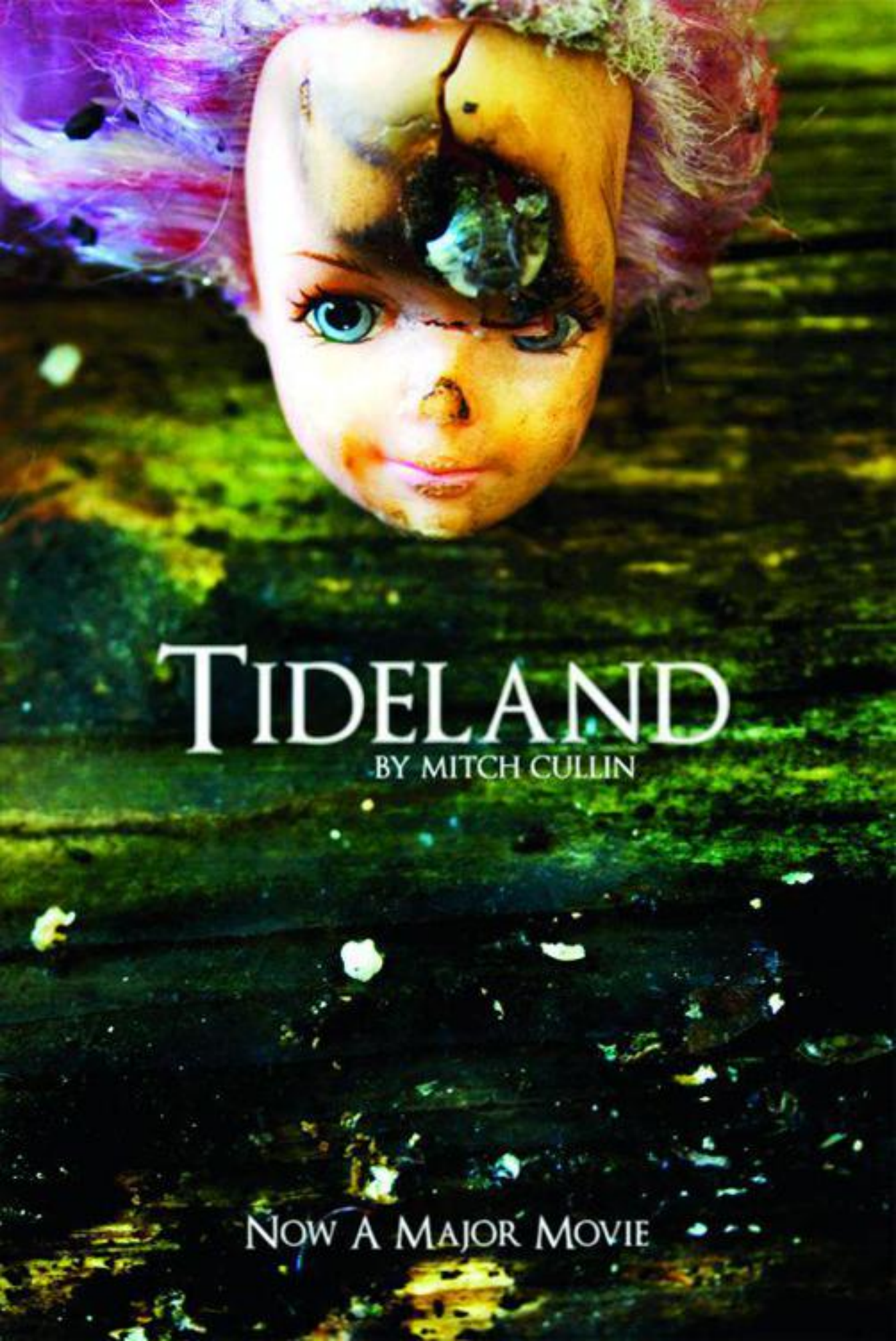
TIDELAND
BY MITCH CULLIN
NOW A MAJOR MOVIE

