

Crooked Crosses

I dreamed an interstate highway, but it wasn't paved over smooth or marked by lines and lights. Eight lanes of hardened dirt stretched over a ruined landscape of skeleton trees and scorched earth. I walked the southbound shoulder, kicking up dust, and shadowy trucks on the roadway blew by without rumbling or rattling. They shrieked.

The sky was clear and colorless, as washed-out as the fields it overlooked, but on the near horizon, thorny clouds spread on the wind and a distant hum buzzed over the landscape. A strange kind of storm was coming and I would be caught out in it, if I didn't hook a ride.

There was nowhere to shelter along the dirt highway, not a single crumbling barn or fallen-down house where I could hide out from the rain, or dust, blowing in from the east. There was a dead field just off the highway, marked by a barbed-wire fence and a NO TRESPASSING sign, and a scarecrow hung in the distance like a watchman, though there weren't any crows to scare or crops to guard.

Dust blew up around me, the chattering hum on the wind buzzed louder and the blank beige sky went black. The storm was near and I was stranded, lost in a sudden darkness too deep to see through. The moon wasn't out and the stars didn't shine, but

Crooked Crosses

twin lights peered through the night and the roar of a V8 engine chased away the shrieking trucks.

The highway emptied for a long, black car that thundered out of the darkness and crouched low along the roadside, growling under its hood, where I knew it hid sharp teeth. The windows were rolled down to the storm and 'Love Me Tender' dripped from the stereo speakers, slow and sweet like honey, but bitter as poison. I knew whose car it was and I stooped to look inside, but instead of the dead king who had stalked me through the south, my mother's ghost sat behind the wheel, wearing the dress she had been buried in.

She was alone in the car and she leaned across the pink bench seat and pushed open the passenger door. A cigarette hung from her mouth and smoke rose in front of her eyes, but she had quit smoking two years before she died.

"You're smoking again."

She shrugged her shoulders and took a deep drag on the cigarette.

"Well, they're sure not gonna kill me," she said, "Now that I'm already dead."

A hard wind rushed between us and the buzzing cloud broke open, spilling a hail of living thorns out on the road.

"Time to go home, Richie," she grinned, "Can't you see it's starting to rain?"

It was raining harder now, not water or dust, but hard, wriggling drops of dread that clung in my hair and crawled over my face. The chattering wind

wailed all around us, louder than the sound of my voice, louder than the phantom car's motor, too.

"Where's Elvis?" I shouted.

My mother rolled her eyes and shrugged. Rain was buzzing through the open windows into the car and clots of living dust settled on her shoulders and squirmed through her hair. One fell from her mouth when she shouted back at me.

"I killed him!"

Murderer or milkman?

"Well, not by myself," she admitted, "We *all* killed him. Now, get in the goddamned car."

I backed away from the roadside, glanced over my shoulder at the fallow field and thought I saw the scarecrow moving on his post, beckoning me with a wave. When I turned back to the car, my mother was naked, clothed only with the skittering bugs that had come on the storm.

"What kind of rain is it, Mom?" I hollered, "How come it's alive and you're still dead?"

"It's not a storm," she said, "It's a swarm."

Her eyes went black as rare pearls and she shrieked a single word onto the wind.

"LOCUSTS!"

Her mouth hung open wide, hundreds of bugs rushed into her throat and she screamed until she couldn't make a sound.

I pissed my pants and ran for the fence, leaving my pack in the dust and my blood on the barbs. Blinded by the swarming locusts, I ran through the

Crooked Crosses

field with my mouth shut tight, so none of them could crawl inside of me.

I crossed tilled rows of dead soil, where nothing good would ever grow and the chattering wind chased me down with a long, wailing shriek. I thought it was my mother, screaming again, but it must have been the car horn blowing, because her mouth was filled with locusts.

I fled across the darkened field and ran headlong into the scarecrow's post, opening a gash on my forehead and landing my ass in the dirt. I stared up at the straw man and he opened his eyes.

"Where's your milk jugs, boy?"

It wasn't a scarecrow at all, no old, stuffed coat and sackcloth face for frightening birds. It was The Troll-Man up on a cross, alive but crucified. Railroad spikes had been driven through his wrists and ankles and he hung from the beams with his trousers open, his shriveled secret hanging out to the swarm. He wasn't fit for any crown, even one shaped from mean thorns, but his forehead was bloody and bruised, deformed by bony, hooked horns.

"You sure as shit ain't no murderer," he croaked, "So where's your fucking milk jug?"

Among the locust rain, a darker shadow descended and a raven settled on The Troll-Man's shoulder and pecked greedily at the bugs on his face.

I screamed, my mouth filled with locusts and...

Crooked Crosses

I woke up in my bedroll, screaming at the trees and drenched with sweat, the crotch of my jeans soaking wet. I thought I heard the storm still buzzing, but it was only the humming of electric power lines, strung from crooked crosses on the roadside.

In the morning, when I walked out, I avoided looking up at the telephone poles, afraid I'd see The Troll-Man, crucified against the clear, blue sky.

Crooked Crosses