Black Box 2020

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A loud automated sound woke Winston from a fairly deep doze, although the chattering was in a language he couldn’t understand despite hearing the insistent chattering throughout his daily life. Groggily, he blinked open his eyes to the bright lights, taking a minute to adjust to the florescent lights flooding his vision. Ahead stretched rows of plastic chairs with dirty cushions, their design almost hidden from the amount of dirt they must have seen over the countless seasons. His own chair was the same, but it didn’t bother him much.

Looking down towards the ground, his own bright green eyes watched as his anxious partner paced around the subway that was softly rattling away on its tracks. The metal underfoot created soft dull thuds that echoed with each forceful step the other male took, though the grumbling under Vance’s fishy breath was soft and incoherent. Probably nothing too specific.
With a stretch, making sure to stretch out each of his soft, white, limbs and a long yawn, Winston got off the seat that he had been on; he landed gracefully on the metal floor of the subway, his vision turning towards Vance and then to the billboard that displayed odd, pixilated, text that loomed over the doorway. Among the pixilated text, numbers read what hour and minute it was, and underneath the time streamed texts written in a language he knew. What station was coming up next and the estimated time of arrival scrolled into the screen, paused, scrolled off the screen, and then was replaced with the station coming after the next stop, and that stations estimated time of arrival.

The digital screens always made him so fixated. He had seen a lot of screens with moving pictures and moving text, a lot of pixilated displays, but the technology amazed him each time. Occasionally, awe overcame him, especially when these odd boards were displayed at a height much greater than he was. However, concern washed over him instead of the familiar awe or fascination. It was later than he expected, and the text told him their stop was a ways behind them. They’d have to backtrack; the trip to home would take about another hour or two if they were quick about it.

When had I fallen asleep? Winston asked himself as it dawned on him that he slept through the stop that he and his partner were supposed to get off at, and then another two stops. I must have been dead tired if I slept through that much noise, Winston remarked to himself– it had been a long day, there had been a lot of tasks that needed to be done. It’s understandable, I suppose, but I hope Vance is okay, Winston added to himself, turning his head towards his partner, his ears pricked as he listened for Vance’s familiar voice.

“Come on Winston, you’ve got to remember where we get off next!” The short, aggravated, slightly high-pitched tone sounded out in the empty subway hit his ears just as he expected when the male turned and padded back towards him. The irritation was understood by Winston, so he didn’t blame his company for being so aggravated. Besides, Vance didn’t know the stop yet; he was illiterate, unable to read, so Vance couldn’t read the signs or the maps like Winston could; Winston was still trying to teach Vance how to read, but it was hard. Within their city, very few could read, and the skill was treasured and highly respectable. Few managed to learn how, but Winston wasn’t going to give up on Vance just yet.

“It’ll be all right; we’ll just be home a little later,” Winston responded as he drew himself out from the thoughts that he had been swimming through, his voice slightly gentle but still firm as he tried to calm down his partner. “Look at the bright side: we already ate, and we got everything done today
so we can stay home tomorrow.” The tone lightened as Winston tried to create a positive atmosphere; he figured it would help Vance relax. They had some food and water at the house down the alley, they got fresh cloth for bedding which Winston never understood why humans hung them up on lines, and they patched the leaky roofs with clay and leaves. They wouldn’t have to leave for a while. Plus, there was a storm that was due tomorrow morning, rain following it for the next couple of days; the clay and leaves should hold.

As the pacing stopped, the quietness settling into the subway aside from the subway rattling and the human chattering loudly overhead, bright orange eyes met his. “Aren’t we lost? Do you even know where we are?” The angry, sharpness, which edged the sound of Vance’s voice, faltering and softening to a more pleasing, anxious, tone. Vance was a grump who liked to keep others at a distance, who couldn’t understand others of their kind, and as a result, was often hot-headed and stubborn. Yet with Winston, the male could relax and show his softer side, which always brought a soft smile to his face, one of the many things he loved about his partner.

“We aren’t lost. If memory serves right, we’ll get off at the next stop. We’ll wait for a ride going in the direction we just came from and get off there.” The explanation rolled off his tongue, watching those bright orange eyes soften at Winston’s voice; Winston knew the underground systems better than most of their kind who stayed above ground, but in return, he was slightly lost when it came to navigating the streets. Vance often had to help him get around when they were on the streets.

The softness in those eyes were gradually replaced with confusion, and Winston’s soft smile faltered a little out of concern. “Could we walk home from the next stop?” Confusion, with a hint of challenge rose from the tone, yet Winston didn’t let his hackles rise. Vance wasn’t one to sit still for long periods of times, much less in an unfamiliar place.

