

Walker, or, What Happened to the Tail of an American
Indian in Tucson

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All the events portrayed in this work are true and actual, except the names and dates have been changed to protect the author from the guilty

Not so long ago
in a galaxy not so far away
in downtown Tucson
on a Saturday night
in
1999

(13 years before that apocalypse that just kept not happening)

for the Asylum family,
and most of all,
for my brothers, wherever they are

1 zig-zag walkin'

...the funny thing about life is, no one ever makes it out alive...

She walked, just to sweat out the spite. Couldn't fetch a ride, too late for the bus, spent all the cash at the club, couldn't afford a cab. Screw it - she walked. It was only five miles from the club to home. She had flat heels. She was walking. She was always walking. Walking let her remember, let her forget. Each heel-stomp steeled her resolve never to go out with her Lakota cousin Albie on one of his faith-in-crazy-coyote-luck downtown weekend fiascoes again. Paradoxes. That's what coyotes represented for her. Coyotes brought all the bad and all the good, equally bearing sarcophagus mange and joyful disregard for risk and consequence. People were coyotes, sometimes, like Albie. Sometimes people were mangy, spotted, limp-tailed and broken, too. Every time she went anywhere with Albie, coyotes and spotted, broke and broken things found them. They had discussed it once, wondering which of them was the trouble magnet. They couldn't decide. Together, they were a unified field theory of chaos, defying luck and superstition and tradition and the laws of nature and physics without even trying. All they had to do was be in proximity in the same place at the same time and there came trouble, tail twirling, leaping like a daredevil in front of the grills of oncoming traffic, upturning garbage cans and secrets, lifting skirts, being tracked in by the soles of unwitting shoes, laughing and glutting on drama, misery and rapture all in one exhalation, irrepressible and eternal. Coyotes. Been there since before the sun was born, so they say. Nista thought it must be true because Nista believed in the old stories the most. New things were just variations on a theme, in her opinion, new revolutions of an old wheel.

One thing in the universe was a certainty for Nista, besides mankind's persistent stupidity, and that was, if Albie was a coyote, he was a coyote in innocence, bringing bad news with the best of intentions. He was a fighter. That's what he was. He was the kind of guy who, even dusted by an opponent, he would not concede. He'd fight until everyone else was in the arena with him. He did nothing in solitude, except recover. He attracted hostility like he had branded war paint on his chest in blinking neon lights, inviting all comers. It was in the angle of his shoulder blades, the cant of his square jaw, the squint of his eyes, the way his hips were always drawn, ready for a fight, or a dance, or a quick exit, and always, always, that grin...he frowned when he was recovering, and grinned when he was fighting. One too many bouts in the cage had made him resentful of his war-wounds and itchy for conflict - especially with a pint or two of axle grease to take the edge off old aches and old pains and old betrayals by old friends.

Nista was a different kind of fighter. She was a strategist who would pit one against the other and see which one was left standing, studying each opponent's strengths and weaknesses for a long time before deciding an action, if any. She fought for, not against, but she was tired of fighting for Albie, who seemed to crave the label "lost cause". Albie fought even without enemies, created enemies out of friends, and kept on fighting down the road elsewhere - a real coyote, hurt by consternation and ostracization, but unable to change his nature. He'd shake hands with an opponent, even when he'd lost - especially when he'd lost. Nista, however, harbored no forgiveness and planned no reconciliation. That was her nature. It had made her an exceptional soldier.

She jumped at the shriek of the sirens of a cruiser wailing down the westbound lane, lights oscillating, blue and red, dopplers. They reminded her of the planes she used to oversee, in the Air Force. The lights danced off the walkway arcing over the turn-off onto the highway from the boulevard. They droned until they faded away, landing somewhere downtown. Her shoulders sank as her anger deflated. The crisis was over, arrested in its development, for the moment.

