then throws it in the back there with Bronco, so we can watch him go at it like he's a street cat, like he's about to face the firing squad, and my uncle says, "Fucking animals," and punches me in the shoulder, then gets this look that's real serious, serious like a heart attack, and he goes, "Kid, let this be a lesson," and, "Everything you touch is gonna turn to shit, anyway."

Dead Letters

In the obituary (which didn't even make the *New York Times*), one literary critic noted that Daniella Flores-Whitaker was "almost criminally underrated and dangerously insightful" and that her work (in particular, a 600-page novel (though some argued it was really a "collage novel" (and others said it "contained no semblance of narrative at all")) called *Title IX* (which used pieces of federal code and the text of (what Flores-Whitaker claimed were) actual sexual-assault claims filed at a small Catholic college somewhere in Iowa to paint a sprawling portrait of institutional corruption and misogyny (what Flores-Whitaker called "the fundamental and original form of American rot"))) "speaks to a level of bureaucracy and alienation seen only in Kafka and certain Departments of Motor Vehicles located in the lowest circle of hell." So, it was "no wonder," said the critic, that Flores-Whitaker died in obscurity. After all, she was depressing. She eschewed the *New Yorker*/Iowa Writers' Workshop model of narrative, of realistic literary fiction. More than that, she attacked the university (and (in what was "perhaps her most unforgivable sin") did so by villainizing faculty members even more than administrators) and therefore condemned herself to a posthumous career of nearly nothing. The obituary ended by predicting that someday, "70 years hence," all of Flores-Whitaker's work would lose its copyright to the public domain, and still no one would copy or print (let alone buy) it, and this was the ultimate tragedy, the perfect microcosm

of the pervasive problems of the modern literary establishment.

Fortunately (maybe?) for both the writer of the obituary and Flores-Whitaker herself, however, this prediction turned out to be wildly incorrect. A decade after the obit came out, a group of feminist scholars on the campus of Michigan State University organized what they called the “10-Year Reckoning” (because “anniversary” sounded too laudatory, too tame for what they were “commemorating” (which involved pretty much exactly what you might think)) and included *Title IX* (the “novel”) as part of a year-long reading and discussion group, and the book took off (for some reason no one could quite figure, though later critics proposed that it had something to do with its ability to work not just as a prolonged, immersive reading experience, but also in smaller chunks, in anecdotes and hashtagable moments) to the point that it became the university’s “common book” (the book all incoming, first-year students read) for the next two years and then a key part of a class in postmodern literature (taught every other semester (during which time the (so-called) novel also generated followings across academia, and Flores-Whitaker studies became a respected academic discipline) by a professor whose full name was I. L. Reed) until at least the 2040s, at which point technological and geopolitical changes accelerated to the point that the book itself required entirely too much context to be useful for incoming students (most of whom were 18 and 19 years old), and it again fell out of favor, though (as if by magic) bits of Flores-Whitaker’s other work came floating up out of the aether to take its place.

Primarily, focus shifted to a series of (what were originally) blogposts that Flores-Whitaker had written sometime in the 2010s that (according to her official biographer) she’d planned to turn into a book. They dealt with her experiences as a lifelong Green Bay Packers fan and tried to reconcile (week-by-week and during one glorious Super

Bowl-winning season) the tensions between her philosophical and ethical convictions and “the sheer, adrenal joy” of watching grown men smash into each other at full speed. For nearly half a year, these posts were publicly available on the web, and then they abruptly disappeared. The theory is that Flores-Whitaker didn’t want them out in the open while trying to sell the manuscript, but no one can be totally sure what happened. Mostly, critics just count themselves lucky to have found the essays at all (given that the essays’ existence had to be inferred by a scholarly examination of archived email and then only confirmed after a series of formal requests to (and confrontational phone calls with) the Archives & Data Storage Division at a major Silicon Valley firm (and one of the involved scholars called it “a fucking miracle (not to mention an unconscionably shortsighted moment of economic idiocy, or else a blatant attempt at academic PR)” that the drafts were made public at all)), and for a while, these essays managed to speak to mid-21st-century college students in a way that bureaucracy never could because football is king. Football is life. Football is America, or at least it was, until suddenly (maybe another decade later) it wasn’t, and nearly everyone who’d played the game at a high level over the past 50 years started to look like Muhammad Ali trying to light the Olympic torch, and anything containing the barest praise of such a barbarous activity became taboo and practically blacklisted (at least within the confines of the academy).

