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# William Harper: A story

J.T. Dawson

*Eastern Illinois University*

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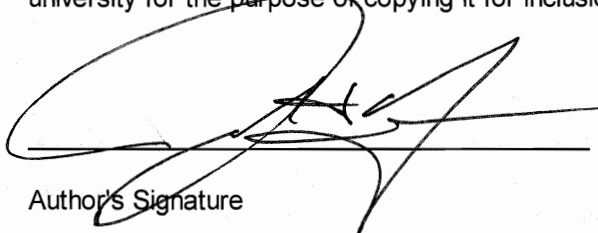
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William Harper: A Story

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(TITLE)

BY

J.T. Dawson

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**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

**Master of Arts in English**

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

**2010**

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YEAR

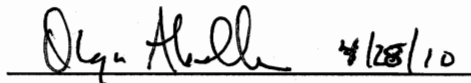
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This research project would not have been possible without the support of many people. The author wishes to express his gratitude to her supervisor, Prof. Dr. Letitia Moffitt who was abundantly helpful and offered invaluable assistance, support and guidance. Deepest gratitude are also due to the members of the committee, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Olga Abella and Dr. Daiva Markelis without whose knowledge and assistance this study would not have been successful.

*So rare is it that we find someone who inspires us to put down into words the simple scribbles of our imagination. To break ourselves open and let the world poke its fingers into our dreams, taste them and eat them so as that we may live forever as a thought or a dream or at the very least a word. Thank you Grandpa for inspiring me to put down into words my dreams, my thoughts, and my scribbles. It is because of you that I am a writer.*

*– For Grandpa Sherer*

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## *Introduction*

My initial intention with this project was, in fact, to complete an original body of work that illustrated how memory and the ambiguity of time affected the meaning and experience of war. However, as the story took shape, I discovered that war was only the tip of the iceberg. War became the frame of the narrative: a string of short vignettes that traced the twenty-eight minutes of a battle sequence through which the main character was shot and eventually died. This was perhaps the most difficult and time consuming portion of the thesis, as vignettes are short, compact sketches that capture a singular moment in time. And in these types of vignettes, every word counts. I focused heavily on crafting the language, considering concrete images and constructing a sense of place and a strong sense of emotion. This specific technique was risky and difficult to shape, but I wrote through that form because I felt it was important to cultivate my skills as a writer, expanding my perspective beyond what I knew, and to experiment with what I did not and offer at the very least “pictures in a contiguous series” (Barloon 08).

I broke the progression of time within the narrative frame using flashbacks, a series of stories that illustrated the most emotionally potent moments within the main character’s life. Essentially, I attempted to develop a portrait of my main character and in the process channel the ups, the downs, the experiences, and moral conflicts that inevitably poked their fingers into the fabric of his life. However, as I discovered, I had to be rather wary in exactly what “experiences” I wrote him into. This was especially important considering that the story (both in style and theme) suggests a coming of age tale where certain narrative choices may expand or potentially tear down both the character and the story at the same time. For example, “Scarecrow,” one of the earlier stories, focuses on a lynching scene, more specifically, how the main character reacts to



his father's reaction or lack of reaction to the actual hanging. The difficulty with the story was the father's dialogue and crafting his character as mysterious, with hidden depths of emotion. I wanted him to be the silent type, the opposite of the main character, however I had to be especially cautious not to shape him into a Yoda-esque moral metaphor, thus turning what could have been a punchy character/moment into a complete cliché.

The use of this linear structure, a-b-c-d-e (the vignettes) and A-B-C-D-etc (the stories), I attempted to tie the thread of the present into the past. That is to say, I wrote these stories to transcribe new ways of experience and, like Ernest Hemmingway, experiment with style and structure in my narrative. Hemingway's style was complex and ambiguous; two attributes that are challenging to even the most seasoned writers. His use of sparse prose was a challenge for me, both as a reader and as a writer. Though he did inspire my writing, I maintained my own style and narrative vision, both of which forced me to push beyond my own writer's threshold and become a more confident and stylistically centered writer. In doing so, I became extremely devoted to the language of my project: the physical descriptions, the concrete details, the senses and the images they evoke. Essentially, I wrote with a cinematic vision of the narrative. As a result, I set out in a new narrative direction, one that focused on the utterances of the *narrative-in-progress*: what is beneath the surface of the image – what is not said. Therefore, I transcended the comforts of "what" and "how" I have written in the past and explored new elements of style, tone, structure, and other tenants of both contemporary and traditional fiction.

Various other works from a few championed fiction writers have definitely influenced this project and its overall creative direction, including the poet and novelist

Gerard Donovan for his cinematic vision of the narrative and poetic language, Ernest Hemingway for his style, and Raymond Carver for his ability to comment on issues that are below the surface of the text. As a result, I learned to make better choices as a writer, and like Hemingway, "learned to look at words as if I were seeing them for the first time" (Hemingway).

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*—For Grandpa Sherer*

April 6<sup>th</sup>: 6:30 a.m.

*They hadn't eaten for days, the two soldiers we captured. We'd roped them by a tree, kept them there. No one watches them. Who needs to watch dead men? During the early morning, half past six a lieutenant limps over towards the soldiers. He drinks from his flask. He is drunk, shaking his pistol at them and laughing. They don't move. They don't beg. Not once. There is nothing left. They don't want to live. Then he shoots one of them down into the tree. The other man lowers his head against his knees. Lets his hands fall empty to the dirt. That stops me. My stomach tightens. I can taste the bile in the back of my throat. I watch the smoke curl out of the hole, the thinnest part of him and into nowhere. I think about reaching out for it, grabbing it and putting it back into his chest, but I don't. I simply watch it float away. So much blood. It gathers in puddles under the wet leaves.*

Beneath Green Leaves *by J.T. Dawson*

All around me, the forest was quiet. I stood beneath the trees. The leaves filled up to the blue sky. The wind moved inside them, shook them into motion. They waved across the top like green feathers. Caught the air and folded into one another, so that it looked like green bugs crawling across the forest. The trees swayed like grass. Sometimes even bent into the wind. It all moved, every part of it. I loved the woods, living in the country, the changing of the seasons: waiting, feeling empty as the branches, until they welled up again with green fingers that swelled like clouds into the sky; the way it rained in the woods; the names of the trees, of the plants, the insects, the animals, both big and small, and all of the birds. I liked to be in it, breathe it in and let it fill me up like a glass to the brim; listen to the language of everything, hear it move, stop, and watch it all start over again. I loved the woods. The woods were better than the people. I was never frightened in the woods. There was nothing that could hurt me.

I looked down into the ravine. I saw a buck at the water. There he stood, tall, broad-chested, heavy-sided, and ancient looking, horns that twisted like trees up into the forest. They curled out into the sky. The wind blew past me, carried my scent down with it across the way. It must have landed like a snowflake on the bucks nose. He stood, facing me. He was so still. His nose up, and soon his eyes covered me. I sat down on a rock and waited for him to move. I wanted time to stand still. He stared at me, considered me for second then returned to the water. I wondered what he thought of me then, a young boy, alone out in the woods, sitting on a stone watching out over him. He stood, looked up to me once more, and walked off into the spaces between the trees.

I stood in the shade of the trees, looked out the through the tunnel of heavy branches that arched across my eyes. It was late in the morning, but the wind was still

rising and the leaves stirred over my head. I could hear it in the high branches. The vibration of cicadas filled my ears. Sometimes, I scanned the wrinkled, brown bark on the trees for hollow cases. Found the brittle shells clinging to tree trunks, limbs, logs, and spread out everywhere along the ground. I would pluck them carefully from the trees. Raise them to the sun and let the light shine in. Try and look inside, as though it were a window. I never saw past the dirty glass.

Sometimes I found them changing skins. Watched the cases break open, as white bodies poked through and bent towards the sky. Wet wings tasted the air and unfolded against their backs. Then they pushed entirely from their skin onto the tree and sat along the bark beside their shells. I would watch them climb up into the branches and disappear into the cover of green leaves. They could go anywhere. Eventually, they would fly away, never to return.

I looked up and the sun hung heavy in the sky. It drew shadows across the ground, heated the leaves and dried up the morning's dew. It was cool in the shade, though I could feel it getting warmer. I headed off into the trees, keeping my direction by the sun. I crossed through a ravine and on the other side, halfway up the hill, I found the worn trail going into thick bush. It was so thick that sometimes I had to jump to see which direction I was going. I pushed past the ferns, the needlegrass and arrowwoods, picked a few berries even, and wended my way to the other side. When I got to the end, the thicket poured into the yellow grass, the field just before the stream. The wildflowers had opened, drawing color across the sky. The yellow grass bent along the wind and spread as far as I could see. Butterflies breathed curved beats against the air. For some time I walked until I saw the sun shoot in angles off the stream. I didn't hear the water. The stream was too smooth.

I walked along the edge, upstream, watching fish push out of the water and swallow insects that came too close. The fish floated just below the top. I could see their eyes move with the bugs, this way and that. They waited patiently. While I walked, I saw a hawk snatch a brown fish from the stream. Watched the air fill up its wings and fly off over the trees. I heard it scream at the sky. It trailed into the wind and when I looked back there were no more circles spreading through the stream.

I took a stick from along the edge. It was a long straight stick, sat heavy in my hands. I bent it against my knee and it didn't break. It would hold well against the fish. I pulled the knife from my pocket, slid it open and carved a notch at the top of the stick for the string. Then I took some thread from my satchel and guided it around the end of the stick. I tied it in a knot, one that my father showed me. I grabbed the end of the string and pulled the line taught. It didn't snap at the end or come undone. It felt good. I took a hook from my pocket and tied it to the end of the line. It was a small hook, thin and shiny against the sun.

From my satchel I pulled a tin cup. I removed the top and pulled a black beetle from the bottom. It pushed around inside my fingers and kicked at my hands with its feet. I threaded the hook through its back, poking it through to the other side. It punched about the hook, biting at the wire, as though it might break between its pincers. I dropped the beetle down into the water. It scurried in circles on the surface, trying to get away. I watched it float down the stream, struggle against the hook and then disappeared below the water. My line tightened against the stick and it bent down towards the stream. I pulled back against the water. Then my line went loose. I pulled it back from the water. Nothing was on the hook. The beetle had emptied off into nothing. I looked inside of my tin and there was nothing left. My fishing had ended early. I

removed my hook, stuffed it back in my pocket, and cut the string with my knife. I stuffed the remainder back into my satchel, threw the stick into the stream and watched it float down the way and disappear beneath the water. I slung the satchel over my shoulder and continued on, walking along the water's edge.

Further down, I crossed through the shallow water. Rolled my pants up over my knees and kicked off my boots. I threw them to the other side, watched the tadpoles swim under my bare feet and disappear. The water was cold against my legs and sent a shock up into my stomach. I felt the rocks against my feet. They were slippery in places. I poked my hand through the water, picked up a flat rock and skipped it down the stream. It drew white circles across the top. Then I moved to the other side. The ground was loose and rose along a hill to a gnarly old oak tree. It was ancient looking. Its roots looked like giant veins that ran beneath the ground. I circled its base, traced my hands along the bark as it twisted up in spirals. I looked up into its great spread of branches. They were heavy with leaves. The oak tree overlooked the woods and above them I saw the faint line of chimney smoke curl into the blue sky. It came from the cabin. The yellow grass stuck to my feet. I could feel dirt between my toes. I didn't much care for shoes.

I sat down against the base of the tree. Watched a butterfly land on top of my knee and fall off into the wind. It drew color across the sky. My stomach growled at me. I was hungry and tired. I hadn't eaten since the egg and orange my father made me for breakfast earlier in the morning. The sun was low then and I could still see the moon. I opened my satchel, pulled a chunk of bread and an apple from the bottom. I bit into the apple and it was sweet, tasted smooth against my tongue. I took a full bite of bread. It was good with the apple. For a while I sat there, against the tree, sucking down water



between spots of bread and the apple. When the sun moved to the top of the sky, I left the hum of cicadas behind.

I took a gulp from my canteen and set off down the hill. When I reached the bottom the smell of the pines touched my nose. The trunks of the trees were straight and pushed up high into the sky. The branches were high above, so that they might have touched the clouds. Sometimes they bent towards one another, even touched. They cracked and popped as they bent, even pinched the sun into sheets. Pine needles fell and covered the brown forest floor. I picked one from the ground and chewed it. It was cool against my tongue and in my nose. I could hear the birds hanging low across the branches. The wind was high in the trees. I looked up. From where I stood, I could see the roof between the trees. Through there I could find the cabin.

I started off, my satchel and canteen pressing against my hip, walking along through the shadows of the trees split open by the sun. I followed the trail. The grass thinned into leaves. The trees were less tall, thinner and smoother than the others. Through them I saw the cabin. The place my father and his father made. A wood house built of memories. Different eras. Different pasts all rolled into one. I came out through the woods, and down onto the flat land, in sight of my father placing a log onto the stump beside the cabin. He raised the axe over his head and slammed it down. The log fell in half to the ground. He brought another one to the stump. He wiped his face with the rag from his pocket. The sun sat behind a string of clouds. They looked heavy and threatened with rain.

I looked back into the woods. The trees swayed back and forth in the wind. It was quiet. There were plenty of days coming when I could go into the woods and stand beneath green leaves.

April 6<sup>th</sup>: 6:32 a.m.

*I watch the captain and the lieutenant argue by the fire. One points to the forest then points to me and the other men. I rise, rifle loose in one hand, and slip on my cap. Take a sip from my canteen. Let the water run down my chin and sink into my collar. I can barely hear the shivers of the trees. I look up. In the blue sky clouds collide and there are no birds. It is quiet. The man with the beard next to me smiles. A boy behind him shakes. I know at once, after this day, he will not return. I look down. Blood has dried on my boot. A leaf sticks to its edge. We set off for the woods. There are twelve of us, the ground soft under our feet. Ten minutes into the woods I watch the forest move.*

*Into the Woods by J.T. Dawson*

The water swallowed my hook and the beetle that circled along the surface. When I pulled it up, there was nothing left. I was out of bait. I took to looking for bugs and worms, anything that moved, really. Caught the fish's eyes and fit along the metal wire. I found nothing, threw my tin can on the grass and decided to sit and watch the fish.

