

The Tarn

Adam C. Trawick

*Nary a movement 'round the tarn 'neath midnight blue. The still of starry solemnity,
white-lined cloud,
harbinger, soon, the arc of moon — spark-shot moonlight,
ricochet,
spangled in a breeze
atop the water.
A lapping ashore, near cracking flame, pops in his ear.*

Jacob Erle Greely postured himself against a stone of considerable size, he a-face the flames. His son, Silas Erle Greely, studied his father's lined countenance and then felt a bolt of pain shoot up his leg.

"Arragghh! It's broken," Silas exclaimed. "Bullet went straight through the bone."

"I supposed enough. Deduced it earlier from studyin' its effete angle," said Jacob.

"You suppose we got the better of their advances?" Silas questioned.

"Yeah, least for the night," Jacob said. "It ain't their furtherin's that purpose my movements present, current conditions considered. Bone's indeed broken. Shattered — matter a' fact. But it's the entry 'n exit wound what's possessed my appendages. Just wasn't 'nough time to clean it accordingly, before we made a run for it."

"It's only been a few hours. You don't think malignance has set in, have you?" Silas asked.

"Well, the lead made it clean through," Jacob responded. "I reckon not. Can't be certain. I had you over my shoulder near seven hours. Then take account the three or so before I happened upon you. I pride you on your extemporizations — hollowed out tree corpse made for good camouflage, couple stray 'n sturdy boughs bound with some vine t' secure the shin. Lucky-it they didn't have dogs at the time. Sure they got 'em now. Haven't heard evidence of it yet though. Figure they took off after the horses I sent south-east. Tracks lead opposite our trajectory. Those after you were shepherded by the little guy. Oldest, it seemed. He couldn't track an ass in a courthouse from the look of him. The other two didn't make for a competent cut. Could-a sworn I saw a fourth slinkin' around but..."

"I learnt' from the best, Daddy," Silas smiled.

"It's a chain," Jacob said. "Links down the ages. Tradition is older-n-wiser than you-n-I. Never sunder from it. But that don't mean it can't be improved upon. Tradition. Simply because somethin' ain't broke don't mean it couldn't use adjustments."

"My side hurts," Silas grunted.

"Yeah, I got a sharp shoulder," said Jacob.

“My innards are bitin’ themselves,” Silas said.

His right-hand index and third finger pressed upon the lower end of the left side of his rib cage.

“Hurts all over but an acuteness shoots through every now-n-again,” Silas confessed.

Jacob Erle possessed a countenance of weathered sincerity. A ruminative glaze over his eyes; a tuft, slightly styled to curled tips, rested beneath his nostrils. His right elbow rested on his right knee, which was raised at an angle relative to the left leg in repose — his hand stroked, to an ill-kempt point, the hair on his chin.

“They like t’kill you. You done what they say, Silas Erle?”

“What they say?” Silas replied.

The light from the small flame fell, was now failing to reach his father’s face. All Silas could see was the lower half of his father’s torso to the heel of his boot. Silas felt his father’s eyes studying him through the dark.

“*They* is always wordin’ t-gossip.”

“The world darkens when mouths spill words afoul the nature a-things.”

“It’s a dark cloud of inebriation, Daddy — far be it from me t’ recall the nature of the particulars.”

“Paradise and Perdition rest within those penumbral particulars, Silas Erle. Particularly if the mind withholding those particulars has a pristine notion of ’em ’n works t-conceal some wickedness — thus out of hesitation t-confront material consequences the beholder renders turbid the waters of his yesterday with murkier connotations.”

“I don’t know what I done, Daddy. But I know what they say.”

“Pray tell it then.”

“Them that follow’d us — the one whose bullet sought my leg, says I took a girl he’s sweet on under duress. Says that she says that I says there was nothin’ to it ’cept meanness. But that’s *their* story — not *the* history. My life attests to-a simple resolve ’n gentle supposition of others intent. I *know* even in the abandon of strong waters I take not what ain’t mine nor take advantage of what or who could be seen as simpler. My recollect don’t reveal any particulars of meanness, Daddy.”

“One’s history ’n one’s nature wrestle with each given moment,” Jacob said. “Best not to subject one’s present-soon-to-be-past t’the whimsy of nature ’n the recall of others. Be keen of yourself at all times — that’s all any man has to his credit.”

Silas, running a curious hand along the side of his calf, wincing, studies the dark above the chest pockets of Jacob’s shirt. Blood splotches from field dressing whitetails stained around the suspenders, just over the heart, seem to spill from the stark black night where the meridian of his father should be. Silas, uneasy with the myriad-eyed blackness averted his eyes to wary flames that were gently licking the night air like some wound in the atmosphere.

