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The Anatomy of Extinction: Stories of People as Place

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THE ANATOMY OF EXTINCTION: STORIES OF PEOPLE AS PLACE

By

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I. THE BURNING SKY

Oklahoma is all my family has ever known. That blood goes back three generations, at least. It's a land that nauseates itself. Sick with the jerk and the pull of spiraling cyclones and a rumbling stomach bloated with noxious waste. The deep injection wells hide the chemical agents, push them down where the benzene can lace the drinking water. They say the consequences of this are unknown.

I lick my crusted lips. My mind floats to visions of my grandparents as children on the plains of Oklahoma. A dry heat pushed around by restless winds. They'd reminisce on the dustbowl. My grandad would say, "My folks tried to get us out to California, but we ran out of gas in Buckeye, Arizona."

Grandma Parker says, "I got this old cornbread mold, you know where I got it? Well I was playing outside, you know this was during the depression, and there was this car packed, oh it makes me laugh, it was packed so high, I mean you couldn't fit another thing on there. No way. I was playing, and off came this old thing, it's cast iron you know? Real heavy, it will last forever. They went driving off, and I tried to chase them. I ran and ran, and they didn't see me, so I kept it for myself. I know everyone is wondering who is gonna get it when I die. Well, I might just be buried with it."

I hear this story twice a year, on Thanksgiving and Christmas.

An old college buddy called me a few weeks back. Said, "I sold my soul. I'm about to be rich." He's a land man, flips *property* for the oil companies. It leaves me with a single thought: We're living out the end of the world, so what is moral anyway?

Grandma O'Hare has been married a number of times. She had five kids by the time she was twenty-one. She is a strong woman. Writes children's books. Someday she'll show them to the world... someday.

When I was young, I would spend afternoons at her house mesmerized as she blew smoke rings through glimmering dust and the stale air of her living room. I'd drink strawberry milk. She would tell me stories of her teenage years spent racing a hot pink '57 Chevy around Stanley Draper Lake, a popular spot for dumping bodies. Same place I would have my first beer. Same place me and my high school pal, Stempy, flipped his dad's white Chevy pickup leaving us to hitchhike back into town thinking, "We really did it this time." I didn't know it then, but Grandma O'Hare lived in the destitute part of town. The red and blue police sirens shining through the windows gave a brilliant lightshow throughout the night. Grandma O'Hare struggled financially until she was poisoned by diet pills. That did a number on her ticker. She won a lawsuit against a nasty corporation and now she lives comfortably.

The Oklahoma sky stretches as far as the feelings of love and loss. The sunset burns as hellfire. People forget that the land's patience is finite. It has waged war on the settlers before. They fled. The seismic activities, a rumble of conflict. I know where my allegiances lie. With Pan, Aja, the twelve deities of flowers, Dionysus, the satyrs, Arunyani, Damu, Ceres, Grand Bois, Gaia. No Senator. No Governor. No Devon. No Chesapeake. No tax incentives. No injection wells. No more begging and compromising, drinking benzene and water at the gates of the energy empire.

II. POOLS

In Oklahoma we swim in pools. Concrete pools filled with cool water that dissolves the boundaries of self. Pools where time seems to slow down when you submerge and open your eyes. Sound bounces in your head and ends up nowhere.

We swim in pools of viscous oil. We come to be in the blackness of that oil. Gestate there like wet grubs. Same kind of grubs we throw on our hooks to bait striper as we float lazily down the Illinois to the place where it's strangled by a looming dam.

They say Tenkiller Lake was named for the ten men who died building that dam. That's a lie. It was named for a family of rich Cherokees. I always liked the way it rolled off the tongue. Ten-kill-er, where the tall cliffs rise from the water's edge like decomposing ribs. I'd jump off despite my mother's wishes. Gravity would push me down into the water, and it felt like the thumb of a giant had come from the sky to rest on my thick skull. There are no natural lakes in Oklahoma, only pools that came about through human engineering. Dams and pipes that run for miles.

I'd twist my line in a fisherman's knot, fastening down colorful lures or hooks baited with stinky brown putty to draw catfish from the depths. Others would noodle. They'd hold the bait right there in their bare hand and shove it in a hole hoping they didn't catch a snapping turtle instead.

On those summer days, when the blistering sun struck the water unabated, bow fishermen would spear alligator gar as they surfaced through the rush of the Illinois. They didn't do much with them. They just put an arrow through their long bodies and let them drift downriver splitting swells and spinning lifeless among the eddies. The dead fish would float alongside chicken shit

and guts, pumped by Tyson into the river in exchange for campaign contributions to Oklahoma's then Attorney General, Edward Scott Pruitt.

I had a happy childhood in an unhappy place. I grew up in a big house in the middle of a dense forest of post and blackjack oak. The borderlands of the cross timbers collide with the great plains just a few miles to the west. Our home was positioned on the curve of a U-shaped neighborhood with two cul-de-sacs. In autumn, the trees stood gnarled and strong like a sea of metallic prosthetics hugging the curves of the planet. They'd lovingly pinch the vast expanse of blue sky that came down to meet them.

It was overseen by a home owner's association and a hierarchy of housewives. They had clear cut a refuge to construct their suburban echo chamber. It worked pretty well until they got tired of hearing their own voices.

In the back yards there were always pools.

Off in the distance, well beyond the forest, there was an air force base that sent AWACs flying through the sky. Big planes with saucer shaped radars propped up on the top. As a child, I imagined them gliding over deserts fighting for the right side in the War on Terror. The government expanded that air force base by taking poor folk's land. They call that eminent domain. There is not much left of that forest anymore. Oklahoma City encroached and sucked up most of the oaks and dogwoods.

