

NORTH

Frank Owen is the pseudonym for two authors – Diane Awerbuck and Alex Latimer. Diane Awerbuck's debut novel *GARDENING AT NIGHT* won the 2004 Commonwealth Writers Prize and Diane was shortlisted for the Caine Prize in 2014. She has long been regarded as one of South Africa's most talented writers. Alex Latimer is an award-winning writer and illustrator, whose books have been translated into several languages.

Also by Frank Owen

SOUTH

NORTH

Frank Owen



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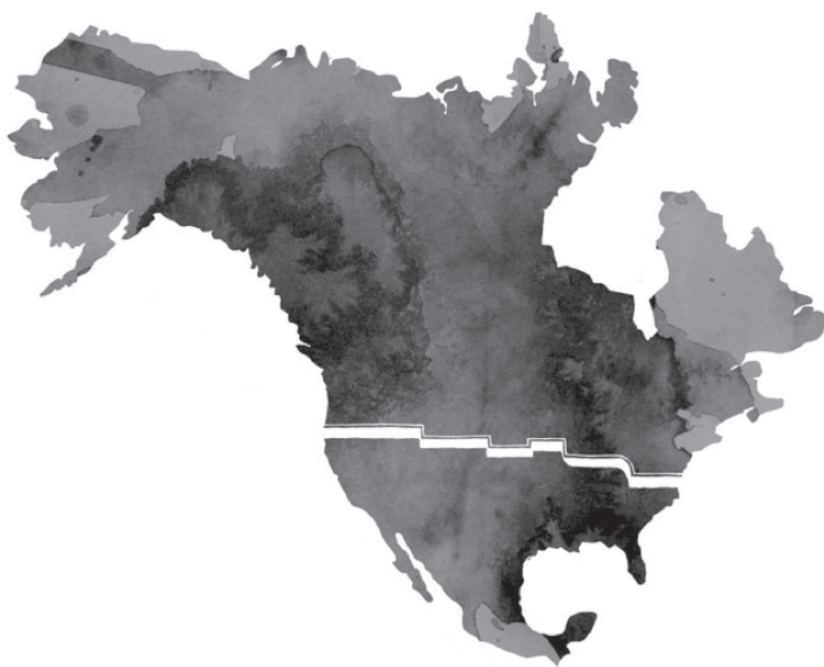
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A single virus permeating a membrane is all it takes for a full-blown infection to take place. A single virus, tiny as it is, can bring death to systems infinitely larger than it. And yet, death in this instance is not the end. It is a pruning so that systems much larger than that individual might be healthier as a result.

DIDIER RENARD



1

You're not even born yet, but if I don't set this down, I'm afraid that I'll forget exactly how it was. Ma had her recipe book, but you're going to have your own history written plain and clear.

Baby, I want you to understand some things about the people you came from, how they fought and struggled so that you could be alive and here and with me. The world is going to be different by the time you're grown up in it, and for that I can only be grateful.

It was bad. And the War was only the beginning.

After it ended, and Renard built his wall between the North and South, the wind still blew the sicknesses from above. And it wasn't like bird flu or Ebola or the plague or something where you knew how it worked, even if it was terrible. The viruses took everyone differently. The worst were the brain viruses, because there wasn't a whole lot you could tell from the outside: no peeling flesh or blackened toes. Mama – that's your grandma Ruth, and don't you forget her – said it was like they were burrowing into the soft meat and chewing through the wiring that made us kind to one another. The men always had it the worst, because they had more juices to turn sour. Testosterone makes you brave and adventurous, but when the worms get in it also makes you want to rip other creatures limb from limb.

We learnt that the hard way.

So when the wind blew, Ma and I would camp in the sitting room and tell each other stories to pass the time. Ma was real keen on passing on her baby-birthing know-how, but sometimes she also told me bits of her life. The details would change between tellings, and she'd get to a point I'd recognize and then change tack completely so I could never tell what was true and what was wishing.

Baby, there are times when you can feel change coming. I mean, actually feel it, like history is being made and you're right in the middle of it. My moment like that came when I first saw your daddy. I felt something when I looked him in the eyes that wasn't romance and moonlight, but some other thing, unpretty as a weed, and just as tough. Love can be like that.