I watched two fat brown fish float along the bottom and then shoot like shadows across the water. They swallowed a group of tadpoles. One snapped at a dragonfly that touched too close to the water. It barely got away. I pulled a scrap of bread from my pouch, picked it apart, and swallowed it between spots of water from my canteen. I flicked a chunk into my mouth. The other, I tossed into the water; followed it down the stream as it disappeared over the rocks and beyond my sight.

One of the brown fish floated to the surface of the stream. Sat at the top and stared at me, as though it were stuck behind a sheet of glass. The fish waved its fins in big circles to stay in place. It splashed around and circled in the water as though it chased something away, and popped back up to the top. I watched its mouth move beneath the stream, as if it were trying to shape words through the water, free them from behind its gills. It blinked at me. I threw some crumbs into the water, scattered them into the wind and watched them splash. Each one pushed the smooth water into a foggy ripple.

A shadow passed over me and into the water. The fish blinked and dove to the bottom, curled the top of the water into white. Dirt swirled and then it was gone. I turned around and my father stood behind me, a shadow in the sun. He had his rifle slung over his shoulder. It fit him, the man he was.

"William," he said, swallowed and then nodded his head. I watched the sun drip off his glasses. "I am going into the woods. Go back to the cabin when you're done and wait for me. I should be home before dark."

"I want to go with you," I said.

He looked down at me, removed his glasses and wiped them with the rag from his pocket. He held them to the sun. "All right. Come on then." He stuffed the rag into his back pocket. "Give me the tin, I'll put it in my bag." We set off for the woods, my canteen pressing against my leg and on a strap across my father's shoulder, the rifle his father gave to him.

We hiked to a spot deep into the forest. We walked slowly, even stopped along the way to drink from our canteens. It was cool beneath the cover of green leaves. The sun poked in and out of the trees, drawing shadows across the dirt. My father's eyes covered the ground. I think we walked a while and finally he stopped. Bent down to the earth and placed his fingers inside two shallow dents pressed into the forest floor.

"Look here, William," he said.

I bent down and looked at the dents. "What are they?"

"Rabbit tracks."

"How can you tell?"

"See how their small front paws touch the ground, then the larger back feet land in front?" He pointed up the trail. The tracks continued on a short way and then stopped at a bush where they disappeared. He stood and continued walking into the woods.

"Where did you learn to do that?"

"What?"

"Tell what kind of animal left its footprint behind."

"My father taught me when I was a boy. Before he left. I learned it all from him: how to track, how to shoot, and how to hunt," he paused. "I think you might have liked him." It sounded heavy when he said it. He stopped. I felt the silence break like a wave between us, spreading thin the words he had released into the air, and settle on my shoulders. He shifted the rifle and swung it over his other shoulder, as though the weight had become too much. I let him walk ahead for a while. He didn't say much of what he felt. He didn't say much of anything after that.

Walking through the woods with my father and the rifle, I heard nothing. Just watched him move into the forest and stare off into the trees. I wondered where he was. I looked down at the ground. A set of tracks filled up into my eyes. I stopped, bent down to the dirt, and traced my fingers around the edge.

"What's this one?" My father stopped and turned around. Walked back and knelt at my side. He squinted through his glasses.

"That's a coyote track," he said. "The hind print is smaller than the front. You see?" I nodded. "Most of its weight sits at the front of its body and head. That's why they are bigger. Pressed deeper into the dirt." We followed the tracks behind a tree. I saw a puff of hair stuck to the grass and a few yards away the remains of a rabbit sat fat with flies. They swarmed about its head. The tracks disappeared into the grass. All around us the forest was empty.

Some time passed, not much. I stood, waiting for my father to move, but he didn't. He stared at the rabbit. He brushed the flies from his face. Returned the hat to his head then sipped from his canteen. Something snapped behind us. It echoed through my frame. I saw nothing, but I heard it, whatever it was. I let my eyes wander behind me.

Turned my head slightly to the bushes behind the grass. I didn't move another muscle in any part of me. The seconds dragged themselves across my mind and it was still invisible. I heard the leaves crackle beneath its feet, and then I saw it, a thin sheet of gray fur that poked through the bush. Its ears folded against the back of its head and then it smiled, showing all of its teeth. Spit dropped in strings from its mouth and stuck to the grass. It moved forward, one foot in front of the other.

My father swung the rifle from his arm and cranked back the hammer. He pushed the rifle into his shoulder. Took aim, breathed, and then pulled the trigger. The coyote dropped back through the bushes. There was nothing left of it. There was no movement. The metal punch rang out through the trees.

I waited by my father, watching the bushes. Waiting for something, but there was nothing. He slipped the rifle back over his shoulder. He stood in silence. I smelled the powder. We left the coyote behind the bushes, and continued on, a brief hike back to the trail. He didn't look back.

A splinter of wind blew the sunlight sideways on the trees, sent ripples through the grass and the leaves. I watched it pass between us. "Is killing hard?" I asked.

That stopped him. He turned around. "I don't know, William." He moved back into a hard walk along the trail. I could hardly keep up.

"What about the coyote?" I asked. "Was it hard to kill it?"

"No, that was an exception." He wiped his face with the rag.

I waited. "Do many men kill?"

"Yes. Men kill everyday."

I stopped walking. "Do you think I could, Father?"

He turned around and stared back at me. "We all can. All of us can be killers."

It was a long hike to the edge of a field where we stopped. My father pulled a piece of bread from his pocket. Tore it in half and gave the other chunk to me. We chugged at our canteens. The sun drew high between the clouds. The wind had stopped. The grass settled straight. I stood beneath a blue sky, my father standing by.

"What now?" I asked my father.

"We wait." He removed the rifle from his shoulder and propped it against a tree. He sat down next to it. It was a part of him, pounds of wood and steel. We waited a while. Watched the clouds roll by, as if pulled by invisible strings and pass across the sun. A beetle climbed over my boot. Buzzards circled across the sky.

My father sat up and watched the field. A fox trotted out into the clearing, a copper red spot that stained the grass. Its nose was stuck to the ground. It hadn't seen us yet. My father was slow to move, slipping his hand around the rifle and rising quietly to his feet. I did the same. He curled the strap around his wrist. Put the rifle into his shoulder and took aim. The fox stopped. Looked at the sky and then the grass, as though it were waiting for something. I touched my fathers arm.

"Can I take the shot?"

He said nothing. Followed the fox with his rifle, breathed out then lowered the gun to the ground. "All right, I'll let you take the shot."

"Really?"

"If that's what you want." He handed me the rifle. It was heavy in my hands.

"Remember, put the rifle into your shoulder. Aim small. Breathe and when you let it out squeeze the trigger."

I pressed the rifle into my shoulder and raised it towards the field, barely holding it up. I followed the fox through the field. It stopped again. Looked out over the

grass and found me. It didn't move. Just stared across the way. I aimed at its side and when I let my breath go, I squeezed the trigger. I took the first shot. Watched the ball split open the air and pass into its back. I heard the yelp.

He looked at me and faked a smile. His face looked strange. "How did it feel?"

"Good, but funny at the same time," I said. "It fell so fast to the ground. I almost didn't see it go."

"I know. That's usually the way it is." He slung the rifle over his shoulder and we moved into the field.

I marched across the meadow. Watched the wind speak the grass into motion and whip around me like a rope. A cloud dragged across the sun, passed over the field, and settled a shadow on top of the trees. I watched a spider crawl across my hand, jump off and slip into the wind. It sailed out of sight and the flowers twisted into the sun. I looked across the way and I saw it, the fox, moving slowly through the grass. It saw me. Covered me with its eyes and then slumped onto the ground. I walked across the meadow to the spot I saw it fall. It was moving again, pulling itself across the grass with its front paws. They shook against the ground. It stopped again. Its sides struggled and punched against the grass, drawing in thin sips of air only to let them out again. Its back legs were still. There was nothing left in them. I saw red at its hip. Its mouth moved in squeals and whines, as though it were trying to talk to me. To say something, though I didn't hear a word. Then it looked up at me. Glanced back at the spot beside its leg, as though it had waited there to show me what I had done. It took a breath, closed its eyes.

I waited by it until my father followed in the grass. I handed him the rifle. It was heavier than before, as though it carried the weight of the fox at its end. He looked down, watched the tail twitch against the wind, and float back to the dirt. There was a



momentary spark, a flicker of life that curled at the end of its body. My father shook his head, pulled a lead ball from his pouch. The fox blinked into the dirt. I smelled the powder like black flowers.

He put the rifle to his shoulder, cranked back the hammer and took aim. The fox looked away. Lowered its head into the grass, as though it knew what came next, and breathed into the ground. I heard my father pull the trigger just before I closed my eyes and I put my mind somewhere else. Back to the stream I had fished in earlier that day. Counted the number of worms and bugs I used, the places I found them, and how they acted on the hook.

Worms curled and squeezed like red fingers. Sank into the water and emptied off into nothing. Black beetles punched about the metal wire. Broke themselves open and split along the water. Floated along the top until swallowed by a fish. It was easy. Pushing metal through the thinnest parts of them. Watching them bend and churn to get away. They never did. I pushed a hook into my finger once, watched it slide beneath my skin. Dropped the worm to the dirt and let the red fill up through the hole and bubble into the thin blue sky, then trickle down my thumb.

I opened my eyes. The grass curled about its tail. Covered its face, and filled up through its ears. I thought the grass might swallow the fox. Push up through the ground like green fingers and take hold of it. Wrap around its frame and pull it under into a silence that pressed it into nothing. When I bent down to the grass the fox didn't move. Its eyes were closed. Its tongue sagged against the grass. I touched its tail and brushed my hand beside the hole, the shot that let the air out. Its hair stuck to the grass. I took my hand away. I had put the fox to the ground. I had raised the rifle into the air. I had pulled the trigger. The sun shone on the other side of me, and when I stood it pressed a

cold hand against my back. I stood there by my father, looking out into the cold summer light, if such a thing existed. Stared past what was in front of me into thoughts that split open into other thoughts. It took only two shots to put down the fox, the first from me. The other came from my father.

"I'm sorry," I said to the fox.

"It's just an animal, William," he said. I looked at him as he stood beside me, the rifle at his side. In the sunlight, there was something about his face. It was nice or it was sad. I couldn't tell. I looked away. I said nothing. Just turned and walked away into the tall green grass. I think he said something before I left. Whatever it was I didn't hear it. We walked back to the cabin under the sun. One thousand, eight hundred and twenty-five steps through the grass, the woods, the hills, and along the stream. Parts of the fox still walked with me. It was early on a fine afternoon.

April 6<sup>th</sup>: 6:42 a.m.

*There are eleven of them, like ghosts from behind the fog. They come through the trees like gray sheets. I watch them troll through the tall wheat grass. Their boots sink into the ground, leaving footprints in the mud. They are carrying rifles, all of them. Some of them are killers. The others, they are too frightened. The guns look heavy in their hands, as if the rifles were made of men they put into the ground. One of the men stops. He spits tobacco beyond his boot then raises his rifle. The others come toward him. While they huddle together they whisper to each other then raise their guns. A deer tears out of the brush and disappears into the fog. I see its breath lip through the air. One soldier steps forward. The light shines down through the trees on his face. It is sweaty and dirty. I hear the first shot. A metal punch tears through the leaves.*

The Way of Dogs *by J.T. Dawson*

The rain stopped. Through the window I watched geese push through the thinnest parts of grey still covering the sky. In the fall, the green always left and flew in arrows with the geese. Rose up through the clouds and flew south across the sun. I watched them move farther and farther away until they were swallowed by the sky. The window dripped with rain.

I pulled on the shirt hanging from the knob. Slipped my pants up my legs and made for my jacket on the chair. I pulled on my heavy boots. From a sack I grabbed a chunk of bread and shoved it in my pocket. Took an apple from the bowl and cut it into slices with my knife and swallowed slivers of red between spots of water. I looked for my father. He had left already. His boots were gone. He had headed into town, left me alone for the day.

I pulled open the door to the cabin and the wind pushed past me. Made me shiver like a plant. I stood on the porch looking out into the forest, as fog filled up through the trees. The leaves had turned to rust, dropped down onto the dirt and curled up like shriveled spiders. The flowers dripped color to the ground. They were heavy with rain. Time stopped when it rained. Silence collapsed into silver spit. Thoughts folded into other thoughts and turned into memories that fell away to nowhere.

Rain.

I made for the trees. Along the way I noticed large clumps of hair, wiry spots that led to the side of the cabin. Throaty grunts slipped around the corner. I followed the sound. Beside the cabin, rolling in parts of the mud, I found two dogs: a punchy beagle we called Squirrel and a big black mutt named Boo. They wrestled and pressed each other into the mud hole. I must have come over when things were going well. They

pushed themselves down into the ground. Elbows touched the dirt. Butts raised into the sky, as if they bowed to one another. Their tails cut through the wind. They smiled at each other. Let their tongues hang from open mouths and bounce along their chins. Ears pulled to the backs of their faces. Their eyes saw nothing else, only each other. Squirrel barked and Boo pounced. A leaf fell from a tree and they chased it to the ground, sniffed at it and lost interest. They ran back and slid into the mud. These dogs played with all of their hearts.

They stopped. Looked up at me and sat there, looking out across the way to where I stood. The wind blew them past me and into the forest. They chased each other into the trees and disappeared over the hill. Then they were gone. Their barks faded like shadows into the fog. I followed their footprints into the trees.

One day, when my father took me with him into town, he noticed a group of men huddled against the wall, hitting something on the ground. They had a bit of wood and beat it against the dirt. We walked closer and saw a black dog wedged against the wall. It didn't fight back. Just slumped on the ground like a black rug. Then they pelted it with rocks, one after another. Hit it in the legs, the stomach, and the eye. I heard the yelp; the first time I heard a dog scream. No one stopped. Just kept walking through the street as though they heard nothing. I watched it put its head down into the dirt, a line of blood moved down its nose. It looked through me and then looked the other way.

My father ran across the road. Ran the stick into their heads and faces and punched them to the ground. That was the first time I saw my father fight. Watched him break open other men and pound them to the dirt. They all fell and didn't get up. Then it was over. One of the men had blood on his face, another rolled on the ground holding

his ribs. They said he'd be sorry. That he should go back to the woods where he belonged. Then it was over. They left and that was that.

