



SHORT STORY

Terrain

Genevieve Valentine

illustration by **Richard Anderson**

The trains carved into land that wasn't theirs, and swallowed the men who laid their iron roads—the tracks like threads to draw white men closer together—monsters belching smoke across a land they meant to conquer.

So Faye made herself scarce the day the men from Union Pacific visited Western Fleet Courier, to ask Elijah about the land.

Elijah wasn't a man who thought much where he didn't have to; maybe it was just as well, since many who'd thought harder were cruel, and Elijah's place was where she and Frank had made their home.

So far.

The railroad men spoke with Elijah a long time. They cast looks around the yard where Fa Liang and Joseph were working on a dog, weighting the front pair of its legs so it wouldn't flip backward the first time you scaled a rock face. Fa Liang muttered something to the dog, and Joseph laughed, and the tall railroad man watched.

They watched Maria tending vegetables, rake in hand, shirtsleeves rolled to her elbows.

Faye kept in the barn. And Frank was somewhere those men would never find him. (Better not to trust anyone with the government. That much they'd learned the hard way.)

But Elijah was white, and kindhearted, and had made friends when he lived in River Pass—Harper at the general store still set things aside for him. Elijah had no reason to fear two men who smiled and seemed polite; once or twice, he laughed.

Bad sign, Faye thought.

They shook hands with him and left at last, and Faye was able to tear herself away from the hole in the boards and pretend nothing was wrong.

People came with messages for delivery every week: homesteaders, wagon trains, the Pony Express. If she was shaken every time a stranger showed, she'd spend her life in this barn.

When Elijah came into the barn, he smiled, but there was a second's pause before he said, "Hello, Faye."

She didn't mind the pause; worse to be called a wrong name.

It was easy to mistake Frank and Faye. The twins looked like their mother, the high brow and strong jaw, and they had the matching, flinty expressions of a lot of the Shoshone children who were sent to the white school. It made Frank look like a warrior, and Faye look troubled.

She stood beside Dog 2, one hand on its right foreleg. It was foolish to seek comfort in machines—look at the railroad—but still, she felt calmer with it close by.

She should have had a wrench, if she was pretending to work, but she'd been shaking.

Elijah meant well. Elijah was an easygoing man, most days. He tried to keep peace, he tried to be fair.

Faye just didn't think she and Elijah had the same idea of fair.

She couldn't even ask—the words stuck when she saw him—and she held her breath and looked at the open door behind him, the sliver of deep blue sky.

She'd been waiting for a sign to run. An open door was as good as anything.

Then Elijah said, "Lord, these trains have made men greedy."

The land can be beautiful, depending where you’re coming from.

The sun sets in bands of red and gold, and one of turquoise just ahead of the night; sunrise is cool in summer and sharp in winter, like ice cracking; and the horizon’s so unbroken that weather isn’t a surprise—you see clouds well ahead of the rain.

The soil is shallow and it fights, but there are wildflowers and tall grass until snowdrifts cover them. Snowdrifts, with rock to rest against, climb taller than a house, thin dry powder. The snow can turn any moment, with the wind, and swallow a man whole. You don’t go out alone in winter if you want to make it home.

There is, sometimes, water. It’s always flowing away from you.

There are always hills on the horizon, even though you’re already so high up you never catch your breath. You can look out and out and out across the basin, and see specks on the horizon, twenty miles away, where a city’s fighting to take hold.

Sometimes a city lasts. Sometimes you look out one night and not one lamp is lit, and you know the land passed judgment on it.

When you look at the night sky, it makes you dizzy.

Part of this is wonder. Part is knowing how far away from other lives you are, in this wide unbroken dark.

If you’ve made your way west from the forests, and given up town life for the frontier, this land seems like punishment.

It’s beautiful, if you’re coming home.

Elijah Pike owned the fifty acres of Western Fleet Courier.

He’d come to River Pass from Boston, after he’d tired of being someone else’s clerk and decided it was time to make something of himself in the West. He’d been an indifferent farmer—too uncertain of the soil—but River Pass needed even indifferent vegetables, and he’d found enough success on his own that when Fa Liang presented himself, Elijah had the land, and money for an extra barn, and parts for the dogs.

He was proud of the business; he was proud that they sometimes boarded a scrawny boy from the Pony Express while they handed off a message going where no horse could reach.

Elijah had painted the wooden sign himself: “Any Message, All Terrain.” It hung below the wrought-iron sign for Western Fleet, nailed to the arch marking his property line.

It was just as well he owned the land; he was the only one of them who could.

A dog has six legs. Each one is thin, and tall as a man, and arched as a bow, and in their center they cradle the large,

gleaming cylinder of the dog’s body. The back half conceals a steam engine, with a dipping spoon of a rider’s seat carved out ahead of it, with levers for steering and power, and just enough casing left in front to stop a man from hurtling off his seat every time the dog stops short.

It looks ungainly. The casing jangles, and the legs seem hardly sturdy enough to hold it, and when someone takes a seat it looks like the contraption’s eating him alive.

But legs that seem ungainly in the yard are smooth on open territory, and dogs don’t get skittish about heights or loose ground, and when scaling a rock face, six legs are sometimes better than four.

There’s a throttle for the engine, and three metal rings on each side of the chair, where the rider slides his fingers to operate the legs. Left alone, the dog walks straight ahead; when the rider starts his puppetry, it treads water, dances, climbs mountains.

It takes a strong boy to wield one—not muscled, but wiry, a boy who can keep his balance and his head if the ground slips out from under him.

Faye won’t train them if they look like they force their own way. On the trail, a rider has to understand enough to side-wind Dog 3 in heavy winds, enough to hear what’s breaking in old Dog 1 before it breaks.