That was my first moment. The next one came not long after that, when he'd gone away and left us. He said he'd be back. The rest of us from the ghost colony – Ma and me, but also Sam and Pete and a whole bunch of the other Southern survivors – were resting against a rock face on the bank of the North Platte, trying to keep the brewing storm at our backs, deciding what to do next now that we'd arrived. I was tired, baby, in a way that I hope you will never be. It's not only about the body, and one day you'll understand that too. A person on a horse gets just as tired from looking back over their shoulder, and I was, for sure, worn down with sorrow and with hoping that Dyce would show. I remember the white lightning in the distance, and how it made the horses restless. They were just as hungry and frightened as we all were, and they were tiptoeing on their hooves that had gone soft as rubber from the time spent wading in the water.

That lightning gave me another moment. It showed us the Northern border wall, and the strange orange of electric street

lights beyond it, and after that the glow of high-rise apartment blocks, now and again hidden by sheets of water. Baby, none of it seemed real. It was like looking across onto another planet, or back through time to how things once were.

We were really going to cross into the North! It was unbelievable. It made everything I knew seem wrong. The Wall had always been part of us. When Renard had set up the concrete and the border guards after the War, he had in mind to stop anyone crossing one way or the other. He knew that it would strangle the South. And it worked. We got poorer. And angrier.

But it was the winds that killed most people. We were trapped in the heart of the South, hiding and watching as people took ill and wasted away. No two corpses that I ever saw died from the same disease. You could tell by the way the eyes bulged or sank, were milky or bloodshot, the red trickling like jewelry down to their ears.

For a long time those winds, loaded with their viruses, whittled us down. Millions of people died, I guess. Our immune systems were weak – but there was something else too. You have to *want* to survive. That's the most important thing. You have to believe there is a future you want to be in. Not everyone does.

Some folk headed for the coast, hoping to find boats to take them across the Pacific or the Atlantic: anywhere, like the slave ships all those years ago, but going the other way. Dyce's brother Garrett – your uncle Garrett, he would have been, and your aunt Bethie too – had that grand plan. But the thing was, the sea air was worse. It was wet, and so it actually nurtured the viruses, kept them living for longer, suspended in the air like poisonous pollen. It wasn't fair.

But if Dyce had made it to the coast with Garrett, he would

have died before we had even met, and then you wouldn't have happened. It was fate that your parents met in that world carved down to the bone. Do you believe that, baby? Fate that two people, so different, could fall in love in a time when love was a useless thing?

But love always leads somewhere else.

Now your daddy, Dyce, was only alive because of the hard work *his* daddy did. Your grandpa was no fool: he saw what was coming, clear as day, and when their mama died, he got to spending a whole lot of time teaching his boys survival. Just like the scouts. No one survived by chance, do you understand what I'm saying? We were there and we were there for a reason, and that reason is you. There were the books and there was the teaching – same as what I'm doing here, writing all of this down for you. We can't ever forget. We *are* our stories, and when you're all grown, maybe you'll have a better handle on what I mean by that, but in the meantime, let's go back a bit. There's something real important about this part.

When I first met him, your daddy had caught a terrible virus, which made him blind and weak, like an old-time vampire in the daylight. I carried him – *carried* him – and I cared for him when I got him to a cabin we found. Belonged to an old guy named Felix. (You know what, baby? The Weatherman'll probably still be around when you're grown. He's like a piece of beef jerky. Tell him I say hi.)

It turned out that I had got myself into more trouble than I knew. Dyce and his brother Garrett were trying to outrun some folk who fancied themselves lawmakers. The Callahans. Maybe they'd been lawmen once upon a time; now the laws were whatever they figured might serve them best. I saved Dyce's skinny ass that day.

We all decided to travel together, your grandmama too, and we ended up in the ghost colony, a lazaretto where the sick were gathered to die. Except that here at Horse Head they seemed pretty healthy. Mama got right in there and started organizing everyone, and we found out – guilt makes you lucky – that a lot of viruses had opposite numbers. It sounds weird, but it makes sense: hair of the dog. The alchemists used to think it, and those guys believed in mathematics. You could, in theory, find someone who was living with the cure for your disease in their own body. Sometimes, when the viruses combined in the right way, you could heal yourself. A bit like falling in love.

Because another thing happened at Horse Head too. When you spend a lot of time with a person, you get to know them. They can rub you up the wrong way, like me and your grandma, or it can turn the other way. As your daddy got healthy, he grew on me, baby. It was those eyes. He had the longest, darkest eyelashes, and one day he kissed me until I cried.

