Grounded

Resurrection

… Henson's dead.

We led risky lives and his luck just plain ran out. Henson wouldn't view it as bad luck though, he's an Indian, a truly native American. Luck doesn't have anything to do with life, or death, not in his view, which by now must be omniscient.

I'm having trouble coming to grips with Hen's passing. He's up here somewhere. The mist I'm flying his plane through comes and goes. Now it stays. Suddenly my cocoon of clouds opens to a carapace of earth. The world dashes toward me. I nose up, passing close enough to kiss the top of the world.

I hang on to flight and catch a Chinook wind down the eastslope of the Rocky Mountain Front, descending towards Henson's Blackfeet Indian home.

Darkness envelops the atmosphere as I spill off the Continental Divide.

All kinds of weather—snow when I took off in a clearing of clouds this morning—and now this coming-and-going mist and rain, mostly coming.

Winds of all sorts.

A crease of light remains to the west. Clouds bleed the setting sun behind me, an aura for Henson's repose. Part of me has perished with my American Indian friend, a part lost and gone. I'm much too blear to recount his tale just now. It's been a rugged week and I have my hands full with his yawing craft. Rougher air greets me. Rain runnels my windshield. I hope to navigate a return to his ranch to inform his mother of his unfortunate demise—his mother and her grandchildren. And then his wife, Henson's ex-wife. I need to land. Soon. By my dead reckoning, I should be close.

Darkness deepens. Flat light makes it tough to locate below. My loss of luck may not be far behind my partner's in this shearing squall—a pilot's nightmare, weightless and eyeless, slippery air. My fuel is low. Instead of landing gear, I have two sets of skis on the plane; jerry-rigged snow skis attached to replace landing gear damaged setting down on the riverbank over a week ago.

I had the skis when I took off, at any rate. I topped some trees on the feeble lift out of the riverbottom. I may have tore off the right set of skis, snow skis Henson and I carefully strapped and riveted to the struts to allow my eventual takeoff. Henson crippled the plane he calls Sleipnir landing on a rocky shoal of the Flathead River a week ago. Tore a wheel plum off. There we sat. Stranded. Held captive by wilderness. And then came the girls, followed by the blizzard, followed by the bear and the consummation of Henson's soul. Snow and cold led to my friend's demise—and wind leads me to mine.

I make out the faint silhouette of prairie below, a dusky windswept expanse, Henson's ancestral homeland. This is not Vietnam. No airport. No runway lights. Not an artificial light in sight. Blackfeet Reservation nothingness. Windy silhouettes waver the contourless earth. The Chinook gale sweeps me down the fall of earth. I let her take me southeastward before I nose back around into the darkening gale. I lose altitude to spot a vague elevation, a hogback ridge running out of the Rocky

Mountain Front. I line up and bring my craft earthbound. I place a pillow across my chest and tighten my seat belt snug as can be. Could be touchy setting down in this relentless wicked wind.

The last light gives me shades of terrain. I heave my craft into the howling. I nose straight into her, throttle full open, and hold tight. I ease down. Mother earth rises to me. I've brought a lot of crippled planes down in my time, but this is my first prairie landing with skis. No instruments, no radar, no snow. Young and bold no more. My heart jumps in my chest.

Darkness thickens. Flight thins. Spirits of rain break cross my windshield and spider my view. My craft's groundspeed reels backwards, then surges sidelong. I pitch and yaw, yaw and dip, dip and dive; a maddening madness. I pray. Pilots do pray, you know. Jesus, do we pray.

In a respite of wind I touch her down. Everything shifts to slo-mo as I ski onto a sudden ridge of ground with the left landing gear. The jerry-rigged skis grab and hop, hop and grab. I reef on the flaps and set the tail wheel down. So far, so good… but then my naked right strut spikes the earth. My world twists and tips. I cartwheel. Slow enough at first, before I tumble into the last feign of light…

I awaken to darkness. Blood and darkness and fuel fuming. Mind whirling. A gash of midnight suffused by a gassed upsidedownness. My mouth bleeds. I spit out teeth. I align my senses best I can and decide it's probably too late for an explosion. My head throbs. My ear aches. I touch my torn lobe and feel an eerie splay of cartilage. My fingers come back bloody. I cannot see the redness in this dark world, but tell by the smell, the blood's lubricant feel of life. I dither. I am spinning, earthbound yet spinning.