Sometimes she and Fa Liang placed bets about what would need fixing up when some boy came back.

“The boy,” Frank said, “if he breaks Dog 2.”

Faye shouldered him, but Fa Liang said, “No bet.”

The dogs never tire, and need one quarter the water a horse does. The boys carry some, but the inside of the engine shell collects condensation at night, which siphons into a skin.

That was Faye’s idea; their mother taught her, a long time ago.

They’re five strange beasts—they terrify horses—but they do as promised. The Express advises riders to use them if the road gets impassable for animals.

Even folk in River Pass have a little pride that for those who need a message sent where no messenger goes, you can point them right to Western Fleet.

Fa Liang started the business.

He left the Central Pacific line and came to River Pass in search of work. River Pass wouldn’t have him.

He’d never said if it had come to blows; it didn’t always have to.

But Susannah Pell from the clerk’s office followed him out of the general store and told him about Elijah, living on land of his own, well outside the city limits.

Elijah welcomed him. He was working alone, then, and the place was falling to ruin.

The barn had a pile of equipment Elijah had run so poorly that no one would take it off his hands.

The first dog Fa Liang built was small, and slipshod—the engine casing was one sheet of tin, and the seat little more than a metal spoon nailed on in front of it. The engine sputtered on steep inclines, and it limped. But when the livestock count was off one day, Fa Liang rode out in it, and came back with a calf he’d maneuvered out of a split in the rock.

“Damn,” said Elijah, grinning.

Fa Liang peeled himself off the seat—that first build wasn’t kind to the rider, his back was scorched for a week—and asked, “There a courier in town?”

They met Joseph when they came into River Pass looking for a blacksmith.

Fa Liang handed him two uneven legs from the dog.

“I need something to make this one longer,” he said. “And some weight, for the bottom.”

Joseph frowned, turned it over and over, smoothed his hands over the joints.

Then a smile stole over his face, and he said, “What the devil are you building?”

When Elijah came back from the general store with his wagon of dry goods, Fa Liang and Joseph were waiting.

Joseph had come from Missouri a freedman, after dismissal from the Union Infantry; he’d been working to earn money to go with the Mormon wagons headed west.

“If it weren’t for the dogs,” he told Faye once, “I’d have kept going until I hit the ocean.”

The dogs wouldn’t have kept him long, but Maria came soon after, and she could keep hold of almost anything.

What Maria hadn’t held was her farm—Texas ranchers ran her off as soon as her husband was in the ground.

But she was determined to find another homestead, so she’d joined a traveling preacher, and in River Pass, when he demanded to see the husband she’d claimed to have in a town she’d picked off a map, Maria saw Elijah coming out of the clerk’s office, and took a chance.

Sometimes, in January when it seemed winter would never break, Frank asked for the story. Maria made Elijah act it out, laughing; she claimed he’d been marvelous.

Faye didn’t buy it. Elijah was an honest man. Playacting didn’t suit him.

“He must have been bad, though,” Faye said once, when they were alone.

Maria grinned. “Horrible. Not even Padre was fooled.”

“But you came back with him.”

She shrugged. “A man who can’t lie is sometimes a good sign.”

Faye went to wash before the supper bell rang at the big house.

They came from their own cabins—Joseph, Fa Liang, and Frank and Faye from farthest out.

Maria had moved into the big house two winters back, when the ground betrayed her and her cabin floor split.

The garden turned into a cornucopia when she laid hands on it.

(“It’s like he *tried* to kill them,” Maria muttered to Faye once, wrist deep in dirt. She was planting squash far enough apart that they wouldn’t choke.)

When they came inside, Maria glanced up and nodded. “Frank. Faye.”

Frank glanced at Faye with the ghost of a smile. He had his shell necklace on, looped down his chest like a breastplate, and it was the only reason why Maria had been able tell one from the other. It was the same, the days Faye wore her skirt because her trousers were drying.

Still, Faye took any smile she could get from Frank.

At the table, Faye pressed against Frank and Elijah on either side; wedged at the end was a boy from the Express whose name she had forgotten, bunking with them while Tom Cantor from River Pass delivered his message.

They talked about nothing, for a while, for the sake of the Express boy. They all fought, sometimes—about the dogs, about the town, about elbow room at table—but never in front of strangers. Some things you couldn’t afford to do.

Joseph sat next to Maria, as always, and she pretended not to give him the biggest slice of cornbread, and he pretended not to look at her even when she wasn’t speaking.

They talked with Elijah about Tom and Dog 3, due back any day, and Faye watched Elijah’s face for signs he’d been a fool about the Union Pacific.

He didn’t seem a fool, but you got used to worrying.

When the cornbread and preserves were polished off and the boy from the Express had taken a hint and vanished, Elijah sat back and said, “We had a visitor.”

They set down their forks and knives too fast, ready for the bad news they’d known was coming.

Elijah laid out the visit from Michael Grant, and the plans for the Union Pacific construction, and the offer he’d gotten for his land.

It was the biggest number they’d ever heard.

It was the sort of money that evaporated loyalty; it was such a number that they all sat, stunned silent.

Faye watched him. For a bad liar, his face gave so little away.

“What do you mean to do?”

Elijah shook his head. “Wanted to hear from everyone.”

"It might not come," said Maria. "If they're promising that kind of money across Wyoming they'll run out."

But it wasn't true, Faye thought. The railroad was swallowing the land. The train was inevitable.

A lot of things were inevitable that none of them ever talked about.

(They held together like they did because to break would mean being swept back.)

