The Scout

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"TIMMY?" the young boy's mother called from downstairs. "Breakfast, scout." At the sound of her voice he rolled onto his back and stared out the window. The sunlight sparkled through the mesh of limbs and leaves outside. A good day for tracking, he thought.

"Timmy!" The voice was less patient. He threw back the sheet and swung his bare legs over the edge. His blue jeans lay by his dresser in a crumpled pile; he stepped into them and drew them up. Taking a white T-shirt from the drawer, he pulled it over his head and looked around for his boots. The scuffed square toes peeped at him from under the bed. Timmy picked them up and went downstairs.

When he reached the kitchen doorway, his mother's back was to him as she stood at the range; she flipped pancakes on a blackened cast-iron griddle. Timmy's boots clattered to the floor, but his young face was innocent.

The slender woman jumped but didn't turn away from the stove. "Good heavens, Timmy, I hope you stalk Indians more quietly than that." She took a fried egg from the skillet and, putting it on a plate, set it on the kitchen table. "Sit down, your cakes are almost ready." Sliding onto his chair, he eyed the egg suspiciously, wondering how a scout would ever find an egg on a prairie. He couldn't remember seeing any chickens on "Wagon Train."

His mother slid a golden pancake from the turner unto his plate. "Why aren't you eating?"

"Scouts don't have eggs." He picked at it with his fork. She hesitated a moment. "Well, just pretend you're visiting a settlement." She shoved the butter and syrup within his reach and walked out of the room. Waiting until he heard her steps on the stairs, he held the pitcher above his
plate for a second and then poured the syrup over both the pancake and the egg. With his last bite of pancake, he wiped up the remaining syrup and popped it into his mouth. From a glass pig on the counter, he swiped a few cookies and hurriedly stuffed them into his pockets. Camp cooks just didn’t know how hungry a fellow got on the trail.

Picking up his boots from the floor, he went out the back door and sat on the steps. As he tugged on each boot, the stiff leather pulled at his skin and rubbed across the old blisters on his heels. He winced and thought how with a real horse he wouldn’t get blisters from walking in them. He sat and, thinking through his herd, chose a spirited chestnut for the morning.

Nestled in a corner of the yard beneath the overgrown hedge, an old wooden garden pagoda served as a temporary corral. Timmy led the prancing chestnut from between the two facing seats and deftly swung a saddle onto his back. The boy placed a hand on the base of the arched neck and leaped on, throwing his right leg over the cantle. The horse reared but Timmy forced him down and into a run out of the yard.

The scout had a lot to do today. The word was out in the camp: predatory beasts had frightened the stock in the night. As he circled the herd of oxen and cattle, a small calf dodged in front of him, and he kicked the chestnut into a dead run to head it off. “Get back in there, if you know what’s good for you!” The calf streaked into the herd, its white tail disappearing amid the milling cattle. Timmy reined in, still watching for fresh tracks. Might just be coyotes, harmless, he thought. The larger ones, the cats and wolves, were nervier though; they’d come in close to pick off a stray.

Suddenly, in a patch of dusty ground, he saw a print. Dismounting, he leaned over to examine it. “A bobcat.” He mounted, checking his rifle; it moved easily in the holster. The prints led him over the hill, away from the herefords and camp. The grass was cropped short and turning brown. They would have to move on soon, he thought.

At the creek the tracks, wandering up and down the bank, moved around wild mulberry trees and willows. He rode up to one of the mulberry trees and shook a branch, but
the berries were dry and shriveled and fell to the ground. He pried a cookie out of his pocket but it looked too dry to eat and he threw it away.

The chestnut edged up to the creek and drank, each gulp sending a ripple along his neck. Timmy got off again and splashed the water on his face. Squatting on his heels, he dangled his hand in the stream. He couldn’t tell which happened first then, the low, surly growl or the horse shying, almost knocking him over. Before he could grab the reins, the chestnut veered and galloped toward the hill. Timmy looked quickly up the bank. The tawny cat, crouched under a willow a hundred yards upstream, watched him.

Timmy started walking backward slowly, his eyes never leaving the cat’s. He had moved about fifty yards when he turned, panicked, and raced toward the crest of the hill. Cursing his heavy boots, he glanced over his shoulder. The cat was following, bounding effortlessly, closing the distance. Timmy ran harder, sweat pasting his shirt to his back.

He didn’t dare look over his shoulder again; everything was blurry. He stumbled up the steps and threw open the screen door.

His mother’s arms enfolded him and he wept. “Scout,” she said quietly, “tell me about it.”

He sobbed uncontrollably and clung to her. She waited patiently, smiling sorrowfully. “It... it came... after me. I could... couldn’t stop it... at all... ever.”

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Haiku

by Andrea Carlisle

*English, Jr.*

Blue string of leaf smoke
wavering gray twilight air
over final ash