The Hunter

Donald R. Ling*
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by Donald R. Ling

THE COLD November air blew against his face as he headed down the snow-covered road, leaving his shotgun and shells in the locked car. He pulled the bulky tan coat tighter around his waist as he put his hands into the pockets holding the flashlight that he had remembered to take along with him. His teeth pounded viciously against each other, his breath came in short choking waves. He removed his hands from their holes and rubbed his arms, but quickly put them back when the wind and snow started to burn them.

The wind whipped across the road and grayed his hair with crystals, but he kept on walking, walking, walking, even when he felt that he could not move another step.

Near dusk, silhouetted against the barren horizon, he saw an old frame building. He smiled and began to run toward it, the air scorching his lungs. As he got closer, he could see that it was an old faded-red barn with its open doors slamming in the wind, but it made no difference what it was as long as it was warmer inside than out.

He ran through the open doors, a rush of snow following him as he shut the doors behind, and was greeted by the
smell of hay and dung that lay heavy in the air. He stamped his feet and ran his hand through his hair to remove the lingering snow. He then turned on the flashlight and shined it around the building.

The beam of light fell on harnesses covered with dust and dead horse hair hanging on the walls. The cobwebs parted and floated to the ground as he made his way into the room. He scanned the floor with his light, revealing broken lantern chimneys and cracked boards scattered all about. He walked slowly, the stream of white air coming from his nose and mouth freezing on his eyebrows. As he turned to his right, the beam of light fell upon an old brown ladder leading upward toward the haymow, its top about three feet from the opening.

He put his foot on the first rung of the ladder, but snapped it back sharply as two pink eyes darted out of the dark and then disappeared into a hole in the wall. Slowly he started up the ladder, his face aching from the cold. As he reached the top, he held onto the upper rung of the ladder with one hand and grabbed the edge of the opening with the other. He then stood and put both hands on the surface. Just as his chest reached the level of his hands, his numb fingers loosened and he crashed to the floor below.

The spinning building was silent as he lay there trying to breathe. At last he gasped, “Damn it! God damn it!” His voice resounded throughout the barn. He tried to stand, but his legs gave way. An agonizing pain shot through his body. He shined the flashlight on his right leg and saw loose flesh covered with blood and dried horse manure. A small white bone stuck through the skin. As he looked at the fragment, a heavy, almost burning feeling moved upward through his groin and chest. He tried to scream, but closed his eyes and vomited.

When at last the final gasping brought no refuge from his stomach, he spat a few times and leaned back, his head spinning and throbbing from the nauseating pain and odor; his eyes aching from the tears that flowed freely; his body swaying, swaying, swaying, swaying...
green and yellow foam rolling uphill
and sliding into the valley
splashing over rocks
 going down
 and down
 and

'As I walk through the valley of the Shadow of Death...'
'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be...'
Blue green clouds swirl down and swallow black grass...

"Here I am in a broken down barn, God knows where,
with a smashed leg, no food, no water, unable to move, a
flashlight with a dying battery, some decaying hay, and a
God-awful smell. It's funny, really funny when you think
about it. Here I am, Alexter Martin, hunting ducks in a
rundown barn. Lost from the world. I can see the paper
now: 'No Sign Of Missing Hunter.' Sure, 'No Sign.' God,
there won't ever be a sign if I don't get out of this hole...

Sheep... Lost Sheep... Little lost sheep...

"Hole, sure, hole. Or grave? Would grave be better? Am I
actually in a grave? Ha! Sure, that's it. I'm in my own grave
smelling my own rotten body. And the maggots, they're here
too. So are the rats. Yeh, those damn rats are here. I can see
them right now. I see their hairy stinking bodies running
all around me. I can even hear them. Hear them breathing.
Feel their hot breath on the back of my neck. Sure, that's
them. Those damn things are going to eat me. And when
they're through with me, they'll die, and that'll be me strewn
all over this damn floor. I'll be little green blotches of crap.
Ha! Little green piles of rotten meat, that's me...

red black blue blending bleaching bloating

"Funny, really funny. Me, Alexter Martin, a little green pile
of crap. A mess of little green piles of rotten stinking... Oh,
God, get me out of this place. I can't stand it! I can't...

"O.K., Martin, pull yourself together. I've got to pull
myself together. Here I am crying like some snot-nosed kid
with a toothache. Yeh, that's me: The little boy in pain.
Damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it..."
roaring raging cataracts racing upstream
and cascading into an empty glass

"Hey, honey, what's the matter? Why are you lying on
the floor? Something the matter? Come on now, don't just
sit there when a lady talks to you." A voluptuous brunette
stood in the open barn door and smiled down on Alexter.
Her tall slender body stood like a statue on the concrete
entrance leading into the building. His eyes grew wide as
he watched her approaching, a pale pink vapor stirring about
her gown as she walked. He smiled with all the effort he
could afford, and attempted to sit up straight.

"Hello, I'm Alexter Martin, ah, miss, ah."

"Smith, Alice Smith."

"Well, Alice. . . I hope you don't mind my calling you
Alice."