We set out to find a life for ourselves – and to lead the Callahans away from the good folk of that colony who'd taken us in. We found ourselves in the bowels of a town called the Mouth. We had heard it was the Promised Land: no one was sick there.

Instead, we found ourselves hunted deep under the earth and into the old mines where they were growing medicine mushrooms. But, baby, these mushrooms were different. They grew from the corpses of men and women who were being sacrificed. Can you believe that? We saw things there and after that turn a person bitter. But you've got to fight against the bitterness. What else is there?

Dyce saved us that time: he could see in the dark. And we took some of those mushrooms with us when we got out, baby.

We packed them up like a picnic and took them back to Ma, to Horse Head, and la-la, happy ending, we survived the winds that should have ended the South. We lived because he and I met and were kind to one another.

But there's never an ending, not as long as there's someone there to tell it, and we had no idea what was in store for us beyond the Wall. Whether we'd be shot dead as we climbed out of that river, North-side, we didn't know.

I got the rest of the story that afternoon, curled up and resting against the rock, when Ma finally told me her side. She was a hard woman, your grandma Ruth, but I guess she thought she owed me. Besides, we never knew just how it was going to pan out: every time we said goodbye might have been for keeps. So that day she spoke for a long time about her life before Renard, back in South Africa, about how she'd escaped apartheid with her man, Wilson, who ended up sacrificing himself so that she could get on the last boat they let dock at Ellis Island. And she always kept her book of remedies with her. You'll know it, baby: it's the one with the pages that are swollen and warped, because they're packed with writing, along with all her seeds and dried cuttings and petals.

But that recipe book was *all* your grandma had. She was alone and foreign in a country where black people weren't high on the list. Renard sure wasn't the first president to have some funny ideas about the equality of human beings; being from South Africa prepared her.

And she was a smart cookie, your grandma Ruth. She found work in a hospital and then trained as a nurse, and when she wasn't emptying bedpans and holding dying hands, she was adding to her recipe book. Adding American herbs and recipes to her African ones, trying – and often failing – to match local

ingredients to the ones back home so that her past and her present sat side by side. And being in the hospital helped: they weren't as careful with the dispensary keys back then.

One day she met the man himself – Didier Renard. You know what she told me, baby? She said he wasn't the monster then that he is now. He seemed so ordinary – sympathetic, even, and of course a brilliant doctor. But he was also a cheater, and they had an affair. She was flattered, she said, though at least she looked ashamed when she told me. His wife was blown up in a bomb, you know that? His people say now that's what turned him bad. But it takes more than that, baby. We all have to decide what to forgive and what to forget.

After she told me all that, we hugged for the first time in forever. I remember the hot iron smell of the horses, the rain stinging our faces and the thunder vibrating in my chest. Soon our little gang of Southern survivors would get back up on those poor, tired horses, and then we would wade into the Platte and try to find an entrance point in the barbed wire and the concrete. The same water that was rushing toward us now came from up North. It was right there. Surely we could pass over.

But that wasn't the whole story, or even the end of my part. That was only the bit that I knew then.

2

There were dead bodies caught in the barbed wire under that churning brown water, Ruth knew, but the only person she cared about was Vida. Through the pelting rain she was sure she could see her daughter from here – trapped near the other side of the river.

It was Vida. It had to be.

Ruth breathed. Everything hurt. The burning in her bony chest wouldn't go away, but she sucked in as much air as she could. That burn meant her bruised lungs were still working, and it meant that she had a chance to save her daughter – and she would, by God, busted rib or no busted rib.

She screwed up her eyes. The body on the far side of the North Platte rolled and bobbed, helpless under the churning floodwaters, a dark shape riding the current.

'Vida!' Ruth screamed, but the storm stole her voice.

Someone was trying to hold her back, to keep her from wading into the water again, but she pulled loose from their grip, driven by the red maternal urge. She staggered forward, one step, then another, and now the river was all around her. In she went: deeper, and deeper still, like a baptism, and then the chill stink of the water was rising to her neck.

Ruth felt her feet freed from the riverbed as she was upended, and the branches of the smashed cottonwoods – old growth,

too hard to bend – caught and tore at her arms as they rushed on with the floodwater. She tried a few strokes, but she was too slow and the current was too strong. Of course it was! Her exhausted limbs against the might of the Hundred-Year Storm. When it took her along with the jumbled mess of horses and branches and bodies, she let it. She felt the air rushing from her lungs.

