

The Loam

by Robert Kloss

From above we see the trampled grass circling the house. Trampled grass from where half starved alligators circled the house, hissing and issuing low moans. Half starved alligators deranged by the red skies circled the house in the late August of the last year. Beginning in the spring, and ending in the last year, overhead, a red sky.

Explosions woke the boy. Explosions woke the boy in the night and plaster fell like snowflakes from the ceiling. Explosions shook the house like a startled infant and the boy gazed upward at a ceiling disintegrated in the moonlight. White gauze of moonlight through the particle'd ceiling.

And alligators wandered the streets. On the streets yellow and red alligators hissed and moaned. Alligators half starved and gone insane swayed along the streets.

Vibrations of explosions lingered in the air and numbed the skin. The boy's entire skin went numb and he rubbed his arms absently through his pajamas. In the midst of lingering vibrations, the entire neighborhood flooded into the streets, lighted by yellow lamplights. Circling each other, lost and confused, a hundred people jaundiced. The boy in his pajamas and his parents in their bathrobes and their dog, leashless and placid, and wandering their yards, other families in their pajamas, other moms and dads and boys and other dogs. Mr Hallowdown paced his yard with a shotgun his wife said wasn't his and the boy watched the shotgun barrel with fat eyes, watched from beneath his mother's arms, made placid by the soft perfume of her breath. The entire neighborhood flooded the streets and yards, muttering to each other, saying things like, "I haven't heard such a ruckus since the plane crash" of '68 or '73. The search, then, under cars and in the bushes, the hunt for plane parts or bomb shells or rockets or asteroids. Nothing found by now, although the horizon

seemed a canvass of red flames. As if all the forests jutting from mountains and hillsides were set on fire. As if all the mountains and hillsides had been infected.

Alligators swayed along hillsides seemed lost with bloodshot yellow eyes and fat hissing mouths. Alligators seemed lost, wandering the streets, dripping with sewer-wet. Dripping with blood of kill. Alligators wandered lost like deranged souls circling a mausoleum. Wandered like souls locked outside of mausoleum walls.

The soft earth. The warm wormy loam.

Soon, the boy's father pulled the boy from school. Leather books and notebooks and pens were spread out across the kitchen table. The boy's father leaned on a kitchen chair with a ruler in his hand while the boy ate a baloney and lettuce sandwich. The boy's father now gave a history lesson, "Columbus, who gave birth to our nation, died of infection. Columbus died of infection by syphilis." The boy's father read from a leather book entitled *American History*. "Do you understand, boy? It all goes black and falls off with syphilis." The boy's father patted below his midsection. Later, he lectured on the death of various kings and religious figures, the great push westward, Cotton Mather and the conclusion of King Philip's War. "Great men, from the beginning of time, all feared the spread of infection, of pox, gangrene, typhus—" The boy's father pointed absently to various limbs as he read.

Along the horizon red flames glowed and intensified until dark glasses were mandatory when wandering the streets. The boy's father stood smoking, shirtless, on the front porch while the boy raked grass clippings into a burlap sack. The boy's father watched the red flames with bare eyes, spoke distantly of war whoops and bloodshed and the end of all the abomination which was this life on earth, the life of flesh. This abomination of the flesh. "A hard rain is gonna fall, boy," said the boy's father, snuffing his cigarette, "and

that's why we gotta get scrubbing." After they finished the yard work, the boy's father showered in the basement shower with a scouring pad until his skin bled. The white towel streaked pink. Later, the boy's father sat smoking on the toilet as the boy washed himself raw with a scouring pad and coarse black soap. Finally, when the blood beaded along his shoulder and chest, the boy's father snuffed his cigarette in the toilet water with a hiss and ran his finger along the boy's red raw skin. "Feels about right," the boy's father said. "The worst infections live in the dead skin, you know." When they were dressed, the boy's father read again from the leather book, this time lecturing on the death of General Custer. "Curly Custer, as they called him, and half his men, died of something like a mossy growth along their major orifices," the boy's father read in an official sounding voice. "Could have been avoided." Father's voice gone distant, "so much could have been avoided."

Headlines theorized the origin of the flames ("Satan at Work?" "Premonitions of Nuclear Holocaust Along Horizon?"). Generals insisted ghosts of the ancient dead, his "ancient enemies" revived and furious, had summoned the fires. "For a hundred years we have been monitoring our satellites around the globe," the general said, "for hint of native dances or chants somewhere in the forests." What if those ghosts did return? "We shall bomb them again and again. Maybe it didn't work last time but we sure as hell got bigger bombs now."