She turned back toward home, and her step was lighter, the anger having boiled off, into the creosote and the sage. That realization came over her, as it always did, and for the millionth time, she decided it was better to love Albie and let him be his own worst enemy than to hold the unaccountable accountable. It was only possible to love Albie from a safe distance and it was impossible to decide not to love him at all. Most everyone else in her life had a tattoo on their forehead that only she could see and it spelled out "delete". You can choose your family, your friends, your enemies and yourself. She made a choice. Live and let live - 'cuz everyone dies in the end. Once she was resolved, she could get on with the important business - enjoying the desert night. After all the music and dancing and love and hate and wine and mojo-ghosts, the night air intoxicated her, reminding her of Maui, how the night blooming jasmine burst open with olfactory mana at the base of the quiet volcano. That was a good memory. She had begun and ended her night early, but the carnival was in full swing for the rest of the oblivious masses. The cars that passed her going downtown to oblivion sped along with their dashboard lights and their iPods and cell phones glowing, passengers chattering away, excited to answer the call of the wild night in a small desert town cupped in a circlet of dusty, rubble-skinned mountains that were always catching fire.

"Where you going?" she muttered at one vehicle, a ridiculous chartreuse hybrid. It looked like a tennis ball with golf cart wheels. The tiny tail light tracers as the golf cart zipped by. "Don't you know you can't get

anywhere in Tucson, no matter how fast you go?" she said to an oblivious pale oval clutching a tiny wheel.

As she marched, old friends came to visit, waving at her from the stereos of passing cars with lowered windows, gifted to her like good news in bad times. Suddenly, an old song fell out of the window of an El Camino that wove suspiciously in its lane a furlong behind the hybrid. She realized her heel beats were perfectly in sync with the tempo and it made her grin. "Keep on Smiling" by Wet Willie paced her, let her ignore the sudden onslaught of beeps and honks from a convoy of transplanted college pricks from Michigan shouting at her simply because some local idiot had gone and told them it was a Tucson tradition.

"Duh-leet," she muttered to herself. And so, Kenista Noah-Walker, a displaced First Nations daughter speaking Quebecois with a Southern accent, called 'Nista-miss' affectionately by her own family, autochthone by the French-Canadians, 'Acadian' by seventh generation settlers in New Orleans, 'Cajun' by plantation colonists and rednecks, "high yella" and "sallow" by her Black cousins, and 'White' by her White colleagues because they couldn't deal with her as a 'Red' person (or so they said, on numerous occasions), kept on walking. She walked to songs in her head, walked to the thrum of the highway, walked to the curious cant of the jumping moon overhead, walked to the aromas of sage and creosote, walked to the frightened jackrabbits and the brown bats, the scurrying tarantulas and moon-glint lizards. She walked along the fading yellow stripes of the worn black road, seeing them as permanent markers of countless unheralded pedestrian journeys through forgotten civilizations, time and space.

By mile three, she had forgotten what had made her so angry one hour earlier, forgotten the fight, the spilt wine, the blood and glass, the sirens, the broken gris-gris and leaking mojo, the staring faces. It only took her an hour to get home. She walked at a 12-minute a mile clip, still in condition from her tour of duty. Enlistment was supposed to have paid for her college, but the Air Force enacted an early force reduction. She got her first set of walking papers. Her generation of recruits had been enticed by the thousands to sign early-out forms, only no one bothered to tell them that the fine print at the bottom of the yellow form clearly stated that early-out was granted on condition of voluntary relinquishment of all benefits, regardless of previous paid contributions by the servicemember. She was allowed to register at the VA for free medical care but whenever she called, they'd tell her they didn't have her MEANS test on file and she'd have to come and re-register. She'd re-registered three times and was still waiting on the nurse to schedule an appointment for her women's wellness visit. It wasn't that something felt wrong, it was just that, she was becoming more

and more aware that she ought to have some sort of regular medical check-ups, just in case. The only thing that bothered her now was, she really really wanted a pair of good sturdy low quarters. She could walk for days in a pair of standard-issue low quarters, a perfect quarter-inch heel, fit like a saddle shoe, impervious to politics and weapons of mass destruction alike. Hers had fallen to shreds and scraps years ago. She'd walked them into the grave. They were her war ponies, the best friends a walker could ever hope to have, loyal, silent, indestructible, tar-shiny little wolverines of mismatched children's sizes, the left a half size smaller than the right.

