

Cowboy Jamboree

Fall 2015
Issue 1



Oh, Death

Inside

- * *Western Fictioneer Lifetime Achievement Recipient and Spur Award Nominee James Reasoner on the western pulp writers you should be reading*
- * *WPA Post Office mural homage & new illustrations from Allen Forrest*
- * *A gripping prequel for the prize-winning novel, Murder Country, by Brandon Daily, winner of the silver medal for the Georgia Author of the Year Award*
- * *New rough and tumble rural fiction and nonfiction*

*By my father's grave there let mine be,
And bury me not on the lone prairie.*

*"Oh, bury me not—" And his voice failed there.
But we took no heed of his dying prayer.
In a narrow grave just six by three
We buried him there on the lone prairie...*

--"The Dying Cowboy" (traditional)

*Cowboys loved to sing about people dying; I don't know why. I guess it was because they was so
full of life themselves...*

*--Teddy Blue, *We Pointed Them North**

Contents

<i>Stampede</i> , WPA Post Office Mural, Odessa, TX	cover
From the Editors	#
Differing Opinions (illustration) By Allen Forrest	#
Louisiana Murder Mystery (fiction) By Alice Weiss	#
Ten Western Pulp Authors worth Reading (featured article) By James Reasoner	#
Dog Fight Behind Glass (nonfiction) By Jesse Sensibar	#
In the Northeast Section Corner (fiction) By Roxie Faulkner Kirk	#
For Now (fiction) By Jason Half-Pillow	#
The Suitcase (fiction) By J.A. Crook	#
Crash (fiction) By Tom Darin Liskey	#
Rivals (illustration) By Allen Forrest	#
The Shed (fiction) By Brandon Daily	#
The Jukebox Slayings, Or Violence Told in Two Tales (fiction) By Lancaster Cooney	#

From the Editors

Dear Reader,

We're as happy as a flea in a doghouse to present our inaugural issue of *Cowboy Jamboree* and introduce a new forum for the writing we love: western, rural, gritty. We ain't gonna throw too much dust and pretend we are filling a void or inventing a new form. In fact, we think of this little rag as an homage to those western and otherwise hardboiled folk pulps we've long loved.

That said, we hope you do find something new. The fiction and nonfiction here are original, interspersed with the old folk and country voices and images that have inspired us. We feel the writers and writings we've selected have as much guts as gurgle, and the tales herein hit hard.

Our many thanks to Western Fictioneer Lifetime Achievement recipient and Spur Award Nominee James Reasoner for taking the time to contribute a list of western pulp authors ya'll should be reading if you like what you see here otherwise. We'd like to return the favor and let you know that if you like Reasoner here, you'll love his *Rough Edges* blog (oh, and any of the some 200 books to his credit on the Civil War, World War II, and, of course, cowboys).

The overwhelming response to our inaugural call has had us smilin' like an ass eatin' cactus, and we've had nothing but a good time putting the thing together. We hope it leaves you feeling the same.

The Editors
Cowboy Jamboree

Contributors

Lancaster Cooney graduated from Northern Kentucky University with a B.F.A. in Playwriting. His work can be found or is forthcoming at *decomp*, *Alice Blue Review*, *Everyday Genius*, *Gone Lawn*, *Matchbook Lit Mag* and *Heavy Feather Review*, among others. He lives with his wife, two daughters and pup in the Northern Kentucky area.

J. A. Crook is an independent American author from Lubbock, Texas. He has written and independently published two horror anthologies and has been featured in various literary publications. His short literary fiction examines the human condition with Southern Gothic influence. His inspirations include Carson McCullers, Stephen King, Cormac McCarthy, and Flannery O'Connor. His writing is dark and introspective with a focus on keen dialogue.

Brandon Daily is the author of the novel *A Murder Country* (Knox Robinson Publishing), which was awarded the Silver Medal for the Georgia Author of the Year Award in 2015. His short fiction has appeared in several online and print magazines, and his one act play "South of Salvation" was performed and won first prize in the CAST Players One Act Play Festival in 2012. His second novel, *The Valley*, will be released in 2016 by Knox Robinson Publishing. Brandon lives in Southern California with his wife and son, where he is a teacher. He is currently working on another book and several more short stories.

Artist **Allen Forrest**, born in Canada and bred in the U.S., creates cover art and illustrations for magazines and books, is the winner of the Leslie Jacoby Honor for Art at San Jose State University's Reed Magazine and his *Bel Red* painting series are part of the Bellevue College Foundation's permanent art collection. Forrest's expressive drawing and painting style is a mix of avant-garde expressionism and post-Impressionist elements reminiscent of van Gogh, creating emotion on canvas.

Jason Half-Pillow currently resides in Vicenza, Italy but hopes to soon return to America. His stories have appeared in a number of publications including *The Iowa Review*, *The Bicycle Review*, *Hobo Pancakes*, *Driftwood Press*, *Marco Polo Arts Mag*, *the eel*, *The Satirist*, *Crab Fat Magazine*, *Dirty Chai*, *Points in Case*, *Remarkable Doorways Literary Journal*, and *The Gadfly Online*. A story of his is in *Bully*, an anthology published by KY Story last spring, and he has work forthcoming in: *The Intentional*, *Fiction Southeast*, *The Flexible Persona*, and *The Corvus Review*. He won the Tim McGinnis Award, given by the editors of the *Iowa Review* for humorous writing.

Roxie Faulkner Kirk is an emerging fiction writer from Oklahoma. She's lived on both the east and west sides of I-35, so she's pretty worldly. A former news feature writer for the *Alva Review-Courier*, her most recent fiction work has appeared in the online literary journal, *Eclectica*. She is currently at work on her first novel. If you would like to refer to her work as the literary love-child of Billie Letts and Elmer Kelton, that'd be just fine.

Tom Darin Liskey spent nearly a decade working as a journalist in Venezuela, Argentina and Brazil. He is a graduate of the University of Southern Mississippi. His fiction and non fiction have appeared in the *Crime Factory*, *Driftwood Press*, *Mount Island*, *The Burnside Writers Collective*, *Sassafras Literary Magazine*, and *Biostories*, among others. His photographs have been published in *Hobo Camp Review*, *Roadside Fiction*, *Blue Hour Magazine*, *Synesthesia Literary Journal* and *Midwestern Gothic*. He lives in Texas where he tells his children that he has done worse things for less money.

A lifelong Texan, **James Reasoner** has been a professional writer for nearly forty years. In that time, he has authored several hundred novels and short stories in numerous genres. Writing under his own name and various pseudonyms, his novels have garnered praise from Publishers Weekly, Booklist, and the Los Angeles Times, as well as appearing on the New York Times, USA Today, and Publishers Weekly bestseller lists. Recently, he was honored with the Lifetime Achievement Award from Western Fictioneers. He lives in a small town in Texas with his wife, award-winning fellow author Livia J. Washburn. His blog can be found at <http://jamesreasoner.blogspot.com> .

Jesse Sensibar loves small furry animals and assault rifles with equal abandon and still has a soft spot in his heart for innocent strippers and jaded children. His work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *Ray's Road Review*, *Fuck Fiction*, *Corner Club Press*, *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *Niche*, *4ink7*, *The Tishman Review*, and *Stoneboat Journal*.

Alice Weiss's poems and short fiction pieces appear in the *Alaska Quarterly Review*; *Constellation*, *Oddball Magazine*; *Soul-Lit.com*; *Ibbetson Street 31*, *Radical Teacher*, *Liberty's Vigil-Occupy Anthology*; *Wilderness House Literary Review.com*; *Muddy River Poetry Review*, and *Jewish Currents*.. From 1977 to 1998 she was a civil rights attorney in Louisiana, traveling among the bayous to challenge conditions in the South Louisiana jails, as well as rearranging voting conditions. She says she started out a New Yorker, but the rhythms and the ironies of South Louisiana taught her how to really boogie. She says she's home now, well, sort of, in Boston, but the language and the tales keep wending their way to her, despite the snow.



Differing Opinions, illustrated by Allen Forrest

Louisiana Murder Mystery

By Alice Weiss

Zig finds the first body at 6 A.M. when he walks into the Hangingmoss-Mattress Tavern leaning up against the bar between two high stools, elbow's cracked up, finger's pointing like ordering homemade from behind the bar, pushed up from behind by a cypress wood four-seater, like a tired mama cat waiting back against a root for a jay to come pecking.

Zig thinks he's an old barfly hid in the water closet over night, comes over to Hey Buddy him while he wipes the counter. Man a course don't say nothing and Zig takes off running spooked by talking to a man so dead he fell over like a phone pole in a hurricane, scared, too, old Needle head Burson, sheriff's counsel, would find out about his extra job and dock his good time, like he done last Spring after the sheriff's crab-boil and just for talking to a Burson cousin, maybe looking down her blouse, nothing, nothing, put four weeks back on Zig's time. And too, Zig was scared they'd think he done the killing.

The D.A., third cousin by his mama's side, told him no one would'a thought that. He wasn't smart enough, cat burglar wannabe like he was, sneaking into people's back doors and fingering their business. But Zig, like any kid left wandering early, his own Daddy dead before he was five and the cat a better mama than his was, knew how to use his eyes. Something was eating at him and when he calmed down he figured out the corpse was wearing one of Attorney Burson's green and blue Tulane U. ties. He kep his mouth shut but he wondered.

Two other stiffs showed up. One was an old black man found dead in the woods the day before. Should been in the morgue but the next morning he was found on the segregation academy bus, sitting in the driver's seat in a brown suit jacket, Zig coulda told them had to belong to Burson, the only man in the parish to wear shit-brown gabardine. And too, a bunch a hunting buddies caught Zig when he was mulching up azaleas by Town Hall and told him they had found theirselves by a shed in the woods behind the old Burson plantation. What's Burson doing with a store dummy and a mirror in his coon shed? Zig shrugs. Then Burson come along (his stiff little self) and told Zig to stop *malingering*.

The last one showed up on the Fourth of July, left foot in a possum trap, right hand saluting a flag which hadn't yet been run up and Burson with his arm around her waist, waiting for the Boy Scouts, scheduled for sunrise. Zig, sweeping the courthouse square, early, special for the holiday, had just said Morning to the DA when the boys come shouting. They got there and Zig says he just knew it.

The DA, grabbing poor sad Burson by the other arm, says yeah buddy, you should'a told me. I wouldn't a believed you the first time but by the second, I had a feeling about that jacket, and I might'a saved the wife. Zig looked at the rigor mortis Burson was holding up with his left arm and saw he'd put his brown square frame glasses on her face so it seemed like she was looking through his eyes and Burson, he was standing with his eyes uncovered, white like an albino mole living in the dark soil and hairless, blinking in the steaming sun.

Ten Western Pulp Authors worth Reading

By James Reasoner

I've done a couple of posts on my blog (*Rough Edges*: <http://jamesreasoner.blogspot.com>) about Western writers whose work I enjoy, and when I decided to do another and spotlight some authors I hadn't covered yet, I thought what better place for it than here on COWBOY JAMBOREE. This time around I'm confining myself to writers who made their reputations in the Western pulps, although they wrote in other venues as well.

Frank Bonham - My introduction to Frank Bonham's work was actually one of his later novels, a juvenile entitled DURANGO STREET. By that time, the 1960s, he was a well-regarded novelist for younger readers, but during the Forties and Fifties he was one of the top Western pulp authors, while at the same time appearing in the general fiction pulps and occasionally in the slicks. He wrote a number of fine Western novels for various hardcover and paperback publishers, then wrote juveniles for many years before coming back to pen a couple more Westerns late in his career. Before any of that, however, he also worked as a ghostwriter for legendary Western author Ed Earl Repp (we'll hear more about him later) and wrote a fine essay about the experience called "Tarzana Nights", which you can find in a collection of Bonham's best stories entitled ONE RIDE TOO MANY.

Eugene Cunningham - This prolific pulpster and long-time Western novelist was the genuine article, growing up in Texas, working as a cowboy, serving in World War I (although he had to lie about his age to get into the fracas), and adventuring as a soldier of fortune in Central America before turning to fiction. His stories, which were notorious at the time for the level of gritty, realistic violence in them, appeared in countless Western pulps and by the mid-Thirties he was turning out novels on a regular basis as well, which he continued for a couple of decades. Like many authors from his era, he wrote in more than one genre and produced some excellent straight adventure yarns and hardboiled detective stories. His work has a terse, distinctive style that takes a little getting used to, but it's very effective. Not a great deal of his pulp work has been reprinted, but used copies of his novels are easily found on-line.

