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HORSE: 4 FRAMES



JEFF STREEBY

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HORSE: 4 FRAMES

*Luck is the pick-me-up, Luck un-resented,
For one of these days we'll be the ones.*

Michael F. G. Standen, "Common Knowledge"

*The gate stood wide open when he got there. A man he recognized
but could never quite name waved him through. The man's gray Stetson was soaked
and water dripped from it where the wide brim sagged. A pile of wet snow
grew on its crown. He wore a frayed Fish slicker whose sleeves were bloody.
He had blood on his hands.*

Strange snow still fell. It covered everything

He thought, "*It wasn't like that. No. It wasn't anything like that.*"

but the crumbling county blacktop. It melted there and he could see
the road ahead stretch out wet and black and shiny into the storm.

There are stories that end well, aren't there? This could just as well be one.
The monster from our childhood darkness will die in a spray of blood,
strong sword-voice of the shield-breaker singing him the chant of edges.
Someone will discover, won't they, that one-eyed bastard in the game,
notice those aces up his sleeve? Accused, he'll deny, take chances
through another hand or two— push his luck— draw to an inside straight,
say, or try to fill a royal flush. Caught out, he will try to bluff.
When pressed, out of bravado, he will skin his little hideout gun.
Surely, some game soul will topple this tinhorn from soda to hock.
From those squirming entrails then shall step wisdom, beauty, the winged boar.
Out of that torn throat, out of that heart, sword-split and shivering, shall
spring forth, hoof on stone, the stallion, his brother of the heavenly air.

*The woman had been standing on the front porch, had seen him arrive.
She wore no coat or hat. Snow dusted her red hair, her hunched shoulders.
Her eyes, without expression, unreadable, were red from crying
but she was not crying now.*

The truck's bald tires made a hissing sound

The man's horses had all moved away from the fence as he walked up.

on the wet pavement as he drove along.

*They were wet and they steamed,
shivering in the cold. Their heads low, their ears flat against their skulls,
they had moved off, their hooves sucking at the slurry of snow and mud.*

Where the blacktop ended, the road was gravel.

*The mare stood quietly
her eyes closed. Weak, shocky, she trembled, her breath rapid and shallow.
Snow piled along her topline and gathered in her forelock. When it
melted, water coursed downward in runnels, striping her tawny hide.
She wore a trophy halter. Hanging from it, a new white lead rope
tangled in a little heap at her feet.*

Snow covered the gravel,

He thought, "Hell. It wasn't like anything."

but in ruts and low spots
there were black pools of standing water.

*Each pad of the prickly pear
beside the machine shed drooped under its own burden of wet snow.
The new tin roof of the saddle house had shed in one rough furrow
its whole load of cold slush.*

Fence pliers on the dash slid to the floor
as the truck bounced along. Gravel rattled under the running boards.

He didn't think anymore. He saw it all again.

*His father,
a frail skinful of bones still presiding over household quarrels,
plays solitaire at the kitchen table, aware the losing cards
he deals himself today will still be here next week when he is dead.*

The hero has arrived, you know. The moon can see him and the stars
peer down as witnesses. Wisely, he has consulted oracles,
poured out generous libations. Fragrant smoke of his sacrifices
hangs yet in the air. On the altar, the dun steer and shearling lamb
are bones and ash. He sleeps alone and dreamless on the barrow floor,
his broad sword freed from stone. Soon he will buck the tiger, braced or not.

Water splashed in the fender wells.

He bent to examine the wound.

A long sharp spear of bone showed white through the muscle of the forearm.

Her lower leg, though bent at the knee, rested at an odd angle,

fetlock, pastern and hoof wall of the toe all flat against the ground.

Dried blood had caked thick and brittle over the leg below the break.

Where the mare had stood there was a shadowy stain under the snow.

The heater fan clattered in its housing. The wiper motor whined.
Wiper blades squealed back and forth.

He remembered the truck wouldn't start.