“You’re my creation, Jacob continued. “A developing particular in my life. I instill it in you what best worked for me ’n mine. Just as it was put t-me by my b’fores. Prelude t’all my particulars. I’m usin’ as such now t’give frame what new particulars you breathe into the night — each word a particular naturally riding in on a breeze. We’re all subject t’a nature that knows no limiting principle. What’s the nature of a breeze but t’be swept up in the gale of-n instant? What caresses a flower can uproot the pine. The power of the wind-drunk moment particular.”

“Momma likens me to a breeze of morning spring,” Silas said. “The kind that carries the smell of dew over a pasture.”

“Your mother is wiser than me,” Jacon replied. “A benevolent sophistication — even her fury reckons itself with consequence. But she too has a nature. However, her reason contains it. Reckon she notices her will’n you. Something only mothers intuit. She’d sense it if there wasn’t an aptitude for constraint. But there’re no sureties of composure when the tumult of inner winds meet strong waters...”

“You don’t reckon they’d go find her in my stead, do you?” Silas said.

“Your mother went to her mother’s the morn’ you went off for what we thought was campin’.” Jacob said. “As I said, whoever’s after you most like t’have set after them horses — was it the Lockhart’s hooch that swept you into uncertainty?”

“Daugherty’s,” Silas answered. “We were goin’ to camp out along the Jessup’s Creek. That spot you show’d me years back. Were hopin’ to spot some whitetail, but Wayne Jr. had been workin’ on a mix over the week passed. Fermented five gallons in four days. Come t’think of it, he should have left it for ’nother day or so but we got eager so we stayed around the brew. We made way early next mornin’.”

“Wayne Sr.’s boy?” Jacob asked. “Somethin’ blasphemous about an Irishman fermenting moonshine. Was it one of the Honaker girls that was a shine in your eye?”

“No, sir,” Silas said. “This girl was with...”

“These ones after you?”

“They had an odd air about ’em.” Silas continued. “Never seen the like of ’em before. Came upon us as me ’n the Daughertys were playin’ cards out near Shiloh’s Ridge. It was three boys ’n two girls. One of the girls was no gift t’the eyes. Wouldn’t look at anybody. Kep’ her eyes t’the ground. Her mind was somewhere else that humored her. But the other — she had eyes blue as sapphire ’n they sat atop cheeks red of rose like mother’s that were starred with freckles. Smiled at me the entire time. Kind of presence that even things out no matter the rockiness of the situation.”

Jacob sat stone still, internalizing his son’s every syllable.

“Eldest of the three boys asked if they could play,” Silas continued. “Said they had money but we told them we wasn’t playing for any seein’ as we had none. Pete’n I shared eyes in their peculiarities of approach. Seemed more he wasn’t askin’ t’play as much as he was curious if we had money t’play with. Smallest cut of ’em had rabid eyes under the forehead ’n brows of a statue. They find you ’n you feel ideas percolating behind ’em — ideas that make you feel like

you need t' back away without turnin' your back. Murmured t'himself. Kept rubbin' with his thumb the nub where the ring finger on his left hand used t'be. Spoke not a word the whole span of the evening."

"Seen 'em from afar but not too far t' make out a familiar if there was any," Jacob said. "There are folk out this country that don't take to community — none of orderliness at least'n any way and manner under God or Caesar. Folk merely more susceptible t'the vagaries of nature — *their* nature'n particular."

"I got the same feelin'," Silas said, "the time the Daugherty boys left me out in the woods near dark after tellin' me tale of the early settlers' children who'd get swept up in the trees by cougars. When you had to come by lamplight t' fetch me — 'n I had heard that growl. Felt them eyes peerin' through the dark. Same feelin'."

"You're my responsibility," Jacob reassured. "Father is found by lamplight — so he will find his son. A burning lamp passes between the pieces. Sacrifice of fathers. Them cats been extinct for many-a-year anyhow Silas. You heard what those boys wanted to scare you into thinking of."

The air around Silas began to pulsate. The pop of burning coal and lapping of water fell as the crescendo of a murmuring forest distinguished itself in symphony.

"The churnin' in my stomach is latching on to my head, Daddy." Silas said. "Leg doesn't hurt too terribly much but I feel light'n ain't seein' so good. I'm gonna rest my eyes a bit."

"Take a swig of water from the canteen b'fore you turn in," Jacob instructed.

