

Cowboy Jamboree

rural and western stories, fiction and non-

With Alacrity!



- A breathless new story from fiction and political writer Jared Yates Sexton
- A new spread on the Old West from one of our favorite illustrators, Allen Forrest
- A visit to Zane Grey's house
- New rural and western stories delivered "with Alacrity!"

Cover: *WPA Mural at the Brownsfield, Texas Post Office*, by Frank Mechau. It depicts a cowboy dousing a prairie fire by “yetch,” the process of dragging a recently butchered cow across the fire line.

“Alacrity”: (def.) enthusiastic urgency

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Paladin

By Hillary Leftwich

Sometimes, in a 24-hour diner in Beaumont, Texas, you'll find Buck pouring coffee into lemon colored mugs. Maybe the steam hits his hardened face long enough to make him appear young again. Homeless teens calling themselves *Regulators* burst in at 2 am scattering coins and demanding coffee and pie. *This is America*, they tell Buck. He thinks about how unforgiving the sun was when he was twelve. It doesn't matter; he knows things have a way of dying when they are forgotten. Like the leaves building up in his granddaddy's backyard. How they collect themselves in such a way they become tiny burial mounds scattered across the lawn. His granddaddy is all he has left, so Buck bought a rake. He does the yard work without complaint. Sometimes, when Buck rakes, he hums "The Ballad of Paladin." His father would sing this while cleaning his gun, peering at him through the empty barrel. His eye seemed very far away. The leaves in Buck's granddaddy's yard huddle close, forming their game plan, and Buck thinks: there is a storm scraping itself together. *Have gun will travel* (rake) *a knight without armor* (scrape) *Paladin, Paladin, where do you roam?* Buck sees himself and what is now his life in the grease that builds up on the diner's crusted grill. In the pink of the chewing gum that collects under the stools at the counter after the bar crowd stumbles back home, wherever home is. There are times when the smoke from the grease is so thick he can't escape. He moves around the diner like a drunken chess piece, unable to find a pocket of air worth breathing. Years ago, his wife staggered inside, polka dots of blood painting the outside of her nostrils. She collapsed in the stall of the bathroom while foamy white clouds oozed between her blue lips. Buck returned to the diner the day after Patty was buried. He walked back to the women's restroom, opened the stall and stared hard at the toilet. Stared hard at the walls of the stall. They were an angry yellow. It burned Buck's eyes. He took a black magic marker out of his pants pocket and leaned in, remembering how his wife's hair was the color of the sun when he was twelve. He scrawled on the wall of the stall in loopy cursive: *Far, far from home.*

Boys' Night

By Jayne Martin

The flame exploded from the propane heater like a rocket, sending sparks right up into Bert's whiskey-soaked beard, and lighting him up like a damn torch. I tried to beat out the flames with my hoagie. Drunk folks aren't the most clear thinkin'. Someone grabbed a blanket and tossed it over his head. We threw him on the ground and rolled him toward the lake, hollering our heads off like it was some kind of funny-as-shit party game and we couldn't wait to rib his ass when it was over. It was a long drop off the dock to the water. He landed face down and floated there for a while, but then he just kind of sank.

"I think I see bubbles," Wilson shouted.

"He's either breathin' or fartin'," I yelled back.

Then it got real quiet.

"One of us should probably go down there," Ernie said.

"Yeah," we all agreed. But none of us did.

The coroner said the burns weren't nothin'. That his heart just gave out.

We don't go out there much anymore.

A Good Start

By Noah Milligan

The boy didn't look much like him. That was the first thing. He was just so damn skinny, like dangerously skinny, like he should maybe be in the hospital skinny, and Ralph had never once in his entire life been called skinny. A fat ass, yes, on multiple occasions, but never skinny.

Second thing, Ralph had used a condom. He was sure of it, actually, because he always did. Every. Single. Time. Didn't matter if the girl said she was on birth control or not—he wrapped it up.

Third thing was he just didn't *feel* like he was somebody's dad. He imagined, and later on he realized he was right, that once you were someone's dad, you automatically were beholden by responsibility. You could feel it. It pulsated. You were responsible for a living, breathing human being. His welfare and safety and security. You felt obligated. You felt an immediate sense of love and duty, but when he looked at the boy he didn't feel any of that. Instead, he couldn't help but notice the glaring absence of it all.

The boy's name was Huck, like Huckleberry Finn, his mother said, and "he's yours."

"You sure?" Ralph asked.

"Goddamnit yes, Ralph. I wouldn't be here if he ain't."

His mother was a bucktoothed equestrian rider Ralph had met years before when she'd been in town for the rodeo. Ralph hadn't attended the rodeo itself, but the night of he showed up to Cattlemen's, this honkytonk dive bar next to the state fairgrounds. He'd found her there, six Pabsts in and swooning to Johnny Cash. It hadn't taken much to convince her to go back to her motel room—it was her idea, in fact, if he remembered correctly—and after that he hadn't heard from her since. And time had not been good to her. She'd lost several teeth, and she looked jaundiced. Meth, he guessed. Damn shame, too. She'd at one time had an ass to die for.

"Well, there, Adeleine, sounds like we might differ in opinion in that regard."

"Look," she said. "I was only with one guy then, and it was you. By the power of deduction I—"

"The power of deduction?"

"Yes, goddamnit. Yes!"

"And you wouldn't be offended if I say I want a paternity test?"

She scoffed, pulled out a leather cigarette case, and lit a long, skinny 100 with a flick of a wrist. "And who's going to pay for that? You?"

She glared at his trailer like an uppity, suburban bitch.

"I suppose you're the one accusing," Ralph said. "Should be your dime then."

"Listen," she said. "There's no need. I just need you to watch him for a few days. That's all. Got some business at the Winstar, and I'll be back on Wednesday. Understand?"

The boy wasn't much to look at. He didn't seem angry his mother was pawning him off on a stranger, some guy she claimed to be his father, and he didn't seem to care Ralph denied the allegations, instead staring up at Ralph like he was figuring whether or not he could take him in a fight. This seemed to Ralph to be the boy's

only emotion: defense. To be so guarded like that, Ralph couldn't help but feel sorry for the boy. He was just a sad sack of potatoes, a burlap bag covering lumpy, bland vegetables.

"Fine," Ralph said. "Wednesday then."

Adeleine nodded, sort of—she really just jerked her head down once. Then she grabbed the boy. She hugged him tight and clawed her nails into his back. She held on to him like that for a while, the boy's arms pinned to his side. Most would be uncomfortable in such a position, claustrophobic because they couldn't move, but the boy didn't seem to be troubled by it at all. Rather, it was like he expected it—to not have any recourse of escape.

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Wednesday came. Then Thursday. Friday, Saturday, Sunday. But Adeleine didn't. She didn't answer her phone either, the call going straight to voicemail. They both left message after message, Huck's tone growing from agitated to concerned, Ralph's vice versa. At first, he was worried something might've happened to her. Years ago, she'd known her way around a bottle of Kentucky Deluxe; it wouldn't have surprised him one bit if she'd had three or four or six fingers before climbing behind the wheel. But after a few days, he figured that couldn't have been the case—somebody would've tracked the boy down by now if she were dead. No, she'd run. Sure as shit, she hit the highway and hightailed it. For what reason, Ralph wasn't sure. Could've been she couldn't take being a mother no more, the worry and the burden, the responsibility and obligation of it all. Or it could've been a man for all he knew. Love, she might think it was, and her beau didn't take too kindly to children in the picture. Either way, Ralph was pissed.

Turned out, the boy wasn't that bad of an apple. Most nights, Ralph and he played cards: Go Fish and War and Spades. Games he hadn't played since he'd been a kid himself, stealing sips from his uncle's Schlitz when he was too busy staring at the weather girl on the nightly news. Ralph had always thought cards came down to one thing: luck. Either you had the cards or you didn't. Like life in that regard, Ralph thought. Some people just don't catch the breaks.

On the eighth night he and Huck played dominoes. Huck'd never played the game before, and he fumbled around with the bones not quite knowing what to do.

"The point is to make the ends multiples of five. Five, ten, fifteen, twenty, so on and so forth. Get it?" Ralph asked.

The boy blinked at him like popping a balloon, throwing out dominoes without regard for strategy. Ralph tried to coach the boy, asking him if he had the deuce-three when it would've scored five points or the double sixes that would've scored twenty, but the kid just looked at his hand like he was trying to read Mandarin. Did no good, so Ralph just let him play his way for a couple of hours, them both sipping on lemonade and eating potato skins like the famine was coming, until finally Ralph just asked it:

"You got any other family out there?"

"Sorry?" the boy asked.

"Family? Aunts? Uncles? A Meemaw somewhere that still has two marbles clicking around?" Ralph pointed to his skull, but he could tell the boy didn't get what he'd meant.

The boy shrugged. "Probably. Don't most people?"

"Well," Ralph said. "You'd be surprised."

—

Next morning they headed south for the Winstar Casino, looking for the boy's Mom. It was still dark out when they left, the time of morning Ralph's mother had always warned him about. "Just drunks and cops out that early," she'd used to say, "and I recommend staying away from both." Throughout his 43 years, he'd learned his mother was right about one thing: the middle of the night was full of drunks and cops. What she got wrong is that they were often the same people, and turned out to be some of his best friends. Maybe that was why they didn't get along—turned out her son was one of the very people she mistrusted.

The boy stared out the window like this wasn't anything new, like he'd grown accustomed to the middle of the night himself, his eyes not expectant but rather complacent, steady. He found common ground with the boy in this regard. He remembered his own youth. Used to, his mother had a liking for drink and waffles, so she spent most of her time at the I-35 Waffle House next to the truck stop. Problem was Ralph's dad had skipped town a couple years before, so Ralph was forced to take umbrage in a booth, doing his social studies homework and developing a taste for decaf.

Every hour or so, his mother left him alone in there. At the time, Ralph had just thought his mother popular. It wasn't until many years later he figured out she'd been turning tricks in the back of big rigs. He remembered one night especially—he was working on what the waitresses called a heart attack bomb, which was just a gigantic pile of food: fried eggs, waffles, French toast, biscuits and gravy, hash browns, grits, all topped in maple syrup, and it was the most delicious thing Ralph had ever eaten. It was so tall he actually had to reach up in order to make a dent, and boy did he. He ate and ate and ate. He ate until he was full, and then he ate some more. He ate until he could feel his sweatpants tighten. He ate until his stomach bulged. He ate until his organs contorted. He ate until he could feel it creeping back up his throat. Eventually, he had to stop, and he became lethargic; he became sleepy.

When he awoke, it was light out. New waitresses were working, the graveyard shift having had already gone home. Someone had draped a floor mat over him as a blanket, and it stunk of muddy boots and rainwater. When he sat up, nobody paid him no mind, busying themselves with the menu or writing down an order. It wasn't until he tugged on a waitress' apron that someone looked at him.

"Have you seen my mother?" he asked the woman.

"Oh, honey," she said, her words garbled from missing her two front teeth. "Oh, sweetie. I haven't. I'm sorry."

Ralph found his mother at home, five miles and a couple of hours away by foot, passed out on the couch. She was still dressed, minus a shoe that seemed to have gone missing.

—

After an hour, they stopped at a Love's Country Store. Part truck stop, part convenience store, there was a little bit of everything. Souvenirs lined dusty shelves: dreamcatchers, ceramic buffalo skulls, I Love OK magnets, Woody Guthrie coffee mugs, and beer cozies picturing large-breasted women. The place smelled of oil, the adjacent Subway sandwich shop, and body odor of weary travelers. It was a place Ralph knew well, and a good a place as any to piss and grab a bag of chips for the road.

Ralph let the boy wander, giving him some time alone. Ralph had the idea this might be the first time, but it wouldn't be the last his mother might abandon him, so he thought it best for the boy to work through it himself. Comforting him wouldn't do any good. He'd just ignore Ralph, defenses poised in prepubescent rage, and Ralph couldn't blame him for that. He knew the feeling all too well himself.

Ralph picked out some Pringles and a Diet Dr. Pepper and was heading to the register when he heard it, a scream that sounded something like a Kung-Fu Master on a made-for-TV movie, a high-pitched “Hiiiiyyaaaa.” It took Ralph aback so much he just stared up at the ceiling, like something so bizarre could only come from some place as equally bizarre, like a ninja climbing through the air-conditioning ducts.

“Thief!” the man yelled. He was to Ralph’s left, an aisle over. “Shoplifter! Delinquent!”

Delinquent? Who talked like that?

Ralph tried to mind his own business, but the man kept yelling in that high-pitched, whiny voice until there came a voice Ralph recognized.

“Don’t touch me!” Huck yelled. “Get your goddamn hands off me!”

Fuck, Ralph thought. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Ralph turned the corner and found a small Indian man grabbing Huck’s forearm, a couple Snickers lying at the boy’s feet.

“What seems to be the problem here?” Ralph asked a little more hesitantly than he’d intended.

“This boy yours?” the Indian man asked, pointing at Huck.

“That’s a more complicated question than I think you know.”

“He is or he ain’t.”

“Well, then, in a manner of speaking, the boy is under my charge.”

Huck tried to jerk his arm free, but he wasn’t strong enough. Ralph cut him a look that said to cut it out, and Huck shot him one right back that said to fuck off.

“The boy was stealing.”

“That’s one helluva of an allegation. You got any proof?”

“There!” the man yelled, pointing at the Snickers.

“What? That?” Ralph asked. “Some candy bars? What does that prove?”

“He had them in his pockets! I saw him!”

Ralph looked to Huck. His expression hadn’t changed, and Ralph could read it as if it was in plain English: fuck you and everyone else in this world. Fuck it all. Fuck every single last bit of it until the end of the Earth. Ralph might’ve thought it funny if it was under different circumstances, if it was some other poor schmuck standing in his shoes rather than himself.

“Assuming he did, and I’m not saying I believe you at all—it is, after all, your word against his—but assuming that’s so, couldn’t it be that he just needed his hands free to get himself a drink? Could he not have had every intention of paying once he got everything he wanted?”

“I’m calling the cops,” the man said and jerked Huck’s arm forward and tried to push past Ralph, but Ralph scooted in his way.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Ralph said, his mind running over the laundry list of warrants he might have out for his arrest: unpaid parking tickets, a public urination charge, that one time he'd skipped out on his tab at Cattlemen's. "No reason to get hasty now. I can afford a couple Snickers. How much are they?"

The clerk eyed him sideways, squinting like he was aiming a rifle shot.

"For you," he said, "fifty bucks."

"Ha!"

The man didn't blink.

"You're serious?"

Still nothing.

Ralph did some quick accounting. He only had sixty bucks, and he needed that for the ride back home.

"I can do \$25."

"Forty."

"For fuck's sake."

"Forty-five."

"You can't do that. You can't go up again."

"Back to fifty."

"All right, listen. I'll do the forty. Forty's still good right?"

The man stuck his tongue against his bottom lip. "Fine," he said. "Forty. But you only get one."

"Jesus fucking Christ. Fine."

Ralph pulled out two twenties from his pocket, threw it at the man, who didn't seem to appreciate the gesture, and then dragged Huck from the convenient store. By this time, several bystanders had accumulated, snapping pictures with their iPhones and grinning shit-eating grins like they knew Ralph. He wanted to punch every single last one of them in their snot-nosed faces but, of course, he didn't. He only stopped one time on the way out, and that was when Huck pulled free from his grip and told him to wait just one goddamn second; he'd forgotten his candy bar.

In the truck, Ralph gave the boy a tongue lashing, demanding Huck pay back the money he owes him, to which Huck replied that he was nine years old, "how the fuck do you expect me to have any money?" Good point, Ralph thought.

"But why'd you do it?" Ralph asked.

The boy shrugged. "Got to eat, don't you?"

—

The Winstar Casino was a monstrosity, a hodgepodge of buildings that looked like a souvenir shop had vomited out its gigantic wares. There was a replica of the Eiffel Tower and Buckingham Palace and the pyramids

and pretty much every other tourist trap known to mankind, and the parking sucked balls. Ralph wandered the aisles for what seemed like an hour, intermittently waiting for some gamblers to make their exit, but they just sat in their cars, maybe enjoying a toke or doing something a little more illicit, he wasn't sure.

Once they finally found a spot, Ralph parked.

"Wait in the car," he told Huck. "I'll find your Mom and bring her back."

"But!"

"Don't be a pain in my ass. Just stay. A casino isn't a place for no kid."

The kid looked disappointed. It was the first time Ralph had seen him show any emotion besides disgust and anger, and in an instance Ralph felt sorry for the boy, but it didn't change the fact he couldn't take him inside.

"Lock the door when I leave." He handed Huck the keys. "Unlock it for nobody but me. You hear?"

The boy nodded.

"Good."

The casino was dark, windowless, air thick with tobacco smoke. Ralph's throat swelled and his eyes itched as he snaked his way through the throngs of gamblers. It was a sorted group: rednecks donning ten-gallon hats, young frat girls wasting their parents' money, overweight men with tucked in T-shirts, and the elderly, sneaking a smoke between gasps from their oxygen masks. He'd be hard pressed to find Adeleine here. But hell, he was out of options.

He had no idea where Adeleine would congregate. He'd only known the woman for a few short nights several years prior. Back then, she'd been wild. A rodeo junkie with a cheerleader's flair, she drank and cussed like a soccer hooligan. Fun was what Ralph remembered, dumping an ice bucket full of crickets into the pool; siphoning gas out of the asshole desk clerk's car, spelling "Fuck You" on the parking lot and lighting it on fire; banging left, right, and sideways in the bathroom, the bedroom, even the unlocked facilities management closet next to the mops and bleach bottles. If she was anything like her former self, then Ralph figured she'd be someplace with the most action, getting into any kind of trouble she could.

He trekked from one shit-stained smoky enclave to another, all of it wrapped in this god-awful maroon and orange and teal green gaudiness, the carpet, the chandeliers, the flashing, neon signs. Ralph had never been much for casinos. It wasn't that he was risk averse, he just felt he was being conned, from the faux gold sconces down to the free drinks and the ever-so-patient dealers, taking his money with the sympathetic upturned lip of a friend.

The Texas Hold'em room was large, full of cowboy hats and handsy businessmen, clamping down on waitresses' butt cheeks, the place vibrating with cards shuffling and chips stacking. If he couldn't find Adeleine here, he didn't know what he was going to do. He didn't have the resources to feed another mouth, buy new shoes, keep Huck bathed and out of jail. No, no matter how much he started to like the boy, he'd probably have to turn him over to the DHS, sentence him to ten hard years in the foster system, getting shit-kicked from one dump to the next, hoping the next one might stick, but knowing fully goddamn well it wouldn't. Ralph had known men who'd had a childhood like that, and he wouldn't condemn Osama Bin Fuckin' Laden to that type of abuse, even if his mother was Adeleine Murphy.

But he couldn't find her. Not amongst the tables, not shadowing some big-stacked spender, teasing her chewed-up fingernails along his collar. He didn't find her at the Blackjack tables either, or slinking around the roulette wheel. She wasn't in the sports room. She wasn't at the bar. She wasn't even camped out in front of the

slots, sucking on a burnt out cigarette. Finding her was a lost cause, like trying to collect a debt from a deadbeat uncle—you know there's no chance in hell he'll ever repay you, but you can't help but ask.

It was going to be a long drive back to the house, so he stopped by the shitter before hitting the road. It was rank in there, smelling of pretty much every single body secretion Ralph could think of, roasting in a pot full of cigarette smoke. There wasn't anyone at the urinals, but he could hear a guy grunting in one of the stalls. The sound he made was something canine, deep and guttural and rhythmic. He couldn't tell if he was trying to push out a large one or perhaps preparing to bark. Ralph wouldn't have been surprised either way, really.

Ralph figured he'd take the boy back, then contact DHS in the morning. He didn't want to do it, but he didn't really have any choice in the matter. His disability check wasn't going to cover the two of them, and what would happen if Adeleine showed back up, maybe with a couple cops, accusing him of kidnapping her kid? What would he do then? It'd be her word against his, and Ralph didn't like his chances. A mother's word is gold in the eyes of the court, at least in Ralph's experience. Best to just hand the boy over to the authorities. Granted, he'd never been one to do things by the book, but it seemed like the only course of action. Rip the Band-Aid, he thought, and be done with the whole mess.

