

New Fiction by Neil Allen: The Scar



The two boys creep towards the edge of the crater and stare across. Its opposite rim seems an impossible distance away. The Geiger counter clipped to William's hip rapidly clicks an unending warning. He absentmindedly runs his thumb over the device.

"Can we please go back home," he begs his friend.

As usual, James ignores him and inches forward until his toes hang over the edge. He has waited too long to see this, and he didn't go through all the trouble of sneaking out just to turn around. He will touch the heart of this thing.

James runs a hand through his close-cropped hair, takes a step down into the crater and disappears. For reasons William doesn't quite understand, he follows.

The slope of the crater is so steep it's almost vertical. The boys can barely stay upright. Gravity, along with their own momentum, forces them to half run, half stumble the whole way down. The boys can barely keep from tripping over their own feet. James laughs, impressed with his own speed, while William puffs out his chubby cheeks and holds his breath. He knows one wrong step means a matching pair of broken arms and legs.

The incessant clicking of the Geiger counter keeps pace, increasing its speed and volume the deeper they go.

"That thing is so annoying," James pants once they reach the bottom. He's a scrawny kid, a full head shorter than William, but he's still always bossing him around. "Turn it off."

William is bent over with his hands on his knees, wheezing. He unclips the old device and holds it in his palm. It was a hand-me-down from his big brother. Everyone is supposed to keep one with them, but James always conveniently forgets his.

"My dad told me to always leave it on," William breathlessly protests.

James groans, "I already know we're not supposed to be here. I don't need that thing yelling at me the whole time."

William hesitates with his thumb on the switch for several seconds before flicking it to off.

Silence.

"Thank God," James says, already walking away, "Now, hurry up. It's a long way to the center."

William's breathing is almost normal again. He forces himself to stand up straight and looks back at the incredible slope they have just run down. The curve of the crater wall is so great, the rim curls over their heads. "Hey James, how are we supposed to get back up?"

"I'm not worried about that yet," James answers without turning around.

Unsatisfied, but with no other direction to go, William trots after his friend.

There isn't much to see. Save for the two boys, the crater is devoid of all life. Birds fly around instead of over, and they never land nearby. No worms or insects make their home in the dead soil. The lifelessness here is matched only by the stillness. There is no breeze to cool their hot, sweating faces.

William looks up at the sky, thankful to see it's still blue. His parents have always been very clear, gray skies mean run.

Find shelter. Head for the nearest public restroom or abandoned subway tunnel or knock on strangers' doors if it means keeping dry. Anything more than a drizzle and he should pick up a rock and smash a car window rather than get caught in the rain. They constantly remind him it isn't safe to splash around in puddles like they did growing up, and the crater would be nothing but one huge puddle.

If it rains, would they drown or disintegrate? Would their parents find their bodies or their skeletons? Would even their bones be left?

#

It was his brother's birthday when William's parents first sat him down and told him about the bomb that dug this hole. He was old enough to remember the day it dropped, but his parents told him things other kids his age still didn't know, such as why the bomb was built in the first place, and why some people still called it a miracle.

The country that invented the bomb sure was proud of it. Their leader used to get on TV just to brag about all destruction this one bomb could cause. It was peerless. It could wipe away all their enemies, like cleaning smudges from a map. It was all the armies of Atilla and Alexander packed into a tin can. And, most miraculous of all, it guaranteed peace.

William had watched the leader on the TV promise that everyone would lay down their arms and fall to their knees before facing the threat of his miracle bomb. The leader loved to show off how closely his finger hovered over the big red button. Enemies beware. All he needed was an excuse. Any excuse. He swore again and again he wasn't afraid to use it.

And he wasn't.

Maybe he thought the other leaders were bluffing when they said their fingers were caressing buttons the same size and

same shade of red as his own. Hard to say, but the crater James and William are strolling through is not unique.

The leader was disappointed to be whisked away by his security detail to a remote bunker where he couldn't see any of the flashes or hear any of the booms. It was all he ever wanted.

No one knows where he's hiding, but they're sure it's someplace safe. Somewhere he doesn't have to worry about guns or bombs or rain. He still speaks to his public through the rare broadcast. With a voice made of static, he thanks his citizens for all the work they're doing rebuilding the beautiful nation, and he always reminds everyone how many lives the bomb saved. It's thanks to him the war ended. It's thanks to him there's peace. Thanks to him.

Thanks to him.

#

William has no idea how far he and James have walked, but his feet are starting to blister and his clothes are already dark with sweat. The sun seems to be focusing all its attention on him, so he tells himself he's lucky when a wisp of a cloud drifts overhead to offer some meager shade.

