

Nicholas Rinaldi

JOGGING MY MILE ON THE CINDER TRACK AT ANDREW WARDE HIGH

It's morning: April, clear sky.
I run my mile. The air is brisk,
alert with budding trees. Is this a fantasy I'm in,
or something else? Small clouds like punctuation marks
bother the horizon.

My father's home, asleep in another county
—yet here he is, in the empty bleachers,
my waking dream of him, noisy as hell.
He cheers me on: "Run, you bastard! Run!"
I'm forty-eight; he's seventy-nine, tough as nails.
I push on through my second lap.
God, this jogging's rough.

In the red brick school, the kids are laboring
at geometry and Keats, and early love.
Smoking pot in the john. Some of the girls
are pregnant, making plans
for marriage, or welfare,
an out-of-town abortion. I run my mile.

And now my father's on the track,
giving it all he's got. I'm in the bleachers,
tough as nails. "Lift those knees! Pump! Pump!"
He sweats his way
around the far turn, pressing hard, thinking birds,
trees, spring, imagining death and afterlife,
the God he believes in but wholly doubts. Gasping,
one foot after the other.

And then he's down,
a quick fall, dumb like stone.
It's cardiac arrest. I bend over him
and give him CPR. Slowly, he comes around.
"I'm no fool," he says, managing a wink.
"Did you think I'd die?"

In the red brick school, a buzzer sounds,
signaling the start or stop
of something else. A brown cloud brushes past the sun.
My father's up again, finishing his mile.
And I run too. We run together, side by side,
cheering each other on.

DODGE CITY SALOON

This is where it all
comes together: gamblers, cattlemen,
rustlers, whores. Good guys and bad guys.
The sheriff tries to keep the peace
but can't. Bullets fly.
The kid with big ideas, the one
who wants to be a famous gun,
goes down. They drag him out by the heels.
The fat one in a sweaty shirt
spits a heavy glob toward the spittoon.
The cardsharp from the East deals poker.
The barber, drunk at a corner table, snores.
The tart who waits on table
lifts her skirt and adjusts a stocking.
Come hell or high water, it will all end in a
free-for-all: mean tempers, fists flying,
chairs hoisted and hurled, cracked skulls,
smashed mirrors. They will kill and be killed
because broken bones and ruined desire
are part of the script, the way it was written.
The undertaker leans against the bar,
a dark gaze baking in his eyes. Sooner or later,
he gets them all.