

KEN HALE

River Styx, 2016

Gouache monotype on glossy inkjet print, 16 x 12 in



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

JEFF EWING

Homestead

Landon drew his finger along the length of his upper lip, smoothing the sparse, stiff strands into a kind of order. A number had turned gray, or were leaning that direction, which struck him as an affront. The facial hair of a teenager on a fifty-year-old man.

The mirror fogged over, blurring mercifully. There was no fan in the bathroom and the window above the tub was stuck fast. One of the sash cords dangled umbilically from its frame, the sill spongy with rot. Shirl wanted to hire someone to fix it, but Landon told her that was the appeal of an older house, those kinds of eccentricities. He thought he saw a smile twitching in the corner of her mouth when he said it: here he was again, hiding his incompetence behind aesthetics. Except she'd never say that; no, that was him talking. Besides, it was just as well it didn't open, with the waves of smoke outside having replaced the usual fog, drifting down from the tangle of ravines and hills where the fire had been burning for nearly a week.

He rubbed the mirror clear. Shirl turned the knob on the other side of the door, knocked hesitantly.

"In a minute."

Quiet, then her steps clicking back down the hall toward the front room, where she'd set up a spindrift shrine in the corner, a small foldout table on which her worldly possessions were spread like a refugee's treasures, knickknacks from the diaspora: two brushes; a pair of inlaid-pearl nail clippers; a candle from Vermont that smelled, even when unlit, of rotting apples; the cast-off photo album from her cousin's first wedding; and, raised slightly above the fray, a bottle of murky water purportedly filled by a child's hands from the holy spring at Lourdes. The one where two girls had seen an apparition of the Virgin Mary; Landon always confused those girls in his mind with the girls from *The Crucible* who had faked divinity in order to destroy those who'd disappointed them. The water had somehow been evaporating gradually, despite the seal never being broken. Was that a miracle? In these circumscribed times, possibly so.

He went out through the kitchen door, which didn't squeal on its hinges as the front door, arthritic with rust, did. The deep quiet following its closing should have been a comfort—that had been the idea when they'd moved out here—but it roared in his ears like the vacuum it was. In those early days, he'd imagined the land unspooling in

all directions as a blank slate, a sheet of paper on which to transcribe his deepest thoughts. The idea that he didn't have any worth noting had never occurred to him.

He walked unhurriedly along the tidy gravel path they'd laid out three years ago. A new trail was already worn around the deteriorating trunk of a Douglas fir that had fallen across the path the winter before. Had it fallen in that first year, or even the second, he would have bucked and split it the day after it fell, stacked it to cure in the lee of the shed, which was now draped gothically in blackberry vines. But here in year four he'd left it in nature's hands, hands that struck him often and heretically nowadays as clumsy beyond belief.

At the crest of the hill they'd named after their dog—Rainier, hardly an original name—he stopped to take a leak. In the absence of children, they'd perhaps connected too closely with the dog. Landon was never convinced it was appropriate or natural. Rainier should properly have been left to pass on heedlessly, as he used to do in life, disappearing into the trees with just the echo of his bark drifting back, rather than lingering like a ghost above a drift-strewn beach he'd mostly been afraid of. Landon wondered if he'd even been a good dog, in the common parlance. He ignored commands, ran off without a backward look, leaving them to wonder sometimes for days if he'd return. When he did, there was no remorse, no seeming happiness at seeing them again. He'd bury his nose in his food bowl and fart ecstatically as he scarfed his kibble down. Landon tried to ascribe his behavior to independence, the wildness in him making itself known. But if that's what they were after, why not just get a cat and call it a day?

He unzipped beside a twisted cypress. The beach below was half-observed by smoke. The wind howled faintly through the wave-drilled rocks, stirring it in eddies. The smell had become a constant, the taste of it like a film on his perpetually dry, cracking lips. He ran his tongue across them, hoping for a taste of salt, maybe a hint of blood.

Turning half around he could see the tips of pale cornstalks crowned with tufts of brown silk. There might be a shriveled carrot or two in among the garden's casualties, he thought, the well of his empty gut swelling under his shirt. He'd gone to look the day before and had surprised Shirl snatching a hornworm from one of the tomato plants, crushing it between her fingers, and smearing it into the

loam. Afterward she'd sat with her legs crossed in apparent content, the twitching of her toes in her sandals barely perceptible. But it was there—a nervousness with the natural world she'd been working her whole life to rid herself of. He weighed that unease now against her voice rising in aimless song over the thudding repetition of the waves. He'd detected a certain confidence in it lately, one of several alarming signs that she was starting to like it here. Despite her past resistance, night after night of crying, the words *exile* and *boondocks* thrown at him like dinner plates. He'd promised her paradise and in the end she'd gone along, knowing he had no idea what he was getting them into. How could he tell her now she'd been right?