"I bet the one we dropped on the other guys was twice as big." James says, stretching his arms out at his sides like he's trying to push the walls of the crater farther apart. "Have you ever been to a city?" He asks William.

"Once." It's the most William has said in hours.

"Was it this one?"

"No."

"I heard this one was all cement and steel. Was the city you went to like that?"

“Yeah.”

“With people everywhere?”

“Yeah. There wasn’t enough room on the sidewalk for everyone and we all bumped into each other.”

“Were the buildings as tall as they say?”

“Some of them.”

James surveys the empty space surrounding him and nods his head, appreciating a job well done. He bends down, scoops up a handful of dirt and pours it slowly from his hand. “How awesome is it that so much stuff can be gone like that?” He snaps his dirty fingers.

“Yeah. Awesome.”

James marvels for the rest of their long walk. They’re so deep into the Earth he bets if he dug a little further down he could reach whatever country rests on the other side of the planet and launch a surprise invasion.

While James daydreams about conquering his foes, William wonders what was inside the bomb. What could do this? His face is burning, but most of the heat seems to be coming up from the ground. The sun isn’t even visible from behind the clouds. Those aren’t the storm kind, are they?

They pass the next several minutes walking quietly. Each of them too engrossed in his own thoughts to speak. When the boys finally reach the crater’s center, neither one can help but frown a little. They don’t know what they were expecting to find, but they thought it would be something more than a circle of charred dirt. James thinks it looks like a period at the end of a sentence. This war is finished, but one day maybe he can start the next.

James grabs a handful of the black dirt, admires it for a

moment, then stuffs it in his pocket, surprised to find the layer underneath is just as black. The layer under that looks just the same. So does the layer under that. He holds out his hand, offering some to William. "Souvenir?"

William shakes his head. It's nothing but an old wound, a scar as deep as the Earth's core.

James shrugs and shoves it into his pocket with the rest. "It's a little disappointing though, isn't it?"

William thinks his friend is talking about the dirt and agrees.

"Before the bomb," James continues, "People got to actually run onto a battlefield and fight each other face to face." He wraps his hands around a make-believe machine gun and aims it at William. Spit flies from his mouth with every ratta-tat-tatta and imaginary bullets spray from his fingertips. Usually when they play war, William will throw his hands over his heart, spin around and collapse with his tongue stuck out to the side. Today, however, he doesn't feel like playing corpse.

James unloads his magazine and his shoulders sag. If William doesn't feel like pretending then there's no point in reloading. He drops the invisible gun, and leaves it there forever.

A moment later, James asks, "Did your brother get to shoot anyone, before he, you know, got shot?"

"I don't know. I didn't get to ask."

"Bet you wish they'd dropped the bombs before he died. If the war had ended sooner, he might have been able to come home for good."

"I guess." William doesn't want to talk about his brother with James. Not right now. "I think we should go."

“Seriously? It took forever to get here. Let’s stay a little longer.”

“I want to go home.”

“We can leave in a few minutes.”

“Stay then. I’m going home.”

“Fine,” James groans and follows William.

Neither of the boys say much of anything on the return trip. James tries to ask a few hypothetical questions, like if William thinks they’ll ever have the chance to be soldiers themselves. William only ever shrugs in response, so James gives up trying to talk. William is walking faster than he has all day. The walk back to the crater wall takes half the time it took to reach the center, but the slope isn’t nearly as simple to go up as it was to go down.

It isn’t long before the boys reach a point where the slope’s curve becomes unclimbable. They hunch forward until they are scrambling on all fours, kicking and clawing, driving their fingernails as deep into the earth as they’ll go, but it’s pointless. There’s nothing to hold onto except a few loose rocks. Regardless of how hard they struggle, the boys barely manage to stop themselves from sliding all the way back to the bottom. Sweat carves trails through the dirt on their faces. Their clothes are so filthy they will have to be thrown away. Eventually, after sunset, they are so tired there is nothing left for them to do except sit down and give up.

William closes his eyes and hugs his knees to his chest. “Do your parents know where we are?”

“Nope,” James answers. “Do yours?”

William buries his head in his arms, “No. You made me swear not to tell them.”

"No worries," James says. "We'll get out."

"How?"

"We just have to wait for rain." He points up. They can't see the stars. At night, the clouds make the sky look dark and empty. "The crater will fill up and we can float to the top," James laughs.

William does not. He keeps quiet and rubs his thumb up and down the device at his hip. He flicks the switch. It seems louder than before.