She fought against blacking out, replacing the panic with insistent pictures like an old-time movie reel: Vida, tiny and bloodied and screaming, newborn in the back of a rusted minivan, the one place that Ruth had felt safe after her escape from Renard and the North.

Then Vida at ten, fierce and chubby-cheeked, checking her traps or bagging the last of the locust swarms, chasing them with a pillowcase that loomed white against her skin.

And then a couple of months ago, from her sweaty sickbed cocoon, Ruth watching her grown daughter set off on her daily foraging round, her hair braided like a warrior's. The everlasting satchel was slung over her shoulder, and her legs were long and strong with muscle. That time she had come back with Dyce and his brother Garrett, and things had never been the same after that.

But she always came back, didn't she? She couldn't be dead.

Ruth wiped her eyes, coughing out a mouthful of cold water that tried to choke her. Surely that shape – right there, within reach – was Vida. She *felt* it. Let it be her, Ruth told the universe. Please let that be my child. Let her live. She was no stranger to begging. Before she had met the people from the ghost colony and found the Resistance, Ruth was long used to praying and bargaining away everything she could think of – her

house, her beloved recipe book, her memories, her life – to the bored and faceless gods.

The reply now was the same: only the water that roiled and pounded in her ears, and the knowledge that God helped those who were quick enough to help themselves.

3

Kurt Callahan, thin with teenage hunger, lifted himself out of the foaming water of the North Platte and heaved himself, panting, onto the lip of a concrete pylon that had once supported the railway bridge. There was just enough room around the pillar for him to keep out of the floodwater that surged and sucked at his ankles. He could feel his toes, wrinkled like prunes, inside his shoes – soft and ready to blister. He took off his water-heavy shoes and socks, and hung them above his head on spikes of wire to dry. Then he sat, slicked his straw-blond hair out of his face and wriggled his ghost-pale toes.

Under his spread fingers the rusted rebar held the failing structure together like the bones of a dead bird. Above, at the very tops of the pylons, he could see where the vanished arches had once upon a time been connected. Exhausted, he rested his back against the pillar and stared up at the sky with its rising thunderheads thick with rain, trying to trace the path of the winds that tormented the clouds. Kurt no longer had to fear the poison those winds carried. He raised his fist.

‘The last surviving Callahan on the fucking continent, and the first to make it to the North,’ he told the sky.

That made him special, didn’t it?

But then he’d always known he was special. Growing up, he was taller than most kids his age. Faster and quieter too. Those

were the two most important things when it came to trapping. But there was something else about himself that he'd known but hadn't let on about, especially not to his mother. Perspective, he called it.

The end of last summer had come and the snares were empty, day after day. Everyone had eaten the herbs and bark and ants till they were sick of the sight. Kurt saw the men side-eyeing his dog – a mixed-breed mutt with the snout of a borzoi and a bulldog's underbite. Mason was the undisputed canine king of Glenvale, mongrel that he was: the king and only dog. Like horses, dogs had gotten rare – extinct, in most parts. This one had seen too many years of illness and not nearly enough food. One of his eyes had milked over and the other was on its way; his ears were fraying at the edges, bitten down by the mites. His ribs showed through skin pulled so tight that Kurt saw the lumpy surfaces of his organs and thought: Worms. That was where his food was going.

On the first warm and windless day, when the men had judged it safe to forage far from camp, Kurt had stripped the cord from a kettle and set the old wire around Mason's neck. Whistling, he led the dog out of camp, and no one stopped to question him. Kurt, even at fifteen, had been no man's servant. Sometimes Mason went along for company – Kurt could spend hours crouched, watching his snares – but this time he had not taken his bag of sticks and string, nor the knotted fishing line.

Downstream of the river that ran past the Glenvale camp was a small waterfall. It pounded into the pool below, settling into the color of rust. It had something to do with the alders overhead: they leant down and dropped their leaves, staining the water like tea.

Poor Mason, said Kurt, when he got back to camp with the

dog's limp body in his arms. When that cougar had come charging out of the underbrush, it was foaming pink at the mouth – blood mixed with saliva – the way all the animals did when they caught what Renard had spread in the air. Mason took on the cougar, Kurt said, making his blue Callahan eyes round with grief. The big cat, rare to the point of imagining, crazy with disease, had smashed the dog into a tree stump. Kurt had been too late to save him, but Mason had certainly saved his life, hadn't he?