My father bent down and checked the dog over. Its eye was swollen shut. The other watched his every move, pupils wide and deep as hollow wells. Snot dripped from its nose and its fur shivered against his hand. I could hear its heart grinding through its chest. My father picked the animal up. It hung across his arms like a black coat. It didn't try to move. Just draped its chin across my father's arm like it was meant to be there, as if the curves of my father's arms were made just for him, to rest, to sleep and forget. That's what I thought.

I heard a muffled cough. I looked down and at once noticed a white lump in the dirt. Against the wall, where the black dog had been beaten, sneezed a punchy beagle pup. The black dog had covered it up. Took the beating for them both and didn't move away. I think he might have died for that dog. Taken the boots, the stones, and the wood with him into the ground.

The pup jumped across the dirt. Bit my boot and tugged at my pant leg. Pups don't care how small they are. They are always bigger than the world around them, never afraid of anything. Noses to the ground, ears to the sky, they barked at anything that moved, anything that drifted into their space. I picked him up. He nipped at my fingers and barked at my face as if to say 'what now' or 'now what' or 'you're mine.' Whichever one I could not tell. Dogs are funny like that. They are always saying something, all the time no matter when it is. After a while he settled in my arms. Took to watching the world pass on by. We walked into the forest. We were there in the good place. Left everything behind. Nothing could touch us there.

"Is he all right?" I asked.

My father did not answer. He was looking down at the dog. "Yes. He's all right." He looked down at its face. "He's asleep for now and his eye has stopped bleeding. That's a good sign."

I paused. "Why do you think those men did that?" I looked down at the ground, as though the answer might push up through the dirt.

He started to say something more, but then he didn't answer. Instead he shook his head. Maybe he wanted to say something more. I thought for a minute about the men beating the dog, and then I didn't have any more thoughts except the thought of my father walking away ahead of me. I shook my head. I looked at him and kept looking.

"I couldn't do it?" I said.

"Do what?" my father asked me.

"Hit a dog just to hit it." I grew silent for a while. Wrapped myself in fresh thoughts. I remembered how the men laughed at what they did and I wondered why they were the way they were.

"What are you thinking about now?" he asked.

I didn't answer and slowly walked ahead. "I wish you'd have killed them."

He stopped and turned toward me. Stood against the sun. There was something about his eyes. They were heavy when they caught me. He swallowed. He cleared his throat. I heard the words catch and dribble in his chest. Then I looked away. "I could have killed them all," he said. I looked up at him. He turned around and started walking. It was a silent walk through the woods. The pup felt it too. He looked the other way.

We hiked to the edge of the forest before my father spoke. "There is the cabin."

I saw it between the trees.

He said nothing after that. Just took the dog into the house and set him by the fire. My father smiled and patted his head. The dog looked up, as though it were going speak. Then propped its chin against his boot. He stuck to my father like a black spot. My father pulled up a chair and decided to stay a while. He closed his eyes and opened them. There were things I wanted to say, angry things, consoling things, things like that. I left him alone in the cabin.

I took the pup outside. Set him on the ground. He stopped and looked around, let it all sink in: the trees, the green leaves, the grass, and the sky. Then he took off. He barked at the hens in the cage, pounded through the garden and then set off for the woods. He dove into the trees. He owned them, every part of them.

I came out of the woods on the top of the hill. There was the cabin. The gas lamp stained the window. The porch was bare. It was dimly lit and quiet. Smoke came from the chimney. Floated up and out into the closing pockets of sinking sky that carried the last of the geese. They cackled at the moon. The hens clucked at the worms that poked up through the ground. The trees leaned into the wind. I watched it all happen. It was the passing parts of an autumn storm.

I crossed the open field in front of the cabin. The moon spit against the ground. The door of the cabin opened and my father walked out. Boo lay alone on the steps looking out into the woods.

I hopped up onto the porch. Threw my bag up against the door. "Glad you made it home. Looks like another storm is coming through," he said. I heard the trees shiver to



the ground. Felt the wind whip around the cabin like a rope. It howled through the doorframe. The moon filled with mist.

"Where's Squirrel?" I asked my father.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know. He's probably in the woods somewhere. You know how he is."

I looked out into the trees, into the dark. I thought I saw him run through the leaves. It was only a shadow. "I guess you're right." I said and walked into the cabin. Outside, thunder rumbled through the woods.

By dark the rain had started again and smacked against the shingles on the roof. It fell in sheets against the window. The wind tore through branches and veins of lightning flashed out over the tops of the trees. My father sat in his wooden chair by the fire, carving into a bit of wood with his knife. He shaved it with his blade, steady strokes that drew chips along the floor. He meant every stroke. *Shick. Shick. Shick.* The fire stuck to his glasses. He hummed a tune his father taught him and it filled the cabin. Hit my ears between the raindrops. Boo lay at his side, watching the shavings float down to the wood. I stared out the window, a waterfall of wet glass. My face stared back, blank as the rain outside. A vein of lightning cut through me. Thunder rolled over the trees.

Boo sat up. His ears perked to the ceiling. He jumped to his feet, let go a muffled bark, and looked up at my father. That's how dogs do it. Let people know something is coming or is already there. They are direct, to the point.

Bark.

He darted for the door. Clawed at the sides to get out and kept barking until it filled up to the top of the room and drowned out the rain. My father stood, walked over

and opened the door. Boo spilled out into the storm. I watched him disappear into the mist.

We stood along the porch, looking out into nothing. The sky tore open with light and we saw them come out of the forest. Squirrel moved slow, stopped and fell. Pushed himself up onto his feet and sunk back down into the dirt. He started crawling along the ground, still pushing towards the porch. The rain pushed down on his back. I watched his arms sink into the mud. I thought the ground might swallow him. I barely saw him, but I know he saw me. The sky exploded with white veins. I saw Boo, at his side like a shadow, barking at the porch. He looked at Squirrel and then back at the cabin, and began barking again. It punched through the rain and into my ears, dropped down into the hollow spaces between my bones. And when I heard him bark again, I swear I heard, *'help.' Help. Help. Help.* My father hobbled down the steps, ran out into the rain. I stood on the porch, unable to move any part of myself.

I didn't feel a thing when I saw him against my father's arms, not at first. Only wondered how he got there. I imagined him dragging himself under the rain through the ravine, over the hill and then along the stream and through the woods. All of that to get to the cabin. All of that to see me. And there he was, whimpering and crying out into the sky.

My father carried the dog inside and Boo followed. Looked up at Squirrel and watched my father set the beagle by the fire. His shirt stained with red that drew lines down to his fingers. Followed in droplets that led to the rug. Boo sniffed at Squirrel, whimpered at the spots of red. Even licked at them a bit. They kept filling up through the scratches and the gouge beneath his stomach. I thought it might never stop.

I sat on the ground next to him. Pet his back and moved my hand down to his tail. That seemed to bring more whimpering out of him. He pulled away from me, trembled against the floor. I moved away. There was nothing I could do. My father pressed sheets against his side. He shook his head, wiped the sweat from his forehead. I slipped under quiet, swallowed stone. Watched Boo look down at Squirrel then to me and then to my father. His tail dripped like ink to the floor. He licked at Squirrel then he turned and set his chin against my father's knee.

I saw Squirrel's tongue push out against his lips. Listened to him snort and watched his eyes draw wide. His stomach sunk to the floor. He shook against the ground and his legs scratched at the wood, as though he were trying to run away and then he stopped. There was no more red left. It had all run away. Boo's hair stuck up along his back while he looked down, trying to make sense of what was there in front of him. He sat up and walked over, nudged Squirrel's head. Even licked at his face and then sat down. He waited, sat, and watched. Just stared at Squirrel's face. Nothing happened. There was no smile. He leaned over and rested his head against Squirrel's neck. He didn't move.

My father couldn't save him. He couldn't do anything. He looked around, everywhere except at me. Then he shook his head. He got up and put on his hat. He threw on his coat. Then he went and sat on the porch. When my father went out, I stepped over to the window to watch him. He looked out into the rain. His breath curled into the air. He sat there and didn't move.

The following morning we took him out to the woods. Hiked to a spot at the edge of the forest and buried him beneath a willow tree. It was old and bare of leaves. Rain still stuck to its branches. Dripped to the ground and splattered along the dirt. Boo

looked down into the hole, watched every shovel full of dirt cover the sheets at the bottom, taking his friend into silence and pressing him away into nothing, where he couldn't go. His ears sagged against his face. He sat alone along the edge and never looked away. My father set a stone at the edge of the pile.

He grabbed onto my shoulder and squeezed. We looked down at the dirt together. He said nothing. Just stood there. I looked up at him. He looked at me too. If he saw something he never said. We waited a while, watched the clouds gather in clumps and skid across the blue sky. When we turned to walk back home, Boo walked off into the woods. His head was to the ground.

April 6<sup>th</sup>: 6:43 a.m.

*Death screams at the wounded. I sink to my knees against a tree, prop my rifle between two ruts and fire. I shoot a man. Watch the sluggish lump pass through smoke and screams and into his shoulder. He falls to the dirt. The forest falls around him. Another man shoots me back. I feel it settle in my chest. I wonder if he hesitated as I had. I smell powder. The leaves are still wet. The procession came. There is no beginning and no end. Just animals with their guns, shooting each other into the ground. The air tastes black with smoke almost up to the sky. There is a boy huddled against a tree holding his gun against his face and crying. The sun shines down on it all.*

Scarecrow by *J.T. Dawson*

We had breakfast before daylight and started out towards the town before dawn, climbing the hill beyond the cabin in single file. Ahead there was my father carrying a bundle of vegetables from the garden in a bag over his shoulder, then me with my satchel and his rifle thrown across my back. It was a cool, fresh morning. The trees were filled with dew. Leaves fell heavy in the wind, covering the trail that led to town. They stuck to my boots along the way.

We hiked along the trail for some time until we came to the edge of the yellow hills. Below we could see the tops of the high trees and in a small opening the sun angling off the stream. Across were the rooftops of the town. They flashed against the sun. The sky was cracked with gray all over. There was shade wherever we walked. My father looked back into the woods, as though he were trying to find the cabin amongst all of the trees. It wasn't there. He turned back, swallowed, and then adjusted the bag on his shoulder. We started down a steep path that went in curves along the hills. We went down the long bends of the trail toward the bottom. There the trees grew heavy and tall and opened to the grassy banks of the stream. My father walked ahead of me. He was quiet. He looked smaller to me then. He drew in a breath and let it out.

We walked along the grassy edge, on a sort of worn bank, kicking through dried reeds. They stood above my waist and bent and cracked beneath my boots. It was a funny noise. I liked it. Beyond on the opposite side were thin trees. They weren't tall and behind them the road that led into town. We crossed along an old fallen tree trunk. It was flat against the other bank and it was smoother than other trees. My father crossed first and after I followed. The water was smooth beneath the trunk. The sun flashed off the water and washed my face.

From the stream we wended through the trees and came out onto a dirt road. We stood across from an old wheat field. Dried stalks pointed up like broken trees into the air. There was an anthill at its edge. It was old looking. The wind had blown it dry. Three deer punched across the field. Hoofs pounded the dirt. They didn't stop. Didn't look back. They ran off into the trees. Then they were gone. In the middle of the field, dangling from two crossed planks of wood, I saw a straw man. He was loose at the elbows, neck, and feet. Yellow sprigs of straw broke open his sleeves and pants. Ran out like crooked fingers into the sky. He had no feet. A tricorn hat was perched on his head, covering his eyes. Rope was tied around his neck. His face didn't move. Nothing on him moved. Just sat there for the world to look at. Blackbirds circled above.

We approached the edge of town and I felt the sun, broken, soft on my face. The sun disappeared behind the clouds. There was no light. There were no hills. No stream and no trees. Just me and my father, a bag of vegetables, our two feet, one in front of the other, and a rifle strapped to my shoulder. We walked into the back parts of town. My father kept moving forward, but slowly. His face had gone rigid.

I never liked that town, or the people. It had a picked-over, tight-fisted feeling. The town was nothing like the country. Instead of trees and animals, I saw buildings and houses. Dozens of people walked in coats and trousers and dresses. When we past them they covered us with their eyes. I thought suddenly how a beetle must feel on a hook as it tries to get away. I was out of my head. I felt heavy, as though their eyes had stuck to my boots. Clung to my legs and arms. Burrowed in my skin. I felt I might sink into the ground. I felt it all.

I walked along the road beside my father. He walked slowly. I watched his boots kick up dust. He looked around as if remembering. Then he kept walking. We walked past a row of tall white houses, two brick shops, and a crooked old tavern. The door was open. It was dark. I couldn't see inside. I could hear men yelling. I didn't know what they said. I didn't look at anyone. I tried to act normal. Held the rifle tight against my right shoulder, away from the people. For a while they seemed to pay no attention. Just walked past us and didn't say a word. My father ignored them all.

We went around the side of a red brick building. We passed a butcher stand. I saw a pig head in a bucket, body-less and neck-less. It was heavy and ugly. Its eyes were open and dusty. Flies dragged themselves around its face. Crawled into its mouth and came out the back. The head stared up at me. It smiled. Red puddles gathered in the dirt. The butcher grinned at me as we walked by. My father didn't stop. Just kept walking. I trailed my father, moving slowly through the people. An old woman shook a rug at me. I watched the dust gather like a ghost and then curl away with the wind.

Finally we stopped. A very old, worn and crippled man with grey stubble stood behind a bread stand. He smiled at my father. He was missing his front teeth. The others were yellow and rotten. He smelled like smoke. My father called him John. They talked for a while. Laughed at each other and traded stories. The older man rolled tobacco in paper. Stuffed it under his lip and brought a match to the end. He lit the cigarette. I heard men talking behind my father.

"I didn't drink any of it after you left," one man told the other.

"Why do you keep on with the bullshit?" said the other. He took a swallow from his flask. He only had one ear.



"It isn't bullshit, George." He stuffed a piece of bread into his mouth. "I didn't touch anything. Just get off it." He threw a chunk at the other man.

George took another swallow from his flask. Capped it and stuffed it back into his jacket. "All right, Fredrick. Fine. You didn't drink any of it. Who do you suppose did then?" He crossed his arms against his chest.

"I don't know. You don't know. Sounds like anybody could have. I drank the same as you last night." He pulled a knife from his pocket. Flipped it open and cut at his nails. White flakes fell onto his boots.

"Look at her. There she is, George. The one I told you about," whispered Fred. He pointed to a woman walking along the road. She was a good-looking woman. She had dark hair. It folded into curls that hid her eyes. She smiled while she walked.

