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Dogs of God, Prologue

PINCKNEY BENEDICT

I'm standing there waiting to see if they've got a bell they're going to ring to start the bout, and this weedy bastard I'm fighting skips right across to my corner and hits me in the face. Only he's taller than me and doesn't get the point of the jawbone. Instead, he catches the side of my head, on the ridge of the cheek, which smarts like crazy and takes some skin off, but it can't level me. I guess he figured he could end the whole thing right there. Hell, I thought he was coming over to shake my hand.

I push him away from me, put both hands against his chest and shove, and he backs up a couple of steps, hands high and jabbing, "What the hell," I say, and he catches me in the mouth, splits both lips, then connects with a left cross to the temple: all these head shots he's scoring while I'm still figuring out the fight has started without me. He's a ridgerunner, name of Benoit, I've heard, from some shitty little town farther up in the highlands. I wonder if anybody told him my name. All his buddies are yelling *Rolly, Rolly* at him from behind the saw horse barricade they've got set up around us.

A stroke to my forehead puts me on my knees, brain sloshing against my eyeballs so that everything whites out for a second, and I can feel the wooden plank of the near sawhorse against my back. My guys are quiet, got their hands folded I guess, watching this tall skinny fuck take me to the cleaners in the first seconds of the first round. He's dancing back and forth, weaving, shifting into the light and then out of it again.

The White Mule work gloves he's got on his hands make this wet smack smack as he drives his hooks like rocks against my skull, knocking me back and forth. Look left and there's this crowd of crazed yahoos waving their money; look right and there's the Shifletts—the old man that runs the place and his three giant sons—sucking on thin Swisher Sweets cigarillos. The boys carry ax handles with them, and the old man has an Army Colt stuck in the waistband of his pants. They're all four smiling but you don't know what that might mean. I want just one guy to yell out my name. Yell out, "Get up, Goody! Hey, on your feet and flatten this character!" But nobody does.

I'm mad now but it might be too late to save me. Usually I get mad sometime in the middle of the third round, and I let the punishment I've taken in the last seven and a half minutes come back on the guy that did it to me. That's how I have to do it. I can't afford to wear an opponent down with pokes and jabs; the bones in my hands break too easily. One good hard shot with the right, that's what I've got. That's how I'm fifteen and oh, but not in the record books that anybody's keeping. Twelve of those are clean knockouts, too, the guy flat on his back and not moving. I'm probably the only one who knows my whole true score.

Benoit clips me on the ear and I go down onto the board floor. I can't hear anything out of the ear he hammered, but with the other I hear Seldomridge, who arranged the fight, say, "Right in the latrine." His voice is clear, and I think he must have leaned down to say it directly to me. The world slips and rattles for a minute before the holes line up against the sprockets again.

When I crack my eyes, the hillbillies are screaming *Rolly, Rolly* with this new frantic note. Nobody on my side says a single thing back to them, not even booing Benoit for bad sportsmanship. We're guests here, came up from the county seat to take the wood-hicks' money. They're all related up in these mountain places. They're all one big family. Impossible to tell whose side the Shifletts are on, if they're on anybody's. Rolly Benoit strides across the ring, arms down at his side, muscles in his shoulders bunched. He's shaking his head.

The guys behind me are making plans for the evening. I can catch some of what they're saying.

... *long way down to the valley.*

... *couple of pros...*

... *tonight.*

... *I'm tapped.*

... *too. This little screw-up...*

Somebody else—it might be Seldomridge—says in a loud voice, *Seventeen point two seconds.*

And I'm hot to go now. Suckered. Too slow to stop Benoit. I push off the floor, shove with my legs, come out of my crouch like a lineman from his three-point stance, picking up speed in the short distance between us. Somebody on the hillbilly side calls out a warning, but Benoit is pretty deep in his victory stalk so he doesn't pay any attention.

I was a pretty mean tackle in high school, and I hit him solid in the middle of his back, just above the waist. His skin is sweaty and slick, but I keep my hold. He's not expecting me—fair's fair—and he goes

down. His head catches the sawhorse near his corner as he takes the spill, and then the wooden stool that sits there. I hear both impacts, which sound the same: like the fat part of a baseball bat connecting with a pumpkin. Benoit grunts. He twitches in my arms. Then I'm lying on top of him and he's not moving.

The machine shop falls silent. I swear I can hear the ticking of somebody's wristwatch, a tight metal *snip snip snip* as the second hand jumps forward from moment to moment. Somebody coughs and the sound of it is loud as a pistol shot.

Then the ridgerunners drag me off of Rolly Benoit. They're swinging at me, trying to tear me apart, but there's too many of them. Benoit by himself was a lot more efficient than this mob. They're tugging me every which way and scratching me with their fingernails more than anything else. I get a couple of quick jabs in, feel somebody's nose smash like a ripe tomato against the canvas of my glove, but it's hard to get leverage when they're picking me up, tossing me back and forth. My right eye is swollen shut.

Seldomridge shouts something that I can't understand, and Yarrow, another guy from the valley, answers him, so I know they're in it now. I feel a kind of gratitude toward them, even though it only means we'll all take a beating. One big red-faced boy in a tan coverall, a real heavyweight, has got me pretty much to himself, the others having turned their attention elsewhere, and he's whipsawing me back and forth, holding me by my neck. I give him a shot in his fleshy brisket and he falls back, got his hands clasped against his heart like it might fall out of his chest and he wants to catch it if it does.

And I drop. My legs are made of rubber, and without the big boy holding me I flop down like a baby. I try to rise, but there is not much on me that's in working order anymore. My trunks have gotten jerked down off my ass somehow, and that is embarrassing, but what is worse I can't reach down there to drag them back up and cover myself. I can't even manage that.

