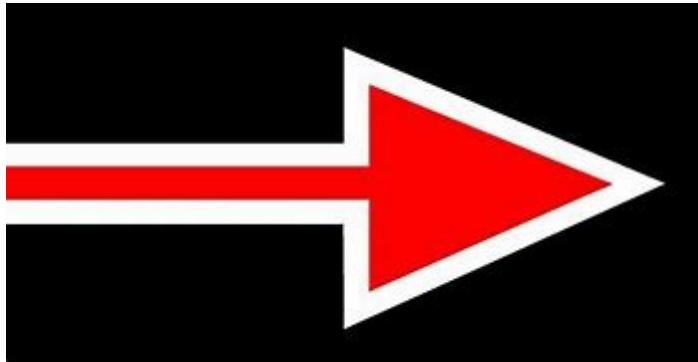


Des-tina-tion



(this here's the way)

Akeldama

by

L. P. R^{ing}

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...* “Destination Akeldama,” packs a lot of Benzedrine, film noir, and allegory into a tight knit tale. Make no mistake, L.P. Ring’s piece is about betrayal. It’s gritty and flecks of Chinatown and detective voiceover rummage through your head while reading, it has violence and war-time PTSD, it has the cookie-crumb trail that makes every reader keep reading. Our protagonist is the lost refuse of WWII, doing work he shouldn’t be, addicted to anything that keeps his mind from bringing back the war or facing who he is. Through some shady deals (work is hard to find in those times), he becomes partner to an unsavory robbing (morally, ethically, principally unsavory), and is albatrossed by guilt. Full disclosure, I had to Google what Akeldama (I hope I am in the majority of others who would need that crutch but you’re bright people) was – I am a philistine and Biblical allegory is lost

upon me – but what makes that fact even better is that this story stands alone. One doesn't need the allegory to appreciate what Ring has done here. Demise is brought upon us by our own selves. “Destination Akeldama,” is an enjoyment for its complexity, its ability to be literary, and the subtlety by which it hides its depths. As always, read on.

QUALITY QUOTABLES (*for the love of language...*)

Only the wakeful dead or some good ole' boys tying one on away from the wives hear the first shot. The bullet lodges in the fender. You get some good licks in before Billy, screaming this was a misunderstanding, shoves the barrel into your gut. You twist and stagger leftways, come back in for more, gritting your teeth at the burn from the second bullet. Dodging right of the barrel, your boot connects with a knee and Billy drops, in perfect pose for a right hook to the jawline. Your old reformatory buddy's lizard brain summons up every last reserve of strength in his wiry frame but weasels with a lifetime's experience needling others to fight their battles don't switch natures on a dime. You press the barrel into the flesh beneath your old friend's chin. His begging, his insistences that this was all a misunderstanding, his spluttered promises to do you right. He'd stand you extra, seventy-thirty, seeing as you did all the digging. Bygones be bygones.

Twilight's after nine, leaving plenty of time. These coddling thoughts aren't quite working; that scene in your sister's kitchen won't shift from your mind's eye. The Bible verse affixed to the dash wishing you to go in safety and not stumble feels like a sick joke. You shake the Beanie pill case again and splatter the dash with a gust of spittle and swearing. Empty pill cases are akin to pistols with empty chambers. Empty packs of smokes like grenades without the gunpowder. You smack your lips over the last of the tarry coffee and grimace in the rearview mirror. Not letting up nor coming closer. Glued to you at seventy, eighty, ninety. Probably at one hundred if you risked it and maybe ended up turned over, wheels spinning and the gas tank catching fire, you still strapped in and screaming. That would be it.

Destination Akeldama

By L.P. Ring

Curse the day you met Billy Torrance off the Silverside from Canyon City. “You dumb fuck!” In memory's burnished eye, Billy beckons you close between rounds, detailing this ‘golden opportunity’ in faux car salesman whispers. “I'm only sharing this ‘cos I trust you.” It wasn't quite draping an arm over your shoulder and leading you to a quiet corner of a car lot. But there was definitely the patter of ‘I'm offering you this because you're such a swell guy’. You should

have called Billy's bullshit there and then. People working for hoods like Dick Hallorann often ended up in way too deep, in jail, or dead. Forget that the cash would get you off Mom's couch, would show you were still something after the divorce. Forget that it would keep you in bennies, broads and booze for a few months.