I wait. When in doubt, wait. That's the flying rule.

My central nervous system calms to a whir.

The Chinook wind moans and howls.

The plane creaks and whistles in its upside-down angle of repose. Oh, my. My oh my. Gravity disturbs me. Blood sledges through my head. I unstrap and crumple to the ceiling. I right myself and

wrestle open the inverted door. Wind fills the fuselage, charging me with life. I clamber my way out of the craft and plunge into the prairie night.

My face stings. My ear bleeds. Bones bend and tendons simper. I fold to the land and hug the earth. My twisted fate heats me. I curl into the soft bunchgrass fescue. My body quivers in aftershock.

I wait, wait for the sun to light my newfound world. Or maybe the moon. And in my wait I sleep. And in this coma I dream vacuous dreams, my memory shucked by the seizing wind. Finally, a dream comes along that I can grab onto. A dream of cleanliness. A dream of bathing. With a woman. I cannot hold the dream in place, so I pocket the memory and roll to my back and gaze to the stars that once guided me over this world.

A clock in my heart.

The darkness of night mingles with the darkness inside me.

I focus and realize this night is not permanent.

Under the scrutiny of stars, I bear the weight of my melancholy.

To the east, light. The moon climbs into a starched sky. White and membranous, she rises above the plains. Her shine caresses me to sleep, sleep in which I dream in a halo of happiness—perhaps a concussion.

I let myself doze to dream some more. I'm finished fighting with death. I am finally getting in touch with my dreams. I let go and fall sound asleep, grounded.

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"Henson? Is that you?"

"It is I, my friend."

"Am I dead?"

"I'm the dead one, Sling."

"But I thought Indians never really die."

"We leave the earth."

"Departed, yet standing before me."

"In your coma I am alive, perhaps."

"Where is this coma, Hen?"

"In your mind, Sling."

"And my body?"

"You are grounded. You must have known the time would come."

"Grounded, yes. Where am I grounded, sir?"

"Of all the places on this earth, you are grounded on the best place of all. You have landed on my home ranch."

"Landed?"

"You piloted Sleipnir out of the wilderness, breached the Continental Divide, my friend, and brought him to my ranch, where you've skidded in and cartwheeled to a stop."

"Sleipnir?"

"Yes, Sleipnir, the fabled eight-legged horse of Odin, the horse that bears his rider to the land of the dead."

"That Sleipnir."

"Sleipnir, my Sleipnir, the Piper Cub we flew into Big River. I flew the heavenly steed in, you flew him out. You tried."

"I crash landed your plane?"

"Yes, you've levelled Sleipnir. Bumped your head, rifted into the land of the dead. Mother Earth's revived you. She embraces you."

"… The sisters, where are the sisters?"

"Daphne and Opal floated down the Big River with Kid."

"Kid Pipe Weasel?"

"He's the one."

"Did they make it out?"

"Not yet."

"You know that and you're dead?"

"Indian dead."

"Versus, say, graveyard dead?"

"Graveyards are for white people."

"Grave-tree dead, then?"

"Life can be elsewhere, pal. A grizzly took me out of this world, remember? No grave up or down. I've transmigrated. I live in a bear's soul."

"You'll cave up and sleep all winter, Hen."

"How clairvoyant. Kid Pipe Weasel told you of my reincarnation?"

"Told Daphne, Opal, and me how the sow nabbed you so sudden. We didn't know what to believe for certain. With all your and Kid's Indian lore, it is sometimes difficult to separate fact from fiction."

"I've crossed over, gone from fact to fiction, indeed."

"Aye, aye, Captain Henson. You're reincarnated as realbear to invade my dreams?"

"That's me."

"Want to trade places?"

"Cannot. I'm Indian dead."

"Are you're limited by this deadness?"

"I am limited to dreams, but you, my friend, you are limited by life, ha, ha."

"Life here on earth limits me, then?"

"If you survive this crash, she will."

"And you, my dead friend?"

"I live only in dreams now. Your dreams."

