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THE OLD COUNTRY

I

FROM THE TIME I WAS TEN, I was aware of the strong possibility I would have to incinerate my father.

His brown hair fell below his ears, and his mustache often seemed green to me, blades of grass turning his flesh into soft soil.

He came from the old country, one of those jagged, sparse masses now erased from most maps.

According to him, it possessed the smell of tulips, and the night sky would reach down and touch every rooftop, straw evaporating into clouds of glistening dust.

When he was twelve, he fell in love with a girl named Audra.

She was a child of sand, he would say, glowing amber grains molding to the seasons and emotions around her.

They loved the touch of glass, and would often steal window panes, bringing them out to the fields of wild strawberries and pressing their hands and faces against it, feeling the cold splotches of red dripping upon them.

But he was not the only one who loved Audra.

Adomas lived three doors down from him.

A scar ran the length of this back from when he fell down a mountain-side, leaving permanent purple bruises, leading the old women to exclaim that the mountain had crept in and buried itself deep within him.

He and Audra enjoyed time together too, jumping into the swirling warm springs, and allowing their bodies to be tossed and tumbled by the slender arms of glowing light.

My father and Adomas were in constant competition, and often spent hours staring into each others eyes, dwelling in the glistening orbs of sweat hanging from their cheeks.

But one day, Audra was sent to live with a relative across the mountains, leaving the boys to wonder which one of them would be allowed to pursue her.

After much debate, the two decided the most sensible option was a duel, with the winner being allowed to cross the mountains in pursuit of Audra.

Because of the sacred traditions the old country had carried for centuries, the two would meet on the last day of April in the blue tipped fields at the base of the mountains when they both had reached the age of 50.

Neither was allowed to die before that.

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

Years passed, their boots drank water and steaming concrete and the wrinkles in their hands absorbed the breaths of trains, crying children and the mirage-like wonder of daily hallucinations.

And finally last week, as a pot of lentil soup boiled on the kitchen stove, my father opened a letter from the old country.

The steam from the bubbling liquid battered the edges of the worn brown envelope, and as the distant black specs of sparrows streaked across his eyes, he turned to me and said to pack a bag.

II

It would take three days on a boat to reach the old country, which meant plenty of time for us to talk about the situation.

Men and women stood by the rails, their faces in synch with the movement of the sea.

My father explained that there was a good chance he would be killed in the duel, and if so, would need me to bury him in a shaded region at the base of the mountains.

If on the other hand he was able to kill Adomas, he would need me to help carry his body to the middle of the red forest, where we would burn him, and stuff his ashes into the jagged holes of the birch trees.

We watched as children ran along the deck, holding hands and leaping through patches of pulsating mist, their eyes closed and drooping, pulled downward by the crashing waves.

As we looked towards the side of the boat, we noticed a school of what appeared to be large fish following us.

Silver electricity made up their bodies, and they rose and dove with the exploding white crests, until blue sparks crackled upwards, staining and cutting dark gashes into the overcast sky.

I asked my father why this, any of this, was necessary.

He looked at me without looking at me, focusing his gaze on a blurred horizon that reflected onto my face as if everything were a series of mirrors.

He told a story of how in the old country, the men of the local village would gather every Sunday around a large pit, where they would shout and sing into it.

The local language mixed with nonsense, instruments of bone chattering away, creating a humming curtain of static draping itself across the rolling plains.

On occasion, one of the men would jump into the pit, tearing through layers of darkness in a speeding current of silence.

The singing would continue, hot breaths padding and covering the silky grains of blackness.

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

The boat shook violently, producing laughter from the nearby children, and coughing from my father.

This was becoming more common for him, and he suggested we sit down on a couple of mangled and rotting deckchairs.

His watch had stopped years ago, frozen not with a time but rather a series of half faded green digital lines, pointing in all directions.

He would turn the inside of his wrist over every half hour or so and stare at the nicked face, taking in several small breaths and whispering quietly to himself, remembering when time was told in fragments of electricity.

We continued to stare off into the sea, a harmonica player's clapping conducting the now soaring waves.

III

We rented a Buick in the port city of Err, and began driving east, along a road dotted with a large number of frayed and weather-beaten scarecrows.