He zipped and was about to wash his hands when he noticed something funny: two high heels sticking out from underneath the stall door where he'd heard the man grunting. Turned out, he wasn't trying to unload that night's buffet dinner but was rather getting a slob knob right there in the bathroom. That's when the man groaned something incoherent, just a string of vowels and consonants that couldn't quite form the hard edges of language. He sputtered three times, then there was a zip, some shuffling, and the click of the lock. Ralph turned toward the sink and stared at his hands lest he make eye contact. The last thing he wanted was to be accused of being a voyeur. Never knew which way it might go—he could be punched in the gut or he could be asked to watch, neither one of which Ralph was willing to do.

"Jesus Fucking Christ, Ralph Banister." No. No. No. No. "Thought you were supposed to be watching our kid?"

"You got a kid?" the man asked.

Ralph hoped, he hoped beyond hope, he'd heard them wrong.

"Sure do. With this handsome son of a bitch right here."

Ralph turned around to find Adeleine with a stick of a man. Adeleine's voice was slurred, face bright red, mascara running down her cheeks, hair disheveled and stinking of gin and spunk.

"Oh man, oh shit. Is this your old lady, dude?" the guy asked.

The man was smaller than Ralph had expected, given the decibel level of his orgasm, just a dry-skinned guy with dangly arms and a round paunch poking over his oversized belt buckle.

"Ha!" Adeleine laughed. "This guy? I wouldn't be caught dead with this guy, let alone be his old lady."

"My toilet's just not nice enough for you, is it, Adeleine?"

"The fuck's that supposed to mean?"

"Never mind."

She chewed on that for a while, literally, eyeing him as she did so. Ralph didn't want to think of what she might be chewing on.

"Where's our kid anyway?"

"In the car." Ralph motioned with his thumb like he was hitching a ride.

"In the car? Here? Alone? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Ralph had half a mind to defend himself—she was, after all, the deadbeat who'd left her son with a stranger, but he decided not to get into that here. It wouldn't do any good. Plus, maybe she did have a point. This wasn't the place for a child, especially one like Huck, a little bit of delinquency running through his blood. There was no telling what sort of trouble the boy was capable of getting into, and, Ralph thought with a sinking feeling, he did have Ralph's keys. He already knew Huck was capable of theft—odds of his truck still being in the parking lot may be slim to none.

Adeleine followed Ralph to the exit, the stick man, quizzically, still in tow. When they made it outside, it was dark out. Sporadic lampposts dotted the parking lot, but mostly it was pitch black, the small halos of light too thin to get a grip on his surroundings. They meandered a bit, Ralph zigzagging through Ford F-150s and Z-71s, all the while Adeleine griping at him, running her mouth about how stupid it was to lose his truck, that only a moron could ever do something like that, some brain dead fucktard not worth the two cent boots he was wearing, yelling that if he lost her kid, she swore to God he'd pay, call the FBI and have him arrested right here in front of everybody, and on and on and on, and Ralph just kept mumbling to himself that he hoped the kid was okay, please, dear sweet Jesus, just let the boy be okay. He couldn't help but imagine all the terrible things that could've befallen the boy: some drug addled con artist could've broken out the window, sold him to some sick pimp trafficking youngsters across the border, or he could've taken off, high-tailed it out of there with one thought on his mind, freedom, but not getting a mile down the road before getting knifed by an 18-wheeler doing 95 on the highway, trapped underneath a crumpled mess of steel and burning alive under the flames. If anything bad had happened to the boy, Ralph didn't think he'd be able to live with it. He'd lose himself on the south end of a bottle and the action end of a twelve gauge.

Luckily, though, none of that came to fruition. Eventually they came across the truck, parked where he'd left it. Huck was asleep in the front seat, his head propped up on a phone book and his hands tucked between his knees. Lying there, he looked two or three years younger than he actually was, just some innocent babe trying to cope. Ralph had the urge to scoop him up, hold him, comfort him, tell him everything would be okay. Didn't even matter if he believed it; he just wanted to feel responsible for someone else. He wanted to be obligated. He wanted to be needed. It was a strange feeling, one he didn't exactly welcome, but it was there nevertheless, like the pull on a smoker's lung tissue, yearning for just one more drag.

Adeleine beat on the window, and the boy stirred awake. He seemed confused at first, swiveling his head trying to discern the source of the noise. When he found his mother, he sat there a moment. He looked at the stick man, then to Ralph, and then back to his mother. Adeleine tried to open the door, but it was locked. Her hand slipped off the handle, and she stumbled backward, her ankle rolling before she could regain her balance.

"Open the door!" she yelled, but Huck didn't move. "Open it! Open the goddamn door, Huck." He didn't budge. Just blinked at her. "Fine," she said. "You don't want to come? Fine then. See if I care."

Adeleine limped away, muttering under her breath. The stick man looked confused. He stared at Adeleine, then back to Huck, all the while his mouth puckered, like he wanted to say something on the boy's behalf, but couldn't, no matter how hard he tried, form the right words. He then walked away in the opposite direction.

Ralph tried the driver side door. It was unlocked.

"What are you doing?" he asked Huck.

“I don’t want to go with her.”

Ralph filled his lungs. The air was cold, but clean. “Sometimes, son, we don’t have a choice in what we do.”

“But I want to go with you.”

“You can’t go with me.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not your father.”

“But Mom says you are.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“But you could be. Couldn’t you? Isn’t it possible?”

“It’s not, Huck. I’m sorry.”

“Not even a little bit?”

“Your place is with your mother.”

Ralph pointed, but Adeleine had already disappeared into the darkness.

Huck screamed. He screamed, and he kicked, and he flailed his arms about. He punched the dashboard and honked the horn and howled like a coyote. Ralph wanted to be mad at the boy, thinking it might be easier, but he wasn’t. He knew what that felt like: complete and utter helplessness. It permeated him. Always had. It started out in his bones and flowed through his tissue all the way to his fingernails. He could feel it throbbing, reproducing, growing stronger, and he didn’t want that for Huck. He didn’t. And if Ralph was to take him, it would latch onto him, spread to him like some contagious disease, and so he did the only think he could think of: he grabbed the boy.

“You may never understand this,” Ralph said. “I may never understand it. I might not ever want to understand it, but this is how the world is.”

Ralph pulled the boy from his truck. He stood there, his face the color of ripe raspberries.

“You see up there?” Ralph pointed, and the boy followed his finger. “There’s a gas station in about a hundred yards. You remember us passing it on the way in?”

“Yes.”

“Good. You get there and you tell them to call the police, okay? That you need help. You tell them your name; you tell them you’re alone. They’ll know what to do. I promise.”

Ralph pulled his last remaining twenty-dollar bill out of his pocket and gave it to the boy. Huck took it and jammed it into his pocket. He didn’t seem surprised, or angry, or dejected even. There was just the unmistakable look of resignation. He was on his own, just like he’d always expected, twenty bucks in his pocket and beholden to nobody—it was, Ralph figured, about as good a start as any.

Wild West: Gamblers, Gunslingers, and Cowboys

Illustrations by Allen Forrest



“Bill and Bob” (ink + watercolor)



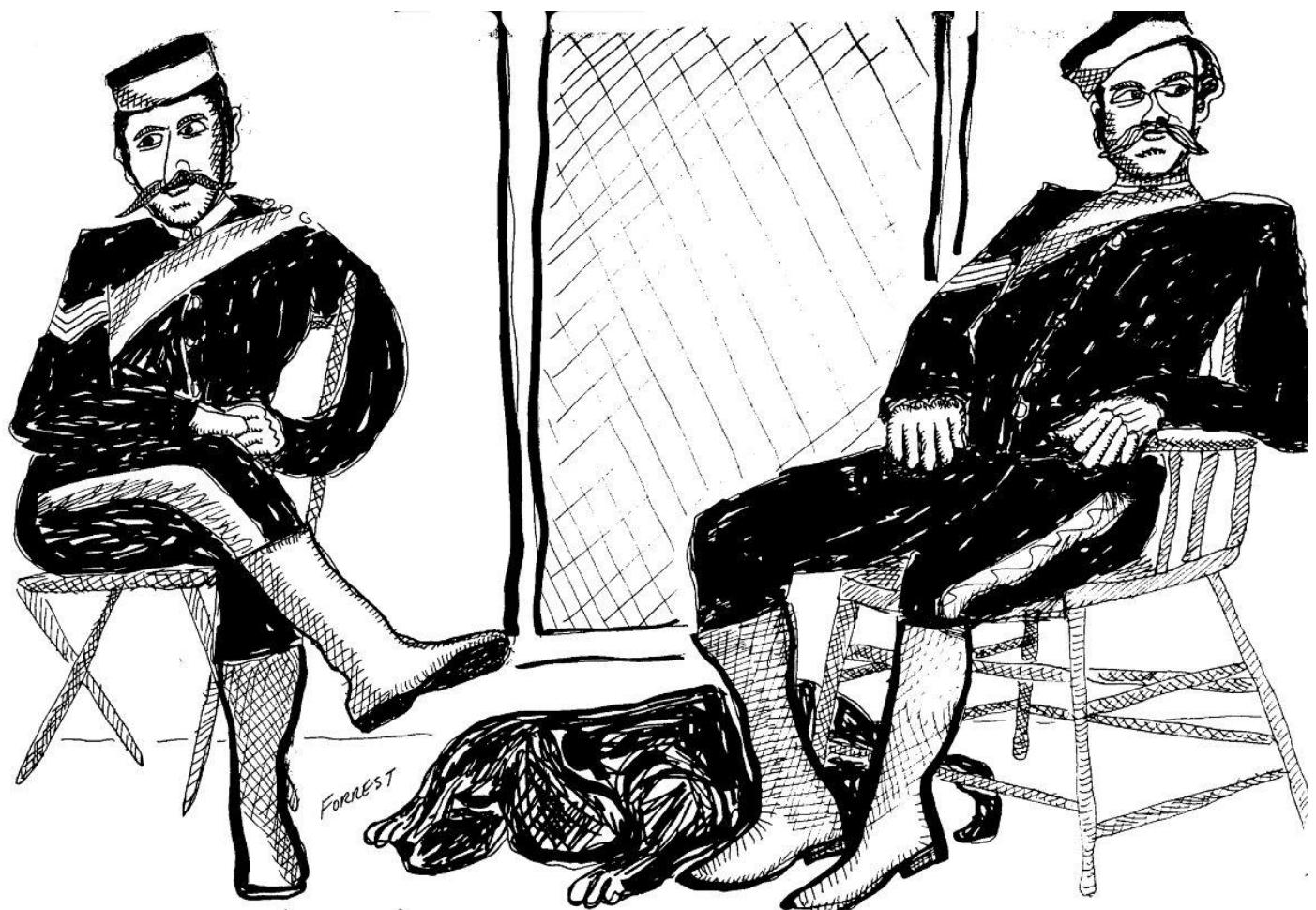
“Big Feather and Little Bear (ink + watercolor)



"Billy the Kid" (ink + watercolor)



"Gunslingers and Frontiersmen"
(ink + watercolor)



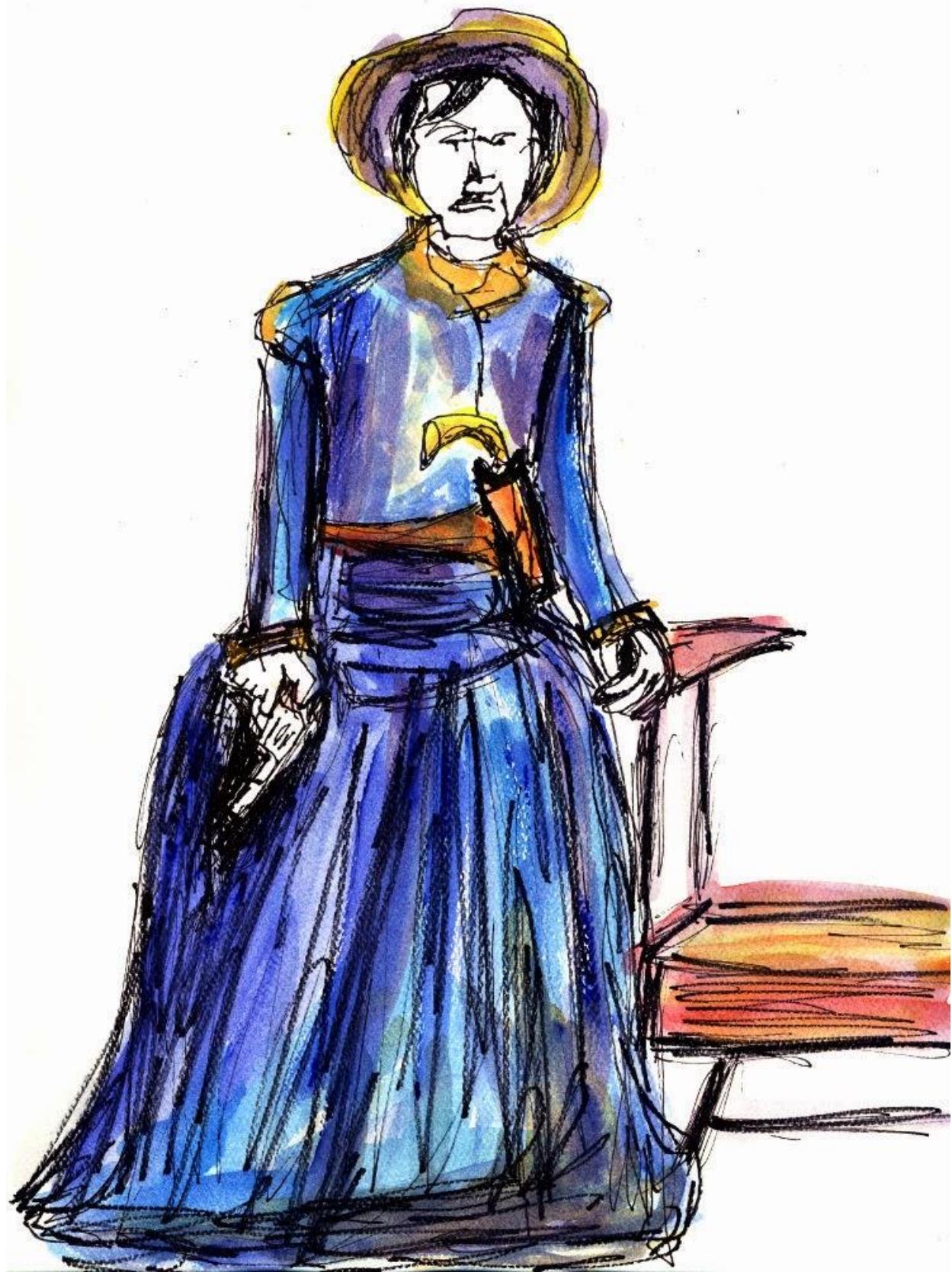
"Sergeants" (ink)



“The Onlookers” (ink + watercolor)



“Brothers” (ink + watercolor)



“Belle Starr” (ink + watercolor)

Don't Speed in Register Georgia

By Jared Yates Sexton

After the incident in the dining room, Gringo was relegated to washing dishes. Most people would've been out on their ass but Gringo had his manager Manuel by the shorthairs as he'd been his shift-leader's dealer for two years going and always cut him a deal, meaning Manuel owed Gringo a favor or three. Besides, the whole staff knew that Gringo was a livewire ready to go off, so it was with a sigh of relief they took the announcement of his demotion.

Because of how tight he was with Manuel, Gringo worked doubles on Tuesday and Thursday, meaning he had plenty of time to maintain his own business and go crawling around town all hours of the night. That was Friday through Monday though. Wednesdays were reserved for drinking with his ex-girl's dad Calamine.

That Wednesday Gringo was an hour late because he had to cover a shift for the other dishwasher who had a girlfriend ready to pop any second. The baby was two weeks late and matters needed tending. Manuel begged and begged Gringo to cover the shift as there was a holiday party swinging through and the sinks were going to be overflowing with food-smeared plates and lipsticked glasses.

At a quarter to ten Gringo dropped his last load and tossed his apron over the pull-faucet. In his ear was one of the kitchen boys looking for Adderall. One of the best and worst parts about working at Rapido Hombre was the constant demand for business.

I'm out, he told Francisco, who was only asking for his old lady, a perpetual freshman at the local community college. Told you last week same thing I'm gonna tell you now.

Nothing? Francisco asked, his face betraying how bad it was going to be if he went home empty-handed.

Ever the bleeding heart, Gringo led Francisco out back to his car and gave him a plastic baggy full of Ritalin. Not what you wanted, he said, but should get the trick done.

Francisco turned the bag over in his hand, watched the pills tumble from one end to the other. He was an emotional boy, just shy of his nineteenth birthday. He looked damn near ready to cry.

Don't get all teary-eyed on me, Gringo said, slamming the trunk.

For the drive over to Calamine's Gringo rolled down the window and reached under the driver's seat to find one of the stray Modelo Especiales that'd been rolling around in the floorboards the past few days. Just the weekend before he'd gone out with the kitchen boys and done The Circuit, a pastime that involved running laps around an old forgotten road that circled the town while pounding as many beers as possible. When he opened the can it foamed all over his chest and jeans as he did his best to get a mouthful.

Such activities weren't the norm for Gringo, but things had been a bag of bullshit lately. Ever since Tori, Calamine's daughter and Gringo's One and Only, had called it quits he'd been running long and hard in the hopes that maybe he could numb the dumb beating of his broken heart. The prescription he'd tried was drinking and tomcatting at paces unheard of before. The problem was that all of his hellraising did little to curb his desire and in fact only exacerbated his longing. With every devil may care decision he found himself wishing for his anchor, his common sense, for Tori to come back to where she belonged.

She'd sworn him off though. That was the issue. Hell, they'd broken up and gotten back together close to thirty times. This time? It seemed permanent.

He'd tried all the old tricks.

Getting her name inked on his shoulder blades.

Sitting in her driveway all hours of the night and laying on the horn until the law had to be called.

Spray-painting her name on the overpass on the main drag.

Gringo + Tori = True Love.

The math seemed so simple.

But it didn't matter what Gringo did because Tori's mind was made up. She'd come to a decision and by god she was gonna stick with it. The final straw, as she explained, had been the way he'd eyeballed Nancy-Ann at the midnight showing at the theater. Caught him dead to rights, he couldn't deny it, but it was a minor crime in Gringo's eyes, something he thought maybe a Hail Mary or two could solve.

The resolve with which she'd held to her decision had been what tipped Gringo off to how things had changed. In the past she'd only stayed mad at him long enough to get a pair of earrings or a good roll in the backseat of his car. This time it was permanent and that told him everything he needed to know.

You tell me, Calamine had said over drinks the night after things came to a close. Did Tori wake up this morning and decide to give you the boot or has this been comin' awhile? You ask me and I'll tell you the truth, Gringo. There's something else here and it stinks.

Gringo had his own suspicions. There was a new police officer the next town over in Register and all the local girls were ga-ga over him. Drove his own Camaro with a light in the windshield. Didn't bother wearing the hat the position called for. And he looked like a college boy with his hair done up right and his shoes shined perfectly.

You thinking it's the cop? Gringo asked Calamine.

Calamine didn't bother answering. He just snickered. You tell me what it is if it ain't, he said.

Calamine had a point. Tori was the most beautiful girl in the county and it wasn't even close. Two years running she'd won the Timber Festival crown and had even marched in the Rose Bowl parade. There were grown men willing to toss off their families and leave their careers just to take her out on the town. If it wasn't the new officer then Gringo was going to have to face facts and believe Tori just up and decided to leave him.

Even though Gringo was late that night he found the porch light waiting on him. The driveway was always crowded with old junkers that Calamine had bartered for around town and so he parked on the edge with his back wheels hanging off in the street. Calamine's house was an absolute disaster with trash and mementos from junkyard runs laying this place and that. Small critters took up residence in the hollows of all the rubbish and went skittering as Gringo made his way to the door.

He didn't even have to knock for Calamine to come running out, which was a feat considering what a big man he was. Calamine had to weigh four hundred pounds if he weighed an ounce and when he hustled his bearded face blushed to the point it seemed ready to explode. His T-shirt, one of the seemingly endless supply of plain blue Hanes undershirts he'd bought bulk at the Wal-Mart, was sweated through and darkening by the second.

Thank god you're here, he cried. I'm all out of booze. I don't even know how it's possible but jesuschrist it happened.

