

Three Prayers for Rain

by Joe Kapitan

Of the Grieved

Still no rain. Eight months, says Hollister. More like nine, says James Earl. We stand in Hollister's high meadow, what's left of it. A hot wind crests the ridge, whips at the beard Hollister hasn't trimmed since the disappearance, ripples the loose hides of his skeletal cattle like limp sails slapping against spars of protruding ribs. The beasts' thin lips are pulled back; exposed teeth snapping at air where grass is remembered to be.

Always we are less today than yesterday. Our own skin betrays us, quits us in layers to join the advancing dust. We are indentured to our ruin.

Two weathered wooden crosses cling to the ridge. James Earl carries a third on his shoulder. I remember aloud my departed wife, withered long before the rains ended; Hollister, his little girl, gone missing one morning. James Earl hammers a hole in the earth. Blessed are those who never knew the dry, we recite. Blessed are the cancered, the vanished, the stillborn.

+

Of the Hidden

We thirst, we three. We descend from the ridge and make west for the riverbed. We follow the tracks across the cracked mudflats, out past the sunken pilings now exposed and bleached by sun, to the deepest channel turned fetid pond. Rotting corpses of catfish and their shrouds of insects mark the rim. Emaciated children bearing clouded jugs pass us, their joints crackling like kindling as they walk. We bend and sink our buckets into the muck. James Earl's bucket hits something hard beneath the murky surface. He reaches under. Concrete blocks. Tethered to them, a canvas sack.

Blessed are the found.

+

Of the Wronged

We crowd the church, we sinners. Reverend Willis shouts Repent!
This is God's righteous punishment, he roars, you brought this upon
yourselves, your traffickings with demons, repent! He points with
manicured hand to a steel washtub in front of him. He watches us,
and someone approaches, then we all approach, one by one,
kneeling and spitting out our sequined lies, vomiting our oily thefts,
coughing up our knotted tangles of adulteries. We wipe our mouths
clean on our sleeves. The tub is near full, coal-black, and rancid.

Some, near the windows, look to the sky and report no clouds.

Old Man Beecham clears his throat and speaks. Room enough in
that tub for one more, he says.

Blessed are the observant.

James Earl lowers the muddy canvas sack he carries to the floor.
A small tibia protrudes, and its saddle shoe. He bends and opens the
mouth of the sack wider to reveal two innocent hands, bound still,
palms together.

We wait for Reverend Willis, his tongue gone dry.

Hollister trembles, fingers the revolver he cradles beneath his
coat.

Some, near the windows, hear thunder in the distance.