"It will come," said Frank, his face grim.

"Trains will be bad for business," said Joseph.

"It can't crawl up mountains," Faye said. "Dogs can."

Elijah said, "They told me they can bring goods from California in three days, right through the mountains."

Fa Liang flinched.

Maria whistled under her breath.

"All the land?" Faye asked.

"They want to build through the north side," Elijah said, "so the station will be part of River Pass."

Faye's stomach sank.

Towns battled for the railroad, because the miles between the train and the city would fill with hotels and saloons and traders. If River Pass had gotten word of this, not Elijah nor anyone else would be keeping the railroad out.

When she looked at Frank, he was watching her, his face a mirror of her dread.

"Have they spoken to the town?" Fa Liang asked, in the tone of a man who knew what was coming.

"They're seeing the mayor tomorrow," said Elijah. "It's River Pass, or Green River. Our land decides."

Joseph crossed his arms. "And what would we do?"

Elijah shrugged. "We could travel northwest, start again. There are places that still need messages taken."

"You have a sweet feeling about how people will take us," Faye said.

"If we had that money, people might," said Fa Liang.

"I could have more money than Croesus," Joseph said. "People won't ever forget what I am."

(Maria looked up at him, a second too long.)

"Then they're small people," Elijah said.

"There are more small people than the other kind," said Faye.

Elijah looked at her, but didn't argue. He was good-hearted, but he had eyes, and he knew how they were all received sometimes, even in River Pass.

Elijah's hair was going gray, and when he smiled at Faye, the corner of his mouth disappeared into the deep lines carved by the sun.

"Then we won't sell," he said.

Joseph sucked in a breath.

Frank unclenched his fist from around his necklace; his fingers brushed Faye's.

Maria's face was drawn. "What will you tell the town?"

"That Union Pacific should look at Carson's place, and talk to him instead."

He didn't look worried enough. He looked like he was doing business, and not handling a monster whose iron teeth chewed right through men. He looked like a man who had never been in fear for his life.

They sat for a little while in silence.

Fa Liang left first—in a hurry, like he planned to clear out while he could.

Faye couldn't blame him. It was all she could do not to race the mile to the cabin, pack, and strike out north before dawn could find them.

Frank must have known how she felt; his laced hands were pressed to his stomach.

Joseph left, after passing close by Maria, and looking down at her with some silent conversation that closed out the rest of them. After he was gone, Maria laid her apron across the back of her chair and went upstairs, brushing her skirt like she could brush the railroad away.

Faye and Frank stood in tandem.

At the threshold, Elijah held out a hand without quite touching her elbow.

(He'd never touched her, not once in three years. He was the sort who didn't presume.)

"It will all come out right," Elijah said.

He was wrong, but still, she wanted to believe him.

She hoped the railroad men felt the same, when he tried to talk them out of it.

In the cool dark outside, Frank said, "We'll never see a fair day again, will we?"

"No," she said.

The dark swallowed the echoes that should have been there; the words pressed in like the nights they'd spent in ditches with one blanket, whispering into the dirt to make sure the other was still breathing.

(The Mormon school had taught them plenty by accident; they knew each other's voices above a hundred strangers, through a hundred feet of earth.)

There was a trail between the big house and theirs, a web worn into the earth from people going back and forth like family. Fa Liang had one from his house to theirs, to pick up Faye and head to the barn for dog racing.

He delighted in maneuvers, pivoting full around on just one leg; Faye delighted in how fast a dog could cross terrain.

The dogs were too useful, she thought. River Pass had to get messages across the mountains. The town might not care for them, but they'd stand up for the dogs.

You always wanted Elijah to be right; she'd even wanted to believe him when he said this could be home.

Faye and Frank had come to Elijah’s by accident.

They’d escaped from the Mormon school in winter—light snow before a blizzard, when they’d be harder to follow—and struck out for home.

They made it.

Fa Liang found them while he was testing Dog 2; they were both nearly asleep, he said later, and frozen through.

She knew how to look for shelter, how to keep away from the worst of the wind. She knew how to find them enough to survive on—they’d lasted weeks that way. But she’d forgotten how many it takes to keep warm in a cold that deep. (For that you need a family.)

There hadn’t been time to fetch help—snow was coming, and it would have been too late.

So Fa Liang had draped them over the dog and taken them straight to the house.

“You’re welcome here,” Elijah had said that first night. “Consider this place your home.”

“It is,” said Frank.

Faye set her jaw and waited for Elijah to strike, to tell them to get out.

But he only said, “Fair enough,” and looked at Faye, the closest anyone had come to apologizing for anything.

“We’ll see,” Faye said, and Elijah smiled.

Frank loved the idea of a service too useful to run out of town, and he and Joseph struck up pretty well, and he treated the place like it really was home.

Faye was waiting for a sign to move. It hadn’t yet come, that was all.

If she got fond of the dogs, it was just from being there so long; if 2 was her favorite, no one faulted her.

Dog 2 was safer than the prototype; Faye’s only burn was a thin line across one wrist, where her arm had hung too close to the shell, and Frank’s just a smudge burned into his stomach, where he laced his hands, sometimes.

When the railroad wants land the owner’s unwilling to sell, it sends a man like Michael Grant to file with the clerk’s office a finding that upon inspection, those acres, a gift from the United States, are being mismanaged.

Grant is tall and clean-shaven and has a new coat, and everyone gets friendly with a man who has money to burn.

Before long, he admits who he is. He says, “Shame about that Pike homestead. Seems we’ll be moving on to Green River.”

Word spreads—they’re close, held back by so little, it wouldn’t take any work at all, the railway will pay Elijah a king’s ransom, who does he think he is to cut the town out of its chance.

