



# **MAN AGAINST THE HORSES!**

**FOUR  
THEATER OF THE ABSURD  
NOVELETTES**

**MICHAEL D. SMITH**

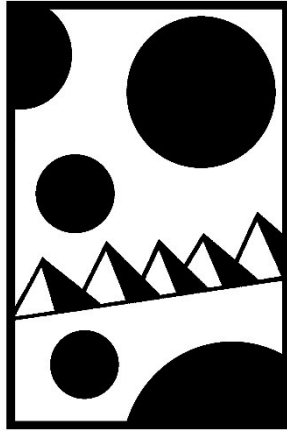
# **Man Against the Horses!**

**Four Theater of the Absurd Novelettes**

Michael D. Smith

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cover art and design by Michael D. Smith

For my wife Nancy  
who backed me fully as these  
stories were created



# Introduction

This informal collection is something like an autobiographical investigation of fresh creative energies arising in my 1975, shortly before I began my breakthrough novel *Akard Drearstone*. All four stories were completed in 1975, and are presented in order of composition. Though I've always referred to them as stories, I see they can be classified as novelettes (word count ca. 7,500-19,000). I hadn't been aware of that designation until recently, and it may account for their many rejections from short story magazines. These lengths show how eager I was at the time to abandon story writing and move into the exploratory possibilities of the novel.

"Space, Time, and Tania" (begun 1974, completed 1975) was published in 1977 and I haven't revised it here except for a handful of error corrections. The other three unpublished stories received a bit more clean-up, but these edits aren't extensive and usually just excise the occasional eruption of obvious BS. I want to maintain these stories' 1975 quality, but I also want to feel comfortable with what I now decide to display on these pages. I feel I'm bringing out their true 1975 versions *as they should have been finalized at the time*. However, I left in all manner of stylistic frills that no modern editor would allow; that's my 1975 style, heavily influenced by late-sixties and early-seventies counterculture.

"Space, Time, and Tania" was published after three or four rejections. "The Highland Park Cadillac Races" was sent to five publishers, "The 66,000 M.P.H. Bicycle" to six. "Man Against the Horses!" remained in draft form and was never submitted anywhere.

## **Space, Time, and Tania**

Bumbling ex-Texas Department of Public Death officer Marty Brimfeeler probes the death of Tania in Houston shortly before World War III erupts. This is a fun, intelligent, loopy story, despite being inspired by the kidnapping of Patty Hearst and her brainwashing by the Symbionese Liberation Army in 1974. The story strikes me now, as close to an impartial view after all these decades as I'm about to get, as properly channeling the universe. There doesn't seem to be a career-minded ego trip to it. Of course it's not really about Patty Hearst.

## **Man Against the Horses**

Five horses in Paris, Texas have finally had enough. They break out of their corral, charge down the highway, and, imbued with fresh superpowers, tear the city of Dallas to pieces. This rough draft manages to express my antipathy toward my new city of Dallas and my post-college job's bleak regimentation, which felt like a return to high school compared to my insular, satisfied university life in Houston. I deleted several cute, screwy phrases that wouldn't have survived a second draft, and aligned the tone of the final section with the story's overall mood.

## **The Highland Park Cadillac Races**

This piece continues my vengeful satire of my new city as it showcases how hapless insurance executive Bobby Thompson, plagued by numerous metaphysical questions, races Cadillac against Cadillac to prove his manhood on the mean streets of Dallas. I removed a disgusting and utterly unnecessary first scene which probably accounted for the continual rejections of this

story; otherwise I just made light edits, broke sprawling paragraphs into easier-to-read ones, and took out a handful of distracting embellishments. Note that whenever I needed to impress the reader with Cadillac engine technology, I just made something up.

### **The 66,000 M.P.H. Bicycle**

Special agent Atoka evades “the Americans” on his nuclear-powered, 66,000-m.p.h. bicycle until he’s bombed into chewed-up guts on a Texas coastal freeway. The 1975 author was able to ignore physics such as escape velocity, inertia, friction, and sonic booms, but came up with some interesting computer concepts for a 1975 story written by someone who knew nothing about computers. But what works here is the ludicrousness of Atoka’s mission, which is never explained. This final 1975 story only needed very light edits.