Between the cul-de-sacs there was a hole. They filled that hole with water and called it a pond. We'd go there and swim. Back then there were still horny toads and fireflies. We'd catch them not knowing any better. Not knowing as kids that our lives would be defined by the planet's impermanence. We know that well enough now. Been years since I've seen a horny toad skittering around my folk's land. The fireflies which once lit up the evening like a great big

irradiated blanket now rarely poke through the veil of night in dazzling little pinpricks. We would catch them and squeeze their bioluminescent ass goop onto our cheeks and send our howls echoing across the flatness of the plains.

Ol' Mike Connor from the brown house on the south-side of the cul-de-sac used to pay us to kill copperheads.

"I'll give you boys a Washington for every skin you bring me."

"Cool, a dollar!"

"Not a dollar, a quarter, kid. I've got to keep little Susie here safe!" he said, stroking his long-haired dachshund as she snarled with her eyes locked onto our throats.

We'd wade out into the thick of the cattails, our cargo pockets rattling with containers of silver pellets. Every kid knew that silver pellets were deadlier than copper BBs. A child's hollow tip. The wind would blow through the tall grass along the edge of the pond. It swayed this way and that. The muddy water sparkled. The frogs and snapping turtles splashed, leaving ripples along our warpath. A hillbilly disco.

When we did come across a snake, we'd jump and yell "oh shit!", and before we knew it they'd have slithered away unscathed. We weren't much good at killing copperheads. Never made a Washington. All the fertilizer and insecticide that washed into the pond did more to thin their ranks than we ever did, but we fancied ourselves killers. Like the ranchers whose rattlesnake round-ups would collect half a million skins a year to keep them from harming the cattle or the kids. Now they're wondering why they can't keep the rodents away.

My uncle said, "There's a new type of rattler that doesn't rattle. Oklahoma has one of the biggest round-ups in the country. It is an event. There's rides and food and stuff. But now they got a defect that's spreading. A weird piece of empty, twisted skin replaces the rattle. Just hangs

there like this.” He crooks his finger and jiggles it around. “They tend to have a mean streak to make up for their missing parts. Now most of what’s left after the round ups are the quiet ones. They keep reproducing and that’s what comes out.”

But we didn’t see any rattlesnakes down by the pond. It was mostly the frogs hopping around. Occasionally they would escape the poison of all that fertilizer only to fall victim to a lawnmower or a weed-wacker. They’d go flying across the green grass, entrails dangling from their stomachs like wet velvet banners. On holidays my cousins would fry up their legs. They were real stingy about who got to eat them.

The suburban fathers woke up early on Saturday mornings to trim and edge their cubes. They would fish the dead frogs from the pool strainers. Except George across the street, he was an air force Colonel and an alcoholic who sent his wife out to mow the lawn. The hierarchy of housewives would talk about it.

In my parents’ living room there was furniture covered with intricate floral patterns. Their living room table was held up by statues of elephants. When the dog’s face itched he’d scratch it on their plastic tusks. He did this over and over until they’d fall off. My dad would super glue them back on and the dog would scratch and scratch until they fell off again.

Up the road from my folks’ place was a great big mansion with peacocks and horses and swans in the yard. They say it belonged to a millionaire who won the lottery in California. He moved to Oklahoma to take advantage of the cheap cost of living. He became a slum lord. He was busted for running prostitution rings out of his massage parlors. They say the different rooms had themes. One was a jungle. One was the beach. So on and so forth. I’d have lunch at a Mexican food joint across the way. The women would come in and out. Their skin was tan and hardened and they were always laughing.

The mansion burned down twice. Some whispered insurance fraud. I wonder what happened to all those peacocks. Those horses. Those swans. The fence around the mansion still has stone lions that sit proudly with their chests puffed out looking over the road into the flat expanse pushing towards America's borders in every direction. They still guard an empty home.



Oklahoma is haunted by the weight of a vast soul, the soul of industry dissipated and melting into false promises. These promises seep through the beer bottles in the doublewides. Seep through fractured earth. They are going to keep sucking that oil until every drop is gone.

No one can rip themselves from the teeth of all that black gold. It's got us ensnared. Those wells pumping like chomping jaws across the horizon of America's belly. The stick it in and turn it mentality that pumps crude mineral from a surrogate womb. Civilization just keeps on churning. Despite the extinction, despite the poison, despite the marching, the cursing, the property damage, the jail time, the sanctity of democracy, civilization still churns.

Yet, through the cracks in the machinery the land speaks. The horizon like a flat line rumbling in response to all the waste blasted below the crust. Time dissipates into the sea of sky above. I can almost see it, the seconds like fragments, floating in the clouds above these artificial lakes, these pools.

III. SOMEDAY I'LL SEE THE WORLD IN YOU

Some years after Grandpa Bruce died I was sitting at the dinner table having tea with my aunts and my Grandma O'Hare. Grandma made tea in her coffee maker and it always tasted smoky like Hills Brothers. As they gossiped, I would stare through the window at the finches dancing at the bird feeder or splashing around the bath in the garden. Their beaks and black eyes looked like an afterthought.

Grandma said, "You know your Grandpa Bruce's parents were first cousins."

"No, I didn't know that. This is news to me."

I looked around the table at my aunts who were staring deep into the brown haze of their iced tea. I imagine they already knew this, but I had just reached the age where I could be brought in on the family secrets. Those that were deemed inappropriate for a kid. The façade of functionality cracks, the truth comes out, and your family becomes far more interesting than they ever were before.

"You don't know that, Mom," said Aunt Doris.