Ma would have begged you to behave. Pop – in between sermons, God rest him - might have got more physical, like after that time you struck Johnny across the forehead with that half-plank in the back yard. Only for the good found in the righteous observations of the Lord would guilt or violence be brought down upon the Dawson children's heads. One day it'd be a lot worse than just filching a dollar from Pop's wallet or stealing the funny pages off the

rack in Cole's Drugstore. One day you'll take things too damn far, boy. Become unstuck, mess with the wrong people. And what will you do then?! You hear the old bastard's voice like he's in the passenger seat.

Johnny still bore the scar and would tell dames he got it fighting the Japs at Midway. Said the shrapnel grazed him and took the top of the skull off the guy next to him. That's why we always wore our helmets, he added, all kind of wise and sorrowful, even when the heat passed a hundred. The gullible ones might reach over and stroke his elbow, maybe run a hand along his well-toned, sun-bronzed arm and squeeze his hand. The modern woman loves a soldier, unless it's the type that wakes up screaming in the night, pickled in sweat and gasping for someone to call in a retreat.

It was just a simple collection job though, right? The following day, Billy was cracking a joke that elicited a dismissive growl from the glowering psycho standing arms folded at the backroom's entrance. Dick Hallorann kept court in Paddy Delaney's once a week, his legitimate businessmen's club discussing investments, personnel, neighborhood welfare and the like amid the stench of stale Guinness and cigarettes. You kept to the shadows, barely worthy of a nod from one of Albany's most powerful citizens, while Billy confirmed the latest piece Hallorann wanted added to his collection of esoterica. It didn't feel right, not right at all. But Hallorann even offered an advance for the plane tickets and a car in Lewiston. "You boys just make sure you do this job right," he finished, his natural inclination for largesse fueling his tone and beneficent smile. "And there'll be handsome rewards on your return."

Hallorann insisted it be done under cover of dark. "Damn superstitious fool's all up in one over a potter's field being guarded." Maybe Hallorann didn't consider how well two men stumbling round an unmarked graveyard would do. "Well, fuck it. I'll press the old bastard

for a bonus," Billy says sometime past four, that airily toned confidence unlikely to be copied with a man known for dispensing of even mild annoyances in the Hudson. Drop down to Gino's Construction, Hallorann was prone to say, gesturing to who he wanted to deal with this 'difficulty'. Fit our friend here up with a pair of shoes.

You can easily picture Billy thus attired. You wince as another blister pops and wonder how many more of these holes need to be dug before finding it. “You’ve done jobs like this for Hallorann before, Billy, right?”

“What freakshow do you think I brought back from Canyon City? The guy may be rolling in it, but he’s also a fucking coot.”

The clotted earth digs up just fine; the clang of shovel’s edge on rock brings a groan from you but excitement from Billy. “This is how Hallorann described it. Keep going!” More than once Billy thanks his foresight for bringing a partner. In fact, he talks a damn sight more than he works.

“What the hell gets buried this way, Billy?”

“Focus on the cash, buddy.” You lift the rocks up, fingers and palms quickly chapped and caked in grime. Your back twinges, your wheezes sound loud enough in your ears to attract coyotes. Meantime, Billy’s steady patter would have strained a mother’s love: Hawaii trips, long sandy beaches, and beautiful women yearning for a rich, handsome stranger...

The thunk of your boot’s toe on coffin lid comes as a massive relief.

“Careful!” Billy warns, easing in. He slides the shovel’s blade into a slit between the planks. The sound of wood splintering carries away in a breeze set for travels toward the sun-tickled horizon. Billy pulls the knife from his belt. The grin of the desiccated corpse teases, as if it finds this funny. You wouldn’t have been that surprised if it winked. Billy reaches for the dried-out appendage lying upon its concave chest and starts working the blade across the withered tendon and bone. “Easiest ten grand I ever made,” Billy mutters through gritted

teeth. After a night of stumbling about and digging in a dozen wrong places, removing the hand takes no time at all. The tendons, dried out in this soil snap easy, the bone crackles, crunches and pops. “Cover it back up.” Billy scrambles out of the grave, the gnarled appendage cradled in his hands. Ten grand, huh? That grin still mocks you from between the coffin slats.