A town beside a railway town never makes it. It’s the train, or nothing, everyone knows.

(Michael Grant might have said this himself, to Harper at the general store, who speaks to everyone and never quite remembers the words aren’t his.)

When the railroad wants to make sure, they call the residents “unsavorites,” and remind God-fearing folk what happens if that kind are allowed to stay long.

It’s easy work. Most people never forget their little fears.

Elijah, Maria, and Frank took the wagon to River Pass a few days later—dry goods, oil for the dogs.

They came back too early.

Faye saw the line of Frank’s shoulders, and knew something terrible had happened.

She swung down from the dog, locked the engine off.

Elijah was white as a ghost.

They weren’t speaking.

“Joseph,” she called, “Fa Liang. Trouble.”

Fa Liang came from the barn, and Joseph from the smithy, and watched them.

“We should run,” said Fa Liang, so quiet only Faye could hear.

(She agreed. The town knew about the train. There was no good news anymore.)

In the yard, the horses were specked with foam and breathing like they’d run for their lives.

Elijah took Maria’s hand. Someone’s hand was shaking.

Neither of them looked at Joseph.

“We’ve agreed it’s wise to marry,” Elijah said.

They went to church early Saturday, before parishioners were awake to object.

They were without Frank, who didn’t like the idea of home being empty, and Joseph, who didn’t like the idea.

As it turned out, neither she nor Fa Liang were legal enough to sign the witness line, so they had to wake Susannah Pell.

“It’s no trouble,” she said, when Elijah apologized. “I wondered if you were in love, you had that look about you. And it’s good to see this for you, what with Grant telling people—”

The father cleared his throat; she said, “Congratulations,” set down the pen, stepped back.

Elijah glanced at Faye, then Maria, her hand in his, standing like a soldier in a black dress.

“Thank you,” he said.

With someone of the right temper, you could work in quiet for a long time. It was the thing Faye liked best about Western Fleet; it was the reason she’d been able to stay here as long as they had.

But they told stories, in the barn mending dogs by lamp-light, or on the porch in summer, when it was too hot to be in the barn any longer.

Joseph had his Freedmen's Bureau schoolbook, so well-read the binding had gone, and he recited from memory.

"Awful lot about forgiveness," Faye said once.

"It's all forgiveness," Joseph said. "Mercy."

"I'll bet," said Frank.

(Maria lent Joseph her Bible; he'd handed it back, said, "I'd just as soon not.")

No one questioned.)

Fa Liang told them about dragons and giants and the bird that tried to fill up the ocean. Once or twice he stopped half-way, saying, "My brother told it better," going quiet after.

He'd left the Central Pacific because he'd lost his brother to a blast, clearing rock for the rails.

Faye wanted to wrap her hand around Frank's wrist, like when they were little, every time she thought about it.

Maria sang in a sweet soprano that floated when it was cheerful, and settled on their skin if it was sad.

She didn't often seem sad, save on long nights where there was nothing left but to look at the sky and be mournful. Then she sang, voice trembling, eyes on the stars.

Faye and Frank never offered anything. The few stories they knew they held like secrets, like they'd need them someday, when it was time to move on.

"Bury me not, on the lone prairie," Elijah sang sometimes, when the others had fallen silent, his arms behind his head, face turned to the moon.

Faye tried not to look at him; when he sang it, her shoulders ached from not looking at anything.

After the wedding, they rode home in silence. Elijah looked older now that the worst was coming true. Maria looked determined not to let home fall to pieces.

It wouldn't, if the law held, Faye thought. It was hard to be sure; the laws changed so easily when people's hates built up against you.

They came back too late for supper, which Faye thought was for the best; when she met Frank in the yard, she could see Joseph already headed to his cabin, as if he'd waited to see them coming before he lost his heart for it.

"This won't be enough," Frank said, when he met her.

Faye said, "Let's go home."

They lay awake a long time, each looking at the other sometimes as if checking their worries in a mirror, until at last they slid into sleep.

(They didn't have the same worries; it was the only way they'd ever been different.

Frank touched her wrist whenever they reached their cabin, as if he was afraid she'd keep going.)

The boy from River Pass rode Dog 3 back to Western Fleet near midnight, six hours ahead of schedule.

Then he shouted them awake about the fire.

At the first scream, Faye and Frank were pulling on boots; you ended up a light sleeper, after as much running as they'd done.

They ran, breathing in time—they'd done this, too—and reached the yard ahead of Joseph and Fa Liang.

The barn was a tower of orange and smoke and a horrifying crackle as the heat started to do its work on the dogs.

For a moment they faltered.

Then Maria shouted, "Right, move," and they jerked into action like a spell had broken.

Frank ran for the water pump. Joseph dragged the hose from the horse barn, and as they attached it, Maria was enlisting the boy from River Pass (Tom, maybe, Faye couldn't think) and the boy from the Express in a bucket chain from the kitchen.

As soon as the doorway was damp, Fa Liang and Elijah and Faye used the wood-chopping stump to break through and run for the dogs.

Fa Liang and Elijah grabbed the two closest to the doors. Dog 5 was crushed under a beam, but Dog 2, parked farthest back, was still whole, and glowing underneath a canopy of fire.

"It's not worth it!" Fa Liang was already shouting, and Elijah called, "Faye! It's a goner, leave it!"

Frank, outside, was screaming, "FAYE!"

She stumbled, but didn't stop. They needed as many dogs as they could save.

They weren't mounts, now. They were weapons.

She shrank back from the walls as the heat rolled out, but she reached Dog 2 at last.

