

Squirrel Poker

Lynn Pruett

He got screwed up at Newport, Tennessee due to an accident on I-40 and took the wrong lane, onto 25E, but at least he was heading north. In the rig's sideview mirror a stone chimney stood in a dead-grass field looking to him like a grand fuck-you sign. That morning his ex-wife had given him Xeroxed copies of their dead son's letters from the Army, copies, not originals, because, she said, the originals were personal, for her eyes only. When he argued that the words were the same, she pursed her lips and rolled her eyes, and folded up the letters Jeff had touched, and put them in a drawer and locked it.

Now his delivery would be late and the winding two-lane was clogged by a caravan of chicken trucks. White fluff, blinding as snow, cascaded down his windshield. At the final stop light in Morristown, Joab accelerated past the chickens but kept to the limit until he passed the pull-off where people lined up to fill milk jugs with cold mountain water streaming out of a tube. Around that curve, and dead ahead in the road was a peacock. It fawned, spread its greenish-blue feathers marked with gold eyes, but wouldn't move. Joab blew the horn. The bird cocked its proud head and whooped as if the rig was its long lost mate.

Joab ground the gears even though the bird was in the middle of a curve, even though the curve wrapped a mountain, even though the chicken trucks were sucking his tailwind pretty close.

He hit that bird going sixty miles an hour.

It left no mess on the highway.

He felt a thousand times better than he had.

From the way the oncoming drivers waved and pointed and screwed up their faces, he knew he had an ornament on the grill. He pulled into the next gas station and parked near a water hose. The smell of fried chicken lured him into the convenience store. He took care not to inspect the peacock.

As he walked around inside and felt his back pocket, he realized he'd left his wallet at Miriam's when he'd snagged the copies of Jeff's letters. He was broke.

Joab went back to the cab and sat there a while before he remembered the dead animal pool.

There's a joke about getting points for hitting a pedestrian. Well, being resourceful and bored, truckers sometimes get a dead animal pool going because accidents happen. Each type of animal is worth a certain number of points, but the hit has to be verified. The stakes are pretty puny east of the Mississippi. Nobody creams an elk. Normally it was big dogs and deer and cows, although one usually wouldn't claim a dead cow.

He called in on the CB and the brothers said a peacock wasn't worth a damn thing. A rooster, yes, they'd give him credit for, since things had been slow in the pool, but a prancy, fancy, stylish bird, no way.

Joab could see which way the wind was blowing for him. He'd taken too long messing with Miriam and now he was paying for it.

He stepped out to attend to the peacock. A desperate attempt to fly had gotten it above the bumper. The wings fanned out and its head hung straight back, its eyes full of passing

clouds. Sort of a martyred look to it. The neck was broken. He pulled out a few keepsake feathers.

"What you going to do with it?" A young woman had come up behind him. She was wearing jeans and hiking boots. A white t-shirt bunched at her waist. Her hair was light and tucked up inside a green Beechnut cap.

"Piss on it," he said.

"You'll ruin it."

He shrugged and reached under its shoulders to pry it loose.

"Is its torso intact?" she said.

"Who the hell are you, a surgeon? Look for yourself." His fingers had sunk into the slimy gore and he gagged. He crossed the pavement to the hose, washed his hand and went and found gloves in the truck. The girl had the bird sprawled on the blacktop. It was smashed pretty flat and exhibited all the colors of the rainbow.

"Good thing it only tore in two places," she said. "It can be saved. If the guts had splatted or the skin ripped--"

"Do you want the damn bird?" Joab sprayed water ferociously at the grill.

"No, but my aunt might. She'd probably pay you for it."

"Where the hell am I?" He pointed at the landscape of forests and fields.

"Clinch Mountain, which you'd know if you could read." She called him a bunch of names he'd heard before though none had ever sounded so comically musical.

Joab gave the rig a good cleaning, his stomach growling the whole time. The woman slid into a blue Duster and watched him. She wanted the bird and she did say pay so he beckoned her but she beckoned him so he went.