That was just about the worst news Gringo had gotten since Tori decided to dump his ass. Bulloch County was liquor dry and the closest store was on the county line, nearly twenty minutes away. If they hustled balls they might get there right as the place closed.

I got a couple beers in the car, Gringo reasoned. That work?

Calamine shook his head. I'm already shakin', Gringo. Let's give it a run.

So they did.

Luckily the roads were empty and Gringo pushed the gas to the point of discomfort. His old Charger was rusting through but there wasn't anything wrong with what he had under the hood. That baby purred and she purred something sexy. In five minutes they made ten minutes worth of time. They were nearing Register city limits when Calamine put his hands on the dashboard.

Son, you know better than to speed here, he said.

You think that sonuvabitch is on patrol?

Think it? Calamine said. I know he is. Where do you think Tori is?

Just hearing it nearly made Gringo jerk the wheel and drive the two of them into a ditch. He'd had his suspicions, but this was too much.

So it's true, he said.

Fuck it, Calamine spat. He had one of the Modelos and was guzzling it between words. We talked last night. Guzzle. Told her how goddamn stupid she's being. Guzzle. Me and her mom. Guzzle. I asked her, How could you ever screw the law? Guzzle. Didn't we teach you anything?

When the can was polished off he tossed it in the backseat and looked for another.

That it?

That's it, Gringo said. They were in Register city limits, a town that made its nut on fines and court fees. Had been the same story since Gringo was little. He remembered making a logging run with his old man in his eighteen wheeler and how his old man put away his Budweiser before hitting town and told him, You ever swing through here, boy, you mind your p's and q's.

The last lawman in Register had been a potbellied asshole named Buckley who had a reputation for getting girls alone out on the shoulder of the road outside town. He'd retired the year before, citing nasty arthritis, leaving the door open for this new hotshot, a prick by the name of Sandy Wallop. He was sitting there in his Camaro in a gas station on the edge of town, just where Buckley used to set up. The windows to his car were tinted so Gringo couldn't see, though he tried, whether Tori was in the passenger seat.

You can't talk sense into someone not wanting to hear sense, Calamine said.

That you can't, Gringo agreed.

To pass the rest of the drive, Gringo asked Calamine to tell him again how he got his name and Calamine told him the story he told him every month, about how when he was in high school he went out into the high weeds to rub one out and got poison ivy all over his hands and balls.

They thought I was gonna die, he said, laughing so hard Gringo thought he might have a heart attack. I'll tell you this though, Calamine said, huffing and puffing, once the itching let off a little bit I sure as shit didn't mind the scratching.

He finished the story as they pulled into the County Line parking lot with four minutes to spare. Inside all the booze was at bootleg prices, the bottles all priced to move. Gringo got himself a bottle of Evan Williams and a little travel-sized thing of Smirnoff, in the off-chance Tori was there when they got back and wanted to join in. He went ahead and paid for his and Calamine's haul, staring at a sign by the door that read DON'T SPEED IN REGISTER GEORGIA.

You're good people, Gringo, Calamine said, struggling to carry the booze to the car. That's what I keep telling Tori. Told her it doesn't matter what you did or didn't do, you're good people like other people ain't. He opened the door and plopped in with another huff. You got you a good heart, Gringo. A real good heart.

Gringo thanked Calamine but his mind was elsewhere. He was imagining Tori in the passenger seat of that Camaro, her feet up against the glass and her panties hanging around her ankles like a trinket for Officer Sandy. He was probably in there listening to an opera or symphony, taking his time with that sweet girl and not even worrying about the law because he carried a badge.

Back into Register city limits, Gringo felt something inside him come to life. It was like the night he got stood up in the parking lot of Rapido Hombre by a couple buddies of the cooks. This had been during one of the times him and Tori were on the outs and he hadn't cared one way or another whether he lived or died.

One of the fellas had him a knife and it wasn't that big or that sharp, but it could've done some damage. He was telling Gringo to open the trunk of his Charger so he could get in there and take his supply. Gringo told him to go fuck himself and the fella pointed the blade at him. Gringo walked closer and said it again. The fella thrust the blade in a way that told him he didn't want any trouble. Gringo walked up closer until the point of it was touching his stomach.

Stick me you shithead, he told the fella. Go ahead and do it already.

The fella took off a few seconds later.

Whatever it was that made Gringo do that also made him hit the accelerator the same way he had to make time on the way over. Soon he was jetting through Register doing sixty in a thirty-five. Calamine had that bottle of Evan Williams out and was taking baby-sips between telling him to slow down.

What in the hell are you up to, Gringo? he asked, screwing the top back on.

It was Gringo's turn not to answer. He cranked that engine up to seventy and had it heading toward seventy-five. By the time they ran by that gas station where Officer Sandy and his precious Camaro were stationed he wanted to be north of eighty.

Calamine begged him, Slow down, slow down, jesus god, Gringo.

Officer Sandy didn't disappoint.

The blue and red lights came on and that Camaro whipped out of the gas station in no time flat.

By the time it did though Gringo had his car to the city limits. He was leaving the Camaro behind, which wasn't what he'd planned. He pressed the break, let the engine rest and brought the beast down into the fifties and then the forties. Calamine was squirreling all the liquor and beer cans away, cursing Gringo's name with every breath.

You got us into some shit now, he said, the car stinking of his sweat.

Gringo pulled the car over onto the side of the road. Put the brake on. He was outside by the time Officer Sandy caught up.

When Officer Sandy jumped out of his car he had his gun drawn. You got yourself a death-wish? he asked. Get your dumbass back into your car.

Gringo took a step toward him.

Slow your ass, Sandy called. I've got cause to shoot your dick off, son.

With another step Gringo got a clear view of him. He was a little older, but not much. Maybe twenty-six. Twenty-seven. Had probably never grown a beard. Probably didn't have to shave but once a week. A pretty boy with nice cheeks and a nose that'd never been broken.

I swear to god, Office Sandy said, shaking now, lay on the ground NOW.

Gringo took another step. He was maybe three feet from the Camaro. The windows were tinted but he thought for sure he could see a face he recognized sitting in the passenger seat. She was just sitting there, watching him, hiding maybe. What was she thinking? he wondered. Screwing the law.

Sir, Office Sandy said with a break in his official bark, I'm giving you one more step.

Gringo stared into the passenger side of the car and waited for something, anything. The glow from a nearby streetlight shined on the space and he thought he could see the hem of the emerald green dress Tori had worn the second time she'd taken the Timber Festival queen. They'd danced that night to all those bad DJ songs and snuck sips of Jim Beam out of Gringo's flask. When it was all over they took a couple of pills and stared at the bandstand being broken down in the early morning hours.

It'll never be better than this, Tori had said.

Gringo had agreed, though he never could've known just how right she was.

He thought he saw her there in the passenger seat. He needed to know for sure, so he took himself another step.

Wolf Hunt, 1946

By Robert James Russell

The day Margrete killed the wolf she had received her first blood. She was thirteen and it was a Saturday.

She had been tracking the beast alone for much of the morning, fearless as she wandered beneath great clusters of tamarack that surrounded the wetlands to the east, the great swatches of red maple and black ash that blanketed the north. She had brought with her only a rucksack filled with dried fruit and bits of moose jerky and had, slung over her shoulder, the Remington 550-1 which had belonged to her grandmother, acquired years earlier in order to protect herself and their land. It wasn't a wolf-hunting gun—it wasn't the caliber for such an undertaking—but she had no other choice.

Late morning she stopped at a small crick that sliced through the forest and drank from it, then removed from her pack the apple and big into it greedily. It was after lunch now and this was the first food she had all morning before sneaking out at first light, careful not to wake her sisters, her mother. She savored each bite, using her tongue and fingers to catch the juice that had spilled from her lips and stained her chin sticky sweet, careful not to miss a drop. After, she chucked the apple core into the woods and removed herself from the crick some paces, dropped her pants, and squatted to piss. She was quiet while doing so, studying the woods, her woods, and wondering how long she'd have to chase the creature. How far he would lead her from home. When she stood to dress is when she noticed the blood in her underwear—just a dab, but there it was, crimson, foreign. She admired it for a moment, lost in thought, until a sudden gale of wind came through and caused the trees to shout in their creaking language. She swung the rifle around and backed against a nearby trunk, startled but careful, and waited for what came next.

Nothing did.

After some time—Five minutes? Ten? She wasn't sure—she gathered her pack and continued north. She climbed over a downed tree as big as a house, and tried, unsuccessfully, to count its rings while she rested atop it, giving up when she reached one hundred and twenty four. She had been, days leading up to this, desperate to see the wolf put down, to see its tongue loll out of its mouth and its eyes milk over, but now she was distracted by the blood, her blood, and to reflect on the changes her body was going through. Of what it all meant.

She pushed on. By midday she had reached the great fields near the center of the island, full of grasses and wildflowers unencumbered by cultivation of any sort, and found wolf scat near the far treeline. She studied it, touched it as she had been taught—still warm—and wondered if it had been left for her to find, out in the open like that. That maybe the wolf had known what it had done, the line it had crossed, and understood she was doing only what needed doing. That it wasn't personal.

Later, among a cluster of skinny paper birch, she stopped to eat again, to guzzle water from the buckskin canteen in her pack and to rest. She fell asleep sitting up for quarter of an hour, gun gripped firmly in her small hands, and dreamt she was a bird overhead, watching the chase, watching the wolf disappear into a cave. The bird then circled back around to find the girl—*her*—and saw her face down in the black soil, crawling the direction of the cave, a trail of blood behind her. She was unable to walk, only pull herself, and the blood poured ceaseless from her.

Margrete awoke with a gasp and would've fired a round off into the treetops if one had been chambered. She pulled the leather sling from around her back, up and over her head, and set the rifle at her side. She was breathing hard and, curious, peeked into her dungarees—more blood now, nearly staining her underwear completely. She stood and felt uncomfortable but didn't know what to do—she thought, even, of circling back to the crick to bathe, to wash, or even to head back home and admit defeat. But she felt compelled to pick up the rifle, her pack, and to press on.

As she moved on she realized she had never been this far north. This excited her. She had, ever since she was younger, loved to explore and to climb and to feel out the land, her home. To realize it was possible that a specific tree or plot of tussock had never been touched by another human before in the history of the world. And now, up here, it was possible only her mother and grandmother had witnessed the whorled bark of these trees, the songs of these nested black-capped chickadees that fluttered in the branches above her, curious about this girl and why she was there. She wondered if they knew what she was, had any real fear of her—that they should, given what she had slung along her back.

It was late afternoon now and the sun had already begun to recede as she came upon the natural caves dug deep into Sugar Mountain, dug by winds and rain and time. The wolf had to be here, she thought, and she wondered if she had the sorts of dreams her grandmother claimed to—the gift of foresight. She stood back, tired and sore, and could feel that the blood, her blood, had soaked through to her dungarees. It was only then did she realize the danger of the crimson—that the wolf, more than likely, had been able to smell her this whole time. And she wondered, too, what it was that blood smelled like—if she was delicious-smelling to it. If, maybe, he had been leading her here all along.

She dropped the pack at her feet and swung the rifle around. She grasped the bolt handle and pulled back, chambering a round. She spread her legs the way she had been taught, to absorb the recoil, and stood facing the caves, peering into the darkness for a long while in the hopes her eyes would adjust and she'd be able to see its details.

“Ulv,” she called out to the caves, the word accented in the way of her grandmother’s Norwegian brogue. She waited, then: “Ulv.”

Nothing, and she could still not see into the empty black of the caves. She studied them further, the handful of deep black pockets nested in the cragged rock face, and decided on one that was surely where it was, this wolf—just big enough, and it looked to be deep, too. So she kneeled and picked up an oval-shaped stone that was smooth to the touch, the kind used for skipping on the water. She threw it toward the cave but it landed at the entrance among some other rubble, barely making a sound.

Margrete picked up another stone, a rough one this time, and stepped closer to the cave. She wound back and threw again, and this time it hit the walls inside with a thudded echo. She waited for silence again, expecting the creature to leap out at her, so she leveled the gun, sighted it, reminding herself that with this caliber she’d have to aim for the head. Would have to get him the first time.

Still nothing. She rummaged around for another stone at her feet when she heard it, though: a whimpering from inside the cave. It was very quiet, but she could just make it out.

“Ulv,” she said again, then waited. “Ulv?”

She moved closer to the cave, stepping slow and careful, repeating the word “Ulv” as she went as if to announce her arrival. Every few paces she stopped and sighted the rifle again, waiting and ready, but there was no reason to be: nothing happened.

She swallowed down everything she had been taught about hunting, about not walking in a place like this where she’d have no advantage, and stepped into the cave. Her feet hit the gravel and she slipped but caught herself on the black granite walls.

“Ulv,” she whispered, waited, and heard the whimpering again. She moved forward and stopped at where the light from outside ended, a barrier she told herself she would not cross. She squinted her eyes as if that would give her the preternatural gift of wolf sight, to see in the dark beyond where the light could go, and there, not far from where she was, she could just make out the gleaming yellow eyes of the wolf. It was lying on its side, breathing slow and deep, whimpering with every breath it took in. Margrete moved back, startled again, and raised the gun as she had been taught. She became aware of the quickness of her own breaths and slowed them down best she could in order to take the perfect shot. She could hear her heart pump loudly through her skin.

“Ulv,” she said once more and the wolf perked up for a moment then lowered its head again, whimpered. “Are you sick, ulv? Is that it?”

Nothing this time. She lowered the rifle and studied it longer, its breathing, its eyes studying her back, and again she thought of the blood in her underwear, her blood, and then her grandmother’s words: *Being a woman is more than just giving birth and cleaning house and raising children. It's the strength to do what's right even if you don't want to. Being a woman is holding on strong so others can hold on to you.*

She raised the rifle and sighted the wolf, its head, and she counted backward from ten. At one, as if it knew, the wolf let out a long sigh, a long deep outward breath that, later in life, Margrete would swear was its soul vacating its

earthly form, escaping while it could. She fired then without holding back, reloaded, and fired again to be sure. The blast in the cave was deafening so, satisfied she could turn her back safely, she went outside and waited for the ringing in her ears to stop. She could feel a warmth on her legs and knew the blood had begun to fall down them in small runs. She had killed a wolf and bled on the same day, she thought, so what else was there to do? A family, she figured. She would have to be courted and make babies, but for now there was only skinning the wolf, removing the meat best for eating and the teeth for jewelry, to clean the hide for warmth in the coming cold winter days, to not let it go to waste and to show the beast a kindness it had never shown her once in its long crooked life.

Dust, Not Blood

By Jennifer Leeper

The dead body re-animated the town through this false population of one. Chloride, New Mexico had sat untouched for more than seven decades other than the wind's hot, dry breath and the language of desert creatures, a strange network of static broadcast intermittently on this breath.

A circulating crown of birds alerted two hikers to the expiration.

An arrow pointed at Micah Page's fate inside his right rib cage. His brown eyes were wide with permanent shock and blindness to life. The only movement was the breeze dancing with his dirty blonde hair. He was handsome, with skin the color of the sun on canyon lands.

A forensics team swept over the body like a quick--burst storm.

"I've seen one like this at that Indian museum over in Cold Springs." Detective Jasper Cole pinched the colorful fletching with a rubber-gloved index finger and thumb. "Never seen one plugged into somebody." Jasper coughed up the last words, as coarsely textured as the black stubble on his chin, and indicting of the cigarette stump ground beneath his boot. His skin was no less rough, and tinted by Comanche blood.

"Looks authentic." A forensics tech remarked. "It was definitely shot, considering the entrance force." The tech sent his hand swiftly toward the body, mimicking the weapon.

Jasper squinted at the arrow. *Let's see if you were sloppy with your prints.*

#

Through the glass of Jasper's office, the forensics tech shook his head. No fingerprints. No DNA other than Page's.

Jasper stared at the pale arrowhead tinctured by Micah's blood. *Where is your better half?*

#

"It's Navajo." Gary Young, curator of the Cold Springs Native American History museum, peered down through delicate, silvery glasses resting at the very edge of his long nose.

"How old?"

"At least a century." Gary twirled the shaft. "These are supposed to be covered in dust not blood."

That seal is broken – but who?

#

Jasper examined the scrubby earth where Micah's corpse had been propped against Chloride's former apothecary. *Why not bury the damn body – the desert is one big cemetery. Symbolic maybe? Old Indian bow -- ghost town?*

The Detective pulled out his phone. No service. He drove to the nearest gas station and looked up Chloride, New Mexico.

Among cold facts and photos was a black and white *Chloride Gazette* still that captured four native-dressed Indians trickling out of the town into the vast nothingness of the desert. Two of the men carried what looked like a body. The photo was dated 1902 and the caption read:

Chief Wolfpaw funeral procession.

Jasper continued threading his curiosity.

Chief Wolfpaw was Navajo. The land of Chloride was a gift from Wolfpaw to a half Blackfoot, half Irish named Callum “Little Wolf” Brannon who became its official founder.

Vigo ‘Stinger’ Salazzo, a.k.a. The Desert Mayor, shot Wolfpaw through the brain in his unguarded sleep. Salazzo’s sister, Lucia, had married Wolfpaw. Salazzo wouldn’t tolerate the union and dissolved it himself. Lucia was pregnant with Wolfpaw’s child. She disappeared from Chloride, and was never seen again. There was only one photo of Lucia. She stood next to her betrothed. They both wore traditional Navajo clothing and there was regality in their demeanors.

Salazzo married and had one daughter, who married a man named Amos Page, who eventually worked for Salazzo selling guns to Mexican guerrillas fighting with their own government and at the border with the Navajo and Apaches over land.

There was no mention of any vengeance on behalf of Wolfpaw.

Page? A theory transmitted through the Detective’s brain. A mystery shelled in a mystery.

#

“People could disappear back then,” Dr. Logan Grayfeather spoke the wide, flat vowels of a full Comanche. Jasper’s cousin held a doctorate in Native American history. “But, not to our history.” Logan’s brown eyes twinkled. “You know Johnny Bird over at the community center in Sweetwater? His great--great--great grandfather knew the Chief. They fought the Mexicans together. Johnny said his grandmother told him stories about a woman who fell in love with the Chief who wasn’t Navajo or Indian. They called her *Lichií' Asdzáni* -- red woman. The red woman disappeared down south somewhere in Chihuahua – but look what Johnny’s grandmother gave me.”

Logan produced a thin silver ring, free of embellishment and engraved with the words Batopilas Mining Company.

“Johnny said the red lady had made a trip down to the Madre with her brother to do business with that company inside the ring and fell in love with the *barrancas*, so she had the ring made. Johnny said Lucia gave it to his ancestor for saving the Chief’s life in battle. Then, she disappeared. If it’s all true, you have a start.”

“A silver needle in a silver haystack.” Jasper studied the ring’s engraving.

“It’s something.” Logan shrugged.

I hope you have something for me, Batopilas.

#

Jasper stared at a black and white photo of a woman swaddled in an even deeper black. No more red after the murder. She was Irina Lobo, queen of the silver mines in the Copper Canyons of Mexico, helming the Batopilas Mining Company for more than three decades. She was Lucia Salazzo. It was the footprint Jasper needed.

The company’s museum sent Jasper everything they had on Irina.

Irina died anticlimactically in her sleep. Her only son ran the mining company for 20 years until a heart attack ended the Lobo influence in the silvery veins of Batopilas.

Another family took over the operation and Irina’s family fanned out across generation and geography, though her descendent lines remained anorexic. The genealogist on contract with the Sierra County sheriff’s department precipitated only ten living representatives.

#

Jasper located nine of the ten descendants within a few days. One of the ten had just passed the week before at the

age of 98. His son died before him and never had children so the line dried up there. Three were in the same family. Two of these were eight-year-old twin girls. Their mother was a nurse. She was working the night Micah was killed. The fifth was a 62-year-old widower. He and his wife couldn't have children and she passed away in a car accident that left him paralyzed from the waist down and in a wheelchair. Six through nine were two brothers and their offspring – a son and daughter, respectively. The children, though adults, were both away at college at the time of the murder. One of the brothers was away in Paris on business and the other was retired and living in Cambodia while an arrow punctured Micah Page's gut. The tenth, a former Silicon Valley entrepreneur had vanished from work one day without explanation. Santa Clara police declared him missing. His ex-wife and son had moved to Dublin the year before he disappeared.

Ulysses Murdock was nearly as much a living ghost as the town of Chloride.