As she grabbed for a canvas, as she spat on her palms and turned the key until smoke rose between her fingers, as she threw the drape over and rode out with her back blistering, she never heard the sound of the fire.

She only heard Frank, screaming her name over a hundred other voices.

Elijah pulled her from the rider's seat, the canvas around her like a shroud.

But Frank was the one who carried her up the stairs of the big house, who cut Faye's shirt off her back—she bit down on something and screamed, hoped Maria put a belt in her mouth and she hadn't severed her tongue.

“Did the dog make it?” she asked later, when she was in a tub, and Maria was making something with mortar and pestle, and Frank was rinsing her with cool water.

Frank snorted, said thickly, “You would worry about that now.”

Even in pain, she knew that wasn’t fair; dimly she thought, I’ve always forgiven you, when you worried about what you loved.

“Not as bad as it could be,” said Maria, bandaging her ribs. “It might blister, but we were quick, and your skin is thick there.”

Faye never thought she’d thank the Mormon school for those scars.

Her hand was another story—there was a diamond key mark burned into her palm, as deep as Frank’s. Some things were past healing.

“It’s all right,” Marie said. “The wound is clean, it will be no trouble. I’ve brought you some clean things.”

“Whose?”

“A wife has ways,” Maria said, with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

But she was right—a clean wound hurt less, once the shock wore off. After Marie helped her into Elijah’s clothes, Faye was calm enough to say, “Let’s go down.”

“Good,” said Marie, fastening Faye’s belt. “They’re waiting.”

Frank was at the door, and he walked so close Faye thought it was a good thing she hadn’t burned her shoulder.

The others stood as she came in—even Tom, green with fright.

“I’m all right,” she said as they took their seats. (Maria sat next to Joseph.) “How are the dogs?”

“Fine,” said Fa Liang. “Dog Two got out all right. He just needs mending.”

“We have to fight,” Frank said. “The next time some coward from the city or the railroad comes here, we send him back dead on his horse.”

“It can’t have been someone from town!” Tom cut in.

“The tracks led that way,” said Joseph.

Tom blanched. “But—” he started, then fell silent as something occurred to him he chose not to voice.

“Go home, Tom,” said Maria. “If anyone asks what happened, you tell them someone set the barn on fire, and not a word else. Safer.”

After a little silence where no one spoke in his favor, he pulled on his gloves and stood.

“It wasn’t the town,” he said, but this time it was half a question.

“The railroad put him up to it, whoever he was,” said Maria, when they were alone.

“I need to talk to the mayor,” Elijah said.

“No,” said Faye.

They all glanced at her.

“She’s right,” said Frank. “No point.”

“The mayor probably set it,” said Maria.

“It does us no good to start fighting without asking for peace,” Elijah said.

“That’s all we ever asked!” Frank said. “And see how they treat us the second we stand up.” He propped two stiff fingers on the table. “Who here ever had understanding from that kind?”

No one raised a hand.

Elijah got an odd, quiet expression.

He said, “Not every man’s army, Frank. Not even railroad men. Many folk are kinder.”

Frank sat back in his chair.

“Strange thing I’ve run across,” Frank said, “since Faye and I were given to the school—knowing how many of them want us dead, and expect forgiveness.”

Elijah got the expression of a man for whom some things he’d never thought about were falling into place.

“Well,” he said at last, “then it’s a vote.”

He plucked five singed chips of bark from the hearth. He passed one to each of them.

Then he stood back empty-handed.

“Burned, we fight. Clear, we look for help.”

Maria snapped hers on the table char up like the high card in a hand of poker, pulled back fingers dusted black.

Faye wasn’t surprised. Anyone can be run off once, but roots take stronger, sometimes, on strange soil.

(They were around this table, weren’t they?)

Fa Liang sighed, and scratched at the back of his neck, and set down his chit with the pale side up.

Joseph was quiet for a little while before he spoke.

“I’m a free man, and if any man questions me, I have his answer. But I don’t know as I want any more fighting.”

His bark went on the table, the pale side up.

Frank sat forward, slid the black chit into the center of the table.

Elijah pressed a fist to the wall behind him. “This won’t bring any peace,” he said.

“Expect not,” said Frank.

Then everyone at the table turned to look at Faye.

Frank didn’t. Frank had closed his eyes, laced his hands tight against his stomach.

He did that, sometimes, when he was frightened.

Faye wished Elijah hadn’t asked her.

She’d wanted to leave three winters back, as soon as they could walk, but Frank asked to stay the night, and then they’d met the others, and the dogs.

Despite everything, Frank loved this place, where their

ancestors might have lived, and somehow she had tricked herself that if they were happy, this was home; but it never had been, and it couldn't be.

Home was a safe place. That was gone.

Now there was only Frank, fingers curled against the necklace he'd bought in River Pass from a trader, because it was what he remembered of their father, long white strands looped like armor.

She tossed the bark back into the fire.

“No vote,” Elijah said, trying to hide a smile.

When she looked at Frank's face, her heart broke.

Don't doubt me, she thought, more angry at him than at the men who'd tried to burn them out.

She'd freed them from the school; she'd led them to homeland again; she'd trained gangly boys to ride the dogs and never been so far as the summit by herself, because he'd asked her not to go, and she'd promised.

If she didn't want them fighting, he should know why; they'd seen what happened when you were outnumbered.

She let the wind slam the door behind her.

Faye remembered being young, when the land was the earth and the marks of antelope and the horizon that told you what was coming and plants growing in the shadow of the rocks.

At the school, she'd learned about barren. Barren was what happened to bad women, to the crops of people who did wrong. In the prayers they repeated until their tongues were numb, there was the hope of plenty, the fear of the blank land.