When she mounted the stairs to her apartment, her cat was there behind the dark screen door, sleek fur sticking up every which way, yowling pitifully. The cat had been abandoned as a kitten. She probably relived that trauma every time Nista left the house. The cat was safer company than Albie, though, that much was certain. She unlocked the security door and the cat sat back on her hind legs and lifted her forearms up. Nista smiled and leaned down to scoop her up into her arms, where she clung, whined and nuzzled for dear life. She carried the cat in her arms like a baby as she set down her purse and sat down on the couch to unlace her boots and stretch her sore toes. The cat finally conceded to perching on the back of the couch. Out of petulance, she swiped at Nista's braids. Nista let her chew on one of them. It made the little thing happy. The cat was a "tuxedo" and had been aptly dubbed "Adolf Hitler" when Nista hauled her down from the tree she'd gotten herself stuck in, mewling pitifully. The cat was a little survivor, an abandoned runt that had never grown past yearling dimensions.

Cat dispatched and put at ease, Nista wiped her brow and went to the bathroom, frowning at herself in the mirror. She was flushed, which made her cheeks glow, but the recent lines and creases of stress and age were not improved from exercise. She rolled her eyes at herself.

"Hurry up and get old, then, why don't you," she told her reflection as she stripped and stood under the hard, steaming jets for as long as the heat held out. She dried off with a vengeance and rubbed her sore calves and feet. She slipped on a night shirt and sat down at her half-moon dinette and had some French roast. She couldn't drink instant or the commercial kind you buy in bulk. Instant gave her heartburn and the other kind used wheat as filler. She couldn't ingest wheat, cow's milk or preservatives. Fish, fowl, beef, berries, nuts, yams, honey, rice and marshmallows - and popcorn. The irritatingly healthy stuff was all she could tolerate. She generally declined invitations to dine with friends, as a result. She'd gotten tired of explaining why she was "never hungry" and trying to find a salad without croutons and asking what was in the dressing and were the wings breaded or not. As she

decompressed in the dark, moonlight filtering through her make-shift, safety-pinned faux-velvet curtains, the cat wound a figure eight around her sore calves before finally leaping into her lap, kneading her bare thigh. Nista winced from the claws of affection but didn't move the cat. This was Kitler's only little comfort in the world. Who could begrudge her that? So Nista endured and finally the cat was satisfied, her oxytocin elevated to acceptable feline bliss levels. Kitler dropped out of the lap of privilege and dragged herself to the closet to curl up on old clothes she'd pawed into a nest for herself.

In the dim light that barely filled the tiny studio apartment, Nista's guitar gleamed, leaning against her bookshelf, nonchalant. She hefted it onto her lap, setting her left foot up on the rung of her chair. She worked through a warm-up exercise she'd composed for herself and then closed her eyes, strumming a mournful cadence. She liked the way the guitar resonated, the way it vibrated her thigh and chest as she cradled it and worked the fret board. For five hundred dollars, the old hand-crafted classical was the best investment she'd ever made. Her second-best investment was a Telecaster, and it had paid her rent when she'd been out of work for six months. The Goya was saving her life now, what was left of it. She let it play, let it lead her rhythms and chord progressions until the ghosts left her just an ordinary kind of tired, a "normal" malaise. She sat in the dark kitchen with just the overhead stove light on, letting her last chord ring out into silence, feeling the throbbing in her hand tendons subside.

She rose and set the guitar back on its stand, stretched and yawned, and crawled onto her futon. Kitler came straight away to get in some last-minute kneading. By the grace of a purring cat, she was soon in a better place than the one she would awaken to tomorrow. Someday never comes, but tomorrow's always there, bright and early, with all the world's troubles just ready and waiting. Tomorrow, she would be an oddity, again, a regular fixture as a story-teller on the downtown spoken word circuit that was hot and bubbling of late. Tomorrow, she had to field White people's problems, Black people's problems, Filipino producer-people's problems, amateurs' anxiety, and a sea of awkward faces staring...staring. None of them danced. None of them walked. But they called her, billed her, "Walker". They would freeze at her stories, because every one of them was about every one of them, but yet, no word was ever pointed specifically at anyone. They would freeze because she loved to add humor and light-heartedness into her stories but they had only come for the poisoned arrows. They didn't understand, thought she was being too "gentle" with them. She never explained her invisible resistance, her kind of coup. Why lose your sense of humor just because they took everything else? Gotta keep something for

yourself. She went to sleep telling herself to dream of rivers, of fishing, of dead friends - all the good stuff that never really went away, just walked in the rain to another field somewhere else.