“We could,” Winston paused, debating on if it would be smarter, but then shook his head as the subway began to slow. “It’d take longer; ya’ know we aren’t humans,” Winston responded, a teasing tone edged his voice, his eyes lighting up as he watched amusement fill those bright orange eyes of his partner. The subway slowed to a stop, and the doors slide open. The couple exiting, side-by-side, quietly onto the platforms.

Towns and cities were a lot bigger when you are a cat.
For Tango
E. Groom

At the beginning of this summer 2016, she found a home in Wickenburg for the nine-year old horse she had raised and trained. Tango first came into her life as a Premarin foal, the product of a terrible business where mares are kept pregnant to produce urine containing hormones used in human hormone replacement therapy. Their babies are often slaughtered. Tango was saved.

She was giving Tango up in part because she wanted to divorce and move away to be closer to a man who attracted her, and she would not have the money to keep Tango.

Before Tango left, I told him the least I could do was write a story for him, about losing one’s home and buddies. His special buddy was Cisco, the color of a copper penny with a temperament of a red head, a short red head, an alpha, a protector horse. Cisco helped to raise Tango. In many photos, I see Cisco’s head protruding from a three-sided building with little gray Tango standing not far from him. Often, I would see the grown-up white Tango resting his heavy head on Cisco’s wide butt.

Once when I was crying about my Dad’s death, the two of them came over to me and just stood there with me.

Tango’s departure at the beginning of this summer left a bruise in my heart. Other people shrugged it off, and in ways, perhaps Tango is in better hands with people who have far more time to ride and take care of him. But then I think of all the horses changing hands so quickly, far more quickly than a dog or a cat would, and for reasons like “I need a more challenging horse or a prettier horse, a faster horse, a younger horse, a horse who doesn’t have this problem or that. Or I have a
boyfriend now and don’t have the time and money.” Disposable. Replaceable.

This summer 2016 was also the first summer in my life that I could not return to the home of my mother and father. My mother died in 2007, my dad 2015. One of my sisters lives in the house with her husband, and when I asked to visit for about a week, she wrote in an e-mail that they could not accommodate me. Accommodate me. My nephew who owns the house then told his mother, another sister, that I could stay in the apartment above the house’s garage set away from the house. And I decided to do just that. But I felt as if the last scrap of my prior life had been flung into the garbage.

When I drove up the driveway to my parents’ house, I told myself it is just a house, and I quickly looked up the sidewalk and to the big back porch where my father would sit and smoke his pipe and listen to ball games on the radio. Then I opened the door to the garage and climbed the stairs to the hot apartment. Rationally, staying in the apartment is probably for the best, I told myself.

Mrs. Leibensperger, a friend living down the street from my parents’ house, agreed. She told me that, in the apartment, I could go and return without having to tell anyone. But then she also would say, “Oh, you don’t know how much I would like to be home at the dinner table with my mother. Every afternoon at about four I think about this.” Mrs. Leibensperger is 102 and Pennsylvania Dutch. I have known and visited her since I was a kid. “But Macungie is all different now,” she would add. I can hear her clear as a bell, as clear as I can hear in my mind a train miles away from that apartment above the garage, a night train rumbling
and moaning through a nearby town. “I always missed my family home,” I hear Mrs. Leibensperger say.

The day before I was to return to Arizona, a day when my nerves jangle, I received “permission” to come inside the house for one last look at the books in the hallway. While I stood there pulling out different books, my sister started to dust the bookshelves with a little duster and then commented on how I laughed, “my little laugh,” after she made a comment I no longer remember. I don’t remember laughing. I don’t remember laughing sarcastically, but for her, it was the segue into a verbal attack about whatever flaw of mine that flew into her head. I kept thinking that I did not know that I was at all important to her.

Soon after that visit, when I was back in Arizona, I dreamt that I could not find my license and my passport to go back home.

Tango by the accounts of his prior owner who has visited him in Wickenburg is doing well. I hope so. His prior owner said horses probably don’t react the way we do to losing a home and buddies. I don’t believe her. Sometimes I catch Cisco after we return from a walk looking, no, staring, at the arena where for years, Tango would be waiting for him if he had been left behind. I imagine many horses seen standing at a fence looking toward the hills or toward mountains or forests are patiently waiting for friends to round that bend or surface at the crest of a road, or maybe, like Mrs. Leibensperger, they are contemplating the dinners with their very first families in the homes that meant so much to them. I can understand.