"She's a mighty fine woman, Fred. Who is she?" George scratched at his beard. Pulled his flask out again and took another drink.

"I don't know. I seen her only a couple of times," Fred went on. "She's always walking through town."

"What for?"

"I don't know. She just walks. Up and down the streets. Like she ain't got no cares in the world. She talks to people. She laughs. Plays with the children. Sniffs at the flowers by the shops." He stopped. "She's always with her nigger though." A big black man walked up beside her. She smiled, even wrapped her arm around his. He was young looking with smooth skin. His overalls hung loose at his shoulders. He carried his straw hat in one hand. The other he used to balance a seed bag over his shoulder. His bare feet scuffed along the dirt. "I heard something."

"What do you mean *you heard?*"

"I heard that they're —" I couldn't hear what he said. Fred stuffed his hands into his pockets. George said nothing and looked very angry.

The black man and the woman stood at a window talking. He leaned up against the shop. She laughed. He smiled. She grabbed his hand. He squeezed hers. She smiled back. The two men ran toward them. Pulled the woman away and pushed the black man to the ground. "What's the idea, boy?" He didn't answer. He looked up at the men. Then he looked down at his hands. When he tried to get up George kicked him in the face. The other held the woman back. She fought against his arms and couldn't get loose. She screamed to the black man on the ground. Reached out for him and grabbed at nothing. His face spilt quietly into his hands. He trembled against the dirt. George kicked him in the stomach. The black man rolled away like a stone. He pushed himself to his knees.

"You're a tough one, aren't you nigger?" the man yelled into his face. Blood dripped from his mouth like red ropes to the dirt. Stuck to the ground in dusty puddles. I watched his mouth move. Nothing came out. Blood ran in lines from his nose. Drained into his mouth and down his chin. It was smooth.

"Where the hell do you think you get off touching her?" The black man did not reply. Just slumped on his knees and looked down at the ground. "What, you too dumb to talk back?" The black man groaned. Tried to push himself to his feet.

I saw another man walk toward him from the mob. He smiled down at the black man. Then kicked him in the stomach. I watched the black man fold in half and curl up in the dirt. He lay there like a muddy raindrop in the road. I waited for him to melt away into the dirt.

The men laughed at him. They couldn't stand still. They were on their feet moving around the black man. They waited. The woman broke free. She covered the black man with her body. I heard screaming. She was screaming. She cried over him. She begged the men to stop. They didn't. The cane man hit her across the back. Raised the cane into the air and brought it back down across her shoulders. She screamed. Grabbed at her back, as though she might pull the welts out from beneath her skin. The man beat her with the cane until she didn't move. She was quiet. She didn't beg. She didn't scream.

*Whack.*

My father stood beside the baker. They both watched. My father's face looked funny the way it set. He put his hands on my shoulders, as if he thought I was thinking about jumping into the middle of it. I tried to pull away. But he would not let go. He pulled back very hard. I didn't move. We watched together, his hands still squeezing my shoulders.

The two men picked the woman up. She didn't fight. They threw her onto the ground. Her back was open and drew lines across the dirt. She didn't move. Everything in her was still. Her hand lay open, as if she were reaching out toward something. Her fingers pointed towards the sky. The black man stirred. Pushed off the ground and stammered to his feet. He swayed like a big smooth tree. He walked over to the woman. Bent down and touched her face. His blood dripped onto her cheek. As the black man moved to pick her up the man with the cane clubbed him across the face. Blood flipped into the wind and landed in puddles. He crashed to the dirt like a giant tree. I heard the crash.

A few other men broke from the mob, gathered him in their arms and walked him across the town. His feet dragged behind in the dirt. Swirled dust at his heels. His head sunk into his chest. I watched a boy push through the mob. Pick a rock from the ground and pelt the black man in the face. The black man didn't flinch. Blood gathered beneath his eye and traced along his chin. The boy laughed and smiled. His face was strange. It was scared or it was nasty. I couldn't see. Then he ran away. My father looked down at me. I leaned into him. If he saw something in me he didn't say. My father and I followed the mob. He took the rifle from my shoulder and slung it around his own. We continued on a short walk, the rest of the way, to the edge of town. All around us it was loud. I couldn't hear a thing.

The road came out of the town on the top of a hill. There was an old oak tree. It was ancient looking and had a great spread of branches. They curled like twisted arms and wrinkled up to the tips. I saw a single leaf flutter on a branch. It snapped off and floated in the wind. I followed it until it settled onto the dirt. It fell fast.

My father stood beside me. Placed his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. It was soft, as though he were thinking about something else. I didn't look at him. I didn't look at anything. An older man heaved a rope over one of the branches. He caught the other end and tied it around the trunk. The other end they knotted and slipped over the black man's head and looped around his neck. The group of men raised the black man onto a water barrel, made him struggle to his feet. He was broken and bloody. His eyes sunk into his face. His lips were cracked, sagged heavy with blood and dirt. Snot ran from his nose. His face was split open. It fell in drops onto the ground.

They tied him at the wrists and then at his feet. The mob yelled at him. Threw rocks that spread across his arms, legs, and face. He cried. He didn't cover his eyes. He didn't fight. He took it all, every part of it. I watched a man kick out the barrel. I saw a priest clutch a bible to his chest. He closed his eyes and whispered, 'Our Father who art in Heaven—' The black man dropped like a stone. The rope tightened around his neck. He squirmed and wriggled like a fish. Snot flooded from his nose. Spit dropped from the corners of his mouth. The whites of his eyes bulged from his face. For some time he kicked and spun. Then he was still. His body swayed from side to side. It spun around in the air. He was a man empty as straw.

I closed my eyes.

When I opened my eyes they lit his body on fire. One of the men brought a torch through the mob and held it against the black man's toes. It all started at his feet. They turned to ash, spread up his pant legs and caught onto his shirt. I watched his fingers burn. The whites of his eyes turned red. They just stared. No one moved. The flames dripped from their eyes. They all smiled. The priest walked away. He shook his head. It sunk low into his shoulders. He dropped his bible to the dirt. It was covered by dust. I heard crying. It was me crying. The black man burned on the rope. Half of him was gone.

My father stared at the black man burning. He closed his eyes. He drew in a long breath. When he opened them, he shook his head and walked away. For some time, I stood in front of the tree, watching the body burn. Smoke curled out of its mouth and into nowhere. I thought it might be the last of his spirit, the thinnest part of him. I watched it float away into the mass of black flakes. Then the rope snapped and when his body hit the dirt, it broke open into dust. Grey specks that drifted into the trees, as

though the wind and the grass erased him from my eyes. That was the last I saw of him. After that, he was gone.

I picked up the priest's bible. I brushed the dirt from the top. The gold letters were faded. The leather cover was torn at the corners and the pages were loose. They jutted out of the side, yellow and worn. The book was heavy in my hands. I looked out onto the town. My wasn't there. He was gone. I dropped the book onto the dirt and left it all behind me.

Back in the town, my father stood beside the baker and said nothing. His eyes dug into the ground. There was nothing to say. I looked out at sun. It was high in the sky. He took off his glasses and shut his eyes. The vegetables gathered about his feet. The bread had fallen into the dirt. The rifle fell onto the ground. He didn't look. I picked it up and set it at his side. My father looked at me as if I were crazy. He stared at me. I looked down at my boots and then I turned away.

Two men picked the woman up from the ground. Blood had dried along her back. They carried her onto some stairs. They tried to set her on the steps, but she fell down onto the dirt. They looked at her. They gave up. When they walked away she was sitting on the ground. Her head was on her knees.

My father and the baker stood beside each other. It was quiet. They didn't look at one another. My father cleared his throat. I tied the bread sack and slung it across my back. He took the rifle, slipped it over his shoulder and wiped his glasses. They shook hands. After that, we set off for the woods. We left it all behind.

Later that afternoon, I found my father in his chair by the fireplace. He took a sip from his tea. He didn't look at me. Just stared off into the fire. "I'm sorry you saw that,

William." His hard features did not move. They never did. I watched his eyes, the age in them fall back to his tea. His fingers closed around the cup as if to catch something. Whatever it was, I did not know.

"Why did they kill him?" I asked.

My father sipped from his tea. He moved from his chair and threw another log onto the fire. He said, "Because he loved a woman that he wasn't supposed to."

"That's it?"

"Yes. That's how people are, William."

"All of them?"

"Most." He returned to his chair and looked up to me. "People are animals. You can't trust them. They steal. They lie. They wander. They kill." He took another swallow.

"I hate them. All of them," I said.

My father grabbed my arm. "You can't hate them." He looked at me through his bare eyes. He didn't move. They were made of stone. He touched my hand. I pulled away and took a step back.

"Will I ever be like those people?" I asked.

"I don't know," said my father. "That is up to you."

I let it all sink in, every part of it. Let the words break open onto my skin and wrap around my thoughts. All I could think of was the woman: how she covered the black man's body with her own while he was being beaten, kicked, and punched. How she screamed as the cane sliced open her back. And how she didn't move after the cane fell the fourth and the fifth time. I couldn't get it out of my head. I looked at my father.

"Don't feel bad about it, William."

"I can't help it." I said.

"There's no use."

"None of it was their fault. I'm sorry for them."

"I know." He stopped and wiped his face. "What's done is done."

"I guess so," I said. I didn't mean it. I walked towards the door, stopped and turned around. I looked at my father. His face filled his hands as he took in a deep breath. He looked up at me. His face looked strange. I could see the faces of men in his eyes. They screamed to be let out. He blinked them away and stared off again, into the fire.



April 6: 6:45 a.m.

*Everybody is screaming. Black clouds follow the dead. A fat soldier walks up to the boy. He smiles and spills powder over his rifle. He winks from behind his sight. One eye closed. The boy begs 'please God,' bloody and broken. There is no reply. The boy looks at me. He knows he is going to die. He wants to live. He is a soldier, not a killer and he wants to live. We all want to live. I don't know what to do. The soldier holds his rifle to the boy's chest, smiles, and pulls the trigger. He stands there quietly. His face doesn't change. A smile soaked through with blood and dirt. I hear him laugh. The boy falls to his knees, hand outstretched as if reaching out toward something. His eyes are still open. His blood gathers in puddles beneath his chin, the last trace of a boy left long after he's gone and wiped away. I wonder what he saw through those eyes. If he saw anything at all I do not know. The ground is made of men, bodies stretched along my eyes. They all wanted to live.*

*We Were Heroes by J.T. Dawson*

"I was in a war once," my father said one night. He sat in his chair, carving at a bit of wood with his knife by the fire. I watched snow tap lightly against the window. I looked at him. Then he looked up at me. He got up from his chair. Took a bottle of whiskey from the shelf and poured a glass. He took a good swallow.

"The Redsticks had raided Fort Mims. When we got there it was abandoned. They'd left a few days before. What we found—" My father took another drink. He looked away, out onto the fire. He was quiet. For some time, he carved at the wood. Curved the end and blew off the dust. He cut a smooth chunk from the middle.

"They'd killed all the settlers, and burned most of the fort and shot most of the men. The others they burned alive. Their bodies still crackled with smoke when we walked through the village. The women and the children they had cut to pieces. They had taken the babies and slammed their heads and faces against the walls and piled the bodies. The others they carved out their scalps and even took out some of the eyes." He paused and pushed the chips from his lap onto the floor. "We buried them all, what was left of them."

He stopped and wiped his mouth. Then he sat back down in his chair. I looked at the floor where the wood shavings had gathered. Shadows dragged themselves across the walls. I said nothing. I watched the smoke curl off the top of the fire and around his words to me: "We caught up with them at the Tallapoosa River. They had put themselves behind wooden walls and we could see them watching us. They waited. We took our time, first with the cannons. We watched the wood scatter in every direction and everything shook around them, but they didn't move. They screamed at us from

behind their wooden walls and banged on their drums and fired shots into the air and laughed.

"We came across the field. They heard us, all of us and our battle cries and they shot at us and men fell to the ground. I could see their painted faces. They smiled and kept firing, but that didn't stop us. Soldiers climbed over the walls, shot through the Indians like paper and stuck them through with the points of their rifles. Arrows, and spears, and balls, flew past me. I fired into the mess and lost the ball among the bodies. Soon after, we took them apart, piece-by-piece. It was slow."

He took off his glasses and closed his eyes. "I haven't told this to anyone," he said.

I looked into the fire and then at the floor.

"I shot an Indian boy through the throat," he continued. "He looked at me with his big eyes and he said nothing. He dropped like a stone to the ground. When I stood over him, his eyes were still open." He paused and cut at the wood. "For some time, we chased them all and shot them into the ground, one after the other. All around I saw painted bodies, crumpled against the dirt. I can still see their faces. Even hear their screams. We left nothing. We killed them all." He looked over the bit of wood. Rolled it around in his hands. Then he smoothed it out at the top and blew off the dust. Studied it with his eyes.

"I saw a small Indian boy wander over to a group of men. He was crying and naked and his face was dried with dust. A man stepped forward and smiled at the boy. Then he hit him in the head with the rifle. I watched that boy die and slump on the ground like a dead cat. The soldier laughed then he walked away, as if it were nothing."

My father cleared his throat. He swallowed. Something caught and quibbled in his chest. He stared at the wood and turned it in his hands. He shaped the bottom. Ran his knife slowly over the edges and brushed his finger across the sides. He shook the chips onto the floor.

“Those that we found by the river, we shot and threw into the water. I watched their bodies float down the bend and disappear into the grass. Soon after, we burned the walls. I watched the flames curl out into the sky. Then it was quiet. Everything was calm. It was over. Some soldiers cut on the Indians with knives, cut the noses from their smeared faces and stuffed them into bags. That’s how they kept count. Others took skin from the backs, the arms, and the legs and put them into baskets. Men laughed. They drank. They cheered.”

He took a drink. He stared into his empty glass and then at the fire. He drew in a deep breath and stared at the bit of wood in his hands. He rolled it around in his fingers and smoothed it over in his palms. “We were heroes,” he said. My father began to say something. Instead he shook his head. He stared down into his hands.

“But that was a long time ago,” he said. He moved from his chair and put another log onto the fire. He pulled on his coat. He closed his eyes for a moment. I saw his breath frozen in the air. For some time he was quiet. The silence dragged itself across my thoughts. I could think of nothing. Then he tried to say something. Nothing moved except his eyes.

