

CATIE O'LEARY

Visual Stories—Forest, 2017
Collage with antique engravings, 10 x 8 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

RYAN MASTERS Providence Mining Corporation

They brought Joba Turk back to Beulah in a wooden cage drawn by a black ox. Joba squatted inside for balance, clinging to the oak bars as the wheels rattled across the rutted late-spring roads. The two Indian bounty hunters paddled silently alongside, rifles cradled in their arms.

“They got him,” whispered Bill Utley, who now owned the soda works. “Sweet Jesus, they got him.”

“Half starved near the South Fork of Bear Creek,” I said.

Inside his cage, Joba appeared of another mind—unwell, clutching some deep germ of thought. Grimy blond hair matted his head. Bones stood in relief through his greasy skin and torn rags. By the looks of him, Joba wouldn’t have survived another week in the wilderness.

“Not much left to hang,” Bill said.

Clumps of townsfolk had materialized to watch the condemned man be paraded down Main Street. After the cage trundled past, most people slipped down the alleys from which they’d emerged or disappeared into clapboard businesses. I myself had been hanging a business sign delivered that day from Sacramento: *Shaw’s Gold Assay & Melainotype Portraiture*. The latter was a new venture. Gold was the past, portraits the future. Like everyone else, I had to adapt, use my imagination. When mining polluted every stream in the district with mercury, Bill Utley shut down his wheelbarrow business and opened a soda works, selling carbonated water in fancy bottles. I had pinned my fortunes on the melainotype, a French technology recently introduced to America. I was wagering on the vanity of folks, a good bet from what I’d seen.

The grim procession turned from sight at Main Street’s dogleg, and the last of the spectators, mostly kids, drunks, and a few hangdog corporate miners, dispersed. Beyond, the tree awaited her man.

The district sheriff came to visit a few hours later. I was out back handling molten gold with tongs and leather gloves. It was a delicate and rigorous process. The crucible of hot gold in my grasp radiated heat like a second sun. Sweat permeated my shirt and vest as I worked.

“Just a moment,” I said, eyes fixed on the task.

“Take your time, Shaw,” the sheriff said, easing himself

into a chair I kept outside for tending the furnace. "Hate to see you burn your hand off on my account."

I poured the gold into an iron ingot mold set on a flat, lichen-covered boulder. I dropped the tongs, wiped my brow on my sleeve, and took off the gloves.

"Nothing finer looking than fresh gold," the sheriff said. He was chewing on a strip of willow bark to numb the pain in his teeth. The town dentist had lit out for the Comstock, and the sheriff had yet to go to Sacramento to have his rotten tooth pulled. "Where's it from?"

"The Welshman's placer claim. Some Italians are working it now. This ingot represents about six months' labor."

"That whole claim's coyoted. Nothing left. Those Italians should light out for Nevada too. Or try their hand in a less speculative business. What is it your sign says you do now, anyhow?"

"Melainotype portraiture. A new technology that permanently captures and records images in minutes. I can have it ready for the customer like that," I said with a snap of my fingers.

"You don't say."

"Or capture momentous occasions and sell the images as keepsakes."

"You may be onto something there. How does it work?"

Inside the rear door of my business sat a crate of supplies newly arrived from San Francisco. I returned with a four-by-six-inch, wafer-thin sheet of iron to show the sheriff.

"See here, it's iron. Much cheaper and a whole lot faster than a glass plate. You coat it with a gelatin and silver halide emulsion. When light hits it inside the camera, it burns a visible image. Then I use potassium cyanide to make sure the image doesn't vanish."

"You lost me there."

"You'll understand me when you see it for yourself," I said, carefully replacing the plate in the crate. "What can I help you with, Sheriff?"

"Our little town here finds itself scarce of learned types such as yourself, Shaw. We need you to lawyer for the Turk boy."

"What happened to Jim Hodgkins?"

"Skedaddled to Sacramento last month."

"I have almost no experience with the law."

"Be that as it may, son, you are an educated man and

a businessman of good standing in Beulah. I'm afraid that makes you his lawyer. Ain't no one else left who meets those requirements."

"When's the trial?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"And sentencing?"

"Everything tomorrow. You can confer with him tonight. Prepare his defense and what have you."

"Prepare him to face the tree, you mean."