She found the path to their cabin without really looking, set herself on the hard-packed dirt that marked three years of habit.

There was a chill on the breeze, the edge of a winter that was still far off.

She knew why Frank wanted to make a stand. She just couldn't risk it.

If he would only leave, she'd go tonight, head for the mountains, never stop moving.

Their cabin was on a little rise, and she could tell its shape by the way it blocked the stars.

It was close enough to home, sometimes.

Of all the things that had been taken from her, she missed most the days when she looked across the place that had been home, and hadn't yet learned what empty was.

She was still awake at dawn, looking across the plain to the disappearing stars, when Frank found her.

“What's happened?”

“Elijah's gone to speak to the mayor.” He sat with her. “How are your burns?”

“I'll live.”

“I was calling for you.”

“I know,” she said.

They sat that way, not talking, just together and awake, until there was enough light to start work on the barn.

They worked all day, hacking out dead boards and scavenging replacements, trying to fit a home for the dogs.

“We could board them with the horses,” Joseph said.

Maria frowned. “Absolutely not. Those dogs will go in the sitting room first.”

“I'd beat you in a race through the house,” Fa Liang said, and across Dog 2, Faye gave him a look until he laughed.

They worked until the supper bell, and ate quickly, too sore and tired to make conversation.

It wasn't until Maria was pouring coffee that the empty chair occurred to Faye.

“What time did Elijah leave this morning?”

Maria paused.

Then she pulled back with the pot in her hands, counting his hours, her knuckles going white.

“Oh please no,” she said.

They stood up so fast they knocked their chairs over, a clatter that echoed as they ran for the dogs.

Because the land was what it was, Faye and Fa Liang saw the horse two miles before they reached him.

Whoever did it had waited until Elijah was on his own ground to shoot him.

His horse was loyal, and stood only a few yards from where his body had fallen—just past his property line, crossed by the long shadow of the sign for Western Fleet.

Fa Liang was the one who lifted the body and carried him to the dog.

(Faye couldn't imagine touching him; he was the sort who hadn't presumed.)

When Father Jake came to consecrate the ground, Susannah Pell came with him.

They all went up the hill in a ragged procession behind the cart that held Elijah's coffin, and they stood in a line beside the grave as the father said things that didn't matter.

After it was over, Father Jake walked with Maria to the house, and Fa Liang and Joseph began to cover the coffin.

The dirt landed with heavy thuds, as if their fear and sorrow had cracked the land, and Elijah was sinking into a place that would never be quiet again.

Frank took the harness of the cart horse. Faye fell into step with him.

So did Susannah Pell.

“I have her papers,” Miss Pell told Faye. “Let’s hope she can keep the land.”

So it was theirs to defend; the law would never freely give.

“Not with the railroad men coming,” Faye muttered.

“They’re afraid of you,” Miss Pell said.

Faye looked over. “What?”

“They’re cowards,” Miss Pell said, with too much feeling for someone at the county clerk’s. “Grant calls you awful names in town, makes out like you’re trying to rob them of a chance.”

“What are they saying?” Faye asked.

“Things no one should believe. Joseph’s a drunk, he says. Fa Liang worked for opium traders.”

Frank raised his eyebrows. “And?”

After a moment she admitted, “They say you have dark magic—you raise ghosts.”

Faye flinched.

Frank reached out for her absently, pulled back. He wasn’t a man of much comfort.

“If I could raise ghosts,” said Frank, “they would be right to be afraid.”

Miss Pell smiled tightly, moved faster to catch up with Father Jake and Maria.

“We should leave here,” Faye said.

Frank looked at her.

“Where would we go?”

He sounded as if he was thinking it over. Her chest went tight with hope.

Twice before, he’d run when she asked him to.

“Someplace quiet,” she said. “Free of people. Free. I want to look at the sky and know there’s no one else for fifty miles.”

He put his hands in his pockets and looked sidelong at the horizon.

(For a moment he looked like the little boy he’d been the first time the schoolmaster had accused them of black magic, for speaking their language.)

“I’d feel like a coward if I ran.”

“Then feel like a coward,” she said, “and live.”

After a moment, he turned and led the horse and cart toward the stable, on the far side of the big house.

For all she ached for home, she knew Frank’s anger. The whites had done things that shouldn’t even be spoken, yet they’d forgiven themselves. And now the train was trying to stretch an iron road across the land between them.

You just can’t be dead enough for some people. They want to burn your footprints right off the earth.

They slept in the big house together—it was safer to take watches through the day.

There was no one left to speak for them. The town had done what was right, on paper. It was waiting to see if the railroad overcame, now that the man who mattered was dead.

By evening they were awake, preparing for the worst.

“We should fit up the dogs,” Faye said as they loaded rifles at the table.

“What with?” asked Fa Liang.

“Claws,” she said. “Blades. Something that can kill.”

“They’re mounts,” said Joseph.

“They’re weapons,” she said. “Arm them.”

Maria, who was distributing bullets, looked up.

“One blade,” she said. “Under the turn of the ankle. They won’t see it until you use it.”

Joseph looked at her.

But Frank and Fa Liang and Faye rose, to take blades from the kitchen and start their work.

Grant and the railroad men waited until deep night before they came.

As the cloud of orange dust rose behind their horses in the light of the torches they carried, Faye realized they must have been waiting to see if help arrived. They were sure, now, that it wouldn’t; there was no hurry.

“We’ll lead them away from the house,” said Joseph.

He was too tall for a good dog rider, but he’d brought Elijah’s horse from the barn, and had a rifle in one hand.