"Sure I do. Bobby Sue and Frank Bruce were first cousins. Makes sense. I always thought Vandal might have been retarded."

"Mom!" my aunts howled.

"I don't think you're supposed to say that Grandma."

"Well, why the hell not? I got the right to call that man whatever I want. I was married to that son of a bitch for years. The old inbred redneck."

My grandma is the uncontested matriarch of the family. She's a kind and affectionate woman. I always thought that she had room in her heart for the whole world. It's just that she reserved the most contemptuous corners of her heart for Grandpa Bruce.

“Well you married him!” Aunt Darlene pointed out.

“You think I don’t know that Darlene? He was the worst of the five!” said Grandma.

“I believe it. Y’all remember those Bruce family reunions? There were more people than there were teeth!”

Now, there is a reason for the poor dental hygiene that characterizes the Bruce family. For the past century or so they’ve been perfecting the craft of distilling jet-fuel strong corn whiskey deep in the woods of southeast Oklahoma. They began running moonshine into Arkansas during the prohibition era when Al Capone and Lucky Luciano had setup shop in Hot Springs and Oklahoma was still Indian territory. Overtime, they took to drinking it. Family lore said they guzzled so much of that stuff it burned the teeth right out of their heads. Now they are known for their gummy smiles and indecipherable dialect. A rag-tag band, feral and at home in the backwoods.

My biological Grandfather’s name was Vandal. My Grandma O’Hare remarried the same year my folks got hitched and her husband, Lloyd, has always been my grandfather for all intents and purposes. But biologically it’s Vandal Bruce. They tell me Grandpa Bruce inherited some of those drinking habits even though he didn’t make the stuff himself. He’d drink from a two liter every day. One liter of cheap whiskey and one liter of coke. He’d get real nasty with my uncles, Jim and Bill, making them fist fight as he sucked down that hooch, spectating in a drunken delirium.

“He was a mean old hillbilly. He’d drink all day. Make us beat up on each other just so he could watch.” That’s what Uncle Jim says.

But I remembered a different man. A broken man. He had a round nose and a shiny head that he hid under a navy blue hat. Tufts of disheveled hair stuck out from the sides. He was an

old man who'd finish every phone call with the same question, "Is your soul still on fire for the lord?" while his wife Martha breathed heavily on the other end of the line thinking we didn't know she was listening to every word.

I'd say, "Yes, Grandpa." Even when that fire had turned into a blazing void inside me, hungry for meaning and moral certitude. If I had been honest, I'd have said, "Is my soul still on fire? Yes. It's a great big fire. A wildfire even. Chaotic, destructive, unpredictable, oh yes Grandpa my soul is on fire. But for the lord? No, not for the lord."

But I stuck to the script. "Oh yeah Grandpa, my soul is on fire for the lord. Absolutely."

Then he'd say, "When are we going fishing, bud?"

"Whenever you want, Grandpa."

And occasionally he would follow through with it.

One morning when the day's temperature was on course to be 110 degrees, he pulled up in an old Mazda pickup. It was small with a single cab. The leather covering the bench seat was worn out. There was only white webbing and yellow foam. The body was flat black with a coat of primer. As he rolled into the driveway a mist of evaporating antifreeze rose from the engine. In the bed there were two beat up old Rhino rods and a brown tackle box whose cracks had been covered with duct tape. "Bruce" was scrawled in sharpie across the top. And there were half a dozen jugs filled with water. This was going to be our last fishing trip.

So this old man, he and I were rumbling through the farmlands. The sky was far-reaching. It bounced between my senses and a pale expanse, becoming a nebulous vast that consumed itself endlessly. To my left there was the shadow of a monster spread out behind the steering wheel with a calloused hand on the stick shift. His mind was only half clinging to his senses. I could see that. I stared at him as he focused on the road. There were the pieces of a

broken spirit jostling around, barely held together by the glue of Jesus Christ. That was his best shot at redemption. His children had disavowed him, so Jesus would have to do.

When I try to understand the origins of his maliciousness, I imagine a child that had come to be in the carnal fog of poverty. A dirty little kid drudging through the foothills of the Kiamichis. In the fall the rolling hills would change colors, yellows and oranges and reds, in kaleidoscopic waves that would breach the sky. It's a place where people went missing because they stumbled onto the wrong marijuana farm, and the local sheriff would look the other way for a little bit of cash. This child was a part of the land like those hills, rising and falling, lumbering through the green grass and the dead leaves and the gusting wind that could blow a kid right from his feet.

There's a certain curdled sense of self defined by Oklahoma. Age sets in and all you can see is nothingness in every direction. It wears at the edges of your soul. He had looked down into a vast gorge filled with all his conceivable selves only to see a million piles of bones covered with anger and loss. Facing his final years, he'd hoped to drift into the afterlife with some peace of mind, but the people he'd abused just wouldn't give it to him.

I view my relationship with my Grandpa as a proxy for coping with the reality of ecocide. Like the narrative we stretch over planetary collapse, his story is characterized by invisible tragedies. A cathedral of moving pieces, material and immaterial, arising from the mythology of dark forests and dangerous backwaters. Sanctuaries of the animalistic. My relationship to him was one of perpetual loss. Every time I thought I had him figured out, he'd wrestle free or shapeshift like a crazed coyote. Extinction, climate change, deforestation, they too resist my attempts to grasp them fully.

For work he drove a big dump truck. He would pick me up and I would spend the afternoon riding around with him. On those days we would stop by a polo field on the Northside of Oklahoma City and a smiling Mexican man would dump a Bobcat full of horse shit in the bed and give us a thumbs up. We'd carry the load to farms where they'd use it to fertilize their crops. I'd shovel and spray the bed down when we got done. Shoveling all that shit was grounding, visceral, and I enjoyed it.