-E. Groom
Gypsy
Gabrielle Pingleton

She was a nomad, a wanderer, a gypsy. There are many names for a person like she is. A person on a lifelong adventure without permanence in placement. She hadn’t ever found that “perfect place” she always heard about. In her eyes, there was too much to explore, too many possibilities out there to just find that one place so precipitously. At least right now.

She was short in stature with shoulder length dark brown hair. Her eyes were the color of umber, almond shaped, and warm. Smooth and soft skin that seemed to almost shine like gold encompassed her frame. She was undoubtedly a sight one would not easily miss. Despite her ethereal appearance, she was able-bodied and extremely brilliant-minded. She certainly was special. In her travels, she met many people. Almost every man she met wanted to claim her as his own. Wanted her as nothing but mere property. They often didn’t mean any harm by it, but what she had and what she was wasn’t something to be possessed. It was something to be cherished and tended to as Mother Nature does with her many living beings.

This nomad, she loved birds. She was awed at the freedom that they represented. She wished that she herself were able to fly. To see things from that
higher perspective and not be held down. She relished their adorning colorful feathers that refracted opalescence in the sunlight, and their songs that could carry for miles. The songs were only truly understood by their fellow fowl, but she found her own meaning in it: a sense of serenity and peace. No matter where her travels took her, she always made time to sit in silence amongst the trees and the wild things around to watch and hear the winged creatures move about in their environment. There was a natural gentleness to them. Even when the predatory nature of them was seeking their meals, they were still so careful, so concise. It was mystical. These times were where she felt understood in a way that no human ever understood her.

One day on her trail that is void of destination, she found a small but thriving village. There were many merchants there and much to her luck, they operated primarily in trades rather than currency. She had some money, but it was limited. Among the belongings she always carried with her, she had a collection of jewelry and small trinkets that she gathered over the years. They were the perfect things to trade for food and other items whenever she could. One vendor was selling fresh baked goods and other refreshments. She traded a small wood-carved fish and a small polished gemstone for a loaf of their bread and a lambskin of juice made from grapes and apples. As she took a curious walk around the village, she met a woman. This woman was rugged, short haired, and quite tall. This woman introduced herself as Galchobhar. The name
was traditional Celtic, a male name which meant “foreign help”. This struck her as odd, but she elected to not inquire about it at this point. Galchobhar asked her name, but our traveler politely asked to just be called Gypsy. So, she wordlessly nodded her head in agreement and said, “Well, Gypsy, if you plan to stay here over night, I would be happy to have you as a guest in my home.”

The traveler responded, “I would love to stay here, what would I owe you for my night’s accommodation?”

Galchobhar considered a moment, “Well, me offering for you to be my guest should imply that there is no requirement of compensation. However, if you insist on payment, I would love to hear stories of your travels. In my opinion, stories are far more valuable than trinkets and money.”

The traveler said “That sounds like a very fair deal to me. Can I meet you here in front of the tavern just before sundown? I still have some things I would like to do before I settle in to rest.”

Galchobhar was a woman of few words and simply nodded her head in agreement.
The traveler hadn’t made any meaningful connections since she left her parents’ home to explore many years ago. Because of this, she was used to going along nameless. She never had any use for a name since she hadn’t connected with anyone on a personal level, and the fact that she hadn’t met anyone that cared to ask. Even the men that tried to woo her only called her by terms of supposed endearment. Now, as she walked away from Galchobhar, she had a sense of elation, but also fear. She was excited that someone was so interested in her and her experiences, not just her outward appearance. Then, she grew afraid of getting too close, as she was still a woman of travel.

She went to the woods and pulled out a leather-bound book with half of the pages blank, and the other half filled with drawings of birds and other things of the wild. Between many of the pages were pressed flowers, all of them found along her treks. She sat and started on a sketch of the landscape. She couldn’t stop thinking about the arrangement she agreed to and how it could affect the future of her travels. The sun started to dip toward the tips of distant mountains, forcing the realization that she needed to head for the tavern-front. As she approached, Galchobhar was already there waiting. She had a small piece of wood in her hand, carefully carving something with a small knife. Once she noticed the woman that asked to be called Gypsy, she placed the wood in her vest pocket and the knife carefully in a small pouch on the side of her boot, “How was your expedition?”
With less hesitation than previously, the traveler responded “This area is beautiful. You have some of the prettiest birds here.”

Tilting her head curiously, Galchobhar inquired, “You like birds, do you? Makes sense for someone like yourself.”

Taken aback Gypsy retorted, “What could that possibly mean?”