Tom Curry - A writer who began by writing primarily crime and detective stories, Tom Curry would become one of the stalwarts of the Western pulps, especially for magazines in what was known as the Thrilling Group, published under a variety of imprints such as Better Publications and Standard Publications but all owned by Ned Pines and editorially overseen by Leo Margulies. Curry wrote many stand-alone Western stories for these pulps, but he was also one of the primary writers behind the Jackson Cole house-name, turning out more than fifty of the Jim Hatfield novels that appeared in the pulp TEXAS RANGERS. Curry wrote for other Western character pulps such as MASKED RIDER WESTERN and RANGE RIDERS WESTERN, but his magnum opus is the Rio Kid series, which he created and for which he wrote many of the lead novels in RIO KID WESTERN. These tales featured a young former cavalryman named Bob Pryor, who

along with his sidekick Celestino Mireles, drifted through the West in the years following the Civil War and became involved in many historical incidents, interacting with such real figures as Buffalo Bill, General Custer, Wyatt Earp, Will Bill Hickok, and many others. The stories were only loosely based on history, but that grounding was enough to give them a realism many pulp stories lacked. After the demise of the pulps, Curry went on to write several hardcover Westerns (many of them revisions of his pulp yarns) and house-name paperbacks, including two in the Sundance series as by Jack Slade. He also wrote most of the Buck Duane stories in ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE, a popular Seventies digest magazine. Many of Curry's Rio Kid novels were reprinted in paperback by Curtis Books and Popular Library, and copies of these turn up frequently in used bookstores and on-line.

Harry Sinclair Drago - Best known under the pseudonym Bliss Lomax, Harry Sinclair Drago also wrote under his own name and the pseudonym Will Ermine. He was more of a novelist than he was a pulp writer, but he had many stories appear in the pulps as well. Later he wrote a great deal of non-fiction about the American West, which isn't surprising given the strain of authenticity that runs through all his work. No matter which name appears on a book, Drago's work is consistently excellent.

Ernest Haycox - I'll admit, it took me a while to warm up to Ernest Haycox's work, although he's widely regarded as one of the best Western writers of all time. Many of his stories were made into iconic movies, such as STAGECOACH, based on Haycox's story "Stage to Lordsburg". He brought a realism and a depth of characterization to his work greater than most found in the pulps. Unfortunately, the pace and action of his stories sometimes suffers because of that, which is why his stories are still hit-or-miss with me. But when they're good, they're really, really good, and I've found that his early tales in pulps such as WEST and SHORT STORIES are very entertaining. I plan to continue reading his work, since there's a lot of it I haven't explored yet.

William Heuman - Although William Heuman is probably best known for the paperback original Westerns he wrote for Gold Medal Books during the 1950s, he was a prolific contributor to the Western pulps before that and provided consistent entertainment for their readers. He was especially good at narrative hooks. I've never read a story by Heuman that didn't draw me in immediately. He was also successful as an author of sports novels for younger readers. Several of his Westerns have been reprinted in large print editions in the past ten years and can still be found in many libraries.

L.P. Holmes - I've started reading L.P. Holmes' work only in the past couple of years, but he's quickly become one of my favorite Western authors. His plots are very traditional, but he had a great command of pace and his style is one of the smoothest and most readable I've encountered. Several of his novels and pulp stories have been reprinted in paperback by Leisure Books, as well as in large print editions, and they're not difficult to find. For me, Holmes' Westerns are pure pleasure reading.

William Colt MacDonald – The long-running series of Western B-movies featuring the Three Mesquiteers was based on characters created by William Colt MacDonald. He had his biggest success with novels such as the ones featuring the Mesquiteers and a later series starring railroad detective Gregory Quist, but he also contributed quite a few stories to the pulps. His work is a very appealing blend of humor, mystery, and Western action, and it's easy to find copies of his books, including a couple of paperbacks that reprinted some of his pulp stories.

Harry F. Olmsted – All of the writers I've talked about here wrote novels as well as pulp stories...except Harry F. Olmsted. One of the top names of the pulp era, Olmsted wrote approximately 1200 pieces of fiction, ranging from short stories to novellas, but never a novel, and none of his work has appeared outside the pages of the pulps, which makes him the most difficult of these authors for a casual reader to sample. But Olmsted's work is worth seeking out. He produced a few series, such as the one featuring cattleman Hoss Greer, but for the most part he wrote stand-alone stories, often with historical backgrounds. Like Frank Bonham, many of Olmsted's stories deal not with typical Western settings and characters but less common backgrounds such as fur trapping, riverboating, and logging. Everything I've ever read by him has been well-written and exciting. One side note: Olmsted's stories were so popular that he was known to employ ghostwriters from time to time to keep up with the demand, just as Ed Earl Repp did. (There's that name again!) As someone who has read a great deal of Olmsted's work, however, I've found it to be consistently in the same voice and don't believe that he resorted to ghostwriters very often. Others have claimed that Olmsted and Repp never wrote anything on their own, but I don't believe that for a second.

Ed Earl Repp – And finally we come to, yes, Ed Earl Repp. It's a matter of record that Repp used ghostwriters extensively, so in a way, when you read one of his stories in a pulp magazine, you can never be sure who actually wrote it. But here's the thing: Repp hired good writers, Frank Bonham and Tom W. Blackburn among them, so regardless of the actual author's identity, the stories published under Repp's name are usually pretty good. Not always, but for the most part I've found them to be quite entertaining. Repp also wrote a considerable amount of science fiction in that genre's early days, and my hunch is that he wrote most, if not all of that himself. There are half a dozen Western novels with the Repp name on them as well. I've read all of them except one, and they're all written in exactly the same style, leading me to believe that one person wrote all of them. I think that person was Ed Earl Repp.

This article just scratches the surface of the Western pulps. There were many fine writers turning out stories for them, and many of those stories are excellent and worthy of being read today. Back in the Sixties, after the first boom of pulp reprints in paperback, some people said, "Everything that's worth being reprinted from the pulps has already been reprinted."

Well, not hardly. The pulps are still a treasure trove of great fiction, and I'll never get around to

reading more than a fraction of it in my lifetime.

But I'm going to try.

Dog Fight Behind Glass

By Jesse Sensibar

The red tractor I'm hauling from Arizona to Michigan sits heavy on the two axel equipment trailer I'm towing it on behind the big grey Dodge diesel pickup. West bound on I-10 in the hot July sun, the trailer tires begin to overheat and delaminate like peeling onions.

At El Paso, Texas I cut northeast across the green seas of El Paso in this wet summer, 10 years after drought.

After crossing White Sands Missile Range I stick to the Sky Island towns of Ruidoso and Capitan where I sleep sober at the Smokey Bear Hotel. Choosing to pass on a meal from the shelves of the Capitan Dollar Store, I eat sweet cherries from a brown paper bag and drink spring water from a chipped glass tumbler for dinner.

I do not dream when I sleep but my sleep does not come easy. Those first nights even the go-to of Bourbon over ice and a single light blue Valium only buys me a few short hours of peace.

They say I'm a hero. Nothing about me feels very heroic. Instead it's just incredibly sad and heavy. I wish I could have got to choose to do nothing. A part of me wishes I had just pretended not to see.

The sun rises through my 5am windshield in a notch over Roswell as the ancient shrines and churches of Lincoln, New Mexico turn red and then pink and the grave of Billy The Kid rolls by. Broken bottle glass glints at me like the eyes of saints from the shoulder of this haunted cattle country.

Riding with these ghosts and saints beyond my side-curtain truck glass, I am still mostly alone.

In the Northeast Section Corner

By Roxie Faulkner Kirk

At the August meeting of the Rose of Sharon Holiness Missionary Society, those good saint-ladies gathered around the quilt-frame decided that Cecilia and Hetty should be the ones to go calling on the Jaspers. Hetty, on the grounds that she had so many boys of her own, she could maybe pass off a few pieces of clothes as hand-me-downs, rather than as outright charity. Cecilia, because the McKeevers were now the Jasper's nearest neighbors, since the Howes went bust and the McKeevers had bought their place from the bank. Cecilia could use the excuse of asking nine-year-old Lem to come haul buckets of water to her garden in exchange for supper on a regular basis—maybe the two little boys, too, once in a while, could help weed or hoe, if she had enough supper to go around.

So one week later, Cecilia and Hetty drove over to the Jasper Place with the donations they'd gathered up from the Society members. It was a pitiful bounty; no one out here had extra food just piling up and getting in the way, not even the McKeevers. But everyone found a little something to give, even if it was just a jar of cactus jelly. Prickly Pear Cactus makes a good spread, and it doesn't really need much sugar at all.

Cecilia stopped her car in the yard. While she and Hetty waited for its wind-caught trail of dust to lie down, they looked through the gritty windshield and took stock of the place. "That hen house might save a chicken from a coyote if it fell on him."

"I don't see any chickens around, though."

"Or a garden, either. How do you think they are eating?"

"I don't know. Maybe Sam or Lem hunts jack rabbits?"

Without discussing it, they both removed their hats and gloves and left them in the car.

"Hello? Is anyone home?" Hetty called toward the dugout.

The wind swept over the roof of the dugout and caught a flap of tar paper. It waved at them, but nothing else gave notice. "Hello?"

In the distance, Cecilia heard her Pete's tractor's steady putter. He was doing dirt work on the new place today, carving out steep, curling terraces that would trap the rain water when it eventually comes. Planning, ever looking to the future, always for his family. But here, at the Jaspers, it had been a long time since anyone had seen a future for this family.

"Nobody's home." Hetty said. "But I wonder where they could be? They don't have a car that I know of. And there's their wagon. I don't see that old horse of theirs, I guess Sam took that, but where are Josephine and the boys?"

Something just out of sight, behind the dugout, caught Cecilia's eye. Two small boys peeped out from behind an old, caved-in outhouse. She took one step closer, slowly, the way you approach wild barn kitties. "Hello, there!" Cecilia said, in a soft voice she'd almost forgotten she owned. "You know me, I'm your neighbor down the road." She pointed toward her house. "We wanted to visit with your folks. Are they home?"

Over-big, sunken eyes stared out from under mops of dark hair, expressionless and silent.

"Well, I came over because I was hoping somebody would eat these extra sugar cookies and bread and butter sandwiches I have in the car." Cecilia continued. "Do you boys know anyone who could help me with that? I have way too many, and it'd be too much trouble to throw them to my dogs."

The boys darted from their hiding place, made a wide circle around Cecilia and planted themselves behind the car as if this were tag and the car was base. Cecilia and Hetty exchanged puzzled glances as they unloaded two boxes from the car and set them on the table under the lean-to. Reaching under the old dish towel covering their box, they pulled out a paper sack with cookies and a Mason jar of cold milk and set them on the table.

In a flash, the boys were there, grabbing the jar, pulling off the lid and guzzling the milk. Taking greedy, sloppy turns, spilling too much, both of them trying to drink from it at the same time.

"Why, they're thirsty!" Hetty said. She saw an empty jar on the shelf, held it up, made a face, and then wiped the jar out as best as she could. Forcing the boys to give up their jar of milk for a moment, she poured half of it into the empty jar as they grabbed for it impatiently. She then gave them each their own, which they promptly drained. They reminded her of hungry babies, gulping, eyes rolled back, eyelids fluttering. She felt that familiar tingle again. *Still? Baby Wiley's almost a year now!* She clamped her arms across her chest and forced herself to think of dressing fish, gutting and skinning them for frying, until the tingling stopped.

"I think I have some water in the car." Cecilia said as she went to look. She tried to keep a jar of water with her, in case there was car trouble and she was stranded on her way to town. Hetty showed the boys the cookies, which they gobbled down before Cecilia was back. The sandwiches were next, but when the boys saw the water, they dropped their half-eaten bread on the ground and grabbed for it.

"Wait! Stop! You boys will get sick, you're eating and drinking so fast." Cecilia held the water above her head, while they jumped for it. "You sit down on the bench, and I will give you all this water. But first you have to do what we say."

Miraculously, they followed her directions.

“You,” Cecilia pointed to the slightly larger boy, dressed only in a pair of thin undershorts. “Can you tell me your name?” She poured a quarter-inch of water into an empty jar, ignoring the milky tinge, and handed it to Hetty.

“Delbert.” Hetty handed him the jar. He drained it and handed it back for more. The littler one’s face screwed up, ready to cry.

“You? Tell me yours?” Cecilia asked quickly, pointing to him and pouring another serving.

“Otis,” he answered, earning his drink.

