

The United States of Centralia

By Daniel Walker

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We can't help feeling the presence of Cormac McCarthy in this strongly written apocalyptic thunderclap—even if it's only intuitional. There is a remarkable stylistic consanguinity between the two authors. That said The United States of Centralia stands on its own. This kind of fiction is high on the 'pop' register because it appeals to our fantasies about societal dissolution—something that feels kinda real right now. But what raises Walker's story above the clichés of the genre are the intriguing characterizations, at once off beat and startlingly real, and a powerful sense of human frailty. Dialogue smokes and his prose might as well be a living organism. Quote:*

“Why don't they fertilize it, try to make it grow again?”

“It's not real grass, it's called astroturf. You can't fertilize fake grass.”

“Sure you could. You could use fake poop. Like they use in practical jokes.”

And...

What was he, anyway, compared to the cat? A big hairless ape, a troglodyte cast out from his clan of lost boys. All he knew how to do was pick people up and throw them around, maybe bang their heads against the doorjamb if the situation called for it. He'd always be a big kid, unable to muster up even half the dignity that this little fucker carried with him.

Five stars.

(Spacing and font size are author's own.) Eds.

A snatch of an old song came to the blond boy in his sleep. When he awoke, he taught it to the others, and it gradually evolved into something like a war chant. "Scotty doesn't know, Scotty doesn't know, don't tell Scotty, cause Scotty doesn't know." They ran up and down the length of the doublewide trailer, high-kicking at invisible foes and yelling their newfound hymn at the top of their lungs. "Stop it, STOP IT!" yelled the big kid. "You're scaring the fucking cat." But no one could hear him, for the din was too great.

Normally, people listened to the big kid, especially if he was bold enough to throw out a cuss word like "fucking" or "shit." But something had the boys riled up today, something weird and intangible. A couple weeks before the Heavy Stuff began, the big kid had gone to the zoo. By himself, just for nostalgia's sake. Most of the animals were silent and still – the reptiles buried themselves in the crevices of the earth, the polar bear sat forlornly on his plastic ice floe. But the monkey house rang with a tumultuous rattling, a cacophony of howls and screeches - not unlike the noise that presently surrounded the big kid. It had felt like the monkeys were telling him off, he thought, and there in the heat of the monkey house he had felt small, and when he felt small he felt compelled to lash out. He glanced under the bed. The cat was crouched down beneath the saggy midsection of the mattress. A single fang peeked from its mouth, and its wide eyes rose to meet his. The big kid stood up, took a deep breath, and drew his shoulders inward. Then he crouched down once more, reached beneath the bed, and scooped his new friend into his pockmarked arms. No one noticed him step outside.

He dusted the cat off, feeling apologetic about the ruckus. It didn't look too scared, and he wondered now if bringing it outside might've been a bad idea. But the cat just turned in a circle and sat nonchalantly on the dead patch of earth beneath the piss 'n shit window (so named because it was the window that the boys pissed and shat out of - save the big kid, who preferred

the blue-white alcove of the trailer's built-in commode). He looked at the cat, in all its grace and nonchalance, and suddenly felt bigger and clumsier than ever before. What was he, anyway, compared to the cat? A big hairless ape, a troglodyte cast out from his clan of lost boys. All he knew how to do was pick people up and throw them around, maybe bang their heads against the doorjamb if the situation called for it. He'd always be a big kid, unable to muster up even half the dignity that this little fucker carried with him.

Then the cat arched its back and mashed its head into the big kid's ankle. Yet again, he scooped up his feline friend and gave it an experimental peck on the nose. *There we go*, he thought. *Now the playing field's even. If you're gonna love me, I'll love you right back.* The cat batted at his cheek with a blunt paw.