Now rubbing the back of her own neck, the taller woman seemed smaller than before. “I only meant that a traveler like you could find an affinity for birds because you can relate to them. Not being tied down, moving about, and creating new homes wherever you go. I never meant to cause any offense.”

Our traveler only responded with a soft smile, but that was all that was needed to communicate her appreciation.

Galchobhar led the way to her dwelling. It was modest, but comfortable. She had a fire set in the fireplace, and it created a soft flickering glow on the walls. There was a pot hanging in the fireplace just above the flames. In it was a vegetable stew that she was offered for supper. They both happily ate and
talked vaguely about personal interests and other basic small talk. Once the meal was finished, Galchobhar and Gypsy began to relax.

Trying to not be too forceful, Galchobhar inquired, “So, how about some of your stories before we settle in for the night?”

“Oh right! Of course,” responded Gypsy with a caring smile.

Gypsy spent the next while telling of some of the most interesting places she has visited, and all the incredible and strange people she has met. She had Galchobhar, who was listening quietly, eyes full of wonder, entirely enchanted. When Gypsy finished her last story of the night, Galchobhar asked where she planned on going next. She only said that she never plans her travels and that she just goes where fate leads her.

The next morning, Gypsy shared a morning meal with Galchobhar and thanked her heavily for the night’s stay. Galchobhar responded in kind, thanking her for the stories and company. Finally, Gypsy admitted what they both already knew, but didn’t want to acknowledge:

“I have to leave today. I am not ready to settle down. I promise I will return. I just can’t say when. No matter when it is, I will remember you, as I hope you will me.”
“I will wait for the day you return. I will know when you do because everything will be more at peace from your presence, as it is now. If I tried, I couldn’t forget you.”

Galchobhar gave Gypsy a few items to help sustain her. Gypsy went on her way and Galchobhar watched her as she left. When she went back into her dwelling, she found a piece of parchment with a sketch of a bear that was signed “Until I return, Gypsy”. When Gypsy reached for her book in her bag, she found something that was out of place. She pulled it out and discovered that it was a piece of wood with a burrowing owl carved into it. They each in their separate places smiled through tears, each holding their item and knowing that someday they would be reunited by fate.
Red Hot Pokers
Pat Watkins
You Were Supposed to Set an Example
Daniel Nunez

Looking up to the older you
That changed. Now you’re a different you.
You guided with your wrongs,
But you let your wrongs also guide you.
I did not follow.
It was common sense.
Stop your impulse
Is all you had to do.
Now you leave us alone without you.

I remember all the meaningless things,
And the things that now
Don’t mean a thing at all.
That’s just the way it is,
Missing you.
He with all the answers,
Mute and deaf.
Outspoken by the grasps of necks
And poisoned by constant inhales.
Near to what once was
Our good old days.
I’ll be next to you.
For the 19
Audree Davis

A wild lander I am,
Sacrifice is my specialty,
Safety is my mantra,
45 pounds weighting me down,
Digging line through the rugged terrain,
Adding fire to line, eating fire’s fuel,
Because when a spark hits, we set fire to fire,
The smell of smoke sets in my nostrils,
Lifting my head for a breath of fresh air,
Up on the mountains, as a sea of flames crackles below,
We fought till the very last day of June 30, 2013
Watson Lake Tree
Pat Watkins
Fire on the Can
Zachary Felton-Priestner

This is a story about one of my most infamous projects which ended in flames.

This story had many beginnings, but it originated from a history class in high school. My teacher told the class we would be doing projects. Options for the project included writing about various topics or an art piece. I asked if I could do anything mechanical. The teacher told me that I could do something related to hot air balloons because they were first conceived during the time period we were studying. I decided to make a functional hot air balloon. Little did we know, this project would become my most infamous yet, for all the wrong reasons.

I had a reputation for making unique and interesting projects. The final product would have to include some personal innovation as well as some borrowed ideas. I found some paper designs and sought to recreate them, but when I began testing, I discovered that I didn’t have the patience these designs required.

The first design was simple and rectangular. I began testing in the kitchen and quickly learned that versions of this design were prone to catching fire. One such design used a modified votive candle as a heat source, suspended in the opening of a rectangular “balloon” made of wrapping paper. The modified candle produced plenty of heat, but it was virtually inextinguishable when it was attached to the balloon. The balloon caught fire, but I just stood there, monitoring the situation. The cool orange flames grew, climbing the edge of the rectangle. A hole started at the top corner and grew uniformly as if lasers were cutting away layers of the rectangle from the top corner toward the opposite bottom corner. The smell of melted plastic and burned ink was heavy in the air. Testing moved outside.