Cecilia poured another serving and pointed to Delbert. “Where’s your Ma?”

“She was sick.” Answer, drink. Otis’s turn.

“Where’s your Pa?”

Shrug. Drink. Delbert’s turn.

“You know where your Pa is?”

Head shake. Drink. Otis.

“Where’s Lem?”

“Going to look for Pa.” Drink.

“Where?”

Shrug. Drink.

Hetty suddenly interrupted the sequence, handed her jar back to Cecilia, came around the table and sat beside the boys on the bench. Ever so gently, she asked. “Boys, when your mother got sick, was she here, at home?” They nodded uneasily, wondering if the food and water part was over now. “Did anybody come help her? Anybody come see her?” Head shakes, *no*. Cecilia and Hetty looked at each other. “Have you two been outside all day?”

Nods. “Lem told us when he woke us up not to go back in the house til he got back. Said there was a whole family of rattlers under the bed. So we stayed outside all day.” Otis said.

Delbert added, “I didn’t believe him. I didn’t hear no rattles, but he said they was asleep so that’s why we had to sneak out quiet and fast and not even look at the bed or they’d wake up and git us.”

Cecilia set down the water jars, came to the bench and sat on the other side of the boys. “Boys, did your momma get better?” Puzzled looks. Shrugs. She casually stood back up and reached into the box for a fat, paper-wrapped square of cornbread and handed it to Hetty. They

exchanged a glance. Hetty made a big production out of unwrapping the cornbread, dividing it and serving it while Cecilia edged to the door of the dugout. She didn't have to open it, she could see through the gap between the door and the jamb. Cecilia closed her eyes, leaned her forehead on the door, and tried to pray for the departed soul of Josephine Jasper, but, frankly, just wasn't very successful at it.

She turned back around and caught Hetty's eyes and shook her head.

"Say, boys," Hetty said brightly, "I have a great idea. Why don't you two come over to my place and wait for Lem and your Pa there? I have a whole passel of little boys your size to play with. And we'll have catfish for supper. Would you boys like that?"

"OK." Otis said, and headed to the car. Delbert, though, asked, "Will Lem know where we are?"

"I'll stay here to wait for him." Cecilia told him. "Hetty, you take my car, but stop and get Pete. Send him over here." The boys were out of earshot now, already bouncing on the back seat, excited to be in a car. "It's gonna be dark in a few hours, somebody needs to hunt up Lem. And then there's--" she nodded toward the dugout.

"I'll send Floyd for the sheriff." Cecilia said, before she opened the car door, mindful of the little ears inside. "Who knows what happened here?"

Sheriff Cole saw no signs of a crime as a cause of death. "Least-wise, no crime on the books." He shook his head in disgust, then turned his head to spit in the dirt. "And I bet we've seen the back of Sam Jasper for the last time." Floyd, Cecilia, and Pete all stood around the Jasper's yard in the early evening heat, waiting for instructions from The Law. What to do about Josephine Jasper? "We ain't gonna find Sam. Word is, he's crosswise with that boot-leggin outfit up in Kansas right now, so he ain't gonna pop up for some time. That is if they ain't already caught him and put him down themselves. You all know anything about her people, where she come from?"

"Hetty heard her say once she was full-grown when she first came to Kansas. That's all I know." Cecilia said. "I don't know where she called home".

"I suppose I could make a call to the sheriff in Kiowa, but I'd have to drive all the way back to town for a phone," said Sheriff Cole, "and I doubt that'll turn up much, anyways. Anybody who knows anything about her won't likely be hospitable to a social call from the law. So that means no next-of-kin immediately handy, and she becomes the responsibility of the county."

"You gonna bury her in the Potter's Field, then?" Floyd asked.

“Well, now that’s what we could do, yes; but here’s what I’m thinking. She’s been holed up in there all day, and it’s been mighty hot. I do not want to haul her in my car with me, and it just don’t seem right to put her in the trunk. Other choice is, I drive all the way back to town and get the undertaker to come back out here to fetch her. But as I was leaving town, I saw him puttin’ gas in his hearst on his way to pick up Clyde Schute from clear over at the Cherokee hospital to bring him home to bury. So it’d be nearly midnight by the time he could get her, and somebody would have to wait with the, ah, remains til’ then.” Nobody looked eager to volunteer. Not that they were squeamish; it’s just that they felt they had more useful things they could be doing.

“And even then, we’d put her in Potter’s Field in the morning, and that’s the end of her. No marker, no way to look her up, in case Sam ever does show up looking, or those little guys one day want to see her grave. She was a mother, after all. And it is getting late.”

“So what are you suggesting?” Cecilia asked.

“Ain’t Sam’s first wife and baby, and even his folks, buried out here, somewheres on the place?”

Jack pointed to a scrubby cedar tree about two hundred yards past the barn. “Right there. All of ‘em; I remember. I helped him put Lucinda and a baby there, myself.”

Floyd understood the Sheriff’s unspoken preference. He nodded in agreement. “I have a pickaxe in the pickup right now, to bust up the ground with. We could have it all done in no time, if Pete runs home for a shovel.”

“What do you think, Mrs. McKeever?” asked the sheriff. It seemed prudent to have a woman weigh in here. These kinds of things required someone used to civilized thinking to remind menfolk how to act, and, after all his position was an elected one. “I can take care of the death certificate when I get back to town, so’s there’s record of it at the court house.”

“I’m thinking’ of those boys.” Cecilia answered. “I know I would sure hate to come back one day and find my Momma’s in a pauper’s grave in town, lumped in with all kinds of unnamed, homeless peoples. At least here, she’d be at home. And whoever buys it back from the bank--” she glanced at Pete, their eyes meeting, “--could make sure it’s somehow noted in the deed, that there’s graves in the northeast corner of the section.”

Sheriff Cole nodded, relieved. “Sounds as Christian as we can manage, under the circumstances. I already got one shovel in my car. Let’s git ‘er did.” Last week was payday; Aggie Ann might still have some beef to cook up for supper, and Sheriff Cole sure hated for it to get any colder than necessary.

For Now
By Jason Half-Pillow

We called him Benny Bases which comes from the Spanish *veinte veces*, and we started calling him that when we asked him in Spanish one night how many times he'd crossed the border and he said "ben tee base ace" - that's Spanish for "twenty times".

We 'd let him do it and pick him up sometimes and let him go others. He was a harmless little dipshit that the women around here chased off when he came by and offered drunkenly to sweep up their yards. He didn't wear a belt and his pants fell down if he didn't keep one hand pulling them up sideways, so they were usually up over his hip on his right and down below the other on his left. He was always in some state of drunkenness and kept a flask-sized bottle in the pocket below one hip. It bulged there obviously and obtrusively. The only pair of pants he wore were worn thin to the point where they were almost see through in the sun. They used to be dress pants and had pleats and were maybe once a kind of dark olive or maybe some shade of brown. Pancho Villa he wasn't.

I shot and killed him last night crossing the border. It was dark and the air was swarming and dusty. We all came speeding up to a specific section of the border where Salvadorans had been pouring in out of nowhere. They'd started coming suddenly and once they get in they can't be turned back because of a law I won't bore you too much with now - it simply says that you can only be sent back automatically if your country of origin is contiguous. That means Mexico. The law didn't have in mind Central Americans coming in via Mexico. It was passed because of something going on somewhere else, maybe the Sudan.

None of them have ID anyway, and I keep saying we can just say they're Mexican and send them back but the bosses don't want to do that, and the union guys are all in bed with them, so in they come and we have to put them wherever we can, and the news people fly in from all over and swarm like flies themselves and that just increases all the pressure, and I'd been warning all along that one of us would go off, but I just didn't think it'd be me. I didn't go off that much, though; it was still just a single shot.

As far as my job goes, though, it doesn't matter. Or so they say. That's what I'm being told, but it's only for now.

The boss and his union butt buddy called me in and made a point of telling me it would have no impact on my career, which is another way of saying, they're keeping it in their hip pocket to draw out and use against me if ever they think they have any such need. They don't like me 'cause I make trouble and know the law and the union contract better than either of them, who go along with the whole damn system and observe everything only in the breach.

They told me I'd hit him on the other side of the border, and since I'd shot from America and hit him over there, there'd most likely be no investigation from the Mexican side. I knew they knew there damn well might be. Unless animals got him and ate the part of him that held the bullet.

No one knew what the hell was going on at all that night, and this whole threat of tuberculosis thing has the whole town worried anyway, and these news crew people only film the Salvadoran kids fly covered faces in church basements. The reports of a shot being fired had long been forgotten and it had said it was a warning one just fired in the air. That's what they were saying over and over again in different ways all through our meet.

"No one's gonna dig up and start asking about some Mexican hobo drunk on Tequila who got shot on the border," the union guy said.

"He drank whisky," I said. "And he was shot across, not on, the border."

They never once asked why I'd shot in the first place. What was I doing aiming straight in that direction?

"I didn't kill him on purpose," I said. "There was a cy'ote comin' up behind him. That's who I wanted to kill."

"The one you keep saying does all the raping," my boss said.

"Alleged raping," the union guy said.

We'd known forever that he did it, to boys and girls and women; men, no. They both knew damn well that a chopper had shined down on him a spotlight of him doing it to some girl whose head he was pressing into the ground and one of the guys up there filmed on his cell phone but it was too far away and the chopper kicked up too much dust for the image to ever be clear.

"There's nothing alleged about it," I said.

My boss leapt in.

"It's not a good thing. But that's for their side of the border. We can't go shooting them from over here."

"Alleged shooting," the union guy said.

"Alleged," I said.

“Who checked your rifle,” the union guy asked.

The boss looked right at me and me back at him.

“It was a crazy night,” he said. “That didn’t get checked until way later.”

“How way later?”

We looked at each other again.

“I don’t know the precise time, but it was later.”

“It has to be done within...”

“It was on time,” I said. “He did it and got to it on time.”

“I think the report said...”

“No, it was on time. That was a clerical error.”

“Who made it?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “It was a crazy night. People were busy with all those Salvadorans, getting surgical masks, calling doctors, the media....”

The people who typed up those kind of reports were lower down and represented by a different union.

“If someone made an error on the...” the union guy started back in.

“There was no error,” I said. “Except mine. I shot the fuckin’ Mexican guy. That was the error. The typo was not the mistake.”

“Yes but if the rifle wasn’t checked in....”

“It was checked,” I said.

“But if the report says it was late...”

“It was on time,” I said.

“But if the person who filed it...”

“They were sitting their thinking ‘Am I going to get tuberculosis?’” I said.

“Look,” my boss said. “Let’s all calm down. It was a crazy night. We can cross this bridge if we ever even get to it. We’ve got lots of other fish to fry.”

The union guy was just making a big show of being on my side.

“We’ll table it for now and get back to it later,” he said.

I asked if he would leave the room.

“Something personal. Family. Private. Not work related at all, please.” I said.

He didn’t like that at all but complied.

“The cy’ote’s still out there,” I said.

“You’ll have to cross over to kill him,” he said.

I said nothing.

“Don’t go in uniform,” he said. “Don’t let yourself be seen. Do it at night. Use your own gun.”

“Back of the head,” I said.

“Good idea. Shoot him when he’s facing our way. It’s look like it came from the other side.”

“How ‘bout I shoot that fucker out there along with him?”

He sighed. Couldn’t do much more than that without tipping his hand and showing his side.

The Suitcase

By J.A. Crook

As it often was, they sat in front of the gas station and chewed tobacco. Their mouths rolled like cement mixers. They looked around at things: the old pumps, each other, the dusty building behind them. The suitcase between them. One of them spit onto the ground and it sizzled like a morning skillet. They wore what they always wore: denim overalls and white dirty shirts and brown leather boots and straw hats with a gradient of browns painted by years of sweat drawn under every condition. They'd become a piece of a dying environment full of asphalt and oil and dust with nowhere else to go.

A car arrived and they craned their necks to get a look at it. Red. Ford. Compact. It stopped next to the gas pumps. A woman stepped out of the car of screaming children and pulled out a credit card. They looked at each other then back to the woman. They chewed. She swung the small plastic card back and forth like she was performing some brand of capitalist voodoo while trying to find a place to plug it in or slide it. She did at times push it against pieces of metal that were nothing and she got nothing for it. Frustrated, she put the card away and looked up to the men.

She looked at them like anyone looked at them, with a sort of confused anxiety. Her feet shuffled next to the pump and she looked back to the kids in the car with all the certainty in her eyes that she'd never see them again. She stepped the men's way.