Tideland

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A Novel by

Mitch Cullin

Dufour Editions

First published in the United States of America, 2000
by Dufour Editions Inc., Chester Springs, Pennsylvania 19425
This paperback edition published 2006
Reprinted 2007, 2013

Cover Design by Andrew Kelly

ISBN 978-0-8023-6041-0 PDF

The Library of Congress catalogued
the hardback edition of this title as:

Cullin, Mitch, 1968-
Tideland : a novel / by Mitch Cullin.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-8023-1335-3
1. Poor girls--Fiction. 2 Fathers and daughters--Fiction. 3. Texas--Fiction. I. Title.

PS3553.U319 T53 2000
813'.54--dc21 00-027918

Printed and bound in the United States of America

For Mary and Barbara

Author Biography

Mitch Cullin is the author of the acclaimed novels *Whompyjawed* and *Branches*. Besides being a featured author at the Texas Book Festival, he has been the recipient of many awards and honors, including a Dodge Jones Foundation grant; writing sponsorship from Recursos De Santa Fe; the Stony Brook Short Fiction Prize; and a nomination for inclusion in the *American Library Association's* "Notable Book List, 1999." His fiction has appeared in *The Santa Fe Literary Review, Christopher Street, The Bayou Review, Austin Flux, Harrington's Gay Men's Fiction Quarterly*, and other publications. His story "Sifting Through" appeared in Little, Brown's *Best American Gay Fiction 2*, and an excerpt from his forthcoming novel–*Cosmology of Bing*–is featured in Alyson's *Gay Fiction at the Millennium* anthology. He currently resides in Tucson, Arizona.

Thanks to the following for support and inspiration:

Amon H., Bill H., Bill O., Brian B., Burt K., Chad P., sisters Charise and Chay and the girls, Charlotte R., Cole T., F & Z & Y, Horton, Jemma, godson Jesiah, John N., Martin and Judith and Renee, Max E., Mr. Mifune, Mom, Moon & Brown Star, Nez, Peter C., Pete T., Richard B., Robert P., brother Steve, Strummerville, Thomas L.–and, of course, Lai Lai Dumpling House, Betos, and Velvet Elvis Pizza. Lastly and most importantly, much love and mega-nods to Brad Thompson and my father Charles Cullin.

The dead and the sleeping,

how they resemble one another.

—*Gilgamesh Epic*

One

1

On my first evening in the back country, I skipped down the porch steps of the farmhouse–leaving my father inside and the radio playing and my small suitcase decorated with neon flower stickers unpacked–and wandered toward the upside-down school bus I'd spied from an upstairs window. Flanked on either side by Johnsongrass taller than my head, I followed a narrow and crooked cattle trail, extending my arms straight out for a while so my palms could reach into the grass and brush against the sorghum.

"You bend so you don't break," I whispered as the Johnsongrass slapped across my hands, half-singing the song my father had written about me: "You bend so you don't break, you give and you give, but you can't take, Jeliza-Rose, so I don't know what to do for you."

And I continued along the trail for some time–winding left, then right, then left again–until it ended at a grazing pasture sprinkled with foxtails and the last bluebonnets of late spring. A breeze shuffled through the humidity, and the sky was already dimming. But the low-growing bluebonnets were still radiant, so I carefully stepped over them while moving

further into the pasture.

Behind me swayed the Johnsongrass.

Before me rested the upside-down bus in a heap–the hull a mess of flaking paint and seared metal–with most of the windows busted out, except a few which remained black and sooty. It seemed bluebonnets had sprouted everywhere, even from under the squashed bus roof, where they drooped like bullied children. And the air was so rich with the scent of lupine that I sniffed my fingertips as I came to stand beside the bus, inhaling instead an earthy odor which belonged to my filthy dress.

The bus door was ajar, an inauspicious entryway. Peering within, I spotted the melted steering wheel, the upholstery on the driver's seat bursting fuzz and springs. A smoky scent filled my nostrils, bubbled plastic and corrosion. And even though I was eleven, I had never been in a school bus. I had never been to school. So I squeezed past the inverted door, glancing at the stairwell overhead, and delighted in the glass chunks crunching beneath my sneakers.