That night, I heard my father cry out. I woke up when I heard him. He said something. Whatever it was, I didn’t hear it. After that, I think he stayed awake. For some time, I watched him. His sides raising up and sinking back down beneath the

moonlight. There was nothing I could say to him. I didn't sleep much after that. Just lay there under my covers, watching the white flakes fall quietly against the moonlight. They touched gently and disappeared against the glass.

April 6: 6:48 a.m.

*I weep against the tree, my rifle hard against my hand. I stare with watery vision, fix my eyes to the ground. I try not to look again, but the crumpled body of the boy creeps into the corner of my eye somehow, and my insides sink to my feet. I want to die. He is still clutching his rifle, his left hand forever reaching out toward me. The boy was not a killer. He died ten feet away from me and I did nothing. Just sat there stuck to the back of a tree. It was then that I felt something creep after me along the leaves. Perhaps it came from the boy's outstretched hand or drifted in through the smoke or the trees. Something that measured and fit me, slipped its fingers beneath my skin and filled the brittle spaces between my bones. Something I've never felt before. I had no name for it, whatever it was.*

Days: Part I *by J.T. Dawson*

I watched the rain pull apart a spider web, slide down the strings into the middle and snap without a sound. It wrapped along the branch in pieces and disappeared. My father stood beneath a tree. Rain dripped from the brim of his hat and traced down his face. It gathered in his beard, hung at the ends for a while before falling in droplets across the dirt, splashing against his boots. The rifle strap dug into his shoulder. Pressed the rain from his jacket. I watched it fall from the tips of his fingers, as though he were made of rain. As though he might disappear with the next big wind. He was silent, and for some time, we stood beneath the cover of the leaves. A patch of thunder punched through the air. The wind tore through branches. Veins of lightning cut through the sky, as though they were woven into the trees. We heard the horses through the wind. They screamed.

We pushed through the woods and down the footpaths. Wended our way through the tall grass and crossed along the stream. The rain pressed us almost to the ground. Lightning broke open the sky. Thunder rolled through the trees and the horses screamed again. As we came to the hill before the cabin, a faint glow flickered over the tops of the grass. When we reached the top, we looked out onto a fire, spreading slowly along the roof of the cabin. I looked to my father and he stared at the cabin. The fire stained his face. He blinked it away.

The horses whined and screamed, roared on their back legs and tried to break away from the fence. The fire had swallowed the roof and bent the windows. My father dropped the rifle and hobbled down the hill. He pulled out his knife and cut the horses loose from the post. They screamed and ran off into the woods. I watched them disappear with the lightning into the trees. I heard their screams scatter through the rain

and then they were gone. I watched my father grab a bucket from the top of the fence post and dip it into the water barrel. He flung the water at the fire and for a second a piece of it disappeared. Then it came back as if nothing happened. He dipped the bucket under and swung it at the fire again and again. Then he stopped. He dropped the bucket at his feet. His head fell to his chest. The fire roared at the sky.

For some time, I looked down toward my father from the hill. He didn't move. Just stood there, pounded by the rain, watching the fire spread along the cabin. He put his hands in his pockets. He turned and walked away. I couldn't see his face, only his shadow, walking towards the hill. I heard him cough. Then he stopped. I made my way down the hill and met him at the bottom. His face was black from the smoke. He coughed again. Then he looked at me. Covered me with those wild, blue eyes. He swallowed and opened his mouth, as though he wanted to say something. But instead he blinked and turned away. We looked out onto the cabin and from the hill we watched it burn beneath the rain.

The next morning a familiar voice settled around me. Spoke me into motion from beside the tree. It was my father. He handed me his canteen and a bit of bread he'd toasted over a fire. He sat beside me against the roots. Stabbed his knife into the dirt and wiped his hands over his knees. He took in a long breath. Held it in for a while and let it out. I bit into the bread. Tasted the smoke on the crust and swallowed a spot of water. The sun was soft on my face. Clouds hung about the sky and birds flew shadows across the sun. I looked down from the hill and the cabin was completely gone. Black logs crackled and popped. Folded over other logs and broke apart onto the ground. Smoke curled off the ash and into nowhere. Nearby, all the grass had shriveled into black curls against the dirt. What was left of the cabin was open to the sky.



I heard the horses whine and squeal. Across the way, by the woods, my father had tied them to the low branches of a tree. I pushed up to my feet and moved down the hill. The chickens were all dead. The cage was melted. Smoke curled from the twisted metal frame. They burned to death. The garden was covered in ash. There was nothing left. We pushed through the door and it crumbled against our fingers, leaving black smudges against our skin and I coughed when it curled into my mouth. I could taste the fire.

Beyond the door everything had burned to dust. I found what was left of an iron frying pan, twisted and folded in half. I tossed it out of the window and it didn't make a sound. I kicked past the melted chair where my father used to sit. The legs stuck up from the floor. The rest was burnt away into ground. I found one of his smaller woodcarvings buried amongst the ashes. When I picked it up it crumbled to dust in my hands. The wind blew it through my fingers. I wiped what was left on my pants, stood and walked outside and leaned against the fence post. My father stayed for sometime. He wiped the ash across the floor with his hands. Closed his fist around a handful of dust and then let it fall slowly without a sound from his fingers. He stood. Then he looked at the sky, as though an answer might fall from the moon. He waited.

I watched my father stand in the middle of a burnt down, empty cabin. He looked back down at the floor. He kicked at the black dust, looked at the walls, up at me, and stopped. My father put on his best smile and for a while his face went out of shape. Then he looked away, out into the open field behind the cabin. It was a golden field, spread far as the eye could see and it swallowed the sun like water. The wind pushed through the grass. Made the swaying stems bend and curl like waves. Birds leapt out

from beneath the grass and drew lines across the sky that disappeared just beyond the trees.

The wind left the grass and a cloud passed along the sun. There were no more birds along the sky. Everything went quiet. My father turned around and walked out of the cabin, pushed through the door and it crumbled to the ground. Black dust fell across his shirt and he brushed it off into the air. As he walked away from the cabin he looked up. The sun flashed off his glasses, ash covered his hands and streaked across his face. He stopped and stood in front of me, brushed his hands onto his pants and let them sit on top of his knees.

"I'm going into town," he said.

"For what?" I asked.

"Tools," he told me. "We are going to start building today. The sun is out and the weather is good. We don't need to waste any more time."

"Just the two of us are going to rebuild the cabin?"

My father looked at me through his glasses and he nodded. There were tiny drops of sweat along the tops of his eyes. "Yes. Just us and that's it." Then he looked away from me and out towards the cabin. "I'll need you to go into the woods and mark the timber for the cabin."

"What?"

"What's the matter?"

"How am I supposed to do that?" I was sure I wouldn't mark the right trees. They would be too small. Or too big, and then my father would have to do what I couldn't. I wanted to tell him I'd be fine with sleeping on the ground outside in the grass. By a fire, on the dirt, was good enough and that I'd be fine sleeping in the rain. It

wasn't true, but I'd say it just because I wouldn't mark the right trees. Though I would never tell him that.

"You'll think of something," he said to me. Then he turned and walked off into the woods. I watched him disappear over the hill. The clouds passed shadows across the sun. I watched my shadow vanish as if swallowed by the grass. I sat down on a bucket and shook my head at the idea of marking trees. Passed the back of my hand under my nose and watched the ants file through the grass. They followed in his steps.

I had once watched my father cut timber in the forest. He would knock on trees, as though they were doors and he'd listen for something in that knock. Then he'd talk under his breath. He never said much to the trees. Just whispers and I never knew what he said or if he said anything at all. But if he thought it was ready he'd carve a line deep into the bark. If not he'd leave it and pat its side as if to say 'goodbye,' or 'maybe next time.' Then he'd walk on to the next tree and repeat. When he marked all the trees, we sat on a rock and picked at the blackberry vines. Gathered them in a tin bucket and ate them while the sun stuck through the slits in the leaves. We didn't say much of anything to each other. Only that the berries were good and the trees looked healthy enough for firewood in the winter. Then I thought of my father whispering short turns to the trees. I wondered what he said to them or if he'd ever tell me.

I stood, picked up the pail beneath me, and walked into the woods. For some time, I walked the worn footpaths through the forest. Passed tree after tree until I found myself where the sun wouldn't reach. There the trees were thick and looked the same. They were big and round and twisted towards the sky. The leaves swayed with the wind like green feathers. I listened to the bugs chirp and whistle from the low branches and the grass. The wind was hot and raised sweat off my forehead. I stopped at a big

tree. Knocked against the base with my knuckles. It was hard and scraped my hand. I took out my knife and tried to chip at the bark. It wouldn't give. It was not a good tree.

I marched deeper into the woods beneath the cover of green leaves. I continued my search for trees. Pushed my way through thickets of bushes. Passed over a hill and crossed the banks of a ravine before I realized I'd gone too far. Once I marked the trees how were we going to get them to the cabin? If I pushed too far into the forest it would be impossible to pull them out. Or we'd have to cut them there and then carry them by hand. At that moment, I turned around and made for the cabin.

I walked past hundreds of trees along the way to the cabin. But none of them, I thought, would have fit my father's knock. Most I found were too big. The others were either dead or just saplings, not yet ready to be cut. I thought that I might return to the cabin with no trees marked. Then what would my father think? What would he say? I already knew what he'd say. He'd say nothing or shake his head and let out a long sigh. He'd take his knife into the woods and mark the trees. He'd knock and whisper to himself and cut a line into the trees he'd chosen. All of this would happen while I sat on a bucket by the cabin and waited for him to come back. It was then that I walked through a thicket of yellow birch trees. They were tall and spread alongside one another at the top. Black spots glazed the wood. Drew lines along the branches that lead into the leaves. The high branches swayed in the wind and with them the birds drew color across the sky.

I knocked against a birch tree and it didn't hurt. Not the way the others had. The tree simply cushioned and pushed back against my knuckles, let them sink in for a second before pushing them out into the air. I watched an ant clamor up the side of the tree. It stopped and moved its antennae along the bark, as if to look for something then it

moved on and disappeared into the leaves. I looked up into the green leaves. Ran my hands along the smooth bark. The tree was thick, but not too thick and I could tell it was strong. I took out my knife and cut a line into its skin. I watched the slit in the bark open up and take in the wind and I wondered where the wind went. If it was stuck inside of the tree, or if came out through the leaves all along the branches. Wherever it went I didn't know or if it even really mattered, but I wondered all the same. I did this to every birch I found in the patch and when I was done I had chosen and marked twenty-eight trees.

The entire walk back to the cabin, I thought of my father. I wondered what trees he would have chosen if his father asked him to do the same. Then I thought about my grandfather and how I never really knew him. I wondered if he would have chosen the same trees I did. Or if I even chose the right trees. If he'd like them the way I did and what he'd say if he didn't. I wondered if he was at all like my father.

I stopped at a hill and just around the bend I found a thick vine of fox grapes. I broke one from the vine. It was purple and fat. When I bit into it the sour juice filled my mouth. I broke off entire bunches of the grapes and dumped them into the bucket until it was overflowing. After I was finished I continued on, a short walk, the rest of the way to the cabin. When I reached the top of the hill, I saw my father. He sat against a log sharpening the teeth of a long cross saw. He took his time with each stroke. Made every slide of the blade mean something. I wondered what he was thinking.

I took a grape from the bucket and stopped at the top of the hill. The sun glazed its skin. I looked down at the grape in my hand, twisted it around between my fingers, and admired how round and purple it was and then I wondered what was really inside a grape. Was there time found beneath the skin of a grape? If I unraveled it would time

fall out? What would I do with that time? And at that moment, another question filled my head: I wondered if I would ever be like my father. If I'd ever become the same kind of man he was. He sat against the log and looked into the sky. Then he took to sharpening the blade.

As I reached my father beside the log, my shadow melted into his. He looked up and stopped the file. I set the bucket at his side. He picked out a grape and tossed it into his mouth. He winced at the taste and swallowed. He stuck the file against the blade and moved it back and forth. *Shick saw. Shick saw. Shick saw.*

"What about the trees?" he asked me. He took another grape and tossed it into his mouth.

"I found a lot of them. They're good trees. They're strong and sturdy. I found them in a clearing not too far from here."

"How many did you find?"

"Twenty-eight," I said.

His face said nothing. His eyes continued to sit on the blade, as he slid the file against the teeth of the saw. He blew off the dust. "Let's go have a look." He set the saw against the ground. I saw the grass trace along its edge.

I lead my father through the forest to the patch of birch trees. He stopped in the clearing and cleared his throat. He looked around. Leaned against one of the trees and crossed his arms. "Why birch trees?"

"Why not?" I said.

He stared at me for a minute. Then he turned to a birch tree and looked it up and down. Ran his fingers along the bark. Then he knocked on the tree. Whispered something to himself, turned around and said, "They'll do just fine." He stood along

side me and squeezed my shoulder, but said nothing. Just popped another grape into his mouth and chewed on it. We both stood in the clearing, looking out onto the birch trees that swayed in the wind

When night came, my father built a small fire. He sat at its edge and continued to sharpen the blades and I watched the fire flash across his glasses when he looked down. He was quiet. I watched him for a bit, while I toasted a chunk of bread on a branch. I chewed at the fox grapes while I waited for it to cool down. When I took a drink my thoughts drifted to my grandfather.

“Was grandfather quiet like you?” I asked my father. “When he was your age, you know, and you were—” His eye twitched at the question. He stopped, as though he were about to say something. I stuffed a chunk of bread into my mouth. But he didn’t say anything. Just went right back to running the file along the blade. I took a swallow of water to wash down the bread and slipped another grape into my mouth. I turned to watch the fireflies flash across the open field.

“And I was your age? Is that what your getting at?” He asked me. I nodded. He looked down and he didn’t answer right away. I waited for some time before he spoke again. “Yeah, I suppose he was.”

“I don’t remember him at all,” I said to my father, as he tossed a grape into his mouth. “I guess I never really knew him.”

My father didn’t say anything, just sat against the log and looked out into the fire. He stopped sharpening the blade. Stopped eating the grapes and began to throw them one by one into the fire, as though they were thoughts of his father. They sizzled and popped in the coals, shriveled into black dots that curled away to nowhere.

"Better get some sleep," my father said. His words broke open the silence and settled along my ears. "I want to get the cabin down tomorrow. That way we can start cutting those trees out and start the work on them."