He walked on, and the cat followed with him. Before the two of them lay a field dotted with patches of black mud. The well-worn soles of the kid's sneakers left smeary grids in the mud, and the cat's tender feet left little round craters beside them. He walked up a hill carpeted with rotting moss, crushed skinny sticks underfoot, and crossed yet another muddy field, all the while looking down to make sure the cat was still at his side. After many minutes, they happened upon a thin brown creek that bisected the valley. The cat leapt onto the riverbank and bent its head to hesitantly lap at the brackish water below it. His big companion surveyed the river, making sure the water was free from any foreign contaminants. A glint of rusted metal caught his eye, and he grabbed the cat by the scruff of its neck and hoisted him away from the water. So startled and worried was the big kid that he found himself verbally reprimanding the cat: "What the fuck's wrong with you? I thought cats weren't supposed to like water. I turn my back on you, and you go and drink-" He stopped. The stray crackle of snapping twigs caught his ear. He looked to his right. At the edge of the river, far down to the right, a girl was watching him.

Arlene was blonde, with black eyes, and a voice like an adult's sigh. She was a little older than him, though she was still what he considered a big kid. The cat sniffed at her for an instant, then moved into the brush to explore. She was gathering sticks for the little kids at her school.

"Do you go to school?" she asked him.

"No, I don't go to school," he told her. "I used to, but I try not to remember about that stuff. Why do you go, anyway?"

"Just to volunteer, when I can. I stopped going too, but ... I had a little sister. And I'd go in with her, just to see all the little kids. Nowadays I go in anyway, just to help out. You know, since they're so understaffed these days ... I mean, out here."

"These days out here," the kid said.

She suggested they walk together, and so they did. The cat squirmed slightly in his arms as he held it like a bag of groceries. He handed it off to Arlene every couple minutes, and she held it close to her chest like a heavy book. Eventually, they found the football field. The fake grass at their feet had been bleached a pale grey. As the kid looked down, the phrase *ashes of time* floated through his head - though he had no idea where he'd picked it up. Arlene caught him looking down and said "I hate it, too. They should rip it all out, if you ask me."

"Why don't they fertilize it, try to make it grow again?"

"It's not real grass, it's called astroturf. You can't fertilize fake grass."

"Sure you could. You could use fake poop. Like they use in practical jokes."

And she laughed at that. Her laugh carried no malice and no echo of the monkey house.

She guided him to a red pickup sitting in what he guessed was the parking lot. They got into the cab, the kid taking shotgun and Arlene slouching in the driver's seat. And then they were off, Arlene steering the red bulk of the truck down a raggedy country road. She took the opportunity to tell him everything about her life, and he took the opportunity to listen. He learned of her parents, who used to work the earth before the Heavy Stuff, her two big-ass brothers who wrestled each other at all hours of the day, and her little sister. When her immediate family exhausted itself, she moved on to her distant relatives. She talked of uncles who fought the fires as well as each other, the way her grandpa always called the Heavy Stuff the "Heavy Shit," and an aunt who lived out in California and worked as an acting coach.

"My aunt, she was in the movies. Well, only one movie, when she was very young. *Five Easy Pieces*, have you heard of it?"

"No," answered the kid. He stayed taciturn, but he was enjoying this. After his days in the trailer, it felt especially nice to be around someone who could talk and stand still at the same time.

"I didn't expect you to have heard of it. It's old. But it's one of our family's favorites. My auntie's only in it for a minute, but it's our favorite minute in any movie."

They pulled into the gravel driveway of a small two-story farmhouse, and the truck ground to a halt. The kid swung the passenger's side door open as the cat jumped gracefully to the ground. Arlene hustled past him to the front porch, where she stood by the screen door and dueled with the keyhole. The door opened with a croak, and she waved him inside. He found himself in a parlor room with a wood-paneled floor and furniture that looked decades old. The room probably hadn't been changed in many years, and he figured that Arlene and her family just

didn't have the resources to do so. Or they might have been trying to keep a tradition around. Maybe both.

“There's a bedroom upstairs you can take. Second on your left. And if you hear screaming, don't be scared. We just ran out of humane ways to slaughter the livestock.”