peyak (the first one)

...it's been a while, since the impetus for spoken words arose from its dormancy, a long dark tea-time dormancy...words go to sleep, and waking up, they become actions...they make you move, they move others, they make you want to make others move...it's that old itch, to be in front of an audience, see how they get snared in your word-net, or don't...strolling to the venue, thoughts on nothing but your piece, the world wavering around in your peripheral vision, unintelligible...see people..."hey, how ya doin'?"..."yeah, yeah, should be a good show"...meaningless words that have no footing when your mind is full of discourse, waiting to be born...you're thick, fat, stuffed with words, consuming and consumed with them...everything else shuts off, all your vision, your hearing, your sensation...nah, there's just those words...come into the lobby, nod at the producer, your host, whoever gave you the slot, tell them you're ready...smile, always...wander off to the backstage area, the narrow slot where the boilers are, where other performers are...you sit there, listening, not listening, waiting for them to finish...you can't get too strung up in their set...there's no room in your mind for more words...you hear them, but you don't listen...you delete their rhythms, intonations, energy...and there it comes, the MC's silent beckoning...and there comes that cue that you're ready...see, all the words go invisible, they go underground, imprinting in your memory so you don't have to think about them any more...yeah, there's a tingle, a knot, a nauseating swirl of "what am I doing here?"...same thing, every time...and then...wait for it...pop!...there that goes, too, and the next thing you know, you're up! a story-teller, telling story...clear your throat, glance at the footlights, the blank faces, the squirming...wonder how you want to hit them tonight, easy or hard, or maybe not at all, tired of hurting...wonder how many seconds that last thought had actually taken, from the audience's point of view...

"I'm not a poet, just want you to know that. I'm a story-teller."

..."that's alright. go ahead!" an old veteran says, encouraging...

"I'm gonna give you a little story, a story about questions and answers, called 'Questions and Answers'."

...they laugh, in the mood for something light...perfect...don't hit 'em hard, then...here we go...

"I get told all the time, 'Oh, you're Indian? You don't look Indian!'..."

...check to see if they get it, and hope for laughter...see the nods, the smiles of acknowledgement because they thought she was White, too...they perk up, eyes bright, anticipating...

"I get looks all the time, especially when I say anything vaguely spiritual - or even just vague."

...the Filipino producer in the wings gives a thumbs-up because he identifies with that line...

"Some people just seem to hang on my every sacred word. Others grow indifferent; only a few relate..."

...laughter...good sign...they're digging in...the producer is beaming, chewing on his cigar...

"I get told often, 'Just get over it, what happened to your people! Technology has so much more to offer! We're all the same after all, aren't we? You can't get back what's lost and besides - you look White!' And they can't wait to teach me the post-colonial slogan: 'Your culture's gone - just move on!'"

...a faint snicker and a few kudo-coos...

"What's it mean to be Indian? Aboriginal? Indigenous? Une autochthone? A dream-walker? A Free Person of Color? A throwback? A vestigial fourth world appendage of a vanishing race? A tired-ass-gene-pool-surviving-too-broke-for-a-bus-pass-last-call-for-alcohol-evolutionary-dog-end?"

...they bob with the flow, the cadence all spoken word performers are required to speak to...they tap along, make approving sounds after certain word-pairs they like...

"I get asked that question and I get asked for that answer more than I get paid for playin'..."

...a wink to the other slammers...a guffaw of sympathy from the audience...look at their Whiter faces, grinning and nodding, willingly playing their part...smile in secret knowledge that you're feeding them their own bullshit in a Hershey's kiss foil and they're eating it up...they want you to remind them of their guilt but you won't comply...it's better to love than to hate...and no one's perfect...and there is no master race...