He waited for the piss he could feel pressing against his kidneys to find its way out. God, he was hungry. He'd left the house without eating anything, embarrassed by the dream he'd woken from, a dream where he was living comfortably and contentedly with a woman who wasn't his wife, in a city he didn't recognize. A residual thrill shuddered through him like the underfoot rumble of a subway. He closed his eyes and tried to call some trace of the dream back, but all he could summon was a series of muffled explosions against the backs of his eyelids, dull darts shooting toward the edges like bursting seed heads.

His hunger stalked along the weedy edge of his consciousness—he wanted to kill something, to wade in its gore and eat himself sick.

He felt something on his ankle and kicked out. The brush all around was crawling with ticks and thick with poison oak. There were so many adversaries he hadn't been prepared for, a new one every day. Just last week a chunk of flesh had rotted away on his shoulder where he'd been bitten by a brown recluse spider. There weren't supposed to be any within four hundred miles, the distribution map showed a pure white arc across the western half of the state. Yet here he was with a hole in his shoulder he could fit his pinky in down to the knuckle.

His bladder convulsed finally, and the stream began after a wait that had once been worrying but was now business as usual. Another gust swept down the ravine, heated by the fire glowing behind the still-intact pines along the ridge crest. It pulsed faintly, pushed one way then another. Close by he heard branches snapping, something crashing through the brush. He saw the buck just as it saw him,

a vision out of a perverted mythology—smoke trailed it in whorls rising from patches of fur that still burned at the edges, the blackened hide ringed in red. It veered sharply, nostrils and eyes working wildly. Landon staggered back as it plunged past in a blind headlong leap through the narrow band of brush at the edge of the cliff. He heard it hit a second or two later, a wet, unpleasant sound.

Leaning over, one hand holding tight to the cypress, he watched the deer kick twice, lift its head, then go quiet. He wondered if the cool air—rising up the cliff face while the fire scorched the air only a half mile away—had been any comfort as it fell. A moment of respite before the rocks rose up to meet it. He could feel its effect himself, chilling the trail of urine that had dribbled down his pant leg.

* * *

Sand flies were already swarming the wounds by the time he reached the beach. The idea of eating the deer passed quickly. Blood had surely spread through it by now, internal bleeding tainting the meat. Besides, hadn't he read something about eating an animal that had been frightened at the time of death, some terror protein born at the last instant that turned it bitter and unpalatable, the fear itself transmitted like a parasite?

It had landed at the edge of the sea lion rookery, scattering a few of the heavy females from their hollows. They watched Landon as he dragged the carcass to the water. The tide was coming in, and little by little the waves overtook it, each successive one dragging it a little farther out. The legs kicked deceptively in the undertow, the antlers drawing gouges that filled quickly and were soon obliterated. It was a feature of the ocean that was often admired—this knack for erasure—for reasons Landon didn't understand or trust.

"You just threw it away?" Shirl said, unbelieving.

"It wasn't any good."

"How do you know?"

"It fell thirty feet."

Shirl dropped into a chair, twirled a strand of hair around her index finger.

"It was half-cooked already—"

"Jesus!"

"I could have made a stew or something."

Not so long ago, she'd been a rabid vegetarian.

"Why don't we drive into town," Landon said. "Pick something up."

"I don't want those people judging me."

"People have to eat, it's not a failing."

"Yes it is."

She was like that, Landon shouldn't have forgotten. *Stubborn* wasn't the right word, it didn't capture the desperation of her single-mindedness. She assembled her convictions from whatever she found lying around, and once she decided on a path there was no compromising or backtracking. Even if she hated every minute of it and wanted nothing more than to be back in the suburbs where she grew up.

"Henrik came by," she said.

"Really? What did he want?"

"There's a community meeting, he said. Tonight."

"Whatever that means."

"What it sounds like, I imagine. Don't create mysteries where there aren't any."

"All right," he said. "Probably about the fire."

"Very likely."

Shirl dressed in her nicest long skirt, put earrings in for the first time he could remember since they'd moved here.

"You look nice."

She didn't seem to know how to respond—their instincts were turning feral, every motivation under suspicion. He hadn't anticipated that when they'd stood out on the bluff with wine glasses, toasting their first sunset in paradise.

"We'll be happy here," Landon had said. "I promise."

Shirl laughed.