“Stay here,” said Faye. “Maria will defend the house. Don’t leave her alone.”

Joseph looked at them, loading up their dogs with weapons and water.

“She’s right,” said Fa Liang. “Good luck.”

After a beat, Joseph nodded, and turned for the house.

Faye mounted Dog 2, slung her rifle in the holster and her pistol at her side.

“Make for the hills,” she said. “Fa Liang, flank them. We’ll take them out from the rocks. Frank, with me.”

“Of course,” said Frank, and grinned, his mouth a bright sliver of white in the dark.

“You’re a fool,” she said, smiling.

“Ride out,” said Fa Liang, and three engines started with a clunk and a shriek and a roar.

The dogs ate up ground toward the hills, which were easy enough to hide in and take shots while you could.

“How many are there?” Frank asked once.

She risked a look, in between the pistons of her dog’s left legs, but behind them was only thunder and a soft glow, dimmer, as if some had broken off to burn the big house instead.

“Hope you brought plenty of bullets,” she said.

Frank laughed, which numbed her fear a little; it was dark, and they knew the ground better than a stranger could, and any minute they’d reach the hills.

She’d forgotten about the barn fire, in the chaos; when two left ankles on Frank’s dog snapped, it took a moment too long to remember what happens to metal tempered in haste.

“Frank!” she called as soon as he dropped from sight. She gripped the rings and pulled; Dog 2 spun with a screech, circling back to him. “Quick, take the middle leg from mine. There’s time if we move.”

“There’s no time,” he said. His dog limped a few paces. It was slow, but the joints might hold long enough to reach the rocks.

The men were gaining; she could see two men with torches, two more in shadow.

“Get to the hills,” she said.

He was testing the broken legs, finding a gait that could support him.

“Go on,” he said through gritted teeth. “Fast as you can.”

She hesitated. Her heart was pounding so hard it sounded like another horse coming after them.

One of the silhouettes, she could see, was Grant.

Her throat was dry.

“No,” she said, “no, come *now*, come on, Frank—”

“Faye,” he said, turned to her with a look she’d never seen. “Go on. I’m right behind you, soon as I can.”

(She’d said the same to him, a long time ago, just before the soldiers reached them.)

The horses were coming into sight.

“Go on!” Frank shouted, gunned the engine, aimed the limping dog to follow her.

A gun went off, close, too close.

Faye took the hill.

It was slick and steep, and a struggle even for the dog, and she was fifty feet up before she realized there was no sound behind her but the thunder of the horses.

Frank, she thought, with a stab of guilt and sorrow sharp enough to tear her open; Frank, I would have stayed with you.

She didn’t need to look to know what he’d done so she could escape; before she could turn, she heard two shots crossing and a sharp cry.

(It was a voice she’d know among a hundred voices.)

A body landed in the dirt.

She spun, hardly breathing, her hands white-knuckle on the shifts, and tilted back so the dog’s front talons rose high, blades out.

The rifle appeared at her shoulder, two shots in quick

succession. Someone shouted; there was a clatter of hooves on the rocks.

She’d take the hillside screaming, and kill who she could, before Grant got her.

She dropped the rifle in her lap, gunned the engine.

She never made it.

The rider who crested the hill on her right flank was one of Grant’s railroaders.

He’d cast a wide net, she thought. He hadn’t wanted survivors.

The man must have been nervous going up a rock face so sheer; it took a moment before he looked up and caught his first and last glimpse of a dog of the Western Fleet.

By the time she reached the bottom of the hill, Grant and his men had vanished.

Frank was already gone.

She sat with him for a little while, pushed his hair from his forehead and closed his eyes.

She didn’t know any songs. (There was so little left).

So she told him the story he’d loved as a child, of the warrior who sought his stolen wife in the enemy camp, and the old grandmother who advised him and called him from the dead when he was torn to pieces, and when the man had his wife he brought the grandmother home as well, because it’s good not to leave behind those who care for you.

Her fingers were slick; she’d pulled at the rings until they bled.

When the worst of her trembling was over, she carried him to the dog, for his last journey home.

The others were in the yard, shouting plans to find them—Joseph was the fastest draw, Maria was on horseback, and Fa Liang had broken Dog 1 but was changing mounts, and knew how long it took railroad men to regroup.

Three men were scattered, dead, in the pool of light from the house.

Good, she thought dimly.

When Fa Liang saw Faye, his arms dropped as if grief had knocked him in the chest.

When Maria saw them, she dismounted and went inside, to clear the table for the dead.

Joseph reached for Frank, but hesitated, so Faye could object if she wanted to.

She didn’t. Her strength was coming and going. She could barely walk.

(Joseph could carry him, they had built the water pump in the yard together, they’d been clever and now Frank never would be, never again, her hands were cold.)

They laid him on the table in the front room. Faye smoothed

his hair down his shoulders, wiped blood from his face, laced his hands across his stomach in his old habit.

He'd wanted so much to fight for home, and win.

She yanked her hair out of its plaits, dragged her fingers through it, just for something to do with her hands.

Outside, she heard horses and engines, and people calling. Maria was riding for town to demand the sheriff honor her claim. Joseph was going with her, as armed guard.

There was a clatter as Fa Liang set the dog on watch.

When Faye looked into the hanging mirror on the far wall, there were two doubles in the frame; the weeping one reached out, took the cool hand of the other.

Maria and Joseph came back with grim faces, and spoke to Fa Liang. Then they came into the sitting room.

“To pay respects,” Maria said.

Faye wanted to ask what had happened, but her throat was dry.

Through the window she could see down the flats to the horizon. She'd watched that open line a long time.

