Screenplay

Connor Loyd

"Land of the Living"

"CALIFORNIA FRONTIER, 1875"

EXT. BOOM TOWN. MAIN STREET. MIDDAY.

The sweltering California heat beams down on a small frontier town.

Outside the local Sheriff's office, a collection of "WANTED" posters hang together on a wooden wall.

In front of them stands JOSEPH Sumner, a 39-year-old bounty hunter.

His eyes move from poster to poster, considering his options. $500... $900...

Finally, one catches his attention.

"MAD MURPHY BIERCE. REWARD: $1,000 DEAD, $5,000 ALIVE."

A small smile spreads across JOSEPH's face. He tears down the poster from the wall and rolls it up.

INT. BOOM TOWN SALOON. MIDDAY.

JOSEPH sits at a saloon bar. In front of him, the "WANTED" poster is sprawled out across the bar top for the BARTENDER to see.

JOSEPH
"New Eden?" Never heard of it.

BARTENDER
Most haven't. You won't find it on any maps. But last I saw of ol' Murph there—

The BARTENDER taps at the poster.

BARTENDER (CONT'D)
—he was talking about making a visit out there.

JOSEPH
Then I guess I am too. Where is it?

BARTENDER
I don't know. As a matter of fact, nobody does.

JOSEPH
What do you mean? Somebody has to.

BARTENDER
Only the ferrymen.

JOSEPH
The ferrymen?

BARTENDER
The folks who take people to and from New Eden. They're the only ones who know the way.

JOSEPH
What's so special about this place that they gotta keep it all hidden away for?

BARTENDER
I've heard stories...

The BARTENDER leans in closely, dropping his voice down to a whisper.

BARTENDER (CONT'D)
Stories of sick children returning healed. Of amputees coming back in one piece.

JOSEPH
Of pigs flying?

BARTENDER
Scoff if you want, Mr. Sumner. But just because you can't explain something doesn't make it any less real.

JOSEPH
Where can I find one of these "ferrymen?"

EXT. CALIFORNIA FOREST. AFTERNOON.

JOSEPH reaches the top of a hill and looks down at the wooded valley below. Waiting in the forest is a small crowd of 11 or 12. Some are well-dressed, carrying luggage with them. Others are visibly ill or injured.

JOSEPH descends into the peculiar gathering, glancing around with suppressed curiosity. He approaches a cheery, rotund man wearing expensive clothes and smoking a cigar, WALTER Blythe.

JOSEPH
Afternoon.

WALTER
Afternoon, good fellow!

JOSEPH
Is this——

JOSEPH briefly glances around himself.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)
Is this where the ferrymen come? For New Eden?

WALTER
It is indeed!

JOSEPH
It's a bit odd, isn't it? Meeting out in the middle of the woods like this?

WALTER
A little, I suppose. But from what I hear it's well worth the eccentricities.

JOSEPH
Yeah, I heard that, too...

WALTER
Here, have a seat.

WALTER pulls out a large travel case next to himself and motions for JOSEPH to sit down.

JOSEPH
Thanks.

JOSEPH takes a seat. WALTER holds out his hand in greeting.

WALTER
Walter Blythe.

JOSEPH takes WALTER's hand and shakes it.

JOSEPH
Joseph Sumner. Nice to meet you.

WALTER
Likewise! So, what brings you out here, Joseph?

JOSEPH
Work. And you?

WALTER
Oh, it's pleasure for me! You see, I've always wanted to kill somebody.

This catches JOSEPH off guard. He shifts a little.

JOSEPH
You have?

WALTER
Oh, yes! Ever since I was a boy I've imagined what it would be like. To watch the light drain from someone's eyes, and to know you're the one who took it! Now, that's all it's ever been, mind you. Just my morbid little fantasies. But now I finally have the chance to experience it in person, because out there, it doesn't count!

JOSEPH
Well, um, I hope you enjoy it.

WALTER
Thank you! Have you ever killed somebody before?

JOSEPH tenses up. His voice drops ever so slightly.

JOSEPH
Um... yeah. Yes, I have.

WALTER
Ooh, really? Tell me, what was it like?

JOSEPH
...you get used to it. After a while.

WALTER
I can't wait!

The crowd's attentions turn as a horse-drawn wagon pulling a large cart approaches them.

The wagon stops, and the two FERRYMEN driving it climb down.

FERRYMAN 1
Alright, everybody. The ferry is $100 dollars each. You can either pay it all up front, or do 50 now and 50 on the return trip.

The crowd gathers around the back of the cart. One at a time, the FERRYMEN take the people's money, count it, and let them on board.

JOSEPH fishes for cash in his pocket and hands it to FERRYMAN 1, who looks it over. Satisfied, he motions for JOSEPH to take a seat.

Once everybody is seated, FERRYMAN 2 circles around to the front wagon to take the reins of the horses.