"Are you sure it's up to you?"

And he'd laughed too, god help him.

* * *

When he was in seventh grade he'd gone on a survival trip not far from the land they ended up buying. Scavenging in the ocean, rummaging through tide pools. Four days without food, thirteen-year-olds drawing pictures of corn dogs and chicken wings in the sand. He wondered if it was that memory that had drawn him back here. He hoped not. It was a little alarming to think what a short distance he might have come in all this time.

The community center parking lot was only half-full.

The glow of the fire was visible to the north, an unnatural light through the trees. He could feel the heat as he stepped out of his pickup, a beat-up old GMC he'd bought to fit in; though looking around there were mostly recent Fords and Chevys, extended cabs with AC. The fire seemed hardly to have moved, hovering always on the periphery. Of course it must have, shifted and grown—now that he studied it, the bright heart of it did appear slightly closer than it had yesterday.

A handful of people nodded as they found seats in the back, but most ignored them, snubbed them as outsiders, never mind they'd all come from somewhere else once. On twin barstools at the front of the room, Kim Teale and a man from Cal Fire answered shouted questions.

"It's unpredictable," the man from Cal Fire was saying. "The fuel's dry as a bone everywhere, and the wind can't seem to settle on a direction."

"We don't want you to tell its fortune," somebody piped up. "We want you to put it out."

The man smiled, a tired smile that was clearly overtaxed.

"I understand."

"Do you?"

"I do. My house over in Leilo burned yesterday. My wife and daughter are living at the high school."

There was some quiet after that. Then Kim Teale began matching names. The first name belonged to one of the families seated off to the side of the room, downcast people with plastic bags by their feet; the second to somebody local.

"What's going on?" Landon asked the woman in front of him, whose hair exuded the skunk smell of strong weed.

"Temporary housing," she said. "Neighbors helping neighbors."

Landon nodded and smiled. This was more like it; this is what they'd come for, wasn't it? He put his hand on Shirl's knee and smiled. Then his name was called. His and Shirl's.

"Did you put our name in?" he said, turning to her in alarm. She shook her head.

"Raise your hands, please," Kim Teale said, scanning the room. Landon raised his hand hesitantly. They'd have to straighten this out after, not right here in front of everyone. He leaned out into the aisle to get a look at the

people they'd been paired with, a man and a woman in their thirties; no children, a single Hefty bag. And a dog.

"They have a dog," Shirl said.

"I'll take care of it."

But he didn't. It was an emergency situation, like a war; the rules were different. The man and woman climbed into the back of the GMC, the dog's nails like chalk on the bed sliding forward and back as they made their way home.

"Your name's Dollop?" Landon asked. Shirl had brought out some cider from the year before, half vinegar already.

"Yes," the woman said. "No jokes, okay?"

"Course not."

"I think it's pretty," Shirl said, squinting as she took a sip. Nobody believed her.

"Crosses to bear, right?" the man said. His name was John, a name as common as his wife's was uncommon. Close up, Landon thought maybe he was older than he'd first looked. His beard was tangled and matted like an old Mormon's, his mouth inside it small and round as a mouse hole that kept opening and closing. He hardly left room for anyone else to talk, recounting his and Dollop's lives back to their first meeting at a bar in Santa Cruz.

"Course we don't drink anymore," he said. As if apologizing for the meeting that had brought them together. Dollop ducked her head shyly.

"Are you praying?" John said. "Don't bring that in without asking."

"It's all right," Shirl said. "It's a free country."

"Don't I wish," John said, and took a long slug of cider. He studied the empty glass afterward, tilted it back to catch the last drops on his tongue. Landon leaned over and filled it back up.

"So your house . . ." he said, not quite sure how to word his question. "Were you burned out?"

Dollop smiled.

"We never had one," John said.

"Wait, what?"

"We had a place," John said. "A little corner up in the national forest."

"But not *ours*," Dollop said.

"Well no. You can't own the land, can you. Not for real."

"You mind calling our bank?" Landon said to blank faces.

"I kind of admire that," Shirl said.

"We've been camping since we got married," Dollop said. "Seven years."

"Oh, Jesus," John said. "Happy anniversary, Doll."

"You too."

They kissed gently, and Shirl filled their glasses again.

They were loud sleepers. The dog slept with them, but it wasn't him making the noises. Shirl, of course, slept straight through—limbs sprawled and hair strewn across both pillows. Landon fell asleep with his face in her hair and dreamed of swimming through clutches of towering kelp and wading through fields of yellow grain. He was alone in the dream, miles of nothing as far as he could see.