Gut instinct gets you following Billy back to the car. Cargo stowed safely in the trunk, Billy appears, the new day’s sun glinting off the barrel. You launch that first punch on instinct too.

Only the wakeful dead or some good ole’ boys tying one on away from the wives hear the first shot. The bullet lodges in the fender. You get some good licks in before Billy, screaming this was a misunderstanding, shoves the barrel into your gut. You twist and stagger leftways, come back in for more, gritting your teeth at the burn from the second bullet. Dodging right of the barrel, your boot connects with a knee and Billy drops, in perfect pose for a right hook to the jawline. Your old reformatory buddy’s lizard brain summons up every last reserve of strength in his wiry frame but weasels with a lifetime’s experience needling others to fight their battles don’t switch natures on a dime. You press the barrel into the flesh beneath your old friend’s chin. You ignore his begging, his insistences that this was all a misunderstanding, his spluttered promises to

do you right. He'd stand you extra, seventy-thirty, seeing as you did all the digging. Bygones be bygones.

"Is that seventy percent of five grand or ten?" you growl before pulling the trigger, bullet number three tearing half Billy's face off, dousing you in splashes of hot blood that momentarily make you squint red. You wipe off what you can, using Billy's jacket as a makeshift cloth, spit and sputter at the taste of blood, rinse your mouth with a shot of coffee. The gun gets wedged in your belt, the knife tossed in the trunk. You figure that friendly bastard in the box won't mind sharing his resting place.

Flesh wound tended to like any veteran of Uncle Sam can, you're back on the road, speeding towards that cool ten g's. You are Phil Dawson the teenage tearaway, the petty thug, and breaker of your mother's heart made good. Someone please say you can't go faster, you think, and see you push the pedal to the metal. Tell you to slow down and see Phil Dawson blow you off, Daddy-o. Life on the great American highway - miles upon miles of open road. You are James Dean in Little Bastard, Lee Petty at the Charlotte Speedway. King of the Road. When the crackling from the radio starts, you switch stations, twist along the dial, half-wondering what else you can get out here except Hank Williams and maybe Jerry Lee. It won't even switch off. You consider prising the damn thing out and dumping it on the side of the road.

The rearview mirror shows the blackest Lincoln you've ever seen bearing down fast. You flash the lights, wind down the window and wave it past. No dice. The driver must like being close enough to see the bullet hole in the fender. Fine then, let the fucker stay in your exhaust fumes. You press down on the accelerator, frowning at the knots and clasps of language now coming through the static buzz. A voice through the wires linking life and death, you'll soon realize. A voice to growl and holler, caution and threaten. A voice who knows of desecration and theft. And who knows where the bodies are buried.

You bawl a volley of expletives at the radio, slam your hand down on the dashboard. The voice answers with your mother's birth date and year, which you've forgotten. "And you just wait 'til we get onto your brother Johnny, your sweet little sister and her family. You won't have a soul left." There's that humorless chuckle again. The voice now details the birth dates of your sister and her kids. Your knuckles whiten, bile heating and souring your throat as the voice details what will happen unless you turn round. "Shut the fuck up!"

"They'll stay right behind you until you've returned what you stole," rumbles the radio. "All the way back to Lewiston. Then they'll be there again in Albany, right outside your folks' house while you explain how some sudden windfall means you don't need that couch space anymore." There's more crackling, this time accompanied by a chuckle steeped in the illest of humor. "Why do the living think they can take from dead men?"

A bright flash pierces your thoughts and there's Melanie, strung upside down, the blood gushing from the slash across her throat splattering onto a linoleum floor. Alongside her, her husband – who you've never actually met – kneels bent over, hands glued to the floor, a nub of bloodied

flesh in each upturned palm. The kids... you scream for the first time since Midway but this is fucking worse. They're only kids.

Spirit, are these the things which must be, or are they what may come if I don't succeed?

"You've got 'til sundown, Philip Bartholemew Dawson." Your chest thumps against the steering as the car behind clangs the fender. "If that final shovelful of dirt isn't patted down tight, there'll be nothing to save you and yours from me and mine."