On the road, he would try to pry information from me. He'd ask what the family thought of him. I'd tell him they didn't say much about him at all.

Other times I would stay in his creaky old lake house where he had striped bass mounted on the walls. At dawn we would go to his favorite spot on the banks of the Arkansas and collect bait. We'd flip rocks and giant earthworms would wriggle around in the dark mud after being exposed to the moist air and the light of morning. We would spend an hour filling little Styrofoam cups until they were writhing and overflowing with worms. I'd be covered in dirt for the rest of the day. All this time Grandpa Bruce would be making jokes. He spoke from his chest rather than his mouth, and he had a hearty laugh that came from somewhere deep inside.

He had always felt like an extension of the landscape existing through the dirt and the dung and the rocks and the water. There is a reason why they call people like Vandal Bruce hillbillies. You can't have a hillbilly without the hills. They are a reflection of the place they came to be.

But the old man that I knew in those earlier days wasn't the same one that I was seeing then. For the first time the signs of dementia were setting in. Those signs would turn into midnight visits to the nursing home to settle him down because he was roaming the halls stark naked, yelling incoherent demands, and making passes at fed-up nurses.

Heat rose from the asphalt, distorting the road ahead, and the wheat leaned to the west as I looked out from the truck window. The sky lifted itself from the ground with casual breaths. It was like the clouds were doing push-ups on invisible arms and if you approached them from the right direction you could climb up and look out at the stars. We were lost. The man next to me had a shadow cast across his brain that left our destination in the dark. It hid his moments and his memories in a deteriorating panoramic picture, a snapshot of a life he'd already lived.

We had been driving around aimlessly for an hour and a half. He couldn't afford to keep buying antifreeze to fill up his leaky radiator, but he also couldn't afford to fix his radiator. That's why he kept all those one-gallon jugs in the back of the truck. We would stop every thirty minutes or so to fill the thing up. It hissed and sizzled as we opened the hood. We'd stick the funnel in and slowly pour the water. The jugs burned my hand from sitting in the sun all morning.

As we looked at the grease covered engine he said, "I'm not sure I know where we're at. Thought the turn was back there a couple of miles ago. I'm not remembering things as well as I used to."

"Well, that's alright. We can keep looking. We'll find it eventually."

I was wrong. The day pushed on and the heat came in more and more fierce. We drove and we drove. We stopped at every gas station until there were no more gas stations. We turned down a gravel road.

"Maybe this is it. I think this is it."

His voice sounded stretched and desperate.

We came to the end of the road where there was an old white trailer. All around the yard were little indications of someone's life, their hobbies and their habits. A target filled with holes from a .22, a chicken coop, a rusted-out Nova, a kiddie pool. Thick elms rose up, shadowing the trailer to relieve its owners of the relentless heat.

“You wait here bud. I'm gonna go in and see if they have a phone.”

Ten minutes later a thin man with long hair and a tank top emerged from the trailer. He was holding three frozen water bottles and a Nokia cell phone. He trudged across grass and dirt and mulch, weaving through lawnmowers and basketball goals with a long cigarette dangling from his mouth.

“How's it goin' boy? Your grandpa tells me you're lost. Hot day not to be knowin' where you're goin' don't you think?”

“Yeah, I was thinking he knew.”

He laughs.

“That man in there has got no idea where he's goin'. Hell, he doesn't know where he's at. Anyway, I got y'all a couple waters here. They're frozen so they should last you a while. He's inside trying to get hold of somebody, but I don't think it's working. He told me there was a kid out here. With this heat and all, I figured I'd come out and make sure everything was good. See if you might have more luck getting hold of somebody than he's had.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that. And the water.”

“Sure thing.”

He pulls a long drag off his Marlboro.

“Well, guess I'll go back in, see if they made any progress. Bring the phone in when you're done.”

I sat there trying to get through to my aunt on that old Nokia. The phone would ring, cutting in and out. Reception was poor. She answered but I could only hear bits and pieces, and she could only hear enough to cause a wave of panic. I imagine she heard, “We are lost. We are at a trailer in the woods.”

The screen door swung open and Grandpa Bruce walked out. He waved a lazy hand through the air as a gesture of thanks and goodbye. He got back in the truck and pulled a can of Grizzly from his back pocket. He shoved a big horseshoe into his lower lip and extended the can out to me.

“I’m ok, thanks.”

He laughs. “That’s what I was hopin’ you’d say... Well, I still don’t know where we’re going... I hate to say it, but it looks like there might not be any fishing today.”

I returned the phone and we got back on the road.

As the sun set, the sky, always the sky, over the vast fields of wheat, above the monocrop eating the horizon and the biodiversity, blazed in a red that consumed the clouds and obscured the bouncing oil rigs cracking the endless flat. The wheat became illuminated like the mouth of heaven. The tyranny of all that open space melted into a sensuous ensemble. I began to feel its complexity shaking my bones. I could see all the strokes painting my perception. The ones that go unnoticed through the rigmarole of our daily grind. And then the truck began to putter and the engine sounded like it was going to explode. So Grandpa Bruce pulled over on the side of the road and we were once again bent over the engine compartment until he finally remembered that he needed to refill the antifreeze from one of those gallon jugs that had been sliding around in the bed of the truck since we left. And I wondered how it took him so long to remember that.