I nodded. I wanted to ask my father more about his father, but I knew better. I rolled over on my back and covered myself in the blankets and slid my hands behind my head and looked up into the night sky. Clouds dragged themselves across the stars like smoke and curled like a hand along the moon.



April 6: 6:50 a.m.

*The wind inside the leaves sounds like rain. I sit in silence for a bit. I look up and while the leaves fill my eyes, I think about dying and the different ways to die. I am alone. The world stops. As I close my eyes, my heart squeezes a thousand tiny knives. I think it might pop, push itself through my chest. Then another thousand cuts my chest into slices to let the air out. I can barely breathe. Across the way, the man with the beard smiles at me as if to say something. I wait for words to take shape from behind his eyes, but they never do. His eyes close. He is still smiling. I swallow hard and it hurts. The weight of the boy lays itself across my shoulders, slips in through the hole and into my chest, across my lungs, tons of it on my heart. It drifts up onto my eyes where I see a fox peep from behind a log. The last thing I expect to see. He takes a drink from a puddle and looks toward me. His eyes cover me. Steal their way into my heart as if to look for something. Whatever it was I did not know. Or if what he wanted was even there. I wait for him to move. But he lowers his eyes to the leaves. And as he walks away, I swear, he shakes his head.*

Days: Part II by J.T. Dawson

My father was nineteen the first time the cabin collapsed. He tells me that all that spring storms came and went. Dumped rain all over the land and flooded the streams. It rained for days at a time that spring, he says, you would wake up in the morning and rain would sit over the trees and drip all afternoon, stop for a while and then start again. The clouds were thin like the smoke from his father's pipe. Then they'd go dark and fat and the wind would blow through the trees and wrap around the cabin like a rope. *It's only a storm*, my grandfather used to say, when my father looked out the window. The lightning would flash through the glass. Thunder would pound against the door. Then it would stop, go quiet, and start to rain again. That was normal. Then one morning, my father tells me, one dark morning, the storms didn't stop and nothing went quiet.

In the late afternoon, during the last days of March of that year, my grandfather goes into town to fetch the doctor. "My wife is sick with something," he tells the doctor, a fragile old man with stubble and yellowed eyes. He has tried everything to make her better, but finally there is nothing he can do for her. The doctor arrives that night and pushes my father out onto the porch and closes the door. My grandfather's face stretches along the window with the lamplight and for some time, he and the doctor speak.

That night, after the doctor leaves, my grandfather calls my father into the cabin to explain why she is sick, just the way the doctor has done for him. He sits by the fire in his chair for some time, looking at a spot on his hand. He tries to say something to my father, but instead the words quibble in his throat. He tries again. "Your mother's pregnant," my grandfather says.

My father stands next to the fire. He kicks at the logs against the wall and laughs to himself. He is excited, though he is nervous about the baby. He remembers the old

baby clothes: the toys, the shoes and blankets never worn. He stares into the fire. His eyes catch the light and he squints. He has his father's eyes and they are wild, blue eyes. He stands there by the fire and tries hard to think of anything he can to keep his mind still. He looks at his father and he doesn't look scared. He doesn't look like much of anything, just a man sitting in a chair. His father stares into the fire. My father expects to be like his father very soon.

Late that night, my grandfather sits on the porch. He drinks at his whiskey and takes a draught from his cigarette. He flicks it into the grass and blows the smoke through his nostrils. It curls up to the moon. My father sits with him. He is silent on the steps. When he is with his father he is usually quiet. He stares past what is in front of him into blank thoughts behind his eyes. For a while, he sits inside his little pocket of silence and turns over old thoughts.

Then the pocket is broken; the door opens and his mother stands in the doorway. She is sweating and pale and her red hair is crimped against her face. "I'm feeling warm again, William," she says to my grandfather. He looks at my father and smiles half-heartedly. My grandfather is an older man, nearing his sixties. He is thick and well-built and he still has the body and the spirit of a younger man, even after the years in the war and the sun. But my father can see the age in his eyes and they are heavy. My father stands and leans against wall. My grandfather squeezes his shoulder, lowers his eyes to the ground, and steps back into the cabin. He shakes his head and closes the door.

That night, my father lies in bed, watching the rain slip down the window, one fat droplet after another, again and again. Then it stops and lightning breaks open the sky. Thunder punches through the forest and rattles against the cabin. Then everything goes quiet. There is no sound. He hears his breath. The wind picks up and then circles

around the cabin and settles on the roof. The window by my father's bed rattles and shakes and then it busts over him. The wind is screaming at him through the window. He shouts at my grandfather, but my grandfather is holding onto the woman in the bed. She is screaming and looking around at the cabin as if it might pick up and fly away. Slats of the roof pull up and break off into the wind, as though something is trying to get in. Shingles fall to the floor of the cabin without a sound. The only thing my father hears is the wind. It pokes its fingers through the wooden walls and drags them across the cabin floor. The wind swells and sweeps across the cabin and in a wave it pushes the bed over on top of my father's mother. His father falls away from the bed and at once, my father runs over to his mother. He sees her face, though the bed covers the rest of her body and she doesn't move. His father tries to pull her out, but she won't move and as the winds scream inside the cabin, my grandfather moves my father into a corner. Soon after, the remainder of the roof falls in on top of the bed. My father's mother is buried beneath the planks of wood and shingles.

For some time, the wind screams and punches at the cabin, pounding at the sides, again and again. Then suddenly the wind rolls itself into a ball and passes on through the woods to somewhere else. The door stops shaking and falls off the hinges. My father sees the moon and the stars are fat. The sky is clear. He stands in the cabin next to his father and they stare at his mother's hand. It is small and gentle. The fingers look as though they are reaching out toward my father and when he goes to touch her hand his father stops him. *Don't*, he says. That's the last my father saw of her.

My father tells me this story as he chips away at the side of the cabin with his axe. Pieces fall in chunks to the ground. Crackle and break open next to his boots and drift away in the wind. He stops and looks at the sky. Wipes his face with a rag and

sticks the axe into the ground. He drinks from his canteen. Pours water down the back of his neck. The horses' ears flick at the flies. The sun sits high in the sky, presses the water into nothing. There is no wind inside the leaves and the trees don't sway. The grass is still and black and everything sits quiet. My father turns over the bucket and sits down. He looks at the ground. Takes the axe from the dirt and brushes the ash from the head with his hands. Wipes them against his pant legs and drops the axe back to the cracked earth. He tells me that his father loved her more than anything. That he was never the same after she was gone. Then he looks at me for a moment. Stands in the sun and grabs the axe. Then he turns and walks towards the black walls of the cabin.

Two months after his mother is buried, my grandfather takes my father into town. They walk through the woods, beneath the cover of green leaves, along the stream, and up the dirt roads to the very edge of the town. My grandfather carries his rifle, strapped across his shoulder. He is quiet. The town is small and hot and it sits like a dead animal in the sun. It is quiet and still and almost no one is out in the streets. My father watches the heat yawning at him like a ghost off of the ground and people bend in and out of view as if behind dirty glass. My grandfather walks into a shop to get nails for the roof and my father waits outside in the sun. At that moment, he sees Charlotte. She is a quiet girl and doesn't say much of anything to anyone. She stands alone beneath a tree, curling her blonde hair around her fingers like strands of wheat and when he sees her he feels his stomach jumble up in knots and he can't breathe. He picks up a flower and he hides it behind his back. At once, he knows he is going to marry her. He walks up to her and he smiles. He forgets to speak and she looks at him funny with those heavy, green eyes and then she looks away.

"Hello." My father quibbles his words.

She doesn't do anything. She just stands there and looks at him. She looks puzzled, like she is about to say something, and then she doesn't. She stares at a spot in the dirt, then she looks up into the leaves of the tree and at the sky, and even plays with her fingers, while my father kicks at the dirt. For some time they are quiet. Neither of them can think of what to do or what to say and then my father swallows, clears his throat, and hands her the flower.

'Here,' he says.

He doesn't look at her. She twists her fingers over and around her hand again and she doesn't take the flower right away. She doesn't do anything, really. They stand apart, as though a silent space is expanding between them, pushing one away from the other, and then a bell jingles and the shop door opens. My grandfather pushes past the door and out into the road. He waves to my father and makes his way over towards the two of them. My father turns to Charlotte. She smiles at him. "Thank you," she says and takes the flower in her hand. She smells it, draws every part of the flower into her chest; holds it in there and then lets it out. My father feels a piece of him go with that flower and from that day on he is hers forever. She turns and she walks along the road and disappears around a corner and my father stands there in the same spot and smiles at her back. He smiles as he tells me this. He almost never smiles.

That night, my father lies awake thinking of Charlotte. He wonders where she is and what she is doing and if she is thinking about him the way he is about her. Then when he thinks my grandfather is asleep, he sneaks out of the cabin and into the woods. The moon is full and large and is woven into the leaves and even curls along the top of the grass. My father walks along a worn footpath and then he wades through a field

before he finds a small patch of violets that bend against the moonlight. He smiles down at the purple flowers and picks them all for her, every last one of them. Then he slides his nose gently down into the bundle and takes in a breath and holds it in his chest. He smiles and lets it out and every time he smells the flowers like this, thoughts of Charlotte swarm about his head. He closes his eyes and imagines her standing beside him in the field beneath the moon. She sways like the grass and smiles. He takes his face away from the flowers and the wind brushes through the grass. *Charlotte. Charlotte. Charlotte.* He lets her name slip into his thoughts and crawl along his insides, and soon he can't tell whether the sound is coming from the wind inside the grass or from a place deep inside himself.

Everyday after that my father hikes into town and gives Charlotte a flower. He rehearses what he will tell her along the way, to the flowers and the trees, but when he sees her, he forgets what he wants to say. He hands her the flower and smiles. She smiles back and then she places the flower in her hair, just above her ear. My father grabs her hand and she doesn't pull away. She squeezes his hand back and at that moment, he feels something creep after him along the road. Perhaps it comes from Charlotte's hand or drifts in through the trees. Something that measures and fits him and slips its fingers beneath his skin and fills the brittle spaces between his bones. Something he's never felt before. He tells me, he has no name for it, whatever it is.

That night my father comes home and finds my grandfather sitting on the steps of the cabin, holding one of the flowers in his hand. My father sits on the steps and when my grandfather looks at him, my father sees sadness gather in his eyes. My grandfather swallows and chokes on a cough. "I miss her," my grandfather says. "I picked one for

her every morning. I still do." My grandfather brings the flower to his nose, takes in a breath, and closes his eyes. He smiles and my father touches his father's shoulder.

For some time, they are both quiet. My father stares at his hand spread across his knee, while his father stares off into the flower. Then my father quietly confesses to my grandfather that he is in love with Charlotte. My father is surprised at the words he has let loose to my grandfather and the weight of these words spread across my father's shoulders, slips in through his nostrils and into his chest, across his lungs, tons of it on his heart. It drifts up onto his mind where he sees Charlotte as he closes his eyes. My grandfather stares hard at the flower and stays quiet for a long time.

"I loved your mother," he says. He stares into the flower and brings it to his nose again. "I loved her more than you will ever know." He repeats it. Then he twists the flower between his thumb and his index finger, as though he were twirling thoughts of my father's mother in his hand. "Do right by her," he says. "Keep her, love her and never stop." My grandfather tucks the flower into his shirt pocket.

"Yes, sir," says my father.

My grandfather sits on the steps and stares at the toes of his boots. He rubs at his knees with his hands and when my father moves up the steps, my grandfather grabs his arm and looks up at him. My father looks back down and my grandfather looks as though he might say something. But instead he tries a smile. My father pats his shoulder and pushes through the cabin door.

This is the story my father tells me as he rubs his hands along his pant legs. He doesn't look at me. For some time, he picks at the wall. *Chop. Chop. Chop.* Then he stops. Lets the axe fall to the ground. Then he lifts a shaky arm to the wall and lets his head



collapse down to his shoulders. He turns away from me. Chokes back hard, jumbled sobs.

"Your mother died too young," he says to me. My father leans against the wall.

"How," I ask him.

For a while, he stands there. He doesn't turn around. "She died when you were born." Then he walks away from me. I can hear his voice. He is speaking quietly to himself. He walks off towards the trees and dust lips off the heels of his boots. I stand and watch my father walk away. I look at the ash on my fingers. Turn over my hands and follow the trail up my arms to my neck and run my fingers across my face. I walk over to the water bucket. Stare down at my reflection in the water. I look for her in my face.

I stand over the water in silence. Look down at myself and wonder if I will ever see her again, or if she will ever want to see me. I wonder where she is and if she is the same woman my father remembers from so very long ago. I wonder if she will remember me if we ever cross paths. "Come back," I whisper into the water.

In the months following, we built the cabin again. We cleared the ash and charred wood, cut the new timber and shaped the logs, stacked them one by one through the mornings when the sun was low, and into the evenings just before we lay beneath moon. My father would lie beside me with his hands behind his head. Though he was mostly quiet, I knew he was saying something. Maybe one day I will understand what he was trying to say. Maybe not.

Long after the cabin was finished, I often sat in a chair by the window. Watched the rain slip down the glass and wash the trees together into a green blur. My father

would sit quietly at the table. He'd carve at and shape soft chunks of wood with his knife. One day, while the rain covered the cabin, he sat at the table and looked down into his tea and spoke quietly to himself. He cleared his throat and looked up at me. His cup continued to rest on the table. His fingers draped over the sides, occasionally tracing its lip.

"I'm sorry I killed my mother," I said to him.

He took a drink and looked at me. Then he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, pulled off his glasses and wiped at them with a rag. He raised his head and covered me with his eyes. I watched the age in them settle on my face. He stared at me for some time before he lowered his eyes down to the floor. Finally, he stood, walked over and pressed on my shoulder and squeezed it. He was quiet for a few minutes, as though he were soaking in my thoughts.

"It wasn't your fault," he told me. He squeezed my shoulder again. "I'm sorry I never told you that."

I moved away from his hand. Walked past the table and tore off some bread from the sack along the counter. I didn't hear him move: the crackle of his chair when he sat down or the scuff of his boots across the floor. I am a few years younger than he was now, the year of the storm. For a while, I stared down at my hands and listened to the silence fill up the room. Waited for him to say something, but he said nothing. When I turned back to the table the front door was open. My father glanced back as if to say something before he shut it.

