**The First Two Pages: "Shaft On Wheels" by Mark Troy**
From *The Eyes Of Texas: Private Eyes From The Panhandle To The Piney Woods*,
edited by Michael Bracken (Down & Out Books)
An Essay by Mark Troy

When Michael Bracken put out the call for submissions for *The Eyes Of Texas*, I jumped on it. I'd written few Texas stories, even though I lived in Texas nearly as long as I've been writing. My PI stories have mostly been set in Hawai'i. Michael's guidelines were specific. The story had to take place in Texas and the PI had to be Texan, not someone passing through, which meant I couldn't bring in a PI from another of my series. He also wanted the story to show the diversity of the state and its PIs.

I tossed around some ideas and made some false starts. I wanted a story unique to Texas and a PI who clearly represents one of the many diverse Texan populations. Then came Hurricane Harvey and the flooding in Houston. A few days after the storm passed, the news showed video of abandoned vehicles being trucked to Texas World Speedway while their owners were being located. I thought, "What if one of those vehicles should not have been in Houston?" I knew I had a setting and a problem.

To paraphrase the late Ken Kesey, "Don't write what you know. What you know is boring. Write what you don't know." That dictum guides much of my writing. In particular, I try to make my protagonists as different from me as

possible. The reason? I write to learn about these people. I want a character who can open my eyes to a new view of the world. Colt Colton is that character.

Character, setting, problem. I like to introduce my main character at the beginning of the story, especially if I am telling the story from that character's point of view. I want the ride-along to begin for the reader with the very first line. Now the reader can see the setting and the problem through the main character's eyes. I introduced all three in the first line.

> Colt Colton watched a steady stream of flatbed trucks creep along the Highway 6 frontage road for the turn into Texas World Speedway.

Why so many trucks going to a speedway? By the end of the paragraph, we know the problem, unusual for a speedway, is too many vehicles, most of which show the kind of damage wrought by flood waters.

> Each bed carried one or more vehicles. Sedans, SUVs, vans, pickups, late models, older models. Mud crusted many of them all the way to the roofline. Others appeared pristine to the casual observer.

At this point, the reader doesn't know anything about Colt except his name. I don't like gratuitous descriptions of characters. I want readers to form their own images of a character from how they act and from what they say. So, in the second paragraph, I doubled up. That is, I introduced another character, which allows the reader to learn more about Colt and the problem.

Private eyes work for a client. A common feature of a detective story is the client bringing the problem to the detective. The client serves as a messenger, delivering the call to adventure. They help establish the scope of the problem and give the reader some insights as to why the detective was chosen for this mission. Through description of the client and interaction with him, the reader is able to construct an image of Colt and acquire a sense of Colt's attitude. Tommy Ledbetter is the client.

> Tommy Ledbetter, standing beside Colt, said, "Been like this three days now. They say there might be a million vehicles down in Houston and Harris County." Ledbetter wore a blue polo shirt embroidered with his company name—Autopros. The September sun had already cooked his face like the inside of a medium-rare steak. He wiped sweat off his forehead.

A million vehicles! Left unsaid is that these are abandoned vehicles—the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey which brought massive destruction to Houston and other parts of the Texas Gulf Coast. It's September. Harvey made landfall on August 25 and hung over the Texas Coast, dropping massive amounts of rainfall before moving east on August 30.

The reader knows Ledbetter is fair-skinned because the sun is cooking his face. Using contrast and dialogue, I'm able to help the reader form an image of Colt.

> Colt adjusted his Stetson and said, "Y'all ain't from here are you?"
> "Gary Indiana."

"Figured as much. When you be melanin challenged, you best be wearin' a hat if you wanna stay long outside in Texas."

The Stetson is a big hat and Colt has an attitude to match. He's not just proud of being black; for Colt, being white is a handicap. Colt does have his own handicap, however, which he uses to advantage whenever he can.

"Didn't plan on being out here. Thought we could meet inside." Ledbetter indicated the mobile office behind him.
"Yeah, coulda done if y'all was handicap accessible."
Colt let him stew in embarrassment a minute. Then he said, "So how many of that million you gonna take?"

Ledbetter goes on to explain they will probably take about thirty thousand vehicles for which they need to find owners. He acknowledges that the owners of most of the vehicles are known because it was the owners themselves who had them removed when the waters receded. Other owners are easily tracked down, but a few are hard to find. Locating the elusive ones is why they wish to hire Colt. This gives Colt another chance to display his Stetson-sized ego after Ledbetter tells him he had been referred to them.

"My bosses asked for referrals. Someone in the Dallas Police Department said you were pretty good at tracing vehicles."
"Them mothuhfuckers lied. Not pretty good. I'm the best. Eight years auto theft division."

Does this seem familiar—a black private eye with a big attitude? Sure does. It sounds a bit like Shaft, the character played by Richard Roundtree back in the

seventies. Only this isn't the seventies, it's 2017 and Colt Colton is in a wheel

chair. And he's Texan. How Texan? One more exchange completes the picture.

> Colt dropped the folder onto his lap. Before he could wheel
> away, Ledbetter said, "You mind if I ask you something? Your injury,
> did you get that in the line of duty?"
> Colt grinned. "Funny way y'all say that. Not *in* the line of duty.
> *On* line of duty."
> Ledbetter's face twisted in confusion. Colt laughed. "Line Of
> Duty was the name of a fifteen-hundred-pound bag of aggression. A
> rodeo bull. Spun to the left comin' out the chute and threw me into a
> rail. Then the mothuhfucker stomped on my back."

Colt Colton is Texan from his Stetson hat to an outsized ego that not even a

fifteen-hundred-pound bag of aggression can trample into submission. The reader

can be confident that he will be a match for the outsized problems created by a

Texas-sized storm. He can't resist one last display of Texas attitude before leaving

Ledbetter.

> Leaning out the driver's window, he said, "Hey, Gary Indiana,
> best get your white ass out of the sun."
> If you can't take the heat, get out of Texas.

<div align="center">#</div>

Mark Troy has written two private eye novels, including the Shamus-nominated
*Pilikia Is My Business*, and numerous PI short stories featuring private eyes Val
Lyon and Ava Rome. His novella *Dos Tacos Guatemaltecos Y Una Pistola Casera*
will be published in 2020 in the *Guns + Tacos* series from Down & Out Books.
Mark is retired from Texas A&M University and lives in central Texas.