Kurt had held out the body, flopped in his arms but starting to stiffen, the animal's tongue swollen and dark, lips drawn back in a rictus. The women looked at him, their hands over their mouths. He shoved the body at Bethie, but he should have known better. She had only looked away, nauseated.

It was a shame to let all that good meat go to waste.

No one had liked eating Mason, exactly, but no one ever liked what they were surviving on lately. Kurt couldn't decide what the low point was – the boiled leather tongues cut out of every pair of shoes, or the dry-bone soup, or the millipedes, bitter as gall, that had to be wrapped in river weed so they slid past the tongue without making contact with the buds. Maybe, if the women had not been so hungry, so eager to skin the dog, they'd have noticed the burn line around Mason's neck, thin as cord, the healthy eye spidered with burst blood vessels.

Perspective. Kurt hadn't killed a dog. He had saved a community.

He'd watched Bethie eat her portion of Mason – three vertebrae, with the meat and sinews that joined them. Watching her pick her careful way, teeth and tongue, through his provision gave him a strange feeling, a friendly fire in his stomach that stripped him of his appetite and hardened his dick. He'd

hidden it with his hunting bag slung in front of him. When it subsided, he had gathered his courage and gone to offer her his own plateful so that the feeling wouldn't stop. At first she resisted, saying he should eat, but in the end she took it, didn't she? She was starving by degrees. They all were. The tendons in her neck flexed as she swallowed, and the ivory pendant she wore moved with the motion. It would be warm from her skin. Kurt longed to hold it between his fingers.

It was goddam perspective that got him North-side too. Seeing the Callahan clan for what they were – weak-minded men too shit-scared of old man Tye to think for themselves. No way he was hightailing it back to Glenvale with that chicken-shit posse. It was Tye who could teach him something, Tye the only one who wasn't afraid to stand up for himself.

So he'd made sure Tye had caught sight of him in the treeline, hadn't he? And then, just to make sure, he'd thrashed home-ward as loud as he could without it seeming deliberate. The old man had fallen for it too – hook, line, sinker and swivel. There he was, giving himself a pat on the back for still being a step ahead of the cubs, unaware that Kurt had crept back, silent as a shadow. The old man had gone about his business, which was where things got real interesting. Northern scouts: goddam! Kurt had wanted to step out of the bushes and cut those motherfuckers down, but he knew that as soon as he was front and center, he'd lose any advantage he had. He told himself that over and over as he lay beneath the sumac, and he'd been rewarded. Tye had met with the Northern army, bold as you please.

And that wasn't the end, neither. Kurt had also seen what happened next: that whole army poisoned by Garrett's brother and that mouthy girl of his; seen Tye's trophy – the syringe with its antidote – and seen where it had dropped too, still with a

quarter-inch left in the plunger. By the time it was over, the slopes were empty – just the needle sticking into the dirt like a stray arrow. He'd cleaned that needle off on his sleeve, then washed it in the river and let it rest for a few seconds on the dying embers of a campfire. It burnt when he jammed it into his arm and he wasn't sure he'd hit a vein, but he'd gotten his dose of antivirals – enough, anyway, to have kept him alive this long.

Yup. It was all down to perspective, for sure. There was more to life than surviving so you could obey orders and hold Tye Callahan's dick while he peed.

Now Kurt rubbed his hand through his wet hair. Bethie was dead and that was that. So was the old man, though he felt no particular pang. Kurt got gingerly to his feet and shook the last of the Platte River water out of his ears and the thoughts of those two doomed Callahans from his head. He needed a plan.

It didn't look good from over here. There was no way he was getting back into the water as it was, with its sticks and logs and guttering, the flotsam a hail of knives as the floodwaters rushed them onward, and so he would have to wait on his concrete island. He needed to rest. He could shelter on the leeward side when the rain got too hard.

The luck of the Callahans was on his side. The next day, near midday, a gold pickup came by, an old couple sitting high inside, propped like puppets. Kurt noted the peeling sticker of the wrench and faucet across the driver's door: DRAIN SURGEON, it said. Natural disasters sure put money in some men's pockets.

Kurt raised his arms and hollered until the driver caught sight of him. The old man got out and stood beside the pickup, thumbs hooked in the straps of his dungarees like Uncle Remus,

judging the situation – a fair-headed white boy stranded on some pilings in the middle of the river.