When I got to the window he was a breath against the glass. The wind swept up the rain, rolled it into a cloud that passed over to someplace else. At that moment the

sun touched through the wet glass. Brushed my skin with its warm whisper. I watched  
him move farther and farther away until he moved beyond my sight.

April 6: 6:51 a.m.

*I huddle against the tree, watch the sky close and shut tight. The wind splits open the leaves above my head. They fall like rusty feathers. Scrape against the bark and down onto my face. Gunfire grows distant, though I can still hear footsteps scatter amongst the leaves. I bend my face around the tree to the boy, hoping that he has moved. That he has somehow pushed himself out of the dirt and simply walked away into the woods. My eyes find his hand and he lays there, still, a crumpled boy, amongst the leaves. My face spills quietly into my hands.*

*Winter by J.T. Dawson*

I brought the axe down through a log. Watched it split in two and fall in pieces down to the snow. I brought another log up, set it on the stump, and brought the axe down through it too and repeated again and again until there were no logs left. Then I stopped and blew warm air through my fingers and watched my breath swirl into the air from my hands, roll into a ball and twist away with the wind into the trees. The trees stood stiff, like wooden bodies in a silent forest. They cracked and groaned in the wind. Trees don't bend much when it's cold.

I brought the axe down into the stump. Stacked the logs against the cabin, ten long and seven high. It wouldn't be enough to last through the next few days. I thought about stopping. Waiting to go out and find more timber until the next day, but winter doesn't wait for anyone. I thought how in winter the days grew longer or sometimes never got going. Never lifted themselves with the sun to break open the clouds and crawl across the horizon. Everything left when winter arrived. It would not be fought with. Not ignored or run off. Winter dragged itself across the sky, cut through the forest and breathed away the leaves. Then it fell in pieces that stuck to your face, cut your lips and ears and left you squeezed between the sky and the ground. It came in late November, raked its fingers across the windows. Squeezed itself through the door and slipped into the hollow spaces between your bones. It kept hold of you for three months. Then it left without a sound. That's winter in the woods.

I pulled my jacket up around my neck and tightened my scarf beneath my chin. Pushed down my hat to block the wind and the snow from my face. Dug my hands into my pockets and set off for the woods. The wind rattled my frame and as I looked back at

the cabin, I watched the chimney smoke curl into the spaces between the snow. The wind blew it away and it was gone just like that.

The snow fell heavier in the woods. It stuck to the trees and covered the trail that led through the forest. My boots sliced through the snow and crunched beneath my feet. Clumps caught along my ankles, crept down my heels and pools of cold water settled between my toes. I passed under trees whose branches looked like stone fingers that cut lines into the winter sky. Pine needles poked through the snow, like green fingers and I saw a little color buried beneath the white.

For some time, I walked. I balled my hands into fists and tried to catch the heat between my fingers. It didn't stay for long and the harder I squeezed the colder they got, until I couldn't squeeze anymore. Moments later I strode out into a clearing. I looked back and the trees looked the same, as though I had walked alone into the middle of nowhere. All around me I watched the wind pick up the snow and when I looked to the ground, I saw the woodpile, as though the wind had blown it across my eyes. I bent down and wrapped my hands around the largest stump I could manage. Picked it up and threw it onto my shoulder. I turned back towards the cabin, lowered my head into the wind, and took to slicing through the snow.

The cabin was about a hundred yards ahead through the forest. Acres of silence and trees that I knew well stood in front of me, behind me, and at either side and I thought about how heavy the snow was growing on top of the log and how it pressed the cold into my shoulder. I thought about dropping it, letting the cold swallow it down into the snow and press it into nothing, but I didn't. I kept walking, felt the snow crunch beneath the bottoms of my boots. The crunch could have been my spirit. I felt lifeless. I took a breath and I smelled the forest. Tasted the sharp tang of the cold and the bark on

the air and let it sit inside of my chest. I adjusted the log across my shoulder. As I looked out across the forest, I saw the line of chimney smoke rising towards the grey pockets of empty sky and at that moment, I thought of my father. I imagined him alone in the cabin sitting in a chair by the fire pulling on the end of a cigarette. He'd take a draught. Hold it in for a moment and then let it out through his mouth. The smoke would slide over his face. Break open across his chest and fall against his feet. It would cover him. Stick to his body, as though he were made of smoke and if I opened the door I was sure he might blow away into nothing, twist up into a smoky tendril and slip out with the wind and never return. The winter did that to my father. Filled his eyes with voices and cold faces that wouldn't be blinked away. He'd smoke and he'd get lost in a silence that filled the cabin. Then he'd sit in front of the fire for hours and not say a word.

After I'd walked a few minutes, I looked up and saw the cabin and through the window I saw my father's pale face, as though he were a snowflake, sticking to the glass and I waited for him to disappear. He spoke in my direction and I couldn't hear him. Just watched his lips bend through the glass. To me, an unsettling apparition: my father, the lonely ghost of a man, moving his lips against the cold, talking through the glass to me, to himself, then to the ground, conversing with whatever he thought was by his side.

I dropped the log beside the woodpile and the wind blew hard. I pushed through it and onto the porch, stomped the snow from my boots and opened the cabin door. My father sat in a chair by the fire. He swallowed a spot of tea, passed his hand beneath his nose and coughed hard into his arm. His body tried to shake away the cold. He gathered the blankets around his neck and as he reached out towards the table, his fingers trembled around his cup. He began to cough again, shaking violently to catch his

breath only to push it out again and again. The tin cup dropped from his hands and clanked against the floor. The tea drew puddles across the wood. Spilt into the cracks and spread thin beneath the legs of the table. He turned and looked up at me and moved his lips, as though he were going to say something. But instead he coughed again and I watched him hunch over in his chair, as though the cold were bending him in half and punching the air out.

I walked over and placed my hand on his shoulder. He took in a deep breath and held it in and as he let it out he sank back into his chair and at that moment, I felt my hand freeze to his shoulder. Nothing could warm my fingers. Not even the fire, I thought. I looked down at him, swiped my eyes across his face. Watched his chest tremble to rise and fall, and caught his fingers shaking against his knees. I stood beside him and he made no more effort to speak or move. He closed his eyes and fell asleep, and I sat down in the chair beside him. Removed my boots and socks and set my feet in front of the fire, and I felt the cold bare its teeth and chew at my toes. I eyed my father some more, watched the stubble along his chin turn silver in the fire light, as he pulled in deep, unsteady breaths through his nose. His head fell to the side and his eyelids flickered, as though all of the faces had poked their fingers into his dreams.

I looked down at my feet and watched the fire spill out across my toes and I thought they might melt away like the snow and run in lines across the floor. I went silent and my eyes glazed over with a dribble of thought. My father held so many men behind his eyes that it's a wonder he could even sleep: men from the Creek War, the Battle of the Thames, and other small wars that no one talked about anymore, hundreds or thousands of men dead and gone, wiped away into nothing and forgotten. He almost never talked about them. He had seen too much fighting. I asked him why he never



talked about them once, to which he answered, Fort Mims, Talladega, and the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, the flat lands of Alabama where thousands of men fell to the dirt: thousands of Indians and hundreds of soldiers, shot, blown up, or stabbed one another into the ground without a thought. "How many, William, do you think remember that," he asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"No one and that was hardly forty years ago," he said.

I rubbed my head with a cold hand and looked back over towards my father. I was watching a man coming apart with age, a man taking in the cold with every breath and there was nothing I could do or say. I looked away back to the fire, and only the sharp silence filled the space between us.

I awoke the next morning and the fire was out. My breath ballooned in the air, dragged itself across my eyes like a ghost and thinned out over my face. I shivered myself awake and looked over at my father. He sat in the chair, the line of blankets drawn across his lap, while his head leaned over towards his shoulder. His mouth hung open like a cave where nothing came out, and only the cold went in. His face was a mixture of blue, silence, and sadness. I stood up and walked my reflection across his eyes.

I nudged his shoulder with my fingers and he just sat there in his chair. I stood silent and the cold tang burned in my nostrils. I rubbed my forehead with a cold hand. Ran my fingers through my hair and scratched the sleep from my scalp. All I could do was stare and I sat back down in my chair, as no thoughts formed inside my head and I didn't know whether to scream or cry, so I did nothing, but cover my mouth. The wind

rattled the door and I closed my eyes, covered my ears and my first thought of was my father. I thought of him on the other side of the door, twisting the knob back and forth, pounding his fist against the wood, trying to get into the cabin and shake away the cold. I opened my eyes and I stared ahead with watery vision, fixed my eyes to the ground. I tried not to look again, but my father's face crept into the corner of my eye somehow, and my insides sank to my feet. I felt the fear scream inside my stomach, and at once, I knew it could not be him outside the door. He was as still as the stones beneath the snow: cold, hard, and grey.

I walked over and stood in front of my father. I stared down at him for a moment. Swiped my eyes over his face. Waited for something to move or flinch, though I knew nothing would. Then I reached a hand over his face, pushed his eyes shut and pulled the blankets up over his head. I felt my legs tremble, wondered what I would do now that he was gone, and I was alone and I felt the silence that he once filled lay itself across my shoulders. Slip into my chest, across my lungs, tons of it on my heart. It drifted up onto my eyes where I saw the blanket and behind that the shape of my fathers face. I stopped and looked away. The air had grown colder. It was silent in the cabin. Like the sound the dead make.

I slipped on my boots and buttoned on my jacket. Pulled a pair of gloves from my pocket and slid them over my cold fingers. I grabbed my hat and wrapped my scarf around my neck and when I opened the door the first knife cut across my face, then the second not far behind. The cold rolled over my body and filled up the cabin and when I looked back towards my father the blankets still covered his face. I shut the door behind me, grabbed the shovel and felt the handle freeze to my hand. I sucked in a deep breath.

Choked down the cold air and let it out in coughs. The snow fell in lines across my shoulders.

I walked out to the edge of the woods, took the shovel and punched it through the snow into the ground and heaved to the side the frozen dirt. The wind whipped the snow back into my face. I lowered my head and leaned into the cold, as it shaped itself into a thousand tiny fists that spread across my face and punched at my skin. The cold was on top of me and for some time, it pounded me deeper and deeper into the hole, as though I were a nail. The wind grew longer and sharper. The snow heavier and harder and though my hands were numb I dug harder to keep warm. *Shick. Scoop. Shick. Scoop. Dig harder. Dig faster. Dig to keep warm.*

I dug.

As I swung shovels of dirt out of the hole I remembered my father, when he carved at bits of wood by the fire between pulls of smoke from his cigarettes, the rifle he carried wherever he went, as though he carried the men with him at his side, the way his jaw tensed just before he spoke, and how he meant every word he said, though he hardly spoke at all. That was my father.

Snow drifted into the hole and hit the ground without a sound. I straightened and stood in the hole. I found I had dug up to my chest. As I stood there, I felt the wind whip through the trees and slap across my back, one cold punch after another, until it seemed to me that all of winter's winds were blowing across the hole and pushing into me.

I threw the shovel out of the hole and climbed out onto my stomach. Pushed myself onto my feet and watched my hands disappear into the snow and when I looked up towards the cabin, it was dark. The wind and the snow had filled in my footprints

from where I had walked only a few hours before. I cupped the scarf over my mouth. Then I broke through the drifts and pushed back towards the cabin.

The ghosts of men took my father, I thought. Dragged themselves across the ground, the trees, and through the snow. Squeezed in through the small space between the windows and poked their fingers into his thoughts and pressed them into nothing, until they were the only thoughts left. The only thoughts his mind could produce, and so he stopped thinking and spent the rest of his days, eyes open staring off into the fire.

The door groaned when I pushed it open. The light frayed in sheets through the window and the cabin was mostly dark. Though I could still see the outline of the blankets in the chair and beneath them what was left of my father. I stopped at the edge of the room where the light cut through the floor. Ran my eyes over the blankets and then looked away. I couldn't see his face. But I could see his eyes when I closed mine. Those cold, blue eyes looking up at me with nothing to them. I shook my head at everything. Then I walked over towards the chair. I reached around my father's back and wrapped my arms along his side and then took my hands away. I felt sick when I touched him.

My eyes dropped to the floor and I looked at my father's hand. It was blue and his fingers almost curled into the chair. It hung loose, as though it never belonged to him. Something that poked out of the blankets, and caught the dribbles of cold light, if such a thing existed. A hand: four fingers and a thumb, held a rifle, cups of tea, a knife that carved at wood, matches that lit the ends of cigarettes. I paced the room, swam in and out of the light, and thought how he wouldn't do any of those things anymore and how I hadn't said more than a few words to him the night before. It was then that I felt something creep after me along the floor. Perhaps it came from my father's hand or

drifted in with the cold or through the door. Something that measured and fit me, and whatever it was it slipped its fingers beneath my skin and filled the brittle spaces between my bones. At that moment, I decided I was going to bury my father. It was the best thing to do.

I grabbed a coil of string from the table and shoved it into my pocket. Walked over and wrapped the rest of the blankets around my father's legs and feet. Around his arms to his back and up over the back of his head. I took out the string and tied a line around his feet, moved up and tied a knot at his waist and then around his head. I took a step back, looked at the shape of my father behind the blankets, as though it were a cocoon and stared out through the window and watched the wind gather snow in its hands and throw it through the air. I watched the white flakes tap against the glass.

I bent down and lifted the blankets and my father with them out of the chair and swung him gently over my shoulder. I felt my father's chest sink into my shoulder and I stopped. Waited for something to snap against my arm, or for him to jump awake, but neither happened. I walked out of the door, down the steps, and into the snow, until I found myself standing over the hole, staring down into nothing.

The hole was darker than the sky and for a second I couldn't find the shovel. The snow had covered it in the short time it had taken me to walk from the cabin with my father. I kicked around and found it with my boot along the edge, shifted my father and cradled him in my arms. I looked down and saw the outline of his open mouth through the sheets. At that moment, the wind died down and the snow fell straight out of the sky onto my shoulders. It took its time.

From down in the hole, I stood and pulled my father to the bottom. Set him gently onto the steady stream of snow and pebbles that had gathered beneath my boots.

I looked down and watched the hard dots spread over the blankets and after a few minutes everything went white. The snow had covered him. I tried to say something. But instead let the silence spill in with the snow and fill the space between us.