* * *

The fire continued to burn, coloring the sky and draping a steady pall over their diminishing wedge of refuge. Dollop and Shirl spent long hours in the garden, trying to resurrect the hopeless plants. At night they sat together by Shirl's little altar, to which Dollop had added a jar of some kind of curative jelly from Sedona and an ornately carved cross with sparrows perched on the crosspiece. It made Landon uneasy, seeing them talking quietly in the corner or sitting knee to knee between the anemic stalks. There'd been even less to eat than usual the past few days, with more mouths to feed. The store in town was closed, most everyone north of them having evacuated, and he'd begun to resent the garden, picturing the fat tomatoes and peppers he'd been deprived of.

"When will they leave, do you think?" he'd asked the night before. Shirl had taken to masturbating in bed beside him, the warmth drifting over to him beneath the sheets. She thought he didn't notice.

"When the time's right," she said.

She didn't like the question, he could tell. With Dollop, especially, she'd found a way toward the sufficiency and freedom he'd advertised to her but had never managed to provide. The problem, he suspected, was that it was an internal strength. A nascent sense of fulfillment where he felt only a steadily growing shortage. The solitude had begun fucking with them; the isolation he'd imagined as strictly benevolent was showing itself otherwise.

In a clearing that had possibly been an orchard, he yanked some wild mustard from the ground, cleaned a root off, and began gnawing. It was tough and stringy

but tasted something like a radish and settled the tumult in his stomach. It was the one useful bit of information he'd taken away from that goddamn survival trip. He'd lived on those roots and nothing else for four days and still viewed them—weeds to most people—as mamma.

There were new pups every day now in the rookery, flopping beside their mothers, the older ones drawing and charging the waves. Watching them he felt a little of what had brought him out here in the first place, what he'd hoped to find. But it was like leafing through a scrapbook, the life he'd pictured for them quaint and childlike.

He hurled the stump of root far out over the bluff, nearly to the water, where it plopped into the sand beside John. He waved up at Landon, who hadn't noticed him there. A seal pup brushed past, seeming not to notice him either. John ran his hand along its sheened fur. If only Landon could become like that, so adapted as to be practically invisible, all this—the fire, his hunger, their marriage—might resolve back into some kind of equilibrium. He was a disturbance, he saw that now, a fly in the ointment.

John yelled something up at him.

"What?"

His voice smacked against the bluff, loud and confident and maddening.

"This is fucking heaven!"

He might have forgiven him the delusion, having shared it himself once.

The dog trotted beside him down the long slope to the river mouth and sat beside him on the bank, rising occasionally to chase a duck or root around in the shallows. His muzzle half-submerged, snorting clouds of mud out into the current. It was cooler by the river, and an offshore breeze had blown the air nearly clear. But it was uphill coming back, and the unnatural heat met them again at the top of the first rise. At some point in the coming winter there would be snow. He drew in a deep breath, imagining the taste of the air chilled and cleaned, and hacked up a knot of gray phlegm.

Emerging from the trees below the house, the dog lifted its nose and sniffed. Landon stopped; he smelled it too—the smell of cooking, of honest-to-god food, rising above the now-customary pitch death of burning forest. He passed the dog, who'd taken a couple of steps sideways, and trotted the last hundred yards to the back door.

Inside, the rough table was set, with a plate of steamed dandelion greens and a platter of seared steaks center stage. “Holy shit,” he said. “Where did that come from?”

“There’s food all around us,” John said. Which was news to Landon, though he didn’t say so. The meat was salty, with the slightly bitter taste of sea fat. Greasier than beef. He swallowed a mouthful, then another. Shirl watched him, and John and Dollop. Dollop said a short grace—thanking the invisible power that had turned its back on them—before they dug in too.

“What is this?” Landon asked, taking a sip of cider. He felt his stomach lurch at the sudden, unexpected plenty. The dog slunk up beside him, sniffed once, then backed away again.

“You like it?” Shirl asked.

“John got it,” Dollop said.

“Got it?”

“God’s bounty,” John said, grease shining on his chin. “Or whatever.”

Landon looked for the first time into the kitchen—at the pan on the stove, the flipper tilted in the compost bin. “Oh Jesus.”

He threw up the first bits on the floor, unable to make it outside fast enough. “Meat’s meat,” he heard John say, and the others laughed. He retched until his stomach was even emptier than it had been before, the muscles of his ribs aching and spasming.

“Goddammit,” he said to the dog, who’d curled up by his feet. “It’s like eating your own fucking heart.”