The sun was setting when he found the spare room. Gray skies turned a darker shade of black as he sunk his weight onto the bed, not even bothering to lift the thick floral-printed comforter atop it. The cat crawled up the length of his body and settled itself on his chest. As night fell, a sense of contentment crept over the kid. For all the comfort that the warm sheets and the noiseless cat gave him, he knew that it couldn't last. There was something massive and invisible hiding in the night, hanging over the farmhouse like a dark cloud or a god. And there in the spare room, with a cat purring on his stomach, he made his peace with it. The cat bobbed up and down with the rise and fall of his breath.

He awoke a little later, the sheets in disarray and the cat sprawled out on the floor. It was night now, late night. He rose, walking in quiet halting steps to the window. His hand, feeble from half-sleep, pulled back the ancient lace curtains. Once they had parted, the kid leapt in horror at what he saw. A pair of eyes were peeking through his window. He stepped back and the eyes vanished with a blink. A thin, singsongy voice hissed through a crack in the window, whispering nonsense into the dimly lit room. The big kid lay down once more and closed his eyes, the sensation of breath all around him. He heard footsteps in the room above him, heavy ones. As he fell asleep, he convinced himself that it was her. They sounded anxious - and that could have been good or bad. And it could have been about him, or someone else.

He awoke again with the rising sun. The cat was gone, and there were no steps in the room above. In fact, there was no noise at all throughout the house. He stood to search for the cat when his door shuddered with two loud knocks. There in the doorway stood two much older-looking boys, who he guessed were Arlene's big-ass brothers. One of them, who sported a thinning goatee, grabbed him by the scalp and dragged him into the hall. The other big-ass brother produced a length of rope, and together they tied the big kid's hands behind his back and marched him through the desolate hallway.

As they led him down the stairs, the big kid tried desperately to understand what was going on. He thought it had something to do with Arlene: maybe they thought he'd done something wrong to her, or was planning to. They silently and roughly escorted him through the house, and he frantically scanned the cluttered rooms for any sign that Arlene was still around. But his mind was clouded by terror: all he could hear was the rush of blood in his ears, all he could feel was the bile swirling around in his ribcage, and all he could focus on were the piles of stray clothes that lined the hallways. Here a pair of coveralls dangling from an improvised clothesline, there a soiled karate gi lying atop the hamper - it was unbearable.

One of the big-ass brothers spoke at last. He started mocking the big kid, delivering a mush-mouthed soliloquy to the flaking paint of the farmhouse walls. "It's human nature, man - you want proof, just look out your window." A fist like a bony meatloaf made contact with the big kid's belly. "Obviously, you're not gonna be able to do that, but ... it's a nice sentiment, isn't it?"

They emerged from the dusty house into a clear-skied morning. As the two big-ass brothers led him across the lawn, he noticed something sitting in the field ahead of him. The

brothers dragged him across the field, and as the object in the distance grew closer, he began to make out just what it was. A meager wire fence, connected by starved-looking wooden posts, led a path like a bank queue towards a tall-backed chair. That's when the big kid looked down and noticed a belt hanging loosely from one brother's pocket. He looked towards the other, and realized that he was carrying a small, rectangular box. Whatever was inside the box rattled slightly. A plasticky rattle, with the faintest metallic - suddenly, a thousand half-remembered warnings flooded back to the big kid all at once. He let out an involuntary groan – a wordless exhalation – as the realization of what was going on hit him. He was being led to his own death.

“Stop struggling, now,” the goateed brother told him. “As you've probably figured by now, we intend to kill you. It's nothing like a vendetta, understand? The county needs bodies, and we get a nice cash surplus for every one we bring over. Now, I don't know what in the fuck they do with 'em - last I heard, they grind 'em up into biofuel or some shit. But it ain't no business of mine. Now get in the chair.”

The big kid, silent and cowed by fear, obeyed. To his right lay the farmhouse, and though it was some distance away he could still see inside. Through the square freckles of a screen door, he could make out a clean-looking white room he guessed was a kitchen.

“Why you sulking? You want to see her, don't you?” The big kid cast a wary eye towards his tormentor. “Well, I'm afraid you can't. We did her last night, while you were snoozing. Brought the floodlights out and everything. We'd been holding back for ever-so-long. But you, little man ... you're an excuse, is what you are. A good one, the best we ever had.”

