

ONE

The night before battle, the traveling mortician E.L. Charon came before them in a wagon and dressed in a black suit with a red tie and a top hat he held in his hand and spoke to them with natural charisma.

“What is your soul worth, my good men? Would you not choose to be among the eternal Heaven if you could so choose? I am here to offer you that choice.”

He pulled out from his wagon two coffins and showed the body of a soldier who was not preserved by his care that was rotting and the skeleton under his flesh was blackened and was missing an eyeball, and one who he dressed himself with make-up, and had sewed his cheek and head back to its face, and clothed him in a cotton uniform he washed and dried, reattached his fingers, scrubbed the wedding ring and had slid it back onto proper placement.

“How do you wish to be dressed for death? Should you not look graceful before the angels of the lord, and before your loved ones to say goodbye one more time before you are lowered.”

Mountain lions howled. “It only costs you ten dollars and lasts forever.”

Lookout Mountain behind them which manifested itself in the dark fog into the skull of a faceless godhead, delivered upon earth from clouds and chiseled out of iron and stone.

Confederate campfire blazing, whipping and moaning like the soul of ghosts on the planet named after the god of war.

Then Colonel Adams gave the soldiers crates of whiskey and opened up a casket of newly purchased automatic Henry rifles he paid for with his own currency. “There’s only a few men in the entire country who own such an instrument, and now you all are among them.”

The guns had oak stocks glazed with a honey walnut coat, a golden level and chamber, and silver steel that shined in the night. They were hymns of war.

Adams seemed to be a god in apprenticeship. Eagle feathers tethered to his hat and a golden eagle pommel on top of the sword slung at his waist in a silver scabbard.

He kept a few slaves with him wherever he went and had earned the slaves, did not inherit them. Born into poverty and working in the sun picking cotton and painting houses and sawing lumber while he sought education in his own time, studying the law until he could defend the law in courts before judges and jury, earning enough monetary currency to buy good land and then good slaves to maintain it. When he was twenty-five years younger, he was commissioned as a lieutenant and watched over this land to see through the evacuation of the Cherokee and was recognized by the President himself as an upstanding young soldier. By the war's end he will be memorialized forever where he is from and in the history texts that mention his name as a great American and there will be erected a ten-foot-tall stone statue of him in the Chattanooga Cemetery.

He told his men to fight like the tigers of their ancestry who made this nation independent, that God has spoken amongst them here this night and has told them to take the mountain and he and God will guide them up its slopes, that they shall move swiftly as the movement of night and conquer the Confederacy with the iron of guns-thunderbolt.

When he finished, they were wild-eyed and crazed drunk and running through the fires, and Boone had taken off his shirt and beat his chest, roaring like a man raised by wolves.

Boone was born 23 years earlier, Ephraim Prometheus Boone, and would have been promoted many times over the past two years except he never knew of an officer that was killed and has a wife at home who wears worrisome on her skin as a blouse and twin sons who do not yet know him and when they grow old enough to play will play Cowboys and Indians with firecracker guns.

Brown, dirty hair. Bushy sideburns that touched his mustache. Achromatic eyes of a dulled blade and stained into his cheek as inherited warpaint was dried blood and dirt that would not be washed out from his skin.

In the past month alone, death had come like a plague touched down by the hand of a cold god. He had seen one soldier desert only to be found and returned and shot and killed by his own company, another soldier kill himself in a cave awakening bats that screamed out along the river and yet a third who was seventeen, a rising star after beginning his ranks as a drummer boy with ambitions to fight Native Americans in the West, who would drown as their company silently swept across the Tennessee River behind enemy lines.

The boy's name was Jameson. His last words were, "I'll be damned if I don't feel that I'm Moses and General George Washington both, when each went down the mighty Mississippi. I shall be baptized as soon as we cross the river and reach land."

Three days later Boone would find a corpse washed up on the banks. Much of the flesh had been fed upon by the fish and cloth been torn and ripped apart and disintegrated into the river wash, and skeleton throughout the body cracking and caked through the skin and its head revealed half its skull. Boone whispered Little Buddy and then prayed it was not him. Jameson's mother would live to be past seventy years old and then die not ever knowing what happened to her son.

In the past month the company had lived on minimal rations, corn extravated from mule feces and a dog they had named after their president that they finally butchered and cooked.

It rained for a straight thirty days like some fable from the Bible.

Then one day the rain stopped and Boone was on picket duty by the Lookout Creek when he met a Confederate named Asher.

Asher had red hair and a mask of freckles around his eyes and nose, and a long golden goatee that touched his chest. In his down time he would play the fiddle to tunes which could make men dance and make men weep and could play the fiddle no more, losing his right arm in the previous battle.

