

Young Writers Award 2020 – Thomas Alan

Runner up

Dogs

Hens Fence runs straight through the middle of our farm—straight through the goddamn beet fields and through the only part of the little river that would be good enough for bombing. It heads south, running towards the hills and over to where the men have been ripping up the old, wet paperbarks and laying them out, roots and all, like the twisted, rotting intestines of some great and hideous beast. The fence cuts across at least a dozen properties before it loops back on itself, returns to our farm, and then runs up into the hills again. Strange thing is, the fence doesn't belong to anyone. It's not used to keep sheep and it sure as hell doesn't divide any of the old property lines. It's as if every steel picket exists only because of the one left before it—as if the fence's only purpose is to chase itself over and over, and to repeat the twists and runs through the backroads and bushland of Tennby.

I fucking hate Hens Fence.

Jacob and I tried to rip it out when we were younger. We tried kicking through the chicken mesh and yanking the steel pickets out of the ground. Well, needless to say, there's a reason why that fence is still there today, and there's a reason why Jacob's got those wicked scars all over his shins. Damn thing's as solid as those old telephone posts—as if the steel has spouted roots and taken hold of the bedrock underneath.

I keep my tipper steady, driving parallel to the fence—driving between it and Jacob's harvester as the harvester picks and deposits the sugar beets into the back of my truck without spilling them across the field behind us. We must have done this at least a hundred times together—and probably another dozen since dad left.

'Little Chariot, can you hear me?'

Jacob—coming through the radio. Another day, another godawful nickname.

I pickup the receiver. 'I don't feel like talking.'

'Then listen, Beth. I know things have sucked lately. I know that looking after Owen has been a real pain in the ass and that it's hard watching mum get old. I know

the business with Russ was horrific and I know that he was a good mate of yours. But I'm glad you're sticking it out. It would be easy to disappear right now, and I just wanted to say thanks, because things would be proper shit for me without you.'

I take a breath and look across the field. 'Thanks Jacob.'

He's right. Things *have* sucked.

'Nipple King, Little Chariot. Today you will call me Nipple King.'

I sigh. 'Be fucked, Jacob.'

Some people reckon us Shorts have a mad temper. They say that our family's like a pack of caged animals—like a bunch of gorillas that scream at the glass and beat on it whenever anyone dares peak inside. They say that we're angry and cursed. Angry on account of what's happened to mum, and cursed because everyone knows that Owen's been body-snatched by the devil.

But they're wrong.

Every morning you wake up to Owen first—screaming and shouting, breaking plates and pulling out kitchen drawers. He'll be having a reaction because he's taken some assortment of drugs—or, more likely, because he's forgotten to take his prescribed ones. His eyes will be red and rum-fucked, his skin will droop off his face like old sodden rags, and something will be broken—whether it's a front tooth, his Torana, or half the goddamn town is for you to find out.

Mum will be out sitting on the front steps, muttering to the letterbox. She'll be seething with it—cursing and spitting, damning the world for the way it's left her. You'll hear her mutter the names of all her old class mates—of Gina Rort and Ciera Bows—and, at times, you'll hear your own name, or Owen's or Jacob's, and you'll pretend that you don't. She'll sit there, entrenched—as if the brick letterbox entombs her and surrounds her with all the ghosts of her life.

Finally, you'll deal with the Nipple King, Jacob Short. Eldest child. Loneliest child. The type of boy who was forced too quickly into becoming a man. Who stumbled through high school, was punched out of tenth grade, and then took over the family farm. He is the worst of us. Too goddamn proud. He often reminds me of Old Pastor Gary who built the Lighthouse Church up on Peter's Road. The sort of man who scorns offers for assistance while setting up Easter decorations, but is then found crushed to death by God's cross. I remember one particular sermon given by Pastor Gary about the

Garden of Eden, and I remember sitting and thinking that if Eve was made from the bone of Adam's rib, then that would simply mean that man's been fucking himself for all eternity, and in the case of Jacob that bloody-well shows.