The sky possessed a pinkish hue, and up from the local village fires would arise plumes of shimmering smoke, seeming to scoop large chunks of the pink and drop them into the cavernous slits of the horizon.

The scent of winter was all over the Buick, and I remembered my father driving us in the black caravan down the snow-filled streets of the new country, his cigarette breath writing the lyrics to familiar 60's pop songs along the windshield.

I suspected my father had killed in the past, even though he never confirmed this.

He had spent two years in the war, the one that for most of us existed in a land of white static, blurred faces and arms carrying the dead and repairing tanks, the weeping, melting faces of women and children lying like puddles in the muddy roads.

He told us soldiers would take things, souvenirs from their kills.

The only thing he took were photographs of the dead. Sun reflecting on the chrome Yaschica, a shutter clawing past humid, lingering sweat to the open eyes caked with brown grease and flaking blood.

He kept slides of these for months, until one day they were hit by a roadside bomb, destroying the tank they were in and sending him flying into a rice field.

He spoke of the moistness of the moment, distant nude bodies aflame, running across the road and the blades of a helicopter now cutting through the black sun.

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

They gave him a silver star for his tour, but it made him sick to look at it, and he allowed my sister and I to run around our backyard with it, pinning it to one another as our bare feet sank deeper into the cool grass.

For the longest time after the war he slept with two guns, one on his chest and one under his pillow.

The night melted over him, streetlights floating in his pupils and the cracks in the walls like fence post stakes, a string of severed heads grinning as fallen constellations.

I wondered what Adomas would look like.

For some reason I pictured him as slightly overweight, glasses and a gray mustache and the scent of polished linoleum exuding from his fingers.

I imagined he had a family. Maybe even a son who would help him with the burial of my father if need be.

But what if he had no son and killed my father? Would I then employ this stranger's help to bury him?

I saw us carrying my father together into the red forest, dousing him with gasoline and watching his clothes expand into twisting embers of orange, his hands now dust, disappearing into the surrounding sap-stained bark.

I watched Adomas' truck barrel down the road, crunching gravel like the mating calls of insects, leaving me crouched low in the yellow wild flowers as the crescent moon descended from the clouds.

My father said he was in the mood for coffee and knew of a town on the way where we could get some; if it was still there.

IV

Birds sat atop a sign featuring the torso of a woman holding a pie, their beaks picking at a crumbling circle of brittle wood above it.

Blue chairs sat behind faded brown tables inside the restaurant, the steam of coffee wrapping around flickering light bulbs.

My father and I took a seat at the counter.

Soon a man in a grease-stained apron emerged from the back, his eyes moist and sagging, as if his pupils would slide through his cheeks and splash on the tiled floor.

Briefly glancing at the menu, my father turned towards the man.

"Do you still serve that mint coffee," my father asked.

"It's about the only thing we serve any more," the man replied.

"Let's get two cups of that then."

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

The man turned and began pouring coffee into two cups, occasionally directing his eyes towards a television sticking out of a wall, the image somehow switching back and forth between a sports game and a soap opera.

He laid two porcelain cups before us and we began to drink.

"Just like I remember," my father said.

"You got a northern accent, but I don't think I've ever seen you before," the man replied.

"Been away awhile. Years actually."

"Well, what brings you back?"

"I wanted my son to see the old country."

"She looks pretty good for her age don't she."

"Tell me, what happened to the horses? I haven't seen one along the roads."

"Afraid they're gone."

"How's that even possible?"

"There was something with the earth."

"The earth?"

The man began to twist his neck back and forth, his skin like fabric, flapping across thick pointy bones.

"We see a light. This was, well, I guess maybe couple of years ago. There's this light, right in the middle of the day, and it comes down like fire smashing into the fields, leaving big, I mean real big clouds of dust, so there's not even a sun anymore."

I tried to imagine this, plumes of thick brownness spiraling upwards, creating a sun and planets that orbited through the bare branches of trees.

"And it's maybe a couple of days later that we notice the horses can't walk. They crawl around in circles in the stables, sounding like we ain't never heard before, dying with their eyes wide open."

My father seemed to look past the man's eyes and over to one of his ears that was now strangely pink.

"We tried bringing other horses in, but none of them would take. To the west they still got horses. A good number actually. But it's something in the earth here. The sun hasn't been the same since."

