

Hooves on the Sand

by Jeff Geiger

Prologue

There was a child went forth every day;
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became;
And that object became part of him for the day, or a certain part
of the day, or for many years, or stretching cycles of years.

The yellow creosote became part of this child,
And burrograss, and short and tall cacti, and yellow and white
yucca, and the call of the road-runner,
And the young chicks, and the bitch's new-born pups, and the
mare's foal, and the cow's calf,
And the peaceful sound of the ranch land, or by the roaring of the
river-bank,
And the birds soaring around the ranch so happily above
there—and the clear blue sky,
And the juniper trees with their sturdy broad trunks—all became
part of him.

The desert grasses of the summer and shrubs of the winter
became part of him;
The fall-yellow aspens, and those of the green conifers, and the
oak and pine woodlands,
And the wild flowers cover'd with blossoms, and the riparian
shrubs, and piñon trees, and the tumbleweeds on the road;
And the gang of boys roaming the streets from the school, whence
they had ditched,
And the bullies that spott'd the child head'd straight for him,
And the quarrelsome boys advance'd—and they gang'd up,
And the child punched—and the bloodi'd kids fell,
And the child grew stronger, wherever he went.

His own parents,

He had father'd him, and she that had conceive'd him in her womb, and birth'd him.

They gave this child more of themselves than that;

They gave him afterward every day—they became part of him.

The mother at home, whoring her room to other men;

The mother who did not care—flaunting her sultry self, a foul stench trailing her person and clothes as she walks by;

The father, drunk, angry, strong, abusive, corrupt, stupid;

The blow, to the mother, to the son, the closed fist,

The family ranch, the gambling, the debt, the government—the disappearing life,

The past that will vanish—the horses, the peace—the future that is all wrong,

The suspense of day-time and the suspense of night-time—living from minute to minute,

Whether the father will be drunk, or will the family be safe?

The mother at the brothel, the father at the bar, the son going from school to gutter and back,

The streets themselves, their new homes, and the open land beyond,

Wagons, riders, the steel-plate'd trains—transportation of the new life,

The child sees the fort on the highland, seen from afar at sunset—the mountain pass between,

Running, hunting and stealing, a lone appaloosa in the stables, ready to ride,

No hesitation, the child mounts and gallops—the new pair a unit.

The pounding hooves, the blowing wind, the growing fort,

The child at the stone'd walls, solitary, powerful—the sense of strength lies within,

The training done, the war commenced, the war victorious;

These became part of that child who went forth every day, and who now goes, and will always go forth every day.

Chapter One

It was a bright day in April, the cruelest month, and the gears and pumps of the train beat on into the still air. The Man in White sat on the bench in the cell and scanned the car. There were a few other captives, some young and some old. He was unfamiliar with all of them, yet they all knew of him. Bored, he fiddled with his manacles around his arms and legs and tested their strength. Knowing that there were still hours until their destination, the Man in White got as comfortable as his restrained self could. The man peered out the window at the flat, rolling landscape and closed his eyes. When he almost entered the land of Morpheus, he was suddenly awakened by an old man's harsh and off-pitch singing.

I killed a man in Mesa,
And another in Sante Fe
But when I killed the man in Springs
I knew they'd head my way

The Man in White slowly opened one eye and stared at the sexagenarian crook whose almost toothless mouth sang the old tune.

“Hey!” said the man, “If you can't sing right, don't sing at all. Don't you realize how far we have to travel? Please, just let the remaining hours be in peace.” The old man just chuckled and continued on.

I rode all night for Folsom
To rob the Union car
And I fled New Mexico

With the marshals not far

“Old man, I respect my elders and all, but if you don't shut your trap soon, I'll come over there myself yank your tongue out!” said the Man in White. The Man in White stroked his black gristly beard, imagined the gruesome scene and smiled. He rolled up one of his shirtsleeves and ran a finger over his tattoos. However, the other criminal paid no attention to the Man in White and he just kept on singing.

But the marshals were a-ready
To get me on the rail
Now in Truth or Consequences I'm a layin'
In the Sierra County jail;

Once again, the Man in White voiced his agitation, “Do you realize that we are headed to that same jail in the song? I'm pretty sure every one of us here is familiar with this high security prison. We do not need reminding of our pending doom. Now would you kindly stop your singing?” The old man chuckled once more and finally stopped his singing. The Man in White adjusted himself and went to sleep. In a few hours, the man awoke to the whistle of the train and the sound of it coming to a halt. He looked outside the window and saw the large ominous letters painted on the brick entrance that said, “TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES CORRECTIONAL FACILITY.” The guards entered the train car, unlocked the cell doors and shoved the fugitives out of the train. They all walked single file between two rows of armed guards. The criminals lined up outside the warden's office and each man entered one at a time to officially join the prison. Finally, it was the Man in White's turn. While opening the office doors, the Man in White heard the old man behind him sing the final verse of his song.

