

Spring 2016

Issue 2

Cowboy Jamboree

Flood Waters



Contents: new rural and western stories from around the country

“High water risin’—risin’ night and day
All the gold and silver are bein’ stolen away
Big Joe Turner lookin’ east and west
From the dark room of his mind
He made it to Kansas City
Twelfth Street and Vine
Nothin’ standing there
High water everywhere...”

-“High Water (for Charley Patton)” by Bob Dylan

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The Warmth of Socks

By Katarina Boudreaux

Jimmy doesn't know if the tire will spin, but it doesn't really matter.

"Got to get to getting" he mutters and swings open the car door. The rain is falling like dropping buckets and Jimmy's left leg is soaked in under three seconds. Grimacing, he forces the rest of his body out of the car and slams the car door shut with a ferocious shove.

"Should have worn the boots," he says, as he hates the feeling of water in his tennis shoes. The squishing sound isn't even the worst part; Jimmy doesn't like his toes to be cold, and that's a fact.

The exhaust on his car is humming like a trapped bird. He walks to the back of the car and squats near the left back tire.

The rain is blowing like cake icing and he can't really see. He stretches his right hand out to feel around the tire. There is a depression, then the tire, then the other side of the depression.

Caught like a worm on a hook, Jimmy thinks, and checks the depth of the depression with both hands.

Too deep, Jimmy decides and looks around. Of all the places to pull over and take a leak, Jimmy thinks, and then squats again to look at the tire and the depression. Water runs straight down the

back of his jeans and pools in the bottom part of his underwear. It is an unpleasant sensation, so he stands up.

The water licks down the back of his legs, and Jimmy shivers. His toes are definitely cold, and he decides to call the manufacturer of the expensive ski socks he is trying out to tell them their product does not work.

“All weather’s what it said and all weather doesn’t mean all weather but rain” he mutters and walks back to the front of his car thinking maybe he will demand a refund or replacement socks.

“Stop raining,” Jimmy yells. The rain doesn’t slack off. Jimmy sighs and reviews his situation: he’s wet straight through, his tire is stuck in what looks like a random, lidless drain hole, and his toes are cold.

Jimmy looks inside his car and sighs. It had cost a pretty penny to get the heated seats, and the new upholstery is in mint condition.

Jimmy turns around and leans on the car door. Deserted, he thinks. He tries to remember if there was a service station or a house over the last couple of miles, but he doesn’t remember seeing anything except dead animals and discarded trash on the road’s sides.

He had considered stopping to pick through an old washing machine rusting out on the shoulder of the road, and Jimmy wishes now that he had stopped, taken a look, and taken a leak then.

Jimmy turns and looks inside the window of his car. The heater is good to the point of being luxurious, as Jimmy wanted to make sure he was warm at all times.

Jimmy looks up and down the two lane highway. He considers scooting under the car to get out of the rain, but he decides it's a poor idea. He would barely fit under there, and then the water would be rolling into his ears.

Walking wouldn't be so terrible, Jimmy thinks, since he's already wet and cold, but remembers the last sign said four more miles to town.

Closing his eyes, Jimmy wills his toes to be warm, but nothing happens. "All right then" he says and turns back to his car.

Leaning his head against the car door, Jimmy's mind wanders over the memory of a man and a door. He remembers the switch in the man's hand, and the way his toes curled more from the cold of the tile floor and less from the lick.

Jimmy closes his eyes. He can still see the dirt under his father's fingernails, the shadow of the switch. But it's the cold that he really feels.

He opens his eyes and looks at the new upholstery.

"Damn it all" he says and shakes his head like he is shaking feathers out of his hair. Jimmy takes a small step back from the car door and peels off his shirt. He leaves on the undershirt, but

unbuttons his shorts, then unzips them. He lets gravity pull the soaked jean shorts down to his ankles, then he steps out of them.

His boxers are white and probably transparent by now, but Jimmy doesn't care. Stooping, he unties each tennis shoe then slides his feet out of them.

The sound of the rain is like trumpets in his head, and Jimmy strips his undershirt off and pushes his boxers down. He leaves the socks on, as he wants to be sure he can give the company a full report on their utter failure.

Jimmy gathers his clothes into a pile and manages to hold them all with his left arm. He picks up the tennis shoes with his right hand and walks to the trunk. It won't lock anymore, but he's pretty sure no thieves are going to venture forth in the driving rain to steal his soaked wardrobe.

He balances the tennis shoes on top of the pile and slams the trunk closed. With a quick intake of breath, he walks quickly back to the driver's side door, grasps the car handle, and pulls.

When the door swings open, Jimmy feels the expensive ski socks lose traction on the wet ground and then he is falling and the ground comes up quickly.

For a moment, Jimmy sees the inside of a police car, feels the motion of that car driving away from his father, and the way relief sometimes comes in color. He remembers how his father had struck his mother down, and finally, the shape of her eyes.

Before he hits the pavement, Jimmy feels the nice warmth from the inside of his car. Then the ground embraces him with lead arms and he is saved, safe, saved from the cold.

Death on the Ranch

By Ethan A Zimmerman

In the long run, you make your own luck - good, bad, or indifferent.

-Loretta Lynn

Everyone knows you have to hang a horse shoe with the heels pointing up or else all your luck runs out onto the ground and surrounds you with grief. As a teenager, Ernie took a cast shoe from his ranch horse Blue, and tacked it up outside the barn door, cramming two of the straight shiny jutting nails into a board to hold it in place. The shoe stayed perched that way for just one day shy of thirteen years.

The day before Ernie's first son was born, a wild storm off the northern mountains swept up the valley, hitting the barn square in the face, busting loose a nail and turning the horse shoe upside down. Trouble is, Ernie didn't notice his luck had run out until it was too late.

Some men collect antler sheds, others old whiskey bottles or belt buckles. What Ernie didn't know is that he was collecting luck, and all of it happened to be bad. His Farmall tractor refused to budge another inch in the middle of the half-mowed hay field, one of his cows got hit on the county road

last week too late for anyone to butcher, and his last pair of socks that didn't have holes, sprouted holes on both heels at the same time. Beyond darning. And it that weren't enough, the price of cattle feed was going up again. He also couldn't help but feel that God had cursed him; giving him a first wife that was barren and a second wife that produced a girl and then a pair of useless boys. They weren't even useless; they were worse than that.

Everyone knows you have to have sons when you own a ranch thought Ernie: girls were only so strong. A man needs the strength of a boy child or two to really get any true work done: rustling cattle, ear tagging, castrating, branding, starting a stubborn tractor in Siberian-like weather under a dozen frozen inches of snow. So when Brian was born, and then Raymond, Ernie lifted his filthy hat to heaven and thanked the all mighty Lord he would have help.

His boys grew up just like any other farm kid, teasing and falling down and getting up again; two bright blue-eyed boys born into ranching life just as sure as the big sky was blue. They were inseparable, sleeping in the same room, running through the same fields and attending the same two-room school house. Brian was older by a year, a head taller and stronger than Raymond by a mile. When they wrestled together, it was Brian who most often won. He let his little brother Ray, whom he nicknamed, LittleRay, win once in a while just so that he'd be willing to wrestle another day, and not quit on 'em like a girl.

LittleRay didn't like to wrestle, but he loved his brother and did whatever he could to make him happy. One afternoon, behind the old tractor shed, covered in straw and sweat and the desiccated dust of historic cow-patties, Brian tackled LittleRay from behind, hard-carrying him to the baked dry earth, all arms and legs twisting like a half-mad bull in a rodeo show. They laughed and struggled and grunted against each other's weight, and soon LittleRay felt the heat within him swelling. He relinquished his hold on Brian, and squeezed his thighs together, though of conjuring a stomach ache: trying desperately to hide his shame and his delight. But it was too late. Brian too felt engorged and ready. The heat of the wrestle brought them together again and although they were brothers, their hands found themselves fumbling inside faded worn Levis, red-hot and scrambling for release, spent in a moment, then forgiven.