He had been camped up on Lookout Mountain throughout the thirty day rain.

In the rain, just after the Confederate Vice President came to the mountain to speak, a soldier in Asher's company passed by him, saying he was fleeing from here, and Asher asked him if he knew what they did to deserters.

"Don't matter," the deserter said. "God don't know us here. Never could have."

By the time Asher spoke, it was a hoarse whisper and only the shadow of the deserter remained and it glided down the slopes as it were the shadow of the sun setting, with Asher saying in parched speech, "God does know who we are."

The deserter stood in sodden uniform before a thirteen-point whitetail buck and dropped to his knees in the image of confession.

Now, the Confederate Vice President had come up the mountain by wagon, to a two-story white cottage house and the view oversaw the tens of thousands of Union soldiers, their firelight through fog seeming down there in the valley to be an army raised out of Hell.

Slaves escorted the Vice President and held cover for him from the rain while he coughed in a monogrammed handkerchief before speaking.

"Young, and brave men. Remember the tribulation our Founding Fathers suffered in creating this world for us, of freedom and Liberty."

Each night Asher slept in the open rain staring into the darkened skies through the wounded wings of the branches above them. One night he heard shuffling in the dark near him something

that did not speak when he called out to it, and he warned the trespasser he will shoot if it does not speak, and it spoke not. Asher pulled up his rifle and loaded it and stayed on his back leaning his weight down on his handless arm, aiming top his knee and fired and rose, following the trail of smoke unto flickering sunlight of the morning, and stood above his captain's horse which he had shot in the night. The way the horse was screaming was the score for a million mothers across the country dressed in black.

Asher's captain crouched beside the horse's body and rubbed his hand over its ribs and spat beside his feet. Stuck his rifle underneath the horse's left eye—possessing in it green leaves and blue waters and brown earth orbiting and appearing as an ornament of the world captured within its vision—and it snorted and Asher snorted and rubbed his eyes with the rain sliding down his face and turned away when his captain pulled the trigger and its final scream delivered from its jaws a horrid cloud that gaited down the slope of the mountain.

That afternoon Asher was saved at the river. The chaplain held him up and touched his forehead, saying, “Blessed be the man born again, forgiven is he who asks for mercy, with pure heart and cleansed soul,” and he held Asher underwater and the water flooded his lungs. Upon the surface it rippled while Bayer repeated the prayer.

Asher was lifted up, his face parting the waters and there was the gunshot echo of thunder rolling with the current and a fleet of bats screamed overhead and three of them got tangled in his wet hair and clawed his scalp.

Before the Vice President had finished his speech and departed from the mountain, he had repeated the words and writing of the Founding Fathers. “The purpose of this nation is the right to eternal freedom for all men, that this shall never be transgressed, and when threatened, there is an equal right to bear arms against its oppressors in the name of liberty.”

“God does know who we are,” Asher whispered. He closed his eyes.

“Our nation was founded upon these things,” The Vice President said, “and also on the principle that slavery is a naturally moral and normal condition to the existence and prominence of a new nation.”

“God does know who we are,” Asher said again with awful doubt, almost unable to finish the sentence, and he repeated it once more like delivering from the spirit of the earth some ancient curse. He opened his eyes and he saw a herd of a dozen buffalo came thudding and echoing the voice of thunder, stampeding top the river below, rolling up the mountain and blazing past him and he was nearly trampled to death before they dispersed into the thicket of fog and forestry, leaving Asher with a cold and hollow face and speechless and he could not breathe.

At the creek with Boone, after the rain, they played cards for their boots. Boone said his were made from a thirteen point buck he had killed with his father when he was ten.

Asher said his were handed down from many generations of Tennessee back woodsmen.

They were standing ankle-deep in the creek, and the sun shined upon the land for the first time in over a month and gave unto them what they called an Indian Summer.

Hummingbirds and robins crooned and were building nests in the oak that stood beside them off the creek and had been standing there for hundreds of years.

The sun glinted off where its waters rolled cold and trilling over stone and pebbles and past roots sprawled underneath.

We Boone smoked a pipe and shared some with Asher. Asher poured Boone a cup of whiskey.

TWO

The night before battle, after the speech delivered by Colonel Adams, Boone thought he saw the amber-green eyes of mountain lions peering steep in the woods and he chased after them and

they vanished and appeared at some other mark. To the Rebels up the mountain they must have sounded as mountain lions themselves, chanting for blood, and Boone spoke in drunken verse, shirtless and sweating in the cold November night, saying wildcat, wildcat, wildcat. He ran through the fire and the flames swindled and cloaked his form, and smoke and spark spurted upon him as he chanted while the flames parted and waved in the air appearing hinged to his shoulder blades.