You see, he would never exist in my life as a person, only as an enigma. I was born of him but also into his shadow. He was chaos. A collection of stories and myths spread over flesh and bone. I saw him as a wave rising from the landscape of Oklahoma, in part because my relationship to both is defined by precariousness. It's an intimate, material relation to someone and something that I can't discern. An eternal connection that pushes through time in ways seen and unseen. Like my grandfather, the planet that we've been told exists is no more. It is being shaped and reshaped by climate change and deforestation and extinction and drought and indigenous genocide and civilizational collapse.

“Is your soul still on fire?”

“Yes, my soul is on fire.”

We turn the truck into a dusty gas station. A woman in a worn out Tweety Bird shirt with a mole over her drawn-on eyebrow tells us to make a left out of the parking lot and keep driving for about three miles and around that time we should see an on ramp. If we take 240 West, we'll be heading in the right direction to get us home.

We pull up to my Grandma O'Hare's house. You could tell everybody had been sitting in the kitchen staring out the window past the finches waiting for that rickety Mazda to roll up, breaking through the mist being spewed from its leaky radiator. After our phone call Aunt Darlene must have sent out a distress signal. The whole family was standing at the bottom of the driveway glaring at him.

“You think I should go say hi?” Grandpa Bruce asked.

“Maybe next time.”

I don't know if a person can ever really get forgiveness once they've done something truly wrong. Why should they? The people they damage have got to live with that shit for the rest of their lives. People go looking for redemption, good people and bad people. We've been told that we can be forgiven if we want to be. But Grandpa Bruce's bad decisions are still frozen in time. Mistakes like ice cubes in the freezer. I think he'd have done just about anything to see them melt away. Some part of him really believed that was possible, but it just wasn't.

His wife left him lying on the floor the night he fell. That's how it goes with old folks, right? There's a fall from which they never recover. Well that's what happened, and Martha decided she'd take care of it in the morning. Grandma said she thought that was his comeuppance for leaving her laying in the tub once when she was pregnant. She had finished her bath and couldn't get up. He was drunk and thought it was funny, her swollen and rolling around like that. So she saw it as the universe getting back at the bastard just one more time before he kicked it.

He spent the next year wasting away in an old folks' home on the Southside. There were manic episodes punctuated by moments of clarity. His eyes would bounce around the room propelled by an empty confusion. Then one day he died.

He was laid there in the casket with the uncanny look of a dead family member, none of the waving aloofness that rooted his character to the land. His wild gray hair that stuck out from the sides of his head was neatly combed behind his ears. He had a fine-fitting suit and some sort of make-up was smeared across his cheeks. No one seemed bothered that he had taken leave of this life. There was this box of tissue. Everyone just kept passing it along. No one ever took one.

I imagine everybody had their own reasons why they weren't struck by a particularly strong sense of loss. Many people were happy to be rid of him. As for me, I didn't know what I was losing or how to process the loss of something I didn't understand. There was sadness, a sense of melancholy, but loss? No.

Grandpa Bruce's blood and those memories that connected him to the hills, they run through me. Run through me like flames. I was left with a way of existing pulled from the mythology I'd forged to explain my grandfather's cruelty. Over time there arose a way of understanding how to process grief for something that transcended my scope of being, my finite perception. Each role that he plays in my mind; the feral child, the abusive drunk, the bass-wrangling church-goer, and the shell cracked with senility, is a puzzle piece to be put together in a fog. The real cost was hidden. It wasn't the loss of what was, but what could have been.

On the way home, I was sunk into the backseat of my parent's car, looking out of the tinted window across a wheat field. I saw something I hadn't seen before. It rose from the plains. It looked more like a launch pad than an oil rig. Below it were miles of pipes and spikes and proppants seething with chemical cocktails. A hundred different pieces held together by black gunk and avarice. Invisible things.

IV. KITCHEN LAKE

The was the sound of crackling wood. There was the heat on his face. There was the smell of beef and battery acid cooking in a frying pan. Then in a wave, the sulfuric stench of burnt hair. That's all there was. The Settler's eyes were squeezed close.

He opened them. The sky was orange and doughy. Everyone's voices were clamoring. The world has been liberated of another impurity. The accused isolated herself in the shadows of the Cross Timbers. Her isolation was not enough. There was no forgiveness for one who communed with the devil. Her lust for earthly things, the pleasures of the body, and her occult connection to the natural world. They made her an enemy of the divine. There'd be no trial. It wasn't Salem. It was outlaw country. The laws of society had no hold there.

A group of the men took it upon themselves to do the Lord's bidding. Crossed over the old bridge near Kitchen Lake. Fifteen, maybe twenty of them. The Settler didn't think to count. They couldn't have a witch living out there in those woods where their kids ran around. They couldn't trust a woman that lived all alone in the darkness of the woods anyhow, witch or not, there was something not right about a woman behaving that way.

The Settler had heard stories. The people in those parts, they talked. They talked a lot. Stories whispered throughout history. Cries of children coming from her home. Mad fires with mysterious figures dancing naked in the flames, demonic specters mingling with the tangled shadows of the hickories. Non-human things standing upright, moving around like a man would. Beastly grumbling in response to vile promises. Wailing pleasure. Copulating with wild animals.

She had a wicked garden of hallucinogenic plants and herbs that would heal the flesh through the Devil's blessing. They passed it as they approached the little old cottage. Tufts of smoke were rising out of her stone chimney, so they knew she was inside.

They knocked on the door violently. She cracked the thing open and peered out. Few of the men, they forced their way in and pinned her down. She was screaming, kicking, biting, grabbing. Kept asking what the reason was for all this was. Kept denying her ungodliness. They tied her up. The Settler started to feel a little off after a while. All that screaming and crying made him feel something like guilt. It just started creeping up. They got in that mob, everybody was going along with what all the hoopla, and he felt compelled to keep it going. So that's what the Settler did. Just stood complacent in the whole thing. Still, he felt he was in need of some penance.