The brothers never spoke of their engagement, and over the course of the summer lapsed many times into entanglement in quiet dark places: the dry attic, the damp basement, the far end of gabled barn. That had been their favorite place to meet, hidden behind heavy dust-coated horse blankets, leather saddles, stack of buckets, bags of grain and mile upon mile of rope and chain; each boy leaving their own mark upon whatever was at hand.

One day while out fetching cattle, Raymond looked down at his saddle fender, at a place close to his knee, saw the dark colored dribble of their early morning dalliance, fading off into the rubbed worn leather, and into his memory like the setting sun. He looked ahead on the trail to where his brother rode his horse, strong shoulders, emerging male muscles, rippling in the yellow light of day. He looked to the sky, to where his mother always told him Jesus lived, and sent up a small

prayer of forgiveness, a prayer that LittleRay could have sworn only made it half way there and then floated on back to the ground like a plucked free feather.

It ended as quickly as it began. Their brotherly affair abruptly cut off by the surprise visit one afternoon by their older sister Lena, who spied them through a knot hole in a barn board, bursting in on them, first letting a shovel fall to the ground to announce her arrival. “You boys quit what yerdoin' and get to the house.” The boys zipped trousers in unison, ran past Lena toward the house. Dinner that night was unusually silent. Their parents saying what's gotten into you kids. None of them could form an answer. “At least yerquietfer once,” said Ernie, wiping his plate with a fat piece of homemade bread, pleased to have some peace both during and after supper.

Lena tried to talk to Brian about it but he silenced her. Said he'd never speak of it to no one, not her, not anybody, not God, no one. And so she left it. Her parting words edged closer to a threat than a suggestion: “You'd better ask the Good Lord's help on this 'un.”

The boys separated themselves from then on, like what they did was the wedge that drove them apart. Doing ranch work in silence, they barely contacted eyes, and never ever again did they wrestle.

Raymond felt more alone than ever, like half his body had walked off on its own. He kept to himself at school, avoided the gaze of his brother, and tried to concentrate on what the teachers

said. Slices of their wrestling days slid through his mind and in order to erase them, he pinched his leg under the desk hoping that the pain would outweigh the desire. Mostly it worked.

Filbert Oakum was a neighbor boy who often walked the three miles toward home with the Blacken brothers. Lately he'd seen Raymond walking alone with Brian nowhere in sight. The two boys found themselves on the same side of the same dusty road and walked together for a while, neither boy making a sound. Their worn shoes scuffed the gravel ground below them, and when they got to the yard in front of Fil's house, Fil kept right on walking, figured if Raymond didn't want his company, he'd say so.

The boys walked straight away to the barn together, to the corner where Brian and Raymond used to mingle, manhood to manhood. LittleRay pushed Fil to his knees and released himself all at once and then did the same for Fil but in a lying down position. And that is when Ernie's bad luck showed up real fine and clear. Standing over them with his fist in the air and with a look of pure madness on his face stood Ernie, white hot ropes of spit lassoing his chin. He had no words, only gestures of anger and fists flying at them both. The boys stood up, fastening belts and zippers, all the while ducking and dodging Ernie's swings. They ran out of the barn, squinting in the sunshine, Fil all the way home to his house and LittleRay into vast sage-covered hills.

LittleRay stayed out until well after dark, knowing that a beating was what waited for him. The cold blue moon hovered and watched him as he entered the house; the rhythm and click of the

Grandfather clock tick-tocked loud in the living room. Perhaps his father had fallen asleep waiting for him, perhaps his anger had subsided, perhaps...wham, from around the corner in the kitchen his father's fist hit him square in the jaw, a burning sensation like lava overwhelmed him as his knees hit the linoleum and his hands covered his now bleeding lip, the jolt of warm steel filling his mouth. And then - silence. His father had spoken. Ernie went to bed and left LittleRay right where he felt he belonged, on the floor like the pitiful bitch he'd become.

The next morning both Brian and their mother asked LittleRay what happened but he stayed silent. Made up an excuse later that he'd fallen off his bike, hit his face on the handlebars. LittleRay avoided his father for weeks to come, took a far ranging path around him in the stockyard - like a big cat surveying the herd - did everything he was told ahead of when he was told to do it. He'd seen his father with that look in his eye before, right before he killed a heifer that he didn't like, all mean and mad and fuming like the devil.

Ernie lay in bed after the punch, steaming with a fierce hate at what he knew his son to be.

Two weeks later, just as the birds and the calves and the soil awoke, small pinpricks of morning light began to fill the blood-red colored barn, illuminating LittleRay's hanging torso. Rumor spread through town that he had some sort of accident. A tragedy is what the townsfolk called it, a misfortune, and how could he do such a thing? Such sorrow. Brian knew different.

Brian barricaded himself in their room that night and cried into LittleRay's pillow like a newborn, open-wide screaming. After milking, the morning that LittleRay died, Brian witnessed his brother being pulled by his hair to the barn by their father, heels dragging in the dirt. Too afraid to approach, Brian lay in the tall grass behind the swaying bodies of the milk cows, and when only Ernie emerged minutes later, figured LittleRay had had a beating so bad he'd just stay put. At breakfast their mother asked Brian the whereabouts of his brother, he shrugged his shoulders, making a promise to go out and look for him.

The journey to the barn took Brian fourteen hours or so it felt. His feet moved over uneven ground as though it were foot thick with mud even though it was as dry as straw. He slid the barn door back and saw LittleRay suspended, a statue elevated into the wide open expanse of the barn, above the exact spot where they had laid about each other like where it says in the bible you shouldn't do, like husband and wife. "You say a word of this and you'll find yourself the same," his father's rigid voice from behind him. Brian felt no need to turn around, just stared up at his brother's mask-like face, eyes wide open, peering down at him like an angel, praying for forgiveness. Ernie could not know it then, but his luck was about to get worse.

Brian knew that as soon as high school ended he'd have to get married. After LittleRay died, all suspicion from his father turned to him. Ernie drank the day in and saw it out again with a bottle in his hand, sometimes passing out in his pickup truck, facing the front of the barn where LittleRay once hung. Brian found him that way a couple times a week, sometimes opening the truck door and rolling down a window so Ernie wouldn't suffocate in the heat.

Brian married Rose Sneakthief in June and they had a baby on the way by August. Brian's life had begun to feel normal, at least when Rose wasn't yelling at him for some darn thing or another. At least Rose's yellin' he could handle because he could tune her out like a bad radio station. There was no tunin' Ernie out no matter what.

After a Rancher's Association meeting one night at the Grub N' Go diner, Brian and Fil Oakum got to talkin': the fine boned boy grown into a muscular lean man. The pair walked across the road to the Bum Steer, washed down handfuls of free pretzels with cold beer, Fil apologizing in a small way for what happened to LittleRay. Brian cast his gaze deep inside his bottle, pushing his grief into the swirling suds, hoping against hope that he would not shed a tear in the bar. The two men walked out into the night, high tensile buzzing lights overhead casting short shadows next to their bodies, men thin on conversation and long on silence. Fil asked Brian over for one last drink, said yes, knew what he would be getting into.

