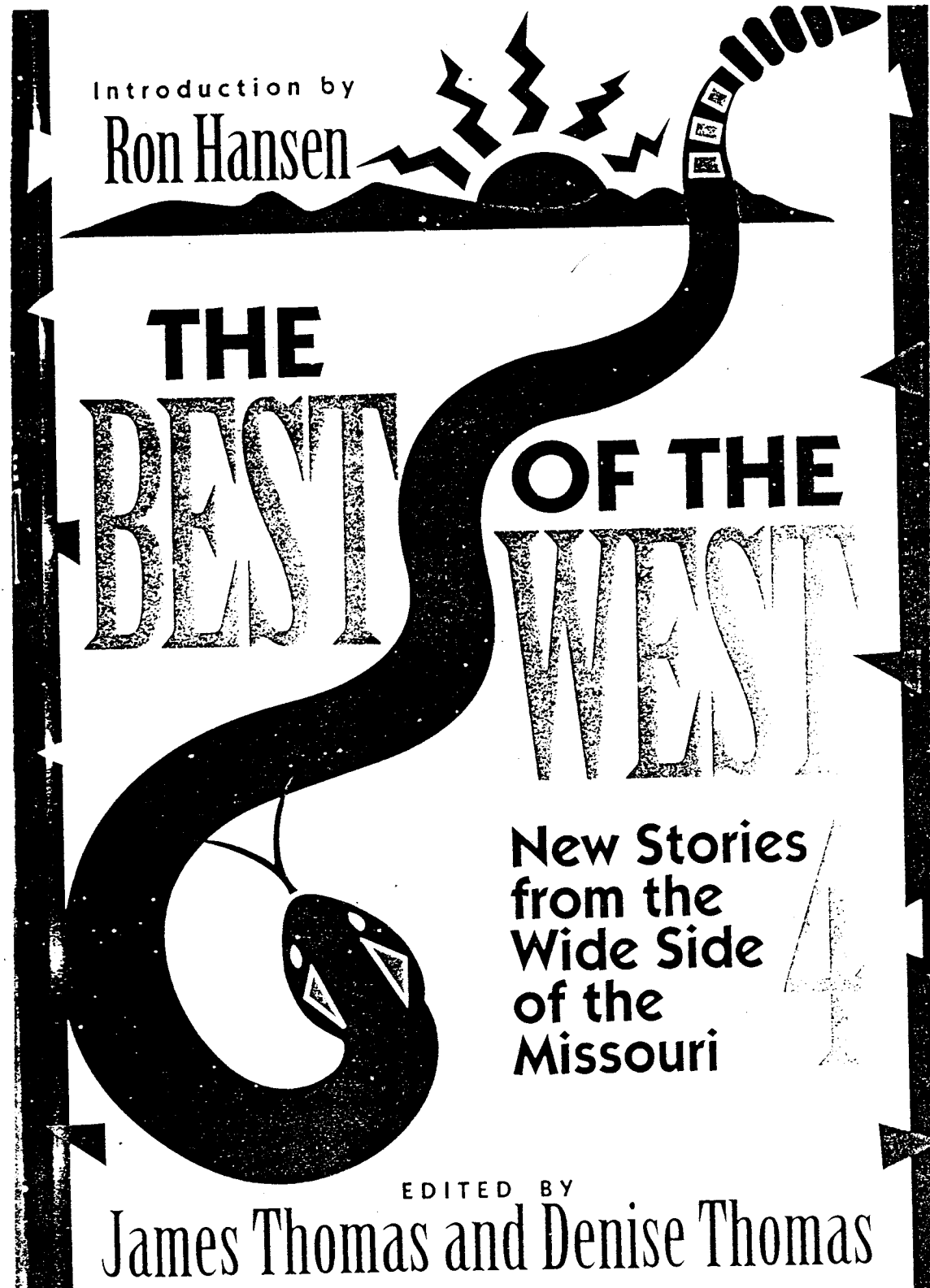


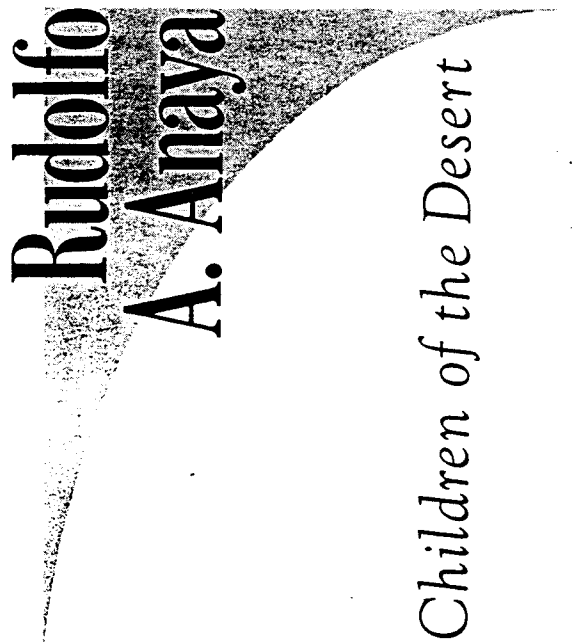
1982-1983
Introduction by
Ron Hansen



**THE
BAND
OF THE
WEST**

New Stories
from the
Wide Side
of the
Missouri

EDITED BY
James Thomas and Denise Thomas



Rudolfo A. Anaya

Children of the Desert

He had worked the oil fields of south Texas for as long as he could remember. Abandoned as a child, he was passed from family to family until he was old enough to work. He grew up living and breathing the desert, but never trusting it. He sometimes drove into the desert alone, not looking for anything in particular, perhaps testing some inner fear he felt of the vast landscape. Sometimes he would find sun-bleached bones, and he would feel compelled to take one back to his trailer.

Once he had seen the bodies of two Mexicans the sheriff had brought in. They had died of heat exposure in the desert. Their mouths were stuffed with sand, sand that in their last feverish moments they thought was water.

He could not forget the image of the two wetbacks, and after

that he developed the habit of hiding plastic milk containers full of water along the desert trails he knew. The desert was merciless; without water a man would die of thirst.

He kept to himself, but once a year at Christmas time he went to Juarez. He took the long drive across the desert to drink and visit the brothels. It was a week in which he went crazy, drinking to excess and spending his money on the prostitutes.

When his money was gone he headed back to the oil town, his physical yearning satisfied, but the deeper communion he had sought in the women remained unfulfilled.

One Christmas he stopped to clean up and eat at a trucker's cafe on the outskirts of El Paso. The waitress at his table was a young woman, not especially pretty, but flirtatious. She wore bright red lipstick which contrasted with her white skin. She drew him into conversation.

He was self-conscious, but he smiled and told her he was going home. He talked about the oil town, the aluminum trailers clustered together in the desert. He had a job, he had a truck, and he lived alone.

