

B R E A T H  
L I K E T H E  
W I N D A T  
D A W N



D E V I N  
J A C O B S E N

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# 1

Yonder they lay: a tangle the like of fleas. They that we had sought since long before sunup this morning hovered a bit and sank from the horizon. Quinn and I had been jogging; now looking together, loping of a sudden to reclaim the distance, we raced to where they set.

The sky shot through with clouds, dusky like patterned roses. I feel myself become all entity with the horses. That instant when horse and man and tack float up a single being—cinches, hooves, and stomachs waiting there—the suspension—and then that beat where you are sundered, jolted into knowing that you have merged and been torn apart, only to do so again the next moment, because the horse carrying out your purpose has done the job so well it is as though you have fulfilled the feat yourself. You hover there like that as much a horse as man.

I recall once watching a Saddlebred pass a gelding who was walking a lazy walk and thinking something was funny, off. No simple difference of appearance. Something fundamentally at odds in the two horses' natures that watching's abetting could not enlighten.

I studied the Saddlebred jogging by, one beside the other. Nothing unusual, a sight seen every day by all likes and types of folks and everywhere, but in this passing was something wholly different.

As I came to sift it, I perceived first by the noise of the jogger against the walker (it required a new way of seeing since seeing would not behold). Only by letting my eyes,

trained on them, the passer's thighs and form at large, go loose yet still implacable could I behold it: the feet moving in apparent twos, in tandem diagonals, so unlike the walker's whose plodded one leg at a time, one behind and then in front, this side followed by that. They were walking two different walks.

And a canter has got a different gait from a jog, which has a different gait from a walk, which has a different gait from a gallop.

Once I saw a man stride his horse so high his fetlocks reached his muzzle. Round and round they went, cavorting, a hilarious smile so wide an eagle's nest could fit inside. Tipping his hat to the bewildered applause.

Whether he or someone else had trained the mare to prance that way he would not say despite my plying. So I beat him and stole his horse.

## 2

Watching the smoke of the unsighted fire, they waited for the noon of night to come, and once it had they began to lurk forward, up the rise, where they waited for the fire to grow dark. The smoke, nearly unreal like a defect of the eye that stays forever tagging the viewer, extinguished among the myriad stars.

Laughter broke. A loud wind shook the camp so that the smoke appeared to have died altogether. Voices slurred, of which there were nine. Then the wind went off, and for a moment the night lay taut with silence.

Soon the foodsmell in the air. They heard utensils pecking at pans, the while fixed on the trailing smoke.

“Let’s go bust em. Tell em we’re here for supper.”

“No. They need to get more drunk.”

“There won’t be gristle left in them pans.”

“Hawk them Pepperboxes. You’ll eat like a king for a week.”

“I’ll take my king on an empty stomach, thank you.”

“Shhh.”

They stayed against the rise, where they listened to the voices begin to pitch louder. Trying not to move or fend off what felt like ticks crawling around their thighs or laugh when someone said something dumb.

At one point one of them rose. Kicking a path through the brush, he came near to alighting on them. The liquid running down, conjuring up leaves and dust and motes and casting them down on its flood. Paralyzed, they held there

beyond the draw. They could hear the grass lift off the ground as it rushed and went.

The stranger hawked into the dark, though neglecting his buckle—Quinn making to chime, Irv reining him no—and turned and went.

“Let me tell you boys about kidding and why I don’t.” His melodious, quavering voice becoming the voice of night. “A fella can’t afford to play no games. He can’t play nothing but keeping his wheels in line. Ain’t that what a man is? His seriousness like to defines him. He ain’t a boy can tool around the way he used to, pulling pranks. No, his absence of a fool defines him.

“Let me tell you boys. I rode of a company with a trickster, a drafty door of a fellow who pulled more pranks than pulled his pecker, and when we was coming back, not a half-day’s ride from his hometown, he catches wind his ma and sister have set to running a little inn. With the farm pretty much all sold they was pretty hard up for cash and took to running a little inn where there was always some fella about they could count on for protection.

“So the trickster borrows a coat, a big old gus and wears her low, and rents himself a room at his own mama’s inn where she and the sister don’t much recognize him, the brother, the trickster, who is spouting off in a Yankee tongue about how much cash he raked up manufacturing Union rifles and how much he aims to surprise his own ma and sister when he sees them flush with cash a few days hence, and everyone’s a load of laughs.