"You got to do me a favor," she said. Her eyes were green. "You take my aunt an apple pie. I was supposed to but I got other plans."

Joab nodded.

"My aunt's called Ma Jule and she has a museum full of stuffed animals. She doesn't have a peacock but I bet she'll like yours. She'll probably pay you good for it." The green eyes smirked. She handed him a pie, gave directions then tore out of the lot.

Joab put the pie in the cab, wrapped the peacock in cardboard he took from the dumpster and followed the directions back to the river. He turned east into the rolling hills past a large sign proclaiming *Ma Jule's Museum and Collections. One Mile*. He came upon a small brick house and a dozen gray outbuildings stretching to the near woods at the base of a mountain. It didn't look like a museum at all. The buildings were the remnants of an old farmstead, a corn crib, a tobacco barn, a chicken house, and a mule barn. One was an open dogtrot house and there was a second small brick dwelling with a sign saying, "The Dollhouse." Outside of it, an old lady sat in a chair made of a tractor seat welded to a metal rod.

He approached, and when she waved him down, he sat in the other tractor seat. The table was an iron wagon wheel put on its side and topped with a thick pane of round glass. The woman was writing checks.

"I've brought you an apple pie," Joab said.

"Cash is better." She counted up a sum on her fingers.

"It's from your niece. A present, I think."

"Too bad." She left off counting. "I was up to eighty-seven hundred and forty-two. Will have to start again. After the punch pie."

When she said punch pie, Joab's mouth watered so bad drool collected under his tongue. He didn't want to surrender the pie. He wanted to eat it. "Can I have a piece?"

She drew herself up, tossed a black shawl around her shoulders and grabbed the pie.

His stomach growled long and low. "I'm starving. That's all I meant."

"Stay out here." She disappeared into the house with the pie but much to Joab's relief, she returned with it, a bottle of rum and a bowl of sugar.

She punched holes in the top crust with a fork and poured the rum until the top was dotted with golden bubbles. She sprinkled a generous layer of sugar on it and handed him a pack of matches.

"I'm not good with fire anymore," she said.

He lit the pie and it burned perfectly. When the flame died, the sugar was a sweet brown crust. They ate the whole thing. Joab had five pieces; she had one because she was watching her figure, which resembled a fire hydrant. She served ginseng tea. He was satisfied.

He told her about the peacock, which she wanted to see to make an assessment. Ma Jule poked and prodded and gave the bird a total exam, pinching its legs, seeing if it had voided due to its traumatic end. She agreed with the niece that the tears could be repaired with clever sewing and it was a good thing he'd held his head back when he spread-eagled because it wouldn't be worth anything to stuff a headless peacock.

Joab was beginning to feel embarrassed for the fowl when she clapped its feet together. "Is this a donation to the museum or do I have to buy it? You'll get a better deal in the long run if you donate it and write off your tax return."

She sounded just like the Salvation Army. Joab felt bad because he'd eaten her pie. "I'll be honest with you. I need the money. I have to get my load of furniture to Lexington by midnight or I'm fired. I don't have a dime to my name."

"Well," she clucked and closed the red checkbook. She stood up and gripped his arm and led him past a glass house encasing a corn-liquor still to a building with a sloped roof strewn with bottles.

Ma Jule stepped through a dark doorway guarded by a bobcat. Joab shrank back, sure she hadn't seen it. She flicked on a light switch. The cat was stuffed. The sun had fallen across its face and given life to its yellow marble eyes. Ma Jule took a rusty key from beneath a wooden box labeled "Donations." Next to it was a guest book signed by people from all over the country. Ma Jule's Museum averaged a visitor a day. But Joab didn't sign it. He didn't want to leave a trace of himself there.