"I get tired of having to define what just is. I contemplate just like a Buddhist - but I look white. I don't ask these questions of myself. I've never

asked myself who I am. What kind of two-headed fool would do that? As if anyone could not know who they are? Why in hell would I say to myself, 'Excuse me, even though we've been conjoined from birth, I have a question: Who are you and why do we have the same social security number?'"

...barked laughter, a random clap...

"It's others who need the definition, the fine line, the boundary, the check box, the finite equation, the answers, the solution, the resolution..."

...nodding, cat-calls, a clap or two on the beat...they came expecting the rhythm of a slam more than the juice of the words...you can give the audience this, at least, but fuck all else...

"... the lie, the half-truth, the redemption, the salvation, the accusation, the judgment, and the whole world in their hands, walking a fine line all in one shade of rainbow, uniform, compliant, contentedly confused about who they are, who we are, who I am, what all of it means, anyway. What the hell does all of this mean, anyway?"

...cry it to the heavens and the auditorium rafters and the empty spaces above smug heads, privileged and safe and able to walk away entertained from someone else's miseries, feeling sophisticated and cultured and secure in not being Indian...

"What does all of this mean? It means I think I just might have a little coyote fun with all of this, maybe erase that fine line that split the sky and cut the earth five hundred Columbian years ago, just to cause a little commotion."

...someone gets 'Columbian', a reminder of the rally that was coming up on campus a couple months away...put your thumb up to 'em...

"I tell y'all what. How'd about I just steal some fire, just for a laugh. That way, when people ask me who I am, I'll say, 'Watch out! I'm an infamous fine line-eater! I'll steal your fire and rob you of answers so you'll be forced to go out and find them all by yourself!' And then just watch their faces as they try to remain polite and open-minded and tolerant."

...big laugh and a clap from the producer...pause to take that in...

"Maybe I'll do just that. It's better than asking myself what it's like to be Indian. As if I didn't know..."

...spread the arms in apology for any Puckish offense, take a bow, say 'Thank you and good night' because you like to say that...go back to the "dressing room", a bench in the green-tinted service hallway that opens

onto the back alley, and sit next to Henry, the "Bound Soul" performance artist who is still trying to catch his breath...he nods...you're panting, too...you sit and suck in oxygen, calm down, let the red dwindle to rose then to gray...you have that nausea you always get when you perform in shows like this for White audiences anywhere...you always want to throw up because those people somehow suck the vigor from your spleen, hoarding it and never returning the volley...they don't know the tradition of orality is a two-way street...

...you joke, 'Got a bucket?'...Henry laughs because he feels that same drain, feels just as raw and inside-out...he tells you he likes you, likes your work, appreciates you because he's gay and you say, "That's almost like being one of us," and his childhood wounds appear like stigmata but he is smiling because he found someone he can show the boo-boos to...his smile fades at the advent of an unbidden audience member, barefoot, anklet bells, draped in swirling hand-dyed skirts, patchouli-soaked blondish dreadlocks choking the air in a futile effort to disguise the cow-shit stank of weed and an aversion to soap and shampoo, wistful, looking like a vaguely Middle Eastern fairy...she kneels supplicant, like a misplaced harem princess, at your knee...you steel up and scowl at the offense of touch when you're in the raw zone...Henry looks away, shuts down and robs you of his tender, child-like energy, so needed at that moment...she wants to thank you for sharing...she'd be a real prize in someone's harem if she didn't prefer to stink and be odd and beautiful at the same time...the beautiful freak has touched your knee...

...so you tell her, "If you really appreciate the performers, the best thing you can do is give us our space. I accord you the freedom to return to your home..." and she accepts this with a predictable unconditional 'understanding' and wafts away, lingering at the ragged curtain just a moment to cast a forlorn old-young wisdom-eye at you...but she's still, nonetheless, in your space and you're still raw...Henry shakes your hand after she complies..."I've always wanted to tell them that!" he confesses in a whisper, still censoring himself, Catholic-raised...you like Henry...the two of you talk about talking later but not now, and eventually you make your respective ways out of the building, into the night air and the warning mist of a soft dewy pre-monsoon evening rain...you breathe and you smoke, because to smoke is to pray and to pray is to dance...you smoke as you make your way down to the gay dance club on 4th Avenue because it has the best dance music in town...Henry will be there later...maybe you can talk about combining talents since both of you dance, both of you are invisible, and both of you need a bucket...

