

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

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An Old Man and a Boy: Samuel's Story

The hole smells of buried roots and old dirt.

River water running.

A screaming.

The boy there, and he hears his mother yelling no.

She's crying.

The baby in his arms crying; struggling, and he holds her tighter.

The sounds of his mother stop.

The baby struggling cries harder. "Shh," he whispers, "they'll hear you," and he puts his hand to her mouth.

It's quiet.

The river water running.

And he waits and he listens and he presses himself back farther into the dark earthly hole and he holds the baby in his arms tighter and squeezes harder his hand upon her mouth.

HE'S AN OLD MAN SHORT AND THIN with uneven clumps of white hair, his face smudged with dirt and heavily lined and red, as if constantly exposed to a cold wind. He stands in the river, unmoving, his deep-set, squinting eyes, focusing on a small collection of flies and spiders he's placed on the still water. He hears a sound and he looks. He sets the pole he's holding on the grassy, muddy shoreline, and he unsheathes his knife.

He crosses the river at the low rippling section and he looks up at a tall maple tree pulled partway from the ground. Maybe a fox. He picks his way along the edge of the river and stops. "Dear God," at his feet lies a baby, stiff and blue with dead round eyes pointing to the sky.

He closes his eyes, feeling another small part of his own life leaving, as if in exchange for the misery of finding a dead baby fallen from the roots of a tree.

He begins to climb, scrambling on his hands and knees, searching for grips among the saplings and large rocks.

He reaches the tree and sits next to it. He looks at the dark space between the embankment and the circular wall of entangled roots and he wonders, what the hell's in there? He hugs his knees and begins to rock. It's quiet. He stops. Maybe it's not a fox. He rocks again, looking for signs, something to tell him what's in there.

There's nothing.

He leans into the hole and waits for his eyes to adjust, and when they do, he sees the outline of a young boy curled up, pressed back to the dark earth and torn roots. He places two heavy fingers on the boy's neck. There's a weak pulse. He leans back, the hard light of the cold day bright against the clear sky.

He stands, slanted on the decline. It's a sign. Time to go. Death is comin' again.

He scrambles up the embankment on all fours like some frightened animal having scented danger in the wind. At the top of the embankment,

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he looks again at the falling tree, and he slips away through a stand of young evergreens.

He comes to a road and finds a dead man next to a horseless wagon. He walks closer. There's a bullet hole in the dead man's forehead.

He looks to his right, to the slope of the road below him. Two more dead bodies. Both young boys. Both face down on the road.

He turns and walks the road in the other direction and he comes upon two more dead boys. He looks at the valley before him, the long quiet of four hundred acres of shield rock, mixed bush, hardwood and tall white pine trees. He looks at the Crowe River winding slow and easy through the breaking valley floor. He looks at The Gut, a fissure cut into granite; thunderous water, turning and pounding for half a mile.

He walks back towards the falling tree and scrambles down the embankment. He leans into the hole and searches with his hand. He leans farther, his hand finding the back of the boy's shirt, and he drags the boy from the hole.

"What were ya doin', hiding?" He looks around. "I guess ya probably were."

He puts the boy on his chest and he leans back and navigates the sharp decline with his hands and feet.

He stands with the boy over his shoulder and walks back the way he came. "You're heavier than what someone might think." He crosses the river and walks to where the shoreline widens out to a high rocky cliff. There's a large section of tall rock that rumbles out towards the river and at the crux of this, there's a hole in the wall. He crawls into the hole dragging the boy behind him.

The cave opens up higher and he stands. Beyond the damp darkness comes the sounds of running water. He lifts the boy and places him on a bed of pine needles covered with the furs of black bears.

The boy sleeps for three days and in that time he dreams. He dreams of hell and he dreams of fear and he dreams of where he lives now and shall forever more. He dreams of the face of horror, the faces of his brothers burning in the long nights of the days before him, and he dreams of this world, of men and blood with furs and skins and faces painted with the death of others, their hollowed eyes of broken glory coming hard on wild mounts from hell, devil hooves pounding the earth in the name of all that have come before them.

And he piled the bodies of the dead in the corner of a rocky field next to the road. And why would he not? For who among us could leave a family there for the ways of this world to pick and chew at without regard for the souls of things? It was the baby that was the hardest to do, to touch such a thing, one so little and lifeless and light in his arms.

He dragged the first two dead boys up the slope of the road, caught on point, or so it seemed to him: The baby woke and cried and the mother put a wine skin filled with goat's milk to her mouth. She rocked the child and hummed a lullaby, a rifle shot cracking in the quiet morning air, re-sounding.

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The father stood and slapped the reins looking for the boys past the trees that lined the field to the north.

Two more shots.

The wagon approached the bend, his other two sons catching up and riding alongside the wagon. Together they made the turn, the road running straight with a steep decline just before them. They brought their horses to a stop. At the base of the hill, a group of bloodied and battered men, post-war privateers and outlaws, by the look of things, with only a few horses among them.

On the downside of the hill, the two boys stretched out dead on the road.

The father watched a man riding west across the field next to them, chasing the boys' horses. He jumped to the ground and lifted his youngest son, Samuel, from the back of the wagon. He looked at the two boys sitting their horses. "Ride back to The Gut and lay up somewhere in the valley." He looked back at the men, three of them riding hard up the hill towards them. "Go," and he slapped the one horse, the boys turning and riding hard towards the valley.