He made up his mind and went back to the pickup, conferring with his wife on the passenger side. She had been knitting something in dark green wool, as far as Kurt could make out, but now she set her handiwork down and got out of the car. The old man began wrangling a battered toolbox from the flatbed, then they both came sliding down the riverbank like Jack and Jill, the mud leaving grayish-brown smears on their clothes. The man waved to Kurt, but the water was too loud to hear what he was saying. He handed one end of the coiled rope to the woman and walked upriver, away from her, looking around, searching for something. He bent to reach into the reeds and emerged with a plastic milk bottle. He half filled it with water and tied the rope through the handle. Then he threw the bottle as far as he could into the water. The woman held onto her end, and the river swept the bottle to Kurt.

The boy grabbed the weighted rope. The man, slipping in his mud-caked boots, went back to where the woman stood. They signaled for Kurt to tie the rope around his waist. When they were set and the river was clear of debris as far as they could see, the man raised a hand and counted to three by raising his fingers – thumb, index, middle.

Kurt slipped into the water and felt the sharp yanking of the rope as the couple reeled him in, hand over hand. When he could stand, the man waded in and helped him out of the water.

‘Are you all right?’ yelled the woman, but Kurt didn’t answer. He raised a rock from the riverbed as big as his fist and crunched it into the old man’s face. He fell forward into the water, terminally surprised. The woman started screaming, her mouth a purple O, the way they always did. She turned to run up the

slope but slipped. Kurt caught her by the ankle and dragged her backward. She was kicking and shrieking; all he had to do was wait for the current and just let her go. He watched both the good Samaritans tumbling over and over in the water until they vanished beneath the foam.

‘Drain surgeon, huh? How about first Southerner to kill a Northerner since the War?’ said Kurt. He untied the rescue rope from his waist.

Felix woke wet and numb and stuck between two inbred hackberry saplings, like a shred of meat between a man's molars. But at least he was out of the water and under the struggling low-lying sun, praise the Little White Baby Jesus. He couldn't feel his fingers. He didn't remember hauling himself out of the river, or stumbling up this slope. He did remember falling endlessly forward into the rivulets of rain that wiggled over each other, the watery knots making mermaids' hair of the drowned grasses. He turned his wrists over, the flesh puffed and bruised from the impact, as if he'd been cuffed in the night, or doing push-ups in the mud.

The portion of the Platte River he could see was curved and unpredictable, still foaming brown from the storm. The near bank was littered with logs, their ends straw-pale and raw in the early light. They lay stiff as the sorry corpses of the stray dogs that had been too terrified by the thunder to be rounded up. Their bodies bobbed by every now and again, bloated bladders with sticks for legs.

'Coulda been me,' Felix told the last one. 'Could, woulda, shoulda. Wasn't.' He coughed out a chuckle and went back to assessing the damage.

Further along the river he could make out the wind-torn shapes of demolished structures – old or new damage, he couldn't

tell. If he turned his stiff neck and looked south, out near the horizon, he could see the concrete slabs of the fortress Wall – and beyond that the ragged clouds, still coming in fast with the last of the rain. As he looked back North-side, there were jagged splinters of cladding sweeping past in the river, tumbling over and over in the swell like the teeth of a circular saw.

Felix patted himself down slowly, amazed that he was not worse off from his time in the water. He lay back between the saplings and pieced the sequence together – the rolling over, how he had at least remembered to turn his face sideways so he could breathe through the rain without choking, like a rebirth on a couch or at a church. But still – he would have been fucked. The water had washed him back down the oily slope toward the river again, undoing all his precious progress, until he'd been snagged hip and neck by the twin saplings.

He couldn't say when the rain had let up. It was even now speckling the patches of his clothes dry enough to show it; he had been too dazed to notice. The river still thundered in his skull like a hangover, an ache like pneumonia. The shivering hadn't quit, either, and the dimpled scar on his thigh from the long-ago bullet ached worse than the day he got it. He rubbed the place through his pants leg, thinking about the shiny purple tissue, the X where his knife had dug for the lead like a terrible treasure. He shook his head. It was still weird to think about. Shot in the leg by a moron: ole Tye Wrong-Toilet McKenzie! But that fucker had got his just deserts, as they say in the classics. Yes indeedy. Crushed under a horse, and then his own harrier stripping the flesh from his dead face. It gave Felix the heebie-jeebies. He peered into the sky as if he might see the speckled bird circling overhead, waiting for its chance, like a buzzard.