Jacob Erle reached to his satchel. Tied to its arm strap was a wooden canteen of white pine, cylindrical with a corked buttonhole. The letters *JEG* engraved on its flat diametric. His calloused fingertips unfurled the knot and grasped at its frame. Across the cherry coals, a hard hand extended. The waking liquid of life contained in pine.

Silas, with his left hand, cupped the dispenser. His eyes took note of the letters thereon as his right hand clumsily felt for and removed the cork and quell his lips. Upturned, the contents spilled over his tongue — a weariness settled in his bones. Both hands cradled the canteen as it made its descent to his lap. His eye lids shut for the night. His breathing slowed from shy and shallow to confident and deep claims of crisp night air.

Jacob watched his son fall gently into slumber. Studying the nature of the body in rest, the rise and fall of his son's chest, the sporadic twitch of his left pinky finger as it had done in sleep ever since the first horse he broke-in got the better of him, bucking its head at an angle with a powerful thrashing that ripped the lead from Silas' grip. Silas breathed through his nose, clean and competent; not sloppily with mouth agape as Jacob's first born had before he passed from fever at age 11 a few years back.

Damn near kill't your mother seein' you fly off that horse, Jacob thought. Did you do what they say you done? They will come. Depends not what happened but what they convinced themselves of. What did I not do? Can't cover all ground. Lend lessons. By example. Show it. By story. Parable. By rote. Inculcate. My responsibility. Make sure he takes his mother into old age — make sure that happens, Jacob. Raise him t'take care of others. Raise him t'consider all else

while keepin' himself fit t'do as such. All you can teach a boy. Has t'take to it. Nature'f things. Brought you into this world. World come at you. Keep a tough mind. Tougher body. Soft heart. Simpler things benefit. Has t'take t'it. Breathe, Silas. Breathe, Jacob. T'morrow will flesh out the particulars. Take t'the responsibility. Keep things in order. Simplest manner of the term. Composure amid excess. That's justice. Breathe. Somethin' spooked that horse t'throw him off like that. Wasn't just wild. Wasn't just makin' sport'a him. Somethin' just beyond the tree line. Breathe. A man. Hiding place from the wind. Covert from the tempest. Rivers of water in a dry place. Shadow of a great rock in a weary land. Isaiah.

With his satchel and jacket, Jacob fabricated a buffer between his head and the stone. Beneath his body rested dry dirt that led to a small body of water. Wind carried the faint inveigle of its lapping. Liquid whispers beckoning. Birds of searching echoed through the pines.

Brown Thrasher, Jacob thought. Cuitlachoche Rojizo. Triplets. Northern Mockingbird — Mimus Polyglottos. Couplets. Lonesome warbler of borrowed songs. Seven stars. Seven candlesticks. My works. My labor. My patience. I am fallen. Remember.

Jacob, eyes now closed, felt with his right hand for his firearm.

L.C. Smith. Field Grade. Double barrel. Checkered walnut. Double trigger. Rest now. Temptation of mornin's song soon t'warble a waking note. Rest. Breathe.

A shot broke through his slumber waking him to morning. Three figures stood blocking the light of the dawning sun. Smoke rising from the barrel of a shotgun held upright by the closest figure's left arm, propped up at the elbow, fulcrumed at the hip just above the femur. Jacob's eyes adjusting to the light feverishly looked to his son. Head down. Breathing syncopated. Wet with mucus. Jacob then looked to his right only to find vacant where once rested shotgun. The figure holding the discharged firearm settled on his left knee. His right elbow resting on his right knee which steadied a hirsute musculature stature that near obscured the other two. A statuesque build, all too comfortable as though every sinew were ready to tense up, instantaneously generating a powerfully crafted pounce. A smile crept from under a wide-rimmed nose that sharpened downward where the fleshy wall between the nostrils met the vertical groove of his upper lip. A thick, finely contoured mustache and sharp tuft of hair outlined long, tobacco-stained teeth that grew darker toward the gumline. Brown and yellow irises exploding from tiny pupils peered into Jacob's. A slinky, agile neck erected from a torso of fur that jetted out from an opened burgundy collar that rode down to sleeves rolled-up just above the forearms. His eyes began to project an inner-conjuring of movements.

“Mornin’,” the sleek face uttered calmly.

Jacob exhaled through his nose. His eyes searching his person to see if the markings of a mind still in its vivid imaginings of sleep was at work. He returned to the sleek brown eternity that summoned the greeting.

“Business in these parts you take upon yourself?” Jacob said, clearing his throat.

“Huntin’,” he said.

“You always go huntin’ with other men’s armaments?” Jacob asked.