One of the approaching riders split off from the other two and cut through the field in pursuit of the boys.

He put Samuel down next to his mother. "The river's that way," and he pointed. "Find the embankment and hide. Go, run. Run as hard as you can."

The mother with the baby in her arms and holding her young son's hand, turned and ran for the woods.

He dragged the father, face down on the flat of the road, dead weight— the heaviness of nothing in his clenched fist: The father picked his musket up and climbed back onto the wagon. He stood and watched one of the two riders cut away and ride in the direction of his wife and two young children. He sighted his musket, steadying himself, his finger to the trigger, and a bullet ripped into his forehead. He dropped, falling to the ground.

The other two boys he dragged, one at a time, over the dirt road, caught fleeing, so it appeared to him: The boys heard the shot and looked back and turned around again, just in sight of the valley trail. They kicked their horses, the younger of the two boys lagging his older brother.

At a full in-hand gallop the man in pursuit of the boys appeared from the trees onto the road. The boys looked back and as they did the man reached out and grabbed the youngest by the collar and threw him to the ground. The older boy reached for his pistol, and as he turned to fire the man was upon him, slashing a large skinning knife across the boy's throat.

The man rode down the one horse and brought it to a stop. He looked back at the other horse standing over the boy. He rode forward and collected the boy's horse. Before he left, he took his pistol from his belt and shot the boy in the back.

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Of the mother, he did not find, that day or any other, left to be eaten, gutted and wormed at, her bones chewed and cracked for their marrow, her skull emptied and possibly still there yet: She ran through the woods, thick and heavy with underbrush, her baby in her arms, her youngest son, Samuel, running next to her.

The man in pursuit dismounted and tied his horse to a tree branch. He stood and listened to the sounds of Samuel and his mother stepping on sticks and dried leaves, breaking thin dead tree limbs as they ran. He moved in the direction of their sounds.

They reached the embankment and stopped, the mother peering over the edge. "This way." She pulled Samuel along the edge of the embankment. She stopped again and looked down. "There," she whispered. "That tree hanging by its roots?" She looked at Samuel. "Sit down."

Samuel sat on the ground and his mother looked behind her. She heard the man approaching. "Take Evelyn and go." She put the baby in his arms. "Hurry."

"What about you?"

"Shh," she whispered. "I'll be right here. I have to watch for the man." She touched his shoulder. "Go."

The boy inched forward, the baby in his arms, pressing his feet against the trees below him to brace himself.

The sounds of the man approaching stopped. The mother turned and listened. She looked back and saw Samuel reaching the dark space between the embankment and the tree with half its roots pulled from the ground. She watched the boy and the baby disappear into the dark hole. She turned to look for the man. She waited, and he broke from the trees. She screamed and ran away.

And he covered them all with rocks.

The boy wakes and screams, and the old man sitting before a small fire tells him, "You're not dead."

The boy backs away like some crab-like cave creature, his hands and feet scrambling amongst the skins and furs of past things and rancid cave dirt until backed against a weeping wall of fear and desolation.

"Did ya wanna say somthin'?"

"All right, well, that's it, that's where I put 'em. Just so ya know."

He holds out a water skin. "I think this was theirs."

"Go on, take it."

They walk without speaking, an old man and a boy, and I watch them go, and I wonder, will he ever dream again, beyond these cold breaths of time that have him now?

And the question settles upon him.

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Stay close, in the shadows of the wall, and we'll see 'em first if they ever come again.

"Let's sit and drink some of this good river water. It's quiet enough, don't you think, boy?"

Put the sun there.

He puts the sun there.

"Pass me that cold river water." He rinses his mouth and spits. "I almost didn't do it, if ya wanna know the truth. And you know why?" He takes another drink. "Cause nothin' can ever change without changin' another thing." He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and holds the water skin out to the boy. "Here, damnit, you do it. And who among us can ever say the one thing is on the side of a good thing? Who? And that's just the way it is, boy."

"That ever-lovin' warmin' sun sure feels nice, though, doesn't it?"

"It'll be a long winter, a hard winter, you'll see. Lord knows how I made it through that first one, misery and death everywhere. But it wouldn't come for me."

No.

"I did more than just wish, though, didn't I?"

Did.

"It's harder than what ya might first think. I had a hard time of it."

In the dark.

"Failed miserably."

In the quiet.

"Takes a lot of strength. A lot of will."

The river water running.

"And here we are."

And we'll be all right.

"All these years later."

Won't we?

"You and I."

You're a good baby, and we won't fall asleep, will we?

"Did I mention I have a sister?"

In the dark.

"She has a house."

In the quiet.

"Lots of gardens and sunshine there where she lives, and I was thinkin', we can go there, if you wanted to? Are you sleepin'?" He lifts his head. "I guess you probably are." He puts his head back down.

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On the road at night, by the stars—all the living stars. You and I.

“I guess that’s what I’m trying to say, boy, we could try, if we wanted to.”

And by the river, by the trees, beneath the ever-lovin’ warming sun, the old man’s words runaway with the river and a little breeze comes too.

He’s an old man standing still in a river. He hears a sound and he looks towards a falling tree. Maybe a fox. He crosses the river and stops. “Dear God,” at his feet lies a baby, stiff and blue with dead round eyes pointing to the sky.