"Don't you give me a hard time, Shaw. We all answer to the same man. You can come by and talk to the poor bastard after he's had his supper." The sheriff winced and held his jaw with his hand, trying to calm his tooth. I returned to my work, preparing to chip my fee from the Italian ingot.

* * *

The cage rested among the enormous, meaty arms of the great oak at the south end of town. The ancient trunk was twelve feet wide at its base and erupted into a leafy, many-armed kraken that stood one hundred feet high, towering over the clapboards and tents around it. Many of the largest branches rested upon the ground like monstrous tentacles, supporting the creature's enormous weight and creating a sheltering canopy so expansive that it cooled the air beneath it. Some said the great oak was two thousand years old, yet its leaves shone a vibrant and lively green. The preacher held that the tree had been planted in the Garden of Eden and had seen the very fall of man, but if you asked most folks lured to these parts by the promise of a golden salvation, they'd tell you there was no paradise to be found, just a long, hard fall into debt, desperate poverty, and the grave.

In his cage, Joba Turk was still eating supper. As I moved closer, the two Indian bounty hunters startled me. They lounged overhead, drowsy lions on tree limbs as wide as a horse's back. The pair's lidded eyes betrayed less than knotholes. Turk set aside a wooden bowl of gamey-smelling stew and stood inside the cage, wiping his hands on a new cotton shirt. His short-cropped hair looked like freshly grazed grass. He'd been fed and cleaned since arriving in town, yet the soap and water could not wash away his frailty. He laughed quietly at me, his eyes unamused and partly detached from the here and now. "I know who you are," he said. "You're the assay man."

"Yes. I'm to argue for your life tomorrow."

"That don't make a lick of goddamn sense."

"Why not?"

"You're the one put me in this cage."

"If I don't report suspect gold, they throw me right in there alongside you. The corporation is the law in this district."

Turk nodded. He picked at the wood of his cage, peeling off a splinter. "They aim to hang me from this tree, don't they?"

"They do."

He pricked the back of his hand with the splinter. A single drop of blood formed on the skin.

"Where did you come from?" I asked.

"Oregon," Turk said, studying his blood. He placed a finger on the bead and smeared it across a knuckle.

"When did you arrive in these parts?"

Joba Turk licked the blood off his hand and flicked away the splinter. It landed beside a musculature of roots that erupted from the soil. Afternoon was turning to evening. Javelins of fading sun pierced the canopy here. Turk nodded at the Indians, who remained relaxed and immobile in their perches. "Know what them two said to me on the ride home from Bear Creek?"

"I wouldn't care to guess."

"They said their people are dead and dying. And all that Indian blood turned to gold dust. Every soul, a shiny nugget. Every village, a vein."

"I don't believe those Indians speak a lick of English."

"They don't need to." Turk tugged the skin down beneath one eye with a finger, exposing a pink scythe of flesh. "Rivers poisoned with mercury. Mountains collapsing in on themselves. You're a reader of books, ain't you, Shaw? You know the meaning of the word *apocalypse*."

"The end of the world.' Revelations."

"No," Turk smiled. "That ain't it. *Apocalypse* is a Greek word. It means 'uncovering.' You see?"

"Why don't you tell me what happened with you and Edwards that day at the river, best you can recollect."

Turk looked irritated to be redirected but considered the question before speaking.

"Tine attacked me with a hatchet. Jumped down on me from a digger pine he was perched in. I shot that son of a bitch in his leg, but the bullet come out his lower back, scrambling his lower insides along the way."

"Why did he attack you?"

"He said I stole his gold."

"Did you?"

"No, but I sure as hell took it after he tried killin' me. The man was on a spree. He'd been drinking for a whole five days. I figured his stake was fair compensation for trying to steal my life."

"Well, the council won't see it that way."

"I reckon they won't."

When I turned to go, the Indians had disappeared from their boughs. I fought the urge to seek them out in the gloaming.

"I'm gonna make peace with the tree tomorrow, Shaw," Turk said. "Someday you will, too. We got a lot to atone for, you and me."

"Mr. Turk, I posit, pulled this very pistol from his pocket and shot Tine Edwards in the right thigh," the mining district attorney said, brandishing the weapon.