Tired of simple online designs failing, I re-thought the whole process. I wanted something bigger, for which I needed a lightweight heat source. I decided to use a camping stove. This decision would later lead to considerable damage to the camping stove, a mess of extinguisher retardant, and a new look for the lid of our garbage can.
The new heat source was mounted to a balanced platform with bicycle spokes extending from the four corners to make a gap for airflow between the balloon and the platform. I prepared a few different balloon designs made of large garbage bags for testing. The first balloons tested were not able to take the heat of the air inside and slowly started coming apart. These tests indicated that the stove was difficult to turn off, especially without myself being burned, but I failed to notice the problem and continued testing. Without gloves.

The next setup used much stronger plastic. My fate was closing in, but I had yet to learn that plastic can catch fire. Oblivious to this fact, I resumed testing, assuming the worst that could happen would be a mess of melted plastic.

From the point of ignition, things escalated quickly. Within a couple of minutes, the air in the balloon was taking weight off the platform. It was positively exciting, but the positivity did not last as long as the excitement. The balloon began showing signs of failure, but I was hesitant to stop testing because success felt so close. In my mind, the balloon was supporting even more weight than in reality, and I could almost feel the platform getting lighter. Bubbles formed on the surface of the plastic balloon. They grew rapidly, indicating the balloon was past its breaking point. The fate of the project and my afternoon was closing in.

Through the trees and across the valley, the sun was beginning its descent over the hill. The sky was still blue overhead, but the sun was beginning to glow orange, like the metal burner on my camping stove. Without further warning, the balloon began caving in. I did not want the flames from the stove to spread, but I could not turn it off. Despite the impending disaster, I remained calm. I still believed that the stove might be damaged by melting plastic, but when the balloon was melted through, I would be able to access the valve controlling the fuel. It was a dangerous and costly misconception.

Caving in over the platform, the plastic balloon began catching fire, creating a barrier of flames between the stove and me. The plastic blanketed the stove, and small bubbles of flaming
plastic began taking off from the stricken platform like fireflies. The innocent-sounding project was now a crisis, but the situation would have to become worse before it could get better.

Flaming melted plastic pooled on the lid of the garbage can where the platform sat. I was finally able to close the fuel valve, but it was too late. Fire had started melting the plastic pump which acted as the top for the pressurized fuel bottle. Holes formed through the plastic, spraying white gas into the fire, keeping it strong and alive. Although the fuel line to the burner had little fuel left, the fire was now out of control and growing steadily as the holes in the pump grew larger. Decisions made in the next few minutes were critical.

Despite the lack of gloves, I grabbed one of the spokes extending from the platform and rotated the assembly such that when the fuel bottle blew up, the ball of flame along with accompanying debris would go between the two cars parked in the driveway, and the rest of the contraption would be blasted into the side of the hill (instead of into the house). I sent my terrified brother inside to get a fire extinguisher. I was scared, but not to the point of calling the fire department just yet. I had experience dealing with excited campfires, so I grabbed a relatively high-pressure hose nearby and began hosing down areas that would be impacted, should there be an explosion. I was aware that I could not put out a fuel-fed fire, but if the fire spread to nearby organic material, I would be able to put it out with the hose before it set the forest on fire. An achingly long time later, my brother came back with the fire extinguisher and a phone.

The flames were now between one and a half and two feet tall. The fire was threatening, with sounds of spraying fuel emanating from the depths of the small inferno. There was no need for reading instructions. I had never used a fire extinguisher before but was well versed in the techniques recommended on every label. I pulled the pin.

Despite my feelings, I did not hesitate. I freed the pin from the extinguisher, aimed the hose, and squeezed the handle in one swift motion. A concentrated and powerful stream of heavy yellow powder sprung from the extinguisher nozzle. The sunset flames vanished. All was quiet and calm. For this project.
Granite Dells Moonrise
Pat Watkins
A Deal
Jordan King

It had rained recently, and the mud was starting to stick to Hans' boots. The gravel on the roads was too far gone now to keep the mud down. But Hans continued toward the field and main road far below the chateau.

The air was crisp, and a few low-lying thin clouds scattered the unobstructed view he had of the stars. The moon wasn't quite full. It offered enough light for him to be able to make his way towards the end of the drive, then to the winding cobblestone road that wraps around the hill that their humble abode resides on.

The battle of the Somme began to wind down as news of it being called off entirely had just come to the soldiers at the front. Albeit slowly, the battle was coming to a bloody end all the same.