* * *

He carried his shoes in his hand and opened the door as quietly as he could. The dog sat in the shaft of light the door threw out, tail thumping as if he’d been waiting there for Landon to figure this out. He sniffed the air cautiously as they climbed the long slope up the ridge.

The main fire had backed away slightly, chewing through the forest above the old harbor. The crowns of cedars and cypresses bloomed red against the nighttime horizon, the stars dwindling overhead, pricking weakly through the smoke.

The heat was intense even at this distance. Landon’s face ran with sweat and each breath was like a drag off a cigarette. The dog ran past, darting to avoid lingering hot

spots, quick yips leaking out of him. He stopped finally on a patch of grass, an oddly misplaced field of color that had somehow escaped the burn. Landon made his way over, and together they stood and marveled at the devastation and all it promised. When he started down again, the dog stayed put, whining softly.

“It’s okay,” Landon said. “I’ve got it.”

In a skeletal stand of western hemlocks he found what he was looking for—a section of branch charred on the outside with a still-burning heart that pulsed with each gust of wind washing past them. He took the hay hook from his pack and sunk it into the wood, tied his rope to the handle. The branch was light and bounced along easily behind him. The dog mirrored its movements, leaping nervously over it when it crossed his path. On the home side of the ridge, where the fire hadn’t reached yet, the branch touched off small flares in the grass that crept outward for a moment before fizzling under a film of fog. Landon carried it the last hundred yards, laid it almost lovingly against the wall of the house.

He stepped back and let what he still considered nature—and which was the farthest thing from it—do its work. This sleight of hand was something he’d perfected over the years, leaving himself just enough wiggle room to imply, if not innocence, at least some kernel of deniability. Maybe the wind would blow toward the house, and maybe it would blow away; that was out of his hands. In the same way he’d convinced Shirl (and himself) that the two of them were enough, that they didn’t need any children or friends or neighbors, only each other. The city was a distraction, with its noise and chaos; away from it they could be themselves, truly themselves. Their betrayal by the seductive solitude and beauty of that new world—and the hard reality of their true selves—could hardly have been foreseen.

When the boards began to crackle and crumble, he went inside to wake the others. He expected them to accept the fire, to surrender with little fuss—to calmly watch it burn and then move on. But John tore the script up immediately, dashing purposefully across the garden to the shed. He came out with a shovel and began hurling loose dirt onto the flames. Dollop wheeled the cart of compost over and dumped it beside him. Suddenly they were a fire brigade, banded even tighter than they had been before, while Landon stood aside and did nothing.

Shirl brushed past him, back toward the house, hair wild and robe trailing. She ran inside and began to madly—how else could he describe it?—gather her relics and tchotchkes into her arms. He watched from the doorway as the fire licked in through the gaps where John and Dollop had pried the boards loose. The arms of her robe caught fire, he could smell scorching hair.

“Shirl,” he said, moving toward her. “Leave it.”

She turned on him, clenching her arms tighter. Thin tendrils of flame licked upward. He could see the holy water in its little bottle begin to boil. How clear her eyes were watching him: This, they said, is the test that matters.

But it was John who broke through the wall and threw a seed sack over her, gathered her close, and smothered the flames. Soothed her like a child with coos and grunts. Dollop joined them, the three figures nearly indistinguishable, arms thrown around one another in an embrace whose intricacy astonished him.

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He rubbed salve on the dog’s pads, working it gently into the cracks that shone red and raw as if the fire were still smoldering inside. Shirl and Dollop and John sat around the table playing some half-baked variant of charades—Guess What, John called the game, reveling in his discovery of the already known. Shirl stood and gestured incomprehensibly with her bandaged hands, shaking her head or nodding as John and Dollop shouted out nonsense: “Porcupine wedding!” “Ride of the Valkyries!”

The altar candle flickered in the breeze sifting through where the wall used to be, swelling Shirl’s cast shadow to outlandish proportions.

“Home sweet home,” Landon said.

John and Dollop turned to look at him. Not sneering, exactly, but something close. The dog whimpered beside him. Shirl raised her arm slowly and, with considerable effort, touched her finger to her nose.

Jeff Ewing’s poetry manuscript *The Wind Apples* was a finalist for the 2019 Catamaran Poetry Prize. His poems, stories, and essays have appeared in *Catamaran Literary Reader*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Willow Springs*, *Sugar House Review*, *Crazyhorse*, the *Saint Ann’s Review*, *Lake Effect*, and the *Penn Review*, among others. His debut short story collection, *The Middle Ground*, was published by Into the Void Press in February 2019. He lives in Sacramento, California, with his wife and daughter.