**The Rodeos of My Childhood**

Kody Ford

As gnats circled the harsh glow of stadium lights, the crowd gathered from throughout the county and across the state line to sit in the thick summer air and witness the three-night spectacle of man versus beast at the Ark-La-Miss Rodeo. They watched women in bedazzled shirts and pink boots make hairpin turns around 50-gallon drums; broncos buck and kick as daredevil cowboys clung to their saddles; clowns in bright, ill-fitting clothes contort their white mouths and wave their black hats, taunting 1,700-pound bulls who flailed erratically. Then they watched us.

On Saturday night, during a break from the action, the announcer called the children into the arena. A clown stepped forward, tracing an imaginary line across the ground with his finger. A cowboy emerged from behind a gate holding a small spotted piglet. Someone had greased the animal and tied a five-dollar bill to its tail. The glistening pig writhed and squealed as the cowboy held it firmly just above the ground.

We gathered, hungry for victory, longing for the prize. Some of us would grow up to become welders, teachers or doctors. Some of us would become addicted to meth or pills and have run-ins with the law. Some of us would never live to see thirty. At that moment, we had no idea what life held in the long run. We only understood the immediate future—the triumph and the reward.

When the clown pulled the trigger of the starter pistol, we took off behind the pig—shin-deep in mud and shit—screaming, swatting, knocking each other to the ground. Adrenaline fueled our small bodies as we ran across the arena in pursuit. The animal darted from one end to the other, frantically dodging our wild, rapacious grasps. Our families cheered from the stands, each certain their child would come out on top. They shook fists. Shouted names. Hooted and hollered. But none of that made any difference. Blind luck and viciousness decided the outcome.

Within minutes, one kid clutched the dirty five-dollar bill while the rest of us walked out of the arena empty-handed, sulking and cursing under our breath. Until the next summer, when we’d return to try again.