Brian crawled home past 3 am., let the screen door close near silent as a church in prayer, and laid down next to Rose who had not slept a wink. She turned over and questioned him until dawn regarding his whereabouts and by damned if she wasn't going to get the harlots name out of him yet.

“Jus' tell me the bitches name Bri.”

“There is no bitch. I swear. I was just out drinkin.” He could not tell her with whom.

“You'd better not be lying”, then the overwhelming joy of silence.

The two men carried on that way for months on end, always meeting when they could and barely talking about the past or the future, just physical conversations punctuated with guttural noises and the sound of clothes going down and coming up again.

Brian continued to ranch for his old man, still kept a wary eye on him, walked around his anger as though it were a moving mound of red ants. If they said more than two words that didn't have to do with ranching' to each other it was a rare day. In the back of his mind, Brian believed Ernie blamed him for the way LittleRay turned out. He was the older brother after all, in charge of showing him the ropes, the good glowing gold ropes of God and not the bad twisted burning ropes that belonged to the Devil. He wished the wrestling' had never begun, that touching his brother had never entered his mind. But as his mother used to say, “shit in one hand and wish in the other and see which one gets full first.”

The Blacken ranches sat on almost two thousand acres in the Absaroka mountains. It had been passed down for generations, added to little by little and was now one of the biggest privately

owned land holdings in the valley. The sheer size of the place left lots of untouched basins and troughs of land where two men could be together with only the gophers and God as their witness. Fil drove up the back forty, met Brian as the sun fell throwing long shadows behind the scrub oak, pulled his underwear to his knees and let Brian fill him like a post hole auger until he was raw and walkin' like he'd ridden a horse all day. Brian wiped himself on his pants, headed for home with Fil drivin' in the opposite direction. He slammed the already cracked dash with his fist thinking of his brother and how no matter whose body he touched it was always with the most tenderness that he remembered LittleRay.

Next morning at first light, Ernie headed toward the equipment shed, his six foot frame bent slightly at the waist as was his normal gait, gestured for Brian to meet him there, crooked finger in the air swiping in his direction. Rose had just driven off to town to go to work, a sour look on her increasingly sour looking face. They didn't kiss goodbye, just widened the silence between them and parted for the day. Brian walked toward the shed, knew he'd no doubt be put to fixing some piece of farm equipment that was broken again. Seemed something was always broken, just been fixed, or was on the way to breakin', near as he could tell. He pushed open the tin door that made a sound like distant thunder, saw his father standing by the workbench shuffling tools, dropping incidental pieces of this and that nail or washer on the floor. The light from one small broken window made him look older than his true age, his ever whitening hair glinting in the sunshine, and for a moment making Brian wish that things could be different between them.

At first Ernie didn't speak, was quiet like deer in the woods, gripping a pipe-wrench in his hand so hard his knuckles turned white. Set the wrench down again, picked up a hammer. Set the hammer down and spoke.

“Bolts is stuck on that mower. See if ya can loosen it.”

Brian felt as though he'd not heard his father speak since last winter. “Got any grease?” Brian asked, glancing at the dented bench for the can of bearing grease in a plastic whip cream tub. He moved slowly like a photo taken frame by frame, began working on the bolt while Ernie disappeared silently into the back room for a moment, came back, went out again. The bolt gave way and just as it popped loose in his hand, Brian turned round to four sets of eyes: the gray-blue eyes of his father and two hollow black eyes of a shotgun staring at him.

“Think I didn't see you and that stinkin' Oakum boy the other day up by the ol' homestead?”

Brian's hands instinctively felt for the stagnant air in front of him the way he'd seen countless cowboys do in old westerns. “Don't say a stinkin' word to me bout nothin’” said Ernie, as he could see Brian about to speak. He took a step closer, his eyes squinting down the barrel. “You and that filthy brother of yours and that same Oakum 'sum bitch, screwing against the wills of God and man. You can't give me one reason good enough to not kill ya.” Instead of dread, Brian felt a rush of relief fill him from head to toe. He'd lived in fear of his father all his life.

Ernie held the gun as one would a pool cue, trying to figure out his next move. A dog barked in the distance, the echo surrounding the tin-covered shack. Magpies in high cottonwoods, held conversations unaware of the battle between father and son, and somewhere in the hills a cow bellowed low and long like a fog horn. It occurred to Brian that this might be the last sound on earth he ever heard. Besides the click.

In the farm house just a hundred yards away, Ernie's wife, Brian's mother, carefully swung the squeaky steps out from under the seat of her favorite green counter-stool, perched her slippered toes on the edge of the black rubber treads, settled down to talk to Lena. A cooling cup of weak coffee with an orange rooster on the side, sat before her as she picked at the embedded gold flecks on the counter-top, worn here and there to a dull shine. It was a clear cool morning with clouds long in the distance. The distinct bang and whoosh of a shotgun blast rang out over the grass, up the front stairs of the house and between Bessie's ear and the phone, breaking their conversation. "What the hell was that?" said Lena into the swinging handset, but Bessie was already gone, running to the shed, where she found Ernie, stock still and looming over the body of his oldest son. Ernie's luck it seemed, had finally run out.

My Father's Hailstorm

By Katie Bickell

My father lived a hailstorm and his children paid in skin.

We never seeded the land that had been our grandfather's, the topsoil all but stripped atop Newfoundland's jagged stones, our cliff drowned in the constant, pelting, water. Potato plants, the self-seeding echoes of Grandad's once bountiful farm, pushed stalks in an unavoidable act of faith but their spears limped, water-saturated; pale leaves unfolding like the hands of a stillborn: soft, sick, quietly against the crushing hardships of which they were subject. We kept vigil over these plants from the shelter of our home, willing their roots to take with cynical optimism, letting our children's minds to imagine dense veg growing in the claylike soil, the plants drawing sustenance from nowhere, succeeding, somehow, just out of God's sight. But His falling ice never failed to rip their leaves, to snap the stems, to pummel all hope. Thus was life for the offspring a living angel, the curse of us, divinely illegitimate.

It was Dawho taught me to hunt on those rare gentle days. The boys were babes, then, and me too young to go alone, too little to afford him the time he would commit to drink later in my life. Choking on the rattle of his lungs, he guided me in watching and waiting. Watch: has the pruning of your fingertips yet tightened? Wait: how many seconds have passed between the drums of hail? Wait for God to sleep, then risk the run to the hills.

"Head down, hands over your neck, like this, see?"

I'd repeat these words when it came time to teach the boys. "Pray," I added, "Don't mistake your opportunities for His permission. Not ever." First rays are not certain--a lesson learned in my toddlerhood.

He'd poured liquid fire from a flask over my young chest, the first time a hailstone sliced my skin. "You're your father's daughter, Josie," Da said. "That hit could've stopped a man's heart, Lass, but not yours. Not my mighty hearted child."

I bit the insides of my cheeks, soothing myself with the familiar taste of my own blood.

He brought me to his lap and spat at the clouds. "He'll have to do better than that, won't he? The 'ald Bastard."

I threw a stone into the wind.

"That's it, Lass," he laughed, "tell Him to go piss himself." The wind whipped around us, cutting like demon claws, but my father held me tight and I was warm as he carried me home.

None of us suffered an injury so great as that after I took over the hunt. Though the boys forever sought the sweet air of the fells, I had them pray Mam's rosary in wait. As the twins murmured I'd watch, listen; evaluate the size and force of the stones outside our home. *In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost...*

Always, Abby crept to follow, our baby sister hugging the doorframe as she lowered the tips of her toes to the grey ground. I accounted for this, waiting for attempted escapes, annoyed with my mother's prayers to Jude, saint of lost causes.

"Keep her in!" I'd shout. We'd almost lost her once.