That made him get up, slow and sore, from between the

saplings. He had to struggle against the outline of his own body in the mud where the streams had washed around his arms and legs. Now, upright, he regarded the depression in the muck, his ghost limbs caught by the spindly trunks. His arms were spidery; his head had been severed from his body.

‘Fuck that,’ he told the river and the mud. ‘That’s the Platte for you: too thick to drink, too thin to plow.’ He scuffed at the alien imprint with his damp boot. ‘So fuck you. I’m alive.’

He turned and limped up the slope away from the river – any place but here – squelching as he went. As he retreated, the water’s threats faded, and he could feel the squeeze of his stubborn old lungs and the clench of his shrunken stomach, measuring their workings against the weak morning sun.

Dripping, he passed over the jagged edge of a road, the verge washed loose in black clumps of asphalt, and suddenly there it was, squatting in the wet, the first sign that the previous night – the last forty years – hadn’t been a dream. A diner, by God, a low-roofed mirage, the gutter hanging drunk.

It stopped him in his tracks, but the idea of what might be inside got him going again, double time, his eyes pinned to the building in case it disappeared on him. Now he had to pick his way around the storm debris like a crash-site investigator – clothes stripped from washing lines, terracotta pots herds dashed down from balconies, Styrofoam balls like white ticks clinging to whatever brushed against them, and always the leaves and twigs and branches, green to their innocent cores. Every time he thought he was used to it, there was a sudden rust-free razor, a doll’s head, a defunct water cooler from an absent office.

Along with every able body in the South, Felix had got used to decay up close, but this looked like fresh damage. Back home after the first virus, when people gave up on maintaining things,

there'd been a gradual kind of decline. Folks held on a long time, and buildings were slow to age, but in every house someone was dying, like a plague newflash or a medieval woodcut; no one gave too many fucks about peeling fascia boards or a few loose shingles or a patch of blistering damp. No, sir. Fucks are in short supply when you're puking your guts out, thought Felix. No time for neighborly niceties.

This, though, was simple storm damage, he was pretty sure. The gutter had been fine maybe yesterday and it'd be propped up and working again tomorrow. The screen door that had blown off its hinge and sagged against the flagstones – that sort of shit would be straightened and reinforced tout suite, good as new. The rest would be swept up and dumped somewhere out of sight. Some things could be fixed so that you didn't remember they'd been broken in the first place. But you had to start on the fixing before too long or you'd never get a handle on a decent repair. And of course, every single thing he'd left behind south of the Wall was beyond that point. If it was working, then that was all you could rightly hope for. Count your blessings and say your thanks before bed.

There was a rectangle of bare wood above the broken door, where the name of the diner had been, Felix reckoned. It didn't make much difference. SAM'S or JEAN'S or BOB'S. They were all the same. There'd be a sweaty cook inside there, Felix thought as he marched, a man with a faceful of stubble and a disappointed past, even now slicing and sizzling a haunch of bacon against his arrival, shoveling flapjacks onto a couple of clean white plates.

As he got closer, Felix saw that there was an animal hunched in the window: a grubby tabby cat. As he paused to peer in at the plate glass, the cat lifted a leg and began to lick its balls. Felix

cracked a grin. He could feel the pale sun warm on the back of his neck, and there was a sign just above the cat that made the saliva spring under his tongue and his stomach flip over with delight: HOT COFFEE HOT COFFEE HOT COFFEE.

‘Fuck everybody in the North, cat,’ he said. ‘Fuck ’em sideways to Sunday. But if there’s coffee behind that counter, I reckon I can put aside my grievance for fifteen minutes. A half-hour, tops.’

The screen door of the diner lolled against his grip but lifted easily enough. Felix opened it wide and rested it flush against the wall. He had to lean hard against the glass of the door to get it open. The water had swollen the frame against the jamb, but it gave, and the mechanical chime jangled. He had a sudden vision of everyone in this town a robot, like some science-fiction story, but the big white woman with her back to him was real enough. More than real: the vast pink of her flesh in the tented house dress made her blood seem too near to the surface. Felix blinked. Fat people were scarce in the South.

The woman still hadn’t seen him. She clicked her tongue in annoyance as she squinted into the lard-speckled lid of the grill behind the gas plates. He stood dumbly in the doorway and looked at the rolls her bra made on her back, like sausages. Then he cleared his throat.

‘Don’t listen to what the cat says,’ she said. ‘We’re closed.’ She was still examining her reflection in the grill lid, fiddling with her hair in its bun. The flesh on her arms jiggled. ‘I just come in to sweep the place out. Mind the buckets.’