Sadly, as much as it pained him, Hans and his countrymen were losing the war. He was exhausted of seeing children run across no-man's land only to be cut down by enemy machine gun fire. This was tearing at his heart.

That's what drove him to asking for an audience like this.

The night was cold and still. Quiet as the sounds of crickets echoed off the walls of the chateau. The entire airfield was quiet, the little red flag at the end of the cane pole in the neatly groomed square airfield hadn't moved in the slightest. Even with the number of men that normally bustled around the area, there was little to be heard. It was a Sunday evening, and there was little action to be had in the evenings at airfields. Nights were reserved for the simpler things, things that were to be enjoyed in the time they spent on the ground, as little time as they surely had left.

Besides, there was not much in the realms of flight to be done at night.

Nearly everyone had gone, save for the lone mechanic working by candlelight on some destroyed horizontal stabilizer, patching the blackened holes in the canvas from airborne shrapnel. A fateful reminder of how many times men didn't come back and became too close of friends with the stinking mud of no-man's land far below them, somewhere they all said they would never go.

He thinks to himself, he lives like a king compared to his brothers fighting in other areas of the war. He and the other fellows of his squadron are invited to fancy parties like they are some fantastical heroes awarded medals on the daily. They live in some rich lord's private chateau... it has different wings for heaven's sake. They had a sponsor at their airfield. He thought it was crazy how pilots were considered heroes these days in the war, with how little he felt he did. Hans had a massive score of three aircraft downed, and he had been fighting the real fight for no longer than two weeks, he was certain. He would make ace if he lasted another week; he was sure he would become one of the legendary aces.

He kept walking, passing through the gate unnoticed at the outside of the property. Even the guards were off duty tonight, enjoying the fact that the battle is dying down. So much so that they took their own leave. Hans thinks it's unlikely that anything will happen. Nights like this give both sides a break, and even though they were fighting a war, there were still nights to be mutually respected by both sides of the trenches.
He walks more towards the grass now, hoping to clean his boots from the clay-based mud that seems to be collecting on the leather soles. He hopes the damp grass will slowly scrub away the mud, knowing it certainly will not come off later. He fidgets with a piece of paper in his pocket, making sure it's still there, remembering briefly what he is about to do. He adjusts his coat, pulling it close around his shoulders, as he pulls the bill of his cap low over his eyes, hoping no one will see his face.

He reaches the end of the rather lengthy drive and hangs a right on the road. About half a mile down, the road enters a thin grove of trees. He is pretty sure they are an old abandoned grove of fruit trees because he has flown over them a dozen times, and they are all in relatively neat straight lines. But he has never been close enough to know exactly what kind of trees they are, though they are pretty in autumn.

Hans is pretty sure that this grove of trees will do for this meeting.

The final stretch of his walk is certainly uneventful, quiet and still, just as it had started and exactly how he had planned. He slows down once he enters the thin area of the trees and listens just a little more carefully.

And he picks up on something, a small sound off into the lower-lying shrubbery in the forest.

Footsteps oddly similar to his own off to the left. In the grass, a shadowy figure appears. A man, in a cloak not too different from Hans' own. Shaggy black hair that reaches down to his ears and bright, cunning grey eyes. Grey though, without any whites, and his pupils? Glowing a soft white, producing light like that off the moon. He is not smiling, but more like he is attempting to hide his amusement. Hans can tell, the fellow seems tricky indeed.

Hans checks his watch.

It's half past one, right on time.

“So...what I can do for you? Hans, is it?” the blonde man asks carefully. Something swishes about behind him beneath his coat, but Hans isn't quite sure what he is to make of that. It's late. He may be hallucinating that little fact.

Hans digs into his pocket without a word, digging around for the sheet of folded paper he had been toying with previously. He shoves it out at the man with blonde hair without a word, looking away.

The man takes it carefully, unfolding it and turning away from Hans. He steps away a bit and reads the note. “I see,” he nods as he turns back to Hans, “I can do this, no problem. Surely though, one of the more interesting deals I have had to make.”

“I thank you in advance, my friend,” Hans tells him, still not meeting his eyes. The blonde man has a few inches on Hans, and he is strangely intimidating, appearing far more human than Hans had expected.

The blonde-haired fellow nods. “I accept your thanks, but do not mistake me as your friend. You know the cost for this, yes?” He holds out the paper towards Hans, gesturing to it with his other hand.

Hans nods quietly. “My spirit, so long as I have done my research correctly.”

