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Old Soul Dog

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BRETT PURYEAR

OLD SOUL DOG

NEW DOG SOARED slung-bellied over the split-rail fence and beat hell out of the wind, and dove off the dock with a dead rabbit in his or her—no, quick! Study the undercarriage, *his*—mouth, this occurring while we gassed up that old trashed jet ski borrowed from Mr. Hurley. Iridescent gasoline on the water spread into a birthmark shape and forked around the hull. New Dog swam into the color-changing splatter like some special heavenly dog and ejected the dead rabbit out its mouth. Good dog.

Fetch that bunny out the water, Carp told me.

My friend Carp got the nickname from his mom 'cause he was the gruesomest baby she'd ever seen, come out of her own inner chamber, but never did get better looking; a red birthmark splashed Carp's back sized like all of Eurasia, but his mom couldn't admit the mark had been fired upon his flesh via blood of her own—Nothing ugly came from my blood! she'd cry. That's his shit-ass daddy!—because she'd been a pageant girl in McMinn County and once even dated the great handsome quarterback Rory Brock in high school. She hurled out this historical detail at every social event at some point so as to let everybody and their sisters and babies know she'd once been a debutante. What happened?

Okay. I fetched up this dead rabbit from the water. We finished gassing the jet ski and idled over to the dock and Carp heaved up and got ahold of a bright blue stringer and his pocketknife, the one with his dad's initials etched into the steel in the Olde English style. Carp hook-mouthed the rabbit and plunged the knifepoint into its jowl, carving fish gills. Black blood pooled thick-paint-like over its scratchy brown coat. He stuck the bright blue stringer through the rabbit's mouth and yanked it through a bloodied gill and clinched it to the U-bolt off the back of the jet ski.

We went for a ride out on the slough towing the rabbit like a little bitty bunny tuber.

Old Dogs beheld us at bank's edge yipping and snapping their jaws forever young, yet their fresh accomplice New Dog the Rabbit Hunter was not a convert to their happy bemused little reckonings.

You see I know a lot of words, but I'm still stupid.

My folks thought me either the brains of the family or a complete 'numb nuts,' or at least sometimes that's what my Dad called me. I'd become the celebrity of the school spelling bee; they didn't know where it came from. But I didn't put any value on that and thought maybe they ought to concern themselves with matters of higher significance and just I'd turn out however I'd turn out. Right now I just wanted to haul out a large-scale-rodent deathcart in miniature across the green summer sparkle of Tennessee water.

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NEW DOG WAS not a convert because he was sad for how we'd treated the rabbit post-mortem. By god he'd killed it, yet he *respected* it. You could tell by the way he just lay there looking sullen and droop-lipped. He was not as lowbrow as these old dancing dogs who had never learned, in all their expansive, compacted dog years, how to self-reflect and doglike catch the scent of and hunt down and tear apart cruelty and meanness, an Old Soul Dog much further advanced than they.

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MISS TRAYLOR AND her little daughters, who lived on the corner of the slough, stood by the bank, looking very upset. Miss Traylor was a ghoul, like most people, sunup to sundown just dead drunk off invented petty concerns.

We'd got back from our procession on the beat-looking jet ski and Miss Traylor was yelling at Dad with her arms flying around.

Instead of untying the stringer Carp just drew his knife out and cut it loose. The rabbit floated away with this bright blue string coming out its mouth. Drifting away like he'd wanted to tell us something, to tell us something in sheer bright blue, but it never turned into the bright blue bubble where you'd read his words like you did in the Sunday funnies.

Truth be told we had made the little Traylor girls cry. Dad called Carp's Mom over and told her to take care of Carp and then Dad took me up to the porch where he kept a thick sheath of palm leaves in the corner for

decoration, like a beach house thing. He yanked my trunks down and lifted the palm leaves and rocketed my rear with a red wrath that never stopped and never stopped—

Numb nuts numb nuts numb nuts.

Afterwards he and my mother sat at the kitchen table pouring spiked iced tea from a pitcher.

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I WAS SO angry with New Dog. Everything was his fault. I had to find him and let him know he'd ruined my day, bringing this dead large-scale-rodent into my life. That's right: I didn't see it as a pretty little bunny but like some glorified donkey-eared rat come out of a sewer somewhere to hurl a wrench in my existence.

I came upon the new dog like hot hell with my little watersock: You little stinking ass face-fuck-dick! I'll kill you! I got him in the face with it. He was nothing but a mutt, ugly as Carp, though lean-boned and crisp under the summer sun's heaven. Again, I watersocked him in the face. But New Dog leapt and double-paw shoved me and I collapsed all over the hot grass. He bit my titty. I'd changed my opinion of him. I preferred Old Dogs with their slack-jawed lack of world-care and principles.

We had, Carp and me, given the old dogs names. There was Scab Ass, and Ribbit—'cause he had a frog face—and Mr. Crow, a tar-black dog who had earned our respect 'cause he'd lick your hands and face with a breath

that didn't make you feel dipped in vomit. Then there was the mega-old dog Gurgle, who made awful sounds with his throat while he snuffled at the grass.

Old Dogs joined that night for the cookout with Carp and his mom and me and Dad and Mom and Mr. Hurley and his grandson Christopher—a big old boy with sawdust-colored hair and eyes set far apart like Ribbit's—who, earlier that day, had hooked into this giant turtle with his rig, a chicken liver tied to a yellow milk jug. Mom fried crappie and big chunks of turtle meat. She made hush puppies and what she called twice-fried French fries. She made cocktail sauce so heavy with horseradish it was bright orange as her daylilies.

Can Carp stay over? I kept saying.

Dad said, No you can't cause you been acting like a little shit-ass numb nuts, but Mom told him we didn't know any better and then they got into some kind of a serious talking match but Mom won because he's a fool with words and she's where I got mine.

Carp's mom had had too many and talked about all the experiences of her youth and how *advanced* she had become at such an early stage and how you couldn't take that from anybody.

I dipped a great wad of turtle meat into the pale orange cocktail sauce with the smell so strong it opened up your whole face like some big wind got in there making you clean again.

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MY REAR-END STILL stung a little from the stack of palm leaves, but Carp and me had the bedroom window flown open. Outside was icy black. New Dog skittered darkly somewhere in the tall trees.

I listened for the crackling feet of creatures. I peered out into the fanged night.

Carp, my friend, fell into some serious snoring, like his dreams were boiling inside his head.

I could hear the heat of my father laying with my mother in the other room.

I heard a snuffling. I shoved my face out the window. New Dog, below—he spun and he danced like he'd come to give me some kind of reckoning to keep, to fling inside me like a sword.

He skittered away on the black ground. To harry the trees, to fly the split-rail fence. I cried out to him: Come here, boy. Come, friend.

New Dog, he just kept on dancing and dancing and dancing with the blue spirits of rabbits. I watched. It doesn't really matter if it's real or not, that's the secret.

I opened my mouth so as to cry forth every ounce of air in my body toward New Dog and the Dancing Ghost Rabbit.

Suddenly the breath inside me came and cut out my tongue.