Excuse me, she said. Any chance you know where I can pay for gas? I'm running pretty low and this looks like the only place within driving distance.

The two men looked at each other then on each side of her toward the car. One spit. She looked at the saliva on the hot concrete. She didn't know it but she grimaced. One of the men made a sucking sound from his mouth and he rolled his neck. The woman looked between them yet. They chewed.

I can pay cash if that'd be best. I didn't see a place for a credit card anywhere on the pumps. Maybe I didn't see, I don't know, she said.

One of the men scratched his thick eyebrow and opened and closed one eye a few times. The other smacked his hand down on his knee to kill something none other had seen. He lifted his hand then and looked under it to see if anything was there and nothing was. The woman looked at the suitcase.

The both of them stopped chewing and looked at her. They'd become still. Even the rise and fall of their chest had stopped. One's eye twitched but that was all. The woman took a few steps back. She turned around and ran doubletime to the car and she got in. She left and that was it.

Crash

By Tom Darin Liskey

Eustus was working on an oil rig in Osage County when the price of crude plummeted.

The money was good in the beginning. Twelve hours on and twelve hours offpulling a twenty-day hitch. But oil had been tracing down for weeks now and managers were cutting back on overtime for the crews

The rotaryunit was leased to a small exploration company out of Shreveport to drill a wildcat just east of the Nemaha Ridge. Two days ago the owner of the company, a pasty-faced fat man who dressed more like a Wal-Mart manager than a wildcatter, came up all the way from Louisiana to check on the well's progress.

The Saudis had opened the spigot and the world was facing a crude oil glut. Just about every oil man and roustabout in Osage County felt the pressure to cut costs. The owner of the company was all the more jittery because the rig's crew hadn't reached target depth yet. The drill-bit broke 300 feet down in the hole and it was taking the men longer than expected to fish the fractured oil-tool out.

The owner stomped around the rig with his exploration managers and crew boss, moaning about how the delay was costing him money. Then he called the men together to give them a pep talk, like he was a junior high football coach and this was the last down in a big game. He said the crew needed to hit pay before the price of crude got any lower. He repeated that like the men didn't understand how the oil market worked.

One of the geologists recommended skidding the rig over to drill a replacement well. The owner's face went red as a cherry tomato. Eustus knew the owner was a Baptist deacon back home, but he'd never heard any man with an ounce of religion curse like that. The man stormed off in his decked out Escalade with an order for the crew to press on once the broken drill-bit was finally retrieved.

Eustus knew something was up when the rig manager, Boone Rose walked out of the dog house shaking his head with envelopes in his hand. The man was a veteran toolpusher who had worked the oil patch longer than even he could remember. Rose climbed the metal stairs to the control room and gave the order to halt drilling. The manager walked out to the drill floor and held the envelopes over his head. The other roughnecks pulled their ear plugs out. Rose still had to shout because the men's ears were ringing from the roaring rig engines.

"Meet me down by the doghouse boys," he said.

The roustabouts shook their head and made their way to the secondhand airstream tailer just west of the rig where the men changed in and out of their work clothes and Rose had a small office. He pulled his hardhat off. Rose had a white gray military style crew cut with a deep network wrinkles around his eyes from working out in the sun so much.

"I'll be blunt with you, all the storage facilities from here down to Texas are full up," Rose said. "Hell, we got more oil above the ground than in it. Even if we hit a gusher boys, it just don't matter. The market is drowning with crude. We're calling it quits. That's all she wrote."

A couple of men grumbled because the other crew would plug the well and get the rig ready for cold stacking back in East Texas.

"Things are so bad you're lucky to be getting paid today," Rose said.

Rose called out names and handed out the envelopes. The men picked up their pay, walked in the doghouse and changed out of their company supplied equipment.

Some the men getting their pay were ginzels. This was their first drill job. They seemed the most let down. The others had learned by then for every boom there was a bust. Eustus took his envelope from the crew boss.

"Mr. Rose, I've shut in my fair share of wells. I could stick around and help if need be."

The crew boss whistled through his teeth.

"I'd love to keep you on son," he said. "The company is cutting costs with oil prices so low. We're going to have to wrap this up with a skeleton crew."

Eustus nodded.

"Thank you anyway," he said.

"You ever need a reference, you can count on me," Rose said before yelling out more names.

Eustus dropped his hardhat and safety equipment off in the doghouse. He climbed in his Ford truck and headed to Pawhuska. The nearest town to the well pad and where most of the other roughnecks rented rooms.

He parked in front of the run down motor court where he stayed. Mud caked steel-toe boots lined the sidewalk in front of the bungalows. He undid his boots, pulled them off and opened his room with the key. He was close to the main building where an Indian family lived with their elderly parents. Eustus's room reeked of roach spray and currie.

From his window he saw groups of men climb into in their trucks and SUVs. They were heading into town to cash their checks. The roadhouses and taverns would have a windfall tonight. The roughnecks would be tying one on before heading back to their homes, or hitting the highway in search of new opportunities.

Eustus started packing. He kept his birth certificate, honorable discharge from the army and social security card in a small safe deposit at a bank in town.

Eustus loaded the truck and drove into town to retrieve the contents from the box. The bank stayed open later than usual to accommodate the oil workers. Eustus told the bank manager he was canceling the rental and turned to leave. There was a long line of roughnecks with payroll checks in their hand. That meant some of the other explorers were laying off workers too.

Eustus climbed back in the truck and turned on the ignition. The engine barked to life.

Eustus sat there with the window rolled down smoking a cigarette as the sun slipped westward in a slow, trying to decide his next course of action.

Across the road, the neon sign in the tavern window buzzed to life. A group of roustabouts men left the bank and walked into the tavern. They were laughing and slapping each other on the back, like the crash had never happened.



FORREST

Rivals, illustrated by Allen Forrest

The Shed

By Brandon Daily

They crested, the two of them, over the low ridge made of cold red and gray rock and made their way slowly down into the heart of the valley. The land there was barren, clear of trees and brush and shrub. The sinking sun behind them drew their shadows out a long way before them and they rode over these shadows, trying to outrun them on their horses, though they could not and they eventually slowed the animals to a quick walk.

After a long distance at this pace, Edward Corvin, the first and larger of the two riders, stopped and climbed down from his horse; he brushed the dust off his pants and stretched his arms high above him, reaching up to the ether of the coming night. The land was strong and smelled bitter—a taste of damp earth. The approaching darkness brought with it a gray fog that hovered over the land like a strange specter, something both sinister and kind. The man looked up to the other rider, an eleven year old boy, his son. “Get on down here, David.”

The boy did as he was told. His legs felt heavy on the solid ground and he felt as if he would fall. He grabbed hold of the horse to steady himself.

The older man nodded, though David did not think the nod was directed at anyone or thing in particular. Corvin spat out some spit that had been turned black with tobacco juice. “Stop here fer some hours,” the man said, looking out over the stretching land. He turned to the boy. “Go on an find us some wood. Might could be a cold night.”

David set out in the direction of a grouping of trees a ways off in the distance. His eyes swept quickly over the land before him, as if he were seeing it for the first time, and this might be true, he thought; he could not decide where on the property they were. The boy had seen the land on the map his father kept nailed to the wall of his office room—the property was massive, stretching from the creek all the way up to the mountains where his father first found the coal buried in the heart of the world there. *Some day this will all be yours*, his father had told him that day he looked upon the map. *Don't yeh bring disgrace on it*. Then his father walked out of the room. David had dragged his hand slowly over the paper then. Now, he was looking at the land itself, what the map could not convey: the bitter quiet of the earth, the fear of looking out at its expanse, believing that natives would come and attack from some hidden direction—Cherokees, he had heard talk of as a younger boy, though he would not know what one of these people looked like had he actually seen one. At this thought, he quickened his pace to a run; the trees were just a bit further—he would grab several felled branches and hurry back to his father without looking back.

When David returned, his arms full of branches and small twigs, his father nodded in approval. David dropped the wood and sat next to the pile, beginning to arrange the pieces in a

small pyramid, placing at its center some kindling he had taken from the base of the trees and put in his pockets. He looked up at his father.

Edward Corvin was looking up to the sky. He had lit his pipe and was slowly blowing the dark smoke into the air. He pulled out the small box of matches he kept in his pocket and tossed them to David. Then the man looked out to the setting sun that just showed in a sliver of yellow in the western sky. Corvin spoke, though it seemed as if he were speaking to the coming night, where the last traces of orange and pink were being enveloped by the black night. There was a faint smile that crept quietly over his face. "Yeh did well comin an tellin me of this, boy. We'll find the nigger." He took a long inhaled breath on the pipe and then let the smoke escape slowly from his lips. "I reckon I know where he might be headed to. Least he better be there."

* * *

It was dark by the time Washington made it to the small shed: a crudely constructed pile of wood planks held together with crusted mud. He almost passed the place by—it was covered in thick vines, kudzu and moss that stretched over the wood in a strange and slick natural skin. Many of the side planks facing the creek had caved in since he had last been there. The small creek that ran beside the place was the only thing that told Washington where he was and where the shed was.

He looked around him unsteadily. His breaths came out in strong gusts but he tried to silence them, to listen to the woods for any sign that he'd been followed. As he held his breath, his head began to throb but he kept silent still. They would need to leave soon, to beat the sunrise. After hearing nothing but the sound of animals, he moved on toward the shed.

It had been months since he had last been there; *Nine months*, he thought, as he approached the black shadow structure. He did not know who had originally constructed the shed; it was merely another mystery within the woods, as all things within seem to be. The moon had been high above him that night those nine months ago, as it was now, though, when he looked up, it was hard to see the moon through the thicket of branches that covered the wooded area like a high ceiling, warm and protective somehow. That night, all those months before, had set this night and all of its dealings into effect.

Washington crept up to the shed now and looked through the splintered and loose boards of the walls. Inside, he could just make out the movement of something. It was dark within and he could not make out the form of her, but he knew her shape and he knew it was her. He felt a strange feeling of fear and something else, something he was unsure of. He could have called it happiness or joy, if he had known what those things were. But he did not.

He turned from the structure and made his way over to the creek and bent down, scooping water up to his mouth and drinking it loudly in wet slurps; the spillage from his hands leaked down his chin and cheeks and onto his chest, where it stung cold on his haggard and ripped skin. He

continued this drinking motion several times before sitting down heavily on the wet bank. His legs hurt and his breath was still heavy from the long journey; he had left the bunker-shacks that morning, starting out in a sprint toward the first portions of the woods—he would pass through those woods and then arrive out on the open valley floor that would take him hours to cross before he arrived at the next set of woods, where the shed and his family waited for him. As he left, Washington had kept his body low to the ground, using the hanging fog to help hide him. He had told some of the others there that he was to break free that morning, though many of them thought he was just giving a story. It was not until they saw him scuttling out into the early morning—a black form against the dark earth—that they believed him. He stopped only once to drink from the sack he had brought with him—tied around his neck and kept within his shirt so that it bounced in a heavy thump against his chest as he ran. That thump kept his pace as he pushed his legs heavily forward.

Now, as he knelt beside the creek, Washington passed his hands over his bald head, tracing the long scars that stretched from the nape of his neck to his eyes. *These are new marks*, he thought, *New to her*. He hoped she would recognize him still. He felt his face with his hands, exploring the rough, sinewy scars. He could feel the knife still, feel it being dragged over his skin, the warm blood that seemed the only comfort in that moment. He looked around him again, listening closely for the heavy sound of horse hoof on the earth. Nothing, though. He closed his eyes and tried to shake away these memories as he stood, but he felt weak and dizzy and he knelt back down. Those scars had come the last time he had gone to the shed.

On that day, nine months before this night, Edward Corvin had seen Washington walking tiredly back to the bunker-shacks where all the negro slaves slept—it was early morning of a Sunday when he returned; there would be no mining on Sunday, Washington knew that. Corvin waited until Washington found his way back into the bunker-shack, letting the latter settle himself peacefully before Corvin kicked in the loose hanging door. Corvin walked directly over to Washington, who sat up quietly and was looking at the white man expectantly, resigned for what was to come; there might even have been a nod of the slave's head, had Corvin looked close enough. Instead, Corvin looped a rope around Washington's neck and dragged him out into the yard. The two of them, Corvin leading Washington like a hound, made their way to the fence that divided the negro quarters from the house and yard of the Corvin family. Corvin forced Washington to sit on the cold ground, and the white man went about tying the black man to the fence, making sure that Washington's arms and feet could not move. After he had done so, Corvin walked slowly into the large house, disappearing into the darkness of the place. Washington waited there quietly, unmoving, not trying to disentangle himself, feeling the sun begin its rise on his bare back. After several minutes, Washington heard the sound of the house door clatter open and shut; he looked up and saw Corvin walking toward him. Corvin stopped just in front of where Washington sat and knelt in front of the negro. "Where yeh been?" Corvin asked. His voice was soft, without heat of any kind. It was at the cool sound of Corvin's voice that Washington began to grow nervous for the first time.