My father nodded and I caught a glimpse of a woman outside of one of the windows, carrying a pair of black shoes and kicking tiny pebbles with her bare feet.

"Well, thank you," my father said, reaching into his pocket and laying some money on the counter.

The man nodded, and we rose and made our way back out to the Buick.

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

We watched for a moment as the birds continued to peck at the sign, flakes of flesh sailing and scattering along the gravel, inspected and carried away by a large mound of ants.

V

Night fell, and at the current speed we would be at the base of the mountains by morning.

I had never seen stars so low and I found myself touching the glass of the window, watching as my fingers slid through blurred countryside, breaking the serenity of light and causing the sky to ripple.

My father turned the knobs of the radio, and found a scratchy Sam Cooke song playing.

I then heard my father sing.

It was soft yet forceful, a shouting whisper always a second or so behind Sam, that would sometimes deviate from the lyrics, becoming instead a soothing buzz warming us in the cold air.

I started to doze off, and intermittently found myself lying beneath a leafless tree.

Although I remained in a lying position, I soon began floating over smoothed pieces of glass, clouds moving through them and lightning igniting gleaming patches of inverted hilltops.

Through a couple of blinks I stood in the center of a small house, water rising from the floorboards, and random shoes and pieces of luggage floating towards the ceiling.

Again I heard singing, and looked out the window to find a woman pinning a man's shirt to a clothesline.

Dirt and grime stained the sleeves, and the rays of a distant sun seeped through it.

As the woman paused and turned her head, I found my cheek pressed against the Buick window, a warm map of anxious breath etched on its surface.

My father continued to sing, his words now invisible, a language descending into the paint of mile markers.

VI

There were wolves.

A pack scurrying in the mist, paws made of cloud and yellow eyes swirling over the whiteness.

We had reached the base of the mountains a few hours earlier.

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

I hadn't realized rock could be so blue, and the snow-capped tops seemed to breathe heavily at the morning's rising light.

We ate biscuits and gravy, and my father smoked a cigarette, his smoke and breath intertwining in the cold air so that there was a constant rush of soaking steam.

Can't keep my soul in this morning, he said.

We finished our breakfast and loaded our packs, making our way down a path into the red forest.

The trees seemed to speak in shadow, crunching branches beneath our feet laughing and wailing, desperate for a glimpse of the sun.

We watched as quails emerged from burrows, hiding behind brown grasses and shaking off the dirt that had gathered upon their wings.

My father pointed to what looked like straw and mud wedged into various holes on many of the trees.

He told me that's where the ashes were stored, and that once a year the local villages would travel through the forest, finding the trees containing their loved ones and would kiss the mud and offer up their prayers.

I imagined scores of women, no men for some reason, nude and moving in and out of the mist, their fingers fitting perfectly into the contours of the bark and placing their lips along the moist soil so that for an instant everything was one, flesh falling from bone and becoming grass once again.

As we entered a clearing, we came upon a giant tree almost completely carved up with lettering and initials.

My father explained this marked the middle ground of the forest, and that for centuries the villagers would carve their names and initials into the tree, praying for safe passage.

We made our way to the foot of the tree, and taking out a long knife, my father began to carve his name into the rotting wood.

Mist seeped through the dark tears in the bark, carrying with it pellets of loose moss and creating a green overcast.

My father always had terrible handwriting, but here the letters were easily discernible, even elegant, tiny flecks of dust swimming slowly away from the glistening blade.

He then handed the knife to me, and I went to work right below his name.

The wood seemed to moan, not from pain but rather pleasure, ecstatic prolonged sighs echoing through the treetops.

I liked that for a moment our initials touched, producing a language only the two of us would understand.

I handed the knife back to him, and we made our way into another patch of woods, tall grey splinters rubbing against our arms and shoulders.

VII

Everything was yellow now.

A large, crater-like field containing mounds of tall wild grasses and flowers.

It was like a glowing pool, and I imagined lying on my back, the bottom of my shirt being nibbled on by prairie sea creatures, and moving slowly under gathered shape-shifting clouds as the waters of grass rested warmly in the palms of my hands.

We spotted two dark specks in the distance, stray shadows that had been hardened into stone.