Meanwhile, FERRYMAN 1 boards the cart and walks down the center of the aisle. At the front, he grabs a handful of cloth bags.

Lying beside the bags is a shotgun, which he picks up with his free hand.

FERRYMAN 1 walks back down the aisle, handing out bags to each of the passengers.

FERRYMAN 1 (CONT'D)
Alright, folks. As you know, the location of New Eden is proprietary. So, for the duration of our trip, I'm going to ask that you keep these cloth bags over your heads. If I find at any point during our trip that one of you has removed your bag, is peeking through a bag, or is in any other way tracking our whereabouts...

FERRYMAN 1 holds up the shotgun for everyone to see.

FERRYMAN 1 (CONT'D)
You will not be arriving at your destination with the rest of us. Is that understood?

The crowd replies with affirmative murmurs and nods as they place the bags over their heads.

FERRYMAN 1 (CONT'D)
Excellent.

(to FERRYMAN 2)
Are we ready?

FERRYMAN 2
Ready if you are.

FERRYMAN 2 pulls on the reins and the wagon takes off.

EXT. CALIFORNIA DESERT. EVENING.

The wagon traverses the desert landscape, weaving through cavernous, rocky valleys before coming out to a vast, barren landscape of dirt and sand.

As they travel, FERRYMAN 1 sits surveying the bagged passengers. FERRYMAN 2 guides the horses.

EXT. NEW EDEN OUTSKIRTS. NIGHT.

The lights of a bustling town glisten in the near distance.

The wheels of the cart pass over a mysterious white line painted deep into the ground.

As the wagon grows closer, it passes by wooden signs posted along the town's edges.

The sign's writings face the direction of the town. One reads "DO NOT BELIEVE THEIR LIES." Another warns "THEY ARE NOT WHO THEY CLAIM TO BE."

EXT. NEW EDEN. CENTRAL SQUARE. NIGHT.

The wagon pulls to a stop just outside the town's lively center. Echoes of festive music, noisy banter, and smashing glass call out from just around a corner.

As FERRYMAN 2 ties the horses, FERRYMAN 1 gets up and walks to the end of the cart.

FERRYMAN 1
Alright everybody, we have arrived. You may now take off your bags. Give them to me as you exit and enjoy your stay at New Eden.

JOSEPH, along with the other passengers, removes the bag from his head and hands it to FERRYMAN 1 as he files off of the cart.

He follows the group around the corner and into the town's CENTRAL SQUARE.

JOSEPH looks around in pure awe. The sheer spectacle, excess, and debauchery on display is more than he's ever seen before:

-Crowds huddle and toss money around knife-wielding fighters, who hack and slash at one another as the spectators cheer.

-Drunken patrons stumble about, drinking enough booze to kill an elephant. A few seem to be downing literal poison.

-A pair of gamblers sit at a patio table, playing Russian roulette with a pile of money between them.

JOSEPH approaches the two gamblers and brings out MURPH's "WANTED" poster.

JOSEPH
Excuse me, gentlemen. Have either of you seen—

BLAM! GAMBLER 2 topples over! GAMBLER 1 lets out a huge belly laugh, he and rakes the cash over to his side of the table.

GAMBLER 1
Better luck next time, friend!
(to JOSEPH)
Sorry, what were you saying?

JOSEPH
I was wondering if you've seen this man anywhere recently.

GAMBLER 1
Let me see here.

GAMBLER 1 takes the poster and holds it close, eyeing the picture.

GAMBLER 1 (CONT'D)
Maybe, maybe not. Why, is he a friend of yours?

JOSEPH glares at him, unamused.

GAMBLER 1 (CONT'D)
Okay, yeah. He looks familiar. I'm sure I've seen him around here somewhere.

JOSEPH
Where?

GAMBLER 1
I don't know. Doyle's, maybe?

The gambler motions to a saloon across the square. Above the entrance hangs a large wooden sign which reads "DOYLE'S."

JOSEPH
Thanks.

Joseph rolls up the poster and leaves.

Behind him, GAMBLER 2 starts to groan, slowly sitting up.

INT. DOYLE'S SALOON. FOYER. NIGHT.

JOSEPH enters through swinging saloon doors into a foyer filled with smoke, music, and chatter.

He wades through the raucous, rambunctious crowd as his eyes scan the room for MURPH.

At the far end of the foyer, perched on top of a piano, lies his target.

MURPH is rambling to a pair of clearly disinterested female patrons.

MURPH
But that's how you survive in this business, I suppose. They may be smart, but I'm always one step——

MURPH feels something and glances down. JOSEPH's hands are wrapped tightly around his boot.

JOSEPH tugs back, swinging MURPH off the piano and into a wooden table, smashing it to the floor. Glass shatters and people scatter as a disoriented MURPH struggles to his feet.