“Then he bids them goodnight, tucks himself abed, snuffs his candle, and commences to fall asleep. In the morning he’s gonna reveal himself and tell them how it was all just a joke. But that’s the trouble with pulling pranks:

you can't be sharp thinking you're the only trickster. You get to fooling yourself you're the only joker in the deck.

"Well, our fella gets abed, and during the night the mother and sister slip in, and before he can say, 'How do,' they slit his throat from ear to ear and clean out every one of his coat pockets and take what cash he's holding. Next morning after the sun comes up and the guests have all gone home, they go on back to clear the room, and what do they see in that bed, only the trickster, the boy, the son. Mother goes crazy and drowns herself; sister eats poison. And that's why I don't kid."

They heard the fire collapse and saw the sparks burn out among the stars.

"What about the daddy?" said one.

"Why the daddy came home a happy man!"

Laughter erupted through the camp.

After a while they began to dwindle, and what had been a cluster of voices became a selection of four identities drifting on a tide of snoring. The smoke from the campfire now vague, intermittent. Periodic howling cleft the dark.

"Don't want to make it too easy," said Quinn.

"Right," said Irving. He took out his Remington and cocked her.

Doffing their hats, they shifted up farther, up to the extreme ledge, until they could venture a judicious glance. About thirty paces yonder were the men sprawled out like a den of cats. Some had fallen asleep with their rifles on their chests, their feet upturned to the warmth. Beyond the ring the eyes of horses, small points of fire, as if someone had gone and thrown gems into the night.

Quinn shivered, then Irving.

"I'ma go for a waker," said Quinn. At that he licked his lips.

They each took aim, sharing a grin. Made the silent countdown.

Gusts emerged from their guns. Shouts spilled forth instantaneous; as the men went for their arms, they were effectively felled back. Something inside them seemed to snap, go off, go wrong, as random body parts ejaculated blood. The embers hissed, doused in blood. Those who did fire appeared to be discharging at an abstract sense of retaliation, one sending a shot that seemed cast in multiple directions at once.

Within half a minute most were splayed and dead. A few were moaning, thrashing by the dark fire when the twins crested the rise.

Their hands blackened and holding full cylinders, they surveyed the camp.

Irv worked the circle, giving each an ensuring bullet: their faces blossomed with shot. Noting a set of rowels he'd come back for. A sizeable Whitney with ivory grips.

"This one pissed himself."

"Where?" yelled Quinn.

"Wait!" he heard. "Don't shoot!"

"Why not?" said Irving. He said this without criticizing, as if he just wanted to know.

"What's this?" Quinn said. He trotted over. He was hugging more guns than he could carry.

"I don't know," he told him. "You get your pistols?"

From his hips he flashed the Pepperbox Derringers, the pure gelid silver of them shining to polished sickles.

“Damn,” he said on making his inspection of the boy, a corpse not half alive. “Fella’s sure had hisself a beating. Ain’t a cheery day, is it, pal?”

“Please,” he said, “don’t kill me.”

The fellow had been much shot. Something of a hand lay at his side, which had been more or less blown off from the wrist, and the tips of the fingers were continuing to move, catching the light.

“What in the *hel*-pful doctor happened to you?”

In the tampered embers he found the culprit: a Root Revolving Rifle washed with powder. Irv came, bearing a lantern.

“Whoowee,” hollered Quinn. “I’d say you had yourself a chain fire! That’s why you always gotta grease her, otherwise she’s bound to go off. I’d say you shot your load all at once you done. Shot her right into your hand.”

He looked a terrible discarded version of humanoid, some entity painful to look at.

“Please, wait,” he said, his breath tremulous and weak. “I can make it worth your while.”

“Oh,” said Irving, “how’s that?”

Grimacing, he strained, readying to speak. Instead his legs jerked out from under him, which caused a startled Quinn to jump back, tripping back, guns and everything.

Then there were two of them hurt on the ground. Irv seized the occasion to laugh until he realized his brother’s eye had fallen out. It had just plopped out and was wagging against his lips. Its unraveled exposure nearly indecent, evoking the visual shock of a private part.

“Put it back! Put it back!” he was screaming. Shouting, flailing, a madman.

“Okay. Okay! I can’t if you keep fighting me!”