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# Space, Time, and Tania

## Junior Year Drawings

At night, the walls of Marty Brimfeeler's office were lined with hundreds of Mr. Salty pretzel boxes. One dim study lamp was on. Dried brown blood made the pages of Tania's diary hard to separate. Marty poured another Pepsi from the little refrigerator. The air conditioner didn't work very well, the room was slimy, and Marty sat in the grim leather swivel chair with his chest bare.

Marty looked up again. Beyond the illuminated square of his desk a little red light on the emergency radio floated in terrifying psychedelic blackness. It seemed that some genius locusts from outside the window had merged with the faint air conditioner hum to create a structured work of art ... it was as if Marty were listening to a group of very spaced-out people as their voices tried to convince each other of very spaced-out philosophies, but fell back in laughter every time. It was so pompous that Marty had to laugh. A laugh rush. He lost his mind in it, then stopped. He was hearing the locust music with a different sense, the texture of it floated out like a wooden river, with symbols of pentacles glowing red above cities, spread out above the barren and hideous nighttime American countryside.

As he alternated between this series of auditory sensations and the scattered, elongated handwriting in the diary, Marty pictured Tania in her black MG, on Wayside Drive in east Houston, Texas, at seventy-five miles an hour. Her consciousness was rippling in white eels of motion and wind, as the oily humidity of the ocean boiled over Houston, carrying liquid seeds of possibility in the sorry breezes. He could feel Tania shifting that four-speed, could hear the mechanism clicking precisely into each slot. The scene locked in his head. Little boys on bicycles fled from her path. Beautiful, ugly Tania. Slowing down only enough to miss cross-traffic at intersections, and then she was accelerating, with a mindless deft slide into the next higher gear. Tania on Sixty-Ninth Street: Marty felt the engine turning over, felt each cylinder rocking, the distributor revolving, sending the sparks in, the shaped metal pieces falling together in the undisturbed order of insanity. And Marty saw the last stoplight she had run, the puddle of water she had raced at. Marty saw the Black Cliff that Tania saw, and he felt her relax behind the wheel, felt her guide the MG smoothly into the Black Cliff, and explode herself on the first handy lamppost.

It was Thursday night, or early Friday morning, a couple weeks after the Tuesday afternoon that Tania had died. Marty Brimfeeler looked down at his big tan trousers with the two black stripes running up the sides, pushed a dull spider off them. Marty Brimfeeler, Officer in Charge of Public Death at the Texas Department of Public Death on Alba Street up off Thirty-Fourth Street, reached over to a cheap portable stereo and placed Bob Dylan's *Planet Waves* on the rubber turntable, set it moving, and placed the needle in the record. The music came out heartily. Marty pulled another box of pretzels from the wall, tore its top open and fisted out dry salty brown shapes. Crunched them. His mouth became sticky. His ears lost themselves in pounding music shapes. Mr. Public Death, as he affectionately liked to think of himself, could not properly concentrate on the matter at hand. Everything was distraction. This three o'clock in the morning was distraction.

"As Patty Hearst's mother squeezes oranges to make the screwdrivers' foam at the San

Francisco moodies' parties ..." the first entry read, the sides of the page burnt, but this first handwriting was legible and refined, as opposed to the psychotic roaming fantasy loops and the furious digging desperations that were to follow ...

Marty pushed the black mess away from him again. It was no use. He would have to retake Freshman English to understand this crap. Another entry: "The theory that my separate so-called 'ego consciousness' is the only possible consciousness in the universe--I do not mean this in a simple philosophical sense--I mean walking into an elevator and knowing that *this is it*, this is *all there is*. There's nothing else, there are no 'levels of consciousness.' There is nothing hidden or mysterious about this--to think that there is, is delusion. So here I am, assembling little pieces of bullshit into larger structures of bullshit."

In the light of the Dylan album, somehow this meant something. The two alternate structures seemed to mesh somewhere ... it all tied in somehow ... or perhaps Marty was just so full of energy that it seemed that he was always on the verge of a breakthrough. But then, what was a breakthrough? So much more nonsense added to the top of the pile.

"Whoever invented the ego was probably the world's first mystic. Before he got it together, people were gorillas, egoless but complete assholes. Then this first mystic saw that an assumption about reality could be formed, namely, that a separate ego exists, and that this assumption could be used as a tool in understanding reality."