Unseasonable heat and a nauseous expectation had taken Beulah this first of May. The townsfolk moved sluggishly through the dusty streets. Above, turkey buzzards dotted an unblemished blue sky, riding a hot breeze from the valley. Yet beneath the shady tree, the air remained cool, the light diffuse and pleasant. Noisy scrub jays flitted and hopped through the branches overhead. Only involved parties were allowed to attend Joba Turk's trial—Judge William Shipton and his council, a mining district attorney, me, and, of course, Turk himself. I had unsuccessfully lobbied the council to release Joba Turk from his cage for the proceedings, but it would not consider the matter, so Turk sat Indian-style at the bottom of the cage, oddly peaceable. As for the dead man, Tine Edwards had no family to speak of any farther west than Kansas City.

"According to the good doctor Matthews," the district attorney continued, "the ball ranged upward and passed through the rectum on the left side, mortally wounding Mr. Edwards. Mr. Turk proceeded to abscond with Mr. Edwards's gold, leaving him to bleed out and be consumed by wild animals."

Seated on his throne of roots, Shipton appeared preoccupied, fretting, no doubt, about reports to Chicago full of numbers indicating eroded profits and stalled growth. In addition to acting as mining district judge, Shipton ran the Providence Mining Corporation's Beulah operation.

An overweight and breathless man with a salt-and-pepper walrus mustache, he fiddled with his uncomfortable necktie, a fashionable four-in-hand direct from New York. Arrayed in chairs placed to Shipton's left, the council of four listened carefully to the district attorney's summation. These middle managers were also company men, aspirants to Shipton's job, no doubt. Not one had ever used a shovel or pan for a living as far as I knew.

"Why is it that this mining district flourished while others degenerated into chaos and anarchy? Rule of law. The protection of a miner's rights. This here rattlesnake murdered Tine Edwards and jumped his claim. He needs to be hung until he is dead. That is all."

All four men on the council nodded their heads. One even politely clapped his hands. Joba Turk barked in laughter at this, startling the lot of them. Shipton grimaced at the prisoner and gestured impatiently at me to begin. I stepped forward.

"When I arrived here in the year 1849, California was a lawless place. Only just acquired from Mexico, as you'll remember. Mining districts sprung up all over the place, each unique in its own particular way and with its own code. Am I correct, gentlemen?"

The council agreed and Shipton impatiently bade me continue.

"Yet who could anticipate the crush of humanity in store? Within a year's time, Beulah was overrun. Every square foot snatched up. If you'll remember, the canyon to the west of town was claimed to its very head, nearly twenty miles, each man being allowed but twenty feet. So when the Providence Mining Corporation of Chicago, Illinois, showed up to consolidate the claims and pay a living wage, it was welcomed."

Judge Shipton was listening now.

"Indeed, over the next few years, Providence made itself indispensable to all matters in Beulah. In fact, our esteemed judge, his entire council, and greater than seventy-five percent of Beulah's citizens are counted on the Providence payroll."

"What are you getting at, Mr. Shaw?" Shipton said. He shifted his large, uncomfortable frame on his chair.

"I'm suggesting that this district, for all intents and purposes, is the Providence Mining Corporation, and as such is a direct competitor of the gold miner Joba Turk.

Thus, it cannot fairly and objectively judge or pass sentence upon him."

"Is that the totality of your argument?"

"I also question how Dr. Matthews could determine the manner of Tine Edwards's wounding if wild animals had been at the body."

"I did it," Joba Turk said from within his cage. "I shot and killed Tine Edwards because he was a mean drunk. Then I ran off with his gold."

"There you have it," Judge Shipton said, standing. "Guilty. I hereby sentence you to death by hanging. Sentence to be carried out immediately. God rest your soul, son."

With that, the judge and his council departed, followed closely by the mining district attorney. The men vaporized into the blinding sun beyond the protection of the tree. Apparently satisfied with himself, Joba Turk lay down and closed his eyes as the sheriff and his men arrived with the rope. Overhead, the scrub jays continued to argue. As a deputy began work on the hangman's knot, I left to collect my camera and melainotype plates.

Ryan Masters is a writer and poet from Santa Cruz, California. He is the author of *Above an Abyss: Two Novellas* (Radial Books, 2018) and a chapbook, *below the low-water mark* (Pudding House Publications, 2003). He spent a decade on staff at the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* and *The Monterey County Weekly*. He is a frequent contributor to *The Surfer's Journal* and former poet-in-residence for the City of Pacific Grove, California. His work has also appeared in *The Iowa Review*, *Unlikely Stories*, and the Spring 2015 *Catamaran Literary Reader*.

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