“Ain’t been nowhere, sir.”

“Don’t lie to me. My niggers don’t lie.” Corvin shook his head. “You been gone a long while. Over a day, I reckon. I give yeh more freedom than most anybody else I know. Them others say I’m crazy for doin it. Makes me a fool. What’s worse is yer the one to make me a fool. An that don’t go unpunished. Cain’t. But I reckon yeh know that already, don’t yeh?”

At that, Corvin grabbed hold of Washington’s head. The latter violently pulled away, but Corvin held tightly to the skull, pushing his fingers into the other’s scalp. From his belt, Corvin brought forth a knife, the blade of which was some six inches or more. Washington did not see the knife in the darkness of the morning until the other brought the blade slowly in front of his eyes.

“I should take a nose fer yer trouble.” With that, Corvin brought the blade just under Washington’s nose. He could feel the cold of the knife. His quickened breath fogged up the metal, and he tried to pull away from the blade, but Corvin held him tightly and would not let him jerk his head further than several inches.

“But I won’t,” Corvin said, bringing the knife away from Washington’s face. “Instead, I want something smaller, a gentle reminder of what yeh done. Somethin yeh can see everyday to mind yeh of what yeh is.”

Corvin dug the tip of the blade into Washington’s face, the soft part of skin between the eye and ear. “Where was yeh?”

“No,” Washington moaned loudly, twitching his body hard this way and that, feeling the rope dig into the skin of his hands and neck and chest.

The white man dragged the blade slowly up and over the negro’s head and down to the nape of his neck. The skin separated gently, with ease. “Where?” Corvin yelled at the other. “I’ll keep goin. Flay you alive, boy.”

Washington screamed, waking birds sleeping on the roof of the house and bunker-shacks so that they flew overhead to survey the scene. “The shed,” he yelled, finally. “Out in dem woods. Out there a distance away.”

Corvin nodded. “Alright, then.”

The blood spilled out over the black skin and dripped onto the cold earth. Corvin stood and looked down at his work, noticing with surprise the straight line of the carve, even with the negro’s jerking head. Washington stayed there, tied to the fence, feeling the blood dry and crust on his skin, for the rest of the day and that day’s night. The other slaves, and those members of the Corvin family, walked past him as if he were not there at all. The only time anyone came to him was late in the afternoon of that day, when the young boy, David, came with a ladle full of water and fed it to Washington. Washington never said thank you, though David could see in the negro’s

eyes the appreciation, and Washington could see in the boy's expression a look of sadness, regret, apology, and pain, even.

* * *

The fire was small and threw out light for only a few feet. Across from him, David could see only small, flickering portions of his father's face, the rest of his body consumed in darkness and shadow in the cool night. For a long time, David did not know if his father was asleep or not; it was not until the boy added several more branches to the fire—all that was left of the stock he had gathered—that his father moved. Edward Corvin took his pipe from the pocket of his coat and then pulled out the pouch of tobacco. The man slowly and methodically, with a practiced hand, knocked the remaining spent contents of tobacco out of the pipe bowl onto the ground and then pinched out a small amount of fresh tobacco from the pouch and stuffed it into the pipe bowl. He leaned forward and took hold of a small twig from the fire and lit the pipe with the ember end of the wood before casting it back into the blaze of the fire. He folded the tobacco pouch back up and returned it to his pocket. Corvin sat there staring into the blaze as he puffed slowly away at the pipe. The flames licked up into the air and then disappeared in the night. He could feel it in his chest, the runaway would be in the shed, just as he had been before. There was nowhere else for him to stop. The night was cold and the next town, outside the valley, was another day and a half journey on foot. No one, runaway slave or not, would try and make that distance without stopping for rest.

David opened his mouth to say something, to ask his father some long held question that the boy had wished to know the answer to, but he could not bring himself to ask any such question or speak any such thought. There was fear in the boy's mind, not of his father but of some other presence that lay between them, lost somewhere in the flames of that small fire.

* * *

Washington ducked his head low as he entered the small shed. There was hardly any light inside, save what moonlight filtered in through the cracks in the walls, though this was not much. He had to squint, his eyes just making out the darker things in the dark place. He shuffled his feet forward, fearing that he might kick some hidden obstacle before him. When he felt fabric on his bare shin, he stopped and knelt down, bringing himself eventually to his knees. Pebbles and pieces of brush scraped at his skin, but he moved forward until he sat just inches away from her. His eyes began to adjust to the dark of the room and he could just make out the rise and fall of her chest, the warm breath coming from her mouth in silent appeal to the night. She was sleeping. Peaceful. The shadows lay dark about the floor of the place, and he moved his hand over the ground, feeling the wet of blood and afterbirth. He could smell it, the strong aroma stinging his nostrils; for the shortest of moments, his breath caught and his chest hurt with fear. He reached out a hand and gently laid it on her exposed arm. It felt cold and sticky with sweat or some other thing he could not understand or imagine.

She flinched awake, turning her body quickly over onto her left side, away from him, covering the small bundle of cloth and bone and blood and skin. He breathed easily. She did not speak, only lay in that position for several seconds.

“Jane,” Washington whispered. His voice was deep and sounded as though it scratched with hurt when he used it.

“Washington?” the woman replied, with a wavering voice. She turned over to face him more directly and then sat up, holding her bundle tightly to her chest.

He nodded, though she could not see the movement in the darkness of the place. Sun up was still hours away. They would need to leave before first light, *Before mornin come*, he had said to himself earlier, as he made his way to the shed. But that was not important, not now, now that they were complete, the three of them.

Washington moved into a sitting position just next to her. He slowly, with cautious movement, afraid to scare Jane, to hurt her, to make her feel wrong, wrapped his strong arms around her. He could feel the sweat, still cold on her hot skin, her neck puddled with the stuff. She reached up with her right hand and held his arm tightly, returning the embrace, pulling him closer to her, into her. And this moment seemed to exist in some other time and place for Washington. He turned away from her then and let forth a loud sobbed cry. For several seconds, it was the only sound within the place—this place that was his home for the moment, his safety and his life. It had been so long since Washington had cried that he did not know the feeling and feared this weakness; it was not until he heard the sounds of Jane’s tears and sniffled replies that he accepted this moment as both joy and pain, all things one in the same, though never understood as such. He was brought out of his trance by Jane’s touch, her hand pulling his arm back to her, back to the them.

“Yo son,” she whispered.

Washington turned and faced her. In the darkness, he could see her moving closer to him, shuffling on her seat, lifting the bundle and placing it within his lap, his arms and hands—big hands, strong hands—open, holding the newborn.

It breathed so quietly that Washington lifted the small thing higher so he could feel the breath of his son on his face, warm and new, fresh to the world. He settled the child lower again, holding it tightly in his lap, and then he reached his hand out and found Jane’s face. With his thumb, he followed the curve of her cheek and jaw down into her chin. The tears were still present on her face and he imagined his tears and hers mixing together in his hand, their two selves joining into one.

“How yeh feel?” Washington asked. His voice was deep and cautious.

“Ain’t feelin so right,” she said in return.

He nodded his head. "Got a long walk head of us til we're out of trouble. Feel up to movin'?"

Jane sat up straighter, looking as if she were about to stand, but she could not and she let her body slump itself down again. In the darkness of the shadows Washington could see Jane shaking her head no. Her lips trembled. "I'm sorry," she said. "I try to. We need to."

Washington put a hand on her arm again. "No. Ain't nobody out there. Ain't nobody comin. I been listenin fer it." He turned to look behind him, searching the darkness of the room and the woods beyond it for answer, as if the shadows could tell him he was right, that they were free. That no one was coming. But it was merely a wish. *Maybe they wouldn't be coming yet.*

He turned back to Jane and smiled, though she could not see this.

"I only could hope yeh got mah message from Randall," she whispered.

"I got it. I got it," he said softly, looking down at the newborn. "I's home." He nodded proudly.

Jane leaned her head onto his shoulder and the three stayed in this way for a time that they did not want to count. It was too right to put a measurement on.

* * *

The sky was a dark blue-black when Edward Corvin nudged the boy awake. David sat up and took stock of his surroundings, looking out wonderingly at the cold, dark land mysterious still until he remembered just where he was and what he was doing there. The fire had since burned down to ash; David put his hand over where the flames had been, hoping to gather warmth there in the night air, but the ground was soft and black and cold. The boy lifted himself off the hard earth and made his way over to his horse, folding his blanket into a roll as he walked. He stored the blanket securely on the saddle with the leather strap and took the piece of bread his father handed him. He ate slowly, his jaws hurting in their movement—still tired.

Edward Corvin took his watch from his pocket and looked at it, holding it high to his eyes in order to see the face of it in the fading moonlight. It was just past four. He nodded, replacing the watch where it had been. The sun would be up in just over two hours. They still had several miles of riding ahead of them.

He mounted the horse and looked back, watching the boy follow suit. Corvin gave a quick jab of his heels into the horse and they set forth, father and son, riding silently into the darkness of a land that neither truly knew.

* * *

Washington had tried to stay awake—he watched Jane and the baby sleeping, listened for the sound of any movement outside, any flicker of lantern light spilling in through the falling slats of the shed—but the heavy feeling in his feet and legs seemed to spread up to his face and eventually his eyelids closed and remained closed. His breathing steadied out and he felt calm. Washington didn't know how long he'd been asleep when the baby's crying woke him. It had been a light sleep—he'd awoken, his eyes barely lifting in their exhaustion, with every breeze that blew around the shed, the moving limbs of the trees outside. He'd hold his breath and listen for the sounds of Corvin, but each time he heard nothing of man outside.

Once in the night, he'd gotten up and walked out of the shed, out into the cold air of the woods, his eyes moving steadily across what horizon he could make out, searching between the trees for sight of Corvin, but Jane had called him back in. He came inside and saw, in the dimness of the room, her body shivering slightly, the blood dried black beneath and around where she lay. He sat beside her and rested his head gently against hers, her breathing a calming movement that nudged him back to sleep.

When the baby cried out, his first thought was to quiet it, put a hand over its mouth—*What if they out there? Waitin'?* It would be too late to worry about that now, and he let himself relax his taut arms and legs. Washington looked over at Jane, wondered if he should ask if she was feeling up to moving; it wasn't safe to sit there, waiting to be picked up. Corvin wouldn't let him go. Not after everything else that had been. But Washington could not ask her in that moment. He could only hope Jane would feel stronger by first light, that they might be able to leave off from the shed and move on to some semblance of safety. Though in this world there is no such thing as safety, it's a tale told around the campfire, made up in whispers, and Washington knew it.

The baby cried again, this time more muffled, and Washington sat up. In the darkness, he was able to make out the short walls around him; Jane, next to him, sat slouched over as the child began to feed. Washington leaned in and felt the child's face, the skin soft and smooth, warm to the touch.

He reached down at his feet and brought up one of the blankets and dried some sweat from Jane's neck with the soft material. The blanket was still wet.

Earlier in the night, after he entered the shed, Jane had sent Washington out to the creek with one of the blankets she brought with her—she had carried the blankets in a large sack that she had slung over her shoulders after she left the farm two mornings earlier. She held her swollen stomach with both hands, then, cradling the weight, falling more than walking forward, her mind set on the shed where she had visited Washington nine months earlier, where they had affirmed their love, their union, *Don't matter none that ain't no church nor preacher man blest it, we done blest it wit ourn love an God kin take that fer what it is, an if He don't then that don't matter none to me*, she had thought. She stumbled through the woods, stopping to hold on to trees and various bushes so that she wouldn't fall down with the pain from the coming birth. *Have ta make it*, she told herself. When she entered the care of the woods, she took from the ground a small twig that

she carried with her and put in her mouth when the pains came. She bit down with all her strength in those moments, feeling her jaws tighten in pain and her teeth grow sore. When the birth pains passed, she would continue on, patting her belly, whispering in prayer to the child inside to hold off coming until she could make it to safety. It was not until she reached the shed that she looked at the twig and saw the frail thing for what it was: more than wood chewed nearly through with bite marks—a compass, a religious keepsake of her own religion, one marking her transition from child to woman to mother; she would keep this till she died—so that he could clean the blankets in the cold water, wet them and bring them in so he could wipe her legs and the child off, cleanse them both of what afterbirth and blood there still remained.