#

A woman with a brogue washed out by years of living in California shook her head over the phone. "No – no not Uly." Then, silence. "He was diagnosed with severe manic depression and schizoid personality. He was so doped up he could barely get out of bed. One day he went off the meds and two weeks later he walked out on his job and no one saw him after that. Vanished like a banshee," Siobhan Murdock finished.

"Mrs. Murdock, the victim was killed by an antique arrow. Your husband didn't happen to own anything like that did he?"

Again silence caved in.

"No, nothing like that, but he was always reading about his ancestor — an old chief called Bearpaw or something like that -- NO, WOLFPAW."

It was the detective's turn for silence. "Did he ever mention a town called Chloride?"

"Chloride? No – nothing like that."

"All right, well if you think of anything else –"

"There is one thing." Mrs. Murdock cut in. "I've got a book here - he left a stack in our old house back in the States – it's about preservation -- of bows and arrows -- I'll mail it out."

Ulysses' ghost was guilty.

#

The title of the book was *Protecting History: Traditional Bow and Arrow Preservation Techniques*. It was a cookbook of wax recipes from Native American and non-native sources. One of the sources was a half Comanche, half Irishman who was given a piece of land by a famous Navajo war chief. On this swath, the Sun Blush shrub produced lipstick pink flowers and a pungent, viscous liquid the war chief called *Wood Blood* because of its purported healing properties in splintered bow and arrow anatomies. The chief stood next to the Irish-Comanche founder of Chloride in a sepia-toned photograph opposite a page with a botanical diagram of the Sun Blush.

Wolfpaw.

Jasper looked up the plant that proliferated in Chloride and neighboring communities up until the silver rush began. The hunt for silver stripped the soil of the nutrients the Sun Blush thrived on. The towns that grew up with silver died with it in the long cold shadow of the gold rush cast across the southwest. The Sun Blush never again flourished, but it could still be found in desert pockets.

Let's see if the ghost of Ulysses has been hunting Wood Blood.

#

"You pink devil." Jasper pinched the stem of the third Sun Blush he had encountered between Chloride and Silverhead, the next closest mirage of history in the desert.

The shrub's head was excised and it had shriveled. The detective pulled it out by the roots and dropped it in a plastic bag.

#

The technician tapped at the window, nodding and pointing at the plastic bag that held the remains of the Sun Blush. *DNA jackpot.*

Jasper grinned. *Ulysses the unfriendly ghost – where are you?*

#

Those in Santa Clara who knew Ulysses Murdock spoke of him in the past tense.

"He was one of the smartest guys I knew," reverberated on the lips of colleagues and friends. They had all buried him under their memories. Santa Clara was an empty grave.

No one – not even the local police claimed Ulysses in the present. "Icebox case," the sheriff called it.

Warmed up in the desert. Where do ghosts live?

Jasper started driving back toward Chloride.

#

The detective warmed his hands with his breath. The night had chilled the desert air. Even as a child he hadn't spent much time in the desert though he grew up not far from Chloride. His grandmother had told him stories about evil people who had died and in their afterlife they slithered, crawled and skittered across the earth only after the sun fell each day, in the knowledge they had once been human. They only came out at night. "The white man says these are the animals that only come out at night, but the Comanche says that these were once men who walked in the daylight."

He was crouched behind a boulder not far from where he had pulled up the Sun Blush. He had walked from the closest gas station and for hours waited for a man-ghost to materialize out of the ground around Chloride in search of waxy exudate. He listened to the desert change its voice from an intimate buzzing and crackling against his ears to a low howl in the distance.

Fatigue weighed down his lids, shutting out the dark void of the world. A light as bright as any sun punched through his curtained eyes, flinging a being from the mouth of an abandoned church on the edge of town, across a tongue of fire glow into the night.

Jasper leapt up on stiffened legs that disadvantaged his momentum, but his muscles yielded to his brain that had already been inside the burning church and was chasing a ghost-man.

Years of running down men and women like animals had accelerated his adrenalized responses, allowing him to overtake men half his age. *But a ghost?*

The figure ahead of Jasper passed beyond the range of burning illumination but the detective could hear the light panting of an animal – not a poltergeist. The animal that panted was sleek in its movements. It darted with the precision of a Mexican Wolf through the low obstacle course of vegetation.

Jasper pushed against his age, mobilizing muscles he had not called on for favors in many months. They energized like the rear movements of an army surging against the front lines for propulsion. Jasper could feel himself extending somehow beyond his longest reach, his fingers touching long hair flying at him like a flag. He leveraged the hair for the body and in the bargain lost his own balance and landed on his prey, who in a quick flash of silver sliced a

gash through cloth and flesh. The detective winced at his bicep wound, but the nerves in his fingers sensed his gun even before it was a thought in his head. The bullet sped to the gut of Ulysses as the arrow had to that of Micah Page's.

#

Ulysses had died again to the world. The bow healed by the Sun Blush was lost with Ulysses – maybe to the fire. Jasper would never know. St. Anselm's of Chloride was a torch lit by insanity. Ulysses the ghost-man was more beast than either the former. He had lived and killed primitively, and died with the same ferocity toward life and death.

Other than the knife, the detective only found a note scrawled in red marker on a napkin on Ulysses body. It read:

You are my blood but you are not my blood. Your blood poisons our blood, so I must cut you out.

“Dust, not blood.” Jasper spoke to himself over the napkin.

I hope they bury your blood curse with you ghost-man.

Runner, Runner

By C. Gregory Thompson

The fields across the road: cornfield-green in summer; fallow, scorched brown in fall; snow-covered nubs in winter; nascent seedlings in spring. He sat on his front porch watching, waiting; until one spring morning, the orb of the sun peeking from the east, yellowish-orange light pushing off dark shadows, he stood up, stepped to the middle of the road, and ran. He ran past fields that used to be theirs, down the straight black tar road, sidestepping pot holes, the white lane stripes his guides. The next morning he ran again, and again the next. He practiced running daily: high, long, forward strides; his feet way out front, pushing his upper torso forward. A grimace on his face, teeth bared in a snarl, like a cornered animal, a boxer in the ring. He practiced in case. Because he didn't know when he might need to run. From the cops, from his enemies, from friends, relatives, or rabid dogs. He practiced running, waiting to run away from something. It never came. Not yet. He practiced and waited and practiced again.

He didn't run like those fake boxing guys throwing punches when they ran: one-two-punch-step, repeat. None of that shit. That would slow him down. Fast, speed. He wanted to get away. Fools. After school and on summer afternoons, he watched the neighbor, Carl or "that black kid" as his mother called him, run by the house beating the air with clenched fists, forcing noisy bursts of air between his lips. Carl, eighteen, two years older than him, almost a grown up, aspired to be a boxer.

"Hey, Mikey. Wanna come?"

"Nah, I'm good."

Every day Carl invited him to run. He preferred to run alone, and besides, he knew he was faster. He sat on the porch watching and waiting.

"Mikey!"

His mother bellowed. Slurred words at three in the afternoon. Slurred words first thing in the morning and late at night. The baby needs changing. The baby's crying. Bring me my cigarettes. My drink needs ice.

"Mikey! Michael!! My—Kuhl!!!"

Michael H. Rutherford, Mikey for short.

Get off your fat ass and do it yourself, he always thought. But he still got up and did whatever she asked.

His people were people once. There was money. Grandma used to talk about it all the time. Grandad was in steel and had his own company until he lost it all. Bankrupt was the word they used. Grandma always went on about how they were the Rutherfords of Reading, Pennsylvania like they were kings or royalty. Now, grandad and grandma were long gone. His mother inherited the house, a falling down two-story wooden box that barely provided shelter—peeling, sunburned, white paint; holes in the walls and roof let the wind and rain in; floorboards missing; front porch steps rotted out and unreplaced. The only house for miles around, it sat alone, an island, surrounded by corn fields, property sold off piece-by-piece over the years.

He started running when he was thirteen. Now, three years later at sixteen, he was faster, more efficient. He checked the clock hanging in the front hallway before he ran. He tried to start on the hour. Over time, he completed his circuit faster and faster. He thought the clock gave him luck. It had belonged to his grandmother and required several manual turns with a key daily to keep it running. The hourly gong his firing pistol. He still ran like he did that first day: high, long, forward steps; his feet out front pushing his upper torso forward. A grimace on his face, teeth bared in a snarl, but now with smoother, cleaner movements—less herky-jerky, more balletic, fluid. His breathing paced, steady in and out, quieter. Whenever he took off down the road their dog, Sam, a flea-bitten, mangy German Shepherd, tried to follow. His mother kept it chained to a post in the side yard. Once it saw him, it barked and barked, and ran back and forth to the end of its chain until it was yanked back, over and over until his mother opened the back door and threw out a piece of raw hamburger meat. She must have put something in it, like a tranquilizer, or some shit, because whenever he returned from his runs the dog always lay unconscious.

Weather permitting, when not running, he sat on the front porch watching and waiting. Waiting for a police chase; a car careening down County Road 23, three cop cars in pursuit, sirens screaming just like on TV. Waiting for people fleeing, getting away—not really, they were usually caught. He dreamed of getting caught, of running and running until they grabbed him, tackled him, stopped him from running anymore. During dinner one night he heard sirens on the road. When he rushed outside to check, hopes high, it was only a firetruck. He watched it fade out of sight on the straight-line road, flashing red lights dimming into the night.

He didn't go back to his meal, fish sticks and tater tots. He sat on the steps, peering into the black, watching the thousands of bugs bounce off the porch light, a sickly yellow color. Nothing ever changed. No one ever came. It all remained the same: his mother poured him vodka instead of milk; she let his baby sister, diaper dirty, wander alone around the house; she drank herself into a stupor by four o'clock. He helped her to bed, gave his sister a bath and put her down, then sat in the dark living room, remote in hand, watching episode after episode of COPS waiting for the law to chase a suspect down. A running criminal, thrown to the ground, subdued, handcuffed, arms twisted behind his back.

One fall day, on his way home from school, he rode his bike fast. He wanted to run before nightfall. Their house poked up into the sky, never lost, or unseen, the land around them so flat. Close enough he heard the dog barking, then closer he noticed something moving in the road. He pedaled faster. Not the dog but his sister. Where the fuck is that fat bitch? Where the fuck is she? He thought of his mother. I'm gonna kill her. I will, I swear. I'm gonna kill her. He braked and dropped the bike in the dirt by the side of the road and scooped his sister up. She giggled and laughed and said his name over and over, "Mikey, Mikey, Mikey."

He took her inside and tried to rouse his passed out mother. Nothing he did brought her back to life. He lifted the baby into her highchair and heated up a bottle. The rumble-rattle of Dirk's barely running pickup truck pulling up in front of the house jolted him. He put his sister into her crib and brushed past Dirk when he came through the front door. He refused to be inside the house when his mother's boyfriend invaded it.

"You gonna say hi to me?"

"I'm not," he said. "I won't."

"Suit yourself," Dirk said.

"I will."

Meth head, dealer, drunk, user, monster, fucker-fucker, asshole, he thought of Dirk today—pretty much what he always thought of the man. He didn't want to be there when they lit up squares of foil and smoked crank, or worse when they used a hypodermic needle to shoot it between their toes, or when Dirk brought in the thirty-can cases of Miller he bought at Walmart on the drive over, or when he pulled down his mother's jeans and screwed her even though she was stone-cold passed out. He didn't want to be there. For any of it.

From the front porch he looked across the road at the corn fields, scorched brown stalks rattling in the wind in the late afternoon light. From the front porch, a straight line out, a dirt path separating two fields and running off into the distance. Straight out like a line God drew in the earth's crust. God reached down with his finger and ran it right out from their front door until you couldn't see it anymore. He imagined what it would look like from the sky: the straight-line dirt path intersecting the straight-line paved road, crossing over and continuing up their rotted stairs, inside their house where it ended, their house a crown at the top. From the sky, an immense cross. He stepped off the porch, crossed the road and ran down the dirt track, fast, between the fallow cornfields, evading pretend pursuers, on the ground and in the air. Runner, runner, getting away.

He stopped, out of breath, at the midden. Hidden by a copse of Buckeyes, he first saw this place when he was little, around four years old. His grandfather took him out, told him what it was called: a "midden." For most of his boyhood, he'd sifted through the rusted-out tin cans, tobacco tins, and other refuse left behind by early settlers. His bedroom was full of finds he'd collected over the years: the rusty skeleton of a pistol, a still sealed can of beer, iron soldiers that a boy from long ago played with. He hadn't gone out to the trash heap in many years but now that he had, he was happy.

He listened to the wind in the trees and thought he heard voices—maybe not voices but memories of his grandfather. Family stories he'd told, of how they'd settled this land, of how they'd dug way down deep into it and removed rocks and boulders and trees using plows and draft horses. The men of the family overcame the ruggedness, made the soil productive, rich, and life-giving. He wished he could have been one of those men, his great uncles, cousins he never knew, a part of this manly effort before it all tumbled to pieces. A siren screeched in the off-distance, only an echo of what it could be, pulling him back to now. Growing louder, heading his direction, he ran down the track towards home.

In front of the house, Carl held his kid sister.

"When I ran by she was out on the road."

Carl passed her to him.

"Why'd you call the cops?"

"Your mother wouldn't wake up," Carl said. "You weren't around."

"They'll probably take her away from us."

He watched a sheriff's car stop, lights flashing red, off and on, siren silenced. He figured that after Dirk finished with his mother, planting more of his poisonous seed inside her lifeless body, leaving behind the addictive shit that kept her returning to him, he picked up his progeny, kissed her on the cheek and set her down outside the piece of furniture that protected her. The deputy wrote notes. Carl explained how he found her, roadside, playing in the dust. Done testifying, Carl ran on down the road, punching the air, stupid-fake-boxer-like. After the deputy asked him a few questions, he told him to wait outside.

The deputy, a tall, muscle-bound, white man he didn't know, mounted the steps and entered their house. His mother appeared from around back, stumbling and tripping in her bare feet, pulling up her jeans. The deputy, out the front door, down the front steps, in pursuit—the scene like one of the many chase scenes he watched on COPS. His mother drunk, stumble-ran, zig-zagging down the middle of the road until she fell to her knees, face-planting onto the pavement. The deputy helped her sit up.

"Why'd you run? I only wanted to ask a few questions."

A half-hour later, after he assured him he'd take care of his mother and his sister, the deputy left. Friends at school had told him what happened when the police came. They told him a record was made, a file opened. They told him that the people who kept track of family problems would be notified. His friend Kyle had been removed from his home and placed, "placed," the official word, with another family when his parents were arrested for dealing drugs. Kyle went to one family and his little brother to another, separated, not together. Runner, runner, time to go.

#

Snow fell hard that winter. The fields, white, icy, brown nubs of dead corn stalks poking through; his company when he ran, his view when he sat on the front porch wearing everything warm he owned, his beholding when he pushed the stained lace curtains aside on the front windows to check the weather. He ran when he could, like he was getting away, like he was being chased—high, long, forward strides; his feet way out front, pushing his upper torso forward. A grimace on his face, teeth bared in a snarl, like a cornered animal, a boxer in the ring. Wanting and waiting for something to run away from. "God is in the details." His grandmother often told him this. He found the phrase in a birthday card she had given him when he turned seven. When he was little, he didn't understand what it meant. He knew the word God was there. He knew religion played a part. His grandmother, God-fearing, attended church every Sunday and took him with her. If God is in the details why aren't things better? Now, at sixteen, he understood that the details were interior. How a person lived his life, the decisions he made, the actions he took. Thoughts thought running straight-line down County Road 23, around his circuit, a four-mile flat square, expired corn fields on all sides, their house, sticking up, the only structure visible.

February, the coldest month of the year, froze up worse than normal. The house, so full of holes, and cracks and breaks, the icy wind blowing in, never warmed. He wore all his warm clothes on top of each other, slept underneath a stack of his grandmother's wool blankets, his sister next to him at night to keep her warm. He

put a space heater in his mother's room so he wouldn't wake up to her frozen stiff. One morning when snowfall briefly ceased blanketing the world, he stepped out to run. He ran in the opposite direction than he normally did. He turned right and headed north, running his circuit backward. His exhales bursting fog-like from his lungs. His feet and legs painful slams each time they hit the frozen roadway. He ran on, forward, into the frigidness. A quarter of a mile from home he noticed a body lying in the ditch beside the road. He didn't have to look to see who it was. He didn't have to know to understand that he'd never hear her slur his name again. He didn't stop, he kept on going, and he didn't look back. He ran faster and faster, harder and harder. That night a blizzard blew in.

He sat, the unnatural blue-tinged glow of the television the only light in the living room, watching the news, waiting for the weather report, hoping for a snow day from school. His little sister slept next to him, buried in blankets, the space heater vibrating and shaking on high. The weatherman said to expect more than two feet of snow, that it could be a record-breaking storm. He didn't leave the house that night or over the next three days. The blizzard ended late the first night, but snow continued to fall nonstop. Day four the snow stopped and the temperature rose. The sun emerged, the snow melting, cracking and trickling and glinting.

He ran the usual circuit, turning left and heading south when he stepped out onto the road. He raised his face to the sun's weak warmth. He listened to the crunch his shoes made in the patchy snow, to the splash they made in muddy puddles. On the final one-mile length, close to where the body lay in the ditch, he saw Carl kneeling. Carl stood to stop him, standing in the middle of the road, waiting for him.

"Who is it?"

The face of the body, obscured by the hood of a coat, turned away.

"I'm sorry, man, it's your mom," Carl said.

At first, no reply, then:

"Is she dead?"

"Yep."

He stood staring at Carl, trying to decide what action to take.

"I'm sorry, man," Carl said. "I'm sorry. You stay with her. I'll go for help."

He nodded to Carl, who took off running, boxer punching the air. He waited five minutes, not moving from the spot in the middle of the road where he stood, and then he ran. He didn't stay with the body, the cadaver, the carcass. What reason to? It wouldn't bring her back. No one would steal her, it. He ran, home.

Approaching the front of the house, he stopped, stared. Dirk's truck parked askew, across the road, blocking traffic if there had been any. Two little legs stuck out from underneath the truck, the tiny feet wearing the small white baby shoes he'd put on them that morning. He didn't chase after Dirk, who had hightailed it down the dirt track. He didn't check for life in the body. He sat down on the third step of the front stairs and waited. Waiting, no chasing, no leaving, no running.

The next night, after the coroner had removed the bodies and after the sheriff had picked up Dirk, he snuck away from the foster family the county had placed him with and ran home. While he slept alone in the house, the space heater rattling next to his bed, too close to the wool blankets, an inferno exploded. He ran down the stairs and out the front door and stood in long underwear, unlaced boots, and a winter jacket, watching. Their house, his house, the one he'd always called home, burned to the ground.

The farmer planted his crop that spring and by summer the fields, waving seas of cornstalk-green, lined the road. The blackened remnants of his house remained and looked much like they had after the February fire. Seventeen now, he returned to scavenge for trinkets, items that might have survived. Digging in the refuse, he found more than he thought he might. He borrowed a wagon and a dray team from an Amish farmer down the road and loaded up all the heirlooms he could find. Last, he turned over a section of wall near the front door and found his grandmother's clock still attached where it had always been. With black ash-stained hands and dripping sweat, he led the horses and the wagon down the dirt track between the corn fields, out to the midden.

Climbing up in the wagon, he threw the leftover family property on top of the trash heap. The clock landed last, releasing a weak gong-like sound from the chiming mechanism. Without looking back, he led the

horses away down the dirt track, along the paved road to the farmer. After returning the animals, he washed his hands and face in the cold water of a hose, drank until he felt his thirst quenched then stepped back out to the middle of County Road 23. Feet straddling the lane stripes, he ran. High, long, forward strides; his feet way out front, pushing his upper torso forward. A grimace on his face, teeth bared in a snarl, like a cornered animal, a boxer in the ring.

Bitternut

By Shauna Mackay

Somethin' nearly happened, but it didn't. So we all went right on back to Normal.

After all, Normal's where we live.

It ain't a bad place. Kinda small and hidden, but seems like pretty much everybody wants to stay.

We're the lucky ones. Sucked in Normal air with our very first God-given breath. We truly belong here. You have to work at it if you weren't born lucky that way.