Now what was that shit? Marty demanded of the pretzel wall. "There are two kinds of record albums: on the one hand, you have those which function as a present work of art, little pieces of bullshit into larger, such as Dylan's *Planet Waves*. These albums do all the pleasant form-content artistic communication we have all grown to know and love. Then you have the kind of album which functions, in addition to the old arty expression shit, as a symbol of a certain kind of experience. As Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland* so obviously encodes the LSD experience into a symbol which will make people who have undergone the experience recognize the fundamental acid perception which began it all."

Was Marty on to something? It must mean ... he flipped forward a few pages to another entry. "Experience of two nights ago. Cannot remember it." What?

Marty listened to the realm of sounds pulsing up around him, from the four cheap speakers in the corners of the room self-wired by amateur electrician Marty. The corners were dark. The red light on the radio had gone off. Marty was alone in the Department of Public Death building. He flipped more, randomly. "Rows of mystical paychecks ..." Or: "I feel encased in it, the four trees in the city park bursting vision--*all over again*--the globes of *time*--hanging over the *freeways* ..."

Okay, goddammit. Time to get out of here. Marty pulled on his light tan Officer Death shirt, muttering, stood. No more foreign scholars, or loose interpretations that must always be retracted to please one's foreign friends. No more of this. He had read it all a hundred times and it still didn't make any sense. Marty grabbed his car keys. His eyes caught the last entry in the partially shredded diary.

STARTHROAT.

Out on Sixty-Ninth Street at three-forty-three A.M., inside the big white Texas Department of Public Death cruiser. It was a quaint semi-ghetto jumble of colorful buildings and intersections. Some construction. Marty was waiting at the light to the intersection where Tania had laid down her MG as efficiently as any acid-acned asshole ever lay down a Kawasaki 500. Marty must have seen this intersection for the fiftieth time now. He pulled the cruiser to the side of the street and parked it. Then locked it. He was in a four A.M. dream, the silver-gray light

from the lamps above fell down in a lazy neutral mindglow. The houses and shops were cardboard facades for some theatrical production--as if some Hollywood manipulator type had greased the area with cash and delusion ... Marty went over to the intersection, to the streetlamp where, yes, little crushed pieces of plastic amber turn signal indicators still remained. Right in front of a white wooden Baptist church, with its own dual floodlights. He heard the gray spotlight box click, saw the yellow light on the cross street, and the Sixty-Ninth light go green. That particular diary entry Marty had memorized: "AND IN FRONT OF ME THE PAINFUL/UNPAINFUL OPEN-ENDEDNESS, THE GRACE OF GOD AND THE FINALITY OF DEATH, THE BLACK CLIFF WHICH HAS CLAIMED MANY A PUBLIC VEHICLE, PASSIONATE, UTTERLY *ENTIRE*, WHERE THE ROAD HAS CRUMBLED OFF AND THE SIMPLE SHOPS AFFORD ONLY THE JOKE, THE LAUGH, FOR THE CRIME WHICH COULD NOT BE COMMITTED BECAUSE IT WAS SO BIG, SO IMPOSSIBLE EVEN TO CONCEPTUALIZE, HAD INDEED BEEN COMMITTED, INDEED WAS GOING ON RIGHT NOW IN FRONT OF MY EYES ... AS I FLOWED INTO THE ... STARHROAT ..."

And the sudden edge of awareness, the moist eyes and the shiver. Tania ...

Run through it again. Marty Brimfeeler had pulled the body out from under the black-green car, overturned. Overturned in a stream of black water which was obviously enjoying itself in the gutter. In her hand a blue medium point deluxe Bic pen, the end of it thoroughly chewed. "Whatever consciousness is *new* you *must* take into your system."

Marty had no doubts that the celebrated "Starthroat" passage had been composed as Tania was flipping the light car up on the high curb and into the lamppost, bouncing off the post, burning ... her hand was still finishing the "t" at the end of "Starthroat" when Marty had stopped the big white cruiser which he had just turned out from the side street that Tania had cut through at seventy-five. Tania had known what was happening ... the lightpost had been her starthroat.