Looking through the topsy-turvy windows, I shook a hand at the Johnsongrass outside, pretending they were my parents waving from a sidewalk somewhere. Then I put myself below a seat in the rear, imagining a busload of fresh-faced kids filling the other charred seats, all smiles and chatter, smacking gum, spinning paper airplanes down the aisle, and I was leaving with them.

From where I sat, the second floor of the farmhouse was visible, jutting behind the high Johnsongrass. The upstairs lamp was on, glowing in the third gable's window. At dusk, the old place no longer appeared weathered and gray, but brownish and almost golden–the eaves of the corrugated steel lean-to reflected sunlight, the thumbnail moon hung alongside the chimney.

And soon the grazing pasture erupted in places with bright soft intermittent flashes, a lemon phosphorescence. The fireflies had arrived, just as my father said they would, and I watched them with my dry lips parted in wonder, my

palms sliding expectantly on the lap of my dress. I felt like running from the bus and greeting them, but they joined me instead. Dozens of tiny blinks materialized, floating through the smashed windows, illuminating the grim bus.

"I'm Jeliza-Rose," I said, bouncing on my crossed legs. "Hello."

Their flickers indicated understanding: The more I spoke, the more they blinked—or so I believed.

"You're going to school. I'm going to school today too."

In vain I reached out, attempting to snatch the nearest one, but when I unclenched my fist there was nothing to be seen. After several failed captures, I made myself content by simply naming the fireflies as they flashed.

"You're Michael. You're Ann. Are you Michael again? No, wait, you're Barbie. And that's Chris. There's Michael."

The bus was suddenly populated by children of my own creation.

"We're going on a great trip today," I told them. "I'm as excited as you are."

The sun had almost disappeared. And if the train hadn't startled me so, I might have stayed in the bus all night, lost in conversation with the fireflies. But the train flew by without warning, rattling the ground, and making me scream. I had no idea that tracks were concealed in thick weeds beyond the pasture, perhaps fifty feet away, or that each evening at 7:05 a passenger train tore past the property.

For a moment it seemed as if the world had started spinning faster. A vagrant wind pushed into the bus, mussing my oily hair. Squinting my eyes, I noticed blurs of silver and fluorescence outside, glimpses of people riding in the coaches and dining car, followed by freight cars—and then the caboose, where a lone figure seemed to be waving from the cupola.

Then the train was gone—so were the fireflies, having been whisked afield by the wind. I was alone again, still screaming, terrified. I bit my bottom lip without thinking, felt the skin crack, and tasted the blood as it swam onto my tongue. And everything became quiet, just the faint breeze

whooshing the tall reeds, three or four solitary crickets tuning up for the night.

I glanced in the direction of the old house, knowing my father was in the living room, quiet and awaiting my return. Then I studied the rows of Johnsongrass, which had grown darker during dusk. That's where the Bog Man is, I thought, wiping blood from my lip. And I knew I'd better leave the bus before it got too late. I had to be with my father before the Bog Man stirred.

I needed to unpack.

2

When I entered the living room, my father was exactly how I'd left him earlier–consumed in an opiate trance, shoulders straight, hands gripping both knees, boot heels flat and even on the floorboards. In a high-backed leather chair, he sat facing a wall, wearing his big sunglasses, which always reminded me of the Lone Ranger's mask.

"That'd make you Tonto," he often told me at home in L.A. "My little girl's a Hollywood Injun."

"I'm not Tonto," I'd say.

"So who are you then?"

"Don't know, but not Tonto."

And that would make him laugh. He'd grin, maybe pat his fingertips back and forth over his mouth, going, "Woo woo woo," like a TV Indian.

Sometimes I joined him, dancing around the apartment and hooting until the cranky woman downstairs banged a broomstick on her ceiling.

