

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/4

Michael Stone
The Fawn

MANY YEARS AFTER BEING IN COMBAT, McFarland still heard the whizzing of bullets in his nightmares. He smelled the burnt almond of mortar fire. Yet, in those days, death had risk probabilities balanced with a chance of survival.

Today, McFarland stared out the kitchen window, expecting, for just a few seconds, to see Natalie walking up the driveway, as she had done every day before the pandemic. When the virus started, she always came home from the hospital with a crease across her nose from the metal strip in the tight mask. Now, every Friday at 4:30, the guilt began. That's when McFarland thought the end had commenced. By 6:00, Natalie would not eat. By 8:00, she was having problems breathing, and McFarland called the ambulance. If he had just been more active, he could have taken her to the hospital sooner . . . a helpless hope to undo the unstoppable.

Even before Natalie passed, death had been making periodic appearances in his own mental scenes when McFarland reached sixty. It adopted an amorphous form, lurking in his amygdala somewhere—a shadowy figure with a hooded scapular—following him quietly, patiently. The gradual waning to the end was like facing the monster who lives in all children's closets, waiting for the right moment to burst out and do what exactly? Sometimes, while looking in the morning mirror, McFarland opened his mouth in an "O" as if he was dead and had lost muscle control to hold it shut. He was not going to subject himself to the slow dwindle of aging-- the horror of nonexistence—to never think again--to never drink another cup of coffee to clear the morning grog—to never respond to his dog's wagging tail—all threatened by the roulette wheel of nursing home maladies: arrhythmia, renal failure, prostate cancer, pneumonia, Alzheimer's . . . "no more bets, please."

McFarland considered floating down the Seine with a cache of opioids, but that was too passive. So, in the late fall, every year after Natalie was gone, McFarland hired a mercenary to track him. If, he survived, it was proof that he was fit to live another year. Active not passive.

Three years ago, the first mercenary, a former al Qaeda fighter, found McFarland's trail after two days. He had been hired from an Afghan freelance company, which used to subcontract through the British Armor group, known as Mr. Pink. McFarland still had contacts there, having encamped with them to coordinate air strikes. The mercenary stood to gain a half-million to be paid through a series of intermediaries. He had come up from Brazil with a fraudulent visa, then through the Darien Gap jungle passage between Columbia and Panama. From there, it was easy to meld with the others moving across the Mexican border.



In the third year of the tracking, the Virginia red maples had turned orange and scarlet, and the sweetgums were a deep purple. At sunrise, the sky was white and hazy where it touched the mountain. At the forest edge, McFarland had turned to look backward at the single household with two chimneys. Two vehicles, one McFarland's, were parked near the barn

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with the owner's permission. He had installed a remote ignition on his F-150 after witnessing so many vehicle bombs explode in Afghanistan.

In the foothills, the web of foliage resembled a lace curtain of vegetation with patches of yellow light softening the edge of the branches. Looking upward, there were swatches of white and blue sky. A short way in, a branch of about a foot in diameter rested against the main trunk having fallen on its three-prong tip, giving it the appearance of a tripod. Honeysuckle and creeper vines mixed with invasives of Privet and English Ivy that had been brought in after World War II when the university had created housing nearby for married veterans to attend school. There was a clearing with a formidable white oak of about thirty feet around in the center. McFarland rappelled that tree as a VMI cadet.

Two days in, McFarland went to one of his supply caches, sealed in a pouch inside a plastic bucket, buried and camouflaged. He selected a couple of water and food pouches and one powdered milk. McFarland worked his way to an overhang where he could camp and survey what was below. The stream would be just ahead.



The Tracker had been following the stream, looking for any flattening of vegetation or broken twigs. He was vigilant for any broken spider webs or stripped leaves off branches. He figured McFarland might have to use the stream for drinking water at some point, and the Tracker might be able to pick up his trail that way. About a kilometer downstream, he had seen a vine that appeared to have been snagged and pulled northernly. Close by, there were a few overturned leaves showing a darker underside than others. Fifty yards ahead, the Tracker spotted a few stones that seemed displaced from a larger grouping near the water.

The Tracker was cautious in the Virginia mountains which, comparatively, were far more open than the ones he knew growing up in the Congo. He and his family had fled to Uganda but not before the Tracker had spent three months with mercenaries there and another year with them in Syria. The money would help his family seek refuge. After a half year, the Tracker's uncle in America said he would find him a home and work in the San Fernando Valley, if the Tracker had enough money.



Near the ridge of the wood line, McFarland spotted a wolf walking with a staggering gait. He could see thick drool dripping from the corners of its mouth. The wolf shifted his stare, back and forth, from McFarland to a fawn about fifty feet away, trapped under a large, fallen limb near the stream. The fawn bleated, fearing both potential foes. Usually, a wolf will run from a human, so McFarland thought it might be rabid. If close enough, McFarland could use his dart pistol loaded with a tranquilizer to immobilize it, but the effect would not be immediate. The wolf staggered toward the fawn that began to flail. It was not the brutality of nature that made him unholster his gun, but the quick and diamond-sharp defiance that he could cheat death with a pittance of revenge. McFarland spat.

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The Tracker heard the shot. It was a handgun. That meant that McFarland probably was not carrying a long-range weapon, the possibility of which had cautioned the Tracker to move slowly and almost always in the brush. Now, he could move faster, toward the shot. The Tracker knew that McFarland would move quickly, but, also, in haste, would be less careful about his movements.



McFarland used the dart gun to tranquilize the fawn. He figured thirty minutes before the fawn regained consciousness. He waded into the stream and rubbed his thumb on the fawn's head, between its ears. McFarland felt its hard skull and let his hand slide to her chest, feeling it rise and fall. He freed its leg by using a fallen branch as a fulcrum. McFarland did not think the leg was broken. Yet, he would have to keep the fawn immobilized to move her. McFarland began to cut thick vines to make a stretcher and pulley to lower the deer at the pass ahead. Using one arm to encircle the animal's neck, McFarland secured its head against his shoulder. He slipped the other arm under the sternum, then, with the vine rope, McFarland secured its head to the stretcher then did the same to her legs.

McFarland scanned the sky through the tangle of tree limbs. To his left, on the horizon, he could see a triangle of white-gold ellipses of light where the trees allowed access. Their limbs bore a mix of life ranging from dry, dead brown leaves, ready to fall and crumble, to yellow ones that looked ripe like fruit. Then, there were the still defiant green ones that might stay that way all through winter, no matter the cold. To the right, where heaven meets earth, there was an orange streak barely visible through a pocket clearing of rich green leaves. Overhead, there was a Van Gogh sky, clusters of puffed blue-white clouds partially hiding the infinite blue behind them.

McFarland remembered the old debate among soldiers. "Would you hear a bullet before it hit you?" Then, he could hear Gabriel's oboe playing and could see a hooded figure running towards him until, finally, Natalie's face appeared and moved past him. And, then, with the singing chant of angels in his ear, he began to run in a zig-zag pattern with the deer and towards the two chimneys just visible over the knoll ahead, reaching in his pocket for the remote starter which he would keep pressing until the pickup started or otherwise.