The first few times Marty had revisited the death scene, after his first hesitant readings of Tania's diary, he had been totally stopped by the question of the "black cliff," which seemed to play an important role in Tania's mythology. But a week or so after the ambulance had cleaned up the tragedy and the newsmen had had their fill, Marty was making a drive down Wayside and Sixty-Ninth Street after a brief thunderstorm on a Sunday afternoon, coming off a long drinking binge from the night before, in a mood where he sometimes fancied he could even begin to understand a bit of the LSD intoxication that Tania kept returning to, again and again, in her writings. Marty came to the intersection and noticed two things: one, that the intersection was a broken stone hill, an upward slope that masked the other side from the driver; and two, that once at the summit of that hill, one was confronted with a fresh Space, a Volume, consisting of the downward slope of the road itself, the little shops and houses to the side, and between them ... the black ... puddle ... which for an instant, a joyously terrifying instant, looked like ... a black cliff ... as if the road had been sacrificed to the construction workers of Hell ... and Tania had taken that whole trip at seventy-five miles an hour ...

But Marty saw that one *must* realize in the come-down of that instant that it *is* merely a black puddle after all, nothing serious, not the shaky perspective of the annihilation of all existence where paying the price of Woolworth's Eternal Damnation is possible. But then a second realization must hit: that although it is just another puddle of water, nevertheless this puddle has been placed, here, at a certain critical copper wire juncture, the spring has been set, the current is rolling on the interstate, the truckers are picking up their paychecks and--you are into That Situation, and Grace is falling out of the skies, so bright and sweet/unsweet that you

could die on the spot, which is what Tania did. It was her final satori, rather a better term for Tania would be “the structured peak of an LSD trip, the climax of a structure which is so infinitely open-ended as to challenge its worth as a structure.” And for those of us who chose to live on ... for those of us who, in Tania’s words, “chose to go to the Astrodome rather than submit to the Paranoia Which Passeth All Understanding,” chose to rake up the plunder of millions of years of ... Habit ... and Everyday Walking Around ... chose to follow the chain of Brotherhood and Friendship and Love ... to renounce the unsteady balance between Suffering and Bullshit forever ... in her brighter moments no one could have gotten Tania to admit that the Essential Secret of Life was called Paranoia, no she would just have settled back in her chair, said something once about “just my immaturity that as yet I still see it as Paranoia ... for once we have Total Coverage, that Balance is Joy.” And yet the living Tania knew like the rest of humanity how to shirk that Balance ... it sucked all her energy from her ... to know it is to overturn that MG.

And yet, of all the fucking goddamn people who crowded in on him as he pulled the body out from under the car, the people who gaped and laughed and threw up at the smell of smashed guts and blood, of all the assholes who waited in line with him at the Astrodome with their pets and girls and boys, of all these people it was Officer of Public Death, the monstrous Marty Brimfeeler, a comic figure, Marty of all people who had received the diary and read it and had had this vision replayed for him alone. And when Marty had had this vision, when he surprisingly had comprehended it with unusual mental strength, he drove past it. No--he didn’t stop to look for more torn pages from the diary--drove past it. Went north, into the true raw industrial ship channel practical madness of Houston, to brood. The grass in the sawed-off fields was khaki and smelled like urine ... and he still couldn’t fit the insight into the structure, the open-ended structure. You had to be careful with the structure. Not only did you not know what you were doing, or why you needed to fit all your precious insights into this stupid structure, but one misstep anywhere in the complicated ritual sequence and you were out one structure--if it got too open-ended, it became Bullshit. Then it was not only of no use to you, there was also a high danger of believing your own bullshit and spending endless time caught up in pleasant diversions ... until the Need happened again.

So Tania had created that structure. Did Marty have to relive it? As much as he hated *Planet Waves*, Marty studied the whole thing over and over again ... it warbled in the streets, hummed in the corridors of the Department of Public Death. By now Marty had almost succeeded in memorizing every musical note, every word, every rhythm, in the album *Planet Waves*. The only thing left for him now was to understand the entirety of conceptualization which he was certain Bob Dylan had never dreamed of creating, that is, to understand how every conceptualization in the album related to every other one ... a net ... again, maddeningly ... a structure. Now the problem of defining “concept.” Marty wouldn’t even try. A concept was ANYTHING. That meant that there were an infinite number of ANYTHINGS in that album. Which was totally unrelated to what Dylan thought he was doing. To understand how fate had conspired in all its permutations to create this THING, and if it were at all possible to understand that fate, that structure of concepts, to see then how this work of artifice or destiny was the perfect expression of the anti-structure, random reality. Now of course anti-structure and artifice were the same thing. Yet one was yin and the other yang, somehow, and they did something weird when placed in the same room with each other. Ripoff! Tania had written that down three months before: “They did something weird when placed in the same room with each other.” That was all, too, none of this shit about “conceptualization” and “yin-yang,” although Marty saw that the phrase

“with each other” was redundant. Tania never scored any points as a stylist.

