

The Oval

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 5

2011

Missouri Breaks

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Recommended Citation

Hassler, Matt (2011) "Missouri Breaks," *The Oval*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

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Matt Hassler



Missouri Breaks



1.

I'm eleven and we're driving somewhere. A white-tail skips alongside the truck, chasing a doe, throwing his head, laughing maybe. The doe hurdles the fence, and the buck makes a leap to follow, but catches his legs in the barbed wire, thrashes until he catches his rut-swollen neck and resigns himself to bleeding out, like they do. I don't remember where we're going, but that deer is hanging, five feet off the ground maybe, chest lurching in halftime with a heartbeat in cadence, waiting. The doe is already over the ridge, and there's another buck-in-rut, watching her white tail flit between sage patches. This is about that, but it's really about love.

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2.

I'm older now and hunting elk. Wapiti, but you wouldn't dare say that. A kid or something dumber carved in a corner-post: Keep Gat Closed, so I do. I'm walking along the bank of the largest river in the world. If you've heard it's the Amazon or the Nile, you were misinformed. An hour or a day passes, the sun pinwheels through wispy cirrus, high and bright, but not hot. I wonder what can hear me out here. I'm lazy and loud because I've crossed the river, where you can't shoot. They know this, across the river, and they stand stiller, taller, antlers longer. As quiet as everything is, I imagine they're watching me.

I notice something, in a tree, a few hundred yards up. I halve that, through binoculars; maybe it's in the river. Something colorful dangles up there. Things aren't colorful here, across the river, mostly brown, and darker brown, like hair and eyes.

I find a Superman backpack lodged between a rock and a cactus, and some papers are caught in sagebrush, flapping in unison, like ducks on a pond, seconds before flight. I see the thing

hanging from a tree, five feet above the riverbank.

It's the quietest day on the largest river in the world, and those papers in the wind, or maybe my heart is flapping in my ears and there's blood pumping hot in my face. That can't be a person.

It's a kid, but I wouldn't know it, were it not for the way he's dressed. He's quarterback blonde, but there's dirt in his hair, and his eyes are bulging and jellied. They look like they used to be blue. A piece of climbing rope tied in a double knot slices into his swollen neck, tied the way you'd tie a shoelace. The blood in his face has all been squeezed down into his chin, and his mouth droops down around his teeth. He's been dead a while, too heavy for the wind to move, he just floats, red, blue, purple.

I walk back to Deertick Ridge, where I can call somebody. Maybe I'm crying. Maybe I'll dream about that kid for a year. Tomorrow at the Sheriff's office they'll ask, did I touch anything? What was I doing on that side of the river? Did I know the kid? No, thinking, no. I ask them what his name is? Confidential.

3.

Ten years later, I'm sitting with my father, who hasn't learned a thing about love, and taught me just as much. He's pawing a cigar, watching it, like it might paw back. I know he cares about me because he lets the thick smoke bleed out the right side of his mouth, toward the wall. I've never liked the smell. What would you say to her? He's talking about my mother. They're getting a divorce. For action's sake, he's divorcing her. You know her better than I do, I say. He lets some smoke seep between his teeth, slowly, so that when it hits the air, it just hangs there.

The kid in the tree was named Mark, and one of those shreds of paper in the sagebrush was a letter to a pretty girl who didn't love him. It wasn't her fault, he wanted her to know that.

I've since decided that love works like any other disease. The worse your case, the worse your outcome. My father didn't follow anyone over the barbed wire, so he'll be okay. In the end, he left her a note instead. I didn't read it, but I've always imagined it a certain way:

Regarding divorce,
It took twenty-three years for us to pick each other apart,
but the line for my signature isn't twenty-three years long
so I'll just write:
I'm sorry.

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