He brought the light close and propped it on a corpse. After ushering his twin to kneel, he spread his eyelids open, finger and thumb. Gazing into the chasm as one would peer into another's brain and attempt to read his thoughts. But the light did not quite reach and Quinn was yelling too hard, so that the most he could gather of such an insight was a dank and curious wetness.

With the other hand he plucked up the dangling eyeball, winding the thread into the socket, deftly, like a competitor in a game pressed for time, but paused to regard his brother's eye—stared at the moist red ball—because in a way it was something he had never quite seen despite gazing at his whole life, which he then popped back with his thumb. Quinn swore fiercely.

He returned to the boy with the shot-off hand. Again he cocked his pistol.

"Wait!" he cried once more.

"No," said Irving, his humor that of a lifter strained beyond his capacity, "you shut up now."

"But there's gold," he said.

He could hear him quivering.

"Gold." He hesitated, paused. Even to utter the word contained an element of testing, and because of this he repeated, "Gold," this time feeling it faintly real.

"Where?" he said. His manner shifty, he shone the lantern against him so that all he could see was light.

"Utica Bank. They's plenty. More than you can fit to think. The safe, my daddy—"

"Utica? Where the hell is Utica? How come I ain't never heard of no Utica before?"

The boy lay there with all the wanting to run, but with a body that cannot.

"Bout ninety miles west of Mankato. Please," he said, "just please, please don't kill me, sir."

A hand mashed against his socket, Quinn lumbered forward, his good eye glowering. He pointed a weary gun.

"Shoot, I oughta skin you alive for tripping me," he told him, kicking him until he had raised a squeally uproar. He fired a shot over his head at the dark. Then they heard a horse go squealing in the dark. Irv steadied an arm on his twin's.

"Hold just a second. How do I know that you ain't lying?"

The boy wanted to take deep breaths, but all he could do was try. His teeth were lost in a mess the length of his shirt that made a quilt of blooming wet patches.

"My daddy, he was the builder. He built the Utica Bank."

"Good for him," said Quinn. He hefted the pistol. "Time to die."

"No!" His youthful voice did not at all match his miserable appearance. "Wait, I mean there's a cave! Bout two miles east of the town. In the back of a little barn looks like a gingerbread. Near the bottom of the hill. My daddy, he built her atop a X way down in that cave. You dig up through that X you're in the vault. I'll show you. Just please, please don't kill me, sir."

Irv cocked his pistol and watched as his face exploded, Quinn following suit. They emptied the remains of their cylinders into the unbecoming figure, into the ruining face.

Powder hovered about the camp, an eerie pall, as if they two had concluded some necromantic rites, though leaving the conjured spirits remote to find their way home. Both of them standing there frozen.

“Shoot,” Quinn said. “You think anybody heard?”

“Let’s just go and bag it,” said Irving.

Ignoring a Springfield and Jenks carbine, they rounded up the others: an imposing LeMat, a muskatoon, the typical pistols.

While they were going to pony the horses they noticed that one had been accidentally shot. The horse, an Appaloosa dappled from the croup, was wobbling and heaving, her ears tucked flat against her skull, oblivious to their orders. Irving undid her halter, and they watched as she, as though forced by a special magnetism, drifted back to the tree. There she continued to moan, banging her head against the trunk.

They stayed for a while, the two of them watching her shiver and twitch at the cold.

Some of them had never traveled this far east, most not since they were children. Something inherent to the excitement, the collective eagerness to fight, that in returning to the roots from before they had severed and ventured forth they would return to a dead stump that would lend itself to easy defeat, and given the added vitality through which the severing had availed them.

Before they had begun serious training Lincoln extended their three-months-term into three years. A few voices worried the fun. At worst it seemed to multiply the holiday idleness to indefinite luxury; no one wanted to go back even if there was concern about who and what they had left.

It was as though the war had breached an incredible hiatus in their lives, as though the silent men of forgotten youth who had labored demure to fate had all these years been suffering under the pretense of a happiness that thinly disguised real agony while ignoring the best of their dreams when suddenly a chasm had cleft the ground, and now that they had been granted the task of scaling it there lingered scarce question of whether they would achieve that which they set out to win, the primary encumbrance being how to outmaneuver the thousands of other adventurers that were vying for the same renown. Understood it was though inarticulate, they knew they were also to fight each other.