Washington could see the creek water run darker when he submerged the blankets, and he made sure to brush out the pieces of gore before going back in the shed. He felt as if eyes were fixed upon him in that moment, that the wind itself had died down and the world was still—all focused upon his movements. It could be a sign, he thought, though he dismissed this notion immediately. They were alone out there, he told himself. They needed to be alone. He could not bring himself to imagine what would come to be if they were not.

As he stood from the creek to return inside with the wet blanket, his hands feeling of ice in the mid-night, he thought he could see, through the trees that surrounded him in a strange and natural prison cell, a string of lights stretching off in the distance. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his cold hand and the lights were no longer there. Back in his homeland, his grandfather had once told him that lights stretched before a man signaled a change in that man's life, a crossroads from which there was no returning or changing course. Washington had not thought of his homeland or his grandfather or parents, his sisters and brother, in the years before that moment, and the memory of them evaporated with the fogged breath that he exhaled out into the night air.

He headed back to the shed but turned once more, quickly, in hopes of catching a glimpse of the lights again, but there was nothing there except trees and darkness.

* * *

Corvin and his son rode beside each other.

Daylight was not far away. The runaway would wait until daylight, at the earliest, to leave from the shed, Corvin knew that. It would be too dangerous otherwise. The runaway might even try and make the shed his home for a while, though Corvin thought that not even a negro was that stupid.

He looked over at David. "Good thing yeh done, tellin me bout this runaway."

The boy looked over at his father; he had not expected his father to speak, and David hardly knew what to say in return. He thought; he could feel his mind now, filled with different thoughts and emotions. He remembered watching from atop the barn—where he had sat up all night to count the stars—as the negro ran, ducking low to the ground, away from the bunker-shacks.

David had kept it secret for several hours, what he had seen that morning, before he walked up to his father and told him of the man he watched disappear into the morning fog.

“Wisht I hadn’t,” David said, turning to his father.

Edward Corvin lifted the corner of his mouth in a smile hidden from his son. “Why?”

“I seen what you done to him that day them months ago.”

“That boy’s a runaway. That’s how yeh gotta deal with them dumb niggers.”

“He came back.” He sat quietly on the horse for a moment. Then: “Ain’t right.” David felt himself swell with an unfamiliar pride. Even with the thought that his father would most likely stop the two of them and set to beating on him for what he said, the boy realized that he was growing up in this very moment.

Instead of stopping them, though, Corvin continued to ride on. After ten minutes had passed, Corvin turned to his son. “I unnerstand what yeh think yer meanin, but there’s times in life, son, when yeh gotta do things that don’t seem right. But yeh do them to keep order. If I didn’t of done that, ain’t no tellin what could happen. Mutiny, boy. That’s a fact. Some day yer gonna see that fer yerself, I reckon. Some day when I’m gone off to the beyond, when it’s jus you an yer own.” He turned his head to the south. “That day comes fer all of us,” he whispered. He did not care if David heard these words or not.

The child was silent, asleep, but Washington could tell by her breath that Jane was still awake. He reached over from where he lay and hesitantly grabbed hold of her hand. She squeezed it tightly in return, a silent communication whose words he understood better than if she had spoken them aloud.

Through the slats in the wooden walls, the first colors of day were beginning to fall inside the shed. He smiled. There would be long days ahead, days of fear and pain, even, but there was a new life ahead in that coming morning. A new life for the three of them.

Washington’s feet trembled in expectation of movement, and he rubbed at his legs and hard feet to calm them. He didn’t want Jane to see his fear or worry. He turned his head and saw that she was looking at him. He stopped rubbing his legs and smiled, seeing her brown eyes, dark eyes in a dark face—a face full of tenderness and peace. They had met years before on the farm, before he was sold over to Corvin. He would work the grounds of the field while she tended to the inside chores. Her brother Randall had been their sole form of communication over the two years since they were separated. He would carry supplies and vegetables over to the Corvin house from the Thomason farm. On his way out, Randall would always manage to drop notes for Washington from Jane; these notes Randall tied tightly to rocks and let fall from his hand as he walked back

home. They were letters of affection, of sadness and regret, fear and hope. Jane wrote with ease, in a long, flowing script that Washington could only imitate in his mind. He could read, with difficulty, and he could not form the letters himself—he would speak his replies to Randall, always in passing whispers.

Just under a year before this night, Randall had brought the letter to Washington telling him about the shed near the creek; he, Randall, had found the decrepit place on a previous journey to the Corvin house. Jane set the time, and Washington would only need to find his way to the shed. It was in that letter that Washington wed Jane, on a thin page stolen from the Thomason study, a page that contained love within the words. It was the only note that Washington did not bury deep within the earth after its reading; he kept hold of the letter and read it over and over slowly whenever he was afforded the chance, reading it so much that it had become part of his own memory to the point that he no longer needed the paper to know the correct words written there, though he kept the flimsy and tattered sheet, the ink all but disappeared from it now, regardless.

“Yeh think of a name yet?” Jane’s voice was cool and calm, silent almost. The child, lying peacefully on her chest, raised slowly and quietly up and then down with each breath she took.

Washington shook his head. She had still not seen the scars on his face and head and he wondered if he should hide them from her or tell her about them, but he did neither of those things, keeping his focus on her eyes, the white teeth hidden in the darkness of her face. “A name of ourn own,” he said. “Not some name given by a white—Washington.” He sighed and shook his head slowly.

“Ain’t yo name.”

“It’s what I’m called by dem, so’s it is my name. Cain’t member none other, none what I was called afore I came to dis place.”

“Ain’t no more,” Jane said, squeezing his hand tighter in her grip. “Dem men is gone from us. We gone from dem too.”

He nodded his head. “Give im some name of ourn people.”

She looked down at the sleeping child. “It gonna come to us. An when it do, it gonna be right.”

He turned his head and looked at the orange pink of the morning. An hour more, he thought, then they would leave this place behind.

Washington had almost fallen back asleep when Jane brought him back awake.

“Look over on dah wall ahind us. Still’s scratched in’t.”

He sat up and crawled over to the far wall from which the morning light was spilling inside. Three or so feet off the ground was the carving. He could remember scratching the wood with the sharp end of a rock he found inside the shed. He moved his hand over the splintering wood, feeling the soft indented groove of the two lines. Washington read it with his skin. *X*. Each line stood for one of them, one for Jane and one for himself. *Cain't write none*, he told her that day nine months ago, but he wanted some signal that they had been there, that they were joined together for all time. Each line crossed over and within the other. Washington turned back and smiled at Jane and then looked back to the mark on the wall once more, bringing his face slowly to the wood, laying his lips on the symbol, kissing it with his eyes closed tightly.

He turned away from the marked wall and moved back to where he had been laying; he brought his body down gently next to Jane, closer now than he had been before.

Just as he closed his eyes sleepily shut once more, he thought he heard something outside the walls of the shed, a heavy thudded sound, but he figured it to be a bird or squirrel. He rested his head perfectly in the space along Jane's neck, that soft place between shoulder and face.

* * *

The boy had ridden through the woods a short distance before he saw his father just ahead of him, sitting tall on the horse. The sun was just breaking above the horizon line behind David and he could hear the birds rustling above him. They had been riding without stop for two hours. The slow sunlight cast greens and browns on the world before the boy, though there was still darkness. Where his father sat on the horse was covered in a dark shadow from the canopy above, and David could feel the change of temperature on the back of his neck and on his cheeks, from warm morning to cold shade, as the boy approached his father. When he did so, Edward Corvin did not turn, did not acknowledge his son; instead, his eyes were fixed on a dark pile of wooden pieces, junked slats formed in a crude shape that resembled neither home nor cave, just the trappings of some prehistoric savage. Green and red vine hid the place from without so that it seemed a place grown into the world itself.

Corvin came down quietly, slowly from atop his horse, careful not to stir the animal or other creatures surrounding him. He tethered the horse's reigns to a nearby branch and knelt down in a crouch, bringing the palm of his hand to the damp earth. He brought it up and smelled the sallow dirt that clung to his skin, the black flakes of earth. The creek sounded quietly a short distance away, a drowned swallowing sound that made the man's skin grow cold and heavy. He continued to look at the wooden shed, knowing what lay inside.

Corvin turned quickly and shot his son an angry look of impatience and anger when he heard the loud thud of David's boots falling heavily to the ground as the boy hopped down from his horse. He wondered briefly if David had made such noise on purpose, a warning to the inhabitants of the shed, but Corvin shook this thought of treachery away and turned back to the wooden structure. Above, blue sky was beginning to break through the yellow and orange ocher of

the sky, its pinks disappearing now in the cloudless sky. Life's movement, a constant transition throughout time, one without end.

Corvin stood, feeling the tightness in his legs, his knees and calves, and turned to face his son. There was fear on the boy's face, but that did not concern the father. Instead, Corvin walked over to his horse and drew forth a shotgun and a rope some seven feet in length. From his side, Corvin pulled forth a pistol and handed it to his son, who took the weapon timidly, feeling the full weight of the metal in his hand as if for the first time.

"Come on," Corvin whispered to the boy, nodding his head in the direction of the shed. Without waiting for a response from David, Corvin made his way over the small clearing, stepping quietly over the dew-covered ground.

* * *

All Washington could remember in the moments after was the bright light from outside blinding him as he sat up. He thought he could hear screams, Jane's, maybe, and a man, though he was not sure. *Heavy breathing.* Then blackness.

Then he remembered. He'd heard the sound of footsteps on the leaves and fallen twigs outside. Washington's skin grew cold when he heard it, and he moved inside, gently stepping around Jane and the baby. She stirred, but he hushed her with a quick look and movement of his hand. Through the slats of the shed, he saw them coming: Corvin and the son. Corvin carried a shotgun in his hands, and the two of them moved slowly outside, keeping to the shadows and trees for some form of cover. Washington cursed himself for staying in the shed, for not forcing them to move on. But she could barely walk. He couldn't risk it. And now they were here. Washington turned back to Jane and the baby—she held the child tighter. He could see the fear in her face. Washington smiled sadly at his family inside the shed and whispered that he loved her. He would miss them. Then he walked outside and into the morning air, his hands held up to show he carried no weapon. Corvin rushed toward him, but Washington remained where he stood, not moving, simply calling out loudly, "Jus me. Jus me here." Then Corvin lifted the shotgun and smashed the butt of it into Washington's head. Then blackness.

When he came to, Washington was kneeling on the ground outside the shed. He shook his head, feeling the heavy pounding at his temples. His hands were tied behind his back by a length of rope that also was wrapped in a slip-knot around his neck; he could breathe easily, as the rope was not pulled tightly. His face itched and he lifted his shoulder so as to wipe his face on the cloth; after he did so, he saw the deep smear of crimson on his shirt. He tried to stand but realized he could not, as the rope that stretched from his neck to his hands also ran down to his ankles. He tried again, this time lifting himself harder, but this only made him tip sideways and fall on the wet dirt. He rested his head on the earth and, from this position, could hear the movement of the creek water and the vibrations of the world itself.

He looked around, moving his body this way and that, feeling the painful pull at his shoulders with each kick of his feet. Two horses were tethered to branches, he could see that. Washington moved himself in a half-circle so that he now faced the shed.

Standing just outside the structure were two figures—he knew them well.

“Didn’t think I’d catch yeh, did yeh?” Corvin said. There was a smile on his face. *Pride. Pleasure.*

“What you done ta my wife?” Washington said. His voice was weak, coming out more in hushed breaths than actual sounds. When he spoke, the pain in his head seemed to become amplified and he wondered if he should not try to speak again.

“Yer wife? Niggers ain’t got no wife, boy. You know that.”

“Dat ain’t true,” Washington stuttered out. “What you done ta her? An my son?” he called out again, as loud as he could, so that the sound carried throughout the woods and animals paused and lowered themselves to the earth when they heard it. Spit began to come from his mouth, snot running from his nose.

“They’re alright.”

Washington looked at the boy. It was a strange sound in the cool morning, the boy’s voice; he had not expected the boy to speak, had not actually known the sound of David Corvin’s voice before those two words. Washington thought there was compassion in the voice, but he did not figure any white man to hold such a trait.