"This is death, then?"

"For me, yes."

"I'll survive?"

"It's up to you, Sling. The world is upon you. She's all yours. Good-bye, my copilot. Good-bye."

"Come back, Hen! Don't drift off like that."

"Excelsior. I'm headed home now."

"Home?"

"We all travel home."

"__"

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Moonlight

I awaken to the elements.

Wind lashes me with Rocky Mountain sleet. I've fallen from the vortex of flight. I lay warped under the winking moon. I tug myself away from the wreckage. Henson is dead—realbear dead. I am alive, it seems. I gaze starward to find my bearings, but cannot find Polaris or Ursa.

I'm lost to another galaxy, Henson's galaxy…

A comma of light—wan and rhythmic—arouses me.

A water hammer in my head. Blood pulses up my neck. I lose awareness… sleep again, fly into another dream, another reality, my children's reality…

"Daddy?"

"It's me. It's me," I say. "It's me. Your father."

"Daddy, come home…please."

"I'm coming, I'm coming to see you." They cannot hear me.

"Come back, come see us."

Clouds scud under the moon, setting off my vertigo. I stabilize and breathe and reconstruct the time I spent living with my kids—I doze in that good space. Before the war reached out and took hold of me, we had a family life, that life I'd always dreamed. Then that fink neurosis came to haunt me, a prisoner of war thing. Next, my wife took the children away. "We'll do best away from you. We should separate while you heal, you know," she explained. "Let that Indian pilot of yours heal you."

Henson helped heal me, alright, Henson and time. In the meantime my wife's love faded—her love, my love; faded away: love uncapturable as water. She didn't understand me any more than Ho Chi Min. The marriage craft went down. Didn't bring that landing off any better than this one.

Clouds dissolve into darkness. I gauge the stars, taste the blood in my mouth—blood of my children, close my eyes, eyes of the world. My one good ear listens. My kids' pleas ride the wind. They yearn to see me, to know me. I collect myself and rise. I'm fortunate to be able to return. Fortunate to be alive. Henson can't return, not to this world, not to his children's. I pray he speaks to his children in their dreams as he spoke to me in mine.

This eastslope wind is an insistent wind. The blow tilts me as it tilted Henson day after American Indian day. I struggle to stay upright. My thumping heart pelts my concussion with blood. I hear a wrenching and assume it is from within, but no, I open my eyes to witness a gust lift Henson's crumpled plane airborne one last time. Such fierce Rocky Mountain wind. Henson's own wind. The cracked plane balances on her nose—a metallic cobra. She quilts and strikes before reeling off into the prairie abyss.

I scramble toward the wreckage. I'm not yet ready to abandon Henson's craft. I step over a detached wing to reach the fuselage, a warped and wingless cocoon. Henson's spirit is crumpled, gone. I'm weak, worn, and stranded. I stretch out on the prairie. My lungs heave, my heart sputters. A broken rib or two, it seems. Blood pools in my thorax. I find a certain way to repose and my heart eases into a rhythm.

I close my eyes… *buffalo and more buffalo, an endless dance of hooves. Horses, flights of horses, Indians flying atop the horses, horses and Indians as one, Indians and buffaloes and horses as one, everyone together… .*

Sun

Light—fierce and clean—drinks me in, thins me. I rise out of the plains, disheveled orphan of the sky. I am vestibular—cannot find my balance; do not clearly see, feel, hear, or taste the world. Vertigo makes me queasy. I collapse back to the ground and wait for harmony.

I chant the Indian chant Henson taught me. I ask Napi for his help. Slowly building my torso up, I pull my knees under me. I grit my teeth and manage to look away from the sun's fury to witness the mountains. I roll on my back and stare into an empty blue. I consider my health, medically assessing my post-flight condition. I am a doctor, you know, a doctor of veterinary medicine. My pulse lopes along. I roll my neck and flex my torso. I wiggle my toes, limber my jaw. No broken limbs. Everything okay, excepting the ear and head trauma and a chest full of fluid from the shock of the crash.

