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MEG ARTLEY

Reckoning

TRAN ASKS AUNT LIL WHAT RECKONING MEANS. SHE turns from the stove, suspicious.

"Is that a word for school?" she asks. His face betrays him.

"I'll give you a reckoning if you go to see those fools again," she says.

It was worth her wrath to connect the word with the long speech the preacher gave about the water God rained down all over the planet, saving only Noah and his family. After the preacher told the story, he put his beefy hand in a writhing pillowcase. The rattler, stunned into silence by audacity, allowed itself to be wrapped around the preacher's arm. The sheriff's deputy came and shooed everyone off the courthouse lawn before anyone got bitten.

Aunt Lil's love for him is the love of an animal. She is quick to bark, always grabbing at his elbow, or slicking his hair out of his eyes; takes his shoes off his feet so she can scrub a grass stain out of the canvas. She gets up early to make him oatmeal for breakfast, fixes him a snack after school, insists he eat every bit of his turnip greens at supper and finish his homework before he plays in the afternoon. He disobeyed that one time and she made him cut her a switch from the front yard dogwood, though she only zipped it once against his calf. Her love for him is all about keeping him safe and alive. Her love for him comes from the same place as her anger, shriveling her up into a corn husk doll, day by day.

"You stay away from them boogers. Foolish things," she says. She's dressed in her canning housecoat. He can see the side of her bra as she lifts her arms to pull the jars out of the kettle. Her arms remind him of his mother's – skinny and strong. Her hair is matted to her skull with sweat, her glasses are perched at the very end of her nose, slick with fog from the steam.

"Snakes ain't no religion," she says like she's talking to herself. She yells at him to go on, get out of here.

A lullaby his mother sang in a low whispery language protects him. His mother died in 1973. He was six. After she died, he had to ride a plane all by himself from Los Angeles to Kentucky where his Daddy had lived before he was lost in the war. A fat lady with really tall hair, now he knows is a social worker, met him at the airport to bring him to Harlan, where his Daddy's sister was.

The social worker's car had a sign on the door like the police cars in Los Angeles. From the back seat, he was transfixed by the glowing green everywhere. The heavy, wet grass gave way to hills that were made of sharp boulders instead of the scrub and dirt he knew from home. The rock turned to a darkness lapping the edge of the road as they began a steep climb, the car twisting as though dangled and swung from a monster's mouth. It wasn't until they arrived at the trestle bridge in Harlan that he released his grip from the door handle and made himself taller to look over the front seat at the little town, nestled in a crevice formed by a river. The houses were wood instead of concrete, varied and two-storied, rather than uniform and flat.

Aunt Lil and Aunt Dodo watched him from the front porch of an old red wood house as the social worker got his bag out of her trunk. He couldn't look at them, their stares were so intense and bright. The moment he stepped on the porch, Aunt Lil took his hand, walked him to the kitchen for a slice of coconut cake and a cold bottle of RC Cola.

Aunt Dodo joined them in the kitchen after she talked a long time to the social worker. She wore men's clothes. Her hair was cut like a man's, slicked back, like the barber does before you leave the chair, but her voice was breathy and soft, like his mother's in the middle of the night. She asked him if he knew that his father was her brother. He ate two pieces of cake as they flipped through an album of pictures of Beau,

the father he never knew. He got to try on the football helmet his Daddy wore in the championship game. That evening they walked to town after supper, Aunt Dodo said he was the best surprise she'd ever received. On the Courthouse lawn, she lifted him so he could see the plaque his Daddy got after he went missing in his mother's country.

Tran walks back to the door of the kitchen, begins to play with the new yo-yo with glow in the dark paint Aunt Lil bought him after Dodo died a few months ago. He practices walk the dog. It was the first thing he'd learned in Harlan, watching the boys play in the school yard.

"Tea, come and get it," Aunt Lil says to him, waves him back in the kitchen. He must be forgiven for watching the snake men at the courthouse.

Now that the stove is off for the first time all morning, the kitchen is almost bearable. Aunt Lil hands Tran a glass of iced tea with a long spoon and the sugar bowl. He puts three big scoops in the tall glass. She sits down with a huff, pours the contents of a pink packet in her tea, stirs vigorously, drinks in big gulps. He stirs and stirs but the sugar won't dissolve. She puts her empty glass down to light a cigarette. The condensation on the glass or his focus on his task must make her sad.

"Aw, honey, come here child," she says. He stops his stirring and walks to her side, places his skinny frame next to hers. She wraps her arm around him, pulls him close, bone to bone.

"Aunt Lil misses Dodo too," she says.