"You can call me anything you like, honey. Now, what
were you going to tell me? I mean about being down there."

"Well, you see, I broke my leg. I was climbing up the
ladder and slipped. . ."

"Why were you climbing up there?"

"I guess that I thought it would be warmer."

"Were you cold?"

"Yes, don't you notice it?"

"No, I don't notice cold. In fact, I'm rather warm." She
smiled as she moved closer to Alexter and stood with her
hands on his shoulders.

cold, cold, cold snow, snow, cold snow, cold, cold

"I hear the wind blowing. I hear the wind. I hear it. . ."

lavender green blue black red circulating stopping


"Alexter, how did you get here in the first place?"

"I, ah, I was out hunting ducks, and my car froze up, so
I thought that I'd try to find a farm house. I was just about
ready to give up when I ran into this old abandoned barn."

"That's interesting. Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Well, there's a lot of horse. . ."

"I don't mind that, sugar, my feet are killing me. Ha! Ha!
That's funny. Um, it feels a lot better with those off."

Alexter watched her closely as she removed her shoes, her white flowing gown resting above her knees. He glanced into her eyes and she laughed.

roses melting in white sands

"It looks like your leg is pretty bad. I can't set it, but I can stop the bleeding." She tore the hem of her dress into strips and bound the opening in his shin. "Is that better?" she asked as she put her arm around his shoulder.

"Yes, much better." He wetted his lips and smiled.

"How long have you been here?"

"I'm not really sure. I got here..." He put his arm around her waist and spoke softly, "Too long, much too long."

II

The barn was covered with wet snow falling softly through the night. The bright morning sun melted it into gentle streams that flowed quietly to the ground. A slight breeze pushed through the door and rustled in the hay.

"Al. Al, honey, are you awake?" She turned and looked at the man beside her.

"Sure, Alice, I'm awake." He patted her softly as he said, "I'll always be awake when you're around."

"Now, Al, we have important business today. We have to take care of your leg. How is it? Does it hurt?"

"No, I don't feel a thing. I don't feel... I don't feel anything at all!" He ripped the red bandage off his swollen leg. "Oh, God!" The clotted blood tore loose and revealed a green tinge in the raw flesh. "It can't happen! I won't let it happen! I won't! I..."

black whipping clouds choking crushing smothering

He shook his head and tried to open his eyes. The lids wouldn't move.

falling down down down down down down down down down

"How, how long have we been here?" His cloudy eyes moved from his leg to the woman next to him and then back again.
“I don’t know. An hour, an eternity. What difference does it make? Your leg will be all right. Her, let me kiss it.” She slowly moved her lips down to the swollen mass of flesh. “There, that’s better, isn’t it?”

“It, it seems to be healing! The color’s disappearing!”

“Sure, it’ll be fine. Just fine.” Her chest heaved as she drew him near her, digging her nails into his back.

“Sure, it’ll be fine. Nothing’s going to happen to me. Nothing.” He crushed her even tighter to his chest as he spoke.

Morning light shining through the doorway passed into night as the couple’s voices muffled one another’s and the barn fell into silence.

quiet brook’s soft blue water

“Alice, Alice, I think that, well, we can’t stay here forever. I have to see a doctor. I don’t want to leave any more than you do, but I just have to.”

“There’s plenty of time to see a doctor later. Now it’s just you and me and nothing else counts. We’ve got, got...”

“Alice! What is it? You look pale. God, your hand’s as cold as ice. Alice? Alice!” Her body slumped to the floor as he looked on. She lay there quiet, never moving, not even breathing.

“Oh, God, Alice! What’s happened? Say something. Alice! Alice!”

The minutes grew into hours and the hours grew beyond time. Alexter collapsed, clutching at her hand.

molten rainbows melting into slimy puddles

He lay there, unconscious, not realizing what was happening until an eerie screeching note pierced his brain and awakened him. He tried to open his eyes, but they were heavy and covered with matter. When his lids finally lifted, he saw a blood-red haze above the body next to him.

His mouth fell open and the air scratched its way through his parted lips. He tried to speak but could say nothing.

golden statues rusting and decaying

While he watched, her beautiful brown hair rose up. He tried to cover his eyes but could not move his hands.
Slowly, quietly, softly, almost unnoticed, a small hole opened in the skull just above the back of her neck.

blood-covered birds staring into empty baby cribs

As he thought of the horror before him, a thick, heavy, greenish-yellow arm emerged slowly from the vapor, inserted a silver key in the hole, and quietly brought the body to life by turning the key around and around and around and...

"Alice. Alice. I love you, Alice. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

She stretched out her arms to him and they arose and walked out in the morning snow.

roses growing 'round the deep silver lake

The piercing, howling wind ripped through the barn, but he did not feel it. Rats licked the frozen pools next to his body, but he did not hear them. He merely lay there, not moving, not breathing, not realizing what had happened, or even what was now happening.

Two Cinquains

by Theodore Kooser

Creamed tea
and dominoes,
the secret woes of hands
by candelabra; ev’ning glows
but goes.

Lip prints
on coffee cups
are not unlike the stain
of blood around the splintered base
of tusks.