

Muddy Creek

by John Riley

I went with Dale Stack to drown a cat on a fading summer afternoon.

I sat on the porch steps and watched Dale approach across the unplowed field. He dragged a burlap bag, the type chicken feed comes in, tied shut with baling string. When he got closer I heard the screeching and scratching coming from the inside.

Without a word, or a wave to my grandpa, I stood and followed Dale past the fig bush where the bumble bees grazed, down the two-rut tractor lane, through the barbed wire fence, on across the empty pasture and down the dead leaf hill toward the creek. Muddy Creek it was called, as though they'd run out of creek names in the black days before we were born. I thought about those black days all the time. Sometimes it was like I had already lived and died. There didn't seem to be a place I was supposed to be in this life. I found no comfort in the woods, at church, or in living on a run-down farm with an old man with one arm who sat in a cane back chair and read and re-read the same brown books until it was near enough to sundown for him to pull out the Everclear.

Dale walked tall, lightly, onto a tree trunk that had been tossed across the creek by one of the late afternoon storms that came up when the heat had no place to go. He stopped and looked at me. He wants me to flinch, I thought. When I didn't, he leaned forward and dropped the bag into the creek until it filled with water and the noise from the inside stopped. After a long moment, he pulled the bag out. Water drained through the rough threads and soon enough the cat started up screeching and clawing again. The afternoon filled with its ruckus.

Dale's face was blank as moonlight on a pond as he trailed the bag back and forth across the surface before letting it sink again. It settled on the sandy floor, the burlap the color of the rocks that broke the current. A few bubbles rose to the surface, then stopped. He pulled the bag out of the water. There was no noise this time. He untied the twine and shook the carcass onto the log bridge. I recognized the cat. She'd been around a while. Dale stared at the body until the tips of the white fur began to dry, fluttering a bit in the lightest of breezes, then he turned and walked past me, back up the creek bank. I waited until he topped the rise to follow.