*The old man totters out there— everybody trailing after him,
an odd cortege. He makes the grown boys fetch him his tools: screwdriver,
3/8 wrench, an emery cloth. He growls then with his old impatience,
for an instant that eighteen-year-old gunner's mate in Navy wool
spoiling for a fight. He fixes the wrench on the battery clamp.
He strains heroically toward that one small success. His hand
trembles. Sweat seethes on his forehead. And he can't break it loose. He flings
away the little wrench. It chimes cheerfully— once, twice, then three times—
as it bounces down the driveway. He goes inside. No one else moves.*

He is faithful—Pia Fidelis. In fulfillment of his vow,
he has raised up shrines. He is dedicant of a dozen fanums.
With good reason, he expects the sword, shield, cloak, the golden bridle.
Though the gods grant him all, he will fold, cards on the kitchen table.

Wipers packed snow into ice along the bottom of the windshield.

*He had taken a yellow grease marker out of his coat pocket,
marked then the suffering mare's face clearly with the necessary "X"—*

from the base of the left ear to the right eye then from right to left.

It was still early. Up ahead the road was white. There were no tracks.

*He fished three cartridges from his coat and chambered them in the pistol
then rotated the cylinder and closed it up. When he cocked it,
his first cartridge came under the hammer.*

Sinking under wet snow
nearby mesquite thickets looked for all like calving glacial faces.

*Two active shifts of firemen at the graveside. Scores of retirees.
Naval Reserve Honor Guard. Back to the old hometown one last time,
relatives and friends gone for more than a generation.*

Gravel,
mud, ice slush roared against the floor. Wipers could not clear the windshield.
He could not see the fence line on the far side of the borrow pit.

*When he looked around he saw the woman had come down from the house.
A gust lifted her wet hair, made of it a nest of red serpents.
Shivering now, she stood silent by the corner of the neat barn
her grey eyes fixed on him. He nodded and turned back to his business.*

He could not see the windrow of pines just a quarter mile beyond

He didn't get it.
Echoes of a bugle. Cordite in the air.

and beyond that he could not see the ancient peaks of the Franklins.

*He faced the crippled mare and drew back the hammer, placed the barrel
a foot from the intersection of the yellow lines of that "X"
he had drawn on her forehead and touched the trigger and as the gun
roared and bucked in his hand, the bad luck mare coughed once and bobbed her head
and spoiled his aim and he saw as she fell that he had not killed her.*

In the rearview mirror he saw the end of the blacktop recede

No, he didn't.

*Great granddad's Elgin watch was home in a drawer.
Uncle Eddie's old Ivor Johnson was on the seat beside him.
Dad's twelve-gauge, the Zoli over & under, was in the closet.
What the hell was that all about?
He nearly spoke the thoughts aloud.*

until it disappeared behind falling snow.

*She lay there grunting,
unconscious. Her legs moved as if she were running. The broken leg
moved at the shoulder but not below. The ball had entered her head
below the base of her right ear, passed through and lodged in her shoulder.
As she thrashed there, hot blood pumped from her wounds and sprayed him head to foot.*

Ahead of him, he watched a coyote trot out of the borrow pit,
cross the road, watched where it slipped into the chaparral and vanished.

Sometimes every temple is empty. All the gods just slip away.
The mad Pythoness straddling her sacred abyss cannot riddle.
Epona's horses run mad; her mules and asses die forsaken.
Somewhere even monsters must take the time to eat and sleep and breed.
Then sling stones find their shallow angle of repose. Then mosses bloom.
Just when they do, Rick's smiling croupier drops the ball on 22.

*He tried to draw back the hammer to fire again but it was jammed
so he had to break it open and fiddle with the cylinder,
work the hammer back and forth and after a while he got it fixed.
He cocked it, caught the mare's halter, put the muzzle to her skull, fired.*

The *Lucky Lady* casino's sign loomed suddenly above him

He remembered
*the grave was in the shade of some kind of green ash.
On an east-facing hillside close to the road. All the stones are flat,
all set flush with the ground for easy moving by summer groundsmen.*

and he hit the brakes.