As JOSEPH approaches, MURPH grabs a broken table leg and swings it at JOSEPH, knocking him into the crowd. A few patrons turn him around and nudge him back into the fray.

The two continue their violent tussle, wrecking the establishment in the process. Some patrons watch in horror, while others cheer them on.

Eventually, the pair are pulled apart by bar staff who hold them back as they struggle to continue their fight.

In between the restrained brawlers steps Daniel DOYLE, the saloon's owner. He looks back and forth at the two of them and chuckles.

DOYLE
So, gentlemen, what's got you two so riled up?

MURPH
This man wants me dead!

DOYLE
In New Eden? Good luck with that.

JOSEPH
He's worth more to me alive.

MURPH
And how do you expect to keep me that way? Coburn's gang wants my head! I'd never make it to a courthouse alive!

JOSEPH
Not my problem. You should have thought about that before setting his house on fire.

MURPH
He killed my boy...

JOSEPH is taken slightly aback.

JOSEPH
He did what?

Sensing JOSEPH's hesitancy, DOYLE interjects himself back into the conversation.

DOYLE
Well, as accommodating as we try to be around here, I'm afraid I can't have y'all continuing to wreck my place of business.

JOSEPH
Well, I'm not leaving without him.

DOYLE thinks for a moment, then a smile creeps onto his face.

DOYLE
I'll tell you what, let's settle this the old-fashioned way. Who's up for a duel?

Cheers erupt from the crowd. JOSEPH and MURPH exchange confused glances.

EXT. DUEL ARENA. NIGHT.

The rowdy mob leads JOSEPH out to the DUEL ARENA, a long ovular fence with a growing crowd surrounding its two long sides.

Spectators place bets at a nearby window. Others buy food and drinks as they wait for the show to begin.

From a nearby balcony, a shadowed figure, LEYATI, observes the proceedings.

The mob lifts JOSEPH over the fence, placing him in the west corner of the arena. MURPH stands directly across from him in the east.

An ARMORER hops the fence and approaches the middle of the arena, motioning for the rivals to join him in the center.

When they arrive, the ARMORER addresses JOSEPH and MURPH.

ARMORER
Alright fellas, here's the rules: you each get one pistol with one bullet. You each take twelve paces back, and you wait until I call "fire."

(to MURPH)
If he hits you, you have to leave with him.

(to JOSEPH)
And if he hits you, you have to let him go.

JOSEPH
What if we hit each other?

ARMORER
The closest to the heart wins. Are we all in agreement?

They both nod.

The ARMORER takes out two pistols and hands one to each man.

They turn and begin walking out, one step at a time, to their respective sides of the arena.

Tension builds as they stand, waiting for the signal. A hush falls over the crowd.

Finally, they get their sign.

ARMORER (CONT'D
FIRE!

The two spin around and FIRE! They both fall to the ground. The crowd whoops and hollers as attendants on either side rush over to the injured gunmen.

JOSEPH is wincing, holding pressure to a bullet wound just under his left clavicle. It's close.

An attendant stands, facing the attendants on the east corner, and motions on his own body to where the bullet entered JOSEPH.

JOSEPH cranes his neck up, looking to see where he hit MURPH.

On the other side, an attendant stands up from where they were checking MURPH. He motions to the center of his chest... a direct hit.

The crowd goes wild. JOSEPH's head slumps backward in relief. The attendants lift MURPH up and carry him away. The crowd slowly begins to disperse, and money trades hands among the gamblers.

Up above in his balcony, LEYATI turns and goes back inside.

EXT. NEW EDEN GALLOWS. NIGHT.

At the edge of town, wooden gallows loom ominously overhead.

The attendants drown a dirty rag in chloroform and hold it tightly against a struggling MURPH's mouth and nose. JOSEPH stands by, watching.

As MURPH loses consciousness, JOSEPH glances down at what remains of his bullet wound. It's already mostly healed up.

JOSEPH
Neat.

When they pull the rag away, MURPH is out cold. A bit of drool drips down from his mouth.

The attendants tie his hands behind his back and tie his feet at the end of a long noose.

They throw the other end of the noose around the top of the gallows and pull MURPH up. They then tie the rope down, leaving the bound MURPH hanging upside down.

ATTENDANT
Alrighty. That should keep him till morning. You can come and collect him on your way out.

JOSEPH
Thank you.

The attendants walk off, and JOSEPH takes one final look at MURPH. A hint of pity crosses his face before he turns and leaves.

INT. NEW EDEN INN. LOBBY. NIGHT.

JOSEPH walks into a local inn's lobby. It's noticeably quieter here than it has been elsewhere; a sparse number of people are spread throughout the lobby, conversing quietly among themselves.

LEYATI (O.S.)
That was quite a performance tonight.