They woke the next morning to bugles and Boone had to smack his face with water on his hands and search for his coat, and the soldiers loaded their new rifles with thirteen bronze rimfire bullets and marched along the creek without speech. The water splashed and splashed. The metal of their guns in the weight of their hands.

Just before they marched out from camp, Adams said, "Make sure you have with you your forty dead men," and the company unbuckled the U.S. gold plates on their leather cartridge boxes, counting their ammunition. The straps saddling their necks.

Up the slopes hovered a gray fog crowning a halo around the mountaintop. Opaque winds hung with the digestion of dead souls, hissing through the trees and they entered the forest slopes and trekked uphill and the hovered cloud devoured the Army's collected figure as it were a great beast conceived from the heavens.

A hallow atmosphere wafted amongst them. The wings of birds fluttered and acorns dropped on top of leaves and colorful dead leaves were crinkled, the soles of their boots sashaying and slipping as they stepped, and the air whispered a demonic lullaby that scratched within their ears, and all reflecting light upon the earth had been snuffed out and scalped.

They were ordered to halt and kneel. Boone wiped his face from a chilling sweat and uncapped his canteen and took a sip. He pulled out his pipe and loaded it with tobacco and lit it with a

match. The combustion sparked orange and the smoke cluttered his face. Then it vanished, and more smoke reappeared while he exhaled. A mosquito found the blood on his neck and he killed it with his hand.

Farther up the mountain not fifty yards away were the enemy soldiers squatted on the silver palisades that ran ten and twenty feet tall against the slopes, and they were lying down in trenches behind wood and stone earthworks with rifles pointed through the cracks.

Colonel Adams pointed to that direction, smiling and inhaling, watching. Boone pinched the pipe with his teeth and checked and cocked his rifle. The barrel lay across his knee and he squinted through the smog. The order was delivered to raise their rifles and they did, holding the instruments against their shoulders. Boone was lefthanded.

A tremendous squawk sailed through the air and hung in space, and the sound descended and cratered against earth in a dozen intervals, shells of artillery and cannonball crashing and exploding and spurting up sediment of dirt and roots and forts and bones and flesh. And the screams of the wounded.

The Union fired and followed the ghoul curtain of gunpowder. Boone cocked his lever handle, and the burnt cartridge chimed and ejected while he stood and charged, the color bearer beside him—a portrait in the denseness of hanging cloud, of an American fleet, the sails striped red and blue with white stars lashed atop the tides. The brass horns sounded the song of war.

During this, the Confederacy fired and found cover, and reloaded. A second and third wave from their command fired and came down to meet the Union.

A musician was shot through the neck and his song warbled violently. The collected tongue of soldiers screaming was in the vein of Mother Nature's offspring screaming vengeance. The Rebels had reloaded and fired again. Boone hammered out shots while running and tripping over



his bad foot, taking cover behind trees while branches fell before him, and he lay down behind them. The bullets he fired clinging beside his ear. The roar of gunpowder tunneled out from his barrel. Two Rebels emerged from the dim smoke and fog and they came savagely and wickedly and with a foreign howl and they took two bullets to the face from Boone's rifle.

He pulled the wounded musician down beside him, behind a tree that had taken so many bullets it cracked and fell and thudded loudly and with a holy cadence with the crack of thunder. Boone held a hand over the neck jetting with blood, and raised, drawing out his pistol and killed another Rebel, and was shot through the left chest and he gasped from lungs of dust and fell down, his back against the timber. The nurses had come and bullets sprayed over their head. They worked on the musician and lifted him upon a stretcher cot while Boone took out his knife and cut until he could tear open his coat. No blood, he searched with his fingers across his body, and pulled out the deck of cards that had once belonged to Roland. A mini ball had gone halfway through the cards and was wedged into the joker's head.

"That's the devil at play," said one of the nurses.

The musician had been singing an ungodly melody for his mother and had just now lost consciousness. Boone nodded and the nurses nodded, and Boone hunkered his rifle behind branches of the severed tree and rang out seven church bell shots. The nurses lifted up the wounded singer and ran downhill carrying the stretcher. One of them lost balance and fell, and the injured soldier was hurled from the cot and rolled to his death amongst the great spear-shaped limestone rocks blockading his route.

Boone hammered his body against a rock and reloaded the bullets down the barrel of his rifle. Pulling them up from his leather sack. The bullets rattled in his fingers and he lost some in the leaves. Artillery lifted from 1800 feet below wailed in the dialect of whales. Boone had taken to

guerrilla warfare, many had. He met soldiers from New York and of the 111th Pennsylvania. Somewhere on the mountain was Ambrose Bierce.