“Today.” Said the figure.

“You sneak up on party as they sleep, discharge one of their weapons t’wake ’em’n proceed t’temper the puzzle with laconic patchwork?” Jacob said nervously.

“Seems.” Said the figure.

A faint laughter broke out from behind the fore-figure where stood the two other figures with their horses leashed to the boughs of a tree Jacob hadn’t noticed the night prior.

“Those your boys?” Jacob asked.

“Likely.” Said the figure.

“What humor they derive out the moment particular?” Jacob asked.

“Satisfaction.” Said the figure.

“In what?” Jacob asked.

“We studied you through them trees last night,” said the figure. “Watched til’ you slumbered. Then watched some more.”

“Why pray tell would you do that?” Jacob asked.

“Know your prey,” said the figure.

“You the ones who shot my boy?” Jacob asked, perturbed.

Laughter between the boys grew as they shared eyes with one another, their visages now perceptible to Jacob’s eyes.

“We’re here t’satisfy impulse a’nature, is all,” said the figure.

“Impulse?” Jacob said with somewhat subdued uneasiness. “What you reckon is impulsive about lingerin’n the woods? Movin’n stealth? That’s a calculation. Not impulsivity.”

“You know *not* the nature of impulsivity,” said the figure, his smile widening. “Nor the hour of a ready impulse.”

“What sparked such impulsive search of satisfaction?” Jacob asked. “This have t’do with my boy’n yours? If so, what pray tell is the remedial action?”

“Well, at first it was just to kill your horses and eat them in front of you while your son took a whoopin’ from my younger one here,” said the figure. “But that don’t seem t’fill him — we a surfeit type of seeker. Breed of over-indulgence. I queried my boy. He reckoned kill’n eat the horses in front of your boy’n kill him, too. Don’t worry, though. He ain’t got the taste for human flesh. Nor do I. My older boy, there, considers it from time t’time but the impulse hasn’t

overcome him yet. I sent the middle of my three after your equine distractions. Told him t'bring 'em here if he caught up t'em by nightfall, but if he hadn't he could go head'n take t'his own feast. He likes the tough muscle and has a keen hankerin' for horse liver."

Silas, his head bowed, eyes fixed on his lap, became audibly upset at the figure's words. The two figures tending to the horses mocking him with wet, nasally inhalations; rubbing their fingers under their nostrils; slurping pools of saliva along the inner side of their cheeks.

"You aim t'kill my boy?" Jacob said, angrily. "For what crime?"

"Crime of inconvenience," said the figure.

"Pardon?" Jacob said, confusedly.

"Yeah," said the figure, in a sigh of nonchalance. "One of the girls your boy seem t take kindly to didn't take so kindly t'him. He took her anyway."

"That's not true!" Silas exclaimed.

"It speaks," said the figure, glancing at Silas.

"I not a finger transgressed!" Shouted Silas.

"Quiet now," said the figure. "Nature's gonna take its course. Any inconvenience to it is a prolongation of the inevitable."

"He says whatever occurred was in mutuality," said Jacob. "Consented and favored between both parties."

"I hear different," said the figure.

"My boy tells me what you say ain't true," Jacob said. "I have t'believe my son. There are ways of deducing the truth of matters in moments particular. Most effective path t justice."

"*Justice?*, said the figure, now with disdain. "There is no justice in this world-wounded country. There is only the passin' feelin' someone has gotten what they deserve in a moment pertinent. When I was a boy, the local preacher used t'sermonize on Socrates. Said that Greek man was the wisest of us all and even he couldn't figure out what *Justice* was. Not in any lasting sense, nohow. Justice don't last, but it sure falls first in impulse. Greece fell. Rome too. Far East saw its fair share of steady empires toppled by impulse. Empires of code crashed'n corroded by gathering gusts of impulsivity. Every second. In increments. With each encounter, a breeze or a gust. Buddy — it sure feels good t'get or see someone get the feelin' of pertinent satisfaction. Call it what you will — Justice. Gratification. Impulse. That's the natural world. Go'on head 'n post up your laws'n codes. People subvert 'em 'cause code don't reign over a moment of impulse. Ten thousand years or so of order ain't but a spit t'an impulse that birthed billions. *Justice* — nothin' but a pleasin' air. That is 'til it rustles itself up t'devastating consequence, or just raises a foul odor. Which it will. Sure as wind makes its way 'round — some natural sense of justice is projected on you."

