

The Red Waking

By Charles McLean Redding

Have you ever gotten the feeling that this world isn't meant for you? That you've been trapped here from a somewhere else... like... life just makes no sense. A career, a family, a car... all things that I know deep inside I have only ever wanted because I was expected to want them.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" They ask. I have no idea. I say, "Police man!" because that's what all the other boys are saying. I think about it all that day, and all that week, and for the rest of the year. Doctor? Fireman? Soldier? Chef? Actor? Mailman? All? None? A little of each?

So I escape into books, and games, and movies, and TV shows about adventures, fantasy, magic, swords and shields. Like so many others perhaps feeling the same way. Somewhere in that escape is what I'm looking for.

I can't say it out loud though. I can't tell anyone what I'm feeling because it's something impossible. It can't exist in the real world so it remains ever in my head. My whole life corrupted by the life I'm supposed to be living. I'm only half a person because the rest of me is elsewhere, aching to get back home. The rest of me doesn't even look like me. So I live like this, with most of me missing. Until, one day, out of nowhere, long past the time I'd given up hope of finding whatever elusive purpose hangs on my soul... it happens.

I see the news report and it's like an electric shock. I'm frozen in place, my muscles locked. The remains were found stripped. Cut away. Bones, skin and hair missing. The muscles and organs left to rot. Three tenants and one nurse in an old folks home reduced to piles of meat. Pets missing. Close to home. Less than three miles away. Some kind of animal? A serial killer? My girlfriend has to leave the room, she's going to throw up.

A dread and a thrill come over me at once. I am struck with a bone chilling horror, the image in my mind of something standing over the dead, covered in blood, ripping and clawing to strip the flesh from the wet ivory bones. Clawed hands, lanky whipcord limbs, long pointed ears that droop like those of a rabbit, and a long snout filled with teeth. Patches of fur glistening black with blood on the head, the back, parts of the arms. Eyes that gleam with intellect and malice. A voice that whispers in the night... the voice of a friend, a sister, a father... anyone's voice it wanted to use. I know this beast I've never seen. I don't know it's name, but I know it.

With a breath, the image is gone. I gasp for air like I was drowning. I've been holding it. I try to get up to clear my buzzing head, but I feel chained down. Not to the chair, or the ground... but to an absolutely unshakeable certainty that that beast is here. That this abomination and I are bound to meet. Soon.

I don't call in to work the next day. I don't even bother. There is nothing there worth missing. Alice, my girlfriend, thinks the murders have me freaked out. She keeps trying to make me feel better. She can't understand that I am at last awake... for the first time since I was a child and couldn't distinguish between fantasy and reality, before the hard banality of life had set in the mold... I am finally almost myself.

I tell her I'm fine, I just need a sick day. I've already texted my boss, I say. I haven't. I know I am never going back there. Eventually she leaves for work. I promise her I will be fine.

My mind is electric. When you begin writing and can't stop until the story escapes your mind... when you are ravenous and sit down to eat and you know you won't stop to talk or look around until it's gone... When you are speeding along a long straight empty highway and you know

you should slow down but your foot just keeps pushing that gas pedal harder and harder, the speedometer in your heart yearning to burst... that is me. I am adrenalin and purpose.

I have to protect my neck, my sides, my groin. The soft and lethal places. There are pads for that. Hockey, football. Not a lot of protection. Not yet enough.

I have to be armed with something that cuts clean and sharp. Something to crush is useless, something to pierce even moreso. I have swords, collected from my forays into fantasy-land, but they are cheap. Decorative. I take them to the garage, and smash each of them against the pavement as hard as I can. Each of them flattens, warps, chips, or breaks. No good. I get out my tools. Sparks fly with the hours and I hear her coming back. I lock the garage as I go inside. She doesn't deserve to be worried. It's not her fault that her boyfriend was nothing but a made-up half-person who died on the couch and was replaced by... me.

I'm terse, probably rude. I push her away. She's only more worried now. Damnit. She is too good a person. She is made for this world, but cannot exist in mine. I don't go to bed. I tell her I'm fine, and I lock myself into the garage. Many more sparks need to fly before I'll be close to ready.

I lose track of time. I come out into night-time's darkness and I'm not sure if it is still the same night. There is cold food on the counter for me, and she isn't here. Her clothes are gone. Good. I turn on the TV. Children missing, snatched from their beds. More stripped bodies in the park. Tests have not confirmed... I eat quickly, and go back to work. At some point, I make my way to bed. I don't know how long I've been up. I don't remember any dreams.

When I wake up, I have no idea what day it is. I ache all over, my muscles utterly unprepared for the new demands I've placed upon them. My mind is foggy and less focused. The intensity I've been feeling is gone, replaced by confusion and a panic at all the bridges burned. Where's Alice? What about my job? Am I sick? Am I going schizophrenic? I go online and start to look up symptoms. Voices... Auditory and visual hallucinations... maybe?

But there is something that needs my attention. Like I left the stove on, but more urgent... like someone is about to die if I don't move RIGHT NOW. I stand up so suddenly, I throw the chair back and scare the dog.

It's daytime. Mid-afternoon maybe. I rush to the garage, fumble with the lock. Locked? The key... I run back into my room. The time before I slept is like a dream; Hazy and weird. It proves impossible to retrace my steps. I walk into the kitchen, back and forth through the house, the dog watching me with confusion and concern. The dog... something in my mind keeps going to back to him, watching me like I've gone insane.