A pair of ravens strut about and squaw and caw not ten yards from me, Henson's raven friends, no doubt, the interminable Hoot and Moon. They search and peck, feathers ruffling in the sharp wind. They eye me between swallows of grasshopper larva. Henson claimed ravens know folk. The birds stop feeding and survey the horizon. They examine my plane, and then me, adding things up as ravens add. A yellow-eyed wolf who arrives to assess the mess of metal distracts them. I rise to my feet, quickly. Wolf circles low and casual, checking to see if I require an end to my suffering. I manage a smile for the wolf, but the effort stings my cockpit-pummeled face. Henson taught me the human smile will frighten most any wild animal away. According to Kid Pipe Weasel, Hen didn't

have time to smile at the bear that ate him. She took him from behind when he stumbled between her cubs.

Hoot and Moon and wolf and I all regard one another—ravens on the wing, wolf afoot, myself akilter. The sun shines low and true. The wind has settled to a breeze. I stumble back to the wreck and reach inside the cockpit to retrieve my journal and the knapsack of survival supplies Henson threw together before he became the ghost. I find a bottle of water and drink it down. The pervasive vapor of dripping fuel finds its way into my nostrils and stutters my heart. I gulp and gasp and step away, abandoning Henson's bird. A spark from the rubbing of metal could explode bent Sleipnir.

Wolf sniffs out the plane. He eyes me, nonplussed. Flat-eared and high-shouldered, he trots off toward the cold mountains. The ravens drift on the wind, beckoning. I muster some energy and stride after them. I have faith in their dead reckoning. The lightness of downhill travel envelops me. Gravity gives me confidence. I waltz through the native bunchgrass. Hope, I feel hope. I hope my children are well. I make a truce with the world to find them, to know them.

Hoot and Moon take me to a creek that slaloms through a forest of birch trees. Minstrel birds flicker and fly and hop from branch to branch. I stop and sit on the bank and watch their antics. I remove my boots and dip a foot into the flow. I wash the cuts on my face and finger the shred of cartilage dangling from my deaf ear.

I think of Daphne, the wilderness lady I'm afraid I'll never see again. I think of her twin sister Pearl. I pray Kid Pipe Weasel has delivered them safely out of the wilderness. In the distance I hear a blast, an explosion. The harsh echo honks off the mountain front. The plane has detonated. If Henson can't fly Sleipnir anymore, I guess no one will. I stand and brush myself off and walk downstream. Chickadees lead me along, cheeping to one another, showing me their way. A whitetail buck leaps out of the creekside flora, bouncing off, his tail a white flag of surrender.

A ringtail hawk screeches above. Birds escort me along this earth as I once escorted ordnance over Viet Nam. The ravens rejoin my entourage. Hoot and Moon, purple in the morning sun, yearn for Henson. They squawk about Henson's death and my life, and glide towards his ranch.

A cow bellers in the distance, a bubble in her throat.

A dog barks, once.

I reach a fence, the first fence in thousands of miles—wilderness behind me, civilization ahead. The grass is grazed. Henson's homeranch awaits me.

I straddle the rusted wire and hike across the pasture. I encounter a broken cabin, the original Henson homestead.

Time, time and water and earth. Sun. Grass and trees. Fish and birds. Wind and more wind. Cows, horses, dogs, Henson had it all.

I follow an old rutted road out of the bottom. From a rise, I look back to the plane, nothing but a patch of blackness, Henson's pantheon. I forge ahead until I drop into Henson's swale. His horses jerk from their grazing as I come into view. They snort and wheel, racing off as one. They have one another and I have no one. The roll of hooves gets another rise from Mother Henson's dog. The old boy commences barking, but softly.

Henson's modern home rises stark and square out of a bulldozed shoulder of earth, the modular he hoped would cradle his life. He got the house up and running and the wife departed, taking his three daughters with her, children Henson adored more than anything in this world. Desperate, he called me in to visit, and visit we did. All this life-change transpired in the months before I arrived over a week ago, an eternity past for Henson.

The geometric farmhouse is out of sync with the rest of his earthy world. Rather than blending into the landscape, the angles interrupt the flow of the earth it stands upon. The night before we flew into the wilderness, we sat in the house talking, walls shiny, lights bright; a glaring emptiness. Hen told me a modern home was all she ever wanted. Turned out otherwise. A building never is enough. A house is one thing, a home another. I found out that truth myself. Our Prisoner of War experience in Vietnam did not engender domesticity. All we could hope for back on the home front was a raw sort of groping at family life, and grope we have.