At this point, there were those scholars who, like the author of Flores-Whitaker’s original obituary, mourned (for a second time) the loss of such a linguistic force, and for a moment they tried to revive interest in her career by digging up a few pieces (many of which utilized institutional narrators (and one of these narrators was even identifiable as a private health-insurance provider with a massive market share, and there was talk of free speech and libel and transformative use and threats of both litigation and

counter-litigation that never ended up going anywhere)) of very short fiction (flash fiction, microfiction, nanofiction, etc.) she'd published online and in various (and obscure) print outlets, but, even though everyone assumed they'd be perfect for a generation whose collective attention span seemed to be the size of a water molecule, the pieces never earned many plaudits (or even the barest level of engagement), and so, now, today, whenever someone hears the name Daniella Flores-Whitaker, what he probably thinks of is an audio recording. It's from a phone call she made in 2017. The tape was acquired by one of the scholars listed as essential in securing the football essays, and his idea was as follows: Companies record everything. Everyone has to call companies. That means that, somewhere, you can hear David Foster Wallace trying to order some product he saw on TV at 2 a.m., or Thomas Pynchon dialing 1-900 (just for fun, probably, for shits and all kinds of toothy giggles), or, yes, Daniella Flores-Whitaker telling a woman from Comcast to "go fuck your eyelids with a fork" over a disputed late charge, and this is precisely what the tape contains. They play it in college classrooms, and the students sit rapt. They roll their eyes. They laugh. They hear the author's voice flushed and pissed and all-fire fucking helpless (while she tries to argue about the arbitrary nature of language and time and the impossibility of ever entering into a fair contract with any entity who (by rights) can change said contract whenever "the bloody fuck" it wants and on any kind of "flimsy whim") and touch their hands to their temples, so they can do what Sue from Comcast does. Because they want Flores-Whitaker to stop talking. They want to hang up on her, too.

Now Everybody—

A man is waiting for Thomas Pynchon to die because he wants public mourning. He wants national obituaries (and for the body to lie in state). What he wants (at least) is a more recent photograph, or maybe a posthumous American Nobel, but he never stops to think that Pynchon might be gone already, not until one night around 3 a.m. (when he's dead asleep and rock hard and dreaming of something mechanical and unrelated), and once the idea arrives, it establishes permanent residency. It starts paying rent. It drives him to sell his house and load up his car and crisscross the country. New York first, then southern California, and he hits up literary (and national) landmarks all along the way (Springfield, Massachusetts, and the Delaware Wedge and the New York City sewers). At the Four Corners, he meets a woman who says she heard Pynchon was back in Mexico, which causes the two of them to drive straight to Tijuana, where they drink tequila and talk about parabolas and preterition and hole up in a motel next to an *alberga* for two weeks. Some nights they try (and are usually able) to find psilocybin. Some nights they screw and sweat and read aloud from the juvenilia because they know everything else by heart. She likes the intro to *Slow Learner*. He thinks it's just another Pynchon joke. They fight about it for a while, and then the neighbors join in. They shout for an hour. Yell out equations having to do with echoes and sound waves and the speed of voices traveling through various kinds of walls, and, at a certain point, he can't stand it

