

We Cannot Cross the River

by Jensen Beach

We cannot cross the river until it freezes. Bekker predicts January. For food we gather leaves, berries and roots from the thick forest behind the cabin. Suarez boils what we find into a revolting paste that we spoon into our mouths with dirty fingers. Winslow ate a spider he plucked from the web that now covers the ceiling and much of the north wall. We are retreating into nature. Being swallowed up by it. A colony of roots has broken through the tired plank floor.

We are without electricity. It is hot but we feel the cold coming. It is September. There is sadness thick as the river. At night it is so dark we write on the blackness. Molineux succumbed. He forced a rock into his throat and choked a horrid, slow death. Suarez buried him in the soft dirt. Winslow said a prayer. Bekker spit jealous spit on the tilled earth.

We wait. We are fathers but do not remember. Winslow has taken to singing "Little Red Wagon" in his deep rattle. Bekker found a glass jar, which he blackened with soot. He stalks the darkest corners of the cabin for dust and discarded web, for pebbles, for secrets to keep. He places them in the jar and sleeps with it in the crook of his arm. When it is light, he peers inside and tempts us.

We have new feelings. We sit so close we feel our bodies. They do not belong to us. Bekker snores. Winslow cries for his children. We are amazed he remembers them. Suarez speaks Spanish in his sleep, crawling home to the womb he will never see.

We are fathers. We came here. We just did. One by one to this cabin by the river. We cannot go back. Winslow was the last to arrive. We are inevitable. We must move forward. Over the river. Past its muddy

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shores and the insistent twang of its current. Bekker, who has vision, says he can see what's waiting for us on the other side and it is what we need. He swears it.

We must conquer. We must cross what we cannot so that we cannot come back. We are weak and fear failure. We are pioneers of static expansion. We remain.

We are men. We claim what we see. We invade. We defend to the death our stakes in the dust and the dirt of our shrinking world. Bekker's jar is full. He sits in his corner with it, unable to move. We are bones. We strike hard.

We collect sorrows in the room. We toss them back and forth in such a way that they have become unrecognizable. We recognize this because we are this. There is comfort to be had.

We feel the cold come. We count the days. We are less protected from what we fear. The leaves have fallen. There are new smells. Bekker claims to see farther than he ever has. He tells us he can now see how much perfect the other side holds. It is much. He stands at the door of the cabin with his hand up to his brow, looking. Just looking. For opportunity, maybe. Irrevocable change.

We grow weary. We regret but have forgotten for what. Suarez has stopped feeding us and we have stopped gathering. Winslow tries his luck in the river. It is so cold. He refuses to go back. He is a torso. He is a head, floating on the black water.

We are in reverse. Suarez dreams of spring and thaw. He wakes terrified and calls out to us.

We see. There is snow today. Bekker is at the door, the open mouth of his black jar pointed up toward the hoary sky. A tree has lost a branch. Dumped its load of snow to a mountainous pile atop

Molineux's grave. Just beside this, in the place where we raised a cross of two sticks in memorial to Winslow, there is ice.

We are impatient executors of our shattered wills. Two days, Bekker tells us. We talk about the other side. In spite of the cold, we keep the door to the cabin open at night and we watch, hopeful for a blistering storm.

We are on our feet. We are fathers. There is a light snow. It collects on our collars and in our hair. Snow produces sound beneath our feet as we walk. We are electric. Bekker slides a large rock out onto the ice. It does not break through. Suarez throws a handful of dirt for traction. We agree. We are men and we keep our eyes on the rock. We follow Suarez's trail. The snow is wet. Soon there is water. We can feel the ice bending, flowing with the current. We are slow and all else is rapid. There is a loud noise around us, and we have nowhere to go. We cannot go back. We step. We know. And one by one we break through the thin ice and we are gone.