The Funk, poet, director, producer-in-waiting, Filipino son of a Bataan long-walker, stood behind the tattered velvet curtain, peering out at his headliners as they rocketed through their sets. Each could kill, individually, but this finale was a triple whammy and the audience was throwing war whoops in appreciation. Indigo, E=MC and Mojo, back to back, a spectacular finish. They spit very differently in verse and voice but they all had that rhythm, that cadence. Indigo, an un-aging inky-skinned elfin lesbian from San Francisco, had shocking dynamic, moving breath from a whisper to a scream out of a 4'10, ninety-three-pound child's frame. Mojo, a tall raven-skinned man with a black beret he never took off, escalated, proselytizing in a rafter-ringing timbre. E=MC, an even taller, scragglier version of Neil Young in a hand-knitted rainbow-colored top hat, scrambled all the neurons in his vicinity and demonstrated an epic mnemonic capacity, having made his mark by never once reading from the page. E had the most potential, Funk thought, but, Indigo and Mojo were the popular ones who could speak to a broader range of experiences. Tonight, though, E, known for never missing a beat or dropping a line, was way off his game. The audience, keen to see his amazing feats of recall, made a lowing sound when E suddenly fumbled and garbled an entire verse. The slammer stopped himself, staring at the floorboards a moment, shaking his head. Then he took a deep breath, stepped right back up and delivered the verse perfectly, with embellishments. E never spit the same piece the same way twice - his other legacy. When he concluded, he got a standing ovation.

Funk nodded to his inner critic, making his executive decision. E was the feature artist he wanted on the first installment of his slam circuit series. He worked his shoulders beneath his jean jacket, twitching his cigarette holder. He'd have to be ready for the flack the others would give him. E had ankle-biters nipping at his heels, including Indigo and Mojo, the younger breed. The consensus among the young-uns was that the old fogies needed to pass on the torch. Indigo was one of the most vocal, with Mojo and his hot temper coming in a close second. Indigo would not lose her cool, but she would not ease up or back down, once she had her pearline teeth sunk into a cause. They were already chaffing at Funk's involvement with A Frayed Day. The eclectic artist charity show case that Roma Barry, the Madame of the Tucson Underground scenester's hub, had organized was supposed to be a cooperative effort among the performance artist community. Funk had been invited to participate for cross-promotional benefits, as a co-producer. Indigo, for some reason, had taken issue with the venture, claiming it brought too much local competition to the already tightly-pressed Tucson slam scene. Prescott was always stealing their fire.

Indigo wanted her team to take the crown, and she didn't want anyone sleeping with a potential enemy.

Roma was burdened by trying to juggle a draining executive day job and an alternative lifestyle that soaked up her nights and her stamina. Funk was recovering from his addiction recovery and trying to invest himself as a whole human being into his marriage and his second child's arrival, while moving up from performer and videographer to producer. He'd already pitched the concept to his program manager and channel director. All he needed was the demo reel to prove he could deliver the goods, and E's gaffe had just laid the golden egg for him.

When E had taken his final bow. Funk stepped out from behind the curtain and took the stage, calling for applause for all the performers. He called for Walker and Bound Soul and the audience made that lowing sound again, only it wasn't disappointment but satisfaction - a weird thing about that lowing that always surprised him. He looked over his shoulder at the "green room" and Indigo stuck her head out from the curtain, signaling that those two had already left the building. For a split second, he almost dashed backstage to check for himself, knowing Indigo's competitiveness rendered her fully capable of outright deception. He'd been seeing it more and more frequently lately. But he didn't have time for that, now. He called on the remaining artists to take the stage, and the audience stood up for all of them. Indigo and E and Mojo linked hands in front and took their bow and then stood aside to clap for the others, and Funk noted that they had "claimed" their status, officially, in so doing.