*For a little space, a broad stream of blood flowed
out of her wounded forehead, out of her mouth, her nostrils, her ears.
It pooled under her head. It steamed in the cold. Then it slowed and stopped.*

The truck bounced hard and fishtailed a little through deep ruts and potholes

When he looked, the woman was gone.

as he turned into the mud lot.

The motor diedseled for half a minute after he turned it off.

He sat a while using a shop rag to clear himself of dried blood.

He remembered the only war story he had ever been told.

On the tincan David W. Taylor, battle claxons blare.

A seventeen-year-old gunner's mate stands amidships at the rail.

He is watching two Japanese torpedoes approach from starboard.

He waits for the concussion, fire and smoke, sounds of the breaking keel.

He does not breathe. He feels the ship heel over too late. He watches.

The torpedoes pass under his feet and in the next two seconds

he knows they have been set too deep. He smiles and goes to his gun tub.

So solitaire was his game. He was always luckiest alone.

Dusty trophies hang in his great hall— captured arms, the monstrous claw, jeweled dagger hilts (giant-forged), silver cauldrons from the World Worm's hoard— his hole cards bestowed by smiling gods whose runes fade from standing stones.

Amen. By now, the gates of Paradise will have closed behind him.

Some divine psychopomp or other surely will have waved him through.

His heirs, who will cast lots for the blue wool, must one day cash in, too.

Lottery scratch tickets littered the floorboards of the truck. He laughed.

We all know the rough beast runs loose. Red, black, green, we've got his number.

Still we bet the Red Snake and let it ride. We are out of our minds.

We expect miracles but not ordinary things.

He drifted:

He is ten. It is Deadwood or maybe Lead-- some tourist snake pit.

In a cheap copy of Number 10 Saloon, Wild Bill Hickok sits, eights and aces in his hand, his manikin's back turned toward the door where the old man smokes a cigarette and studies the horizon.

Outside, dust devils swirl. Route 85 is melting in the sun.

Across the road a farmer swaths a field of ordinary bay.

Soon our new ring-giver comes. Some bold Battle-bringer among us,
some longshot, our poker-faced Raven-lord, that grim pistolero,
will risk all and ante up, call the one-armed bandit's bluff. Or raise.
He will hit the jackpot, mark with red the feet of raven and eagle.
Should he fold, it is no matter. The same king comes time and again.
Wild rumors are abroad already—stunned virgins swell with saviors,
Kings and Knaves and Queens and Bulls. We shall have us much of anointing.
It will never end. Every day more new Grendels outgrow their fens.

The little bell over the back door jingled as he went inside.

*The one poker machine in the place has blown its breaker again.
He sits at the bar alone all afternoon and drinks good whiskey.
He bets recklessly on simulcasts from Sunland Park and for hours
he wins and wins and wins.*

ABOUT THE WRITER:

JEFF STREEBY is an American poet and haibunist. He is an Associate Editor at *OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters* (O:JA&L).

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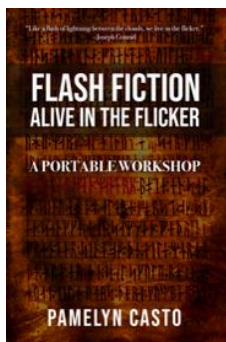
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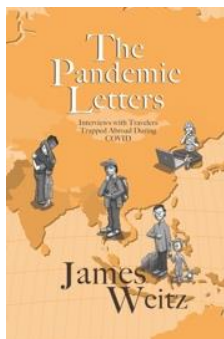
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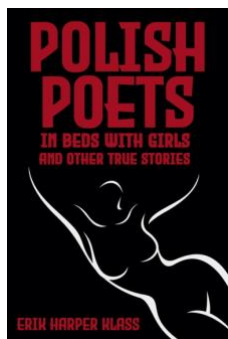
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