They-re gonna hang me in the morning

A'fore this night is done
They're gonna hang me in the mornin'
And I'll never see the sun

Chapter Two

The Man in White entered a dimly lit room with a smug warden sitting at the end of a metal table and an empty metal chair opposite him. The Man in White sat in the chair. Guards fastened his manacles to the table and immobilized him. The man put rested his hands on the table and stared directly into the warden's eyes.

Warden: Well then, lets get started shall we? I know very well who you are, but I still have to ask the basic questions and get all the info for your file. First off: your name, your armaments, and your possessions.

Man in White: The name's Jonah Roland. I have one .45 caliber Apache Knuckleduster, which is a gun that has knife and brass knuckles attachments. Her name is Vera. I also own a basic side pistol and a bowie knife with an inlaid ivory handle. My horse is a white Appaloosa and her name is Dusan al Ghul. Its Arabic and it means, "The White Ghost."

W: Who did you fight for in the Civil War?

Jonah: I fought for the North. I was stationed in Fort Union in Northern New Mexico and I was in the battle of Glorieta Pass. It was the first time I took another man's life. I've seen blood before; hurt people before, but murder...that was new to me...that was...thrilling.

W: Yes you sure do have quite the record. Forty-two charges of murder, 15 charges of robbery, and countless charges of bribery and racketeering. You and your Wrathful Wraiths have gotten pretty famous in New Mexico. You guys single handedly almost run all of

Santa Fe. Incase you've forgotten your actions, here's a souvenir wanted poster for ya.

It read:

Jonah Roland is hereby charged with: 42 counts of murder, 10 counts of arson, 15 counts of theft and burglary, 20 counts of bribery and racketeering, 30 counts of money laundering. Reward: \$500,000.

J: Oh, I haven't forgotten. See these tattoos? Each and every single one marks a life I've taken. They aren't forgotten; their life doesn't just disappear. I take up their burden and bear the weight of all the people I've killed. The dead live on with me. I say a prayer each time I mark myself. No, you could not be any further from the truth. I don't forget.

W: You pray for them? For the innocent lives you've taken? It seems a bit late for that.

J: No. I say a prayer for myself.

W: Why?

J: I may be heartless warden, but I'm not soulless.

W: So you're telling me you believe in redemption, repentance, and salvation?

J: Something along those lines. Every action I do I believe is just and fair. I'm setting things right in the world.

W: Oh really? What about robbery of the state bank just last year? You took over two million dollars. How was that 'setting things right'?

J: Simple: Money is corruption.

W: So then why didn't you pull a Robin Hood and give it all to the poor?

J: Well, for starters that just plain cliché. But I'll go through a logical explanation for you blind fools. Obviously, the bankers don't need them. Those filthy Jews don't need any more money in their grimy paws. My gang and I don't need them. We're wealthy enough as is, and like you said, we control all of Santa Fe. Now, why don't I give it to the poor you ask? Because they don't deserve it. It is their own damn fault for the mess they're in. Every man, woman, and child, has countless opportunities to progress in their own way. Look at me. I've had one of the shittiest childhoods a person could have and I've climbed to the top of the ladder and made a name for myself. They are poor because they don't try and because they don't care. I say let them rot. So, I did the most logical thing with the money. I burned it. Some people just enjoy watching the world burn.

W: You burned two million dollars? All that money...all that power...wasted.

J: Power? Do you honestly believe money is power? Do you believe strength is power as well? Do you think that your so-called authority in this hellhole and you playing house is power? Oh, you amuse me warden. I like you. Anyways, you're wrong. None of those is power. Influence is power. Persuasion is power. You're a weak and feeble-minded man who lives behind a false mask of strength and authority. I will show you what true power is when I escape from here.

W: This time Jonah, you're wrong.

The warden stood up and took out a syringe from his pocket. Jonah Roland underestimated the warden's speed and in moments the syringe went plunging into his chest. Jonah started seeing the

room spin and distort. Spots filled his vision. His head thwacked on the table. Everything went black.

Chapter Three

Jonah awoke to a sharp pain in his neck. He then felt a boot ram into his stomach, throwing him off his cot and onto the hard cement floor. He moaned, rolled over, and looked up at the warden's face.

"Good morning Jonah. Welcome to solitary confinement," said the warden. Jonah looked up with a confused look and groaned. "What?" said the warden, "Did you believe I would let you stay with the other inmates? Oh no, Jonah. You're too dangerous for that. I'm going to keep you on a tight leash and watch your every move. That pain you felt in your neck was an injection of a highly lethal poison. Each morning you'll be getting a dose of it. Each night you'll be getting an antidote. This is to keep you here and keep you miserable. Should you escape, you'll be dead within hours. All we all clear?"