“No, in fact. Not for this. For this,” The blonde man reaches out for Hans' hand. Hans gives it to him, palm up. “For this I shall be taking your soul.”
The taller man simply takes Hans' hand in his own and shakes it firmly. An agreement has been made. Hans wants to never lose his fighting spirit. And the devil? He seems to have agreed. Hans knew he would want something akin to his soul, so this was not a shock for him. He nods to the blonde fellow, and he turns away with a smile.

Hans swears he sees a black almost reptilian tail swishing around his feet, as pleased with himself as he seems to be, the shadowy form of twisting horns reaching around the top of his head. The man vanishes into the forest and leaves Hans alone on the dark road.

A deal had been agreed upon.

Hans could feel in his chest a warm sensation. He was inspired to keep fighting. He wanted to keep going. The war suddenly didn't feel so fruitless for him and his brothers, and he loved how he felt. He felt like he could fight forever, and his strength was limitless. He stands in the middle of the road, feeling only better, like he had lost nothing to the deal with the devil here on this night.

He began the trek back to the chateau, none the wiser about what he had lost. He stops in the middle of the road, not far from the drive, and checks his watch. He hears something approaching and looks up. Headlights are suddenly upon him, the hooting and hollering in the car alerts him to the fact that they certainly don't see him standing in the road.

He doesn't move, and then, impact.

The car speeds off, turning sharply up the drive to the chateau like nothing had happened, its passengers unphased by their collision with another man in the road below. They probably thought they hit a deer or other animal, and it certainly wasn't to be dealt with at this ungodly hour of the night.

Hans lies in the road, and the pain is blinding. His watch is still in his hand, and he reaches towards himself, patting his chest. His ribs feel almost...mushy. The soft crunch disgusts him. His head has a strange dent in it that surely shouldn't be there. He is sure that this cannot be healthy.

He lies there for a few extra minutes, and it doesn't get any darker. He doesn't go to sleep. He stops feeling like he should be dead, and the massive unhealthy dent in his head fades away. He sits up, his clothes bloodied, but, not a single cut remains on his skin.

It is right then when Hans realizes, he isn't quite normal anymore. He asked to never lose his fighting spirit, so he was given a gift no man should have.
Dragon Rider
Caleb T. Williams
Technicolor Dream
Keith Tanner
NO NAME
RAMI C.

THE WIND IS BLOWING OUTSIDE,
IT'S BATTERING THE HOUSE, THE TREES,
AND HOWLS
IN PLACE OF THE COYOTES WHO HAVE
TAKEN SHELTER
AND CANNOT.
Memories of Flowing Water
Alexa Pacheco Olguin

I remember that night,  
The bright and gentle moonlight,  
My lungs filled with fresh air,  
And the wind in my hair.

The sound of flowing water,  
The smell of the rainwater,  
The grass beneath my feet,  
And my life was complete.

Exhaustion throughout my body,  
And I wasn’t just somebody.  
It was quiet except for the sound,  
Of the flowing water where I drowned.

I could see a million stars in the sky,  
Beauty no one could deny,  
That sound was my lullaby,  
I wasn’t ready to say goodbye.

Feeling like a small piece of dust,  
Knowing I had to adjust,  
To a new future, a new life,  
Feeling the stabbing of a knife.

A whole lifetime was spent there,  
It became hard to breathe air,  
The thought of leaving made me frightened,  
But somehow all that weight lightened.
To the Beat of His Own Drum
Jennifer James

During my junior year of high school, I joined the marching band. The director threw the largest bass drum on me, handed me the bass drum mallets, and gave me a not-so-motivational pep-talk before our first big game.

“Ronnie, pay attention,” he scolded. He took a mallet from my hand and beat the drum.

“Left, left, left, right, left,” he said, nodding his head to a steady 120 beats per minute. I can assure you my heart was beating twice as fast. I grabbed the mallet back from him and whipped my drum around to get in formation. The motion nearly knocked all the cheerleaders down like dominoes.

“God, Ronnie. Quit being such a klutz!” a cheerleader steamed at me. My cheeks grew red from embarrassment.

“Nice going, Ron,” I muttered.

The student population was only about two-hundred students at this little high school in Westfield, Wisconsin, so of course everyone knew about everyone. The students knew me as the best drummer the school’s jazz band had ever seen, and now, they probably expected me to be the best marching band drummer, too. Jazz was so different from marching band - I actually had to keep a steady tempo and read sheet music. It was the worst. My head began to ache and my focus drifted towards multiple “what if?” scenarios.