I shamble past his shrine of unfulfilled dreams, step through the corrals, and march openhearted to his mother's cabin. Her timeworn dwelling blends into a curve of primal riverbottom. A crooked chimney discharges pungent cottonwood smoke. Her dog wags his tail and greets me with a nudge. I step onto the sandstone porch and knuckle her door. My rap resonates, followed by a faint rustling inside. The dog stirs his brown eyes at the handle, telling me she's coming. I stroke him and wait, not looking forward to my duty at hand. After a good rub, the door opens. A frail woman squints at me, expressionless. Halved by a shaft of sunlight, her swarth skin is wrinkled with wisdom. Her lips pucker inward. She squints and munches at her tongue. She shades her black eyes with her wrist, but avoids direct contact with mine, looking instead at my legs and boots. She begins to recognize who I am. I spent an evening last week with her before Henson flew me off in his plane. Her dog affirms I am familiar. She smiles.

"Sling?" she asks, confused by my solo presence.

"Yes," I choke.

I have to tell her.

Now.

A welling in my chest.

"Ma'am, your boy is dead."

I don't know why I call Henson a boy, he's been around for half a century. His mother, this mother, never had a date for his birth. She had a month; "the moon of exploding trees." Henson was born during an especially cold January. The sap inside the cottonwood trunks had frozen and expanded during the subzero week of his birth, exploding certain trees. Nineteen-forty something.

Henson's mother fails to react to '*your boy is dead*.' Locked into the expectation of his return, she motions me inside. I expect emotion, but see nothing. At her age, death must be familiar. As I step inside the doorway her little body stops. She is beginning to comprehend. She grabs my arm with a hand to steady her self. With the other, she gently fingers the wounds on my face, soothing their

sting. She pinches the strip of lobe hanging from my ear and rips it free. There is no pain, only a spattering of blood.

"The bird?" she asks, flicking my ear into the stovefire.

"The ravens?"

The smell of burnt flesh.

"Motor bird," she clarifies, spinning her finger, flying her hand.

"Crashed."

"My boy in it?"

I shake my head, "No."

She murmurs relief.

"He's dead," I reiterate. "Your son is dead." She hears me this time. *Dead.* Indian dead. She gazes through the walls of the home in which she bore his bones and stirred his blood. Her eyes travel. Emotion embraces her, suckling at her like he once did. Her lips quiver, beads of sweat forming on the upper, her lower folding into her mouth. She looks me in the eye, scared now, forlorn. I feel the reflection of her pain, that space where the living attempt to annex the dead. Despair stirs in the depth of her eyes.

"How?" she asks.

"A bear," I state. "Grizzly. Realbear."

She grasps her face with palms and fingers.

"Ate him," I restate.

She nods and emits a clucking sound. Tears prism her eyes. She whisks by me, out the door, squeezing her lips in the fingers of her right hand. She steps off the porch to ascend the hill above Henson's birthplace. She lets go and issues a mournful wail. A coyote answers.

She wails some more. A chorus of mourning pours forth for her son. The birds and cattle pine in. Leaves ripple. Horses neigh. Nature mourns my comrade's death.

I stay in the cabin, leaving Mother Hen to exorcise her loss. I stir the coals in the woodstove and put on a pan of water to boil. Her lament intensifies. The wind returns to enjoin her baleful keen.

I rock in her rocking chair. I rock rhythmically. Henson is beyond death by now, but she is not, nor I. Death is luggage, luggage for the living.

For Henson, death is nothing.

Nothingness.

We—the ones that remain—pack death around with us, a dread we harbor, misinterpreted fear of the precious nothingness that awaits us, the sphere Henson has breached. My captain is free now, but we are not. Imprisoned by life, we choke on sorrow. Mother sings. She wails.

I rock and listen.

Her son hears no sorrows, knows no longings. No time or distance. Memories? Who knows? His bird life existed in a realm beyond mine, a spirit world astride reality.

