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Lives

Teenage Angst in Texas

By GAIL CALDWELL

In the mid-1960's, the wind-swept plains of the Texas Panhandle could be a languid prison for an adolescent girl with a wild spirit and no place to go. I buried myself in Philip Roth novels and little acts of outrage, and on lonesome afternoons, I would drive my mother's Chevrolet out onto the freeway and take it up to 90 m.p.h., smoking endless cigarettes and aching with ennui. I was bored by the idea of mainstream success and alienated from what the world seemed to offer — one of my poems from those days weighs heavily on the themes of coffins, societal hypocrisy and godlessness. And yet I cannot locate the precise source of my anger. For years I thought all teenagers were fueled by a high-octane mix of intensity and rage; I only know that what sent me onto the highways and into my own corridors of gloom was inexplicable to others and confusing to me.

Around this time my father began what I dismally thought of as our Sunday drives. As kids, my sister and I were bored but tolerant when we had to tag along on his treks, which were always aimless. But now his itinerary was to chart the path of my dereliction, and that meant getting me alone in the car so that we could "talk": about my imminent doom, about my mother's high blood pressure. Thus incarcerated, slouched in the shotgun seat with my arms folded against my chest, I responded to his every effort by either staring out the window or yelling back. I don't remember a word I said. What I still feel is the boulder on my heart — the amorphous gray of the world outside the car window, signaling how trapped I felt, by him and by the hopeless unawareness of my age.

My father, far more than I, seemed to sense that the country was raging, that it was a bad time to surrender your daughters to strange lands. But these things — a war somewhere far away, a civil rights movement over in the Deep South — belonged to the evening news, not to the more intimate treacheries of car rides and deceptions and disappointments, and so were rarely addressed on any personal level, not yet. Instead we fought about curfews or bad boyfriends; we fought about straightening up and flying right. We fought about everything but the truth, which was that I would be leaving soon.

I had already seen two casualties claimed by history, men who were lighting out for the territory to avoid the 1-A draft notices they had just received. The first was a boy who stopped by the house to say goodbye a few days before leaving for Toronto. When the other young man disappeared, the federal authorities came sniffing around my high school, and I covered for him without a shred of hesitation. I told them I thought he went east, to his mother's in Missouri, when I knew it was the one place he would never go.

These losses and the lies they demanded frightened me, in vague and then inarticulate ways, about just who was in charge — about the dangers posed by the institutions that were supposed to keep you safe. It was difficult in those days to care much about the College Boards, or to think that the path in front of me would hold the traditional landscapes of marriage and family. In some ways the tempests of my adolescence had set me against myself; I'd found that introspection couldn't buy you love, that poetry helped only momentarily, that straight A's and spelling bees were no guarantee of knowing where to turn. Worse and more pervasive, I was maturing under the assumption that you should never let men know how smart you were, or how mouthy — a girl's intelligence, brazenly displayed, was seen as impolite, unfeminine and even threatening.

So I kept quiet; when I dated a boy who liked George Wallace, I rolled my eyes and looked out the window. The smarter you were, the more subversive you had to be. Girls could excel in English, say, or languages, as long as they didn't flaunt it or pretend to be superior to males. But God forbid they should try to carve a life out of such achievements. God forbid they display a pitcher's arm, or an affinity for chemistry or analytic prowess in an argument with a man.

In the end, my own revisionism was unconscious but thorough. I neglected anymore to mention the mysterious test, taken at age 7, that resulted in my skipping second grade. Toward the end of high school, I began lying to my peers about my high scores on placement exams, and I blew admission, with half-intention and private relief, into the National Honor Society. The summer before college, in 1968, I had to declare a major; I took a deep breath and wrote "mathematics" on my admission forms. And when friends asked me what I'd chosen, I lied about that too.

Gail Caldwell is the chief book critic of The Boston Globe. This essay is adapted from her memoir, "A Strong West Wind," to be published by Random House in February.