

Oklahoma

review

Volume Seven | Issue Two | Fall 2006

Curt Eriksen

The Way Over

For Menuca and Saul

There's snow on the mountain, plenty of it, like I knew there'd be, and Molino is dead. No one need tell me this, I know. This morning, when I opened my eyes, the rain was easin' off. I could hear it drip from the eaves and patter on the fallen leaf, the leaf felled by the storm. It was a bitter cold rain, and that's how I knew there'd be snow up there. I don't have to go to the window and wait for the clouds to lift. I know.

After a while I roll onto my stomach and try to push myself up like Don Antonio told me I should. But it don't work, my arms ain't got the strength. So I heave and I ho and I shift this bag of bones anyway I can and I feel the back slip again but finally I'm sittin' up, breathin' heavy. Then it's next to nothing to work my legs over the edge of the bed. The ash limb Molino skinned for me when the hip was replaced is right there where I left it, leanin' against the wall. I grab hold of it with both hands and I do some easy breathin' now to concentrate. I can get to my feet alright with the stick, and then I'm shufflin' as fast as I can across the tiles until I drop onto the cold stool and let it go. Lookin' down between my legs I watch it steam.

When I finish I use the stick to get onto my legs again and I tug my drawers up and over the hip that ain't even mine any more. I can see that the drawers could use a wash, they're yellowed with all that dribblin', but wet as the day is they wouldn't dry and who's gonna know anyway? I pull on the chain Molino fixed for me before he went up there after that demon and the water spills through the long tube he installed and flushes the bowl clean. I'll just make a little fire and get some heat in my hands, then the fingers can loosen up and move better. I'll make some black tea and sip it slow, knowin' my boy is gone.

But I won't forgive him, not this time. I'm sorry, but I just can't do that. I pleaded with him, begged him not to go. I didn't cry though, not a single tear.

"Ain't it enough," I demanded of him, "that she's gone? Do you have to go and follow after her?"

He wouldn't look me in the eye. He slipped his hands out of mine, strong fine hands with the life pulsin' in 'em yet. They were useful hands, too, hands that knew their place.

That's how he let me know that he'd already thought through this thing to the end. Ever since she'd gone he'd been workin' on it, thinkin' real careful about it, with no hurry, but all the way through to the end.

And all the while he carried on, same as if nothin'd happened. He kept gettin' up for work every morning and bringin' the pay home at the end of every month. He'd give it all to me and say, "Here Ma, you know what to do with this."

My boy didn't miss a single day, he wasn't no slacker. He'd be there with the rest of the crew at dawn and he was always among the last to leave. He didn't say much, once she'd gone, that's what Clemente told me. He and Molino were first cousins but they grew up tight as twins, with only a week between 'em. "He keeps to hisself now," that's what Clemente said. And I could see it clear enough. While the rest of 'em sat around in a group, chewin' on the *bocatas* their wives'd packed for them, Molino'd go off to suffer through the break alone. They're all good boys and they would've looked at each other and exchanged one of those glances that says, 'I know, I know,' but no one would've said a thing,

least not in front of him. But they did try to draw him in, Clemente said they'd always offer him cigarettes and a pull on the flask. And Molino'd lift his head and turn to face 'em with that star gazin' look in his eyes. He never sat very far away, just far enough to make it clear that he was a man on his own now, outside of their circle and reach. That distance he put between 'em: Clemente said not a one of 'em dared to bridge it. And this when they were men exactly like him, born and raised here. And when he, just like them, had fallen in love with one of the first women he'd ever known and he, like them, had asked her to be his. And when she had agreed.

Oh I remember how in the beginnin' you could see how much they thrilled and delighted each other. They were playful as a pair of kittens and always oglin' at each other and whisperin' secrets and holdin' hands and the blood was always high in their cheeks. It made me feel good about her, seein' how happy he was. I'm not like some of these nags begrudges their own kin a cut of the joy. That's what Pepe's sister Lola did to Clemente and I told her she was wrong to drive that girl he liked so much away from him. "You gotta sit back," I told her, "and just let 'em be."

My boy doted on his Susana and it was good to see. It made me feel young and light in the heart. He was always promisin' her the world, the whole world. A house? Why, he'd build her a house with his own two hands! "And who's gonna pay for that," she'd tease him. She had wispy blonde hair that was always in her eyes and it was natural too. "Rare and nat'ral," that's what Molino used to say. And he swore he'd find a way. And by that first summer he was out back, near the creek, layin' the foundation. She just sat there with her long legs curled under her skinny butt and watched him pour the cement. Before it dried solid he caught her and lifted her up—she was light as a toasted fly—and he set her to stand on it. "I'm gonna 'mortalize you," that's what he said. And those footprints are still there today, collectin' raindrops. But at the time she was afraid to move, she didn't know what to do, so she just stood there with the cement oozin' between her toes and her arms hangin' stiff as a pair of planks while the tears poured off her chin. Molino, he couldn't stop laughin', he was bustin' his gut, but the next day he made it up to her by bringin' home a big ol' chestnut door. "I'm gonna hang this door and carry you cross that threshold 'fore the baby's born." After work he'd pile the car with anything from the site they meant to throw away or burn or bury or couldn't use. Broken bits of tiling, the cut-off ends of girders and joists, anything nobody else wanted, Molino'd have it. "You gonna patch together a place for me?" She had eyes that went green in the sun and he swore he'd build her a palace, a palace to honor her rare beauty.

I manage to get the fire goin', my hands'll allow me that much. The tinder takes and the little flame leaps and crackles among the sticks. I lay on some of the wood Molino split before he left, nice and dry, stacked high against the east side of the house. Course he never finished that palace. But it was only this last week that he give up on it. She'd already been gone six months. He'd stand with that hammer in his hand, gazin' up at the hills that lead to the pass. He couldn't see her lookin' like that, but he could imagine her over there, on the other side, in Ávila, where she was already livin' with another man. They weren't even divorced yet but that didn't mean anything to her. But if anyone asked him about his wife he'd say, "Sure, she's gone to Ávila." And the way he said it made it plain that he was expectin' her back any day now.

There wasn't much that I could do. When I set the table for two he'd add another knife and fork and a plate and glass too. The first time he did it I stopped and looked at him and I was about to say something but I knew it wouldn't make no difference. He was my only boy and his hurt seared right through me. I knew he was askin' somethin' of me, and although I'd been strict sometimes, I could never deny him what he wanted. So I went along with it. And I suppose that was a mistake. Don Antonio told me as much. I went to see him about the pain in the other hip and after he'd told me again that I'd have to have it operated on real soon, the bone was leakin' bad, he said, "How's Molino takin' it? Her runnin' off like that."

Well I can remember Don Antonio since he was only so high and I was proud as his own mama when he come home from Badajoz with that big certificate in the gold frame he hung on his wall. She couldn't read what it says either but she told me what it was. She wouldn't admit that he changed there at that doctor school but I could hear it in his voice, the way it dropped so low and sure now, and he always knew how to say things just right. So I couldn't tell him anything but the truth. But when he put his hands together and looked at me across that big shiny desk of his and said, "Maybe he needs some help," I started feelin' real dizzy. I heard him say he could recommend someone in Talavera and that he

didn't think it was good for Molino to mope around like that, but there was this awful buzzin' in my ears. I kept listenin', real polite, but after that I didn't understand anything Don Antonio said.

If Pepe would've been around I could've talked to him about it. Pepe wouldn't have said much, but I could've talked. He wouldn't have tolerated it either, such foolishness from his own boy. I don't know what he would've done, though. You couldn't beat that love ache out of Molino. It's just not possible. But I know Pepe wouldn't have tolerated it.

When the water starts boilin' I pour it over the leaves. The fire's goin' good now, it's startin' to warm up in here. I'm still not hungry. Ever since Molino left my appetite's gone after him. That first night I worried so much I couldn't sleep at all. But it was a dry night, the stars were out, bright and near, it was only cold. He took that old pack Pepe brought home from the war and stuffed his bag in there. It was a feather bag and I figured it'd keep him warm. I wasn't so worried about that. The second night was dry as well. I fell asleep and woke up once. The house was so still. I used to be able to hear Molino sometimes, snorin' softly in the other room. When he brought Susana home with him they closed the door. But I could hear that too. Only I knew it was the way it was supposed to be. And I thought I was gonna have a grandson I could hold in my arms.

That was the real problem, least that's what she told him. Soon as people started talkin' she got nervous and bird-eyed. She stayed at home but she didn't do anything here, wouldn't even sweep the floor. She just laid around and flipped through those magazines she'd ask him to buy for her. They were full of color pictures, with women half-naked and men in fancy suits. Those were real palaces those people lived in. Full of diamonds and gold. When Molino'd come home from work she'd tell him all about it. The big swimmin' pools out back, the chandeliers hangin' from the ceiling. He said, "Sure, I'll dig you a pool." And he would've done it too. I know my boy.

The tea's plenty hot and I like it that way. I feel so empty and the heat goes down in there and makes my stomach warm. It don't last long though, nothing ever does.

The cancer took Pepe before he was fifty. And now my boy's gone. Susana got on a bus and went around to Ávila. Takes three or four hours to get there like that. Molino said he was gonna walk there, straight over the top. "Give me a chance to think 'bout what I'm gonna say to her." That was as much explanation as I could hope to get out of him. He was never much of a talker. You live up here like we do and you tend to keep your mouth shut. There's plenty to hear up here, the wind's always in the trees and when the creek's high you can hear the water rushin' over the boulders, but there's not much to say. And anyway, who'm I gonna say it to now?