He grabbed the handles of an old plow and watched his fingers change from pink to white. As he felt the brown calluses grown from years of holding a twenty-ton rig on the road, he understood what had happened to him and Miriam. She'd wanted a two-story rather than a double-wide but he was too far away most of the time to understand that. Now, true to the model of upward mobility, she kicked those on the lower rungs while licking the boots above her head.

Ma Jule fiddled with the key. With a grunt and a twist, she opened the box and dumped out its contents. She clutched for the pennies, scarfed them up and eyed the dates. Nothing of interest, all bright and shiny. She smoothed out the green bills and counted them. Fourteen.

"A good haul." Ma Jule held them out to Joab. "God loves the working man."

"He's the only one," Joab felt so guilty, so *humble*. He'd never taken charity in his life.

"God and Ma Jule," said Ma Jule.

"You keep them. You earned it."

"No, I got everything I want." She closed the box, locked it and slid the key underneath.

"Almost everything. Except that I want you to tell the story of the peacock. More than hitting it. Something I can put on a card."

She waved at the room and turned on more lights. He could see where the bobcat was actually running from a half-grown bear, both headed out the door, their legs in a lifelike trot. Behind them, a hand-lettered card detailed their story.

"Like this," she said. "Tour the whole museum. Look at all the tableaux. Then come tell me what you know." She handed him an index card and a pencil.

He had never seen anything like this museum. Ma Jule was a self-taught taxidermist and had been at it for at least fifty years by the looks of some of the beasts. Nothing was too much for her to try. There were turtles and pheasants, rabbits and snakes, all kinds of animals. There was a tableau of a fox with a fresh-killed chicken and a rabbit just waiting to be got; there were marine scenes and woodland scenes. Joab freaked a little at the barnyard scene. There, proud as any ten-point buck, was a mule head mounted on an expensive walnut slab. Behind the chicken wire a hog groveled and behind it stooped the cow. Chickens in mid-peck were scattered

everywhere. What drives this woman? he wondered. It was as if she thought, "The cow died, let's stuff it." He imagined wild animal mothers threatening their children, "You behave or I'll take you to Ma Jule's."

It was the weirdest thing he'd seen. He read the cards and particularly liked the one of a white mule named Blanche DuBois. It said she'd been a southern belle who lost her plantation and lied about it. He laughed out loud and his echo came back and he was glad to hear it. He happened upon a jar of Carolina mayonnaise, an egg swimming in vinegar, and he cracked up again.

The more he looked, the more respectful he got. Because the taxidermy was ambitious and old. In a glass case, a squirrel foursome wearing clothes sat at a doll-sized card table, their paws gripping tiny hand-painted poker cards. Three had lost their heads; high stakes? No, time had done it. Even though they were preserved, they still decayed. The heads lay around the card table, the cotton stuffing spilling out.

He wanted to reach into the case and pick up the heads, find a needle and stitch them back on. He wanted to replace every lost feather, re-glue every patch of falling hair. Not make it nice and clean in here. Not tack up scientific names instead of made-up stories, no. He wanted to carry on Ma Jule's work. There was something dignified about the place. He sat on a ripped leather couch and breathed in the dust and closed his eyes against the naked bulb in the ceiling. He thought about what it must take to learn taxidermy by yourself and how many times you had to try to get it right and then he multiplied it by how many actual animals made it into the tableaux and he realized that Ma Jule had something there. She'd built a museum. He'd driven his life away.

His peacock would be there for Lord knew how long, a memorial to a life. But he still couldn't think of a history for it.

There was one room left. Four open shelves displayed a thousand arrowheads, easy for the taking. Stone tools and bows and a few hard-plastic so-called "Indian" dolls made up a very disproportionate tableau along one wall. Next to the tools, in its own glass coffin was a human skeleton.

There lay the answer to his unspoken question.

"Human Skeleton Found in Little Sycamore Creek, Cherokee," said its card. Ma Jule assumed it needed no more history.

