

1st Place & Top Northlander (2022): Eddie Williams, Lost on the River New Year's Eve, 1964.

Hank Williams is long dead. The grieving fans who have made pilgrimage to his grave over the last dozen years know it. The generations of *corpse fauna* which have feasted on his tortured, twisted frame prove it.

Yet death and decay won't keep him from crashing my birth day in a small slat-board shack near a mangrove estuary on the Whangarei Harbour.

Hank's discarnate mind, dormant with grief, doesn't register that his essence languishes, lost on the River that flows between worlds. As I struggle to escape the amniotic sea engulfing me, a freak current captures Hank and hauls him towards our world. He washes up on a hard, dusty surface. Hellishly humid air. A relentless pounding in his ears. *Ain't nothin' but a dream*, he thinks. *I'm asleep in the backseat of my Cadillac while young Chuck drives me to Carlton, Ohio.* Raising himself on all fours, Hank is floored by a tsunami of pain, springing from the faultline of his spine. As the wave subsides, he curses the miles of rugged road that took their toll on his back. By Knoxville his agony was such that Chuck bundled him into an emergency clinic.

Shouldn't have washed down the Doc's opioids with beer 'n' bourbon.

Something wet and warm slither over his face. His eyes open to a long pink tongue lolling over yellowed fangs. Scrambling back, he sees an old sheepdog.

Hey there, girl. You friendly?

Another lick to his face. Hank fondles a velveteen ear, setting the hound off frantically pawing the air.

'Time to treat your mutt for fleas,' a gruff voice says.

Hank looks up to see a chunky middle-aged man in an easy chair.

'I only did her last week,' a youthful voice replies over Hank's shoulder. He releases the dog's ear and turns to see a heavily pregnant teenager propped up on a couch, sipping tea. 'See, Dad? She's stopped now.'

The pair look straight through Hank. *Guess this is one of them dreams where ol' Hank's on the outside looking in.*

The throbbing sound emanates from a rickety phonograph. An adolescent stammering his love for a girl named Peggy-Sue. The music, at once ridiculous and infectious, compels Hank to tap out the rhythm on the wooden floor.

'You hear that, Dad? Reckon it's Jay?'

'More like possums dancing on the deck.'

'At least someone's enjoying New Year's Eve, Fred.'

'Fred, now, is it? If I'd called my old man by his first name...'

These folks sure talk strange, Hank thinks as the record finishes.

Fred selects a new record: the Hank Williams Memorial Album. 'Now, this is music!'

Memorial Album? Them money-grabbing dogs at MGM must've cobbled it together when I had that damn heart attack back in Florida.

Fred props the cover on the mantelpiece and places the disc on the turntable. Hank grabs at the sleeve, flicks to the back and reads, "*The late Hank Williams...*" It slips from his grasp and falls to the floor as he reels back in disbelief.

'Wind's getting up, Dad. Old Hank's just taken a tumble.'

Fred shuts the window and picks up the cover as *Your Cheatin' Heart* begins to play.

You sending me a message, Lord? Quit poppin' the pills, guzzlin' booze and cheatin' on Audrey, or I'll wind up The Late Hank Williams?

A thunderclap shakes the shack. My mother and I both flinch. She spills tea over her protruding belly. Flo rushes over, rests her head on Mum's lap and whines.

'You all right, Cass?'

'Yeah. I've spilt more than tea, but - my waters have broken.'

'But you're a couple of weeks off yet.'

'Baby has other plans.'

'Righto - I'll phone for an ambulance,' Fred says, trotting from the room.

'Dad...' Cass's murmur doesn't reach him. 'Don't make me go to hospital.' She curls into a ball, arms wrapped around her torso.

'Hell.' Fred strides back in the room, 'bloody phone's down!'

Cass unfurls herself. 'Right. Plan B. Call the midwife.'

'I'm not having that woman in my house!'

'And I'm not giving birth with my old man as doctor and my dog as nurse!'

'All right, I'll get her - but only out of sheer bloody necessity! You'll be okay while I nip next door?'

'Just go! And take Flo with you.'

Hank follows dog and master out to a pot-holed driveway and gazes upon an upside-down sky - Orion's belt looking more like a coonskin cap. Fred veers towards another shack where a dim light peeps through ragged curtains. Mounting the steps, he gives a knock to wake the dead.

The door creaks open. A male face peers through the gap; eyes looking warily at Fred. Focusing on Hank, they bulge.

