

The Brook—Boulder's Sadness

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(I wrote this poem after a mass shooting took place in Boulder, Colorado in 2021. The shooter entered a grocery store and killed 10 people. Years earlier, I had lived in Quonset huts just outside the university there. The poem shares my experience there and ends with a question I could not help asking myself as I considered the event. This poem was published in The Voices Project and can be found at <http://www.thevoicesproject.org/poetry-library/archives/05-2021>. I hope you enjoy it.)

The swirling dirt settled into her hair, ruffling it, making her feel dirty and scared, mixing with moisture from the babbling brook beneath their feet and the heavy scent of scrub grasses, making the hairs on her bare arms stand at attention. He stood in front of her, Cheshire smirk on his face, peacock dancing, daring, cajoling, as his partners in crime chanted cheers, jeers, encouragement, threats.

Sweat trickled down her back, adrenaline shot along nerves. Shoving her to the hard ground had been enough, but striking hard one young sister's face, lip now cracked and bloody, knocking the other into the rough-hewn wooden pole edging the small babbling brook's bridge, that had been too much. Copying him, she danced. He swung his meaty hand once, and she ducked, fear fueling her movements like a marionette jerking to a higher power's plan. She swung, her foot almost sliding on slick wooden bridge. Why had she let him force her there? If they fell...concussions? He parried, lunged, toying with her. Unprepared for possible defeat, she blazed with both hands, pounding his face again and again—his bloodied nose, his swollen chin. Finally, eyes blurred, vacillating between crossed and straight, he retreated, slipping, righting himself, face contorted, "Damned she devil." Ten years old, she won the only fight of her life, but all she felt was abject misery, an adrenaline hangover, and fear she and her contender would meet again. But he and his cronies abandoned the playground, never to return that summer.

Fifty years later, in a grocery store bullets slam, ten bodies spew life, neighborhood crushed where once a babbling brook, hewn wooden bridge, and a simple playground stood. Shaking, tears rolling down aging cheeks that a city once again became a shrine to hopelessness that burst from a tortured soul to splatter, shred victims alive and dead. Yet, a niggling fear clawed its way up already overtaxed nerves. Had the shooter once been forced to defend himself over a brook like the one no longer babbling there?