Jonah Roland got up and sat on his cot. He was still dazed from the sedative and winded from the kick to his chest. He put his hand to his forehead and rubbed his temples. "I'll escape and live...you'll see."

"Heh, sure." The warden backhanded Roland sending him back down onto the cot. He left the cell and locked it behind him. Jonah observed his cell. It was spacious, but barren. No windows, no sink, mirror, or latrine, not even a simple hole in the ground. It was an empty concrete box sealed with a steel-rod gate and outer metal door. He was trapped. He was alone. He was dying.

Roland just sat staring blankly at the door ahead of him. Minutes seemed to last years. The only thing he could think of to keep his

sanity was to sleep. That did not come easily. As he dozed off, he recalled about what got him to Truth and Consequences.

OUTSIDE: APACHE RESERVATION — GANG RAID — NIGHT

Roland's Wraiths and two other gangs have joined forces to raid an Apache reservation for a bounty on a few men. The raid was simple, precise, and executed flawlessly. It was just a matter of each gang forming a triangle around the reservation and storming in with full force. Jonah and his second in command Matthew surveyed the wreckage on horseback.

JONAH: I love it when a plan is performed without a hitch. We had a bounty on a few of men's heads and we wipe out the entire camp mercilessly. How wonderful.

MATTHEW: Yes boss it sure is quite the sight. Shall we patrol around and pick any remnants?

JONAH: Capital idea Matthew.

The pair rode into the smoldering village. Dead bodies of every sex and age were strewn about. One of the gangs started a pyre for the corpses. Jonah and Matthew dismounted from their horses and entered the chieftain's tent. Everything was already looted, but Jonah saw a shadow in the corner. He pulled out his Apache Knuckleduster and fired. He heard a scream and saw an arrow fly over his head. Jonah walked over and looked at the Indian boy clutching his wounded leg. He flipped his gun in his hand and put on the brass knuckles. Roland punched the boy in his face and quickly rotated the gun again and stabbed the boy in the heart.

JONAH: That makes three tonight

MATTHEW: Nicely done boss, but you really should aim higher next time.

JONAH: I don't care either way. A dead Indian is a dead Indian. Some of his people attacked the town. This is their reward for not using common sense. They need to learn to stay off our land.

SAME NIGHT — WRAITH'S CAMP

Roland sat around the fire with his tattooing kit in front of him. He put herbs into his mortar and pestle and mashed them up to create his pigment. He took his bone needle and heated it in the fire. After combining the ink and the needle, he started making three intricate geometric designs into his left forearm. With each design he repeated a prayer:

Oh Great One save me
Grant me forgiveness and let
My soul live on

Jonah awoke to the sound of the out metal door opening. He took off his white hat covering his face, sat up, and stared at the entrance.

Chapter Four

The warden looked through door at his captive. He shoved a tray with a hard and mealy biscuit, almost-uncooked meat, and a cup of dirty water through the gaps in the bars. He also took an old notebook and a fountain pen from his back pocket and tossed them on the ground.

"Eat up Roland," said the warden, " You'll either die of starvation or die from the poison. Take your pick. And I figured you could use something to do. Write in that journal, you just might be able to save your sanity." The warden shut the door. Jonah heard the sound of his boots and spurs trail away off into the distance.

Jonah grabbed the tray off the floor and ate furiously. He knew he would have to eat to survive if he didn't want to be trapped here forever. He picked the worms out of the biscuit and softened it up with his saliva so he wouldn't lose a tooth. He ate the raw meat and wiped the blood from his mouth. Roland shoved the empty tray and cup back to the door, grabbed the diary and pen off the floor, and sat on the cot. The cycle of his being trapped like an animal was in full swing. Poison. Meal. Writing. Sleeping. Meal. Antidote. Sleep. Poison. Repeat. The only way he could keep track of the days was from the injection schedule.

Day 5- I feel my body losing weight. I'm getting weaker each passing day.

Day 8- The food is getting progressively worse and starting to do more harm than good on my body. The corner of the cell is a cesspit of filth and disease.

Day 15- The loneliness enveloped me. The dark void surrounded me. I saw nothing. There was nothing

Day 16- Like clockwork each night the warden wakes me by kicking me off the cot onto the cold hard floor. Rest is at a minimum.

Day 23- Track marks from the syringes covered my forearms. They became my new tattoos. Yet their meaning was completely different to me.

Day 27- I think the warden is giving me less antidote and more poison. I know he wants me alive, but he's seeing exactly how far he can go before I perish.

Day 35- Will I ever get out? Will I ever be free? Will I ever see daylight again? I wonder if it will be easier if I take my life

Day 42- There's no light at the end of the tunnel. I am trapped. I am hopeless.