Mother, chewed up, splintered, mother, marrow sucked from the bones of—

More explosions. More explosions rocked the house and split the street. More explosions and gas lines cracked and houses detonated into plywood and twisted steel. More explosions and the neighbors went mad, wandered the yard shooting the red sky, hollering to the red sky, hollering about the crazed red vengeance of God. God gone mad, they said. Indians come back to eat our still beating hearts,

they said. The boy and his family moved into the basement. After family photographs cascaded from the walls, burst into shards on the hardwood. The boy and his family moved into the basement with sleeping bags and the turtle aquarium and a knapsack full of books and corn chips and bottled water after more explosions in the night shook the house near to dust. After explosions in the night, Mr. Hallowdown wandered the street, redblasts spreading from his hands. The boy and his father stood at the front window, watching and the boy's teeth chattered until his father wrapped him with a single arm, until father held the boy against his white tshirt, to the tobacco stained warmth there. "We should go live in the basement," the boy's father said, "if our neighbors are going insane now."

Alligators circled, hissing. Bloodshot eyes. Their thrashing tails splintered the windows.

They lived then amidst black dirt floors and dirt walls. Amidst roots and worms, wings and legs, frail and commendable, amidst flies fragmenting to dust, amidst millipedes and rat skulls, mouse skulls, a bird skull, amidst particles of skulls, particles of tails and flesh, once flesh, gone to dust and dirt, and there sat these same yellow faces, observing each other, the slow alterations of each other, observing the eyes and arms and yawns of each other, these same yellow faces, once fat and now slowly gaunt. Father, showering and reshowering, the basement fogged with his steam, his towel streaked bloody pink, and father wandering the basement, nude, his long pale bloody prick and the thick forest of his hair, his blood clotted hair, a horror to a boy's mind. A father always begins as hairs and flesh, before slowly tending toward the dust. Half awake most days, amidst the dirt and roots, tending now toward the dirt and roots. Tending toward a return to loam. No more school lessons from father, father who cradled the dead air radio, ate corn chips from his fist, snored. Father spoke of watching his boy shower, to make certain the boy removed all the skin, father said, before he fell to snoring again. Static and dead air buzzing from the radio, and

then a voice, stuttering into coherence. Father startled, awake, "Listen everybody!" as corn chips spilled. The radio explained most families now lived in their basements. Regular families, like them, afraid of the red sky, the king, the alligators, the blood shot eyes and moaning. They lived amidst the dirt and the tangle of roots. Other families gaunt and more gaunt. Other families tending toward the soil.

Vibrations of radio filled the walls. The walls inhaled the vibrations of radio.

The boy's father withered to bones and tattered sweat pants, but only after devouring mother. He devoured her slow. She put up no fight. She crawled moaning and whimpering into his unhinged mouth. She slid into the cavity of his gullet and disappeared up to her shoulders, where she stalled until he wrenched one arm free and then the other, and now she slid without struggle. Father broke open her arms and sucked her marrow. He sucked clean her wedding band and engagement ring. Spat the diamond, or what the boy believed was a diamond, to the dust. For a while the old man sat shirtless, shriveled save his enormous white belly. In a more fitful youth he would have commanded the boy to sock him one good in the gut, just to see how hard it was. Now, he sat, fat, motionless, and the boy watched. Father could not shower or even command the boy to shower. All the while, worms burrowed in the loam beneath father. Worms and beetles awaited in the loam beneath the father. Then the boy's father diminished to bones and then slow reduced to dust of bones. Worms writhed in the wet soil beneath them. Worms writhed and struggled in the pitch black loam. The boy lay in the dirt and watched the bones of his father and the chewed up splintered gnawed marrow-sucked-out bones of mother.

Newspapers explained the new king's belief that insurrection lay behind the red flames. Public executions were planned for all those

she suspected or those her psychic suggested. All citizens were welcome to attend.