Case Greenstreet was almost there. He was as good as one of us. Then he went and blew it and had to be shown the other place that's nothin' like Normal. It's where we take the discrepant ones. It's only because we love Normal and we like to keep things the Normal way.

You know how sometimes in life things are over before they've really begun? And I guess you could say it's not a thing if it never ever even got goin' but there's the strangeness of when the things that didn't happen live brighter in your mind than the things that really did, things like kissin' another man's wife against the hickory tree out back o' Myrtle Budd Cafe on Supper Club night, which is somethin' I know I definitely am guilty of. Yes, I definitely done that.

'You got a mountain to climb,' Gunner Bryce told Case that hot mornin' we all drove him from Normal in Gunner Bryce's truck. Gunner Bryce had a head twist goin' on so he could keep an eye fixed right on Case when he said it. The reply Case gave Gunner Bryce was a wave with his fist. He might've been intendin' to only raise it in the air but Gunner Bryce's truck's a 2015 Ram Power Wagon and he was drivin' it like he'd got an appointment with bliss so I guess we were all kind o' wavin' at the time. We were only about ten miles from Normal when he said it, rattlin' along real good, and that's before we'd hit any real acclivity of geography.

There were five of us, includin' Case himself. Horsefield and Landrum were there and If I recall rightly from when we were back in school, they are both Josephs, if you're wantin' their Christian. Neither one o' them's got a girl to hold so I guess they never get to hear a soft Joe. I've got Jessamine but I can't quite love her. Horsefield and me were riding backseat with Case between us. Backseats are for cars, that's what Gunner Bryce says, though I'd never heard him sayin' it since he'd gotten that new blood red wagon with its blue tooth, though what one o' those is I swear I do not know. Gunner Bryce don't like lettin' the modern ways into Normal, not unless it comes along with his 2015 Ram Power Wagon. Gunner Bryce had his old dog along but I've not included him in the countin' as he's kinda part o' Gunner Bryce. Had his own bed upfront by his daddy's thigh.

God's good grace had given us a beautiful day with the brilliance of all that red fall foliage hangin' around bein' beautiful for any eyes that cared to appreciate it. And I ain't got no poet mind but I sat back and saw nature at its best through that truck window. I guess we were all kinda stunned by that drippin' scarlet as we travelled on pretty much in red and golden silence for miles and miles. It was a hot fall and we were all appreciatin' it so it seemed, even Case. He was awfully quiet as his head lolled against the sticky leather of the back seat in that febrile truck that day.

By the time we passed by Jurgens' Farm we were all bustin' to piss. Gunner Bryce stopped his vehicle. 'Quick splash y'all,' he said, and he jumped out with a groan, cursin' about his screwed up knees. The rest of us got

out then except for Case, who was actin' kinda awkward. Gunner Bryce was just real cool about it. 'Let him piss his pants,' he said all Johnny casual, 'and then I can shoot him.' He put his head back into the truck then so the old dog could coil around his neck lookin' like a towel at washin' time. Gunner Bryce turned and lowered his head, low, lower still, gently shruggin' the dog to the ground so it could lift its leg over a clump of violently delicate wildflower. Then Gunner Bryce, Landrum, Horsefield and me pissed golden arcs towards Jurgens' great field all orange and high with pumpkins and, right behind it, the dark mass o' the mountain.

The rest o' the trip was real uncomfortable despite our bladders' ease. Case was bein' a right ol' pain. Bobcattin' around all over the place. Wailin' and stuff. We gave him a drink and everythin' but still he wouldn't quit. I offered him a slice o' the apple I was peelin' but he just shook his head no, no. Gunner Bryce was gettin' real annoyed. He wasn't sayin' nothin' but with Gunner Bryce you can just tell. If you got a good name in Normal you can do anythin', you can even communicate by not communicatin'. In Normal you got the family that runs things and then you got everyone else. Gunner Bryce *is* Normal. We all live in Gunner Bryce, kinda. He helps a lot o' folk out. Most woulda starved at some time or other without his assistance and influence.

To tell you the truth, though I wouldn't dared have think it if it woulda showed itself up on my face but sometimes I resent Gunner Bryce. Sometimes I really fuckin' hate him.

We were gettin' close to the foot of the mountain then, and with Case quietin' some, I got to thinkin' about that time I kissed Gunner Bryce's wife. I couldn't help it. She is the moon and the stars and the sun. And I just know I'm something kinda like that to her. We speak in eyes. Now out back o' Myrtle Budd Cafe on Supper Club Night is not exactly the wilderness lands and it was pretty risky what we risked that night, and we only ever kissed that once, up against the bitternut hickory tree, and it was a dangerous and beautiful moment, my face there right up against her face. It was spring then, for the tree had its yellow leaf buds I recall. I recall her smell, her taste and I yearn.

I live with Jessamine but it's Gunner Bryce's wife I'm homesick for.

I never get to leave Normal unless it's punishment time so I am always feelin' Normal kinda ways but gettin' away from town, out in only God-owned spaces, just bumpin' along fast like that in Gunner Bryce's truck, I got to thinkin' thoughts o' my own. That day I guess I started thinkin' that it just wasn't right what Gunner Bryce was gonna do to Case Greenstreet. Hell, I'd nearly opened my mouth that time we'd brought Lenny Budd up there for the crime of public intoxication. I'd felt real bad for Lenny 'cause everybody knows he's a simpleton on account o' hangin' onto a motor vehicle when he was a kid and it movin' off sudden and throwin' him. He'd gotten knocked around and wasn't all quite head right ever after. That's why I thought Gunner Bryce could've let it go, Lenny doin' a spooney. He'd only been celebratin' his birthday and it's not like he'd puked on a lady or broke windows or anythin'. He'd only been bein' happy. Bein' happy, that was all. Lenny managed his punishment though, and he still can collect glasses in the Cafe for his Mom, though I sure definitely do see a negative impact on him from his day on the mountain.

We got to the mountain and I was needin' new air. The wagon had more of us in its leather than we had of us in our own bones by then. 'Out, y'all,' said Gunner Bryce. Oh, that mountain was so beautiful. Green and gold and mahogany and crimson at fall. I could not even tell you of its beauty if I tried. I got out to have a look about me. To really look about me and think. Horsefield got Case out who wasn't lookin' at all well, kinda floppy. Landrum was pissin' again. So was the old dog. Gunner Bryce might've seen doubt on my face or somethin' because he said right off then, 'Set Case on his way.' He was lookin' right at me meanin' I should be the one to do it. I took Case from Horsefield and put him down at the start of the mountain trail. Then we all stood just watchin' and waitin' but Case Greenstreet didn't walk. Horsefield said he thought it wasn't really fit.

'Fit, boy?' said Gunner Bryce. 'We don't fit the punishment to the crime in Normal. The crime has to fit the punishment. My greatest granddaddy Bryce devised this punishment for misdemeanor and it will ever suffice. You walk to the top of the mountain without fail or fade or you don't come back with us to Normal. You will be left here on this mountain.' He pointed now at the malefactor. 'Now off you go Case Greenstreet, off you go now.'

Gunner Bryce was one cold animal, that's what I was thinkin'. Case's only crime was bein' exposed as havin' been born to a man not Normal.

Case was just stayin' put, cryin' an' that. He wouldn't move. Couldn't walk well on account of bein' a baby of around eighteen months old. But we were waitin' anyhow for him to start his crawl up the mountain.

I felt real awful. I started tryin' not to think. I wasn't seein' Gunner Bryce's wife's face right then, only the tree I kissed her up against. Bitternuts are temptin' and so thin you can crack the papery shells right there in your hand but you don't never wanna go try eatin' em, no not ever for they ain't fit for human consumption.

'Gunner Bryce,' I said, 'put Case Greenstreet back in the truck.' I had a knife to his old dog's neck when I was sayin' it. I was only half thinkin' but what I was half thinkin' was that it was time for someone to make some sort of a stand.

And then we all got back to Normal.

Well, kinda.

A Sixteen Second Run

By Kaela Martin

The air is all churned earth and horse sweat, like all rodeos, the dander and mud clinging to your denim and soaking into straw hats. This was you once: the pearl button snaps, a thick cake of mud in your spurs, a Skoal can ring of white on your back pocket.

You forget how big the horses are, though, you've always been around them. A flat shoulder meets yours as you lean against your eight year old's quarter horse. He's a big ol' bastard, sixteen hands high with a head that towers over yours. He's bit people, broke a trainer's ribs, and won best in show three times. Your daughter named him Cheesecake.

She's next in Ten-and-Under Barrels, which ya'll have been waiting on since seven this morning. It's a lot of hurry up and wait, been like that since you were high in the saddle.

Nothing's changed. Cattle still lumber through their channels, shaking the hollow fences with horns and hide. Only the horse trailers and the timer has been updated. A laser stops the clock as the girl ahead of your daughter, blazes out of the arena, reins pulled tight, the thoroughbred's head yanked high against the bit. He rears a little and calls out a shriek so shrill and piercing, the other horses dance and knicker back. You grab Cheesecake's headstall and give it a shake, forcing him to focus.

"Courtney Boone to the entryway. Courtney to the entryway."

"Time to go, Sweetheart." You pat her knee and walk her in. Seeing the beams of the pavilion, you remember when you were ten and how you always walked in alone, climbed fences when you were too short to reach the stirrups.

The arena opens up to shallow hoofprints in the dirt and three rusted metal barrels and, for a second, you don't want to let go of the strap.

"I've got it, Dad," she says and looks at your hand like it's some foreign attachment. You uncurl your fingers and stuff them in your pockets.

She starts at a lope, but Cheesecake's feet aren't digging in like they should. They just dragged, but the dirt is still hard. Her first turn goes wide.

"Nose to knee, baby. Nose to knee," your wife yells over the crowd. You're quiet, though, intent on his hooves. She flies around the second barrel, almost tipping it as her leg hits the edge. Cheesecake stumbles around the turn, struggling to find traction as they rush to finish the pattern.

In the stands, you hear her mother cheering, "You got it, Courtney! Drive him home!"

She's tight on the barrel, almost brushing the side. This is her favorite part and she smiles when she sees you in the alley.

You spot the slip a second before she feels it. Hooves slide out from under them both. They go down and your baby is trapped.

Your feet are moving, but there's no air. The timer sounds as you run, stopping the clock. She's screaming for you, hands grabbing at the air like she's a toddler again. Her leg is probably broken. Cheesecake startles as you skid to her side, lurching as he tries to stand. She yells louder. Your wife has hopped the fence and called the paramedics.

You pull her out from under the horse, and hold her head, not letting her look at the twisted leg. Calluses catch as you pet her hair. "It's okay Sweetheart. I'm here. You're gonna be fine, just fine." The sirens, the horse, your sobbing little girl, the sounds rake the walls.

She leaves scratches when the paramedics pull her away and strap her to a gurney. You have to hold the horse. If you don't, you would never let her go, never let her out of your sight. Your wife follows her into the ambulance, not sparing a glance for anything but her. The doors close, they drive off. You and Cheesecake are still in the dirt, one crippled, the other hardly able to breathe.

Medium Rare

By Jean Wong

Falling off a horse was what he did, but this time he was mortified. ‘Cause it was in front of the boy Timmy, the pesky kid who thought he was a cowboy. He looked at his horse, his saddle, his boots; still he wasn’t no cowboy. He was from India for god’s sake.

He thought of his cow Sura, her damp brown snout nuzzling his thigh, her pungent sweet animal odor. The mother lode of their subsistence—milk, butter, ghee, yogurt, cheese, precious fuel made from dung.

During the Gopastami festival, cows were washed, brushed, and adorned with tasseled silks, horns wrapped in vibrant colored cloth, gold and silver trinkets tinkling from their side, great streaks of red and orange on their foreheads. They paraded proudly down the streets as children serenaded and sprinkled them with heavily scented flowers, offered plates of tasty grass cakes. The day sank into a night of votive candles flickering in bovine designs laid out on the streets.

The cows looked about grandly, their focus direct and fearless. You saw their *Atman*, a sacred essence deep behind their gaze, and felt they saw yours.

Not like these Colorado cows. Calves separated too young from their mothers. Eyes bulging with fear. They know they have been fated to an unspeakable life sentence—their great, great, great, grandmothers and grandfathers and their great, great, great, grandsons and granddaughters, all trapped in an unbroken cycle of slaughter.

He’d wake up in the middle of each night trying to re-trace his steps. How did he get here? The girl so pretty he knew it was an illusion and his destiny. He followed her, dropping out of Columbia medical school; then days of thumbing rides, smoking weed, making love. It was a dream he couldn’t wake up from, even when she left him. Did she split when the money ran out? Or was it when someone else caught her fancy? He couldn’t remember.

He’d drifted from one job to another. This work was actually better than the others. And if he did earn enough to return? What then? It’d been ten years. He couldn’t face his parents.

He heard the clanging of the dinner bell. He was starving. He just hoped he wouldn’t have to eat another steak.

Lineshack

By Lana Elizabeth Gabris

I'd tucked the letter deep in the saddlebags, below the grain for the gelding and under the spare shirt rolled tightly around the small bottle given as a gift from my bunkmates for volunteering to come out the line shack instead of any one of them.

Above me the trees crusted in white made patterns of dark stars against the clouds as sparkles of cold danced across my blurred vision. The blanketed snow had cushioned my fall as the first time in years I had fallen from my mount. Granted, it wasn't entirely my fault, the gelding had slipped and I had gone down with him. The buck I had been staring down my sights forgotten, as the snow had churned around in great tufts, the horse kicking and struggling to regain his footing after rolling. He was standing now, head down giving me a mournful look, but appeared sound.

On my back, with arms outstretched I grasped at chunks of snow, the leather gloves stiff, my wrist tangled in the leather rifle strap. My leg had stopped throbbing, the blood chilling thick and I closed my eyes, wondering what the news was from home, wishing now I had read it earlier, instead of waiting.

"Hey, what're doing down there?" My eyes fluttered open to see my brother grinning down at me and I groaned.

"What are you doing here? You're not supposed to be here till spring." He squatted down beside me, sarcastic brow high, clicking his tongue, as I remembered the words from his own last letter, saying he'd be visiting our mother in the spring after recovering from the sickness so many had died from, then heading on to his next journey, where, he hadn't decided yet, but he'd try to see me before he left.

"Come on now brother, don't you know by now I always find a way?" He was pale, but smiling fondly.

I snorted, those moments had been few and far between, but my eyes closed in relief at not being alone, and waved feebly as ice cold hit my cheek, the weather was changing. A breath of heat chased the chill and I looked up with a sharp suck to see the gelding nosing warily at my side, jarring my leg.

"So, you've gone and shot yourself have you?" His voice held a hint of laughter he had never directed at me and I felt my own lips coil in response.

"That's me," I swallowed, trying to smile, "Ma always said I was the responsible one."

He turned the gelding, waving his arm, "Up you go now, come on, you can't stay down there. You're a bit heavier than I remember, so you'll have to help." I somehow sat up, his hat blocking what was left of the fading sun as he encouraged me.

The cool air had dropped even lower and the melted red stain cracked as I shifted. Using the cracked stock of the rifle to steady my legs he urged me to hurry against the growing darkness. I groaned, grabbing at the gelding's reins as I startled him and before he could decide to flee.

Using a rope I'd found earlier in the day hanging from a wire strand I had repaired with a quick twist, I tied it tightly above the wound where my brother said was best, testament to his own injuries over the years. He calmed the gelding down as I used the stirrup to heave myself up but as the animal shifted I slipped and the pain sent me reeling, my eyes tightly closed against the jolt, the horse heading for the line shack, slipping in and out of daydreams.

My eyes snapped back open as I fell to the floor landing on my good leg and jarring the rest of me. I was in the line shack, the wood covered in light frost, and I frowned, not remembering getting there.

"Need to get a fire going, now." He was standing by the potbelly stove, pointing and I nodded, teeth chattering, digging through my pocket for the tin keeping my matches always dry and soon a fire was warming my numbed body. With the warmth came the pain and I gritted my teeth, trying to heft my leg onto a chair into the light of the lantern. Failing, my blanket was tossed beside the stove and I dropped down onto it, hissing, all the while my brother talking softly, reminding me of cleaning the wound, and staying awake.

The bullet had gone through my thigh clean, and in the low light I picked thread from the wound, my brother sitting cross-legged from me, watching the coffee. The last I had seen him, was on the deck of a steamer heading for places unknown, always wanting to discover what was beyond, a careless wave his farewell. He'd left us, a younger brother, with a kid sister barely old enough to remember him, and the mother who'd begged him to stay, then mourned his leaving, forgetting I had stayed because of her and the little one. I had promised to follow, but instead, I'd hired on to send my wages home, riding fence, following the cattle, only to ride the same trail until every root, tree and post was second nature. His face was lined more now, hair still shining dark with no grey in the dying light. Outside I could hear the gelding stamp some away some of the chill in the lean to and I glanced back over the coffee. It was starting to bubble.

His cool fingers just touched my forehead as I finally settled against the saddle, propped on the floor, still warm from the horse, the bubbling tin cup of coffee almost too hot to grip between my still shaking fingers.

"I'm sorry we weren't closer growing up." His voice was soft, hair curling over his ears, eyes shining bright as the birch popped. Through the slim outline of the cast iron door, the logs shifted sending grim expressions across his face and as in the years past, I denied his worry.

"You had your own life." I tugged at the pant leg, remembering the bottle in my shirt and I struggled to reach for it, digging through the saddlebags, wincing as I jarred my leg, and breathed deep, until it settled.

"You were always too forgiving." The cork rolled on the floor between us, kicking up dust. He reached a long finger out, tipping the plug upright, its shadow long.

"What else is there to be?" I shrugged, hesitating before tipping the bottle, letting the brandy cascade over the rent skin, my brother suddenly laughing as the geldings frightened neigh echoed the yelp I hadn't been able to hold in.

"You've always been stronger than me." His voice had become pensive, and I wiped at my eyes, the shacks walls seeming to breathe with my tired vision and I tried to focus on the room around us. The table behind his back seemed to grow larger as I stared; the low bench under a shelf holding an assortment of jars and a lone book, suddenly so far out of reach.

I grabbed at the bottle, drinking a deep suck, grinning when he wrinkled his nose at my offer, and I clutched the dark glass to my chest, eyes watering from the smart.

"You stayed when I couldn't." I shrugged again not knowing what he wanted me to say.

"You chose not to. You could've stayed." His legs stretched out next to mine, his dark eyes shaded to my own looking me over, nodding slowly.

"I never got to tell you how proud I am of you."

I took another swig, chuckling, "So, tell me now."

He smirked, looking at my leg. "This morning, I would have, before you tore a hole in your own leg." He teased and I chuckled back, before dropping my eyes. I hadn't been home for months, almost years now.

I picked at the tears in my pant leg. "Do you remember Maise? She could've sewed them up while making biscuits and singing you a song." I laughed at the memory, instantly picturing the plump, rosy cheeked orphan who'd tagged after us.

"She was gone on you." He teased, and then looked away, remembering the funeral before he'd left. "And now she's gone, with her folks now."

I swiped my sleeve across my nose, and really looked at him, my chest tight.

"How'd you get here so fast anyway, I thought you only had a little time before your next trip."

He smiled nodding, tipping his head. "I had to make sure I saw you, before I leave." I yawned, for the first time that day warm and rested back against the saddle.

"You gonna try to go see ma too? And sister?" I murmured, thinking of the wasted years. He hesitated, kneeling beside me.

"I've seen the baby girl," She'd always be the baby to us; I chuckled, thinking some things never change. He pressed the back of his hand against my forehead, the touch light.

"I only had a little time left and I wanted to see you." My eyes started to close, "You'll be fine now... if you leave to tomorrow, you can see mama before she joins me."

"Ma's going on a trip?" I sighed, thinking of how she dreamed of seeing the sea, and fell asleep to my brother saying the words we'd never said until now.

When I woke, the coals were still keeping the shack warm, and the gelding's neigh told me it was morning. My lone coffee cup was cold, and I stared at it for a few minutes before looking around at the empty cabin. Beside my hand lay the letter in my sisters' neat, careful writing. She had finished the last letter my mother had started and before the sun could reflect off the ice, I had the gelding headed towards home.

"Dearest brother,

I finish the words our mother started to you with a heavy heart. Last night the fever took our brother, and mother now too is falling to the sickness. I beg you to please come when you can, he passed calling your name, wishing he could say goodbye to us all. I fear that mother has not long, and I need you here.