Men running near him were falling down dead, staring up to the eternal sky through the fog with sunburst eyes, smiling at the gates built by pearl parting for their coming.

Boone shook his head with ghosts housed in his eyes, aimed from behind the rock and fired, watching a Rebel drop, and watching the Rebellion retreat, and through the course of the day would only witness six more of them while he ran across the slanted mountain surveying possible flanks, and kneeled behind rocks, pulling out the wounded who had been lost and hidden under stone, and eyed Asher once in the branches of a tree who sighted him too. A hawk flew between them. None else were around and Boone relit his pipe and wiped sweat from his forehead and moved on.

By dusk there was almost no report, sign or account of a Rebel left on the mountain and upon word of this, there was prolonged muteness of divine messengers flying through the Army's collected spirit, and they could see up a hundred yards up the slopes their flag being erected upon a palisade and then the soldiers shouted in celebration and it reverberated to the bluffs and throughout the valley.

Boone was still heading back to his company when he heard the roaring cry of the battle's victory, and he smiled and breathed out finely possessed pain. He snorted and rubbed under his eyes, lifted his kepi from his head and ran a hand through the lice in his hair.

A bullet broke through a branch, and the branch broke and fell to the dirt, and Boone had turned around and the bullet fissured between his eyes, leaving behind a trickling bloodline silent and hallow from his mind down his nose, his eyes wet and open, him falling to his knees with arms in flight, pushed down by wind unto his back.

Asher turned around late in the day and saw no soldier that he recognized and saw an oncoming band of Union soldiers creeping toward him. He hopped down from the tree branch barefooted, and they sighted him and fired, hunted him down and repeated another wave of bullets. He ran for a moment with his hand covering one of his ears, then pushed against a tree to turn his direction and he whispered, in his hurried scamper, a prayer with great calm. Psalm 23. His steps tracing through the woods tracks that led under shrub and bush and between thorn vines and around giant stone, and his feet ran out of land for which to step, halting on the edges of a palisade with a forty-foot drop. Looking behind him and bullets splintered next to his flesh, and they were coming at him with bayonets and bowie knives, dueling pistols and herding rifle fire. He turned away, watching into the sky as crippled sunlight speckled a soundless ceremony through the fog and he closed his eyes and exhaled, and he dropped down, hitting after a slow second against the earth below.

The night turned into a strange brightness, with the moon round and silver and clayed with dents and divots, the gun smoke and fog lifted and evaporated and the frogs were humming, and lightning bugs lit the forest in a thousand gleaming ornaments. Boone was staring into the dark above him, then were his eyelids closed, and a fiery-blue star pulsated as it were a soul resurrected from earth unto sky.

Then the moon passed through the shadow of earth and glowed red as a possessed deity risen in the night watching over all and passed over beyond its shadow revealing slowly the slender constellation of a snake beckoning the tongue of God.

On Thanksgiving, a train was loaded full with Confederate prisoners, down in the valley, who sat staring out the window with their breath clouding the clear pane, and through the cloud, outside, passed by Colonel Adams on horseback.

He kicked his horse up the mountain past soldiers and teamsters and E.L. Charon collecting the dead, and one soldier pointed beside a tree. "Look over there."

"Where?" another soldier said.

"Where I'm pointing. Look with your ears."

He squinted and turned his head and then he saw. A thirteen-point buck, with antlers extended from its skull in the form of oak branches, lay decapitated with its organs torn out from underneath its skin, swollen with seven bullet shots through it and stained in a coat of blood. Strained from the lungs still breathing was its heart still beating and still bleeding.

Adams rode up toward the plateau where a silver pole planted into the palisades hoisted the American Flag, ruffled and whipping.

Soldiers around the property of the house painted in white were singing and fighting drunkenly and dancing gaily. They fired shots victoriously using the windows and boards of the house's frame as their target. Candles fell on the couches, carpets and quilts and drapes. One soldier straddled a Confederate Napoleon canon like riding a bull and lit the fuse and it hissed and ignited and the artillery shell scorched the sky and burst into the house and the house caught fire. The train in the valley was in view below the bluff, spewing out smoke, wheels turning on metal tracks, the cylinder pistons sliding and churning, and the coals roasting and the whistle proclaiming its steam to the world.

On a flatbed floating down the river were hundreds of coffins lit by a dozen candles and Colonel Adams stood in front of the white house while it burned and collapsed, with the smoke from the cigar slithering out his nostrils, standing still and fortified and stoic.