Behind them were Jenny Red, a journal-reading novice who'd been holding her own for the last three slams but hadn't yet got the zing of that cadence, a young rap trio called "Faith" who had caused a stir on the circuit by taking a position on the latest controversy over whether rap was acceptable as slam or not, and Antares, the mixer-turned-slammer, who was just finding his stride and but still reading from sheets because it kept him from falling back into pure rap. Everyone was there except the story-teller and the interpretive dancer, the only two commercial artists in the line-up. But, in a way that was appropriate, Funk thought to himself. Slam was its own language, its own genre, its own discipline, distinct from other deliveries and led by distinct individuals with distinct agendas, a singular breed of performer. Slam may garner prize money and recognition, but the slammers generally weren't thinking of things like that. They came to the mic because they were on fire, fleshy volcanoes erupting in words and purging themselves and their audiences clean. Slam was an exercise in redemption. The stirrings of unrest were bubbling up, back-hand talking about "going commercial" and "losing the flavor" and "selling out", but for

now, it was pure, therapeutic, amazing - a pop culture phenomenon that showed no signs of losing its vision, its function or its momentum, and Funk was relishing every weird and wonderful moment of it. "Slam Season" was going full throttle, and Funk would be the man to capture it on film for all the world to appreciate. That was the plan.

Success, however, came with a caveat. Funk was beginning to rise above the breed, setting himself apart from his family of slammers and ex-addicts. He wasn't one of the "just usses", any more and the whiff of mutiny had begun to tinge the air at the team's gigs. Most of the time, he kept his back to it, going home to sigh to his wife, who reminded him he was "better than all that". He had been seeking out new people, new avenues, whenever he could, trying out his new producer's eyes, but he had to be subtle and discreet. Indigo had begun watching him like a hawk, and he felt betrayed. He had begun keeping things from the crew, including the way that every night he went home and cradled his wife and his unborn child through the swell of her belly, his resolve was all the more steeled. All he'd been hearing from his crew ever since he'd gotten a segment of his own at the local television studio was flack. They had begun questioning every move he made, particularly when it came to line-ups and appearances at festivals. They wouldn't coordinate, wouldn't caravan, wouldn't show up on time, and more and more often came unprepared, pulling little surprises that he had to compensate for, demanding last-minute alterations of carefully pre-set lighting and sound, which meant he couldn't observe a show with his full undivided attention the way a producer should. The crew didn't want any one getting paid for appearing on Funk's shows, either, because they had never gotten paid. They protested vehemently when Funk suggested they put up prize money and seek out sponsors for donations to fund an on-going series downtown. Slam should be pure, they said, but they were the first to ask for gas money to get to the larger, established out-of-town festivals for big prize money. They talked about loyalty and "just us" but were the first to stab a wayward member in the back for stepping outside the clique. They wanted the credit, the fame, the respect, but wouldn't allow anyone else in the group to do what members of a family are supposed to do - develop, grow, mature, thrive.

Funk had a real family, one that required bills to be paid, insurance not to lapse, a head of household with accountability and respectability. Funk needed to move up and on. He was looking for a way and a time to cut ties, because his crew seemed to think they had it all figured out and could make it on their own. They were letting him know how they felt and diversifying his line-ups and putting up prize monies through sponsors was his way of letting them know that he was calling the shots and that he

would be producing with or without them. He thought they'd either give in or give up and move on, but no, they lingered, clung, rode him all the time over every little decision, as if he had no authority, no distinction from the group, as if they were punishing him for betraying some unwritten slam-family code. He'd been homeless before, living under the bridge with the other trolls where no one could escape, and everyone went down together, but any one of them would kill another over a fix or a good pan-handling spot; this crew was starting to feel like a troll bridge. He needed to get to the light. Indigo sidled up and started coiling cables, but Funk knew she was only spying. The man he was trying to speak with owned an independent theater and wanted to talk screenings and contests, but Funk didn't even offer a card or try to talk business - not with that gossiping raven perched over his shoulder, obsidian beak between his shoulder blades. Some kinds of families are all for the lives of their children, and some turn out to be the death of them.