“Ronnie...Ronnie!!...Ron?” a girl yelled from the stands. I looked at her as she waved ecstatically at me. Her smile was cheek to cheek and her eyes squinted a little.
I had only met her a couple of times during band and student council events. She was the freshman representative in the council. This girl, Rae Ann, was something else though. She was not only kind, but she was extremely smart. She was taking senior courses that I haven’t even enrolled in yet! I bet she’ll graduate with me and the class of 1969.

I realized I had been standing there staring at her and awkwardly raised my hand for a faint wave. She whispered good luck to me and went to go find her friends. I stood there daydreaming as my gaze followed her.

The drum major blew her whistle scaring the daylights out of me!

“Get in position, now!” She yelled at me. I turned around to see that the whole band was waiting for me. The embarrassment painted red on my cheeks and pulsed in my brain. My head ached; this was too much to handle. I lumbered over and stood next to my section leader, and he rolled his eyes at me.

“Your position is behind me, Ronnie. Just try to calm down okay?” he said with a wittily tone. I gulped down a hard lump in the back of my throat and slowly got where I needed to be.

“What a mess you are Ron,” I kept thinking to myself.

The purple and gold uniforms suddenly looked fuzzy and the sounds around me were fading in and out. The only thing I could focus on was not passing out from the overwhelming sea of emotions. The drum majors attentive call from her whistle drew me in quickly. It was time to start the show.

The director’s 120 beats per minute buzzed in my brain and was the only thing defining success at that very moment.

“Left, left, left, right, left...” I repeated to myself.
After about three minutes into the show, I peered over to the stands to see Rae Ann enjoying the show. I started feeling more confident and a smile stretched across my face. I started to get the hang of it more! My heart beat even faster and faster, and I felt as if I were in a runner’s high.

“I could do this all day,” I said to myself.

After a couple more minutes, I looked at the other members. They were fatigued and looked about ready to fall over. As soon as the drum major’s whistle blew, signaling the end of the show, all the members drew from their attention positions. In sync, each of them heaved a heavy sigh, some coughing, as they recuperated from the marching. What happened to them that didn’t happen to me?

“What’s wrong with everyone?” I said.

“You happened, Ronnie,” my drum major said teasingly. “At least you didn’t slow us down newbie.” She patted my back with a slight smile.

“Yeah, seriously, dude. You were almost over 220 beats per minute! You’re insane!” my section leader said, laughing.

I gave a half smile, only thinking about how the director is going to take a mallet to my head when I see him again. The band got in line formation and walked back to the stands to sit down. We passed the student section, and Rae Ann gave me two exciting thumbs up.

“Way to keep them on their toes, Ronnie!” she cheered. I waved and turned my face towards the ground. Blood ran to my cheeks once more leaving me visibly flustered. How embarrassing.

I heard my director clear his voice a few feet ahead. Here we go.
“Well it’s better than falling over. We’ll work on it,” he said with little to no emotion. I gave a small nod.

I turned to my section leader. “I can’t get a read on that guy.”

“Trust me, Ronnie. You never will,” he said, smiling.

The rest of the night was amazing after half-time. Rae Ann came over to sit next to the band, and the band howled out stand-tunes for the rest of the night. It all felt so euphoric, and I was so elated to be a part of all of it. I decided then that marching band wasn’t so bad after all.

For my late Grandfather Ronnie Joseph Parafiniuk

I’ll never forget your stories.
Red was the color of my heart the first time you whispered in my ear that you loved me.
Orange was the color of the flowers you first gave me.
Yellow was the color of the moon as we kissed under the stars that night.
Green was the color of the trees as we stayed up all night talking about nothing.
Blue was the color of my tears the night you told me it wasn’t going to work.
Indigo was the color of the shirt you left in my room that still smelled like you.
And violet was the color of my bruises when I remembered all that you put me through.
And I shined brighter than white when I realized I was more than the dark burgundy of your voice that hissed in my ear the first night you ever hurt me.
And I will pull myself up until I can’t remember how you made me feel because hurt people hurt people.
And the color of love is the purest white.
Whiter than freshly fallen snow and the dove from heaven.
And that color is how I choose to love myself.
Weather Forecast

Mark Sinclair

‘Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the region,
Rainfall will start, around Monday, the evening.
A Pacific trough bringeth both moisture and cooling,
That will set Rudolph, and Santa a droolin.’

Snow will be present, but only for peasants,
That live at the heights above six-thousand footsies.
Temps will be tumbling through Yule-tide and later,
So look for snow flurries, in our little hamlet.

Friday, yes Friday! Another trough cometh!
This will bring more, of the silly soft stuff.
So you better watch out, naughty or nice,
For roads might just well be,
Covered in ice.