Chapter Five

Roland laid on his cot staring at the ceiling. His tray of half eaten food was on the floor. The filth in the corner was larger and fouler each day. He would have forgotten his name if the warden didn't remind him each beating. He would have forgotten the time if it weren't for the poison. He would have forgotten everything. Jonah lied there. There was nothing to do. The pen dried up and he ran out of paper. All he could do was wait.

Time passed. Whether it was minutes or hours, Jonah couldn't tell. Then there was a great thunderous noise from outside his cell. He heard banging and shouting. Roland ran to the door and banged his fists on the metal and screamed at the top of his lungs. "Stay back!" someone yelled. Jonah moved away from the door and it was blown open. He coughed from the dust and shielded his eyes from the unfamiliar daylight and stared at the silhouetted stranger. It was a man in a raven dark uniform much like his own white uniform, save for the color. It was Matthew. "Boss! Is that you?" Matthew said.

Matthew looked at Jonah Roland, barely able to recognize him. His hair and beard were disheveled and unkempt. They resembled black bushes sprouting from his head. The clean white jacket, pants, and hat were brown. Cuts and lesions covered his skin. He was

missing teeth, muscle, and wits. The spark in his eyes and that guileful smile he had were gone. Jonah Roland was an empty shell of his former self.

"C'mon boss we gotta to get a move on," said Matthew while grabbing Jonah's arm and dragging him out the blasted door. The reunited pair ran down the corridor. Chaos surrounded them. Other inmates were free and attacking the guards. The rest of the Wraiths were attacking the guards. Debris and bullets were flying everywhere. Jonah's legs haven't run in almost two months and they had the strength of toothpicks. He stumbled and Matthew carried him and the two hobbled to the warden's office. Matthew had a gun in one hand and his boss in the other. He picked off guards to clear the path on what felt like their last mile. Once there, Matthew kicked down the door and ran inside. Jonah rested in the entryway and grabbed his side, watching his second in command gather his guns and knives. "I...need...an antidote," gasped Roland. Matthew rummaged through the desk draws and cabinets until he found a syringe filled with a clear fluid. He ran over and gave it to Jonah. Just as he was about to make his last track mark on his arm, the glass shattered and Roland screamed in agony. He looked at his hand and saw blood spewing everywhere. He quickly snapped his neck up and saw a guard with smoke rising from his pistol. Matthew took out his gun and pointed at the man square in the face. The guard's face went white with fear and he lowered his gun. Matthew said, "Do you read the Bible? Have you heard of Ezekiel 25:17? Let me tell you it. 'And I will strike down upon those with great vengeance and with furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know that my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon thee.'" Upon uttering the last syllable he fired into the guard's forehead.

Matthew tore off his shirtsleeve and bandaged Jonah's hand. The bullet had taken off his bottom two fingers of his right hand and destroyed the last of the antidote. "It's just a scratch boss, let's keep

moving." They ran to the stables and found Dusan al Ghul. They pair exited the prison through a blasted wall and ran towards the stables. Death and Destruction were still present and not leaving anytime soon. Matthew assisted Roland onto Dusan's back. He clutched at his hand, "You must go Matthew," Jonah said, "I'll ride to a town and find a doctor on my own. You must take charge of the gang and make sure they make it out of here safely. I don't want any casualties." "B-But boss..." began Matthew. "NO! I won't hear any of it! GO DAMMIT!" Jonah roared with a fire in his eyes.

Matthew reluctantly turned back to the prison to aide his men. Roland kicked his spurs into Dusan and rode off into the distance. The Sun was still high in the sky; he had plenty of hours until the time when he usually got his antidote. But that did not make the journey any easier. He was still loosing blood and he had little to no strength left in his body. The desert dried up his fragile body. His skin was blistered and red. Jonah passed out on the saddle.

He awoke late in the evening with the Moon replacing the Sun. He looked around and saw no signs of civilization. Roland burst into tears and tore out his hair. He escaped being trapped from prison, but now he was trapped on earth, and soon to be trapped in hell. "Why?" his voice croaked, "I thought I was making the world a better place. Why must I go through all this pain and suffering? I only did what I believed was right. PLEASE FORGIVE ME!" The darkness around him was much like the darkness of the cell, uncomfortable and unforgiving. The poison was coursing through his veins at full speed, unhindered by the lack of antidote. Every few minutes he would vomit blood and bile leaving a trail alongside the Appaloosa's hove tracks. Paralysis was setting in; he couldn't raise his arm to his face. More teeth fell out, as did his hair. He was sweating blood onto the saddle and stained Dusan's white coat. Jonah could not stop weeping. He knew it was over. He had failed. Jonah Roland of the Wrathful Wraiths died before he could see the sun. Dusan still rode on, carrying her rider to the nearest village for

a proper burial. The last sound Roland heard was Dusan's snapping hooves on the sand.