Marty looked around the Sixty-Ninth Street intersection. The Public Speakers broadcast *Planet Waves* up and down the street, as indeed they were doing on every street in the city. It was getting on towards five A.M. now, in the white cloud pollution near the ship channel, with a faint edge of light from the east exposing a white Texas Department of Public Death cruiser for the early morning psychotics with rifles to shoot at. Black maids cleaned up hospitals in Houston’s Medical Center, all night long, returned with their boyfriends in Camaros. The street was smooth, unusual for this east side of town, but even the five A.M. would not stop the crazies from tearing up the street with bourbon and mirrored sunglasses. The black cliff curb was dry now, but that was all right, everything else was playing the metaphor of the black cliff tonight. Yeah, it was so easy to talk about the black cliff when you were home, safe with Pepsi and pretzels. Marty felt the fear. Got inside the cruiser. Charged it up, back north, to the freeways.

In the width of five lanes, Marty finally relaxed. Okay, so he was no fucking genius, but still, to graduate from the Texas Department of Public Death Training School and be Mr. Public Death the next month ... that was too much ... Marty was afraid he was going to end up on a heavy Power trip. He could feel it ready to surge through him now ... if only he didn’t get killed first. All was change, all was flux, everything was new. Everything new he felt ready to discard at first as trivial and compromising, but then he would remember himself, take it in ... above all to be the person who had access to Tania’s diary--he remembered the soggy red bundle he had removed from her stiffening wrist, carrying it over to Brontosaurus, who said: “Keep it, it’s yours, Brimfeeler. Don’t never say I never gave you nothing.” After all his dull meat-headed training in Public Death, to be aware of that open-ended structure. It was some power building up. So powerful he was afraid to use it. He thought of his office, lovable, with the boxes of pretzels on the walls, so tempting, that he often had to force himself mightily just to sit down and read Tania, and even then he would often give up in disgust ... for in many ways Tania *was Planet Waves* incarnate ... both of them were ill-designed, mediocre, yet polished jewels, perfect.

At five-fifty-six, by his Death digital watch, *Planet Waves* was being played at very soft volume on the Katy Freeway. Marty rolled down his window, and felt the smelly moist air of love push inside bringing *Planet Waves* with it, louder now. Hearing it strung out on amplifiers placed on the light poles two hundred feet apart at seventy miles an hour was weird ... there was either a definite time lag resulting from all those mathematical concepts, or else Marty’s head was really messed. Soft, *Planet Waves* filled the dream freeway like tender cosmic shitballs bouncing happily in slow motion, soon to fill up the entire landscape of trench and sky with fluorescent pinpoints of color. Marty loved the freeway at times like this. And inevitably some fucker in a Plymouth Duster bent on seeing how his hundred-fifty-mile-an-hour thrill would wind up winding up into a *Planet Waves* lamppost would need to be hosed off the pavement, and Marty Brimfeeler would call up a nearby patrol car and plead emergency business up on North Shepherd ... but tonight there were no Dusters, no Corvettes, only Law and Order. Marty took North Shepherd anyway, to Thirty-Fourth Street, then to Alba Street, parked the cruiser in back of the Texas Department of Public Death Driver Testing Station. He unlocked himself into the office, the light still on and Tania’s blood-soaked papers spread over the desk. Marty’s brain had become useless. From outside the building he could hear the sounds of junkies and illiterate high school students who had waited in line all night to be first to take their driver’s tests in the morning. Poor petitioners peered hopelessly into the dark glass. The big waiting room of the Testing Station was bleak green tile, unbroken void. It was past six A.M. Marty sagged in his

chair. Another entry on the table demanded him.  
“TURNED AWAY AT THE ASTRODOME.”