"A man without water will die in that desert," he said, and held his breath. Would she understand?

"The desert's all we got." She nodded, looking out the window, beyond the trucks and cars of the gas station to the desert which stretched into Mexico. "It's both mother and father. Lover and brother." She was like him, an abandoned child of the desert. He looked at her and felt troubled. Why did she pay attention to him? What did she want?

She wanted to go with him. Would he take her? He had never shared his space with anyone. Only during the week in Juarez, and then he went crazy and could not remember what he had done. The women he slept with were a blur. After that week of debauchery he felt empty, like the unsatisfied desert.

Now a new emotion crept into his loneliness. He thought the feeling came with the sweet smell of her perfume, her red lips and blue eyes. She squinted in the bright sun as she looked at him. Her

skin was white, and beneath her blouse he saw the rise and fall of her breasts. He wanted to touch her.

"I can't take you," he mumbled.

"Why not?" she asked. "I can take care of your place, wash your clothes, sew, cook. You said you ain't got a woman."

No, he didn't have a woman. Did he need one? He needed something, someone.

"Get in." He nodded.

"You won't be sorry," she said. She ran back into the cafe and returned with a small, worn suitcase. "All I got's in here." She smiled.

He had never been able to say much more than a few words to any woman, but as they drove across the desert he opened up to her. He told her about his work on the oil rigs and about the small aluminum trailer he had in the oil town. He told her how once a year he went to Juarez and became a different person, but he would give that up for her.

She had no family, so they guessed they belonged together. She was happy with the trailer, she was happy to belong.

He was happy too, now he whistled on the way to work. He gave up the old habit of hiding the containers full of water, and he began to forget where the precious water lay hidden.