He would never forget the burning. It would haunt him. The moment the fire started to pop and the smell of red oak hit his nose, the Settler knew there was no going back. His thoughts started racing like a greyhound, and he couldn't keep up with them. He tried to take deep breaths. The finality of it all set in. The Settler squeezed his eyes closed until the whole thing was over.

This scene played over and over in my head. It's the story that we'd been told took place out past the bridge at Kitchen Lake just a few miles from the Air Force Base. A story that had been caught up and chewed by the jaws of time and the minds of teenagers. A story of a fire and a haunting.

A silver cross hung from my neck. I was squeezed next to Loren, with his dry, Percocet eyes. He was shifting in his baggy black shorts. This was before a stomach pumping and a brief stint in rehab left him thinking the Marines could give him some purpose. His tour in Afghanistan broke him. He didn't have the mentality to cope with that kind of violence. It takes some sort of dark force to tear up a man's mind like that. He was discharged and returned home to find his dad was

dying of pancreatic cancer and there was nothing that could be done about it. Some people just get a bad hand.

His tiny Nissan truck was rumbling and creaking on its worn suspension. A cigarette was hanging from his lips. He took long drags and his cheeks would cave in, making his face look hollow and skeletal.

On the other side of me was Annie, with her tight red shirt frayed just above her belly button, adorned with a butterfly jewel. She was always keen and bubbly. Smart enough to hide her intellect. She escaped to LA after high school, so she didn't have it hide it anymore. I'm not sure what happened to her after that.

The road was a washboard and my diaphragm kept kicking around in my chest. Odd, fractal vapor gyrated, swirled around the wings of a dancing scissor-tail flycatcher, then drifted further along the red and green shores of Kitchen Lake. Scattered piles of ash marked the dirt road leading two miles to a decaying bridge, burn piles where ranchers and sadistic teenagers had set fire to animals, living and dead no doubt. Others are the charred remains of beer bottles, children's toys, diapers, and phonebooks. The warm air smelled like a roll of pennies. The result of blood vessels and spinal fluid. It was a place of fire.

Near the lake there was a spot where the fence was snipped by renegade fishermen unwilling to pay a fee to use the waters. We'd take a six pack and our rods and slide through the cut barbed wire. The fishing wasn't much good. We got skunked nine times out of ten. Occasionally, we'd reel in a small mouth bass or a big fat carp. One morning I was sitting on the shore and a school of sand bass started flopping around on the surface, boiling the water. It looked like rain was falling from the lake bottom up toward the sky. We'd go to the north side to scout for the patrols that would come out us for trespassing. We'd see them before they made it

to the dense woods on the western shore and go running through the big bluestem grass, trying to keep our tackle boxes held together and swallow our beers before we got to the car.

The Nissan came to the end of the road where the burn piles became too frequent to maneuver the truck through. It was a quarter mile another quarter mile to the bridge. Got out of the truck. We weaved through charred piles of bone and flesh and hair, metal barrels filled with ash and singed newspapers. One had an old article, half burned, about the trial of Timothy McVeigh. We came to the Kitchen Lake Bridge. Two long beams were still set in place. We used them to cross over. Below were the remnants of a creek. It had been strangled by the Kitchen Lake Dam. Moist earth is all that's left of the creek now. A red mud that could stain your feet for days.

The only lights to be seen for miles were shining from Tinker Air Force Base. A glowing metropolis of military force. It was a dense glow that penetrated the sky, pressing into the pale blue of the half moon. Planes would come and go at all hours armed to the teeth with explosives and surveillance technology. A fence stretched for miles and miles around the entire complex, and all entrances were heavily guarded by camouflaged soldiers carrying automatic weapons. A sinister acropolis.

As we were crossing the bridge I shined my flashlight off to the north. It was a tunnel of green and black lined with breathing shadows that became endlessly darker until they swallowed the glow of my flashlight. Loren slipped and caught himself. His light went tumbling into the creek bed. He hung down, stretched between the steel beams. Instead of pulling himself up, he dropped into the undergrowth ten feet below. You could hear him wrestling through the brush, cursing and stumbling until he located his flashlight. He shined it into the air like a spotlight and yelled, "I'm good! I'll meet you on the other side."

After we crossed the bridge and found Loren, we pushed aside the undergrowth. Red chokeberry was glowing and alive. Aside from small pockets of gravel along the way, there was little sign of the old road that had been there. The trees loomed on each side. The canopy had inched toward reconnection over the past half-century. It looked like the limbs had finally come to intermingle within the last ten years or so. There were bones of cattle and squirrels and dogs strung up in the trees. The moon cast a glow that wrestled with the darkness of the woods on either side of us.

We pushed forward and suddenly the trees opened up and we saw the remains of an old cottage. A chimney rose from a fireplace on a deteriorated floor. The last erect totem among the ruins of the isolated home. They say the witch was burned there for communing with the devil, dancing naked among the tangled shadows of blackjack oaks, the flickering flames causing the webbed specters to pulsate madly. The scene is played out again and again in my mind. But all of that is conjecture. It's a story that's been told to coat the tragic with the fantastical.

There was no witch. The truth is that the entire area was burned to the ground in the late 1940s due to jet fuel spilled by the Air Force Base. The octane levels left an odd stench that lingered in the air for years after. During that same decade the American military became responsible for over a quarter of the world's energy consumption. It unleashed fat boy and little boy, ushering in the era of nuclear armament. Entire cities, ecosystems could disappear with the flick of a hand.