The ranch birds mourn Mother Henson. *Hen Son* answered to birds, and those birds now answer his mother's call. He lived among birds. He became bird. He flew, and flew well. There were a few good years after the war, and many more before, years that are nothing now. We both experienced childhood, times where little went wrong, but all that changed. Then came war—that blood-bloated affair of civilization—everything wrong. We returned home abandoned. In turn, we abandoned ourselves, left ourselves in Vietnam, never able to fully retrieve our souls from Ho Chi Min's curse.

Henson and I searched in earnest for peace. Tried, anywise. Freedom became impossibly complex, for me it did. Henson found harmony with his ranch life. He found freedom on the land, but marital bliss became elusive. For a while he had the family he wanted, I know he did. He loved his girls. The Indian life was good to him, a life on the land, a taste of his ancestors' culture.

Henson made me come help him round up his herd of cattle each Indian summer, the bountiful time. The year before—out of the blue on a roundup ride deep into the mountains—he claimed "on

some level every Indian hates every whiteman." Be it conscious or subconscious, I suspect he was correct. He related this missive horseback in the middle of nowhere. I considered the comment, attributing the notion to his mourning of the dispossession of his ancestors' cherished land, the extirpation of their buffalo.

We all dream of some impossible life or the other, I suppose. Indians dream of times past when they had the earth and animals to themselves. Henson's ranch was as close to the past as any Indian family could hope.

His cattle company had some banner years until the weather got droughty and the market fell off and he went broke. One year a decade or so ago, the banker showed up and repossessed every critter Henson owned, horses and all. It's serious business when a white banker garnishees Indian horses. Henson was forced to become a carpenter for a time, hammering up tract housing, contracting his body to the Bureau of Indian Affairs as if selling his soul to the Air Force hadn't been enough. Carpentry was opportunity he did not appreciate. He didn't give up though. He still had his land, this land. While racking up time-clock labor he quietly built his herd back, slowly and patiently, a cow and horse at a time. A young heifer, then a colt—each month, another critter or two. Generations grew and multiplied. He hammered the minutes and years away—time itself, hammered away. I remember well his difficult years, as there were no cattle to round.

For a time, we rode an empty range. Without cattle, the grass thickened. He worked in the wind by day, and cared for the animals by night. He drifted through a myriad of pain, suffering becoming life; his pain of war, the misery of a culture lost. One day he set his hammer down to emerge on the other side of suffering. He captured a serenity I envied, a life cradled by his ranch and family, and those invisible birds perched on his shoulders.

Oh, how my mind wanders back to my visits to see him. Good years, bad. Whatever death is, wherever it took him, his ranch lives on. He's lost this life, though it remains for others to have, his children perhaps, if they ever find their way back here. I find rosehips in Mother Hen's cupboard and

brew a cup of tea. I find no sugar, but locate a large can of peanut butter and a stack of frybread wrapped in a tea towel. I butter Mother Henson's baked goods and feast on a much-needed meal.

Her home is plain and simple. The smell is sage and earthy, lodge-like. Henson's mother has lived here by herself since her husband, and then her daughter, passed away a decade ago (liver failure both). She's been alone on the ranch since Henson and I flew off one week past. Weeks, years, decades, and now we have death.

Outdoors, the wind stills, but not the wailing, or howling. Woman as wolf. Henson's memory settles the air. Indian women have been known to stop wind by vocalizing their pain, trundling the souls of all who listen. Her wailing carries the pain I feel for Henson, pain I feel for myself and my children. She wails song after song, songs speaking to her dead son. I don't know if he hears. I don't think he does, but I do. Her song is for me as much as for her son, for my children, for Hen's.

After tea, I wander outside to tend the ranch chores. There's nothing urgent. The movement does me good. I guess I'm okay, concussion, ear, and all. Other folk have bigger problems. With Henson gone and it being fall, I surmise I'll have to round up the cattle so his mother can sell the calves before winter sets in. I find myself trying to sing along with her distant dirge. A tone emerges from my primordial breast, coming from somewhere I never knew I had—a newfound ability to grieve. I'm pulled into Faith's keen, and spill forth with her. Loss curdles the foothill silence, our throats chill the air. The temperature falls into our emptiness. I bid Henson farewell. I wail loud and long.