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He had been the first to go. None of the other children had felt anything either; he knew that. But, he had been the first to go – set the example, the standard. Allowed the others to experience the expectation and to feel misled. To feel sinful.

The chanting still filled his ears. Melodic to the ears whose throats the incessant chirping stemmed, but to him it was haunting, flowing together in one club to beat at his heart.

Even now, remembering the night caused sweat to drip from his brown hair that fell just over his eyes, drying them with the salt of memory.

Thump thump thump.

The stomping. It filled his ears and his fists clenched at his side, eyes wide, seeing it unfold again and again.

“Blake! Son, where you off to again?!”

He jerked back to reality with the sound of his mom’s call – heart beating to the rhythmic thumping of a whole congregation’s feet in unison. In unison – they were all one. They had all...

“Blake!”

“Comin mama!”

He grabbed his shoes from the bed brushing his stubby fingers across the soft leather of a red stripe that had come loose through years of use, and ran to the kitchen.

It didn’t take him long to get there.

“There you are. Where you hiding boy?”

“Run to the store for mama now. We need some suga if I’m gonna cook for Daddy’s birthday tonight. Now, Mr. Montgomery should know your comin so just tell him you gonna charge it to

your mama's bill. He knows I'm good for that."

She brushed her son's thick brown hair, pushing it out of his eyes so she could see the dirty tanned face that hid.

"Well say something? You got that?"

"Yes mama."

He turned away from her, still thinking of the past night. Feeling guilt heavily placed on his shoulders by the one he had betrayed in silent action.

The first to go...

He sprinted down the dirt road waving to his neighbor who past by in his new black automobile. Feeling her judge. Did she know?

The whole town had been there. They had cheered, praised, when he had gone! He had been the first!

Feeling each pebble beneath the worn sole of his shoe he felt the red stripe nick his other shoe and his face slammed into the dirt. Tears glued the parched ground beneath his eyes clinging to the moisture that changed it into something stronger.

This ground had waited. Waited to feel the change. Waited for this boy to come and trip, and quench its thirst.

He had not waited. He had been first.

Up. His arms throbbed with emotion as he hoisted himself back up to turn behind Matthew's house to reach the tracks. He would take the short cut to <?xml:namespace prefix = st1 ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:smarts" />Montgomery's.

Thump thump thump.

The stomping returned and his hands trembled as his feet guided him atop the tracks to balance and cut across to Montgomery's.

Thump thump thump.

Kneeling he returned to the past night as he continued walking across the tracks.

"Feel it! Who will answer His call?! Who will answer the call and come before Him to join in life everlasting?! Feel Him entering your heart, entering your soul! Calling out to you!"

He looked around: right then left, at the trees that surrounded the tracks but saw them as people. His neighbor.

Thump thump thump.

His parents.

All singing. Hands raised, shuttering in awakening.

Thump thump thump.

It was his heart, or it was their feet, or it was both. It screamed in his head, feeling the pressure

of yesterday and the guilt of today.

Foot over foot he inched forward.

He was standing – standing and the stomping grew louder with cheers and reinvigorated song.

He looked forward, onto the bridge, but onto the altar. There he was, dressed for ceremony, holding the Book. Calling out his name. Recognizing him as the first.

He wanted to sit back down, to run out screaming!

Thump thump thump!

The aisle was blocked with dancing and singing. Dancing and singing and stomping and calling.

He closed his eyes as he did last night, running forward, now before the man with the Book.

A loud whistle! It was so frightening.

He had been first!

He had damned himself!

Another whistle and the screeching of metal on metal. He looked back – sparks on the track.
Train on the track!

He jumped, feeling the train batter and smash his left arm he left dragging behind him. His body slammed onto the rocks holding the track and rolled down the hill into the brush at forest's edge.

Thump thump thump.

The train barreled over the bridge past Montgomery's store.

Breathing, the boy rolled over onto his back and looked up past the trees branches at the rays of light that broke through hitting his face with a column of golden sun like some twisted reckoning.

He smiled.

Punishment and reconciliation.

He had been first, but now he had been forgiven.

He stood up, still smiling, but the fear did not leave him, and the thumping he was soon to join echoed in his thoughts forever more.

given the special privilege to take upper level creative writing classes while also serving as the vice president of his class. Jeff is pursuing a Science-Business degree with hopes of attending medical school. Under the penname "David Kraine" he has obtained an agent for the manuscript *Language Barrier* with Foolsap & Quill, writes short stories for the campus literary journal, *The Juggler*, and has also completed several novel length manuscripts (www.davidkraine.com). President and founder of the Eyes on Africa Foundation, a rapidly growing non-profit organization to benefit the Othandweni Orphanage in South Africa, Jeff has published the *Ubuntu* journal to benefit the cause (www.eyesonafricafoundation.org).