The other workers joked about him. The older men said they had never seen him so happy, and it must be because he was getting it regular now. Get your young wife pregnant, they said, otherwise she might start running around. They knew the women of the oil town were lonely. There was nothing for them to do in the desert, and each woman spent a lot of time alone. Sometimes three or four of them gathered together to talk or exchange recipes or to play cards. Usually they drank, and then they cursed their life in the lonely and merciless desert.

The men didn't want their wives to form these groups. On those days dinner wasn't ready, they argued and fought. It was better to have the women stay at home, alone, not getting fancy ideas from the neighbor ladies, each man thought. In preserving

that false peace each woman was driven deeper into loneliness.

He thought about a baby, but he didn't mention it to her. The child would be an extension of something that happened when they made love. That was what he felt, and it provided a small measure of contentment.

He wondered if she thought of a child. She said nothing, she seemed happy. There was no sign of pregnancy, and he grew more intense, driving deeper into her flesh to deposit his fluid of life, water he hid in her desert. But she, like the desert, was never satisfied. She took pleasure from his emptying in her, but he had nothing to show for his possession. She lay in bed when he was done, glowing with the sweat of their love.

She is the desert, he thought, she thrives on the heat and sweat.

"I love the heat," she had told him once, and what she said mystified him. The heat of the desert was death. The men with sand stuffed in their mouths, the bleached bones of those who died there.

He remembered the earrings he had found in the sand. The glitter of gold and the red rubies had caught his attention. Someone had lost her way, a woman. The sheriff found dead people out there all the time. Mexicans coming across to look for work, looking for a better life. The promised land.

He had not told her of the earrings. He felt them in his pocket. Would he give them to her someday?

"Come here." She smiled and drew him to bed to make love, her words like the cry of the doves when they came to drink water. Her movements beneath him were urgent, searching for her relief. He was still thinking of the earrings when he tasted sand in his mouth.

He felt the hair rise along his back, he drew away. She moaned and smiled, awash in the convulsion that swept over her. Sweat glistened on her breasts and stomach. She kept her eyes closed as she caressed herself, slowly running her hands between her breasts, along her flat stomach.

"Hotter than hell," he said, and lighted a cigarette.

She was still out there, in the space the orgasm created. The soft sounds she made irritated him.

"You sound like a cat," he said.

"It's just cause you make me feel so good," she answered. "When you're on me," she said, "a bubble forms right here, between us. I can feel it. I hold you tight so the bubble won't escape. Here. Feel."

He felt sand.

She held on to him even after he was spent. She held tight even when he was choking for air. The desert swept over him and covered his mouth with sand. At that moment he always cried out. Why did fear and pleasure come together?

"You're crazy," he said.

"I can feel it," she said.

He looked out the window at the hot, burning land. Mirages formed in the distance, green trees and the blue shimmer of water. An oasis. Hell, he knew there wasn't water out there. A mirage. Nothing. Death. Like the bubble, sucking you in.

"Crazy woman," he repeated. There she was covered with sweat and rubbing herself, in dreamland, and the trailer was hot as an oven.

"It's hotter than hell," he shouted, got up and flipped on the air conditioner.

"I like it hot," she answered.

He looked at her. She was caressing the spot where she said the bubble formed. Her nails were red against her white skin. Her breasts were full, round, crowned with pink nipples.

Sweat dripped from his armpits, ran in trickles down his ribs. He thought of the pile of bones around the side of the trailer, bones he had collected over the years.

"What do you think about when you feel that bubble?" he asked.

"It's a secret." She smiled.

A secret, he thought. A fucking secret. The men were right, a

young wife shouldn't be running around with the other women. Getting ideas. He knew she went into town with them, drove the seventy miles just to sit in the cool movie house. Hell, they probably went drinking.

"I don't want you hanging around with the women. Damn floozies."

She looked at him. "They're not floozies."

"You do what I say!" he shouted, and kicked the small table near him. The red plastic flowers crashed to the floor.

"Get rid of your crazy ideas," he said in anger, and fell down on her, to crush away the secret of the bubble. But he couldn't do it. The irritation he felt made him impotent.

"You're hurting me," she said, and struggled away.

He stood over her, trying to catch his breath, trying to understand what was happening. Her toenails were painted red. Red like the fruit of the cactus. Her lips were red, the curtains were red, the dress was red, even the plastic flowers were red. And the earrings were red. He stumbled to the sink to splash water on his face.

"You okay?" she asked.

The water was like sand. His hands trembled.