And, after it all, you sneak out at night. You climb through the kitchen window and disappear across the fields into the deep dark. You follow Hens Fence—you follow it like a dog follows a smell because you know somewhere along that fence you'll find Russ. And that's where you can relax. For a moment—but not a moment long enough. You will be happy in moments, but only in the way that Prometheus was happy between the eagle's bites.

But we're not mad.

I reckon being a Short is like being a small piece of clay—moulded when we were younger, tensed and teased by Tennyby, but then put to flames as mum got her tumour and dad left, and Owen fell into drugs. We are set in our ways because we are baked in hellfire. Jacob reckons there's a sort of pride to be taken in being a Short. But I've never felt that way. Each of us knows who we are. But there is no difference between a man knowing himself and a dog knowing that it's injured. For certain, I've never seen a dog take itself to the vet.

It would be easy to disappear right now. Jacob's words repeat themselves in my head.

If only he knew how hard it was, and how much I wish that I could escape this town.

Russ and I tried leaving once. We had a week's worth of groceries in the backseat, enough fuel to get us to Newcastle, and Russ's dog, Ruby—who was the perfect cross section of a crumpet and a cannonball—down between my feet. We barely made it to the bottom of The Spine before I made Russ turn back around.

I couldn't leave—and I hated my family and I hated this town for making me that way. If I was the type of person who could walk away—if I could leave this misery behind—then perhaps that misery wouldn't have bled out and hurt the people around me. If I had of left that day with Russ, then perhaps none of this would have ever happened to him.

I keep the tipper steady with the harvester as it runs parallel to Hens Fence.

Goddamn, I fucking hate that fence.

#

It all started with Huey Fletch. He was a goddamn lunatic at school—that horrific blend of angry and fragile, like the ugly duckling if it had its nose broke then went out and bought itself a six-pack of Furphys and a switchblade. He was an utter terror. I once saw him break three different kids' arms in a single lunch break. Hell, I once saw him tackle a cyclist right in the middle of Castle Mall. Huey wasn't like the other Tennby Kings. He wasn't like David Broker with that old, beat-up Fairmont and those swift buckshot knuckles, and he wasn't half-like Russ, who was quiet, and gentle, and once set fire to Mr. Fagan's car. Huey was properly dangerous. He was wildfire. He was bloodstains and asphalt.

But he wasn't evil.

You see, I used to believe that Tennby relied on Huey and the Kings in the same way it relied on Constable Malcom and Private Ulcer—in the same way it relied on Mr. Simster to cull off the wild dogs, and Pastor Gary to save the addicts. That the Kings were a strange sense of justice in an otherwise backwards and broken town. That, for better or worse, they were what kept Tennby straight. That they were like the wolves released back into Yellowstone Forest who kept the deer from flocking and ruining the ground, who kept the food chain intact.

I used to think they were the poison that fought off the cancer.

But I was wrong.

It all started with some goons who came down from Brisbane—Patrick and Ben Walton, the same-age cousins of Ezra Walton. Slick kids with city smiles. Kids who grinned down at you, who spoke slowly, and looked at you as if you were vacant—as if you were some wild horse ripe for them to saddle. I don't precisely remember what they did to him, but I know how it started. It started with Huey hooking into Ben's ribs and then laying into Patrick. He damn-near killed them. I remember the state of his knuckles afterwards—as if they'd opened up like red zinnia flowers, as if he'd beaten them so hard that his fists had passed through their skin and he'd been punching the gravel below. For whatever the Waltons did, they received their punishment and then some. Never have I ever seen two boys brought so close to death. Never have I been so scared of Russ's friends.

And then it escalated.

Patrick drove a cricket bat through the rear window of David's Fairmont. Then, along with Ben and their cousin Ezra, the three of them ambushed Huey on his walk home across Soaky Bridge. It was an absolute beating. Three-on-one. Broke his nose, his jaw, and a half-dozen ribs.