A fleshy figure, tall and curved, came to the screen door. The big kid strained his eyes to see this new body as it filled the door frame. A singsongy voice - the same he heard the night

before - floated towards him, and the same eyes he'd seen before suddenly came into focus. It was a woman - an older woman, much older, beyond adolescence. Her head was wreathed in dark hair that curled up and away from her, and she stood nude in the doorway as the big kid waited to die.

“Don't look too hard, now. She's his.” The goateed brother jerked his thumb towards the other brother, who was silently fiddling with - sure enough - a long needle. Then the goateed brother pinned the big kid's head, still craned to the right, to the back of the chair with a meaty palm. “Shit, look all you want. Won't have much else to look at soon.”

“Could I make a last request?” the big kid asked. “I'd like to die with my cat on my lap.”

The big-ass brothers said nothing. One moved forward and belted the big kid's arm to the arm of the chair. In the distant doorway, something black and four-legged moved towards the woman. It was a dog, a sharp black form with an angular face. The woman embraced the black dog as he prostrated himself at her feet. She nuzzled him, bent down to kiss him, and in return he climbed her form and explored her with his rough paws.

The big kid couldn't understand what he saw, anymore than he understood why he had to die. He knew without seeing that the dog's padded paws were leaving circles of blood on the woman's flat stomach. And he knew without knowing that this was the same dog that killed his cat. The goateed brother moved towards him with a syringe full of something green and chemical-looking. Then with one sudden motion, he jabbed the needle into the big kid's arm, pressed hard on the plunger with a calloused thumb, and withdrew it.

His sight was the first thing to go. Then the sound of the hollow wind drifted away, and everything went numb, and he drifted away. And as he drifted, he saw every place he'd known

blending and bleeding together. He saw the double-wide trailer that had been his home yesterday morning, and he saw it burn to the ground. Then he saw the other kids frolicking, playing in the brown river, still singing *Scotty doesn't know, Scotty doesn't know*. And he saw Arlene, her bloodied body lying in the back of the red pickup truck. After that, he found himself alone in a field.

It had been a day of fields, the big kid thought. The muddy field in front of the trailer, the field by the river where he met Arlene, and the field where he'd been killed. He looked down to make sure his cat was still with him. The cat affectionately mashed his head into the big kid's ankle. And so the big kid walked on, the cat following along. His shoes carved faint ovals into the dirt beneath his feet, and the cat's tender feet left little round craters beside them.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Post-apocalyptic/society-after-the-collapse stories are a dime a dozen, I know. But we've all had doom on our brains for the better part of our adult lives (at least I hope we all have and I'm not some egregious outlier), so what better way to exorcise some of that anxiety than with a depressing little fairy tale such as this one? I wanted to explore this ruined world through the headspace who was jaded/had "seen it all" to some extent, but was still fundamentally innocent and sort of naively good-hearted. This story was a real experiment in show-don't-tell for me - how much world building can I do without getting into the specifics of how this world came to be? There's a lot of interplay between the natural realm and the "structured" world of humans here, which I feel is very fitting for a story where the world itself and the people within it are at a kind of unspoken war with each other. Centralia is an abandoned mining town in Pennsylvania. "Scotty Doesn't Know" is a pop-punk novelty hit from the mid-2000s. "Ashes of Time" is the name of a Chinese martial arts movie I've never seen. And the last scene - the chair in the field, the woman and the dog, and the prick of the syringe - is from a bad dream.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: Daniel Walker is a writer and playwright living in Moorestown, New Jersey. He is a recent graduate of Ursinus College and has previously had poetry and short fiction published in his alma mater's literary journal The Lantern. He has also collaborated with Philly-area filmmaker and

funnyman Tommy Armstrong on the Youtube series “The Video Game Video Show” and “Elders React” (not the famous one you’re thinking of). He can be found on Twitter @danglylegdanny, and his old opinion pieces for the UC newspaper are catalogued at pagingdanielwalker.wordpress.com