I reached up, and climbed out of the hole. Grabbed the shovel and stabbed at the heap of dirt mixed with snow. Threw the first shovelful in and watched it spread on top of his chest. Fall over his face and fill the space behind his head. I threw the next heap onto his feet and when I brought the shovel up the flat side caught the wind like a sail and whirled around my side. I let the shovel fall into the snow. I thought about leaving it there. Thought about letting the wind and the snow fill up the hole so I wouldn't have to finish what I'd started. But instead, I picked it up in my hands. Felt the cold stick to my fingers, and returned to scooping and throwing and watched as he disappeared from my eyes, one white scoop after another until the hole was gone. I stabbed the shovel into the ground. Let it stand upright against the wind. Here was my father, stiller than a stone, wrapped in blankets beneath the snow and I put him there. He belonged completely to the cold. I was sure the ground would press him into nothing. It was late on a blue afternoon.

After I'd made a fire in the cabin, I sat in my chair for a few minutes. Covered myself in a blanket and stared off into the fire, as my father had done many times before. Whether I thought I might find him in the flames or just needed to find the heat, I didn't know. All I could think of was his face. The grey stubble. The narrow nose. And those cold, blue eyes. After that, I didn't think much of anything. Then I let my face spill into my hands. Cupped my fingers over my eyes and squeezed out all the light. When I looked up I saw my father's rifle leaning against the wall. Across the room I saw his

boots, rough and worn to the sole. They sat beneath his chair. His chair: where he spent most of his time smoking, drinking, sleeping, or staring off into the fire. My eyes widened and all around the cabin, I saw pieces of my father, things that he was made of. The things he carried but couldn't take with him. I thought about throwing it all away, opening the door and tossing out all the pieces of my father into the snow. And that stopped me. I couldn't just throw him away like that.

I let the silence fill the cabin up to the roof. He had lived for sixty-six years in a cabin in the woods. If I were to sum his life up in a few words, I would say that he was a ghost, more than he was a man. But it didn't matter anymore what I thought. I knew that he was never coming back.

Tears brimmed at the bottoms of my eyes. The air in the room dropped and chilled across my shoulders. I'd never felt like this before. I stood and looked out the window. Watched my breath stick in sheets against the glass and in the fading light I imagined I saw my father standing beside the shovel. He leaned against the handle and he stared at me for a moment. Then he stuffed his hands into his pockets and withdrew into the trees. The snow fell straight again. It fell over every part of the trees, and the open fields between, fell softly into the stream, and farther away the town. It fell, too, along every part of the cabin and the flat hill where my father lay buried. Gathered along the shovel, the woodpile, and the cross-timbers of the gate. I watched the snow touch gently against the window and draw faint shadows across my chest, as though it were falling straight through me, falling without a sound into silence. I remembered once, I thought he might never die.

April 6: 6:52 a.m.

*My head fills with rain, like pouring the ocean into a teacup, and my thoughts drown. Sink to the bottoms of my feet into the spaces between my toes. I breathe; a flicker of sound through a silent forest of still bodies. Of wooden men, limbs left bent at their sides, absorbing words, glances, and movement like sticks on water, bloated with the burden of lost moments. My chest is numb. I watch the wind slide through the yellow grass and slip into my hand. Blood has gathered in my palm, a hard blotch left on the barrel of my rifle. It is my father's. His father gave it to him. Faces still stuck to its end. I wonder what my father would say if he saw me right now, a grown man, sitting here by myself. Alone, looking out into the woods. Staring past what was in front of me into blank thoughts behind my eyes. I would say nothing, as there were no words that would fit his. Though I know what my father and his father would say if they were here, sitting by my side: 'William, this is your war.' I am surprised to find myself weighing these words. Let them break open onto my skin and pad along my veins like ants down into the hollow spaces between my bones. Let them settle there. I breathe them in. My breath swept up the words, rolled them into a lead ball that sat beside my heart.*



The Very Short Life of a Buffalo by *J. T. Dawson*

I sat on a hill beneath a mesquite tree, cradling my rifle between my arms and watched it all happen. They had chased it across the fields, through the yellow grass and from the tops of their horses they fired volley after volley, until finally the buffalo slowed, shook at the legs and fell forward onto the ground. It snorted and shook against the grass. Waved its head in the air and huffed again at the sky. Blood ran in lines down its long face, gathered in puddles beneath its side and spread like red fingers through the grass. The buffalo groaned. Then it set its chin against the dirt and closed its eyes. For some time, it didn't move at all and everything went quiet. I stood and set my rifle against the tree, snapped a small twig off at the end and stuck it in my mouth. Sunlight dragged itself across the field. Slipped in and out through the clouds from where it came and it didn't make a sound. I chewed at the end of the twig and then flicked it onto the dirt. Then I pushed off through the grass down the hill, and as I neared the bottom the first man got a horn through the chest. After that I heard his scream. That stopped me. It tore out across the field and pushed black birds into the air.

I saw the horn, the end of it, punch through the back of his shoulder, push out through the hole and curl like a finger and when the buffalo lowered its head the horn slipped out and bent against the sun. The man fell to the ground and the grass covered him. Settled across his body and I thought the ground might swallow him. Slide like fingers around his arms and legs and erase him from my eyes. Instead, he rolled onto his side, dragged himself across the grass, and the buffalo hooked its head, caught him again in the belly and bent him in half. Then it slammed him back into the ground, raked its head across his chest and stomped him again and again. Each time was harder than the last, as though every one of its ancestors were stomping the man too, one

buffalo hoof after another, and as I watched, I could see the heavy power and rage in the buffalo, the muscles hardening across its shoulders, twisting up into its neck, and shooting far down through its hooves into the man beneath its feet, as though it were stomping him, like a blade of grass, down further and further into the dirt.

The men raised their guns towards the field. Sat by and watched the man breath in one sharp hoof after another, until finally one fired a shot and missed. He shook his head. Let his rifle fall against his lap and chambered another ball. The others fired too and at once both shots slapped against the buffalo's side. The buffalo slowed and heaved its head up into the sky. Nothing happened.

The man crawled forward into the grass and blood gathered in puddles beneath his chin. His arms shook into the ground and he groaned into the weeds. Then he looked towards us as if to say now what or what now. I wanted to feel sympathy, but as I stood in the field watching him and the buffalo, I felt mostly fear. The buffalo stopped, snorted dust and raked its hooves against the dirt. Put its head down to hook again and took after the man. He lurched forward, face down and snorted against the grass. He was a damp, red man run through with holes. I thought about shooting him, pressing the trigger and putting him down through his clothes to the ground. Then it would be done, quick and painless.

Once I shot a fox when hunting with my father. Pressed the trigger and watched it fall into the grass. And when I found it, I watched it drag itself across the ground. I couldn't shoot it again. My father finished the fox. Raised the rifle to his shoulder and pulled back the hammer. The fox looked away. Lowered its head into the grass, as though it knew what came next, and breathed into the ground. I heard my father pull

the trigger just before I closed my eyes. In truth, I hated the sound, the smell, and the faces attached to those twelve pounds of wood and steel.

I swung the rifle to my shoulder and my hands shook. I took aim. Stared down the barrel and instead of the buffalo or the man, I saw the shapes of men, ghosts of those faces still stuck to its end. The same faces my father saw and that stopped me. I tried to blink them away and nothing happened. Then I felt mostly fear. That somehow they knew me, had tasted my thoughts, and ate them, and found in me my father. I wondered if they came for me, as they did for him. At that moment, the rifle was the heaviest. I lowered it and let it fall along my side and I took my eyes off the man. Let the long fields drift across my mind and cover my thoughts, roll them into blades of bent grass that swayed like the sound of rain and I hoped they might sail away along the wind and never return.

I tried not to look again, but the man crept into the corner of my eye somehow, and my insides squeezed like a rag. I felt the fear fill up my frame. The buffalo screamed across the field. I raised my rifle and took aim, listened to the buffalo groan, and as it slogged through the grass after the man, it put its head down to punch another hole. I knew I could press the trigger and that the shot would kill it. Right then, I remembered my father and how he told me that a rifle held nothing more than powder and a lead ball. That it took a man to hold the rifle, to catch a target at the end, and to pull the trigger and set the ball screaming through the air. He told me that a rifle could kill either a man or a fox, and that it was no better or worse than the man who pulled the trigger. That was a long time ago.

I cranked back the hammer, breathed halfway out, and from those twenty yards, I fired, one shot that slapped through the folds of its neck. The buffalo lurched forward,

shook its head, and fell into the grass. I lowered my rifle. Looked out across the field to the dead thing pushing up through the grass. One horn was broken at the end, chipped like an old stone that poked into the air, as though it might poke a hole through the sky. The smell of black powder stood beside me. Put its hand on my shoulder and squeezed. Then it slipped off into the wind. For some time, I watched the clouds drag themselves across the sun. Open like hands and choke the light from the sky. Thunder stomped across the horizon, as if shot from the same gun. The last sound the buffalo heard in its life.

I walked over to the man who had pushed forward onto his face. He choked and coughed against the grass. The buffalo had run its horns through his stomach and up through his chest, stomped through the thinnest parts of him, until there was almost nothing left. The men gathered around him when I rolled him over onto his back. Blood pumped from his chest and spread red lines across his shirt. His eyes went wide, as he tried to suck in air. They swung from the men to me and then to the sky, drooping to the side, and his face drew up in crooked lines in some degree of pain. He tried to say something, but nothing came out. His mouth moved in silence, as though he were talking to the air and not me at all. Blood gathered on his bottom lip. The snot ran from his nose. I saw red at his stomach where the horn had come through and tore away. His mouth opened again, moved as though he might say something. Then his lips stopped bending and his body shook into the ground. I watched him let out a breath, as though he were whispering a secret into the grass and I waited by him while he left.

I walked off through the field with my rifle across my shoulder. Slogged through the grass to the top of the hill and sat beneath the tree. Let my rifle fall to the ground and I threw my hat on top of it. I closed my eyes and all I could see were the man and the

buffalo, the way they didn't pick themselves up out of the grass and walk away into the field, and from every side came nothing but pounds of thunder and between them the silence filled the air. Most of the time I sat there, thought of them, until they were the only thoughts my mind would produce. For my part, I had fired only once. The shot filled the field and drove the buffalo to the ground. And soon after, I watched the man shake away into nothing.

I sat against the tree and listened to the wind inside the grass. The clouds gathered in fists. Pounded the horizon, one punch after another, stretching bruises across the sky, and the day felt long, as though it might never end. I waited, listened for whispers of those ghosts in the field and half dreaming of the man, I imagined him where I was, watching me and waiting for the shot. He shoots. I watch the bullet break open the air and pass into my frame. The lead ball passes into my chest and sinks beside my heart. Then it's over. Everything goes black. I opened my eyes and it began to rain. First it fell in droplets and then all around me it fell in sheets. At that moment, I was sure I was done with shooting.

April 6: 6:53 a.m.

*Sometimes my mind fills fast with thought and overflows into my eyes. I sit against the tree, thinking of anything I can to keep my mind still. So it won't wander. Though thoughts of the boy soon drift about me, unable to free themselves from behind my eyes. I had watched him fall like a stone to the ground and melt into the landscape, part of the trees, the leaves, and the ground. Watched the yellow grass fall into his ears, his mouth, and cover his face. Silence and stillness lay beside him now and under all that weight I know he feels nothing, sees nothing, and hears nothing. My ribs stiffen, like I'm made of iron. A tiny knife slips its way into my heart. I feel it peel the top like an orange and sink to the bottom, a blade with absence at its end. It slices into my frame and I think I might disappear. Vanish, as if shot through a gun. He will never move again. The wind inside the grass almost erases him from my eyes and I fear that he isn't there anymore, though I know he is. That stops me. At that moment I knew, I could not let that stand. I curl my finger to fit the trigger and wait for him. That man who put the boy into the ground.*

April 6: 6:56 a.m.

*The silence is heavy, sticks like sap to my ears. Collects on my skin and covers me like a coat. I stare down at the grass next to my hand. Hope that time will fill up through the cracks and into my fingers, so that I may squeeze it, drawing him, that man, across my eyes. My body sags against the tree. I wait and nothing arrives. I close my eyes. I dream I stand beneath an orange tree. Watch time peel away against the green leaves and fall like shriveled grains to the yellow grass. My father uncurls from the branches, like a naked arm and untwists to the ground. He watches me for a moment and then he laughs, and as he smiles at me, I see the crease marks stretch along the corners of his eyes. Then I wonder if the boy is in the leaves too, and if so where and what he is doing, and if the boy I hardly knew would know me. I wonder if I would ever see him again. A deep echo of gun thunder resonates in my chest. The orange tree falls around me into a man who lays crumpled against a tree. And then I hear my father whisper: 'William Harper, wake up. Wake up. Wake up.' I open my eyes. Hear the leaves fold against the grass, and shadows go like ghosts across the sun.*

April 6: 6:58 a.m.

*Two grey soldiers walk passed me and spill into the grass. Leaves crackle beneath their boots. I sit quietly against the tree and close my eyes. The wind rattles my frame; a silent ghost, breathing heavy with fear. Working its way to the surface of my skin, as if it were trapped behind a mask. I hear a man's scream for mercy and I open my eyes. He lies bent against a log. One leg is broken. The other dangles awkwardly at his knee. He yells, 'Jesus Christ. Christ save me.' He cries, spit dropping from his lip. It catches like a web on the grass. Pulls a bible from the pocket of his coat and holds it to his chest and then close his eyes. I hear one soldier laugh then fire his rifle. My eyes press shut. Silence slips its fingers into my thoughts and I feel what's left of me pour down into my fingers. I squeeze my rifle. The two men walk over to me. He's dead, one says. Tommy, says the other, get that gun. He pokes me in the chest, grabs my rifle. I don't hesitate. I open my eyes. 'I am William Harper and you are dead.' The fat one has a smile. I shoot him. Watch the ball pass through his cheek and out the other end, as if swallowed by the trees. He didn't laugh anymore. Just fell to the ground, and as he fell he wrapped me in those wild, green eyes. I let my reflection sink into the back of his eyes. Watched his pupils narrow and catch my face. They knew me now. Then there was nothing. My rifle was heavy in my hands. Yes, I killed him. It happened. Then I laugh. The other drops his rifle and runs into the woods. He wants to live. I take a breath and let it out, a light whisper that wanders through the leaves*