She had followed at such a distance that when our hunt was over Abby was caught in the open fields between the fells and our home. The hurricane gales picked up as if in wait for her, pushing her to the hill cliff edging the west of our property. Her blond curls swept back, tears furious, she scream-howled in silence, her voice stolen by the banshee wind.

I ran to her, tripping on gusts, tearing from my eyes the hair that had fallen from my blown-off cap. I caught my sister's outstretched hand as the heel of her right foot swung over the hungry Atlantic. I pulled her to the ground and covered her with myself, gasping into the pebbles on which I rested my head before again facing His wrath.

Inside, the boys fingered lines of raindrops as they slid down our cool walls. "All storms pass, eventually." Mam lied, applying ointment to the scars ice rocks had etched and against split on my body. I stared into the yellow haze of our neighbour's windows across the road. The storms never hit them as they did us.

They never visited, our neighbours. Village rumour said the Lord raged storms over our father as punishment for the theft of our mother, and superstitions thrive in a small town. Parishioners whispered she was an angel, our mother: a once-daughter of the Lord, as fallen as Lucifer himself. Though created to pour rain and adjust snowflakes at the feet of the Most Holy, Mam fell for Da to birth nephilim and rip moss from plank floors and open her legs to a godless man. While I knew the truth in the gossip, I don't know how others believed it. Mam was more of a wee brown bird than an angel on high.

Pride demanded Da force himself daily to the hail, and I'd steel myself to watch. Having spent more of his life in hail than out of it, Da was a permanent bruise, the red lines of broken vessels covering his skin as they do the whites of a dry eye. Standing on his father's tallest hill, he'd spit insults and blood at the sky. A violent hit would test both our instincts, but we did our best to hide flinches.

Mam called on the churches for mercy, petitioning St. Mary's while her husband slept a sleep of the dead. Da roared with laughter when the visiting order stepped into his house, demanding Mam be returned to Heaven; demanding he, and we, the offspring of rebellion, repent our sins.

“The Lord bleed me, pound me, kill me,” he growled to the pale priests, “before I kneel or run for any man or god.” He raised his dented old flask to his lips, draining the drink.

He sent us to bed early that night, dragging Mam into the storm with him. The boys snapped the string of her rosary, muffling violence with the pelting of beads at stonewalls. I held Abby, bundled under thin wool, burying my face into her hair, inhaling the sweet sweaty baby smell of her. She sang in her quiet, nonsensical way, *Daddy da dee da dada*.

The rest were asleep when the storm lessened, when his footsteps, heavy, stopped at our bedroom door. He slumped, beaten, against the frame, flickering lamplight lighting his face: as always, drenched in rain and blood, never tears.

“Josie?” he whispered. I closed my eyes.

“Josie, anyone... anyone ever says you’re wrong, Lass, ever says you’re a sin... any of you... well. You’re worth every hit, Josephine MacCullin. Every hit.”

His silhouette disappeared by the time I opened my eyes. Across the hall, bedsprings moaned before the house filled with the sounds of his sleep, as deep and as still as our mother’s faith. I crept to the window and opened it, the mizzling cool against the burn of the day’s cuts on my head. Mam stood still on the hill, broken faced, hands clasped against her chest. She hummed hymns with eyes closed, praying for her husband’s soul. Thanking Jesus, for something.

*

I first saw them when I was twelve - the parts of my mother’s anatomy that confirmed the rumours. She kept them hidden under layers of cotton, backed into corners when she undressed, but on the day I started my own curse she invited me into the mildewed bathroom where she and Abby bathed.

“What happened to them?” I asked. The matted wings folded over each other like the grey hands of a sleeping elder as she stood over the basin, baptizing her thighs. I fought duel urges to run and to touch.

“They broke when the winds started,” she said, “Your Da pulled me to Earth but my heart beat only for home. The feathers tore; the left broke.” She locked her gaze to the floor, mouth hard. “They’re useless, now.”

She smoothed the borage oil left from easing my cramps over her baby’s round, naked knees. I pressed my fingers into the dips on Abby’s back, the crevices miniature replicas of those between my own shoulder blades: wounds where wings would have been if the sins of our parents hadn’t cost us ours.

“You didn’t love him?”

“Oh, Josie.” Her voice clipped: a sob-laugh, bitter, small. “Sin burns love up. Sin dims it, dead.”

*

The next day Da stood the hill while my brothers caught hail with their hats, competing to catch the largest rock. They traced the ice onto the thin papers of our family Bible, documenting the stones that could have ended them alongside family names and birthdates. Mam slapped the back of their heads and snatched the book from their hands.

“This is not a thing to remember.”

She kicked me on her way past, telling me to get up and help her with the mash. Outside my father struggled to stand. He held tight to a bottle – more reason my mother wished I wouldn’t watch.

“Why’s it only Da on that rock?”

Mam dropped potato peelings into the sink in quick, forced strokes, bulges twitching beneath her shoulder blades, just visible through her thread worn dress. "Watch yourself, lass."

A cold cooler than cellar dirt spread through my chest. Silent strength, he'd once said she had. A lie. Cowardice. There was no way around it. I stood. Let God bloody me, too, beside my Da.

"He's out there for you."

"You'll not leave this house, Josephine. It's your father's hailstorm; not mine, not yours. When Aengus wants this ended, it'll end."

I snorted, spit at her feet. "You whimpering, withered, old bird."

She lit bright as fire when her palm struck my face. My eyes filled with tears and I was glad of the inherited pride that kept them from falling. The twins stopped their play.

Abby began to cry. "No, no. No, no." Her words matched the pinging of rain in the pots set beneath the holes of our thatched roof. She covered her head with her hands.

Da came in with whisky madness that night. He tripped over Abby and knocked the Bible from its place at our table. The book's thin pages fluttered open, revealing the crinkled traces of my brothers' marks. Da clawed at the tome, ripping paper in his struggle. Abby's wails competed with the wind as Da brought the book up and down hard, again and again, staining its pages with the blood of his sons.

Mam pulled him from the boys, hammering his head with her fists, her elbows.

"Repent, Aengus! Repent!"

He turned and caught Mam by the hair, prying the kitchen shears from her. He cleaved the parts from her back before throwing her to the floor, leaving to his hill with the amputated feathers. Mam shook and bled into a divine puddle on the dirty floor.

“How now, Ya Great Arsehole?” He screamed, shaking the malting wings. “Still want her now?”

We didn’t see Abby run.

The floodwaters came and came, quick as sin, relentless as temptation. Water rose all around as I searched the rooms of our home for my sister, overturning dressers and mattresses as waves lapped my waist.

I ran out, terrified to see her tumble over the cliff that had almost claimed her not long ago. In the kitchen my brothers rode the upturned table, navigating a fresh sea with wooden spoons, our mother’s body slumped over their makeshift vessel.

“Abby!” I screamed. Slashing of the rain drowned my voice. “Abby!”

I treaded water, gasping before going under :eyes freezing, open, frantic. When I came up a last my sister knelt alone on Da’s rock, the waves rising, already drenching the hem of her skirt. She reached for me, the wind pushing her back; white crashing around her, into her, over her. White, white, white. Blue. Grey. Black.

Da found Abby’s tiny body in the morning, untangling baby curls from the waterlogged nettles with a gentleness I hadn’t thought possible of his hands. He rocked her on the top of the hill on which he met the Lord, singing her little song. *Daddy da dee da dada.*

He wept, then, in a way that shook his shoulders and broke what was left of my scarred heart. He prayed for Abby ,for Mam, but not for himself. The rest of us sat on bits of our broken home and I focused on Abby’s blue toes. Remember how they reached for earth. Remember how they wiggled, warm, under kisses. Remember. Remember. Pray to not forget.