After three months of training and enough marching to imprint the mud with the fossil of their boredom for ages to come, just when the original tour should have expired as had the final turns from idleness into drudgery, they saw battle—the training and drills and marching up like the whorl of a cannonball.

Men shouted orders that were torn to howls as companions charged or fled. Strewn limbs led into bodies that were attached to them no longer and hails of bullets stung the air like furious insects to finish themselves on their recipients. A dense cloud drifted in, settling a falsenight over the field so that many were forced to shoot on hearing alone or found themselves bayoneted, their killer rushed out of the fog, their joining ended as soon as met.

Night set as an essence that had already been long present, and the strangers it revealed were the carcasses of friends intertwined with Death, their egregious contortions, these final postures, attitudes so personal, so private. Only the drunk slept that night. Loud was the air and leaden with lowing men; those who listened listened with divine despair.

A week later they fought again. Those who had rejoiced that they had survived the last battle now cursed themselves for staying alive. Their feet exulting them over corpses, launching them over cannons, sporadic fires, leaping between bullets, any devious route to breath. Fallen comrades who should have been dead looked up and shouted encouragement then died. Again a pseudonight palled the miserable activity, causing friend to fire on friend or soldier against captain and the struck to retaliate. The ground in constant paroxysm sending up like April shoots generations of worms twitching and quickening. Many were trampled; those who weren't were often shot while attempting to extricate themselves from traps of viscera.

As the fighting began to quell, a chorus rose from the field. That was a music heard by the damned. Throughout the night the living yelled for the dying to hurry and kill

themselves, though they continued all through the night as ceaseless as the sea. Occasional shots still firing from perhaps a handful of brute fellows who had not been told the battle had broken.

It went on like that for a week. Smoke and clouds became permanent, skin and uniforms swart shadows that vaulted, cavorted, danced, enacting a bizarre new form of minstrelsy. Each night before he went to bed, Colonel Colvill reported the tally of losses to the regiment; then one night, waiting for him to appear, they watched him lurk past like a beaten animal, neither a glance nor greeting, and go fix himself in his tent.

As a semblance of summer wore on they marched back north. Wading through rivers and dismal rains, waters that soiled their garments and made their uniforms permanent things of stains, water drunk hot from boiling.

Every new roll call exposed a heightening absence of deserters who had slipped off into the marsh. Those who stayed began to age at a scandalous rate: boys began to look like fathers, fathers like septuagenarians; everyone grew stooped and bent and cynical.

By fall the regiment had lost enough weight to equal a third of its original mass. Ghastly and unbecoming, they formed a ragged army, suggesting someone had exhumed them from a better war in history, knowing the dead will continue to fight.

It was September, the battle over a three-mile stretch of land. There had been several pretty houses and barns, elegant predecessors of the estates they had built back home, but these were now pocked and mutilated by errant shot and looked the very brothels of target practice. Fields that had once waved their store bursts of canister and the vol-

# 11

For several years after the war there were spans where I couldn't bring myself to get out of bed: no matter if it was a holiday or if there was much urgent work to be done or if my welfare directly hinged upon my raising myself from the frame and throwing a few stale clothes on and walking the quarter mile to wherever they that might be seeking me needed me to come, for the life of me staying right there in the folds was all I was ever good for, all I could hope to do.

To the few who knew me I must have appeared a sort of recluse; to the fewer who glimpsed me they must have noted the dark and gloom I'd come to radiate, wherever I'd go my presence throwing a sorry blanket over a sun-filled room.

There were homes I got turned out of not so much because my indolence kept me from paying the rent but because too many times, having waited for me to emerge and when I didn't, having waited for the pad of my footsteps upstairs and not hearing them, after weeks of worrying and straining to catch a quick noise that might be a sign of some vitality, then coming and busting the door, they had been frightened to believing my corpse lay overhead. Yet none of them realized the act of buying a gun and blowing apart my brain or creeping downstairs to the kitchen in order to pilfer a knife and treading back up again dangled beyond the limit—that even pivoting on the ticking hurt for what it cost.

I forget how many jobs I got let go from and how many houses picked me up, sheets and everything, and dumped me around the corner until some other work, some other roof overhead, seemed to gather me up and dropped me hence.