"You like it here, because of the bubble," he said.

"We both like it here," she answered. "Didn't I tell you, we're children of the desert."

He looked out the window over the sink. There was nothing. Nothing. Only heat and sand. He had forgotten where he hid the water, or where he had found the earrings. Now he had nothing. He was at the mercy of the desert.

"There is no bubble!" he shouted at her, struck out. The slap caught her flush across the mouth. Blood oozed from her lips.

"There is," she insisted, fighting back the pain. "It's here, between us. It's the most beautiful feeling on earth. There's no harm in it!"

Her cry rang in his ears long after he left the trailer. In the desert he could hear the sound of her voice, see the red of her lips. He drove deep into the desert, away from her. But now being alone frightened him. He lost his way, panic swept over him like a suffocating sandstorm.

He had never before been lost. He stopped at an arroyo he thought he knew and tore into the sand until his hands bled, but he couldn't find any of his water containers. He remembered the men with their mouths full of sand, their eyes eaten out by the vultures. In that moment of fear, his mother spoke to him, her red lips taunting him. He saw her clearly, the gold earrings dangling.

Finally, when he found his way back, he was exhausted and trembling. A terrible fear made him shiver. He drank all night and the following day.

He used her roughly in a brutal attempt to destroy the images which haunted him. "No more bubble!" he insisted when he was done. "It's gone!" he shouted triumphantly.

But what was that pocket of air he had killed? The child he had wished for? The secret she hid from him? His failure to understand? And why had he seen his mother in the desert? The questions haunted him.

She withdrew into herself, cowering in fear. He had become a man she did not know. He used her, but now there was only the suffering. The bed became a bed of sand. The more frantic his need, the more silent and withdrawn she became.

He went across the border to Agua Arenosa, to the whore house. He drank and went to the prostitutes until he was exhausted. When his money was gone he argued and fought, and the cantinero threw him out in the street.

He sat in the dust, a bitter taste in his mouth. Around him the town was deserted. Dervish dust swirled down the street, the wind cried like a mourning woman.

He was lost in that wailing wind. Sand stung his eyes, he tasted it in his mouth.

He turned to an old woman who sat by the door of the cantina. Old and wrinkled and dirty, she was called into the cantina only to test the men before they went to the whores. He reached out and grabbed her.

"*Demonio!*" she cried in terror and struggled to pull away. "*Deja me ir, diablo!*"

"No! No! I won't hurt you!" he cried. "I won't hurt you. I only want to know! Inside! *Aquí!*" he shouted and pointed to his chest, the place where emptiness gnawed at his heart.

His cry was one of torment. The old woman grew calm. She had seen eyes like his before. The devil of the desert was in the man. He had seen death, or he was about to die. "*Aquí,*" she said. "*Corazon.*"

Heart? His heart was dry. He had opened his heart and the desert had swept in.

"*Mira, hijo,*" the woman said kindly. She drew a line on the dirt. She spit to one side and a ball of mud formed from the dirt and the spittle. "*Hombre,*" she said.

She spit to the other side. "*Mujer,*" she said.

Then she spit on the line, and a perfect ball of wet earth formed. "*Semilla,*" she smiled.

She pushed the two balls towards the one in the middle, and the three dissolved into one.

"*Amor,*" she said and moved away.

The seed was love. It lay between the man and the woman. It belonged to both. It was like a child growing in the belly, or like the bubble she caressed.

Even in the sand the seed of love could grow. He reached into his pocket and found the gold earrings with the red rubies. He looked at them, feeling the great burden of the past. Whatever was out there in the desert would haunt him no more, and he threw the earrings as far as he could. For a moment they glistened in the sun then disappeared into the sand.

He drove home, careening down the road, a speck in the vast bowl of desert and sky. He drove fast, full of a new urgency to see

her. Near the trailer he crossed an arroyo, the front tires caught in the sand, the truck flipped over and he was thrown out.

For some time he lay unconscious, then awoke to feel a sharp pain in his lungs. When he spit he saw the red stain of blood. But he could not rest until he saw her and told her what he had discovered.

Holding his side he ran to the trailer, calling her name. She was not there when he arrived. The trailer was empty.

He slumped to the ground by the door. The pain was sharp in his chest, he could not breathe, but he felt a calmness. Around him the desert was a space opening and receding. Her bubble. A space to hold a seed. He looked across the silent sand and understood.