The chest was only half-excavated. A hard, rocklike substance had fused to the ribcage, but the shoulder blades were visible. The legs were partially free of the hard mass. He could imagine Ma Jule chipping away to free the bone and slashing off the toes, which lay unattached at the bottom of the case, and then deciding to leave the rest of the bones alone.

But the head. Oh, the head. The jawbone angled in a scream. The eyes hollow and regarding him. It became human, alive. A pioneer, he wondered, or a Cherokee? Whomever it was knew he was about to die and protested it.

He stumbled out of the room and walked in a daze to the front door. He signed his name in the register, all caps: JOAB ABISHEE HENSLEE, COKER CREEK, TENNESSEE. PEACOCK DONOR.

But it was like he was watching a detached hand write his name. All his energy was fighting to keep the deadbolt of sadness locked tight against the letters in his breast pocket.

Letters he had to read. He walked toward the waning light, his breath dense as a large stone.

And yet he moved as if touching nothing at all.

He imagined his son hitting the ground. The boy knew. He had to know as the helicopter torqued out of control. Joab sat on the steps of the old dogtrot and unfolded the letters.

Dear Mama:

4/4

I have met some girls who are in the Army. They are not all butch. Some are married. And, boy, are they tough. I have met one I like pretty well as a buddy, nothing else. Don't ask about her. It's not that kind of thing.

She is almost tiny as a bird but she has muscles. She has short dark hair and the biggest brown eyes you've ever seen. She is from Idaho. I never met anybody from Idaho before. She never met anyone from East Tennessee either so we are even.

I call her Spud and she calls me Hillbilly so we get along. She said the girls have to take a class in make-up so they don't clash with their uniforms. I hooted on that one. I told her girls from East Tennessee would test out of that class.

There is one girl here from Louisiana and I bet her boyfriend back home would have a fit if he saw her now. You know how we all got to get up at 5 AM and do our exercises? Well, she was getting up at 0400 hours so she had enough time to do her make-up and her hair before the day started. She had long, thick curly yellow hair, all perfect. The sgt. told her she wasn't allowed to mess with her hair so much because she kept falling asleep in afternoon class. You'll never guess what that girl did. She marched into the barber and had him give her an army regulation buzz! The funny thing is she is just as pretty as she was before.

Well, gotta go. I like getting your letters a lot. Say hey to Chan, or rather, Hell-o. Sorry, Mama. Tell him I love the Army. Which I do. Except for some things but that's another letter and for your eyes only.

Bye.

Love, Jeff

Dear Mama,

4/17

I have met a friend named Terrell Hamler. He is from Warner-Robbins, Georgia and he is black. It is so funny, Mama, lots of these guys here are afraid of him. Guys from Orange County, Cal. Especially. They don't even try to be his friend.

We got to be friends because one night when we got rec leave he and I were the last ones left drinking. I know that will make you mad but we are on a tight leash here. Terrell and I were sitting at a picnic table in a park. We got to talking about California people and how strange they are. How they expect me and him to hate each other.

When you are out in nowhere like here, I love hearing somebody talk like me. I love talking about how the Dawgs are doing and is Alabama going to finally beat Auburn again? I don't want to hear how the South is still fighting the Civil War from the shit XX zit heads who asked Terrell if his grandfather was a slave.

That's how we started being friends. We were cocked. We were lying down on a picnic bench, him on one side of the table and me on the other, looking at the stars. He said, "You know that the frXX surfer dude asked me. He asked me was my grandfather a slave?"

I busted out laughing and I couldn't stop and he got real quiet and I thought, oh sh--, I've said the wrong thing. So I said, "That surfer dude doesn't know history, does he?" Because we're always being told how dumb we are in the South.

"History," said Terrell. "That ain't history, that's math."

And we both busted out laughing and we couldn't stop.