The first summer Tran lived in Harlan, he went to Boy Scout Camp. There, he learned rivers are born in the mountains. On an expedition to Brush Mountain, his counselor showed them how the tiny tears of the rocks turned to rivulets, became creeks that flowed into Martin's Fork and finally made it to the Cumberland, which switched and slithered through the hollers to the Ohio, on to the Mississippi. On a trail near the river, the counselor pointed out the marks of the flood of 1957

on the stones, said it washed out an old bridge where the iron trestle bridge now stood at Ken's Drive In. More than fifty people died in that flood, he told them.

That first night at camp, after they set up their tents, they played Daniel Boone and the battle at Turtle Creek. He was the Indian. The next day, the counselor taught them how to look for crawdads under the rocks in streams, scooped up tadpoles and showed them the stages of their turning into frogs, showed them what to do when they saw a bear. He came home dirty and tired and accepted into the clan of boys who called him "Chink" months before.

Most days he walked down Central to River Street to meet them, followed a packed earth trail to the bank of the river directly opposite Ken's Drive-In. At the trestle bridge they'd play Star Trek. His aunts had expressly forbidden this because of the coal union fights at Ken's, but he looked for guns, listened for yelling, knew from the boys the fights about the strike happened at night.

Aunt Dodo smiled at Tran the whole time she was telling him she was sick, and that he'd be coming home to an empty house the times Aunt Lil would take her for medicine in Lexington. Smiles creeped him out since they were worn by people who had bad things to tell him. He had known something was wrong. Aunt Dodo looked like she never slept even though she woke up mid-morning. Aunt Lil, who rarely smiled anyway, now looked angry all the time. He'd heard whispers about breasts, which shocked him, since he didn't think of Aunt Dodo as a man or a woman, but as a one-of-a-kind creature found in the mountains.

The medicine killed her. That's what he heard Aunt Lil say at the funeral. He thought it was worse to lose someone close this way. To watch someone fade away. Aunt Dodo's hair came out. She hunched over like a little bird, refusing food so she got skinnier and skinnier. His mother was fully alive stepping off the curb on La Cienega, just never got to step on the other

side. But his mother would always be flesh and blood to him, not some spirit like Aunt Dodo.

After Aunt Dodo died, the social worker came to visit again. It didn't go well. Aunt Lil was polite at first, all of a sudden she was yelling. The lady came again, that time without calling first. The last time the social worker visited she said Aunt Lil had no rights, that she wasn't Tran's kin. It created a flame in Aunt Lil that made her spit fire. The social worker stayed quiet, wrote a lot on a clipboard. After she left, it took days for Aunt Lil to settle down.

Aunt Lil said that if the social worker shows up again, he is to get the car keys and climb into the trunk of the car. She placed a Mason jar with water and some peanut butter Nabs in there for him. She promised she would get him out the moment the lady left. Aunt Lil even had a car key made for him and let him pick out a rainbow-colored Troll doll key ring at the TG&Y to keep it on.

The next time the social worker came to the house she brought a Sheriff's deputy. Tran ran to the back of the house. He heard Aunt Lil yell at the front door, "hy's you coming to my house when all hells breaking loose at Ken's? Feller shot last month, them boys knocking heads? I told you he's run-away last week. You all's responsible. Coming here, scaring him, talking about taking him away!"

He grabbed his key ring, made sure not to slam the back door, ran in the pouring rain through the garden, to the carport. The dark was woolly and hot with the trunk lid shut. He petted the troll's hair, listening to the roar of the rain until he heard her key in the trunk lock. Even though it was mid-day, the rain clouds made it as dark as bedtime. Even so, he was blinded for a moment by the dim light in the carport and the heat radiating off Aunt Lil's face. She said they would leave Harlan the next day, go to her Uncle's old house on Clover Fork for a while.

During dinner, the only sounds were thunder and the

constant rain. Late that night, they took the stuff she packed for their trip to the car, filling the trunk and the back seat, except for the small space in the middle where he would sit under a blanket. His hair was still wet from the downpour when he placed it on his pillow to sleep.

The next morning, Aunt Lil cautioned Tran to stay under the blanket until he heard their wheels leave the trestle bridge. It took a lot longer than usual to leave town. He heard Aunt Lil say, "Oh, my word," as their wheels hit the bridge. As soon as they came off the bridge, he looked through the back window to see a Sheriff's car with the lights on at Ken's Drive-In, people gathered to look at the river, a muddy soup of logs and foam churning at the bridge pilings. The back parking lot at Ken's had as much water as the kiddie pool at the Kiwanis Club. The flat place where he played with his friends had disappeared. He felt sick to his stomach imagining bad things that could have happened if the water had come when he was playing. He could have been caught on a rock as the water started rising, or he could have been swept away in the current, like the boy on *Lassie*. Aunt Lil wouldn't know where he was, wouldn't be able to hear him calling for her. He was glad when she yelled at him to get down, knowing that she would keep him safe.

