

DOWNLANDS

CHALK WALKER'S FAVORITE TIME is endless summer evenings when the sun creeps slow to the horizon, not dipping under until all the kids know they have gotten away with something staying up so late and, even after, the sky won't let go the light, the afterglow gone rose to burnt to blood blue waves up in the islands and peninsulas of clouds, all so quiet that the stars have come while he is still running the streets, unsure of why it is a little harder, then a little harder to see the grooves and ridges of the sidewalks. Chalk Walker's legs are long. Long so that it takes two attempts, look, look away, and then look back again, to see their entire span. His arms reach down to the ground with only a little stooping. He moves as if on stilts and canes, lock kneed and elbowed, like a four-legged insect, and is not willowy, for he does not bend, but is thin and straight and ridged. He worries he is brittle.

There was another one. That one favored fish and blue panthers—living things that seemed about to move made Chalk Walker think of jumping and skipping. That other one worked in solid colors, reds and dark purples that show so well during the day, entice pedestrians to stop and admire. Chalk Walker drew still things, teapots and pickles. He had light blue, white, pink at the top of his pocket. They are the colors that, on full moon nights and in the first moments of street lamp, shine out from the cement. They are the colors the sun mutes and hides.

He thought of this other one as Hopscotch. Sometimes as Dawn or The Zookeeper.

When Chalk Walker paused to admire a drawing by this other one—a mermaid basking in the middle of an intersection, a pig—he wondered if that other one, The Zookeeper, knelt to the sidewalk and closed their eyes like he did and let the dry sticks, the calcium and sulfate clenched between fingers, move without intention, lines and shading, stories and portraits surfacing miraculous and free. He wondered if Zookeeper/Dawn also woke with the vibration of chalk against cement scratching on their fingertips and thought to just stay in today—the sheets so fresh and light, like being wrapped in meringue—but then, when Dawn lay back to dream, imagined strips of clean pavement stretched out and called. He wondered if when they, that other one, Hopscotch/The Zookeeper, fell down to sleep, if they, that other one, also heard tender explosions of soft chalk breaking on rough cement peaks like a lullaby, like a train scream.

Everyday he meant to get up, to see the morning and find this other one, The Zookeeper/Hopscotch. Everyday, exhausted by the long evenings, the long strides and squinting into the darkening cement, he did not wake up. He opened his eyes and saw the light already going soft. He rubbed his ever-desiccated palms rough against his face.

It began to happen that, eyes closed, guided by the chalk, he drew a cut finger or gleaming switchblade amongst the soda bottles and cityscapes. Once a giraffe with a bloodied leg. He shrugged and turned the corner but did not return to that area until several good rains passed.

Once it happened in front of his door—a guillotine and a basket of heads. When he came out the next evening, thinking to look away from the mess, it was transformed into a toy box and an Easter basket overflowing with bouncing rubber balls and painted eggs.

That evening he took out his chalk and slowly, intentionally, drew a body quartered and still connected to galloping horses. In the morning, he found a dancing, laughing, complete giant in the midst of four happy, wild stallions.

Chalk Walker pushed himself to tie women to burning stakes and machine gun villages. He strode fast along the sidewalk, moving until he could force his fingers to draw another horror. He stopped sleeping, his mind full of blood and death—sewage canals floated with severed elbows. Virgin blood dripped from goblets over the chins of flat-eyed men, and he shook at the thought of a thousand cats, eviscerated and still trembling, laid out on block after block of pavement.

The work of *The Zookeeper/Dawn*, it was good. Often it was great. The axes severing mice tails that Chalk Walker sketched became lollypops clutched in the joyful fingers of those mice, their tails restored to their bodies. The reshaping of his work relieved him.

In the day, he did not get up—though he was awake—and find *The Zookeeper*. He did not go see the retooling of his horrors. He lay and waited the next summer evening. When the chalk wanted to draw a rubber duck wearing sunglasses he forces streaks of blood down from behind the dark lenses, and if he found he had drawn bananas, he made them into Viking ships, lost at sea, the men aboard mad and wielding heavy swords against each other. Yes, he thought. Seal up the banana skin over them or convert them embrace each other, if you can.

It did not happen slowly. On a night when the clouds promised royalty in the sunset and the air hung sleepy with humidity and barbeque smoke, when everyone had forgotten that the day could close with anything but a long summer evening, Chalk Walker went out and, on the cement at the corner, there was no dark-blue fairy with wings a paper-thing hint of gypsum. On the pavement there was no fix to his chainsaw. The brains and bits of skull still clung to the edges. The piked heads had not become smile-faced daisies. The day after, also, nothing had been changed, nothing added. Nor the next.

Chalk Walker lay in his bed. The killing and the death hummed in his mind, and he knew it had been left to him to transform the sidewalks into flowers and resurrect the dead. He tried to stay in, tried to ignore fresh poured pavement a few blocks away, tried to deny the familiar alleyways, the sections of path that he had covered in horror. The call of chalk running jagged over cement was too strong. He went out and dug to the bottom of his pockets for dark shades that could overwhelm the iridescents of his own work.

He could not renovate the horror, so he drew new images on top, carefully plotting and coloring so none of the old terror showed through. Often he chalked over entire squares of pavement, made blocks of bright yellow, blue, when he couldn't think of anything to draw. Sometimes he did not plan and found deep-green goats with severed heads amongst the chocolate chips and spoons. These accidents made his arms and legs feel unsupple, ready to crack from each impact against the cement.

Every day he could not stay in bed. Out on the sidewalks, he whispered his apologies, his promises, like a prayer, in time with the swinging of his limbs. If you come back I won't any more. I won't. Come back. If you come back I won't any more. I won't. Come back. But Dawn/The Zookeeper did not and the chalk of that other one, Dawn/The Zookeeper's drawings scattered away into the everyday dust of the pavement.

Each evening he traveled out farther and farther, watched beneath his prolonged and shifting shadow for fresh drawings, a sign of The Zookeeper, stopped at smooth pieces of pavement to set down surf boards and Chinese jugs, and never found anything from the other one, Hopscotch/Dawn.

Once, though, on a night when dark came fast on the edges of a rain storm, the first rain since The Zookeeper had left, Chalk Walker found a parking lot transformed into miles of hopscotch. Though the work was fading, his breath caught at the elaborate mastery, at the grace of line and complexity of rule.

He found himself content and reverent in a game, following the rose petaled formation as it wound with ocean lapped islands and burning candles and plump easy chairs to bound over and leap to. The wind blew through his thin legs and thunder rumbled the chalk sticks in his pocket. Chalk Walker circled, tossed a piece of gravel to guide his movements, his limbs pliant like young trees, in and in, an entire parking lot of nautilused hopscotch embracing him.