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Heartland Wilds

Abstract

I returned home to the heartland wilds, striking Pa as hard as I could. It took him a long time to come to. I stood over him, bigger. I stood over him, and I saw a lot of me beneath the swelling...

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BOOTH



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Heartland Wilds

Fiction by Michael Credico

I returned home to the heartland wilds, striking Pa as hard as I could. It took him a long time to come to. I stood over him, bigger. I stood over him, and I saw a lot of me beneath the swelling.

“Boy?”

“Square in the jaw.”

“Missed.”

My knuckles smarted. I flexed my hand to see whether any blood got loose. I palmed the wall to check that my fingers were still plumb.

“I haven’t eaten, is all,” Pa said. “I’m not right for what I got coming for me.”

“You got blood.”

“All over.”

I opened the cold box, the cupboards. All empty. “Ma deserves—” I began. Pa told me to shush, motioning to the bedroom. It was empty also. “Where’s she?”

“Quiet.”

I struck him square in his pursed lips.

“She’s done for,” Pa said, solemn. “There’s folks around here I don’t want knowing.”

I touched the indent of her shape in the bed.

Pa crawled to my feet, resting his swelling on my thigh. “This isn’t the last thing. We raised you to believe there’s more.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“You came back.”

“Wasn’t done for.”

“Far’s we could tell you was.”

“Went for a walk.”

“You’s less same than you was when you left.”

“Grew up.”

“You saying you’s a man?”

“I’m saying I hit you square and it hurt.”

“Square’s not shit. Can you fish, even?” I reared back.

Pa put up his hands. “Course you can’t. I never showed you.” He pointed out the window. “Look at all them scales in the moonlight. Fetch my hooks, my worms.”

#

We sat on the bank of the river. I sunk my feet into the water. “Wish I’d taught you better,” Pa said, casting his line.

I remembered the old days when the thick of the wilds was thicker. When Ma stood at the window, watching over me as she readied supper. When Pa sat quietly in the yard

with a pipe and a paper. I'd said I would like to fish for evening's supper. Pa had said, "Go on," shooing me away with the rolled-up paper. I did what he'd told me to do like I was supposed to. I'd gone and kept going until I ended up where I'd left.

Pa hooked a fish with no trouble, lifting it from the river, beating its head against a stone. "Want you to have this," he said, setting the fish on my lap. "We weren't all bad."

It wasn't a question. It was the last thing he said before jumping into the river.

I stuck the fish into the ice pail. I carried it to where the river widened, where I hoped I could reach for Pa before the river ended and thus he ended also.

I found a child instead. "Bites?" the child said. "I'm going to let it go."

"Smells done for."

"That's right."

I dumped out the ice pail. The fish broke apart in the river. The water was bloody a few moments before turning again clear as river glass.

"I don't understand," the child said. "You could've fed your folks."

"No folks no more."

The child knelt before me and prayed.

I shoved him away. "No place for that."

The child wept. "I'll tell Mother."

"She's gone."

The child, hysterical, struck me in the knee. "No truth," the child screamed, running into the thick of the wilds.

I didn't run after the child like I should've. Must be I wasn't man enough. I followed the length of the river, looking for home.

#

I fell asleep inside the shape of Ma. I woke up un-alone, the bedroom full of children. The child who'd struck me at the river climbed onto the bed, grabbing my head by the hair.

"Him," the child said, speaking to a woman on the other side of the room. She was staring out the window, paying no attention to the child or what the child was saying.

I tried to sit up. The children pressed me down. "No more leaving," she said.

"I'm already here."

"Home."

"I know."

The children cheered at this admission, one after another touching my hair and my cheeks, praying for me.

"Shall we feed the fish?" she said. The children squealed.

I smelled fish. They were in an ice pail on the stove, boiling.

She ladled the fish and the fish broth into bowls. We sat at the table, all of us, together. I stared at the fish head set before me. It steamed into my face. I reached for a spoon. The children gasped.

"Wait," she said. "Who made this possible?"

"Who fed the fish?" the children said.

"Who?"

"Mother."

"Amen."

#

The fish head didn't sit well. I choked it up into the toilet. "What do you see?" she said.

I was staring at the fish head, and the fish head was staring back.

“Look at me.”

I couldn't, wouldn't.

“Why'd you bother coming home?”

I choked up again: bones, broth, scales.

#

She was standing outside, forcing the children to dig. “For me,” she said.

“We love you,” the children said.

I leaned on home.

The child tugged at me, pulling me to the hole he'd begun. “I can't get any deeper. I'm afraid I won't make it.”

“If you don't—”

“Please.”

The child's hands were raw and bloodied. I fetched the ice pail from the kitchen. I dug the hole deeper.

“It isn't enough,” she said, standing over me. “Never enough.”

“I know.”

The child climbed into the hole. “But I fit.”

“Stay down,” she said.

#

I went to the river. I let the water run over my head. I saw fish swim, and that wasn't all.

She pulled me from the water and then home. She pulled a spade from between her breasts.

“Why?”

“There’s so much more than we understand.”

“You understand?”

“I’m trying, at least.” She climbed into a hole her size. The children were already buried.

“I thought I saw Pa in the river.”

“Do you believe that?”

“I shouldn’t.”

“Do you believe me?”

I could still taste the fish head. I had bones stuck between my teeth, little cuts in my tongue.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“There’s a lot we can’t do on our own,” she said, pressing the spade into my hands.

I filled her hole with dirt until my stomach felt again upended. I was ashamed of the mound I’d created—the shape of it, the swelling. I struck it flush with the flats of my fists.

Michael Credico’s fiction has recently appeared in *Black Warrior Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *Hobart*, *NANO Fiction*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Quarterly West*, and others. He lives in Cleveland, Ohio.