They drive for a long while on the state road, before making a turn onto a smaller road at the base of Little Black Mountain. The rain punches the car roof. Aunt Lil keeps her attention on the river of mud that was the old road in front of her. She slows the car to a crawl, navigates it into a sharp turn and near roller coaster dip towards the house.

He slides in his seat as the car pitches forward. Pine tree branches thump the windshield, needles and cones dance into kaleidoscopic view.

His question about where they are is met with silence. He asks again, prompted by the sight of a wooden house that looks like it had melted into the earth a long time ago. A violent

stream beat the dense deer thorn at the farthest reaches of the back yard.

Aunt Lil tells him to grab a box as she opens the door, stepping into the sheet of rain, which immediately creates a deep puddle in the front seat. Tran senses she feels hesitation, like he used to at the high dive at the pool, sees her knock that feeling back.

"Come on," she fusses. The boxes she packed are like wet leather by the time they reach the house, causing her to drop a jar of tomatoes on the steps, slaps of rain wash the grainy fruit to a faint pink in seconds.

He slips and bangs his knee on the moldy steps, barely missing the glass from the broken jar. The porch has been eaten away in places, so they walk carefully around big holes. He tries not to think of the animals that make their homes there. Aunt Lil jiggles the handle of the door, bangs on it, finally throws her small body against it. It gives way to heavy darkness. The whole house smells like tadpoles and dead leaves.

By the time they unpack all the provisions, the bubbly green linoleum covering the cabin floor from the tiny front room to the kitchen and into the one bedroom is slick. From the kitchen, they hear dribbles and splashes in the front room and the bedroom.

Her flashlight is smaller and dimmer than his camp counselor's. He moves to the tiny bit of light coming from the windows in the kitchen. Through them, he can see the old wooden outhouse enveloped by undergrowth and lichen; it looks like an ancient tree stump. He feels a punch of panic thinking about having to open its door, to sit in that space to do his business. But at his age he is too old to sit on the bucket she placed on the porch for them to use for the bathroom.

Aunt Lil avoids looking at him; ignores the constant engine noise of the water inside and outside of the house. She tells him where the sandwiches are, talks about playing Monopoly by candlelight. As they unpack what she had so carefully planned -- jars and jars of vegetables, a reminder of the bounty

of an old life, their clothes, almost as wet as the ones they have on, a carton of cigarettes, his new yo-yo, it spells folly. Though he is only eight, he knows the stove requires dry wood. She'll never get the car back up the muddy hill for another week, even if it stops raining.

When the water comes into the kitchen, Aunt Lil looks for a crawl space in the eaves. She tells him at her Daddy's house there was a crawl space door above his bed, and she whoops with fake delight when she finds one in this house as well.

Tran sits on the table where she yelled at him to be when the water pooled under the door, trying not to betray his fear. He doesn't want to get down but she says they need to move the table to the bed so she can reach the crawl space. He doesn't want his feet to touch the water, even though his shoes are already soaked. When she yells at him to get off, he does as he is told since her anger frightens him more than the snakes that could come from the holes in the floorboards. It is hard to walk in the water since it is to his knees.

It takes all his strength to hold the table steady on the dry-rotted mattress as she stands on it, beats on the crawl space door. She punches the calcified seal of the plywood door with the heels of her hands, yowls and grunts as she pulls herself up into the darkness by her scrawny arms, her legs swinging and kicking. He is alone in the dark room. He moves his legs to keep whatever is coming with the water away from him.

Over the din of the rain, he hears her yell, "Here, here!" Her face and arms fluid in the frame of the crawl space, the table is moving so much with his weight he must lie on it on his belly first, raise to his hands and knees as it shakes, all the while she is yelling and yelling. Once on his feet, he surfs the movement of the table, keeping his arms out to his sides to stay up.

She finally finds his hand; he hangs like dead weight causing her to yell out in pain. She growls as she draws him up with her hands and her legs. He is electric with panic. His fingernails tear at her thigh as he struggles to find something solid

to hold on to. Finally, his hand finds the lip of the opening; she grabs his pants and pulls.

Once he is up, and they are sitting legs through the hole, their backs to whatever the eaves hide, she says, "It's OK. It's gonna be alright. Come on. Scoot close." She wraps both arms around him.

They listen to the house moan and struggle, staying rock still until the quilt on the bed starts to float and wave. He knows she has put all her faith in this, has untied the bag and reached in for the writhing body of God's protection. There is nothing else to do but to see if they have been forsaken.