As if on cue, the Lincoln eases back. You slow, the tires spewing up dust as you drift into the layby before twisting the wheel.

Drive onwards. The speedometer budges past ninety, yet the benzedrine and the last dredges of caffeine insist you could go faster. The windows are down, the sun's rays blinding, the dashboard scalding, the sun mounted past its midday peak. You could almost trick yourself into forgetting how utterly fucked your circumstances are.

You are not afraid for your life and the lives of your kith and kin.

The tank remains in the rearview mirror, keeping pace with your Plymouth - never passing, never falling behind. Here's at least part justification for the bennies, the caffeine, the speedometer going berserk. The reason for your return to a desolate patch of forsaken land that should never be stepped upon by a living soul.

Who the fuck are you kidding about fear?

Twilight's after nine, leaving plenty of time. These coddling thoughts aren't quite working; that scene in your sister's kitchen won't shift from your mind's eye. The Bible verse affixed to the dash wishing you to go in safety and not stumble feels like a sick joke. You shake the bennies case again and splatter the dash with a gust of spittle and swearing. Empty pill cases are akin to pistols with empty chambers. Empty packs of smokes like grenades without the gunpowder. You smack your lips over the last of the tarry coffee and grimace in the rearview mirror. Not letting up nor coming closer. Glued to you at seventy, eighty, ninety. Probably at one hundred if you risked it and maybe ended up turned over, wheels spinning and the gas tank catching fire, you still strapped in and screaming. That would be it. It wouldn't be it for Ma though, God love her for trying to steer you right. Wouldn't be it for Johnny or Melanie either.

Maybe an hour away now. No more than an hour away. And why didn't you just turn back sooner? Or tell Billy back in Albany to shut his damn mouth and buy a round for once. You wish you could wake up anywhere a thousand miles from here, even back on a rust bucket in the middle of the Pacific, heading to Midway to have the brains of the guy crouched beside you spattered across your face.

"I need to pull over."

Guttural laughter rumbles from the speakers. “A piss in this heat?”

“Coffee.” You’re acutely aware of the sweat soaked into your back and the ass of your pants, legs itching like all hell and going too fast to risk a proper scratch. “I didn’t sleep. And I’m all out of bennies.”

“You think these hicks hand out benzedrine with a cup of joe?”

“There’s a coffee place in five miles or so. I saw it before.” Was that reference to ‘joe’ a sniped reference to your Midway memories? “You don’t want me falling asleep and flipping over in a ditch.”

“We’re trusting you not to try making any friends in there, Phil. That’s more trust than grave robbing gophers usually deserve.”

The coffee shop’s sign glints in the sunlight like a twenty in a panhandler’s grasp. You slide into a parking spot, ease out, one hand gripping the flask, the other pressed against your wounded side. The crackling radio issues a final reminder to be smart. There are a few trucks dotted around the lot. Would any of them have bennies – the truckers’ friend? Tires spin in the gravel as the bell above the door chimes.

You thump the flask on the counter. “And if you got anything else stronger, I’ll take that as well. Got me a helluva day ahead.” Your comment and chuckle doesn’t raise a single head; each set of hunched shoulders bearing witness to the ‘mind your own damn business’ trucker epithet. Fucking typical. The dollar fifty charge seems high but are you going to argue?

“You get many out-of-staters dropping in for coffee and pie?” The waitress’ gawp precedes her neck twisting a near one-eighty, staring into the kitchen where the short-order cook’s letting something turn black on the fryer. His look’s as blank as a school chalkboard in summertime. “Maybe not then, huh?” You register the smear of red on the bill, give a final scan of the customers all staring at their plates like it was their driver’s ed. exam, and head for the door. “Mighty friendly place,” you snipe over your shoulder.

You leave the parking lot tires squealing and a middle finger shoved out the window not that anyone would care. You answer the chuckle audible over the radio’s distorted buzz with a hearty “Fuck You!” and get a ten second burst of Gene Vincent rockabilly in response. Your chaperones’ eased nonchalance in settling yards behind you is just another ticked box in the growing catalog of your malice. You press on the accelerator, tickling three figures, half-

begging a busy-body highway patrol to pull you over. But nobody’s issuing a ticket to this caravan. Nobody.