JOSEPH turns to see LEYATI sitting in a cushioned chair by the fireplace. He's wearing bifocals and holding a book in his lap.

JOSEPH
Thank you. You mind if I take a seat?

LEYATI
By all means.

As JOSEPH heads over and sits down, something catches his eye. Looking up, he sees a painted portrait of LEYATI hanging over the fireplace.

JOSEPH
Is that you?

LEYATI
It was——about 20 years ago.

JOSEPH
You haven't aged a day.

LEYATI
Yes, this place tends to have that effect on people.

JOSEPH
Is it——would it be dumb of me to ask "why?"

LEYATI
"Why?"

JOSEPH
Why this place is the way it is. Why it does the things it does.

LEYATI
I honestly couldn't tell you.

JOSEPH
It's a secret?

LEYATI
Because I don't know.

JOSEPH
So how did you find out about it?

LEYATI
This place used to be called "Kichchawe." It belonged to the Kowim. They used it as a healing site. Very sparingly, though. Most often, for infants and young children. "Kaleh macehn peridimo," they would say. "Not their time."

JOSEPH
Only children? Why not just use it for everybody? I mean, they had a cure for death.

LEYATI
They didn't see death as something that needed curing. Still don't, as a matter of fact. The Kowim believe that there's a natural time at which one is supposed to go, and to fight against that... well, they believe it would bring more harm than good.

JOSEPH
And what do you believe?

LEYATI stares up at his portrait, suspended over the fire.

LEYATI
I believe... otherwise.

EXT. NEW EDEN GALLOWS. NIGHT.

Outside, MURPH still hangs upside down where they left him. He's conscious now, but barely; his eyes struggle to stay open, and he groans in pain.

Suddenly, he hears a faint cry in the distance. It sounds like a little boy.

THOMAS (O.S.)
Dad!

The sound gets MURPH's attention, who tilts his head to see what direction the call came from.

Along the outskirts of town, just beyond the painted white line marking the town's borders, he sees the silhouette of a child standing alone.

THOMAS (CONT'D)
Dad! It's me!

MURPH
Thomas?

A wave of emotions overtake MURPH: confusion, disbelief, grief, and joy. Tears well up in his eyes. His body swells with newfound energy.

MURPH begins to swing himself back and forth, creating momentum, struggling to break free.

MURPH (CONT'D)
Thomas! I'm coming! Don't go! Dad's coming!

His cries catch the attention of a few townsfolk passing by who laugh with amusement as MURPH continues to swing back and forth, squirming and wiggling as he does so. They don't seem to notice the kid at all.

As he swings, the noose holding him up begins to fray along the edge of the gallows. The friction is slowly eating away at it.

THOMAS
Dad, I'm scared!

MURPH
Don't be scared! Please, don't——
I'm coming! Please don't go!

Swinging forward, the noose SNAPS! MURPH goes flying out and lands harshly on the ground.

Hands still tied behind his back, he struggles to kick away the noose and get to his feet. When he does, he's disoriented and dizzy. The world spins around him.

By now, a larger crowd has formed to watch MURPH’s escape.

INT. NEW EDEN INN. LOBBY. NIGHT.

Hearing the commotion outside, people at the inn begin to gather near the windows and out on the porch. LEYATI and JOSEPH both notice this, and step outside to see what's happening.

EXT. NEW EDEN OUTSKIRTS. NIGHT.

Hands still bound, MURPH gallops with all his might toward the boy calling out to him.

He rushes blindly past the various warning signs posted around the town's borders.

"DO NOT BELIEVE THEIR LIES."

"THEY ARE NOT WHO THEY CLAIM TO BE."

THOMAS
Dad, I've missed you!

MURPH
I've missed you too, Thomas! I'm coming! Please——I'm almost there!

THOMAS holds out his arms, waiting to hug his father.

MURPH runs past the painted border, into his son's open embrace...

EXT. NEW EDEN GALLOWS. NIGHT.

To the distant crowd's horror, MURPH immediately falls to the ground dead. Crossing the border killed him instantly.

THOMAS has disappeared, nowhere to be seen.

The entire crowd of onlookers is stunned into silence.

JOSEPH steps out into the street, trying to process what he's just seen.

A shocked LEYATI looks across the street to DOYLE, who's standing outside his saloon. DOYLE looks back at him, also disturbed by what's just happened.

DOYLE tries to compose himself and calls out to the shocked townspeople.

DOYLE
Okay, everybody, I know we're all a little shaken by what we just saw. But let this be a reminder: that's why we don't cross the border until we're fully healed, right? Those signs aren't just suggestions, they're for your own protection. But as long as you are inside this border, I promise you you're safe. You've got nothing to worry about in here.

The transfixed townsfolk seem unconvinced but hesitantly begin moving about once more.

Meanwhile, JOSEPH stares out helplessly at the corpse lying just beyond the border.

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