But that night at the farmhouse, my father's jaw was set, his face firm with two wizened lines incapable of producing a smile. So I didn't bother mentioning the Lone Ranger, or

the school bus, or how the train had frightened me. I didn't say anything, preferring instead to stand quietly beside the chair and scrape my front teeth across my cracked lip, a pleasing discomfort.

Nighttime had shaped the living room, making it shadowy and strange. Without sunlight coming from the windows, fixing bright angles along the floor, climbing up nooks, the place no longer felt welcoming. Even after flicking the overhead light switch–bringing on a hazy bulb that hummed with electricity–I'd sensed some change in the surroundings when tiptoeing toward the chair, like moving through a gauze-like mesh but not quite seeing or feeling it.

And the sight of my father gazing at the wall, where his tattered map of Denmark was tacked, brought to mind the Bog Man photograph he once showed me at the apartment. It was past midnight, and he shook me in my bed, saying, "Listen, you should know this before I forget. Bog water has weird powers. These bodies get lain in bogs for thousands of years and don't decay. I mean, they get a little brown and shrunk and stuff, but not much else."

Then he held open a library book and pointed at a black-and-white photo: an Iron Age man in the course of excavation, my father explained, removed from nine feet of peat, his head covered by a pointed skin cap, around his waist a hide belt.

"The book says he got murdered two thousand years ago," he said, exhaling bourbon-breath.

So I propped on an elbow, blinking tiredly, and studied the well-preserved remains of the boney Bog Man, who was stretched on damp soil as though sleeping, the arms and legs curved, his chin inclined. His face displayed a benign expression–the eyes gently shut, the mouth puckered.

"They killed him?" I said.

"Hanged him and stuck him in some bog in Denmark. You're looking at someone deader than dirt."

"Who killed him?"

"Who knows," he said, slapping the book shut. "But let's

hope we're in that kind of shape in two thousand years. That's what I wanted to tell you."

Then he gave me a sloppy kiss on the forehead, saying I'd better go back to sleep, otherwise my mother and all the bog men in the world might get upset. And as he reeled from the room, I asked for the light to stay on.

"Sure, baby," he said, "you got it."

But the light didn't help much. The picture had spooked me, and I couldn't rest for hours.

Several nights later, I dreamt the Bog Man materialized in my bedroom and tried suffocating me with a pillow. A noose encircled his neck, drawn at the windpipe, coiling like a snake on his chest. And as he bent forward with the pillow, his wrinkled brow and pursed mouth carried a look of affliction. I suppose the nightmare made me shout out, because when I stirred, my father was stooping over me, brushing hair off my face, a length of which I'd somehow sucked back into my throat.

"What's all this?" he said, half-whispering. "Got the creepers?"

Then he lifted me from the sheets.

I wrapped my arms about his collar line, buried my head against his T-shirt, and he carried me to where my mother slept. And I remember thinking there wasn't a bog man alive who could mess with my father.

But at the farmhouse, the map wasn't the only thing that recalled the Bog Man–it was my father's stoic face, all creased and furrowed, unflinching, as if preserved from antiquity in a jar. His long black ponytail, fastened by a rubber band, draped across his right shoulder and hung down the front of his tank top. At sixty-seven, almost forty years older than my mother, his body was lean, his arms brawny and taut. In the stillness of the living room, it was easy to conjure an Iron Age man in his image: frozen in a leather chair, excavated intact, the pupils behind those big sunglasses locked forever on a map of *Denmark's geognostic conditions*.

"Let me tell you two something," he said one morning during breakfast, speaking in his slow Southern drawl.

My mother and I were sitting with him at the dining table, a rare occasion when the three of us were awake at the same hour.

"A secluded and private life in Denmark is where we're headed. I've got it into my head."

After performing all night, playing two different clubs in West Hollywood with his band The Black Coats, he had arrived at the apartment holding a bag of bacon, egg, and cheese biscuits from McDonald's.