Corvin turned quickly to his son. “No more,” he said, and then turned back to Washington. “She’s sleepin in there,” he motioned to the shed behind him with his shotgun, “A little bump on her head too, jus like you. Ain’t nothin bad. She ain’t one a mine anyhow. An yer boy caused a ruckus with his wailin at first, but,” he brought his hand to his ear in cruel mimic, “yer nigger boy seems to settled himself in sleep too.”

Washington felt his cheeks grow wet, his sight blurred briefly before he closed his eyes tightly to rid himself of the tears. But they would not be gotten rid of. His lips trembled.

Corvin began to walk from where he stood over to where Washington lay tethered to himself in a strange contortion. As he did so, the white man could hear the other whispering to himself, between the sound of mucus and sticky saliva, though he could not make out the words until he came closer to him. *Don’t hurt dem. Don’t hurt dem*, Washington repeated over and over.

When Corvin walked over to him, Washington flinched back, scooting himself away. But Corvin grabbed hold of the rope and yanked up on it until Washington was righted upward so that he was kneeling once again. The latter screamed out in pain, feeling his shoulders come near to

snapping out of place, though he continued to whisper the words once he found himself kneeling. *Don't hurt dem.*

"All's you got to worry yerself with is yerself, boy." Corvin took several steps away from Washington so that the latter knelt in the middle of the small clearing, seemingly alone within the hidden vastness of the world. "Get over here," Corvin called over to David.

The boy walked slowly forward. Washington looked up at the boy. A mix of saliva and blood had collected at the negro's chin and was now trickling down his neck and onto the front of his shirt. It was not until David was a few steps away that Washington saw the large pistol dangling from the boy's right hand. David came closer and stopped when he was a yard away from the kneeling man.

"Do it, son," Corvin said. His voice was calm.

David looked over to his father. The boy shook his head. His face had turned a pale cream color and his bottom lip and chin were quivering violently. "Don't," the boy mouthed to his father.

Corvin did not move closer to the boy. Instead, he set the shotgun down at his feet and then folded his arms. "Look round yeh. This is all yers. But it's as good as snatched away from yeh if yeh ain't willin to do what yeh have to. It's life, son. The way things are: there's whites and then there's blacks, and blacks cain't go on an run off twice without punishment."

David looked down at Washington. He could see the white of the man's eye, rimmed with red from a burst capillary. Washington shook his head slowly, pleading with the boy, though knowing the eventuality of his fate, whether by the boy's hand or the father.

"It ain't right," David said, and then he turned to walk away, but he stopped when he heard his father's voice, full of venom, with just enough sugar in it to terrify the boy.

"You walk off, boy, there ain't no sense in yeh comin home again."

David turned back to face Washington. He watched as the wet collected onto the black ground below the negro. He looked to his father again. "I cain't."

"Yes, yeh can, son. Yeh got a strong, white blood runnin in yer body. Gotta wade through the mess at times, son, don't make it nice, but it's the only way to get off clean on the other side. This is you growin up, son. This is the day that comes fer all of us. This one moment." He paused. Then, quietly: "Now's when it happens."

In the distance, somewhere off in the hidden parts of the woods, a bird called out loudly, and David wondered briefly if the bird was speaking to him, telling him the ways of the world, how life is given only to be taken away, how there is no single path a man can take, save the one that brings you through the briars in pursuit of righteousness. These things did not make sense to the boy now, and he wondered if ever he would come to understand any of it. He doubted these

things as he raised the pistol at Washington and pulled the hammer of the gun back with his thumb so that it clicked loudly, making the kneeling runaway flinch away from him.

“You got any words, boy?” Corvin said to Washington.

Washington lifted his head up, leveling it at David; he raised his chest as high as he could, feeling his shoulders grow taut. Then he nodded at the boy. *Don't mean it's right, but ourn world makes it right*, he was saying. Washington turned to Corvin. “Give my son a right name,” he said, “Please. A right, good name . . .”

Washington had barely spoken his last word when his head jarred violently to the side and back and he fell heavily to the ground. It was not until after the negro's death movement that David heard the sound of the shot. It seemed to echo continuously around him, and the boy wondered how far out the reverberations would travel, *Would they ever stop?* David walked closer to the fallen man, so that he now stood just above the still twitching body. A sharp gasping sound came from below, and the boy did not know if the sound came from the dying man's lips or the hole in the side of his face. Blood seeped out of the wound and stained the negro's face and neck a deep red, so deep that it seemed to darken the man's black skin.

David turned quickly and vomited. He fell to his knees next to the dying man. When David looked over again, he saw that Washington was dead—the black fingers did not twitch, there came no more sound anymore. The boy looked at his hands, one still holding tightly to the pistol, knowing that it was his own hands that brought such havoc to the world. It was an empty feeling, though it was strange in the fact that he felt a strong sense of power and pride—if you could call it that—in the simplicity of the act. It took no thought, no real sense of will to complete the task. Just a simple reflex of a finger.

The shattering sound of the shotgun brought David's thoughts back to his surroundings. He had not realized that his father no longer stood there in the small clearing with him. He had not seen his father bend down, pick up the shotgun, and make his way into the shed again.

David stood as he watched his father emerge from within the slatted structure. His father no longer held the shotgun but instead was carrying in his arms the black child. The child moved in small, quiet movements.

“You said we weren't gonna hurt her.”

Corvin looked up from cooing the child, looked up at his son. “I told you, sometimes yeh gotta wade through the mess.”

David watched as his father walked over to the horses, watched as the man carefully lifted himself high on the saddle and began to turn the horse. David no longer knew this man, though he wondered if he could ever know himself either. “What we gonna call it?” David shouted out to the other.

Corvin turned in his saddle. He lowered his head in thought. Then he said: "The nigger wanted a good name, so's we'll give it one. A right American name." He thought some more and then said quietly: "Call it Jefferson."

The Jukebox Slayings, or Violence Told in Two Tales

By Lancaster Cooney

The Route of Man

Swims watched them come out from the wood-line, generating from darkness like some sort of human incantation. Each carried on their person an implement of destruction; a Louisville Slugger to elicit blunt force, crowbar to rip and tear ligaments and a flathead screwdriver meant to slip inside the skin. They looked nubile, a couple of babies newly detached from tit. He pulled a ruck sack at the foot of the porch and opened it wide as a hungry baby bird, “Kick off your boots.” The three screwed their boots loose and slipped them down inside the ruck. “Artillery to,” Muehlekamp fished an old ballpeen hammer from his dungarees. The death that these boys provided was not meant to be subtle nor quick. “Now go round back and toss your clothes on the fire.”

All looked exhausted by the weight of what they’d done, all but Compound who had a springy loose excitement about him, so comfortable in his element, completely overrun by a moment in time.

Around back on a dilapidated old picnic table sat a pyramid of towels and newly unboxed bars of soap. “Delicates too,” he ordered. The boys complied, snapping elastic and surrendering all humility. Swims retrieved a hose from alongside the house and screwed the nozzle loose. Pipes groaned within the foundation, coughing and coming to service.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Reverent said.

Swims tossed them bars of soap; the boys noted the quiet thuds in the high grass and went to their knees to track them down. Compound’s jaw got to chattering on a vocal scale as Swims bent a thumb on the spout and increased the pressure. Frenetic energy ravaged the small group as they worked to get clean.

“Now I want you all to think about what was done. Want you to gain a sense of where this could lead and the repercussions that’ll no doubt follow.”

“Should’ve been done long ago,” Compound chided.

“Might be, Eugene...” said Swims, nodding agreement, “And you the ones that’s done it.” Compound was a small ropery soul, folks used to call him Red-Dog, Bird-Leg, Compound-Fracture, due to hair color, slight frame and a moped accident involving the law and the widest birth of Dunbar Creek, but the name eroded like anything else, got whittled down over time. Swims never thought the boy worthy of nickname, not even the mocking sort. “Now Sheriff Sumptner be knocking at your door by morning, if he hasn’t already, but the stories gonna be same, not one of you’s gonna stray. Laney Carlson’s bout to pull down that drive and when she does each one of you’s gonna saddle up and crash at her place, and that’s it. She picked you up

from Lebo's; ya all got shit-canned, spread some seed with her and passed out on command. Are we clear?"

Each boy hung head, nodding in agreement.

He went inside and pulled the coffee pot and fed the flip-top head of the unit, worked a rosary in the pocket of his Carhartt as it brewed; fresh as their sin, and he was already trying to save their souls. He watched them out the kitchen window above the sink. They huddled together, tight as teammates, towels loose about their waists and capped around their shoulders. Reverent got down in the grass and pumped out a couple dozen push-ups in pursuit of warmth. Compound held an open palm above the flames that nipped away like jumping dogs.

Joanie had been dead nearly three years by that point. Swims stopped sleeping shortly thereafter, unable to recreate that innocuously easy slumber that followed the warmth of her next to him. He'd taken to Crayola Crayons in those days, found himself bleaching the outer perimeter K-Mart's and Wal-Mart's of children's coloring books. "Ah, these for the grandbabies," a clerk would say. He'd never kept them, hardly any sense in the gambit other than passing time and relinquishing focus on the incidentals. Many a morning would he awaken at the kitchen table, head buried in the nook of his inner-elbow, brightly colored pages torn from books like jagged little islands. Their faces haunted him, characters not of his youth, but another generation. Wicked little bitches with anorexic bodies and fangs, wolf ears A-framing out from perfectly manicured hair. Some sort of man-child perched atop a big ole couch, talking to dogs and inanimate objects as though everyday citizens of the earth. Still, he kept at it, expertly transgressing lines, spreading wax.

Laney Carlson come up the drive in a beaten Geo Metro, doors, paneling and hood-a litany of different colors. "Nice," Muehlenkamp said, "Love the color scheme ya got going here. Thirty-seven years old and really killin' it in life."

"Eat shit, Mulley." She said.

The boys sipped coffee and let the towels hang loose, exposing their loins and homemade tattoos. She reached into the passenger seat and came up with a plastic bag full of clothing, sweat suits mostly, couple pairs of socks. Compound held up a long-sleeved shirt with an old tow-truck on it, only the truck had eyes where the headlights ought to be and fallible teeth jutting out from the radiator. "Fucks this?"

"Boys Junior, all I could find that'd fit your scrawny ass."

Swims leaned in on the ledge of the driver's side window, rolled a stack of bills from his possession to hers. "Now that'll keep comin' next several months, 'til you feel all square. Known your daddy a long time and you since you was a girl, so when you feel we good, then that's the end of it, we good."

"T'ght," she said.

Reverent parked it passenger side. This was done without question. Laney leaned her head back against the headrest and immediately went on into flirting. Pretty girl, mostly, who'd started out with handjob jobs back in the fifth grade and shortly thereafter found herself addicted to that momentary sense of power and easy money. The interior dome lit them up something awful. Features seemed distorted, elongated in grotesque shadows and caves about the orbitals. Movements came off as delayed- behind the clock. And the jaundice pallor of their skin was enough to make an entire TB ward blush. Compound snapped the door shut and encased the group in finite Darkness. Laney hung a U-ey and the car receded into what was left of the night.

As expected, Sheriff Sumptner pulled down the gravel drive not long after the light. Stones popped beneath the radials of his '87 Bronco, sending it into a fit of catywhompus emissions that had the young Sheriff grinning over the wheel. Joanie'd taught the boy in Sunday school, screwed a little nub of chalk into the board at the head of the classroom and made him apply the tip of his nose until he had something constructive to say. Upon his head sat an oversized Stetson and dispatch leaked from his rolled windows. Swims loaded the ruck into the passenger side of his truck cab and walked out to greet the law.

"Morning, Odell," said Sumptner. He was lean, always had been, and there seemed to be neither urgency nor aggression in anything he did or said.

"Sheriff," Swims said. "Awful early to be makin' house calls, ain't it?"

"Yeah, yeah, I reckon it is. Lost track a time myself, been up most the night over at Barbie Tannins little shitbox. It would appear somebody had taken issue with ole Barbie and worked one over on her something fierce." Sumptner inadvertently watched for a-tell, but Swims never was the type to bite a line.

"Oh?"

"Caved her head like a pumpkin. In fact, that's what Kaelin Fogg said, said to me, 'Joe, her head looks like a *got damned* caved pumpkin.' You know my deputy? Deputy Fogg?"

"I certainly do," added Swims. "Used to run with his daddy back in the day. Before seatbelts and our Constitutional rights was taken away."

The two crack up a bit.

"Yeah, his daddy was a bear of a man. Admired him greatly."

"As did I."