Clenching white knuckled to their bibles, Oklahomans are jarred by superstition more than the reality of ecocide. Stories of Sasquatches and lake monsters with writhing tentacles abound, while the Earth shakes below their feet, echoing the residual effects of deep injection wells. It is no surprise that the legend of Kitchen Lake is pure fantasy and that the truth of the

matter is indicative of a problem more sinister and far-reaching than witchcraft. One enshrouded in far more black magic than Marie Laveau or Morgan Le Fay or the Witch of Kitchen Lake.

They say witches in the time of enlightenment were burned for the crime of infanticide. Our understanding of the casualties of war, of collateral damage, has changed over the last century with the advent of more destructive technology that coincided our embrace of hyper-militarism. Thirty-two percent of Iraqi civilians killed in coalition airstrikes between 2003 and 2006 were under the age of fifteen. I guess the puritans were right: some black magic does require child sacrifice before it comes bubbling from the ground.

I looked through the gallery of graffiti painted onto the floor and the trees. All the old clichés were accounted for: 666, hail satan, so-and-so loves so-and-so, swastikas, and racial epithets. Nothing of interest. There was one wholesome rebel stuck with Jesus Saves, except someone had marked out saves and wrote sucks and below that someone else added dicks. You know, just to clarify. There was a gas can on the ground. I picked it up. Shook it. Empty.

I stared up to the sky where the lights of the Air Force Base killed the stars. There are vast, esoteric strings connecting the leviathan of military, connections of forbidden insight that control the past, present, and future across the entire planet. They exist outside of spatial and temporal confines. The divination of certain outcomes comes at a cost, a blood sacrifice and a whetting and baiting of patriotic discontent. While war has become more impersonal and messy, more a matter of business and profit than heroism and defense, the overfunded branch of US empire has become the number one source of pollutants in the world.

Those AWACs that soar daily through Oklahoma's sky, they burn 2625 gallons of jet fuel an hour. That's about forty-four gallons a minute. As a child, I'd lay in the grass, counting those AWACs as they took off one after another to carry out whatever sort of covert mission

they had been tasked with that day. And it wasn't just AWACs, it was B-1s, B-2s, A-10s, AC-130s, and B-52s. Hell-hurdling beasts and fuming harpies invoked by gruff generals with sagging cheeks, and a conscience that's always clear.

It's not just the process of war that is characterized by environmental degradation but the very aim of it. One can chart many of our militaristic ventures into other countries by looking at their wealth of natural resources. Of course, many Americans, certainly most Oklahomans, don't believe that. They accept the idea that we are spreading freedom by fighting terror and authoritarianism, persecuting a savage religion in Islam. It's been over four hundred years since the Salem witch trials, and the evangelical Christians that haunt Oklahoma remain prone to the same puritanical mass hysteria.

Witches and pagans had little use for hierarchy, especially as solitary practitioners. They communicated with animals, plants, dirt, and stone, all of which they viewed as being imbued with spirit. This animistic view of empowerment undermined the rigid power structures of monotheistic religions and the institutions that grew from them. It gave autonomy to the woman as an individual. She communed with the spirits of the earth. This empowerment explains why folk magic has been wielded historically as a form of resistance against subjugation, against empire and slavery.

But hierarchies on a scale both grand and small are the model for the American military, whether that be American exceptionalism or a colonel who punishes a private. To lead by fear rather than cooperation and mutual aid.

After we finished sifting through the animal bones and inspecting the graffiti, we sat in a row with our legs hanging from the edge of the crumbling floor.

"You ever wonder why, of all places, we were born here?" Annie asked.

“Bad luck,” Loren said.

“Yeah, but do you think we were supposed to learn something? Like maybe we kinda fucked up in our last life,” Annie asked.

“Maybe we burned a witch,” I said.

“I guess what I’m saying is that we were born around all these people who don’t seem to give a shit about anyone but themselves. All those people in the state capitol like that prick Scott Pruitt. Is this a test to see if we’ll cave in and turn into assholes too?” Annie asked.

“Yeah, maybe we gave in and became assholes in our last life, so that’s why we were born in Oklahoma,” I said.

“That means this is an important conversation, right? Because it marks the moment we became aware of the Great Cycle of Assholes, so we’re pretty close to transcending it. Maybe in my next life I can be born in Hawaii or on a Greek Island,” Annie said.

“It doesn’t matter where you’re born in the next life. Have you seen the world? The whole place will be ash by the time we make it through the bardo. We’re too late. We were assholes for one too many lives,” Loren said.

The chirping crickets were joined by a bullfrog. They gave voice to the mute blackness that spilled from the woods. The lightning bugs lit up in the forest like dust from another dimension. The military has its own dust simmering in the sands of Iraq. Nearly four million pounds of depleted uranium coalesce with the country’s dunes, poisoning Iraqi citizens and American soldiers alike. With a half-life of four and a half billion years, the sands of Iraq will sing a radioactive song long after the human race has perished, and as it finally loses its charge, our galaxy will be experiencing the death of the Sun.

Several millennia before they were diluted by depleted uranium, those sands served as the cradle of civilization. The Sumerians of what is now Southern-Iraq were responsible for the earliest Neolithic settlements. The very first sign of the political society, which overtook the kinship systems that were typical of pre-Neolithic societies and eventually became the primitive prototype for what is today's global capitalist system. Systems of slavery were set up, so that there was a surplus of goods beyond that which was needed for consumption. Hence, the idea of profit and eventually the pursuit of wealth through global warfare once military technology caught up to our drive for the accumulation of resources.