I let the dog out. Need to think without being... looked at. It comes to me. An apple, in the cabinet over the fridge. Really? I retrieve the fruit, cut it open. There's the key. I laugh, well aware that my sanity might be creeping away. I go to the garage, apprehension, flooding my bloodstream. That sense of impending attack, like when you reach for a doorknob, your back to the night, and get a sudden rush of panic. I suppress it. Push it down. Take a deep breath. I open the garage.

My mind grows still and calm. Armor. Riveted, welded plates over the sports pads. The metal burned and robed in char and swirling colors like an oil slick from the intense heat. The welds are sloppy but strong. It's ugly. Functional. I brush my hand over it. Rough, oily, dirty... but solid. I move to the sword. It is heavy, the edge uneven but keen. Hardened and brittle it wouldn't last in a sword fight, but it is strong enough, has weight to chop, and as sharp as a razor.

I pick it up I swing it, feeling the wrapped electrical tape as a grip, part of it sticking to my hand. It doesn't whistle and sing like it would in a movie. It is a real weapon. A solid, heavy, dead thing used for killing. My heart lurches as I hear an inhuman scream... Something feral, like ... something dying. My armor is already on. When did that happen? I leave the garage, my senses

shouting, flooding my mind, muzzy as the strange purpose within me fights again to take control.

I walk, the armor feels like my second skin. The sword an extension of my hand, my mind, my will. The house is like a paper doll-house around me. Fragile, temporary, ready to fall apart at my footsteps. I'm armored and armed. I'm awake and the only thing real in a world made of candy, paper, and glass. I walk to the front door. I feel like I could kick through it like cardboard. I hold back. I open the door.

Blood. A mess of blood and fur, still warm... almost still living the kill is so recent, flesh dragged along the front step. A patch of white fur. The neighbor's cat? Alice speaks behind me, "What was that scream? Is the dog okay?"

The dog. The dog has been missing for days. Alice shouldn't be here. It is too close. I turn. Flashing teeth and claws hit me, heavy like a bag of wet cement. It bowls me over, and I crash through the open door, clattering down the step awkwardly, my feet scraping through the remains of the cat. It's on me, covered in smears of hot blood, wrapping up my limbs in powerful, stretched muscles. It grabs at my throat, slashes at my sides, gouges at my groin with hook-clawed back legs. The armor holds, and the claws find no purchase.

I push with all the strength I can muster, bursting from my core, and shoving the slick, blood-drenched creature off of me. It lands on its back in the grass but quickly flips onto its four legs, standing up on two from there to take a look at me... the unexpected challenge. A hard target in a village of sheep for slaughter. It's just like I envisioned. The floppy ears, the gleeful murdering-eyes, the teeth and claws, the patches of wiry fur. I only spare it a moment as I scramble for the sword.

It leaps, landing on my back, attacking the straps of my armor now, slashing at more vulnerable places. The claws cut deep and leave searing agony behind, but I can survive these wounds. My hand tightens around the grip and I roll, like a crocodile, swinging the blade with the force of my turn. It finds flesh, and cleaves through. The beast screeches and scrambles back, leaving a forearm behind on the ground, unbleeding. They never bleed. It glares, the delighted hunter's malice in its eyes slipping into red hot hatred. It circles me slowly, cradling its stump, as I get to my feet. It moves like a predator, looking for an opening. So do I.

It lunges into a feint to the right, I swing and spin while stepping back, catching it in the side with my second stroke before it can land its surprise attack to the left. I wrench my sword free and the beast stumbles, collapsing backwards onto the grass. It leaves a black greasy stain on the greenery, but no blood.

It shakes and rasps, picking itself up, and speaks in Alice's voice.

"You're never going to die. We won't let you. We'll take you apart, eat your pieces. But you... you'll burn forever." It throws back its head and shrieks in a voice like a hundred different people screaming at once. I step forward and swing in a flat arc. The screech dies as its grotesque head tumbles to the ground. It's body collapses on top of it.

I breath. I feel the blood flowing from the jagged gashes in my back even as it pounds in my ears. In that stroke, that moment, I know my purpose. I see again, as before, a vision with perfect clarity. A place... a basement somewhere in the city. A dark patch with burning edges that leads to somewhere else. The thing... the barghest... this one, others, many coming through. Back and forth. Some take screaming children through. I see the gate, and I know with that same certainty what lies on the other side.

I come back into the world. The dead beast before me shriveling in the afternoon sun like a worm left on the sidewalk after a rain. Soon it's no larger than the remains of the neighbor's cat. My injuries weaken me. The friendly street is strangely silent and unmoving after the struggle. I need to find help. I need to be stitched up and seen to. I need to move, quickly.

I see a black and white car with a siren. Its hood is bent up against a power-pole. There is a day-old pile of flesh near it, a cloud of flies buzzing around. The parts that make up a person, minus the parts *they* like. There are more such remains, left up and down the street. I hear movement, and I know I'm being stalked. They won't attack me so brazenly again. They'll try to take me while I sleep, when I pass out from the bleeding. I begin to move, with purpose and a dark smile. I'll get patched up, I'll be ready for them. I'll kill every one of them, and when I find the gate... I'll finally go home.