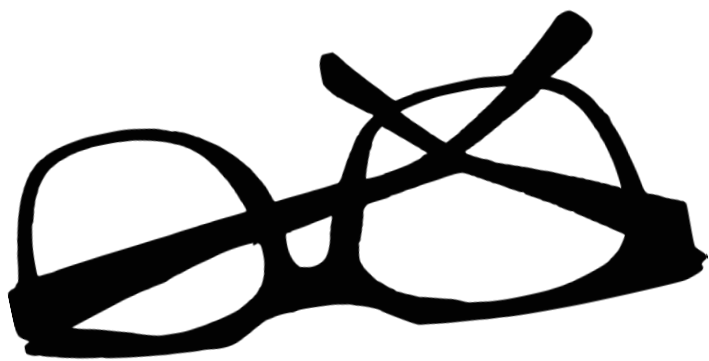
anymore and leaves her frightened and screaming at his back. At his ghost, which maybe hovers there (for a few hours, anyway) while he goes wandering about the city. While he sneaks back across the border and into the waiting arms of a Captain America who shoves him into an ICE van, and together they drive for what feels like hours, and, when he gets out, he's smack dab in the middle of some kind of holding facility, surrounded by Guatemalans. Salvadorians. Hondurans with neck tattoos. He's reciting the story of Byron the Bulb when the lone Mexican says to shut the fuck up. The Mexican says Pynchon doesn't exist. He's invented. A character out of a Bolaño novel, and just as the two are about to come to blows, the agents arrive and tell our man his whole ID situation has been resolved, and he's now free to go. They give him back his clothes. Claim he never had a phone. They buy him a bus ticket to Santa Fe and tell him to go hang out with the other weirdos and hippies, and always remember he's lucky to be alive, and he does go to Santa Fe, except he doesn't stay long. He's more at home in Roswell, where he spends 40 days walking around downwind of the old Trinity Test Site and collecting isotopes in his pockets, knowing someday they'll work their way into his hips and then probably explode. On day 41, he leaves. Heads to Iowa and joins a Trappist monastery. Mostly, this is because he's out of money. He's an oblate for a year. Maybe two. Then, he swears the usual vows and drinks wine and tries to get high off incense. He meditates. Builds caskets. Goes weeks without eating and copies *Against the Day* out longhand (in calligraphy (and he thinks maybe some fellow acolyte will hear about his work on some message board and then start his own pilgrimage, and maybe there should be code words, little Kilroys hidden in the margins)) like they used to. Like they should. He holds the hands of dying monks (brothers with cirrhosis and lung cancer and heart trouble, priests who stare at crucifixes hung on bare walls and mumble about the

resurrection of the body and the holy, catholic, and apostolic church). Hears confessions from pedophiles and porno-addicts and tells the latter they didn't do anything wrong. They smile. They pray. At night, it gets quiet, and there are more stars than he can count, and the bells ring for compline, and he gets lost in the chants. The words. He thinks of Saint Anthony of the Desert and tries to get all mystic. To contact Pynchon in his dreams. It's been maybe a decade at this point, and he figures his hero (his savior, even) probably is dead by now and most likely buried in an unmarked grave somewhere along Vineland (or else near an abandoned postal route, some empty parking lot on CA-49), and Pynchon's death must've managed to escape everyone's notice, and isn't that just perfect? Isn't it exactly right? He decides it is and then all at once feels like Charles Mason going on without his Dixon, and when death finally comes for our man (while he's sleeping off (what felt like) a hangover), a massive load of dimethyltryptamine makes him think he's on some 18th-century galley (that feels oddly German (or else maybe like a rocket, a water-bound missile)), and Pynchon looks 25 in his navy uniform, and they sit there in the middle of the ocean. The ship is massive. It creaks like an old floor. Salt hits them in the face, and they are looking at meteorites and about to cross the equator.

"There are rituals," says Pynchon.

"I know," says our man, but he can't make eye contact. Can't stop thinking about his companion's teeth.

Pynchon checks his watch. They figure it's a long way to Norfolk, and maybe there are some girls below deck, and our man decides it wouldn't be a bad way to go out, and, even if there aren't any, maybe there's time enough to understand. He needs to ask if any of it means something. If this is everything. If it really will be eternity, and please, God, let this all last long enough for me to somehow figure it out.



About the Author



BRETT BIEBEL is the author of *48 Blitz* and *Winter Dance Party*. His short fiction has been included in dozens of literary journals and anthologized by *Best Small Fictions* and *Best Microfiction*. It's also been listed as part of *Wigleaf's* annual Top 50 Very Short Stories (2021). He writes and teaches in Illinois.

Colophon

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