A mild sun soaked away the waters that day, but my father came home no less beaten. Later, as a slight rain misted Mam’s holy eyes, I couldn’t tell if Heaven was washing away her sins, or spitting in her face.

A Letter from a Valued Customer

By Meredith Smith

Everett Lee Jr. – his friends call him E. Lee – sits out on the porch of his family’s farm home. It is just after sunrise, the events of the prior evening have inspired him to take up the art of letter writing. Once a month or so he participates in the ritual – he sends nice little notes in with his bill payments, or when something noteworthy takes place. Today’s letter happens to be on both occasions.

He watches, for a moment, in contemplation as the sun slowly rises to its 8:00 position in the sky, and looks out over his family’s ranch land just 5 miles West of a town called Post. Post, Texas sits just over the edge of the Caprock, in the gut of the canyon that snakes its way in and out of the plains. Post rides the rattles of it all. E. Lee watches, too as the canyon climbs the plateau, the rocky ravines flatten in their gradual rise to the South Plains. He looks over the mesquite-ridden land as the sun takes it in great golden strides, like the steps of some ancient, all-knowing god. In the distance he can see a veritable forest of great turbines spin, their white blades flash a hot brilliance back at him. It’s the only greenery in this lonesome tableland.

E. Lee thinks, suddenly, about all the unknowns out there on the ranch land. He thinks about the countless tracks of deer and possum and is reminded, in turn, of a quote from Donald Rumsfeld, which he hastily scratches in all caps onto the small, white legal pad sitting in his lap. It makes for an epigraph.

Reports that say something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; there are things we know we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know.

Thusly, he begins his letter to the owners of Jennings Oil Company, a small propane company based in Slaton, Texas. They deliver the propane each month to his great aluminum coated reservoirs, that sit adjacent to his old family farm house. The house that sits at the edge of the canyon where he presently looks, and sits, and thinks about his letter, is small but comfortable for one. E. Lee's father, Lee Sr., and his mother, Suzette, died years back, and E. Lee hadn't yet married. And so he kept the land to himself, and the house he kept small, just as it had always been. And each month, when the fuel is delivered, E. Lee celebrates. He jokes sometimes - in the sly way that E. Lee does, which is to say, not often - that he performs his own kind of rain dance, for with each delivery follows at least one heated bath. It is about one such celebration that he is writing in his letter.

The prior evening, E. Lee began a hot bath with his new propane-heated water. It was an outdoor bath - an old cast-iron tub and a faucet hooked up to a water tank that was then hooked up to a propane tank. It was the old hand-crank kind of faucet, where you pump and you pump and you pump until you have enough hot stuff that you want, and then pour into the tub. Halfway through the pumping, however, he began hearing some loud, strange noises, which he described as "hissss, pop, sssst., etc." in his letter. He ran outside into the cold night air, buck ass naked and sopping wet, with little more than a flashlight.

He came to find that the PVC ball valve on his water pump, a plastic contraption that he had installed himself, had burst, and his precious water supply that he hauled himself in a 20-gallon pickup truck up and down the Canyon was now leaking all over the floor, like a cow pissin' on a flat rock. The water leaked from the pump onto the floor and onto his bare feet, everything now water-logged. E. Lee reaches into the dark for a canister of sealant and puts a bit of the greasy stuff on his hands. He finds the busted threading, and somehow, probably by the grace o' God an' his angels, thinks E. Lee, in the midst of all the dark confusion, applies enough sealant onto the split to save the remainder of the water. This is crucial because E. Lee hauls his water from up over the table top and back into the canyon in his beat up old pickup truck, and his fuel was already low. The next morning, he reinstalled the "good ol' steel and brass" model, as he would forever refer to it after "the incident."

E. Lee penned the letter while sitting on that old stoop, a wry smile on the corner of his mouth as he watched the sun rise over his home. That rare wit, laughing to the picture he had in his head, of him scurrying about in his birthday suit. He was not upset about running into the cold night, but he did come to a few conclusions: 1. Not all resins are alike, and 2. Not all PVC valves work with all resins. His gratification is a new triumph, like a notch in a wagon wheel, to signal the miles driven by. E. Lee's contemplative morning has led him to a few water-saving epiphanies, which he shares with his friends, and he continues to the benediction of his letter.

In closing, he writes about a 660 AM radio station out of Mesa, Arizona. On Sundays they play inspirational tribal drums and decent old country music. On cloudless nights, E. Lee sits in his pickup truck and waits for the crackle of the station to appear, hoping for Travis, or maybe Hank, to come crooning through - though usually, it's some sort of sermon. "I never know if they're praying for war, peace or rain," he writes, "but religion's funny like that."

Under Water

By Kathryn Holzman

“She was one big motherfucker.” The woman, rough-hewn and tough through and through, was standing at the counter of the country store to purchase her bear license. She had spotted her prey the previous evening. Pushing unkempt hair out of her eyes with a hand already scarred by prior battles, she towered over the cashier.

“What will you do with the bear if you shoot it?” The New Yorker next in line was skeptical. In Vermont to catch the last skiing of the season, he kept a safe distance from the woman whose ripe scent repelled him.

“Stew it, of course. I’d have enough meat for a year.”

The tow-headed boy who manned the counter made change with a lop-sided grin. He preferred the give and take of idle small town gossip to high school where the days went on too long and one had to sit still all day.

“Where did you see him?” the boy asked. He knew that hibernating animals were just beginning to emerge for the season. Just yesterday a red fox crossed his yard with a squirrel in its mouth, undoubtedly foraging for her young.

“Like I would tell you.” No one was getting her bear.

He had the afternoon off. His best friend was waiting for him in the parking lot under the big American flag and next to the sign that said “Parallel parkers will be shot.” All angles and dark hair, his friend had spent much of the winter on a snowboard he had made himself, surfaces shellacked to a frictionless sheen that carried him down the mountain so fast that the pine trees passed in a frenzied blur.

But now, spring had arrived. The two boys tussled like puppies as they walked the short two blocks to his house, kicking stones and jabbing at each other. As soon as they entered the yard, they pulled the kayak out of the musty shed where it languished next to the weed whacker, a half-empty gasoline can and an unnecessary lawn mower. For much of the winter, well into spring, five feet of snow had barricaded the door to the shed. Now they flung open the creaky wooden door and admitted the spring sun like a burst of enthusiasm.

The creek ran high with snow melt. Deciduous trees were beginning to bud; yellow green leaves emerged by the moment. The day was practically hot and the boys shed their unnecessary sweatshirts and dipped toes into the bracing water impatiently. The surface of the stream reflected back more than enough suns to erase winter's memory.

"I've got the oars. Where are the life jackets?" the dark-haired boy asked, dragging the boat down the ramp.

His friend was already out the door. "Don't be a wuss. Let's get a move on." They had waited too long and were crazy to go.

A decisive push put things in motion. One grunt as they gave the kayak a shove into the stream at the edge of the property; a celebratory shout as they leapt into the boat and dug oars into the roiling water. The current cast their lot downstream leaving a winter's load of boredom behind. They attacked the white water with vigor, oars negotiating the clash between winter cold and spring heat, attempting to dictate terms for the seasonal struggle between what had been and what would be.

"Holy moly, guacamole." The dark-haired boy propelled the kayak from the back. The tow haired boy directed the bow with artful swipes of his oar.