So we're pretty tight. We did good on the basic electronics test so we are going to be put in that program. I wish I'd got to use computers at school like these surfers did. Me and Terrell spend extra time in the computer lab because we got to keep up but it's FUN! You never thought I'd be saying school was fun, did you? It makes me think that if I was in charge of the high schools, I'd put a computer at every desk and say everybody had to learn how to use them not just the college prep kids. I'm turning out just like you, Mama. Figuring out ways to improve the world. Oh well. I'm so tired. Maybe when I get out of the Army, I'll go into computers at college.

Love,

Jeff

PS. Mama. Me and Terrell did not go to Tijuana last weekend.

5/18—

I have flown, Mama. Our unit went up in a helicopter and we flew above the desert. I have never seen anything like it. It looks like a giant sand pit but that doesn't sound like much. There are red rocks that stick up called buttes and they are so pretty when the setting sun lights on them.

You see all kinds of colors, grays and purples in with the reds and oranges. I never thought a place without trees or mountains could be pretty. But it is.

They have flown me someplace I can't really say where. There is no color but for the houses which are few and far between. And the people paint their houses dull colors to blend in with the sand. I never thought a gray-blue house could be considered colorful but that is the most color I have seen outside the sparkling casino signs. I miss GREEN and RAIN so much it feels pitiful to say it.

They flew us over another area and I had this strange thought about Daddy. I think about him a lot because he was in the Army, too. I saw a rig driving across the desert. Then we flew over a maze of brownish canyons and then over a place that was restricted. It was a large pit, maybe half as big as Watauga Lake, and there were things in it, metal things. From where we were, it looked like someone had dropped a basket of silverware. I was hit with the feeling of sadness about Daddy. I never said this to you but I was always scared that he would die and we would never know about it, or that he would die and we would find out after he was buried. I guess him being gone and doing all that driving scared me. It always made me sad to think of him dead somewhere and no one knowing who he was, or no one knowing how to get in touch with us.

But when I looked into that BIG dusty brown pit, I had this strange and peaceful thought that that's where he ought to be buried. It seemed right that he and his rig should go there at the end. Just leave him in the cab and let nature do its work like the Indians do out there. It's so dry. It was weird, like his spirit might could go free out here, that this was where he should be buried.

Morbid, huh?

I found out, and this is not a big secret, that the pit is a nuclear repository, full of all the waste from early experiments.

There's nothing that beats the feeling of flying. Even though I go in a chopper and the engine's loud as hell, I like the slow way we sweep across areas. I'm just glued to my window when I'm not doing something. The other guys nap. Something else, Mama. Everything is brown but then you fly over these big green circles and they look perfect from the air. Too perfect. Those are where there's irrigation. I don't know why I get so excited about things like that. It makes perfect sense. You want something to grow in the desert, you bring in water, and things turn green. How bad I'm missing the green, green grass of home.

Thank you for the cookies. Terrell got a potato pie. Think you could send me one of those? They don't believe in desserts in California.

Your sweet-toothed son,

Jeff

Joab heard Jeff's voice in every word and every word lifted a piece of heaviness from his chest as if the words were small, light sparrows taking twigs to make nests in the trees. His son lived again, through his voice. How open Jeff was with Miriam, how clearly loved. Joab pulled the index card out of his back pocket and smoothed it across his knee. He licked the tip of this pencil and wrote: "I gave my boy a good mother. His name is Jeff. He was unafraid to be alive. He loved and was much loved. I love him, too. The peacock was a wandering bird. It was out of

its tree, running in the highway, running away from home. It is here now, reincarnated and roosting.”

One ray from the sun had fallen on the steps where he sat. His whole body glowed. He stayed a long time on the stairs, feeling serene and at peace, connected to his boy by a tenuous thread that seemed to double in width with each passing second. Eventually a dog howled and the ray disappeared and the cool sheet of night descended.

Lynn Pruett grew up in Dover, Delaware. She's published *Ruby River: A Novel* as well as numerous stories and essays. She has an MFA from the University of Alabama and had a residency at Yaddo. An ag journalist, she lives on a farm in Woodford County, Kentucky.