“According t’your strain of logic what you accuse my boy of ain’t but a gatherin’ of gusts,” Jacob said. “You hold t’no accountability on your end of the gale but if the winds shift against you that somehow warrants retribution. Or justice. Or impulsive satisfaction. What-have-you. Term it how you will, you are making a case against your own. It...”

“That’s where your kind falls victim,” the figure interrupted. “Mind softened by logical deductions. Confidence of a preacher mid-sermon. A false equanimity. You’re under the impression there’s some logical egress. You forget it was the rational side of the human mind that allow’d it t’conceive of the devil. Your logic usurps your courage not t’submit or yield. Talk your way out. That’s an all too human story. It’s...you know what? I’m bored with this back and forth. Boy” the figure gestured to the younger of the two other figures, “you aim t’take him out for his inconveniencin’ you and yours? Or you gon’ let the air take t’the wound you wielded yesterday on this man’s son?”

“It is logic utilized which fortifies me t’yield not,” Jacob darted back. “Your lips part ways with consistency. An aloof eye above tongue-flapping contradictions...”

“*I am contradiction!*” the figure shot through his lips with a cool grimace. His head tilted forward. Narrowing eyes, gleefully knowing. “I am dancin’ inconsistency. Ancient’n mercurial as the winged-wind. Hell is cold because the devil is ever flappin’ his wings to escape. An icy irony, preacher said. The extremities of hot and cold are ’bout the same. Pick up a burnin’ coal — cold ain’t it? Cold air burns the lungs. T’stay true to mankind one must loathe it — betray that kinship t’instill its pertinence — ’n *I am betrayal*. Justice is an availed irony. Sought and exacted. I am unrivaled in my antiquity — yet I seem pretty new t’you, don’t I? Never seen the likes a’me b’fore. Lends t’may ever-being. ’N being ever underestimated. You spoke of sequence — *I am a sequence of ever sophisticating distortions*. A mobile penumbra perpetuated. Some get lost in it. I move on. No reach exceeds my grasp, as made clear in the moment pertinent brought about by our spawn. Our posterity is doomed t’the dance of blame punctuated by war. This is a moment that bleeds into minds of all men. It ain’t seen by none other than us — but it’ll be felt everywhere. It’s happenin’ everywhere. The conflict that is the oxygen t’time’s livid flame. There is always a reckonin’ happenin’ just yonder. Listen for it. My boy’s here ’cause he blames your boy for taking to inconveniencin’ someone close t’him and thus inconveniencin’ *him*. He’s here like the wind — if your boy was always on the way so was mine. So is this now.”

“Now you set it for a moment!” Jacob exclaimed. “Come what may’n may have already, he’s *my* son. He’s *my* responsibility. You want t’take aim, then take it at the source not the symptom. These supposed wayward particulars you raise were begotten out of sequence. If a father can, he should take t’making longer the life of the young — even if it renders shorter his own.”

“Welp,” said the figure. “What’s that t’you, my boy? You derive any satisfaction in...”

The smaller of the two came to the forefront, wrested the shotgun from his father’s hands pressed the barrels against Jacob’s lips and pulled the trigger. A crack broke out in the air. The kickback of the twelve gauge caused the end of the barrel to slip upward. Jacob’s head was thrown back onto the stone upon which his body rested. Red liquid open meridian. White and red chips scattered about his body, flaking the stone and dirt and the boy’s forearms; garnet drizzled his cheeks. Jacob’s body seized and convulsed. Burgundy ooze bubbled from his gaping neck. His

lower jaw and tongue still attached twitched. His legs kicking, hands clenching. A spasmodic spectacle of red. The kinetic language of a nervous system desperately clinging to life.

“Hell you didn’t kill him,” the figure suspired, annoyed.

He pulled from his hip holster a revolver. Pressed it against Jacob’s torso, just above the chest pocket and fired a single round through his heart.

Stillness.

Looking to Silas, the figure sighed in relief of release.

Silas, palsy-bodied, wide-eyed and mouth agape, looked with bloodshot eyes, teary and terrified, to the erect figure.

“What you do makes anew the moment pertinent,” the figure said, matter-of-factly. “Symbiosis, I hear it called. Take care a’that leg, buddy. The air that fills those lungs with life aims also t’rot ’em. A wound is nature’s reclamation at impulse. The nature of nature isn’t t’heal — but t’retreive, and consume.”

As they made their way on foot, the horses’ leads in hand, they merged with dark of the pine. Silas, whose eyes hadn’t left an upward trajectory towards the spot where the figure once stood, lowered his gaze to the water. The wind had passed. He thought he saw movement in the brush on the opposite side of the water. What appeared to be a cougar.

Then, nothing.

The still indifference of air.