Love always,

Your sister."

The Blues Guitar

By Nora Decter

I was eleven and my brother Matt was sixteen, the age I am now, except when he was my age he knew everything. He knew normal things, like how to drive and make conversation with his peers, but he also had specialized knowledge, like how to get onto the roof of the parking garage downtown where you could see for days in any direction, how not to get jumped waiting at the bus stop or walking down the back lane, and how to handle Maggie, our mom. He knew everyone on the block and everyone knew me, because I was his sister.

We were in the middle of a cold snap when the luthier called to say Matt's guitar was ready, the kind of cold snap that comes so late in winter everyone tries to deny it's happening because spring is so long past due. Times like that, prairie people refuse to put their good boots back on, they leave the extra layer of wool at home and then suffer for it. Matt hung up the phone and reached for his coat.

In the name of nothing better to do I went too. We listened to his Discman on the bus, one headphone each, the cord jerking out of my ear because Matt couldn't keep still.

Having a guitar built is an insane extravagance for a teenaged boy. But being a teenaged boy, he didn't care when his socks wore thin and his sheets went grey and his hair grew into his eyes until Maggie would notice and beat it back with a buzzer in the kitchen, and he certainly didn't waste his money on things like that. Matt never spent, he just saved and saved. All the money he earned working at the pizza joint over by the casino, where he spent nights sprinkling low-grade shredded mozzarella over dough painted with tomato sauce brushstrokes, it all went to the guitar.

The luthier was called Sven. His workshop was about an hour north of the city in Gimli, an Icelandic town on the beaches of Lake Winnipeg. Matt went up there a few times over the course of that winter to consult on the type of wood it would be made of, on the shape the guitar would take. He came back buzzing from these meetings, all lit up. I imagined they were building something holy, saw Matt's bus trips to the workshop as pilgrimages.

Sven's cottage was a few minutes' walk from where the bus dropped us. Matt led me around back to the workshop, which was taller than the main house and nearly as large.

Snow had been falling all day but slowly, with persistence. It travelled unrestricted across the fields beyond the yard. We had to lift our knees high to clear the drifts. Sven ushered us into the space, which smelled of sawdust and metal. Shelves climbed the walls like bunk beds, guitars in varying states of completion resting in the shadows.

Matt had three guitars already. The first was a little acoustic our dad, Jim, had given him for Christmas when he was nine (I was four, old enough that I remember him without a guitar in his arms, but barely). Then there was Shredder, a red electric that some guy named Bud left behind after a party. To her credit, when Bud came looking for it a few days later Maggie was like, Guitar?...what guitar? And then got him drunk. Meanwhile Matt was in the basement with Shredder getting to know new kinds of noise. When he was fourteen Maggie had some kind of windfall and came home with the Gibson (I was nine and just a little jealous of the hours he spent playing guitar. Music was always his thing. I listened, loved every new song he wrote, but I was starting to want to be a part of it somehow). They were all good guitars, he explained, but this would be his blues guitar, the one he'd take when he went downtown to jam with the old men at the Windsor.

When Sven handed Matt his new guitar he reached for it like a father reaches for his newborn child. Even in my ignorance I could see it was a beautiful thing. Warmth emanated from underneath the surface of the wood, like fire from behind a fogged up window. Dark lines of grain flowed down it like a fingerprint. For a few minutes Matt could not be moved. He tuned the strings and struck a first careful chord, then another and another. Sven and I stood by watching and he told me quietly that the rosewood had been chosen for how well it spoke. I thought he meant he could hear voices in the wood, but of course he meant that there are ways of testing wood for resonance, of measuring the different qualities of sound.

Matt played until Sven's wife appeared at the door in a housecoat and a wool hat to say dinner was ready and would we like to stay. Matt said no, thank you, we had to get home, but he didn't stop playing. Sven patted him on the back and told us to turn the lights off on our way out.

It was only when we were alone that Matt realized his oversight. He'd forgotten to bring a case. We had no way of protecting the guitar on the trip home. Sven must have thought we'd come by car.

We stood there wondering what to do. Finally, Matt took off his jacket and wrapped it around the guitar's body. I unwound the scarf from my neck and secured it around the long elegance of the fretboard. We ran along the road in ruts left behind by a truck, our heads down, laughing. At the station I stood by the doors with the guitar while Matt went to get tickets. He returned pale beneath his wind-burned cheeks.

We'd missed the last bus. There was another going to the city that night, but it only made a flag stop on the highway. The station attendant said he'd radio the driver and tell him to look for us, then he said we better hurry.

Our cold is dry. It sears your skin, so that you don't feel the pain you're in until you begin to shake with it, a shaking that takes you over, that's more than a shiver, it's a shudder. That's the kind of cold we walked into that night.

At first we sang as we waited at the side of the road in the whistling dark. This song Jim liked to blast in winter. Matt and I would sing it when we took the dog out on short walks that felt like death marches.

"Let's go to fucking Hawaii," Matt sang.

I jumped in. "Go get drunk in the sun."

But the song died on our lips after the first verse.

"I've also heard fucking Cuba is nice this time of year," Matt said, his shoulders up around his ears. The words barely escaped his clenched jaw before the wind whisked them away. He was only wearing a hoodie over a fleece over a t-shirt and he'd begun to shake so fiercely you could have mistaken it for a seizure if you didn't know better.

"Fucking Cuba sounds good," I said.

Soon there was nothing to say that wasn't a comment on the cold. On the prairie you're raised to respect the winter. You're told stories of children who die of snowball hits to the head. Of teenagers who lose fingertips to the frost and of drunks who lie down to rest on a snow bank and never sober up again. As we stood in silence at the side of the road I became aware of how cocky we'd been. We weren't dressed for such an expedition. I gave Matt my hat and he pulled it down over his eyes and wrapped his arms around the guitar, but if he was trying to protect it or take some of its heat I couldn't tell.

Ten minutes passed. Or was it half an hour? Darkness obliterated the highway. The wind blew and snow fell sideways. I couldn't feel my toes. Orbs of light appeared and approached like angels, but none of those angels was our bus.

And then a pair of headlights emerged from the black, brighter than the rest, so bright it took a moment to register it really was a bus shuddering to a halt twenty metres down the road. We ran for it on clumsy, leaden legs, climbing the steps into warmth that set my flesh on fire.

"Is it okay?" I asked, as Matt unwrapped the guitar.

"I think so. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Snow melted down my face like a sudden onslaught of tears. He set the guitar down on an empty seat and we rubbed our hands together to get the feeling back. The bus drove on through the weather, and from the seat in front of us came the terrible, tuneless, twang of guitar strings snapping, one by one.

Dakota Dynamite

By Michael Anthony

Lamar Kingsley was spending the last several days of Christmas vacation at his grandparents' farm near Anselmo where temperatures hovered below zero for the past week; where the full moon burnished the night landscape silver; and, where, from time to time, the strange but sweet scent of summer rain drifted by. That odd combination was exactly what his grandfather, Hubert, dreaded -the makings of a Dakota Dynamite.

Throughout the frigid afternoon Hubert kept checking the horses that he had layered with three heavy blankets each earlier in the day. On his fourth trip back from the barn, a wicked gust lifted the old man clear off his feet and across the porch, slamming him hard against the screen door that hung there year round. By the time Hubert righted himself and limped inside, he was shivering so badly he could not unwind from the tight crouch that reduced his already short frame.

Like Hubert had done to the horses, his wife, Emmaline wrapped him in plaid wool blankets. Then, she sat him in a rocker near the fire she had Lamar stoke while she examined Hubert's ankle. "Looks, sprained," she said.

While Emmaline was in the kitchen stirring her homemade clover honey into a cup of chamomile tea for Hubert, he called the boy over, "Lamar, git me my bottle from the cupboard. Ya know which one."

"Yes, sir," the boy replied.

"Shhh," Hubert hushed, "Don't want Emmy to hear." She didn't like her husband swigging that Southern Comfort; said it made him ornery. Lamar quietly retrieved the bottle for his grandfather who took a long swallow of that golden elixir and then motioned for the boy to put the bottle back in the maple cabinet Hubert had crafted for his wife's thirtieth birthday.

"Emmaline," Hubert called into the kitchen, "those horses are huddled together like I never seen. Wind has 'em spooked somethin' awful."

"They warm enough?" she called back.

"Seems so, but I'm worried 'bout that wind. Damned if it don't feel like a Dakota Dynamite coming."

Emmaline returned with a mug of steaming tea. "Hubert, stop with that foolishness. You're scarin' the boy." She turned to her grandson, "Lamar, don't you go believin' any of your grandfather's tall tales."

"Yes, ma'am," the boy replied.

"Emmy," Hubert said, "had ya' ever seen one, you'd agree."

It took the better part of an hour for Hubert's chills to ease, but his ankle swelled even more. A sudden gale rattled the windows. The unrelenting wind sounded like snowplows grinding on asphalt. But there were no trucks in sight, nor any blinking yellow lights moving out on County Road 21A as the late afternoon sky turned deep violet.

"Emmy, I gotta check those horses agin'," Hubert grunted. "Gonna tie everything down."

"Hubert Kingsley, not with that ankle you're not. I swear your brain's frozen."

Lamar learned early on his grandmother was not a woman easily dismissed or worse, disobeyed. He suspected his grandfather had come to that same conclusion decades earlier.

"I'll check them for you, Grandpa," the boy offered.

"No you will not, Lamar," Emmaline said emphatically before slapping her thigh. "You will remain right here with your Grandpaw. If anyone goes, it'll be me."

"Emmy, you can't go out there," Hubert protested.

"And why not?" Emmaline replied, clearly agitated at the suggestion she was somehow less capable than any man, which she had disproven over the forty-three years she worked the farm alongside her husband. Neither Hubert nor Lamar could construct a plausible objection. So, they stared silently.

"Only be a few minutes," Emmaline said while slipping on the hooded gray wool coat that hung by the door regardless of the season. "Lamar, keep that kettle hot. I'll probably need a cup when I return." Emmaline lit the mantle of a Coleman lantern and once outside aimed for the barn. Lamar pushed against the door while a snow squall pushed just as hard on the opposite side. A blast swirled through the small house and whipped the flames in the fireplace.

The boy watched anxiously through the glazed window as his grandmother battled snow and howling winds. The lantern swung from her upraised hand, casting a cone of creamy white light that painted the otherwise purple-tinted ground. With every step she took towards the barn, the wind pushed her three to the side.

The farther she went, the more she drifted away from the barn. Some forty feet out, she pivoted hard left and cut a path through the knee-deep snow to the barn door. By now the indigo eastern sky was nearly overhead, while to the west, a hazy lavender ribbon outlined the horizon.

At times, Lamar couldn't see his grandmother's silhouette through the snow squall; but could only follow that glowing semaphore, rocking back and forth like it was signaling some spectral freight train rumbling down the old Burlington Northern line from Pierre. Hubert joined Lamar at the window. The steam from his mug spiraled up and clouded the window, which Lamar wiped with his shirt sleeve. All the while the horrifying wind attacked the house, straining its walls, clawing at the roof shingles and blasting tiny jets of frigid air through the corners of the rattling windowpane.

Finally at the barn entrance, Emmaline pushed, then pushed again until she freed the frozen door, eventually wrestling it closed behind her. The sphere of light from her lantern disappeared until a ghostly luminance floated past the lone window on the farmhouse side of the barn trailed by an eerie shadow slipping across that frosted rectangle.

Hubert shifted anxiously from his bad foot to the other. "I should have gone. Wind's too much for Emmy."

Lamar reassured his grandfather, but silently shared his apprehension. Fighting the urge to use the bathroom he crossed his legs and remained planted next to Hubert.

"Lamar," the old man replied, "if you're outside when a Dakota Dynamite hits, they might find ya blown clear down to New Helena or Lillian, if they find ya at all."

"Maybe it ain't any crazy ol' Dakota," the boy said, dismissing his grandfather's dire warning.

"No sir, I can feel it," Hubert fretted. "It's a Dakota all right." At that very moment, the house groaned like an old cow lying down in the shade of a bur oak. "When you been through one, you never forget. Lord," Hubert whispered while peering up at the ceiling, "please guard my Emmy."

"Grandpa, look!" Lamar yelled in a voice brittle with fear.

Through a sudden break in the blinding snow, the boy saw something ominous at the far northern end of this wide plain the Kingsley family had farmed for over a century. A wall of white climbed so high that the last rays of the now vanishing sun tinted the crest of the approaching thunderhead in pale pink. It was a good ten thousand feet tall and rolling down the wide Nebraska prairie. Lamar had never seen swirling snow squalls alternate with clear violet skies, nor the menacing monster aiming for the farm. His body stiffened.

"Oh Lord! It's the Dakota!" Hubert winced and gathered the boy under his arm.

With neither forest nor foothills to slow it, that massive palisade of evil marched south unimpeded. Blue and white fingers flashed where that cloud skidded across the face of the earth. Though it looked like lightening, Lamar knew that was impossible in Nebraska in January. Or, was it?

Worried, Hubert said, "I gotta get your Grandma."

"I'll be quicker," Lamar countered, then grabbed his coat from the wall hook and wrapped it around himself, leaving it unzipped.

Using the indistinct outlines of Byron MacKenzie's silos just beyond the line of lodgepole pines, Hubert guessed the cloud was some five, maybe six miles upland, but would soon be upon them.

"Don't dawdle, boy," Hubert urged his grandson. "Git your Grandma and git back here quick. Ain't got but a few minutes. Now run. Run fast!"

Lamar bolted out into the stinging snow. The snow wasn't falling; it was shooting, at him, past him and at times as though right through him. Tears ran from his nearly closed eyes and froze immediately in jagged lines clear back to his ears. His only beacon was the yellow glow of Emmaline's Coleman in the barn window.

He turned, hoping to see his grandfather in the doorway, but saw only sheet after sheet of white pelting the dim profile of the farmhouse. Lamar had never felt more isolated, more vulnerable than at that very moment. He pushed against a force the likes of which he had not encountered before. When breathing became a challenge, he shielded his mouth in the crook of his arm. There was no east, no west; no up nor down. Some unearthly gargantuan hand was tossing him around in a vast snow globe. He was absolutely alone.

That punishing wind, which he thought could not get any stronger, suddenly did. It whipped around the corner of the barn; forming whirling eddies that erased every one of Emmaline's footsteps. The howl was now a constant roar that would easily drown out the Custer County fire siren. He stood halfway between the farmhouse and the barn, though he could see neither.

The last few yards to the barn proved nearly impassable. Lamar grasped the latch and yanked hard; creating an arrow opening through which he squeezed sideways. Midway down the barn, Emmaline spun to see why the wind unexpectedly thundered through the building.

She yelled over the din, "Lamar, what in heaven's name are you doing out here?"

"Come on. There's a Dakota coming." He held out his hand for her.

"I need to finish tying the last one down." Emmaline shouted in reply.

"No time," the boy screamed. "Let's go!"

Then, as if some great celestial switch had been thrown, the howling wind stopped. Without so much as a gentle breeze to lift a piece of straw, everything was as quiet as the inside of the Freewill Baptist Church at noon on a weekday when the buzz of a horsefly near the pulpit could be heard all the way in the last pew.

The rafters no longer creaked; the chattering windows rested. The sudden uneasy calm frightened the horses, setting their ears twitching as they skittered in the stalls, banging first against one side, then the other. Their hooves dug nervously into the hay. Lamar didn't know what it all meant, but his gut told him it wasn't good. He now wished he had used the bathroom.

"Let's go!" he shouted while pulling on his grandmother's sleeve. She hoisted the lantern and they followed its glow to the narrowly opened door.

Emmaline handed Lamar the Coleman. "Hold this." She then latched the doors and ran a loop of rope through the handles, tying the quickest timber hitch knot the boy had ever seen. Emmaline grabbed Lamar's hand and said, "Okay."

With the snow and wind no longer swirling they could see Hubert waving through the amber window. Halfway to the farmhouse Lamar looked up into the hushed night sky to find a circular opening in the heavy cloud cover and through it a trio of stars - Orion's belt!

Without warning the entire landscape lit up so blindingly bright that Lamar had to shield his eyes. There was a second flash, then a third, then another; each coming faster than the previous.

"Lamar, run!" Emmaline yelled in the unsettling silence.

The faster he ran, the deeper he sank, much like when he scaled the Silver Lake Dunes in Michigan. But here in Anselmo, that pulsating lightening painted their shadows on the iridescent snowscape, shadows they chased towards the porch.

Though still absolutely silent, the sky flashed and flickered in every shade of blue imaginable from the palest aquamarine to the deepest purple. The air was thick with the stench of ozone, but not a single clap of thunder followed those bolts of lightning.

Hubert threw open the door and hollered for them to get inside. His face was ashen; his eyes wide in terror at what was behind Lamar and Emmaline. "Oh Lord!" he shouted.

Lamar turned to see the cause of his grandfather's horror. Less than two hundred feet away a sheer wall of white climbed clear up to Orion's belt. At its base, the lightening skipped along the ground, shooting long tendrils high into that ungodly creature. The flashes illuminated tree limbs, fence posts, and other debris that sailed through the air as though made of papier-mâché. This thing his grandfather called a Dakota Dynamite was a tornado without a vortex, but like its evil twin, it consumed everything in its path and Lamar realized they were directly in that path.

As quickly as it stopped, the silence of the past several minutes gave way to an ear-shattering rumble like a pair of phantom freight trains speeding by on each side of the farmhouse. Blue sparks danced atop the barbed wire fence along the eastern pasture, hopping the posts from one bowed stretch of wire to the next. Hubert's pickup truck glowed purple as the hum of millions of volts of electricity overwhelmed every other sound.

With that menacing wall gaining on them, the hair on Lamar's head stood straight up. Only twenty-five feet to the farmhouse but less than fifteen from the maw of that meteorological monster. A bolt of lightning struck the copper rod atop the farmhouse and outlined the structure like a string of malevolent Christmas lights before slithering into the ground near the root cellar.

Hubert pulled them onto the porch and inside, then shouldered the door closed against the stinging snow and ferocious wind. With the door finally latched, he gathered his wife and grandson into the corner.

Instantly, a ball of lightening, some two feet across, blew the front door off its hinges and hurtled like a meteor into the stone hearth where it exploded into a hail of sparks shooting in every direction. They ricocheted off walls; bounced along the floor; and, careened into the kitchen like waves of glowing blue marbles.

Lamar was struck mute by the electricity coursing his body. The crotch of his pants darkened as he embraced his grandparents.

That great white wall was now directly over the Kingsley homestead. Shards of wood and metal and glass pelted the house and strained at the roof. The abrupt change in air pressure created a vacuum that nearly lifted Lamar off the floor. Hubert grabbed the boy's arm and pulled him closer into the corner. Outside was blinding white; inside shimmering electric blue.

Emmaline's Sunday china flew from the breakfront and crashed to the floor in thousands of jagged pieces. The trio shielded their faces against the onslaught of shards that dug into their legs; drilled into their backs; and, cut right through their sleeves. In the kitchen, a blast sent the refrigerator door hurtling across the kitchen and into the sink as if TNT had been detonated inside it. The lights flickered and then everything was dark.

Lamar and his grandparents lay huddled and motionless in the corner.

Having wreaked its damage, that incredible beast of wind and snow and lightening now barreled past the Kingsley farm, aiming for Merna. The sky was now clear as ice and ancient constellations painted the great black dome overhead. Moonlight danced on the snow turning the outside into a glittered Christmas card.

Where minutes before stood a sixty-foot barn, there was only a skeleton of wood, four stalls, one snapped crossbeam and a dangerously tilting hayloft. The outerwalls and roof of the barn had been stripped clean away. Though not a single board of siding remained, miraculously, all four horses stood as clouds of hot condensation rose from their flared nostrils. They were still alive and so were the Kingsleys who pushed up from the floor

battered, bruised but breathing. Others west of Anselmo didn't fare so well. Some lost livestock; others their homes; and one family their lives when lightning struck a propane tank beside their house.

This particular February night, Lamar Kingsley listens to the KXNB weatherman say the fast-moving snow squall should be south of Lincoln by morning. But, this is the sixth day below zero; that ghostly white moon shines through the kitchen window of the farmhouse that once belonged to his grandparents; and, the air smells like rain in June. Lamar recalls his grandfather's deathbed prediction. "When those three things happen together, boy, git ready for a Dakota Dynamite."