Coffee scalds the back of your hand as the front wheel jolts over a rock. Off the highway now and the suspension’s being ridden harder than a five-dollar hooker. Over the final rise, the spot

still carries the sign of the hastily completed internment. You pop the trunk and grab the shovel. The soil comes away even easier the second time, dirt flying in all directions as you work down to the rock. Then it's by hand again, glancing back every so often to see that your pursuers don't venture closer. The sound of their engine and the thunks of rocks tossed left and right play background to your frenzied wheezes.

There's little to offer solace that they won't just bury you alongside Billy the moment the hand's returned. You're fucked anyway as soon as you return to the city empty-handed, Hallorann now wanting what Billy promised and the money owed for funding this mess. But that's a concern for much later, a later that might bring you down to Mexico or west to California – if one gravedigger might be dead, why not two? You think of the gangster holding court in the back of Delaney's. Would he go searching over the price of two plane tickets and an Avis rental?

You turn another rock aside and glimpse a flannelled shoulder. The undamaged part of Billy's face, you remember, is turned skyward at least. You drag the corpse sideways, looking at his face as little as possible, and remove enough rocks to reach the coffin. That bastard's still grinning. You clamber out of the grave and back to the car.

You return the hand carefully to the dead man's chest. Job done, then restack the rocks - the second time today and thankful to do it if it means living. Billy's corpse is already exuding a lumpen ripeness that flares your nostrils. A worm slithers from his mouth, a sign the local insects, already taking up residence, have some appreciation for your handiwork.

You pause, scanning the ground around you between hefts of rock. A potter's field maybe, but the souls buried here weren't just the poor and unclaimed.

You almost weep as they drive off, not really daring to dream until the rhythmic thuds of the Lincoln's engine are out of earshot. You can rest a little – each breath tasting of blessed relief. Head west – away from Hallorann. West away from family, true, but they are better off without you, aren't they? California would mean the coast, the Pacific, but still far from Japs and death, sparkling now with opportunity. A clean slate working on the shipyards or getting into real estate. You can watch the Dodgers if O'Malley does carry out his threat to move them west. You might even get in the movies. And on the way, you'll find a sawbones for this wound.

It's only a few miles back down the road when the voice directs your attention to the tree ahead. You pull over, listening to the final part of the deal as the engine ticks over. "Mr. Hallorann needs something to remember this by. And I think his reminder should be double what he sent you to steal."

Was that tree there before? Funny what the eyes see but the mind doesn't even register.

"You could take just my left hand. Or what about taking Billy's?" No answer from the radio. You suppose the suggestion doesn't deserve one.

“And that’ll end this? You swear.”

“Five minutes after this, I won’t even remember your name. Or your family’s.”

The rope hangs limply, not making as much as a twitch in the dead air. You balance on the supplied stool and budge the branch back and forth – it’ll take your two hundred and thirty pounds easy - and put your head through the noose. The Lincoln pulls up with a spray of gravel;

and your dalliances with the worst of people Albany has to offer, as a handful of Japs and Billy Torrance have testified. The sentence is death, and may the Lord have mercy on your soul.

You take a final free breath before kicking away the stool. The hint of a breeze cools the tears upon your face as you choke, gasping for mercy, twirling beneath the branch in those last glimmering vestiges of twilight. And your bird-pecked corpse shall join Billy’s in that desecrated ground.

The End

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

For ‘Destination Akeldama’, I wanted to write a tragedy. I wanted to show how a man’s desperation makes him a pawn. I wanted to show that in his reach would come his downfall.

I’m a massive fan of genre fiction, especially crime and horror. These are genres where the starker choices, the hardest questions, and the most honest answers often reside. I’m also a particular fan of the downbeat ending, so give me the bleaker side of Jim Thompson or Stephen King, the dark, desperate solemnity of Shirley Jackson, the grotesque characters and violence of Flannery O’Connor or David Peace. I want to finish a book and be challenged, angry, even afraid. And when there is light at the tunnel’s end, I want it to be the dim half-light as dusk approaches.

I’m also a delight to be around.

AUTHOR BIO: I’ve been writing freelance for about five years now and have had work published recently with ‘The Bombay Literary Magazine’, the ‘This is Too Tense’ anthology, and will shortly be featured on the horror podcast ‘Kaidankai’.