'Holy crap!' The door slams shut.

A monotonous rhythm comes from the other side – tock-stump-drag, tock-stump-drag. The door flies open, and Fred and Hank are staring down the twin barrels of a shotgun.

'Bloody hell, Norah, put that thing away!'

'So, it's just you,' the wiry old woman juggling walking stick and weapon replies.

'Expecting the drug squad?'

'Bugger off! Trev said it was that mean old bastard from next door with some spooky looking bumpkin in tow.'

Hank, in his best all-white nudie suit and Stetson, takes in Norah's shapeless brown frock, bare feet and rat's nest hair. *Talk about the yokel calling the hick rustic!*

'Just the old bastard and his dog,' Fred drawls. 'Your young fella been smoking electric pūhā again?'

'What do you want, Fred?'

'It's Cass - the baby's on its way.'

'Why didn't you say so?' Norah snaps, abandoning the gun and limping onto the porch. 'Trevor! Grab my birthing bag and a Swannie - we're off to see Cassie.'

A lanky youth creeps forward, eyeballing Hank. 'Am I coming too?' he asks, handing over the items.

'No!' Norah and Fred decree.

Hank doffs his hat in farewell to Trevor, who squeals like a stuck pig and slams the door again.

'So, he's highly strung,' Norah says. 'Doesn't mean he's high.'

'If I had my way, he'd be strung up high.'

'And why aren't you driving Cass to the hospital, you miserly old rooster?'

'Because, you meddling old pūkeko, her useless bloke is off galivanting in my car. Besides, Cassie's not keen on hospitals.'

'That nasty ruptured appendix a few years back?'

'Yeah - best not to mention it, eh?'

'Of course not. Poor lamb.'

'Speaking of lambs,' says Fred, 'I've had plenty of experience with birthing mothers - I'm more than capable with the mechanics of it all.'

'Hell's teeth, Fred! This is your daughter - not some fly-struck ewe about to squirt out its young.'

'That's what I'm saying! Cass wants a woman just now. S'pose we'll have to make do with you.'

Back at the house, Hank wonders what use he is in this dream. As the birthing party slips out of boots and coats, he glides past them to the sitting room. His memorial album plays quietly. Locating the volume knob, he cranks it up. *Move it on Over* struts out of the speakers.

Fred pushes open the door, strides over to the stereo, and turns it down.

Hank flicks it up.

'Foreign rubbish,' Fred grumbles, dropping the volume. He stands there, mouth agape as the knob spins to ear-pulverising mode. Norah enters and wrenches the plug from the wall. 'Blokes and their bloody record players! Stop mucking around and take me to Cassie.'

Hank re-engages prongs to socket. A splinter of music. Sparks dance about his hand. Darkness. Silence.

'Dad!' Cassie calls.

'On our way, love - just a power outage.'

It is approaching one o'clock when Mum's final push sends me into Norah's gnarled hands. I am blue. She ties and snips the umbilical cord, she dangles me upside down and spansks my backside. Nothing.

My mother stares at her lifeless child.

'Fred!' Norah screams.

He bursts into the room - Hank Williams hot on his heels.

'He's not breathing!'

Fred clutches my heels and spins me around - faster and wider with each circuit. Hank tries to sidestep the arc of my swinging body. I slice through him like a scalpel. Ectoplasmic gore gushes from the exit wound, purging Hank of years of chronic, crippling pain in one glorious moment.

The overhead light flashes on. An unearthly chant penetrates the air.

Revo-No-Ti-Evom... Revo-No-Ti-Evom...Revo-No-Ti-Evom

My body convulses. I cough. Mum stirs from her stupor, 'Hello, you!'

Fred places me in my mother's arms as I cry for my first feed. Averting his eyes from us, he says, 'Righto - I'll leave the three of you to it.'

'Good,' says Norah. 'Make yourself useful and find out what's making that unholy racket.'

The chanting is coming from the record player. The needle is leaping back and forth in the same groove as the disc spins counterclockwise. Fred shudders as he lifts the arm off. 'Hell - sorry about that, Hank. Bloody storm's bugged the motor.'

About Eddie



Born in Liverpool, England and raised in Papakura, New Zealand, E.J Williams has had two flash fiction stories published in the 2021 NZ anthology: *You Might Want to Read This*. In the same year Eddie self-published his debut novel, *A Volatile Mixtape*. He lives in Northland where he works for New Zealand Red Cross as a First Aid administrator.