With a grimace, my mother lowered her biscuit, saying, "What's in Denmark? When you ever been there anyway?" She glanced at me and said grumpily, "Where does he get these crappy ideas?"

It was a question not meant to be answered, so I kept eating in silence.

Half-frowning, he said, "I'm just thinking we could move and get a place without a phone. Nobody would know we was there, so if somebody wants to hound me, they won't find me or you or Jeliza-Rose."

"I won't go," she said, swallowing her last bite, "so don't bother trying. It's stupid."

"Hey, whatever you want," he replied. He didn't look at her, or at the uneaten biscuit on his plate, but stared straight at me and winked. "Guess me and Jeliza-Rose will make the trip. How's that, huh?"

I shrugged and smiled with my mouth full.

She pushed her chair back.

"Noah, you and the shit-critter can go whenever you like. I don't care."

Her robe fell open as she stood, so she shrugged it off, letting it drop to her feet. And the chunky whiteness of her naked body quivered when she left the table.

My father leaned forward and whispered, "Your mother is the Norse Queen Gunhild, King Eric Bloodaxe's widow. And King Harald promised to marry her, enticing her to Denmark, and so she went–but on her arrival she got drowned in a bog instead. Not very nice."

"No," I said, "not very nice."

"Think she deserved it?"

"No."

"No," he said, considering his biscuit, "I suppose she didn't."

His shoulders went slack and his stubbled chin wavered above his plate.

The day my father and I finally escaped the city, he said we were headed for Jutland soil. In his backpack was the map, which he'd torn from a library book. And as we began traveling east on a Greyhound bus, watching palm trees and apartment complexes skim by our tinted window, my father produced the map and flattened it on his legs. With a shaky finger, he pointed out our aim–the western Jutland, where bog men slept under great, unbroken plains.

Then he carefully folded the map, returning it to his backpack, and said in an abstracted murmur, "I see before me these dark banks, decorated with the creator's most beautiful flowers, Danish men and women, greeting the May sun as it rises to the east. I hear them greet it with songs, with freedom's folksongs. The Danish beech, the Danish waves echo the jubilant tones."

And I knew he was about to fade out, as he usually did after taking his Fortral tablets, a painkiller that kept him walking–or so he liked to say. But I didn't care. I was glad to be going somewhere else. I was happy Queen Gunhild couldn't make the journey, even if Texas, not Denmark, was our final destination.

On the first evening at the farmhouse, I put myself between my father and the map on the wall, asking, "Daddy, is Jutland like Texas?"

But he was gone, so talking became pointless. His breathing had grown shallow. And I was sleepy.

Going from the living room, I pictured myself as Alice, growing tired as she dropped down, down, down the rabbithole. It was my favorite part of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*:

After such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down-stairs! How brave they'll all think me at home!

I often asked my father to read that section again and again, and he'd make his voice higher, sounding somewhat like a girl, saying, "Dinah'll miss me very much to-night, I should think!"

"Dinah was her cat," I told him.

"I hope they'll remember her saucer of milk at tea-time. Dinah, my dear! I wish you were down here with me! There are no mice in the air, I'm afraid, but you might catch a bat, and that's very much like a mouse, you know. But do cats eat bats, I wonder?"

"And here Alice began to get rather sleepy, and went on saying to herself, in a dreamy sort of way–"

"Do cats eat bats? Do cats eat bats?"

"And sometimes–"

"Do bats eat cats?"

"For, you see, as she couldn't answer either question," I said, having memorized every word, "it didn't matter which way she put it. She felt that she was dozing off, and had just begun to dream that she was walking hand in hand with Dinah, and was saying to her, very earnestly–"

"Now, Dinah, tell me the truth: did you ever eat a bat?"

And that night in the farmhouse, I headed upstairs with Alice on my mind.

She wondered if she'd fall right through the earth, imagining how funny it'd be to come out among the people with their heads downwards. She'd have to ask them the name of their country–New Zealand? Or Australia? Of course, it wouldn't be Denmark, because that wasn't on the other side of the rabbit-hole.