“Anyhow,” Sumptner continued. “We got to thinkin’, who would pontificate such a horrific beating on one of nature’s forbearing beasts...”

“Was that a fat joke?”

“No, no, though no question about it Barbie was a wholelotta woman.”

“She certainly was.”

“Gentleman found there too, beat to shits-creek and back. Likely who the Semi parked over at Lebo’s belongs too, some unfortunate bastard she’d pulled from a bar stool. Anyhow, folks been sayin’ might be worthwhile to talk to them boys of yours, one’s you use for side jobs and whatnot?” Reverent was the first of the boys he’d come across; found him walking the rail over on Open Arrow Bridge. Bridge stood about forty feet above a devastatingly barren tributary of water. An ecosystem so depleted of non-negotiables that nary a crawfish or minnow could possibly sustain life. Boy had a look about him that indicated he didn’t care one way or another what side of that rail he’d come down off of. “Lord knows you and Joanie’d always been fond of them.” It was true. Slowly Reverent lead them to the other boys and in a matter of weeks Joanie was loading up their cupboard and providing home cooked meals. “This wouldn’t be an attempt to protect them would it? Get your name in lights?”

“Only light I aim for Sheriff, is the light of The Lord. Now, we was doin’ just fine until all that, but gotta be honest, I take a little offense to such implications.”

“None meant, Odell. You know how it is, people get to talkin’ and we’ve gotta to do our due diligence?”

“I understand. But you know as well as I do what was goin’ on over at Barbie Tannins.”

“Yeah, well, knowin’s one thing and provin’s somethin’ else.”

“Could be folks won’t want this one solved. Some might even look at it as justice.”

This one seemed to trigger something within the young lawman, made him stiffen and perk. “Justice takes place within the confines of the law.”

Swims stepped back and gestured, as though Sumptner’s words themselves were requesting passage. “Well, I certainly do wish you the best, Sheriff. Now if you’ll excuse me, Lonnie Stemper and I are replacin’ the front stoop outside a St. Pats, got ourselves a deadline of Sunday morning mass.”

Let Us Talk of Carnage

Mathew DuFour thumbed through a stack of sugar packets and healthy alternatives, peeled away a bundle of three and propped them beneath an elevated table leg, tested the stability of the table and was proud of his infinitesimal accomplishment. He had facial features most comparable to that of a shrew and it seemed almost reasonable to think he might hunker down throughout the winter months with a family of possum beneath someone's back deck.

"What can I get ya, hun?" The waitress was old, hell, near elderly, but remained slender, likely from the time spent on her feet. He'd read an article about that once, some study involving the upper echelon of Wall Street who averaged three to four days on elliptical's and yankin' weights up and down on those wimpy ass pulley systems, made comparisons to them as opposed to the dregs that fetched their cafe mocha's and Cobb salad's. Numbers overwhelmingly favored the physical health of the dregs, though self-esteem and mood disorders would likely tilt the pendulum back in the other direction. He ordered two eggs (over easy), hash browns and a side of buttermilk biscuits. She topped him off and gave a wink, "You got it sweetie." As she vanished into the sounds of metal and steam he pictured hiking that uniform, taking hold her apron strings like a bridle and riding her right through the *got damned* breakfast bar, yeehaw! Not to mention, he'd always had an affinity for women able to use terms of endearment in what seemed a personal and sincere way.

"That your rig outside," DuFour snapped too, took note of a tall man with gray hair pulled back into the harness of a rubber-band. Never understood a fella willing to wear a tail, saw it as some sort of misguided decay of manhood. The man had enormous globular knuckles that couldn't possibly fit into the pockets of the Wranglers he was wearing, and he was chipper and common and seemed to have plans that sent his mind to a place DuFour was incapable of understanding. "Solomon Jap," he said, extending a hand. DuFour latched on weakly with his fingers, immediately ashamed at this inept display of the social norm. Never had gotten that right, unable time and again to have that webbed region between the thumb and index lock into place, bring the palm flush. Instead it was this pussy shit with the fingers. "Used to rid with Mainland back in the '90's and finished out running toxins of this, that and the other up to Vermont with Dultch. Company outta Indiana, you familiar with Dultch?"

"Yes sir I am. From just outside Alexandria, myself."

"Oh hell, you know then."

DuFour didn't want this conversation. Everything came off as heightened when people approached him. Sunlight now leaked through the blinds and seemed to rest upon his skin, patrons rose up from their vehicles in droves, recently dismissed from morning mass, carrying with them insatiable appetites for grease and fetal excrement.

"Where you headin'?" asked Jap.

“Just outside a Pottstown,” DuFour tried to bring his eyes up to greet the man, but atlas the attempt was futile. He’d taken a free class on public speaking in his early twenties. Professor told them time and again, “Control the conversation. Greet the speaker eye to eye. Win the war of confidence and you can sway things in your favor.” But the professor was running for county clerk and had a big booming voice like Charlton Heston and wore clothing that seemed designed for only him. Not to mention all the female students lined the front of the classroom, all glossy-eyed and dreamin’.

“You don’t say?” Jap joined him without asking, slid into the booth and hunkered over the table like a strategist of war. “Been out that way many a-time. Might I make a suggestion?”

“Certainly,” said DuFour.

“Now there’s a little town down that way by the name a Lower-Crutch, just off Route 8, redneck as all get out, I mean, make you and me look like the Clinton’s!” When he said this he reached over and snapped a couple fingers off the label of DuFour’s denim jacket. “Anyhow, been running that way a long time and herd some rumors. Now mind you this was some time ago, so I’m not promising the offers still on the table, but a bunch a fellas I used to haul with would stop off at a Bar over there by the name a Lebo’s. Big bull looking dude on a neon sigh, can’t miss it.” He leaned in closer then, hushed his words and raised a solitary brow. “Word has it, you go into the place, slip a coin into the ole music box and hit D3 and there’s a gal up at the bar who’ll give ya a piece a ass and put you up for the night,” with that he slapped a hand down flush on the table. “Only a minor fee.”

“You don’t say,” DuFour replied shyly.

“Sure as hell beats the shit outta a them sleepers, am I right?”

“Can’t argue there.”

“I’m right.”

DuFour drove with the CB low, running through the conversation he’d had with Solomon Jap. Back home was a girl, only one that’d give him time, name of Tammie Stills. Now Tammie wouldn’t go much beyond that of heavy petting on account of poor body image and the religious convictions of her daddy. And she was prone to wearing those full-length denim skirts that kept the neathers from breathing and made it damn near impossible to spread her legs. But somehow she’d still get the friction going, allowing him to release himself within the confines of his sweatpants. Mamma thought they ought to marry, but he mostly chalked that up to her wanting him out her basement.

When the rig slowed, its illness rattled the steering wheel and pain hissed up from beneath the hood. Each time he brought the machine to life he bet the bank it would be the last, knowing it was only a matter of time until he found himself stranded on the roadside, hitching or hiking to the

next exit. And it was through this rationalization that he justified the decision to pull the ailing machine from the highway and follow route 8 on into town to grab a brew and a bite and call it an evening.

Just as Jap said, the neon sign for Lebo's lit up in strange accusations of both bull and man, something like that of a centaur or demon dreamt up by one of those tattoo parlor hacks you'd see on Lifetime. Parking blocks sat in front of an Oldsmobile and Chevy S-10, cracked as bone. DuFour eased into the breaks and the whole ride wretched forward as might a vacuum cleaner snagging carpet, as though every aspect of the road, everything he'd passed up until that point was being pulled up behind the tread of his tires and funneled away into some sort of erasure of useless moments. He left the haul parallel to the road and caught hold of a stray bottle as he dismounted, sending it through the weeds.

The door to the Lebo's stood open and a mixture of Randy Travis and pool balls making their meetin' snapped out and hummed from within. A golden retriever stretched out on the floor. DuFour pulled a stool and tapped the bar. A big burly son of a bitch with a tattoo that read, "Eat the Princess" limped up and served him a Bud and a shot of Apple Pucker. He sipped both in long steady swills and felt the world relax. In the corner two old-timers leaned in on pool cues and erupted into harmonious laughter indicative of historic friendship. He fixed his eyes on the crawl that traipsed along the bottom of the television, subconsciously noting the outcomes of baseball games he cared nothing about. No one had picked the next tune and the bartender laboriously lifted the bridge of the bar, limped over to the Juke-box and punched a couple keys. Roy Orbison showed up, worked his way through another song. Behind him were three of younguns, too cool for school and uninterested in conversing. At the center of their table sat a couple aluminum buckets. Empty bottles buoyed in the icy water. Made him think of that movie Tammie'd talked him into seeing about the Titanic, one with that little faggoty motherfucker that drowned at the end. Best part, far as he was concerned, but of course she cried like a baby and harped on his sensitivity. When he asked if the kitchen was closed the bartender pointed to an allotment of BBQ chip and Dorito's bags clipped along the perimeter of the mirror. He settled on pickled eggs and asked for hot sauce. It was then that she first sauntered up to the bar, perched atop a barstool, falling out on all sides in doughy throngs of flesh. She was heavy, ain't no two ways and sweat beaded on her forehead in symmetrical blisters that popped and navigated the omnipotent expanse of her face. But, all that said, she was pretty, mostly, hard looking, yes, but this was more directly correlated to that of poor life choices than facial structure, skin tone or cosmetic application. She sipped on shots that the bartender didn't so much provide as prescribe and she sifted through a Mary-Kay catalogue and dog-eared pages to remind her of things she'd never own.

The juke-box was an old Wurlitzer 3500 "Zodiac" and was damned near two months profit of what came through the door. DuFour found himself leaning over the machine, staring down at the peaks and valleys of its musical selection. He traipsed a finger along the window. Found himself punching in D3, more in a metaphorical manner than anything else. Reminded him of the days when he and Arty Tyler used to crack windows with crabapples when they were boys, sit back in

the reeds and watch the fallout. Nothing seemed to change. Only reaction, period, came from the golden, which slowly rose up onto his haunches and made way toward the door to go pinch a loaf.

DuFour returned to the bar and regained his stool, sucked an egg more aggressively than he would have liked and inadvertently made eye contact with one of the younguns. He raised an empty bottle and the bartender supplied one anew. He hadn't notice the heavysset beauty leave her stool, but she was flat gone, vanished. He felt an urgency wane. Expectations were foreign to him and he suffered a sad loss in this realization. But moments later keys hit the bar with the authority of breaking glass. "You gonna have to drive," said the heavysset beauty. He spun on his stool and over shot his mark, used a leg to kickstand and halt his movements. "You have cash, correct?" he nodded, dumbstruck. She was prettier than Tammie. "Gonna need a hand on that before you come inside."

She lived in a little shack over off a road called, Blarney. "Nothing special, I'm afraid." Weeds cow-licked up past the floorboards and children's flash cards were strewn about the front room. She offered a beer at room temp, emptied her purse on the kitchen stove and began to grind a pill into powder with the backside of a spoon. "Interested," she said, snagging a card from the floor that blatantly read, COW.

"Nah," he said. "I'm good."

"Suit yourself," she leaned over the stove and took two to the head. "Go on back." The ground felt hollow beneath the weight of his boots. He did as he was told, going back to the room and pushing the door wide. There was a ragged mattress at floor level and the television gave the room a lunar ambiance, geriatric smell hung in the air. "You can go on ahead and get started if you want?" she told him. It was then that he noted movement in the far corner. A hulking figure sat Indian-style and rocked rhythmically. It was hard to distinguish if it was man, or child? Age, on a sliding scale of unknown delineation. DuFour approached cautiously. "He don't even feel it really," she said from outside the room. "Nothing goin' on up there." Sitting in the man-child's lap was one of those biking helmets lined in Styrofoam. He hunkered over it, unleashing thick ropes of saliva down into its open dome. DuFour froze, noted the glossy black eyes of the individual and more importantly, that he was naked below the waist.

"Think you got the wrong idea," he hollered back, just as he felt the metal teeth sink into the meat of his shoulder. And instead of going out the way it'd come in, he was reeled back, all too aware of ligaments ripping and bone snapping in half. The Slugger struck next, poached him at the knees and brought him to his back. He laid there; face flush against the floor boards, coughed two great spurts of blood. The youngun from the bar raised a ballpeen hammer in high swooping arks above his shoulder and brought it down time and again upon the heavysset beauty's skull. Her body danced. A smaller man hunkered down over him, took what appeared a flathead screwdriver and placed it beneath his right eye. "Man," he heard one of them say, "Didn't think it'd look like that." It was then that DuFour went on to a vast place-beyond understanding.