Felix looked down at the dirty puddle squares of the linoleum and then up at the ceiling. It looked like the joint between two gypsum boards had burst open. The water was still dripping sulkily into a row of empty buckets beside the cash register.

Their sides were scratched. Some had CLEANER written on them in black marker. Maybe there was a war on buckets too.

‘No coffee, then?’ he asked.

‘Nope.’ She shook a couple of loose hairs from her fingers and Felix watched them float gently to the linoleum. She finally turned around and got a good look at him leaning there, wet through and still shivering, his paper-thin skin bluish in the daylight, a resurrection man. She gaped at him.

‘Jesus Henry Christ! You don’t need coffee! You need a defibrillator!’

Felix tried on a friendly smile. ‘Yup. It’s coffee or I die right in your diner.’

She hefted herself around the counter and picked her way across the linoleum. She was wearing oversized rain boots, and there was something funny about that, but Felix knew better than to laugh.

‘First things first, cowboy. We’re going to get you to sit right down, okay?’ She jutted her chin at a booth near the window. He nodded.

She worked a shoulder under his armpit, and they began to make their way over there. Like war wounded, thought Felix. The woman smelt of bleach and a heavy floral scent that didn’t hide the sweat.

He sighed as she slid him into the cracked vinyl of the booth. ‘Thank you.’

She stood in front of him, hands on her hips, deciding what to make of him. ‘You just stay here, and I’ll see if I can rustle something up for you in the back. And listen. You see a light, you stay the heck away from it. Right?’

‘Lady,’ said Felix, and this time his smile was real. ‘I’m too tired to die.’

The woman snorted and sloshed back behind the counter. When she came back a while later with a tray, it was stocked with a pot of coffee, two cups, paper towels and about a dozen donuts. They probably weren't fresh, but then neither was he, Felix told himself.

'But what are you going to have?' he said.

She twisted her lips and he added, fast, 'Just kidding. This looks great. More than great. Heaven on earth.'

She was pouring him a cup. 'Made fresh with today's water, and I don't care how you usually take it. You need the sugar,' she said, and added three heaped spoonfuls. Then she poured coffee for herself.

'Now you just back up and tell me what's going on here,' she said.

Felix thought: Keep it simple, asshole. Whatever you tell her now has to stand the telling to everyone else who comes after.

She was staring hard at him. 'I'm Norma. Where you from, anyway?'

'I don't rightly know,' said Felix. He took his first cautious sip, and it was true, that stuff was HOT COFFEE, and goddam if it wasn't the best thing he'd ever tasted.

'What's that mean?'

He drank again, not caring that his mouth cried out in protest, and leant forward to get a donut, wondering if she could be trusted with the truth.

'What if I told you I was from south of the border? That the storm washed me all the way up the North Platte?'

He selected a donut and took a bite, dusty with sugar and slick with oil, and it made him want to cry. He tried to swallow, coughed, and chased it with more coffee.

Norma's eyes had narrowed. 'Then I'd go into the kitchen

and come back with the biggest knife I could find.' She looked at the tray, then picked up a teaspoon. 'Wouldn't even have to go to the kitchen. I could cut you down with this.' She waved it at him. 'But then, why dirty a spoon? I reckon a rolled-up paper towel would do it. I could just about beat your brains out with a feather.'

Felix held up the hand without the donut in it. 'I get it. I get it.'

'Fuck the South,' Norma said softly, and the color rose from her throat, a blotchy red that might have been pretty on a thinner woman. 'Pardon my French, but fuck them for all of this.' She waved a hand out of the window.

He chewed and swallowed. 'Good thing I'm from New York, then.'

'Big city boy, huh?'

'Back in the day. Spent a little time in Des Moines too.'

'So what you doing here, then?'

'Heard about these donuts.'

For the first time, Norma laughed, her gullet pink and vast. Felix looked away and kept chewing. He concentrated on the empty car park with its littering of sticks and leaves and debris. Far off, way on the other side of the road, he could see an animal moving. He swallowed, the dough dry and catching in his throat. Something out there was walking slowly, loping and tall. He squinted his eyes in disbelief and leant in against the glass.

'What the fuck's that?' He let go of his coffee to point.

'What?'

'There.'

'What do you think it is?'

'Norma, I think it's a giraffe.'

'Well, then, mister. Welcome to Saratoga.'