Underneath overhanging branches that still lacked enough leaves to cast shadows, the kayak rolled from side to side. Currents eddied around rocks that later in the season would become sun-

drenched islands for lolling swimmers but which now hid just below the surface with dark menace. The kayak was pushed first to one shore then pulled to the other, twirling madly between the two as the boys rode it like a roller coaster. They fought to maintain control.

“Whoa, Nelly.” Eyes wide open. Adrenaline pumping. No time for small talk. Even at this moment, in their prime, strong and sure of their power, the boys were only pawns in an epic battle between winter's melting snows and spring's surging vitality. A sinister swell rose to the side of the boat like a powerful bear protecting its young. The dark-haired boy defended with a flawless sweep stroke but came up short. With one decisive swat, the wave flipped the boat, rolling the vessel effortlessly and dumping the boys with barely a splash into the foaming water.

“Grab the kayak!” The towheaded boy commanded, still thrilled as the current carried him away. “Shit, it's freezing.” The plastic hull was out of his friend's reach.

Their mouths formed little O's of wonder as the icy current pulled them downstream. Winter, which still lingered near the floor of the stream, held them in one last embrace.

On the shore, the woman held her gun at the ready. Her eyes trained on the bear on the other side of the stream where the hungry animal was scouting for passing fish, oblivious to danger as he followed his instinct for survival. When the kayak with its clinging passenger crashed into the rocks at his feet, the bear looked up in alarm. Did he see the gun? Did he glimpse the boy under the surface? Something spooked him.

“Goddamn,” the woman cursed as the bear lumbered off into the woods. Only then did she look down and spot the blond boy under the water, blue eyes wide with terror. Setting down her rifle, she plowed into the current with a disgusted grunt, legs like tree trunks, hair like Medusa. She grabbed the boy's skinny arm, bruising it while yanking him to shore. Blue and trembling, the wet boy struggled to catch his breath.

“I had him,” she said accusingly, “in my sight.” She offered the boy her jacket which carried within its matted fill a season’s supply of sweat and smoke. “What the fuck were you doing out there without a life jacket?” She picked up her gun and looked off into the woods with regret.

The tow-headed boy was intimidated by the woman and terrified of the cold that gripped his chest. His lungs refused to expand. Burrowing into the woolen jacket, he was swallowed as if by a wild beast.

Stowing her gun in the backseat of a rusty, mud-stained car, the woman returned to the shivering boy, lifting him up and depositing him onto the candy-wrapper strewn and duct-taped seat. She cranked the car’s heater up high and poured coffee into the lid of her thermos. The cup she offered him was thick with sugar and cream. The woman who hunted alone would have been more comfortable with a bear carcass than this almost drowned boy who stunk up her car with creek water. Her next steps would have required less effort. Instead, warming at last, the boy asked. “Where is my friend?” The woman looked at him blankly. They were in this together now.

Downstream, the bear returned to the shore, still hungry. The woman and her passenger did not see the motionless animal as they drove the dirt road that ran parallel to the creek, eyes glued to the water with the intense focus of all good hunters. They thought only of locating the dark haired boy.

Two miles downstream, the boy clung to an overhanging branch, sensation slowly ebbing from his limbs.

They stood silently on the side of creek as EMTs placed the boy on a stretcher. The swirling lights of the ambulance competed with dappled sunshine that was already beginning to fade. Fiddlehead ferns, just about to unfurl, bowed their heads.

The tow-headed boy watched from a distance. He turned down the EMT’s offer of a blanket. He was already in good hands.

That summer he learned to hunt under the cranky tutorage of the wild-haired woman with the eagle eyes. Days, he could still be found behind the counter of the store but locals noticed that he was less likely to chat, secretive almost in his silence as he made change. He smelled differently, sweaty like a man after a day's labor. The customers kept their distance as they gathered up bags of overpriced groceries.

The dark-haired boy spent much of the summer in convalescence, a blanket over his knees on even the hottest of days. Nights, he tried to stay awake to avoid nightmares in which he inevitably drowned. He had no interest in hunting, resisted unnecessary movement.

If, when the summer forest was thick with maturing leaves and ever darkening shadows, a shot rang out and an expertly aimed bullet downed the marauding bear, the huntress and her protégé were not about to tell. For them, the kill was a matter of survival.

BROKEN WATER

By Sterling H Cash

“Damn, it’s come a turd floater,” Billy Vernon said while standing on his back porch in a Lone Star Beer T-shirt and a pair of old jeans watching Slidell’s plywood house bob across the yard like a model of Noah’s Ark. Billy Vernon figured that the doghouse would sink before it reached what remained of the east fence, where sycamore leaves and plastic bags now clung to chain link. It’s going to be a pain in the ass to clean all of this up, Billy Vernon thought. About that time, a bolt of lightning flashed wild and bright nearby, and Slidell, Billy Vernon’s old dachshund, stood beside him barking a warning to the thunderburst that followed.

As far as Billy Vernon was concerned, Slidell was the best friend he ever had. He had found the dog on the side of the road in the one-light town of Slidell not long after his wife had left him for his closest running buddy. The dog was scared and skittish and lost, and his coat was matted and covered in stickers and burrs. Normally Billy Vernon would have paid the dog no mind. He had never had much use for little dogs. But, for some reason, Billy Vernon stopped, scooped up the road-worn little fellow, put him in his truck, and took him home.

For a couple of years after that, Slidell was about the only friend Billy Vernon cared to have around. He didn’t want to talk to anybody about his ex-old-lady, his prick of a friend, or how he felt about what had happened. He just wanted to be left alone; and, to ensure that he would be, he disabled his doorbell and stopped answering his phone. Yet, try as he might to drown it, the torch for that woman still burned, so he kept a snub-nosed .38 in his glove box to help him express his feelings were she and that son of a bitch ever to roll back into town. So, to pass the slow, steady

tapping of time, Billy Vernon and Slidell spent their evenings on the back porch listening to honkytonk radio and drinking beer, that is, until Adeline came along about a year ago.

“Sugarpie, please don’t give that dog any more beer,” Adeline said as she waddled through the back screen door of the house. She was wearing a pretty sundress, and her feet were bare. In her hands she cradled her pregnant belly.

“It won’t hurt him. He’s a German dog. You saw Slidell in the weenie dog race in Muenster last Oktoberfest. He took three swigs of beer and won the race. Beer gives him an edge. It makes him faster.”

“Beer will kill him, and then you’ll be sad. He’s a good boy, and he deserves to live forever, or at least as long as we can help him live.”

Adeline put her hand around Billy Vernon’s waist and kissed him on the neck. She liked his three day beard, the firm paunch of his belly, and the hardness of his hands. He softly stroked her arm with the coarse, callused hand that most days clung to a mason’s trowel.

While they stood there, rain pounded the roof, and its tempo increased rapidly with time. Beyond the frame of the porch, the slate sky showed no indication of the storm’s abatement. Slidell paced along the top step, the curtain of water falling from the roof obscuring his view and diminishing his interest in running out into the flooded yard. It was now late in the evening, and the dull, colorless sun had dipped below the canopies of the cottonwoods on the horizon. Adeline had already washed the dishes, and Billy Vernon was standing on the porch nursing a longneck.

“Oh my,” Adeline said with surprise.

“You okay?” Billy Vernon asked.

“I’m okay except...”

“Except what? You need to get off your feet? Do you need me to get you something?”

“Not that. Billy Vernon, I just felt a pop. I think my water broke.”

“How do you know?”

“You didn’t hear it? It sounded like cracking knuckles, and, well, there’s warm water running down my legs.”

Billy Vernon had heard something, but to him it had sounded like somebody opening a tall boy. But he wasn’t going to tell her that. Not at a moment like this.

