

The Crossing

by Matthew Robinson

By then, there were seventeen of us, all between the ages of nine and twelve, walking in scatter file across always-barren land now gone worse. Crossing a field of heat swirls twisting off the pavement, nobody wore shoes, skin on the bottoms of our feet supplemented by blisters and what soft black tar would cling. The world that had left us behind veiled in beige to our backs. Ahead of us lay a quivering haze of a future. Our foreheads burned, stomachs wrung themselves out. What had sent us running now settled around us, among us. There was nothing to do but dream ourselves forward. Nothing to do but not die. Several of us had succumbed. We kept tally of the dead, roll-called the living by the hour. Names were but all we owned, and we brandished them like bullwhips. Of course, we had each other, as well.

“You're a fucking idiot, Moses,” I said to the pillar of a ten-year-old, his mind staggered by chemical imbalance. “Leave him alone, David.” That was Karl, the oldest of us, though his *de facto* leadership was as much bestowed upon him by traces of a mustache smudged under his lip. “He is. Who would do that? Who would risk—” Karl cut me off with a glare. I directed my gaze ahead to the blacktop. “Not a whole lot words can do for us now,” he said. Moses kept his head down, chewing invisible gum.

There was plenty of road-kill, but for a while we weren't hungry or brave enough to conquer the parasites, the maggots. Possums sucked dry by fly clouds and the heat. Bloated deer burgeoning with gas. We saw one explode once, happened about ten yards ahead of us. It looked healthy enough to draw saliva under our tongues, but its flesh buckled under the built-up pressure within and sent shards of flesh and effervescent blood into the sky, down upon us. It felt like rain for a moment, then it felt like molasses, then like boiling oil.

The taste already on us, we feasted into the split carcass like pups to

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a teat.

Nights were worse. Temperatures fled underground with the sparse remaining prairie dogs. We slept in a cluster, facing inward—a lesson afforded us by the omnipresent howling of coyotes. One night three of us were taken, then two more. Then we were a dirty dozen, predestined to fall in the manner of leaves on trees. The world had uprooted and from the top down was stripped bare.

Sanjay, Mark, Ryuji, Damien and Peter cried for father-grilled blue cheese burgers on Kaiser buns, chilled watermelon wedges, baked beans stirred with brown sugar, grape soda. Brandon, Tommy and Clay cried for salvation. Andy, the youngest, cried for heroin, a birthright habit. And we all of us cried for our mothers.

Toward the end, we met a man with a knuckled face. As gnarled preadolescents, it was our first sighting of an adult since the before times. He sat atop an anthill, allowing himself to be slowly consumed by the tireless insects. Said he was Buddhist, said he didn't expect us to understand. It was then that Moses approached, held out a photograph for the man, who held up his hand like a stop sign. The portrait wilted in Moses's hand, the tan sky absorbing its color obsolete. The Buddhist spoke again. "Word of advice: if it's come down to saying, *But I was only trying to help*, you've done just the opposite."

We left them both. It would continue this way. Prophet after prophet settled upon great nests of stinging claimed us one by one until it was only Karl and me. We agreed, we could continue. We could prevail over this. I do not know what's become of him now. Or what's become of me.