The boy licked the salt from his father's cornchip bag and when the bag was emptied save the stickiness of his saliva the boy dug a grave for his father and mother in the soft black soil. The boy's body now no more than bones near splintering from the vibrations of the spade. The spade vibrated through the boy's shoulder and near splintered his bones. Hunched over the hole, the boy thought of his father and mother. He thought of his father's voice, the way it had been before the walls swallowed all sound, before all this other, when the old man's voice boomed in the open streets, pontificating on the likes of Lewis and Clark, the lost colony of Roanoke, LaSalle, and many others father said died of cholera. "You choke on your own blood with cholera," father said. "The skulls of Lewis and Clark are stained red. They are on display in national museums even now." The boy set aside the spade and ventured upstairs. Dust and cobwebs and the redlight tinting every window. On the kitchen table, he found his father's *American History*. Downstairs again, he sat amidst his father's bones and his mother's bones, reading the book, except, page after page, the volume contained no print, only Polaroids, affixed with yellowed tape, Polaroids of his mother and other women, in garters and brassieres, or nothing at all, seated on loveseats with coy smiles and heavy black beavers, their pink vaginal lips spread, strange ruby folds unfolded, or bent over a table with buttocks spread, the strange enticing shape, or once again on the loveseat, wooden spoons inserted into their—

Through the coal chute, the hissing of alligators circling the house.

The boy lay against the dirt walls, listening to the cool earth. The vibrations held within. These are the stories the vibrations told the boy: Families without basements wandered the streets. Families without basements wandered the streets with their pillows and

turtle aquariums and potato chips and their children straggling behind and gasping. Seeking a piece of land where the flames could not blacken them, where insane neighbors could not murder them, where their king could not find them and cut their intestines from their bodies. Families went to live in the sewers and alligators ate the families. Mostly the little babies and dogs and the dogs beds. The dads and moms and grown up kids went to the hospitals with missing legs and arms and some died bleeding in the ambulances or died hanging out the manholes. Sometimes the boy believed the vibrations of the loam sounded like screaming. Sometimes the boy thought the static sounded like people dying in the manholes were screaming into radio microphones.

crickets and low moans and static and crickets and the low off hooting of—

He found the spade and dug himself a house in the wall. He built himself a home in the dirt which he covered with plywood in case the alligators ever fell into the basement. The boy slept in the wall and dreamed of the alligators. He dreamed of choking the alligators with his father's leg bone. He dreamed of crushing the alligator's skull with the spade. The gray brains of alligators spraying against the loam walls.

Throbbing of forest life, crickets and night birds, and animals you never saw, darkness, all around darkness, if not for the red—

When it happened, the floorboards were pulled up, a hundred at once as if by magnetism. The boy was dreaming in the wall when the floorboards were pulled open by the new king's agents. The house above them dissolved into darkness and the floorboards splintered, obliterated. The work of agents dressed in black ski masks, carrying crow bars and handguns. The boy slept in the wall while the agents exhumed his mother and father. The ghost flesh of the boy's mother and father tied to chairs and pistol whipped by agents. They

interrogated them with stun guns and buckets of water. The boy's father admitted to lewd acts with various women and of especially deviant acts with the mother of his only boy but he admitted no connection to the red fires blazing along the horizon. The agents pistol whipped the boy's father and mother across the face, tied them down with nylon cord, stuffed their mouths with oily rags, and airlifted them from the house. All along the neighborhood that night, dissolved houses and pulled up boards, the nylon cords of agents dangled from choppers, nylon cords in the moonlight like the strands of a thousand spiders.

The new king appeared on the nightly news wearing a black ski mask and red lipstick. She read from a prepared statement: "Families have been gathered for public execution. Beheadings and quarterings and often both. The terrible end of those suspected of insurrection and those acquitted of insurrection, of heresy. And, if we're still going strong, those whose charges remained pending. I invited all of you in a rousing show of public spirit."

The boy alone then save for the crickets and the exhumed grave of his parents, alone save for the hissing of alligators, the vibrations in the loam walls of screams and weeping and the gnashing of teeth on the long ago radio. Alone then, the boy, save for the smoke blotted moon overhead and the blood red of the fires, the sirens in the distance, the explosions. Alone then save for *American History* open to his mother masturbating with a hairbrush, her head thrown back, her long brown hair scarcely covering her red erect nipples, the hissing of alligators and the croaking of crickets. The loamy musk in the fresh night air. The boy, if he had a name, would no longer remember his name. If asked by a police officer, if police officers yet existed, he would answer only in the sounds of static, of worms struggling through the loam, in the vibrations of long ago pistol whippings, of tears of father and the gurgling screams of mother, as she is consumed. The boy was alone now, save for the

loam and the alligators, save for the new world shaken to birth
around him.