“Adeline, we gotta get you to the hospital.”

“I don’t see how. If it’s flooding our backyard, that means the water on the main road is too high to cross. There’s no getting to the hospital.”

“We got four wheel drive.”

“Four wheel drive won’t help. The water is already up past the running boards on your truck. It may not even start.”

“I can drive through anything.”

“I know you can, honey, but I think we should wait it out.”

Billy Vernon knew that she was probably right. The truck would probably suck in water through the intake and not turn over. When Billy Vernon was younger, he would have just waded out there and tried to start the truck. And, hell, he still might just risk it. But even if the truck didn’t hydrolock, he’d have to get Adeline loaded inside, and once they were out on the road, he would still be putting Adeline and the baby at risk of getting swept away in high water like the old couple that died trying to cross Fiddler Creek on their way to church last Easter Sunday morning.

Running low on options, Billy Vernon kept trying to figure out the best way to deal with the situation. He could call for help, but there was no longer an ambulance service in Waylon County, and he didn’t figure that this was the kind of work that the volunteer fire department even knew much about. They could put out a brush fire, fetch a cat from a bois’d’arc tree, and play dominoes at a semi-professional level, but they probably weren’t exactly baby doctors. Not to say that he was

either. He was damn good at laying brick, and he was a hell of a good shot with a deer rifle, but he didn't know much about babies. Hell, he figured that folks had been delivering babies for thousands of years, so he reckoned that he could deliver his first child. At least he wouldn't be delivering puppies. There could be six or more. Most likely he would only need to deliver one human baby. How hard could it be?

After spending a half hour in the bathroom, Adeline returned outside to sit on the porch swing and rest. Her ankles were swollen, and her wavy red hair was flat and greasy. Heavy and pregnant, she was still beautiful. Billy Vernon always liked redheads anyway. He didn't know why. He had seen Adeline at the Longhorn Saloon in the Fort Worth Stockyards, and though he was not a dancer, he had asked her to dance. He was able to scoot, scoot, slide, scoot, scoot, slide well enough to make her believe that he was at least a competent dancer, or so he thought, and they had begun to date. Once they were both comfortable with one another, once they had reached the point where they could stay home and watch television on a Friday night, he asked her if she had noticed that he didn't know how to dance. "You can dance," she told him. "You can two-step just like Frankenstein." They both got a good laugh, and the line soon became a running joke.

Then, the next thing you know, Adeline was pregnant. Billy Vernon was surprised, but he wasn't that surprised. After being humiliated and betrayed, he had needed the intimacy just to get by. The intimacy somehow provided balm for the sting. Of course, he would never tell anyone that. Who could he possibly tell? His old buddy had run off with his wife, and Adeline had not been around long enough to be trusted completely, at least not with matters of the heart.

"I guess the story about babies deciding to be born when a storm comes isn't a wives' tale," Adeline said. "It looks like I'm going to have a baby now that it's raining."

She was a week past due, and drought conditions across Texas had been extreme. Rain had not fallen in more than five months. And then, as soon as the thunderstorms heading north from the gulf had reached Waylon County, her water had broken.

“I don’t know much about it,” Billy Vernon said. “All of this baby stuff kinda snuck up on me. Either way, wives’ tale or not, it doesn’t change our predicament any.”

Adeline breathed a fast staccato.

“That was a contraction,” she said a minute later.

“Aren’t we supposed to time those? Do we need some hot water and towels or something?”

“We won’t need hot water and towels unless you’re planning on giving Slidell a bath. But we do need to time the contractions, Sugarpie. Please get a pen and paper and write down what happens. That one was at eight-oh-four.”

“Do you want me to help you to bed?”

“No, this is probably going to take a while. Let me rest on this porch swing. The doctor said rocking is good for women who are about to have a baby.”

Billy Vernon went inside and found a notepad from the Starlight Motor Hotel, a place he had stayed while doing brickwork for an oil tycoon’s mansion out in West Texas. He wrote the contraction time down with a ballpoint pen before going to the bedroom and getting two pillows for Adeline.

“Here you go, Addy,” he said.

Adeline was now on her cell phone talking to her mother. The two of them had not talked in a few weeks. Billy Vernon had asked why, and Adeline said that it was because her mother was not exactly thrilled that she was living with a man before she was married and that she was about to have a baby outside of wedlock. Billy Vernon was not terribly excited about the scenario either, but

there wasn't much that he was willing to change at this point. As for his parents, he never talked to them anyway. They divorced when he was fourteen, and they were both now on their third marriage. This time around, his father had married some young bimbo who was working at a gas station out on I-10, but she had quit that gig and now considered spending the old man's every dime her fulltime job. As for his mother, she had moved to California to marry a plastic surgeon she met at a cocktail party in Dallas. Billy Vernon wanted no part of any of it, so he remained in his little house in the middle of Waylon County and minded his own business.

Adeline talked to her mother for more than an hour while Billy Vernon sat in his rocking chair petting Slidell, whose eyes darted whenever the thunder shook the house. To calm him down, Billy Vernon held the dog's head close to his heart. Slidell, for his part, just lay across Billy Vernon's lap helping him slow down his heartbeat. The two of them had been best buddies for a long time, and they knew how to take care of each other.

Billy Vernon now noticed that the doghouse had sunk and was sitting flush against the eastern fence. Strong water was bucking over the shingles of the plywood roof, and it looked like the doghouse would soon be coursing downstream. Billy Vernon didn't say anything, but he was starting to get nervous. He finished his beer but wouldn't get another. He didn't drink in times of crisis. The water was rising. He could see it lapping closer to the porch.

"Mama, I'll relax," Adeline said into the telephone. "I'll relax. No, you don't need to try to come here. There's no way to get here anyway. The radio just said that the interstate is closed, and I know that there's no way to cross Fiddler Creek."

"Fiddler Creek floods at the drop of a hat," Billy Vernon said mostly to himself. He doubted that Adeline's mama was too interested in hearing his input anyway.

Billy Vernon lowered Slidell into his dog bed and went through the house to see what it looked like out front. Opening the front door, he could see that the water was above the wheel

wells of his truck. Adeline's little Chrysler was faring much worse. At least the house sat up high, he thought. With a little luck, the water wouldn't make it inside. If the water got too damn high, Billy Vernon would have to figure out how to get Adeline up into the attic without her having the baby right there standing on the ladder.

In the front yard, a family of raccoons paced along the branches of an old pecan tree looking down at the river that was flowing beneath them. Billy Vernon figured that the floodwaters would cause all kinds of animals to move around in the next couple of days. He imagined that snapping turtles and bobcats and coyotes would be heading to higher ground. He walked back into the house, grabbed a patchwork quilt from the couch, and took it to Adeline. He wrapped the quilt around her shoulders and sat down beside her on the porch swing.

"Thank you," she said.

He gently rubbed her back.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I'm good."

Night had now fallen, and the two of them remained on the porch. The back porch light illuminated the dark water that rolled through the yard. On the radio, the National Weather Service issued a flash flood warning for all of Waylon County.

"I never thought that I would be anybody's daddy," Billy Vernon said.

"Well, now you'll be somebody's daddy. I hope you're ready."

"Not a lot of choice at this point. I'd better be ready."

"Do you love me?"

"I reckon I do. Yes, I do love you. I wasn't planning on loving anybody, but yes, I love you."

“I love you, too. It’s not the best of circumstances, but we have to make a good life for our little boy.”

“We will. We will.”

Billy Vernon looked out across the yard. He could feel that it was starting to cool down outside, and there was a noticeable change in pressure. Rain continued to fall, but in slow, wavering sheets. Adeline, rocking the porch swing in time with the rain, was jolted by another contraction, but she didn’t make a fuss about it.