During all those years the central thought I kept returning to: I can't keep doing this, can't keep going. Can't continue continuing. Just give me the ounce of strength to end it all this moment or give me the blessed cowardice to dupe myself into thinking it will all be momentarily different. That idiotic fancy to trick myself into believing that help may lie around the bend so that at least I might be moving.

Beside one of those beds a previous tenant had left a grammar for a language I had never heard of or had any interest in learning. As if to verify what did not concern me, I thumbed through the moldering pages, expecting the crushing tedium to come bearing down at any second and demand I let fall the motive, put it down forever and forgotten. A bit amused that any human person would spend his efforts learning something that had long gone extinct and no one went around declaiming for any purpose, at that point I couldn't have known this grammar would prove the fulcrum for tipping my lethargy into deeds.

Little by little I memorized its chapters, the paradigms and words. I went from simple sentences of subject and verb to acquiring the prepositions, participles, and pronouns of adolescent intricacy that kept them extending, elaborate, expansive, no reason why I was forcing myself to undertake so esoteric a challenge, perhaps only to see if I could.

Next, I wanted to render something from that exhumed tongue into the worthwhile one of my own, and I chose a text at random, from which I began cracking a code that straddled nonsense and clunky meaning, watching my work merge from babble into compact thought. I have learned something, I heard me telling myself. Though what was learned may well be pointless and ridiculous and hardly worth the labor, nonetheless I do know something: an artifact from the folds of ancient history, which my tending and preserving may help keep yet alive, even though I myself am not worth such keeping.

Then I began teaching the sons and daughters of parents more deluded than I, since, whereas I had stumbled haphazard into the learning, they were intent on seeking it, a certain mastery of elitism by means of their bored children whom I was painfully, tediously killing with my language, had been instructed to instruct, rendering them as tired and dead and lifeless as I had once been, bent over their trapped desks like stubborn hinges turning out declension against declension, seeking that I should teach it that they might live by that which could hardly be called alive, a handful of cool embers warm enough to help none but the very coldest and bereft of any heat for those even passably tepid. Until all that lead to its own trouble.



Beside the horses we waited until dark, with us a larger tote newly burnished with a stiffness hard as board. The clouds swathing the moonglow to soft cream, we went jogging among the trees, tools and bag and steps shuffling in

# 19

In she goes. The sounds his waiting at what he wants. Inside amongst his things, his chirps and jitters yelling her on.

Fearful if she moves he is to fade. For it is of a kindly and a true. To take him to her arms, his stay a-holding and a full, the linen dripping blood.

She hastens but so's not to frighten. She feels the faith a-beckoning to enter, his chirps and jitters yelling her with love. Through his den the warmth of skin wanting there and waiting and eyeless stare shorn with hate, wanting his bidding moved. She feels him hovering there, adrift yet staid. It is of a long sad quiet hunger that only the pain of a body can know. She knows you, dear as wife to husband.

Beyond the door there comes a weeping. A telling of her to come. In leading her this way he knows she's good to work his will, to catch him in her arms and bear him at the verge and nurse him on her blood. So fair she is and young, and ready in hope to begin the journey, the welcome-back loving-clinging and the offering of blood.

Open the door, round the bend. She hears his chirps and jitters. The pain of allowing his must, since in the day he ain't to rest, but of night he ain't to sleep, only the waiting and the quiet and wanting him to come.

The skin cuts smooth, easy as a knife to butter and as kindly for to peel the cover off an unburst bud. She tears this piece, knowing you to smile, alike her in her gift, and in taking so to stay. Then another, happy for how the skin

gives to demand. A queen before a feast, since any pain is joy, and the more for him to take, the more there is stay, the weight for him to come.

She gathers so much she can, ready to take you here in arms, for she can sense the blood soak to a sponge, like minnows in the sun, fleeing her embrace. There ain't no drifting, no waiting, no yonder, but ahead he stays, dear love compan. He is still of body and naked. His flesh a solid kind of thing, his figure in dark bloom, and so I cast it on him of a kindly, knowing him to stay.

We two go looking face to face. His sightless eyes, whose stare they are, hollow no more and flutter: they are two bulbs opening for the first time, babes of a first day, and it takes a spell for him to halt, to see she is for good. The two of them reading the depths of mind, dear as wife to husband.

The flesh to quit his drifting, has made my figure for a name, since, the wishful joining, in placing a finger on the face that seals our touch, I tell him what he has hollered for me to speak:

“Les Tamplin,” I say.