For the first time my father took me by the shoulder as we walked, occasionally using his thumb to massage the edges of a hole in the jacket.

Upon reaching the figures, we came face to face with an older man and a young girl.

Adomas was different than I had imagined.

He was a sculpture of the land, the barren grooves and crags of dirt rich depression containing moist and darkened eyes reflecting an inverted portrait of roofless houses.

His overalls were a faded blue, and he wore a necklace seemingly made out of mounds of hair shaped into a sort of cross.

The girl seemed older than she was, her blonde hair blowing in the breeze and brushing against her face, leaving a few loose strands to cling and crawl across her cheeks.

No words were exchanged, and instead Adomas pointed towards two small tables each containing a water basin and a white towel.

Taking me once again by the shoulder, my father led me over to the table and began washing his hands and face.

I looked over and noticed Adomas doing the same thing at the opposite table, the little girl focused on the splashing water slowly dripping onto the grass below.

My father soon finished, and folding the towel neatly and placing it to the side, brought forth his bag and began unloading and assembling his revolver.

The sounds of the field burrowed deep into the ground, leaving only the click and pop of metal to exist.

When the revolver was assembled, my father handed me the clip, asking if I would insert it into the weapon.

I took the piece in my hands, its cold body ready to sink through me, and pressed the clip until it clicked into place.

We then turned towards Adomas who was already facing us, revolver assembled and resting in his hand.

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

Without much hesitation, my father and Adomas approached each other, standing a few steps apart and staring deeply into each other's eyes.

I imagined the little girl and I finding ourselves in a world without faces, only the backs of gray splattered heads to greet and influence us.

Finally turning around, my father and Adomas stood with their backs towards one another and after a few moments began taking large steps in opposite directions counting off in unison.

Their words slowly inserted themselves into the slits of the open air, echoing in the dark cavernous world lying under the skin of the one we were used to.

I noticed that the little girl was not watching the scene, but instead crouched low to the ground, playing with a long stalk of grass and mumbling something I could not hear.

They finally shouted off the last number, and turning around in almost a choreographed manner aimed their weapons at one another and fired.

Two muffled pops emerged, like hammers beating on mounds of dirt.

Ravenous black shadows crawled from the sky, slithering around their bodies, and turning them into cardboard silhouettes causing them to float and flutter towards the ground like oversized crumbling leaves.

Their weapons laid by their heads, still smoking, giving the impression of an escaping spirit.

I turned towards the little girl, who had discarded the stalk of grass, and was now gently brushing dirt from the front of her pants.

VIII

The sun was having difficulty breathing.

Every intake was strained as it pulsed and sent clouds scattering into greyness.

I watched as the little girl walked up to Adomas, folded his arms across his chest, and began pulling out bits of grass and placing them in mounds around his body.

Against the horizon, they seemed like one animal to me, a creature eating and surveying the land.

I turned and looked at my own father.

Blood ran from his chest, jagged and zigzagging across his body, roots holding onto dirt-stained cheeks and open eyes.

I smelled coffee, and remembered how my father would sip from his favorite mug in the winter, looking out his bedroom window at the snow falling, flakes caught in the orangeness of the streetlights.

I heard the little girl still pulling at grass.

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

I felt myself leave my body for a moment, and with little hesitation, found myself grabbing a bottle of lighter fluid from my father's bag and walking over to the little girl.

For the first time she took notice of me, and I saw the deep blue of her eyes, the shadows of birds causing them to ripple.

As if by instinct, I began dousing Adomas with lighter fluid until a shimmering bubble enveloped him.

I then struck a match and tossed it near the base of his neck.

There was a great gasp, frightened ribbons of flame thrown into a panic, scurrying over Adomas' body and taking shelter in the marrow of his bones, flesh melting with every nod and blink of their being.

The little girl placed her face in the thick smoke trailing from the fireball, her eyes watering, and her head becoming a field of vapor swaying with the breeze.

We waited out the afternoon, performing the same ritual with my father, and finally placing the ashes of both men in a couple of old pickle jars.

The day had grown pink, and as we stared off towards the red forest, we could see the sun now hiding beneath a grove of dead branches.

We fastened our bags, and began slipping through the tall grass, the distant woods bathing in a light haze, and me jangling the keys to the Buick in my pocket.