Flashes along the northern horizon tell Lamar something evil fast approaches, so he sends Charlene and the children down into the storm cellar he put in last year. Then, he watches those damned blue sparks leap in the waning twilight.

Skykicker

By P.A. Bechko

Nora Spencer kicked her dependable roan ahead, casting a wary glance toward the darkening western sky.

She'd made her plans and snow would not stop her from having that golden mustang stallion in her corral now after months of planning.

Nora spotted the powerful stud, Skykicker and smiled, tightening her hat's tie-down beneath her chin. Wild as a prairie wind, he was not a horse she'd be able to run down and rope. He was too swift, too agile and too damn smart for that, so today, her best horses were positioned all along the stallion's route. She'd wear him down by running relay.

The leaden sky darkened.

"Come on Red," Nora softly urged the big raw-boned roan she rode. "Today we're going to take him home."

Her mount gave an anxious snort of the sort he always produced when they neared the stallion, and stepped up the pace.

She leaned into the warmth of the animal's body, huddling deeper into the folds of her sheepskin coat. Ebony hair, thick and wavy, rippled behind her in a sooty cloud. Her pale blue eyes glittered when she turned them again toward the bilious heavens.

"It'll hold off," she said confidently.

But the declaration was for her own ears.

Because now was only the beginning.

The stallion whickered to his mares and nipped at their heels to press them forward, ignoring the woman as he always had; as Nora had planned that he would.

"Okay, Red, let's make it good."

Across the broad, curving valley near the distant mountains clouds piled up and engulfed the sun. The snow wasn't going to wait. Either was Nora.

The stud ruled omnipotent and the band of wild horses lined out, flowing with the silky grace of water in a creek bed, manes tossed by the rising wind.

"He's moving them to storm shelter," Nora observed.

Red's ears flicked toward her and he tossed his head against the restraining bit. Nora let the reins slide between her gloved fingers. Big Red hit a gallop in a stride, a raw-boned run in a few more.

He settled into his stride, as steady as a metronome while the heavy gray clouds dragged nearer to the ground promising an all-out-hell-raiser of a storm.

The gelding leapt forward, long legs eating up the distance when Nora touched her heels to his sides.

Their changed demeanor brought Skykicker's head around with a jerk. A high-pitched squeal challenged Red and sent the stud's mares racing forward at full flight, one of them in an advanced state of pregnancy. Fleet and nimble, they raced up the valley, manes and tails flowing a calico of color against the dreary hues of early winter.

The stallion ran his mares hard and Nora grinned, unable to deny herself an enthusiastic whoop of victory. They'd tire soon and her remount awaited.

Red's strides, too, were reluctantly shortening and he stumbled galloping around the base of a hill, but Nora's urging sent them sweeping up-valley, into the maw of the coming storm.

The pregnant mare slowed and the stud squealed his frustration and nipping at her haunches, looking back at Nora.

"You've done real fine, Red," Nora crooned into the gelding's ear as the first fat snowflakes fell from overburdened clouds.

By the time Nora vaulted from Red's back it was snowing heavily. She pulled Windy's picket pin and mounted on the fly as the animal hit his stride and took up the chase, hoofs digging into nearly frozen ground and clattering over rock.

Skykicker screamed a challenge, an unearthly sound only a stallion in high fury could utter.

Nora burred to Windy's back, fists wrapped in taut leather reins and coarse horsehair, and they pressed on. The snow did nothing to impede them and Windy stretched out like his belly was going to sweep the ground, gaining on the wild bunch.

He topped a rise, wheeled to slash diagonally down the far side, then skirted a steeper hill, and bolted across the half frozen stream without a misstep. Nora was no longer aware of the intense cold and gave a heartfelt rebel yell, shifting forward on the mustang's withers as he bounded ahead.

"Go Windy, go!"

The space between pursuer and pursued was closing rapidly. In the distance, her third horse, Buck, waited and Skykicker was herding his mares right for him.

Fit and strong, the buckskin colored horse was always curious, rarely so absorbed in anything that he wouldn't take a moment to give the world around him a good look. No doubt he was watching.

The stallion raced alongside his mares, nipping and squealing, swerving even closer to Buck.

"That's your first mistake!" Nora called.

But Skykicker, with a shriek and a bound took off at right angles to the rushing band of wild mares and shot like a bullet toward Buck.

The tactic slammed Nora and brought a cry of denial to her lips.

"No!"

She lunged Windy after the stallion.

Goddamn him, somehow he understood, and he was out to cripple her remount!

Buck pivoted at the end of his line, turning to meet the stallion's charge with stoic acceptance and Nora wished he would just pull that damned picket pin and run. But he didn't, and the collision of horseflesh reached Nora's ears in an audible, slapping thud vibrating through brittle air stilled by winter's snow. Skykicker's powerful jaws caught Buck on the side of the neck, tearing out a chunk of hide and flesh.

Buck squealed, slashing at the stallion with his forefeet, twisting away from Skykicker's attack as blood coursed down the pale buckskin hide.

Nora grabbed her varmint-gun riding at her hip. Never had she dreamed she would be forced to use it on the prize stud, but she knew she couldn't sacrifice the faithful, valiant Buck. She bellowed at the mustang king.

"Let him go you bastard! Run or I'll put a bullet in you! I swear to God I will!"

The buckskin spun and planted a solid kick with both rear feet, in the stallion's girth. The stud was bloodied, but the injury was superficial.

Nora fired her gun frantically into the air. Three shots cracked across the woolen silence created by the snowfall.

Skykicker whirled, hoofs gouging the earth when he slammed a shoulder into the already off-balance buckskin.

Buck went down hard, rolling onto his back, legs flailing helplessly in the air as the stud took flight in a deer-like leap, tossing his rear quarters into the air in his trademark gesture of defiance.

Hands trembling, Nora pulled Buck's picket pin herself. A glance told her his injuries were not serious despite the blood.

"Go! Go home!"

She slapped him on his rump and sent him running toward the distant ranch house.

Astride Windy again, Nora wasn't about to give up. She was too close -- and too damned mad. Windy took off running, with neck out-stretched, into the thickening snowfall.

Up ahead Skykicker placed himself between Nora and the pregnant mare, nipping and urging greater speed, but the little horse was exhausted and the mustang band was drawing further ahead, the heavily falling snow drawing a pale curtain between them.

Aware Windy was nearly spent, Nora sat very still and spoke to him softly.

"You can rest soon. Shadow's waiting over the next rise."

Despite the cold, Nora was sweating in the folds of her jacket. She couldn't afford to be caught flat-footed by the stallion again. She cut off his path to Shadow and the fury in the toss of the stallion's head made him appear the demon riding the storm crest through the blowing snow.

Impatient, Shadow danced lightly at the end of her picket rope, the gray filly but a silhouette against the rippling curtain of cascading snow. She was fearless, high-strung, and possessed incredible speed and endurance. The towering stallion would be just another challenge to her. What a match the pair would make when the time was right. What offspring they'd produce!

The golden mustang nipped his companion, turning her, but the heavily burdened mare slowed, blowing with her efforts. He'd have to stand or leave her.

Nora was congratulating herself on her unexpected luck when the mare stepped down hard into a dip hidden beneath the snow. The awful sound, like that of a green branch snapping, preceded by an instant, the animal's scream of pain and terror and the mare tumbled to the ground.

Nora dismounted on the fly, running to the mare who thrashed in the light, dry, snow, attempting to rise. She threw herself across the horse's neck, holding her down, trying to soothe her while the stallion broke stride and cut back to rejoin the mare.

The injured horse ceased her struggles beneath Nora, small sounds of pain escaping her lips. Her leg badly broken, there was no hope for the little mustang. There was only the merciful end Nora could provide. And the terrible loss of both mare and foal.

"Oh, God!" I didn't mean for this to happen! I'm sorry!"

With a gulp that wrenched her throat and threatened to shut off her breathing, Nora drew her gun again. The mare's eyes, soft and solemn, were fixed on her in a strangely trusting gaze and in that heart-wrenching instant Nora knew the foal was coming.

Skykicker tossed his magnificent head, his body telegraphing his uncertainty and even dismay. He nickered softly to the fallen mare and for a wild instant, Nora knew that she was his favorite. The power of the stallion's striding was electric, snow leaving the ground in wind-borne plumes as the stud circled the woman and the mare.

On the ground, at the mercy of the stallion she had been relentlessly pursuing, Nora gave him one hard look, then turned her full attention back to the suffering animal sprawled in the snow, hoping the stallion wouldn't decide to pound her into the ground.

"We can save your baby. I'll help you. Shhhh, it'll be all right."

The foal was coming fast.

The stallion feinted toward Windy who shifted back a few more strides. In the distance, above the rising wind, Shadow gave shrill testimony to her anxiety.

Skykicker pivoted toward the sound, cratering the accumulating snow, then circled Nora again while the downed mare struggled and the foal entered the world.

The stud chuffed the wind, catching the scent of fresh blood, then charged, pulling up short mere inches from Nora, sharp forefeet cascading snow across her. Just as quickly, while the adrenaline flooded her system, he backed up, head lowered, eyes fastened malevolently upon her.

"Damn you!" Nora ground the words out. "Damn you!" This time louder.

Then, arms full of helpless new-born colt, she subsided.

"Damn me. This wasn't supposed to happen. It was supposed to have been an adventure; we were going to be friends one day."

Skykicker whirled and ran, snow geysering in his wake, then pulled up, dancing between Nora and Shadow. Beyond him his mares slowed, hovering like wraiths just at the edge of his influence.

Nora grabbed handfuls of snow, giving the newly arrived little horse a brisk rub down, finding him to be a fine, sturdy colt with the promise of a broad chest, large nostrils, long legs and dark, intelligent eyes through which he stared at Nora as if comprehending all that had so recently transpired.

She got him to his feet and he promptly plunged down into the snow, immediately trying to get back up.

Standing, Nora realized she was breathing hard and fast, sucking the frigid air deep into her lungs in a cathartic wash, when she glanced from exhausted, mortally injured mustang mare at her feet to Skykicker, sidling up to Shadow. Abruptly, it dawned full force on her that the stud was after the filly.

Nora bolted through the snow, slipping and sliding, gasping and yelling.

"Hiup thar! Get on with you!"

Skykicker's head jerked up, and fury filled the scream of his piercing challenge while he pawed a gouge in the accumulating snow. Shadow shied, but she pranced, neck bowed, signaling interest.

Nora kept coming. She had to drive the stallion off.

Skykicker had other ideas.

Charging Nora, he attempted to force her to give way, but she stood straight and immobile, eyes meeting his as he reared to his full height, towering over her as impressive as an enraged grizzly.

When she didn't budge the stud, a golden phantom in the white-gray filigree of the falling snow, raced back to where the colt stood uncertainly near his fallen mother. The little thing tottered a few steps, head raised, legs unsteady, his posture a miniature of his sire.

Nora nearly screamed her frustration, a sob rising into the back of her throat attempting to strangle her. The mustang was running her just as she'd run him and she was helpless in the face of it.

Skykicker, in a juxtapositioning of rage and tenderness, nuzzled the fallen mare, blowing hot air against her cheek and muzzle, urging her to get up.

Nora's tears scalded her cheeks, her heart breaking when the valiant mare tried to regain her feet. The crippled horse squealed her agony and the stallion was right beside her, nosing her gently, turning his magnificent head toward his new son, then back to her.

The mare tried, but she couldn't put enough weight on the injured limb to lever herself up. She fell back, exhausted, as Nora blundered through the deepening snow to where she lay.

Skykicker feinted toward Nora, returned to the injured mare and hung his head a few moments.

"She can't run with you anymore," Nora said quietly to the stallion, choking on the words, then dragged in a deep breath to continue. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to end this way."

The stallion brought his head up, looking at her through intelligent, liquid black eyes, falling snow clinging to upturned eyelashes. He nudged his offspring, Nora could have sworn, in her direction, then wheeled and loped off a few strides.

Nora, her insides twisted into knots she didn't know possible, didn't hesitate again. One well-placed shot ended the mare's suffering, the crack of the pistol oddly muted in the eerie, silence of the snow-swathed valley.

She shrugged out of her heavy coat and stripped out of her thick flannel shirt and woolen undershirt. Then she swiftly drew the coat back on, buttoning it against the rising wind before wrapping the struggling foal in her garments. Thrusting the colt across Windy's withers, she gathered the reins and vaulted up, pressing close to the orphan to share her warmth.

Nora turned Windy toward Shadow, glancing toward Skykicker with something akin to gratitude for a few moments before the stallion jerked away and began to run.

And he was running straight for Shadow.

Burdened as she was, there was nothing Nora could do. The stud made a bee-line for the filly. Sharp teeth severed the picket line as swiftly as would a Bowie knife and then he sank his teeth into her flank. Shadow whinnied sharply and bolted.

The benevolent feelings of but moments past fled and Nora threw a curse after the golden stud, watching helplessly as the wild stallion took off with her best filly.

"We're not finished, you and me!" Nora yelled past a raw and dry throat. "Not by a long shot! You look for me, because I'll be coming after you!"

The stallion was disappearing into the distance, nearly lost to her sight when he gave his distinctive bound, throwing both hind legs into the air and let loose with the challenging whistle of the victorious stallion.

Silver Cornet Band

By Kristie Betts Letter

Bands, 1872

Shimmering gray in the sky. The cold air tastes like metal, even though you're pulling through thousands of trees. "At least there's no lightning, Miss," the driver says. "The Rockies are so close to the sky that fire just jumps right down." The ridge road torn from the mountainside barely keeps the stage upright. On the left side of the narrow road, the rocky ground plummets; only a few scrubby pines would stop your fall.

Keep your eyes up.

When the wind blows, be sure to hold onto something. Several fellows were swept clean off the mountain, they told you in Central City.

When you get to Caribou, a bowl of land curves beneath three hills. Atop the hills, the land opens into eight mine mouths, while rough buildings and straight roads quilt the valley.

The tossing coach stops in the center of the fresh town. At a Denver parade, you met a man playing in Caribou Silver Cornet Band, a man who cobbled shoes for miners. Harvey Eben, a religious man, had a lung condition-which-was-almost-consumption, characterized by breathless attacks, kept him in the clear dry air. The dark thick mineshaft would have been the death of him. Yet he fit metal nails into boots in a high-elevation boomtown lit by near-constant lightning he took be constant judgment. He chose you.

The ring of course is silver, though you hope for gold.

"Well, dear, what to you imagine God will bless us with?" Harvey asks the morning after.

"Could we get a cow here?" you ask.

He laughs. "My bride fancies a cow as a wedding gift."

The dogs stalk around Caribou, all scrappy, all with extra-thick fur. They're hearty, loud, seemingly indestructible except for those two mutts who get struck by lightning mid-mating. The preacher tries convincing people to disentangle the charred remains before burial, but no one's willing. The lucky families with cows also have small barns. Harvey's cabin (your cabin) just has the one room, the one building.

Harvey tells you about the Thompsons, who were used to Virginia winters where a roof overhang is plenty for livestock. Here during the winter, they had to bring the cow into their cabin, much to Mrs. Thompson's horror. The poor creature kept getting its nose frozen to the ground. Mrs. Thompson said that living with a cow would surely be the death of her, but actually the opposite was true. The weight of snow and the gales of wind were more than Mr. Thompson's carpentry could sustain. One night the roof fell in and would have killed the five little Thompsons where they laid but for the cow's broad back, which caught the roof beams. The cow died a heroically and the Thompsons spent the remainder of the winter living with the Spencers.

Mrs. Thompson was heard to whisper that she preferred the cow.

The cabin is small enough with your body and his. Another creature would push you that much closer together.

"Come see," he yells. It's not a cow, but it's something. Harvey trades twelve pairs of winter boots to get you (his bride) a fine young goat. Now your domestic chores include the goat, the cooking, the clothes, and the wood.

If any thunder rumbles, no matter how distant, your tall husband prays. "The Lord sends us messages," he says. "Those noises are the voice of the Lord criticizing devilment."

"Then you should have nothing to worry about." You lace your boots to bring in the wood for the night. Harvey murmurs each evening about the Lord's intentions for your prospective children. More nights than you can count, you fall asleep to the buzzing of Harvey's interpretation of the Lord's will.

Salves

Who can lead a boom-town band with cracked lips, especially if he happens to be the cornet player? The unforgiving mountain air chafes everything in its path.

You add your small things (three dresses, a set of dishes, your mother's sewing box) to Harvey Eben's household items (a Hawken pistol, a silk hat, piles of shoe leathers). The pegs, awls, and metal shapes he keeps in his corner of the general store, but he does his stitching occasionally by the fire.

His lips crack. The Silver Cornet Band is to play at Saturday's political meeting, but the cornet shines coldly in the corner, as Harvey licks his wounded lips.

"You ought not lick them," you say.

"If I don't, they pain me more." Already deeply etched lines bleed past the lipline on the left side of his mouth. He likes everything soft. How much money did he spend on that feather bed, which was too soft for death to land on? You guess it works, since you've suffered no fatalities yet. He says it's for your comfort, but this is a man not born to suffer. Now Harvey searches for something to keep the cracking cold from his lips. At every opportunity he rubs his mouth with the softest things he could find: the inside of sheepskin gloves, his own tongue, the rim of his grey silk hat. None of these repel the cold, the cracks. The silver cornet stays wrapped in its soft cloth, sleeping beside the fireplace. The cool metal soothes at first, but when Harvey tries to force air through the mouthpiece his lips pull away from the silver instrument in pained shock.

You don't tell him, but his face is almost comical when he tries. It puts you in mind of the goat.

You visit Van & Tabor's store in search of salve. The foul Pullman's remedy they provide gives Harvey a rash. He rages about the four cents, and you cry into the potato cakes as he melts snow to wash his face for the third time. You lace up again to take Pullman's Tonic and Restoration Elixir for Skin back to Van & Tabor's, to ask for those four cents back. Joel Van shakes his head. "We're not responsible for the elixir's failure because it simply indicates weakness in the subject. Put the Pullman's on a stronger man, Ma'am, and you won't be so disappointed."

You stare out the window at the snowglare beyond to keep your eyes busy. Joel Van has a mouth like a featherbed, neither cracked nor bleeding. A brightly dressed man who smells of a mixture of molasses and gunpowder, puts a kid-gloved hand on your shoulder. "Ma'am, the Shoo fly has all kinds of potions that could help your Harvey."

"Truly?"

"Can't ask a man nothing about skin fixes. Up there they know all about skin and can mix you up just what you need." He smiled at Joel Van who scowled back.

"A lady doesn't visit that type of establishment."

You ignore Joel Van and his big pink mouth.

The directions are to a house on the east side of town behind the Shoo Fly Saloon, and you've been to church with Harvey enough to know where the church-going wives point their fingers. But you go ahead and knock on the whorehouse door. You smile at the pretty girl with flyaway hair who opens it. You feel the full weight of your heavy wool dress, and the fat weight of your own tongue behind teeth.

"Well, honey, why so glum?" the woman asked.

"I'm Melinda Eben, Mrs. Eben....my Harvey sews the shoes."

"And plays a mean cornet, if I recall." The woman slides a brush through her waist-length hair. "I saw him play at the Sherman House on the Fourth of July."

"Was that right before the big lightning storm?"

"That's the one. We lost the first Shoo Fly when the lightning struck. That dark skeleton next door is all that's left."

"All this lightning scares me."

You didn't even realize you were twisting your ring. The girl nodded. "Sweetheart, don't touch silver when storms are about. You know the lightning just lingers in the air here. It likes shiny things, just like the magpies."

You sink into a velvet chair, and your scalp tingles with conversation. Once the tongue problem subsides, you discuss dry skin, flyaway hair, chapped lips and other intimacies. You leave with a honey salve to mix with goat's milk each evening. The girl with the flyaway hair promises the elixir will soften Harvey's lips and make him smell better. It does both. The lotion smells like the buzzing fields of summer, warm and lovely.

Ropes

Mornings crackle. Ice moves on the roofboards and distant trees. Air too cold wakes Harvey with chest constrictions, seizing his lungs. At the first rasp, you pull yourself into the cold waking and put the pot of water on the stove. You blow into the stove slightly to hurry the water's boil. Harvey's breath whistles.

"Here, it's beginning to steam."

Like the drowning man, Harvey inhales deeply. He coughs, and the steam soothes his chest. You pat his back, watching shiny droplets form on his brow, as his eyes close with the drugged satisfaction of the deep breath.