“They're debating if it's legal to interfere,” Maria said, as if to Frank, before she left.

“You don't have to stay,” Fa Liang told Faye, when it was his turn.

That was cruel, she thought; he had to know how hard it was to part from a brother.

There should be something, she thought, when the others had gone. There should be someone here who could prepare Frank for a good journey home.

But there wasn't. Grant and his men would be back. There was no time, even if she knew what should be done.

She couldn't even dress him the way he should be dressed; he had only the one necklace. The rest of it was any man's clothes.

She sat beside him for a long time, wishing she could cut her hair.

Frank had made her promise never to, after they cut his at the school. She'd given her word. He'd grown his hair out, since—it was as long as hers—but still, she'd never touched it.

Her hands ached for a pair of shears.

She thought about the people in River Pass, who wanted the railroad, and worried Frank would raise the dead against them.

To the north, if she could swing wide of prospectors, she'd be free. Shoshone territory had been eaten whole, but if she left this behind, she could look for land they might not yet have thought to steal.

All that had kept her here was Frank—his hope of making a safe place, his belief in holding firm.

It seemed a betrayal to go on alone.

She sat beside him, thinking about what it meant to stay here, about how much she was willing to fight.

Then she rose, and took what she needed, and kissed him good-bye.

What Grant and the Union Pacific see, when they come to lay claim to Elijah Pike's lands, is a campfire burning high behind a six-legged metal dog, front legs raised with blades out, bearing a single rider.

They see they've raised a ghost, an Indian come back to guard his land.

Their gun wrists get cold, suddenly; suddenly, their teeth are chattering.

Grant and one or two others struggle for reason. They think, it can't be him, it can't—they look around for any other person who can make a lie of this horror.

But the dog moves forward, impossibly nimble, and they see the man's face in the first streaks of dawn, and the breastplate of his necklace, missing strands and spattered with his blood.

“God save me, it's Frank Clement,” Grant whispers, and the tremor under the name is the sound that sucks the fight out of them.

When Frank keeps coming, his jaw set and his dark eyes fixed on them, the monstrous insect moving underneath him with its engine shrieking, with his open mouth shrieking, with the thunder of the fire behind him, they run.

Less than an hour after Grant and his men had gone, Susannah Pell arrived with Lewis the sheriff and some deputies with guns.

When they came, Fa Liang and Joseph were gone—they'd taken the cart to fetch the broken dog—and Maria and Faye were sitting on the porch, flanked by loaded rifles.

The sheriff told Maria they'd found her claim legal, and the railroad in the wrong. Michael Grant had been formally accused of killing Elijah Pike, and the town would be suing Union Pacific for his murder.

It was the easiest way out, Faye thought, if the town was waking to a conscience. Grant was a good man to blame; he'd just been passing through on land that wasn't his, and that sort are easy to hate.

“The mayor's going to tell the railroad that God-fearing people won't condone that sort of thing,” Susannah told Maria, in the tone of a sister. “You're free to stay—of course we'll stand with you. Poor Elijah.”

Faye waited until the last of the River folk had passed beyond the horizon.

Then she said, “I’m going to bury him. Alone.”

When Joseph moved to argue, Maria put a hand on his arm, and he looked down at her and reconsidered.

Stay here, Faye thought. Take whatever moments you can. They’ll be far between.

They’d all be watched more closely, now, as long as they stayed here—the railroad and the town would both be waiting to see if the folk of Western Fleet had been worth their notice.

The price of a homestead, for their kind.

Fa Liang brought Dog 2 from the barn to the door, and she saw he’d lashed a shovel to the front of the seat.

“Call if you need us,” he said, in the tone of a man who knew what it took to bury kin.

She didn’t call.

All the while she dug into the earth nearly as tall as she was, and covered him with the soft dark dirt, she didn’t make a sound.

When it was over, she sat beside the grave and looked out across the wide horizon, where it curved to meet the deep blue sky.

At dusk, Maria brought wildflowers to the grave.

Then she knelt beside Faye, and said, “What can I do for you?”

“Nothing.”

“I know how it is, to let someone go who you loved.”

She hadn’t let him go, Faye thought, her stomach tight; that was half the grief.

“I wore his clothes,” Faye said. “I wore his name.”

Maria nodded. “It’s strange, the things that happen. I had a husband I didn’t love. I’ll be his widow the rest of my life.”

Faye smoothed her hands against her trousers.

(Some sorrows you carried alone.)

“Come in soon,” Maria said. “It will be cold tonight.”

Then she was moving across the rise and down the hill, sure-footed, all the way to the big house she owned, where she had made a garden grow from nothing.

Dark was rolling in above them.

Fa Liang was probably still on the porch, mending dogs’ legs by candlelight. Maria would be in the kitchen by now, forcing a meal together, and Joseph would be seeing to the horses for the night before he came inside, to watch Maria and not say a thing.

There was no moon, no stars—clouds covered them, the sky was grieving. In the dark, she could see Green River, a dim candle flame across the basin.

Amazing, how far away light could be.

The train would come to Green River; the train would lace the land tight, a faster road to cross the plains.

She didn’t want to see it. She would rather take a tipi and a horse and wander into the badlands, or die free in the first bitter winter.

But Frank was here; just now, she couldn’t leave him.

A lamp went on in the front room. It swallowed the lights of Green River, flooded the whole place like morning—the half-standing barn, the shadows of dogs in the bunkroom, the path to the cabin that was hers and Frank’s, their footsteps worn into the land.

Faye rose from the graveside, and started for home.



“Terrain” copyright © 2013 by Genevieve Valentine

Art copyright © 2013 by Richard Anderson