Around me it is all legs in denim pants. They are standing planted like trees when they swing, and I want to laugh at their footwork. Nobody up there knows how to land a punch; nobody knows how to draw blood. Everybody that really knew how—that is, me and Benoit—is lying on the floor now. A man in muddy brogans puts his foot down on my hand, and I shift it out of his way, but he stomps it again before he moves on. One of the sawhorses goes down with a crash. The others have been shifted out of their places or dismantled for weapons so you can't tell where the ring used to be.

Rolly Benoit is looking at me from only a couple of feet away. We

are laid next to each other like we're grabbing some sun at the beach, or maybe like fish, the catch-of-the-day set out on a bed of ice at the supermarket. His left eye is closed, but the right is open wide; a frozen wink. He looks surprised to be where he is. The pupil covers most of the hazel iris of the open eye, and I am near enough to see that it is ragged at its edge, not smooth like you would expect. It is the dilated pupil that gives him his startled look. He has a slight smile on his lips. Blue shadow fills a deep rectangular dent in the exact middle of his forehead.

There are hard little kernels of cracked corn scattered across the floor, among the cigarette butts and plastic wrappers and hardened wads of old gum. Benoit's got a few of the kernels stuck to his cheek and caught in his cropped hair. It makes me want to laugh at him. There are white worms of chicken shit here and there too, some with wispy pinfeathers stuck in them. At first I think it must be a slaughter plant for chickens that we're in, but then I realize that they probably fight birds in here. They might have fought them before we came in tonight: sunset-colored cocks wheeling on each other, mirror-bright splinters of razor lashed to their spurs, cupped wings swatting the air like big clumsy hands.

Somewhere not far away, Seldomridge shouts again, more like a scream this time, and then he stops. It is all hard breathing and scuffling sounds in the warehouse, like the dancing of a bunch of performing bears. I hear the old man tell his sons to break it up, and they wade contentedly into the fracas. People run to escape them. Someone steps on my chest, forcing the air out of my lungs. A couple of people step on Rolly Benoit also. The ax handles of the Shifletts rise and fall. The sound of them is like the sound of fists in eight-ounce gloves working the heavy bag.

You can stop it now, I want to say. It's finished here. My eyes have both swollen tight by this point, and all I can see is the movement of shapes through a thick red curtain. Thrashing figures pass through bands of blood-colored light. The Shiflett boys grunt. I turn back to Benoit, whose face won't have changed expression, I know, so I don't need to see it. His lips must still be curved in that dumb sweet smile. We're lying together like brothers.

Well Rolly, I want to say, we did it all.

Oh did we? That is what he might say to me.

We sure did. You sucker-punched me, but I got you back.

Oh did you? he might say.

You got an astonished look on your face when you went down. How did I look when you first hit me?

Pretty shocked, he would tell me.

Listen, I could say, this whole thing was a surprise to me. I don't even live around here. They brought me up to fight you because some guys heard I was pretty fierce, and you're the local hero. I never meant to hurt you this way.

Rolly again. My story's much like yours. Circumstances and accident. Except I'm only too happy to have hurt you, you know.

And so on in a companionable enough way while we wait for the Shifletts to sort things out.

After a time I am able to open my eyes again, but by then I am not in the abandoned machine shop up in Peebles County anymore, but in another place altogether.

Sometimes when I am dreaming or daydreaming I get a hand up in front of Rolly Benoit's first swing, a neat sweeping block. I take the impact on my forearm, and I'm surprised because it's a light blow, really, not the kind of thing that would knock you down at all. And I stop the second blow too, and when I shove him he slides backward out into the middle of the ring and he waits for me there, just on his side of center, feet spread shoulder width, knees flexed. I come out to meet him, and I'm ready to start the fight.

He is a solid opponent, in shape, a tall light-heavy who looks more like a golf pro than a boxer. We are pretty evenly matched, because he has reach but I have power. At first he's jabbing me, short sharp testing punches that don't hurt much even when they do land, but then he's getting inside, and there's a seam open on the thumb of his glove. An edge of the stiff material cuts me above the right eye.

I break away, but I come right back, boring in on him, letting his midriff have it. I make it hard for him to breathe, peppering his body, bruising his ribs, tenderizing him for later on in the fight. I'm using mainly the left, sparing the bones in my right hand for a real opportunity to put him away. When he covers up the rib cage I go for the head. He manages to stop my attack, scores a couple off me, dances away.

There are no breaks between rounds, but we don't need breaks. When one of us is tired, we're both tired. We breathe together. The stiffs in the audience, the ridgerunners and the fellows from the county seat, they don't know what they're watching. They don't know how to see it. Pretty soon they start drifting off, his people and my people, figuring to go visit whores or get a couple of drinks. Maybe they'll be back later to see how it all came out, or maybe not. Meanwhile, Benoit and I are trading blows out there on the wood

floor, and he's got blood coming out of me, cuts over both eyes now. That just pisses me off, which is bad for him. He starts to gasp for his breath, those tender ribs costing him pretty dear.

Finally the Shifletts leave too. They shuffle off, the old man and his hulking sons, and the vapor lamps set in the high ceiling shut down with a bang, and the doors slide shut and lock. By this time Benoit and I can't dance anymore. We fight flat-footed, like a couple of pugs, just swinging away, and I don't care whether I break my hands or not. His eyes are purple, bruised shut, and mine are closing. Dark surrounds us, but the dark doesn't matter because we've blinded each other.

We stand arm's length apart, lashing out, not even trying to duck or block. The blows have taken the place of our eyes, of the light. And each lick of the gloves, mine on him, his on me, underneath that metal roof and between those sawhorses, tells us what we need to know: that we are still alive.