Your second year as wife.

"The snow must stop." Your husband evaluates the quality of light coming in through the opaque leathers drawn tight across the cabin's one window. "They'll have to shut down the mines if this weather doesn't let up. Pray for sun."

Perhaps because you don't pray, the winds rise at midday. Whether or not fresh snow falls, no one in Caribou knows because the howling swirls of snow could be coming from either the drifts or the sky. The miners and workingmen can't lift their eyes into the stinging snow. The Caribou Mine had dug a protective walkway, which although half caved-in has the essential logs marking its passage. Banging ankles against the lines of frozen logs, the men make their way to the mouth of the mine.

Returning that evening is the problem. They path goes only halfway down Idaho Street, barely to the center of town, and beyond that nothing but blind white. Most of the Moyles's, Tom Little and Caleb Dotterson can clamber across the snowcrust to their adjacent cabins. Others bunk with neighbors, or in the places of business on Idaho Street.

For the rest, there are ropes.

In the hard-packed piles covering the first floor windows of the Sherman House, ropes lead to the lights of the warm second story. Many miners mumble "coffee" and begin to ascend. Seventeen faint ladies wait on the other end, leaning quickly out of window frames for a final hand up.

How many miners climb the frozen drifts, holding on to the ropes unfurled by princesses above? Where do they sleep, and whose husbands are they? How do the ladies know to leave the Shoo Fly Saloon and head up from the outskirts? Werely's Saloon hosts more refugees from the Seven Thirty, the No Name and the Poorman. When the swirling snow settles, as tall as a full-grown tree in several drifts, most miners come out broke, and the public houses of Idaho Street have empty cabinets and full coffers. No one talks about it. The sun breaks through on the first of December and the other Caribou wives renew their ties with husbands.

Weather comes before questions.

You heard that the static electricity inside the Sherman House lit the night. Bodies warmed up with wool socks and each other flashed lights so bright that many a wife swore she saw lightning coming from her snowbound husband's general direction.

Later, William Donald would act befuddled as to how his second floor filled with the Shoo Fly's faint ladies. "Nothing wrong with reading the weather," a whore was said to have responded.

But Harvey is not one of the men in the golden entrapment. Harvey never makes it to his cobbler corner of the general store. He's not a brave man, and he turns back before he gets to the corner by the Dillinger barn. He does not have to join the other men in the second story. Although everyone exclaims at your good fortune for having a husband home, you notice just how little space or fresh air the cabin offers. Harvey has too little work to keep him busy on normal days, much less while snowbound at home.

One week without leaving the room, one week with the smell of the bucket, one week with the proximities of marriage. You wish he was one of the men with ropes.

After that week, superstitions buzz, about boots, about weather. Three men return shoes in the space of four days. The boots, secured with the metal nails, made to transition from the bitter drifts to the cold muds of spring, have been making men feel weak. Especially when the nails come in contact with raw earth on those electric days before storms. These men whisper about Harvey, about shoes. Nonetheless, watertight boots are as necessary as bread. So mostly everyone mutters over boots and chats about the Lord. Even Harvey's fervor for God dulls with constant mention.

"Everyone is calling upon the Lord these days," he says, following up with a dubious "Praise be."

"Especially when they pick up boots."

The early spring wind dismantles the corners of Caribou. The roof flies from the Donaldson's boarding house, a tree blows into the sorting room of the Poorman mine, and an unhitched wagon crashes through the church doors. Moses Mosley's underfed horse disappears one Sunday afternoon while tied outside of Werley's saloon. Moses swears up and down that the wind took the horse, post and all. His brothers agree, but say that any horse with a bellyful of oats couldn't be swept away, even by the Rocky Mountain wind. Three fires bloom on Caribou Hill after a storm.

"Lightning walks among us," you say. "Caribou is a lightning town."

"That's preposterous," Harvey replies redoing the button on his left sleeve. "You feel the presence of the Lord, the Almighty God. I heard him speak the other day as I was walking into town."

"Listen: that crackling in the air. Something is going to burst into flames any moment."

"That is devil talk. Fetch my salve." The lines of his face do not make your heart flutter. Your pride at saving the Silver Cornet Band and keeping your husband's lips supple becomes less glorious each evening as you watched Harvey slather his mouth with sap and goat's milk.

In the hands of a more graceful man, it could be lovely.

Strikes

The Mining Company Nederland, doing business from the other side of the Atlantic, squeezes more out of thin air. Without working capital, the Dutch persist in working the mines without improvements. To the miners, they offer paltry wages, deteriorating conditions and the spook of ghost ownership.

Suspicious run high as to which miners and mines worked for whom and which veins attach to which mine mouths after three lodes intersected somewhere deep beneath Caribou hill. You think it all must connect beneath. The separate lodes vein together into a tumbling silver jumble somewhere underground. The kid-gloved gentry that sometimes rides in, stepping away from the mountain stage as if wounded by its roughness, produces documents and gives speeches to groups of tired men who spend each spring day removing as much water from mineshafts as they do blasting the silver that pays salaries.

Harvey's business fares poorly. The miners have less money, but they also become suspicious of Harvey's shoemaking. Several more men report being overtaken by a tingling weakness when wearing the sturdy hobnailed boots. Rumors swirl that Harvey allows spirits into the shoes.

He tells you to pray.

You see the flyaway faint lady out gathering flowers, and you're glad. You sit on a rock and talk for the better part of an hour. She tells you what everyone else won't. "They say he pays the Tommy Knockers in trinkets to cobble those shoes each night. Most miners won't put on a pair of Harvey's shoes without rubbing salt inside and saying a prayer." Now you know.

You laugh, not at the superstition, but at the idea that Harvey would be on intimate terms with Tommy Knockers. "Why, any kind of Tommyknocker would send my husband into convulsions," you say.

The springtime wet inspires lightning. You begin to think that lightning waits in the ground, wanting to travel back up into the sky if it didn't find any fires to start.

Still, can't blame boots for weather.

Despite the salve, Harvey leaves the cornet shrouded in the corner, and the Silver Cornet Band hadn't played since the Fourth of July. Without the instrument, what's left?

The goat gets struck. Its milk has softened Harvey's lips and your hair. Plus, you like the creature with its soft fur and devilish eyes. But it's the same storm from the south that knocks Merle Richards clean off his crutches. While Merle gets up, he says that his knee feels better but his ears were ringing. That is exactly when the little gray goat just curls up and dies. You hear the creature's crackling scattering of final sounds.

"The lightning got our goat, Harvey," you say when your husband walks in and sets down his lunch pail.

Harvey unthreads his kneeboots. Lace by lace. "We must pray all evening. This is a message from the Lord that we have cracks, letting the sin in, Melinda." He glares at you. Then shivers.

"Didn't you hear about Merle Sanders? This is not a message, Harvey. This town is too high up, too much a wind-drop. Can we please leave here?"

"God was just giving Merle a small message about his drinking, and praise be his knee seems better. A sort of miracle. The Lord has His ways, Melinda."

"The Lord did not kill our goat."

"You cannot presume to know what He intends! I felt the presence of the Lord this afternoon...."

"No, No, No. You felt the lightening. That was not God, that was cloudfire." Your words on the air surprise you.

"I'll not have this conversation."

"You'll also not have your salve! That goat protected your Godly instrument. But you know I can go down to the Shoo Fly and get some salve. Those nice ladies know all about lip softener. Let me just get on my shoes."

"You'll not leave this house." He pushes you into place before he begins to wind the laces back up his boot. You wait until he leaves before you cry.

Bands, 1875

After Harvey returns to town, you move around the cabin without anything to take your attention. A sound outside rings strong and musical—Harvey playing his cornet in a conciliatory gesture? But no. The frenzied song is wind, returning from the Continental Divide.

With the last fingerfuls of the honey salve, you coat your own papery lips and manage to work your wedding ring free. You set the silver ring in the center of the pine table - a charm against being followed by lightening—and put on your old leather boots.

The wind whips the door closed behind you. If you grip bonnet in one hand and the left side of your dress in the other, feet are free to run. A sharp wail, of air thundering across the slope. Your skirt catches the current, pushes you further. Stay close to the buildings.

You know how not to be struck.

The Last Round-Up

By Jude Brigley

We drove for hours to Lackawaxento find Zane Grey's house on the Delaware, north of Roebling's Aqueduct. I made my travelling companions give the water carrier due scrutiny as if to convince them that it was worth the trip through the Poconos. At the museum, the ranger boasted of her Welsh descent, admitting I was one of the few visitors to recognize the name or to have read the books. I found that very hard to believe. I may have grown up in Wales, on another continent, but the landscapes of Grey's novels haunted my dreams. I loved their descriptions of purple sage, rocky canyons and cool streams. His heroines were always plucky and headstrong, great role models for a young girl whose head was full of imagination and adventure. It was the early sixties and television screens world-wide were dominated by programmes such as 'Wagon Train', 'Laramie' and 'Cheyenne'. I loved them all and recently visiting Ohio's history center, I was reminded of my collection of plastic cowboys with names like Slim, Clem, Bart, Chris and Don and the stories I spun about them. It was harder to get hold of a cowgirl but I managed to find one who I named Terrell after a Zane Grey heroine and made her owner of the ranch.

Meanwhile back at Lackawaxen, our feet were loud upon the wooden porch as we admired the river from the balustrade. Inside, awaited Grey's furnished room, photographs, books, splices of film, a shop, a notebook, an Indian shawl, stashed in the l-shape of the bottom floor. I bought a T-shirt, postcard and a book. The curator presented me with a bibliography. It reminded me of when I was 11, reading by the light of the setting sun, long after lights were supposed to be out. I was so shocked when Red, the red-headed gunslinger got shot, in 'The roaring U.P. trail'. I cried and cried. It still gives me shivers of disappointment now. None of the films of Grey's books have really worked but there were many clips of them at the museum. One stirred my memories, because I always loved both book and film of 'West of the Pecos' with Terrell Lambeth who, like a Shakespearian heroine, successfully disguises herself as a boy, and who can shoot, ride and handle cattle as well as the men who work the ranch. Grey's house was decked out in souvenirs from his many trips and would have suited many of his heroes including Dale from 'Man of the Forest'.

Travelling in parts of America has powerfully evoked Grey's books for me. A few years ago, I was walking in the Hocking Hills and came across Ash Cave so-named for the ash discovered there. For this was an important site for the Shawnee. You come to the cave after treading a winding path through mangled trees and in the background is the sound of running water. In the early morning, the path is dark with doubt and memory-the trees canopy the sun, which sulk behind the outcrops. Suddenly, the path opens up like a wound from a tomahawk until emerging as in a dream you come to a gallery where the floor is like a sandy beach though very far from any sea. A sapling tree is rooted in sand. The place seems like a shrine where stones have memories. Children scramble on rocks where names are carved, tracing back to 1850 when no path existed to guide the pilgrims through this wild country, where I suspect, that unless you were Milt Dale you could go mad among the canopied trees, frightened by eyes and ears imagined in rocks and water.

In a bookshop in Ann Arbor, I was looking through some old prints and came across one of cowboys forcing horses up a mountain trail. It reminded me so powerfully of Grey's books that I was determined to buy it, much to the surprise of my companions who thought it overpriced. I walked down the street and walked back. The picture is now framed on my wall and reminds me of Zane Grey every time I look at it. Imagine my delight when later I checked on the artist Rheinhold Palenske and found that he was a contemporary of Grey's with the same passion for the idea of the West. His picture reminds me of childhood and of the pleasures of reading those novels.

When I left, Grey's old home in Lackawaxen, which he built himself, the green slats of the windows shone in the summer sun and the porch gleamed, the colour of pearl. Above the house the writer slept, home from the sea and the hill. Feeling the peace of this spot, I was transported back to my Welsh valley bedroom where I often gazed with Jane Withersteen over the purple sage to where an unknown rider crossed the plain. And west of the Pecos, Terrell Lambeth, dog-gone it, mounts her pony as light fades over Caerau Mountain, as the lights now faded over the Delaware.



Black Cowpoke

By Trae Venerable



Contributors

Michael Anthony is a writer and artist living in New Jersey. He has published fiction, poetry and illustrations in multiple literary journals and commercial magazines. Most recently these include The Opiate, The Birch Gang Review, Jonah Magazine, the Indiana Voice Journal and The Copperfield Review. The American Labor Museum exhibited Michael's photojournalism essay on the waning of the textile industry.

P.A. Bechko has published a number of novels (westerns and other genres) and you can check her out at www.PeggyBechko.com for that info. Most recently Bechko is partnering with another writer/creator to create a comic series (way off the western path) called Planet Of The Eggs and it's evolving fantastically. More info on that if you like the Facebook page at www.facebook.com/PlanetOfTheEggs. Bechko is currently working on transforming a 'vampire western' screen script to novel format - tentative title "Bloodlines".

Jude Brigley was a teacher for forty years and a Western fan since childhood. She has always been a performance poet and has edited several poetry anthologies. Now, semi-retired, she is beginning to write more in prose and poetry.

Nora Dector is a writer from Winnipeg, Canada. Her work has been published in *Fifth Wednesday Journal* and *TSR: The Southampton Review*. She is a graduate of the Stony Brook Southampton MFA program and she recently completed her first novel. She has a rock n' roll past.

Born in Canada and bred in the U.S., **Allen Forrest** has worked in many mediums: computer graphics, theater, digital music, film, video, drawing and painting. Allen studied acting in the Columbia Pictures Talent Program in Los Angeles and digital media in art and design at Bellevue College (receiving degrees in Web Multimedia Authoring and Digital Video Production.) He currently works in the Vancouver, Canada, as a graphic artist and painter. He is the winner of the Leslie Jacoby Honor for Art at San Jose State University's Reed Magazine and his Bel Red painting series is 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.

Lana Elizabeth Gabris currently lives in the heart of British Columbia with her floor to ceiling sagging bookshelves, along with her fiancé and their much loved dogs of various sizes. Her illustrations of flora have been published in several outdoor magazines across North America and her fiction recently appeared in *Copperfield Review*.

Jennifer Leeper is an award-winning fiction author who's publications credits include *Independent Ink Magazine*, *Notes Magazine*, *The Stone Hobo*, *Poiesis*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Aphelion Webzine*, *Heater magazine*, and *The Liguorian*. She has had works published or are in the process of publication by J. Burrage Publications, Hen House Press, Alternating Current Press, Barking Rain Press, Whispering Prairie Press, and Spider Road Press. In 2012, Ms. Leeper was awarded the Catoctin Mountain Artist-in-Residency, and in 2013, Ms. Leeper was a Tuscany Prize Novella Award finalist through Tuscany Press for her short novel, *Tribe*. Ms. Leeper's short story *Tatau* was published in the journal, *Poiesis*, and was short listed as a finalist for the Luminaire Award in 2015, and nominated by Alternating Current for Queen's Ferry Press' Best of Small Fictions of 2016 Prize. In 2016, The Saturday Evening Post honored Ms. Leeper's short story *Book of the Dead* with an honorable mention in its Great American Fiction Contest. Ms. Leeper's short story *The Bottle* won second place in the Spider's Web Flash Fiction Prize through Spider Road Press.

Hillary Leftwich was born and raised in Colorado Springs and currently resides in Denver with her son. In her day jobs she has worked as a private investigator, maid, and pinup model. She is the associate editor for *The Conium Review* and Reader/Marketing Coordinator for *Vestal Review*. Her writing has been nominated for a Pushcart and appears or is forthcoming in *Hobart*, *Matter Press*, *WhiskeyPaper*, *NANO Fiction*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Dogzplot*, *Fried Chicken and Coffee*, *Cease, Cows, Pure Slush*, *FlashFiction.net*, *decomP MagazinE*, *Smokelong Quarterly's "Why Flash Fiction?" Series*, *NANO Fiction's "How I Write"* and others.

In the last 6 years, **Kristie Betts Letter** has had poems and short stories published in *The Massachusetts Review*, *The North Dakota Quarterly*, *Washington Square*, *Passages North*, *Pangolin Papers* and *The Southern Humanities Review* (among others.) Her novel *Snow and White* was just picked up by KT Literary. As a day job, she teaches *Hamlet* to high school seniors. She has been nominated for the 2008 Colorado Teacher of the Year, and won both the 2009 Jared Polis statewide teaching award and the 2010 Boulder Valley Impact Award for excellence in teaching. kristiebettsletter.com and @kristieletter

Shauna Mackay lives in north east England. She has MA (distinction) in creative writing from Northumbria University. She has previously received a Northern Promise Award from New Writing North and the Andrea Badenoch Award for fiction. She is the 2016 Seán O' Faoláin competition winner and her story The Idyllic Land of the 6's will be published with Southword Journal (winter edition) She is a Pushcart nominee and has several stories at, or forthcoming, online.

Jayne Martin lives on a ranch in Santa Ynez, California. Her work has appeared in *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Pure Slush*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *Blink Ink*, *Literary Orphans*, *Flash Frontier* and *Hippocampus Magazine*. She is the author of "Suitable for Giving: A Collection of Wit with a Side of Wry." Her television writing credits include the movies "Big Spender" for Animal Planet and "A Child Too Many" for Lifetime. Find her at on Twitter @Jayne_Martin or on the back of her horse.

Kaela Martin is a Texas native, studying creative writing at Stephen F. Austin State University. Her work has appeared in *Thin Air Magazine* and *Catfish Creek*.

Shortlisted for the Horatio Nelson Fiction Prize, **Noah Milligan's** debut novel, *An Elegant Theory*, is forthcoming from Central Avenue Publishing in the fall of 2016. He has an MFA from the University of Central Oklahoma, and his short fiction has appeared in Rathalla Review, MAKE Literary Magazine, Storyscape Literary Journal, Santa Clara Review, and elsewhere. Connect with him at www.noahmilligan.com.

Robert James Russell is the author of *New Plains* (forthcoming, 2017), *Mesilla* (Dock Street Press) and *Don't Ask Me to Spell It Out* (Whiskey Paper Press). He is the founding editor of the literary journals *Midwestern Gothic* and *CHEAP POP*. In 2016 he was awarded Runner-up for the *Passages North* Waasnodel Fiction Prize for his story "She Lit a Fire." You can find him online at robertjamesrussell@gmail.com.

Jared Yates Sexton was born and raised in Southern Indiana and received his MFA from Southern Illinois in 2008. He's the author of three collections, a crime-novel, and works as a political correspondent and Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Georgia Southern University.

C. Gregory Thompson lives in Los Angeles, California where he writes fiction, nonfiction, plays, and memoir. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Full Grown People*, *the Offbeat*, *Printers Row Journal*, *Reunion: The Dallas Review*, *Every Writer's Resource*, and *2paragraphs*. He was named a finalist in the Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival's 2015 Fiction Contest. His short play *Cherry* won two playwriting awards.

He earned an MFA in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts at the University of California, Riverside/Palm Desert.

Trae Venerable is part of an African American/Native American cowpoke family. Every generation in his family has owned a ranch or farm. Currently he raises Tennessee Walking Horses and has a cattle operation in Southern Missouri.

Jean Wong is the author of *Sleeping with the Gods* and is an award winning poet, memoir, and fiction writer. Her new book, *Hurtling Jade and Other Tales of Personal Folly* will be published in January, 2017. Her work has been produced by the 6th Avenue Playhouse, Petaluma Reader's Theater, and Off The Page, Lucky Penny Productions. When writing Jean sometimes proceeds like a mule—other times a brilliant racehorse speeds by. Whatever the process, she's amazed to be alive and telling the tale.

Editors

Adam Van Winkle, founding editor, was born and raised in Texoma and currently resides with his wife and two dogs on a rural route in Southern Illinois. He has published, read conference papers, and edited in the academic field on Bob Dylan & James Joyce in addition to publishing short fiction and creative nonfiction of his own. His creative writing focuses, not surprisingly, on the rural folks he grew up with and has appeared in places like *Pithead Chapel*, *Dirty Chai Magazine*, *Steel Toe Review*, *Vignette Review*, *Crack the Spine* and *Cheap Pop* (forthcoming). Van Winkle is named for the oldest Cartwright son on *Bonanza*.

Constance Beitzel is former lead editor and writer for The Buzz Magazine, a weekly culture rag in Champaign, IL. Currently she is a PhD candidate studying American Literature and Women's Studies at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale.