

Written by Berkeley Krell

Lay Piety

A hot zephyr breathed down the necks of the boys who sat along the graying wooden fence. Ralph worked with a block of wood he'd gotten at the last Scout meeting, Eddie watched the horses at the far end of the pasture, and Jesse etched little red shapes into his forearm with a blunt fingernail.

The late summer landscape of their sleepy midwestern town was dry and brown, but it pulsed with life. Robins sang and insects hummed and the quarter horses in the field meandered about, grazing.

Ralph absentmindedly picked away at the soft block of wood with his small pocket knife and Jesse scooted closer to the blonde and tapped his shoulder. Jesse made no further gestures, but so intense was his gaze that it drew all eyes that way.

Fat, pitiful Herman was there, emerging from the thin woods which bordered their small community. He lumbered over the slight hills, waving something in his hand. The boys waited for him silently and Eddie turned away, almost embarrassed for him.

“What've you got there?” Jesse pressed his thigh into Ralph's.

Breathing heavily, Herman didn't bother to articulate. He presented a gnarly bit of vegetation. Ralph screwed up his face and bent towards the boy's flat palm.

“I found a cool root—in the woods over yonder.” Herman beamed, proud of himself.

Eddie glanced dubiously at Ralph who cocked an angular eyebrow. Jesse scoffed and went to grab the root from the boy's flat palm. Jesse, an athlete, was quicker than Herman, and swiped the thing before the fat boy could react.

The boys exchanged smirks and hopped off the fence of the mayor's horse pasture, careful not to snag their shorts, and trotted after Jesse, leaving Herman to exasperatedly chase after them.

The following Sunday, after church was let out and the boys' parents were busy discussing, the trio passed a shining pigskin between themselves. Herman sat alone atop a large rock which rest under their town's largest oak in the sunlight-dappled shade.

Eddie, squinting through his mahogany locks which fell over his forehead, threw the ball without the gentle touch of before. It soared over Jesse's head and bounced across the church's dry lawn, into the prized flowerbed of the pastor's second wife. Ralph recoiled a bit, scared they would get caught for messing with the flowers.

"Hey you guys, be careful," Herman whined from his roost. Eddie and Ralph shushed him violently, almost hissing.

Jesse bent to retrieve the ball, and rose again, the football cradled in one arm and a timeworn dollar bill between his thumb and forefinger.

"It worked," Jesse beamed at his counterparts.

Ralph hummed, confused.

"I prayed for wealth, and here's a *whole dollar*."

"I reckon that's how prayin' works," Eddie fastened his tie round his head.

"I didn't pray to God, Eddie. I prayed to the thing Herm found. It looked like Jesus, sincerely."

"Ain't that still praying to God?"

Jesse shrugged, tucking the bill into the pocket of his church slacks, “not *that* God, though.”

Ralph and Eddie let escape from their mouths confused laughter, but after Jesse suggested they go buy some Cokes from the local convenience store with the dollar Jesse’s *thing* had given them, they were satisfied.

“The river,” Jesse said, trailing behind Eddie and Ralph who jabbed at the brambles with their walking sticks. Jesse cradled in his cupped hands the grotesque, Christ-like deity.

“Father had a dead tree cut down over here last week. He said it disrupted the beauty of his fishing spot.”

The boys hummed, but turned quickly to face the sharp sound of snapping twigs. Ralph exhaled, relieved, as he recognized the meaty shape which blundered after them.

“Ma says you better not be dangerous, or she’ll tell your parents on you guys.”

Jesse groaned, “like my father would care anyway.”

Ralph and Eddie murmured similar remarks then turned and continued their walk along the narrow trail. Jesse began to preach to the boys the wondrous abilities of the root. They listened, one ear cocked towards Jesse.

“The Holy One,” Jesse grinned to himself as they reached the clearing. “That’s what I’ll call it.”

Holy? Ralph and Eddie glanced at one another but accepted Jesse’s words.

“C’mon you guys. Don’t go worshipping nothin’ that ain’t Christ. Ma says pagan religion is a bunch of,” Herman lowered his voice, “*bullshit.*”

“We don’t care what your ma thinks, Herm,” Jesse said, adjusting The Holy One so that He stood at the very origin of the tree’s rings. The boy’s lips curled into a smile which frightened Herman. “We’ll worship it. The Holy One, unlike your God, *listens* to our prayers.”

Ralph and Eddie agreed.

“Squealer,” Jesse hissed to Herman as he strode through the threshold of the dank pastor’s office. Herman flinched and recoiled, turning away from Jesse’s malevolent eyes of gold.

The boys sat in chairs before the head pastor’s desk. The man’s face bore lines of age in which festered his memories of the Great War. They pitied him.

Ralph glanced at Jesse. The boy glowered at the pastor through his fringe of russett hair. Ralph swallowed and looked down at his feet.

The boys were spoken to, picking out certain phrases. “One true God” and “destructive child’s play” were of the more memorable.

The sun had enveloped the homely countryside in a pink film by the time the boys were released. They hastened to their houses, each in a comfortable walking distance from the small church.

“Do you feel that?” Eddie breathed. Ralph and Jesse paused, feeling.

The atmosphere yellowed and newly strong squalls of wind lapped at the boys’ clothing. A turkey vulture soared ahead, but soon disappeared into the blackening woods.

Jesse nodded, running a hand through his hair. “We gotta get home.”

They agreed.

“And lo! I saw it! The sky cleared and from that hole beamed down onto His resting place the silver moonlight. The rain and thunder and lightning only got worse. The Holy One *spoke to me*. He spoke not in words, but in energies. I could feel what he wanted. I could feel what he wanted from me—from *us*.”

Jesse preached from his perch atop a large tree which, as a product from the preceding night’s storm, had fallen across the river. The bark dug into his bare feet as Jesse strode along its length.

Ralph and Eddie stood barefoot in the marshy slop of the river bank and listened. Herman rest in the brambles a distance behind them.

Ralph felt his pulse in his neck as he held his breath. Eddie picked at the sides of his thumbs until his index fingers ran through a bloody soup.

“Gather logs,” Jesse turned to face the boys. “We need to satisfy The Holy One’s hunger.”

Ralph and Eddie looked at one another. Their eyes were glossy not with trepidation or fear, but rather something primal and dutiful. Jesse wandered over to the root’s roost, murmuring to either himself or his newfound deity.

The flames roared, loud and angry, lapping up hungrily at the clear twilight sky.

Herman sat away from the boys, holding his knees to his chest and rocking back and forth. They didn’t pay him any mind.

Jesse and Eddie watched Ralph intently as the blonde held a slingshot he had made in one quivering hand and a smooth river stone in the other. Ralph was an excellent shot, and the boys

wore ferocious grins as Ralph extended his right arm, aiming for the robin's nest which was arranged carefully in the smaller tree limbs.

The boys supplied quips of encouragement; they chirped like content songbirds.

Ralph took a deep breath, shook his lengthening golden hair from his eyes, and relaxed his countenance. He loaded the contraption, and with one quick and methodical movement, shot the nest to the ground.

The boys expressed great glee as the thing fell, though Ralph felt his gut churn as Jesse bounded towards the blue eggs which were rendered stark against the soft browns of the tall grasses.

There were four eggs—one for each of the boys—and Jesse maneuvered them gently into his cupped palm.

The tall, golden-eyed boy meandered to each of his peers and handed them an egg. Herman took his eagerly and cradled the thing in his uncalloused hands.

Jesse held his between his thumb and forefinger with a gentle touch; a gesture strangely demure for him. Ralph was afraid it would fall from his grip.

“Life,” Jesse said, “that’s what He needs.”

Herman whimpered.

“He needs—he *craves*—what we could provide him with. The life of a thing so young it has yet to escape the confines of its chamber. The blood of those who pledge allegiance to his power.”

There was a quiet *crack* and Ralph and Eddie recoiled. Herman let out a sob.

Jesse tossed the mutilated remains of the brilliant egg into the fire. Its flames seemed to leap to catch it.

“There,” Jesse smiled to his peers, nodding for them to do the same. They did. Eddie liked the feeling more than Ralph.

Ralph retrieved from the shorter grass of the clearing the small wooden bowl which he had made for the Scouts. He didn't think it would be used for this. From his pocket, the blonde drew a small pocket knife.

Jesse gestured Ralph to come to him, and Ralph did, though he pondered it for a few moments. The boy was beginning to question some things. Three of the four regularly shot at squirrels and birds and deer, but this felt different to Ralph. He didn't want to *really* hurt anyone. It was just a game, right?

Making up his mind, Ralph shoved the knife into Jesse's hand and held the bowl before him. Jesse looked into Ralph's wide blue eyes and his lips curled into an alluring smirk.

Their eye contact not once breaking, Jesse dragged the knife's blade across his palm. His blood, a seductive crimson, flowed into the small bowl, and when it began to cease, Jesse contorted his hand as to withdraw more.

When Jesse decided he had given up enough of himself, he took the bowl from Ralph's trembling hands and gave him the knife. The blood on its silver blade was hot and wet and scintillated in the fire's light.

Jesse, noticing Ralph's new unease, softened his countenance. “Are you alright,” he paused and looked off to the side, thinking, “Ralphie?”

The blonde's heart heaved at that nickname.

“I can do it for you, if you'd like.”

Ralph shook his head and steadied the knife in his grip. Jesse's eyes bore into Ralph's vulnerable being lustfully. Ralph swallowed dryly and flinched as he sliced his pale flesh with his own father's knife.

Eddy went after Ralph, and when it came Herman's time, he refused.

"C'mon guys. You know that thing ain't real. It don't want your blood—it don't want *my* blood, sincerely!"

Jesse drew his brows together and offered a sympathetic look. Ralph found himself blushing, embarrassed by the tenderness of Jesse's expression.

Jesse crept over to the fat boy. He moved quickly, stepping over roots and native river vegetation. Herman could hardly process what Jesse was doing, that is, until the boy had him pinned to the sharp brambles of the surrounding wood. Jesse held the boy's plump wrist in his hand and slowly dragged its blade across Herman's pillowy flesh before pulling the blade back towards him, and then forwards once more. Herman sobbed and fought against Jesse's weight, but it had been done. A glittering red ravine across his palm.

Eddie held the bowl to collect Herman's contribution and they beamed at one another before Eddie straddled Herman's back, forcing the boy's deep cut into the sticks and mud.

Jesse held the bowl in his hands, staring at his reflection admiringly in the vicious biofluid.

"Now," he said, turning to Ralph, "we drink."

Ralph felt his heart squeeze and throb against his sternum.

"What?"

"We drink. To be bonded to one another and The Holy One. It's not my idea. It was His,"

Jesse gestured to the deity which stared at Ralph.

“I don't think I can, Jesse.”

“Oh don't be a sissy, Ralph,” came Eddie's voice. “We'll be like blood brothers.”

Jesse agreed, stepping closer to Ralph.

“It's just a *fun game*,” Eddie suggested, looking to Jesse. “Isn't that right?”

Jesse hesitated for a moment, but nodded his head slowly. “C'mon Ralphie,” he cooed, extending his arm to touch Ralph's flushed cheek.

Ralph shook his head. “I can't.”

Jesse furrowed his eyebrows and swallowed thickly.

“I'll do it, Jesse,” Eddie said. Ralph could hear the smile in his voice and a green broth of disgust swirled in his chest.

Eddie drank. And Jesse drank. Just one sip; not even enough to swallow, but enough so that when the boys grinned a lurid crimson concoction of blood and saliva pooled in the spaces between their alabaster teeth.

Ralph felt acid rise in his dry esophagus. The muscles in his legs began to quiver, attempting to pull Ralph away from the boys with the bloody teeth.

Jesse smirked, took a small sip from the bowl and Ralph, confused and conflicted, had no understanding of Jesse's intentions until the boy grabbed the blonde's wrist and forced their mouths together. Ralph could taste the metallic bitterness as it transferred from Jesse's hot tongue onto his.

Ralph pulled away the moment his dazed muscles could react. He spat into the grass and wiped his mouth, though the way Jesse stared at him through the shade of his long brown eyelashes made Ralph's gut churn with neither disgust nor resentment, but something foreign.

Ralph sat on an older log, the moist wood shifting under him. He stayed there, thinking. Ralph heard the whines of Herman, the roar of the flames, and the song of the robins.

The blonde felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked up and stared into Jesse's face. Jesse took Ralph's wrist in his grip and examined the congealing wound. He frowned and retrieved from his shorts pocket The Holy One. Jesse pressed His small body into Ralph's tender palm and gave the blonde a quick nod.

Ralph stood, took a few hesitant steps forward, and dropped The Holy One into the dying flames. The fire consumed the thing as if it were another twig or leaf. Ralph blinked a few times, then turned his back to the stump, river, and dying fire and followed Jesse back to the town, their fingers intertwined, wound against wound.

That following week at church, Herman sat apart from the three boys. They never spoke of The Holy One or the robin's eggs or the blood sacrifice again.

The only thing which would ever remind them of what occurred were the faint white scars which eventually replaced the bloodied scabs on their palms, though looking at these only filled them with bittersweet memories of a fun summer game.

THE END