“Let’s get you in the house before you get pneumonia,” Billy Vernon told her.

He took her hand and led her through the living room, down the hall, and to the bedroom. Slidell jumped onto the bed and sat at her feet.

“Now that’s a good guard dog,” Adeline said. “Probably not the best place for you to be with me having a baby, but you’re a good boy.”

Billy Vernon picked up Slidell and sat him on a blanket on the floor. Slidell gave him a surprised, indignant look and lay down. Returning to the bed, Billy Vernon sat down beside Adeline in jeans and stocking feet and stroked her hair. She was uncomfortable, but she tried not to let on.

Through the deep hours of the night, the radio played Lefty Frizzell, Patsy Cline, and Ernest Tubb, though the pedal steel and gentle drawl could not tarry the contractions that came at closer intervals and with greater power. Not knowing what to do, Billy Vernon held Adeline’s soft, sweet hand. He kissed her on the cheek and wiped sweat from her forehead with a warm washrag. To make sure that they were safe, every now and then he went out on the porch and looked across the flooded yard. When he went out the first time, a sack of garbage was floating by, and when he checked a few minutes later, Slidell raced out past him to get to the cottonmouth that was slithering across the porch.

“Slidell, go inside,” he said, but the dog stood his ground.

The snake coiled and prepared to strike. With his pistol in the glove box and his shotgun behind the bench seat, Billy Vernon realized that there was no shooting the evil bastard.

“Slidell,” Billy Vernon said sharply, but the dog just stood there growling.

For lack of a better alternative, Billy Vernon slipped inside and fetched a fireplace shovel from beside the wood burning stove. When he returned, the snake took a fast lunge at Slidell, and while the snake was unsprung, Billy Vernon cracked it behind the skull with the shovel. The snake began to writhe and roll, and Billy Vernon had to kick Slidell away to keep him from getting bit by the dying serpent. After catching the dog by the collar, Billy Vernon picked him up and took him inside. From the window, Billy Vernon watched the snake strike the air and convulse until there was no longer any movement left. Then, when he was sure that it was dead, he went back onto the porch, caught the thick center of the water moccasin’s body onto the shovel, and flung the heavy, lifeless snake out into the murky water. There was a splash that sounded like a big bass hitting the surface, and then the dead serpent was gone.

“Is everything all right?” Adeline asked when Billy Vernon returned to the bedroom.

“Fine as fur on a bullfrog,” he replied. “The rain has let up.”

Come daylight, the rain had subsided completely, and the river in the yard had become merely a creek. An hour after that, when Billy Vernon was starting to wonder if he really was capable of delivering a baby, only puddles remained of the floods that had flowed through the yard.

Billy Vernon called emergency at the county hospital on his cell phone.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m bringing my wife in right now. We’ll be there in about an hour. Yes, ma’am. All right, I’ll tell her.”

Adeline gave him an odd look.

“Wife? I didn’t know you were married.”

Billy Vernon didn’t know what to say, so to fill the silence he slid his snuff can out of his back pocket and got himself a dip.

“Nah, I ain’t married,” he said, “but I’d probably consider it again. Now listen here, Addy. The nurse said for me to tell you not to push unless you want to have the baby in my truck. Do you want to try to get to the hospital?”

“It’s probably best.”

Billy Vernon took Adeline’s terrycloth robe and her toothbrush and placed them into the little suitcase that she had packed at the end of her second trimester and had stored in the closet for this occasion. Billy Vernon then helped Adeline sit up on the edge of the bed before crouching down to put slippers on her feet. When she was ready to go, he put on his boots and slid a clean Sunday pearl snap over his beer T-shirt.

“You take care of this place while we’re gone,” Billy Vernon told Slidell after letting him out into the yard to do his business. Billy Vernon then petted his good friend and let him back into the house before taking Adeline by the arm and leading her through the muddy front yard to his truck. He gently lifted her into the passenger seat before climbing in on the driver’s side.

“Are you going to put on your seatbelt?” Billy Vernon asked.

“It could do more harm than good.”

That worried Billy Vernon a little, but he tried not to let it show. He put the truck in reverse, spun around, and headed down the county road toward the state highway. Approaching Fiddler Creek, Billy Vernon tensed up, and when they reached the high water crossing, he clutched the steering wheel in his left hand and the gearshift in his right. When they reached the water, a rooster tail shot high in the air past the back bumper. They cleared the creek in a half-

controlled swerve, and then the truck began to climb up the hill. Adeline, her feet planted firmly on the floorboard, held onto the oh-shit handle and prayed.

“It’s gonna be all right,” Billy Vernon repeated as they cruised along the blacktop.

Heavy rain mixed with hail now started to pound the truck and careen in all directions. Billy Vernon could barely see out of the fogged windshield that he kept wiping with his hand. They passed a pickup that was upside down in a ditch and a dead Hereford calf that was sprawled on the shoulder of the road. Then, just beyond the headlights, Adeline saw the reflective sign for Waylon County Hospital. She clutched her belly and smiled through her teeth.

“I told you,” Billy Vernon said. “I told you it’s gonna be all right.”

“I know it is,” she replied. “It has to be.”

Billy Vernon parked the truck under the emergency room awning and ran inside.

Ramblin'

By Mary Bone

Out here on the rustic trails.

The smell of supper cooking wafts
through the canyon as I make my way back
to my campsite and the chuck wagon.

My appetite gets the best of me
and I eat two bowls of red beans
that had small pieces of smoked bacon
mixed in.

The stars twinkle bright as I roll my
saddle blanket into a pillow.

Sugarfoot snorts beneath me as coyotes start to howl
in the distance.

Tomorrow will be another day on the open range, in the life of
this rambling cowgirl.

(Cover image: Rooster Creek Bridge, Lake Texoma flood of 2007)

Contributors:

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- Mary Bone's poems have appeared in newspapers, journals and anthologies.
- Katarina Boudreaux is a writer, musician, composer, tango dancer, and teacher – a shaper of word, sound, and mind. She returned to New Orleans after circuitous journeying. New work is forthcoming in Broken Tooth Press and YAY!LA. www.katarinaboudreaux.com
- Sterling H. Cash is a native of Fort Worth, Texas, and was raised near Thunder Road.
- Kathryn Holzman, having deserted the City where she once ran a popular poetry reading, now finds her inspiration in West Massachusetts and Southern Vermont. Recently she has published short stories in *Calliope Magazine* and the *Zodiac Review*.
- Meredith Smith is a stay at home mom in Seattle, WA who spends her baby daughter's naps dreaming about places she's lived, places she's been, and places she'd like to go. Originally hailing from the dustbowl region of West Texas, Smith learned quickly how to write about absolutely nothing in a place that's famous only for being the middle of nowhere. Previous publications include *Bust Magazine*.
- Ethan A Zimmerman is a Canadian conceived, American living author and cowboy, currently riding and residing in western Montana. His work is included in the Writer's Digest Top 100 Short Short Stories of 2015. He won 2nd place in the 2015 Missoula Public Library Writing Contest. He is working on his first book of short stories called *Seven Postcards*. His biggest hero of all time is his wife who manages to keep her eye-rolling to a minimum, and her editorial skill turned up to 10. One of the events of his childhood he remembers the best is when his absurdly fat uncle fell through the seat of a lawn chair and couldn't get out. It has been said of his writing, "If Cormac McCarthy and William Faulkner had a baby and that baby grew up to be a writer, that writer might just be Ethan Zimmerman. That person can no longer be located."