And so there was retaliation. This time it was decided it would be organised and fair. It would settle the score. Patrick and Ben against David and Huey. No weapons. No audience. Only Ezra and Russ, who were there to keep things tidy. 7pm—the Lighthouse parking lot.

It was bloody. It was brutal. It was like watching dogs scrap.

Russ stayed out of the fight. He wasn't a fighter. He only ever acted if something was absolutely unfair—if the anger boiled up inside him and forced its way out through his stomach and lungs. Like I said, he was gentle and kind. I don't think he'd actually been in a real fight before.

The Kings walked away. Huey with his still-busted ribs. David with a bleeding ear and scratched around his throat. Victorious. And that should have been the end of it.

But of course it wasn't.

I was with Russ when it finally happened, and God, it still hurts me to think about.

I think the boys must've been trying to break into Russ's house. They must've gone over the back gate to fuck with the shed or to climb through a window or something. I don't think they did it on purpose. I believe Russ's dog, Ruby, went after them when they climbed the fence. I reckon she went after them because they were in her yard—because they were intruders and she was, quite simply, a dog. I reckon she scared them. I hope to god that she died on accident. It takes every part of me to stop myself from thinking they jumped the fence with the ultimate goal of murdering her. If they did, then they're sick fucks and they deserve to rot in the absolute belly of hell.

When we found them in the backyard—when we saw Patrick and Ben kneeling over her, when Ezra opened that back gate and stumble out to the street, when they smiled those wicked slick smiles, when they put their hands up as if they'd never touched her, when they started shaking their heads and saying they found her that way—well... that's when all that anger bubbled up out of his stomach and lungs.

Russ broke.

He shattered Ezra's wrist and popped out the boy's knee.

He practically ripped off Patrick's ear and punched the teeth out of his mouth.

He cracked Ben's skull and dragged him out onto the front lawn towards the road.

The neighbours rushed to intervene and they wrestled Russ down to the ground. He kicked and bucked and scrambled out of their grasp. He threw men against their cars. He tackled Mr. Tuke through his garden fence. He spat blood and threw wayward hooks. He fought every man on that goddamn street and beyond—swearing, yelling, damning the Waltons all to hell. He fought his father. He fought David and Huey. He fought the constables until they sprayed pepper in his eyes and ties him down. Even with the pepper in his eyes—even with his broken knuckles and his collapsed cheek—he went after them.

They loaded him into the back of Ulcer's police car and took him away.

I used to think the Kings were the poison that fought off the Tennby cancer, but now I know that they are the symptom of it. Tennby forces its young to be violent. This town eats its young.

#

I drive the tipper in squares—bound by the small dirt roads, bound to my family and the farm, bound to Tennby and that fucking, godawful fence.

Owen's been aching for a fight all morning. I watch him as he stalks the farm, sneering at the chooks, then spitting and kicking the garden shed's door. He kicks and kicks until Jacob comes out screaming and throwing a fit. And I see it all over again. Dumb boys posturing as men, swinging their fists—snarling and snapping like dogs. I see Jacob, Huey, David, and Owen in the dust. I see Russ and the Waltons. I see Pastor Gary and Dad. And I see that fence—running round us in circles, knowing that *this* is what has always happened, knowing that this was *expected* to happen. That the boys of Tennby are made in the footprints of their fathers—that every post exists simply because of the post before it—and that they walk their lives along the length of Hens Fence, following the hideous chorale of those left before them.

I see us driving away from Tennby—Russ and I, like goddamn glorious thieves—and I know that I could have saved Russ, but I know that I am as tangled in Tennby as anyone else. And I realize, Tennby rots us all.

I kick the tipper in the guts and ignore the bend in the road.

I drive straight out across dad's sugar beets and plough through that goddamn fence.