Stateside, the US military has a long, often kooky, relationship with the desert, one that has given rise to new myths and cosmologies, like ours at Kitchen Lake. The presence of civilization in the desert never did anything to counteract its inherent weirdness. It only fed into the myth of the UFO, one which the military could facilitate to draw the public's attention away from their own top secret experiments, leading to reports of black triangles, floating orbs, and flying saucers. The military is the great architect behind this American mythology. They have their hands on the shaping of the collective American psyche, deciding what is seen and what is rendered invisible.

I looked up. The sky. A glow. The forest. A blackness. Loren. The hollow. Annie. The wonder. Our feet dangled from the side of the crumbling structure, swinging above green grass growing from ash and dirt. You dig in and you'll find that the clay, red rich with iron like blood. I hopped and landed upon that earth, for a century plagued by its own clandestine abundance. We began our walk back to truck.

In a bleak sense of irony, the American military embraces the reality of climate change. The reason for this is two-fold. One, they know, unequivocally, that it is happening. Two, they

know that they can use it as an excuse for increased militarism in the future. There will be wars over resources and there will be climate refugees. Valuable new territories will emerge, so-called cold deserts exposed by the melting of the arctic. The industrial interests wouldn't pass on this chance to fully embrace a new reason for warfare, conquest, and, above all, profit. Resource depletion and militarism are inseparable. They sustain one another, feeding off of the soul of this country, its poor, the belly of the Earth, the misguided anger and toxic nationalism.

Our minds began to play tricks on us. We were moving back toward the bridge when I looked up and saw flames shooting from the truck. Loren and Annie saw them too. It appeared first like a raging inferno in the distance. We ran forward, through the burned piles of magazines and soda bottles. Through the half-charred animal remains. As we got closer, the flames got smaller, like a lantern hovering above the ground. In the corner of my eye there were flashes of dog skulls hanging from the tree limbs around us. Darkness oozed through the vegetation. Viscous black coursing through the veins of night. The flame grew smaller still, a glowing pinprick, like the keyhole into a furnace room, culminating in an endless pursuit.

Our story, like this story, begins with a myth. It's founded upon a fable, brutal and barbaric, that we can somehow use the mechanisms of capitalism and democracy to liberate ourselves from the worst parts of civilization. Mythologies are propped up so we don't have to cope with the truth of our dying planet. We are told that if we recycle, use solar panels, write letters to our senators, things will be ok. But what we see now is the most radical expression of the instability of civilization. It seems that the more we pursue the promises of sustainability, the further from reach our chance for survival becomes. Even if every single person on the globe stops consuming and emitting, the world's military forces, war itself, consumes and emits

enough pollutants to push us forward into the spiral of catastrophic climate change with feedback loops, mass extinction, and uncontrollable fire.

When we made it back to the truck, we were dazed and wondering what had happened. It must have been a reflection on the rims or the side view that dimmed as we got closer. It must have been the excitement; the way sound or light can be exacerbated by the tension of the moment. We slid into the cab and looked at each other. What had we just seen? Some illusion or a shared hallucination. Not the paranormal. We were too materialist to believe in omens or conjurings.

When Loren got back from his tour in Afghanistan, he and I went out for a drink. I thanked him for his tour of duty. He looked into his beer, fidgeting uncomfortably under the weight of my empty expression of gratitude.

“Come on man. I know you too well to believe that you’re thankful for my service. You think the war is bullshit, and you know what? You’re right. It is bullshit. But all that violence... It haunts me...” He swallowed some of his Coors. “You know what’s weird, though? How little had changed from when I left to when I got back. This country doesn’t even know we’re at war. Not really. It’s not like Vietnam or World War II, when you came back and they loved you or hated you.” Loren adjusted the wet napkin underneath his glass. “We’ve been at war so long, and with nobody really, that y’all don’t even remember it’s happening. And why would you? That’s what they want, the Pentagon, those fucks in Washington, isn’t it? It’s just that, us, the ones that

went over there, we still see what's invisible to most of you. We still know. We still know that the war is happening and it's just as fucked up as it always was.”

Many of the tragedies of war now go unreported. They are unseen, ethereal. Lives are lost, foreign and domestic, and minds are left in need of mending. The environmental toll will eventually lead to a catastrophic new reality where wildfires burn year around, and, as Americans, we see nothing. All that jet-fuel that consumed Kitchen Lake in a vast inferno, well, the military is still setting fire to the world.

Kitchen Lake is red. Saturated in Oklahoma's dirt. When the water's surface is calm, you can see the flying machinery of war reflected back into the sky. Nothing goes unacknowledged. The grass grows long around its shores. It bends with shifting winds toward the borders of this country. Toward an invisible war in every direction. The planes take off and they land. Inside the Air Force Base there are homes and grocery stores and bowling alleys. There is a golf course and a liquor store. The sandwich shops proudly offer military discounts, making change for a turkey club under the watchful eye of the American flag. There is a vision for a future based on a past that never was. What a country.

Every morning Loren wakes up and makes a cup of tea. He sweeps. The silence is nice. He distrusts his senses. Walking through his garden, he talks to his plants. He sits with them, and he tells them good morning.

V. TRASH FISH

The river was low. They hadn't opened that dam that day. A grizzled man with a feather earring told me that alligator gar were spawning in one of the tributaries. Gar are the creatures of nightmares, beautiful things. Long, brutish fish with sharp teeth hanging from their mouths in a jagged expanse that scared me out of my wits when I was young and swimming in the waters of the Arkansas. Their fins were the size of a Neanderthal's head after it was flattened by a well-rounded stone some 40,000 years ago. Their bodies stretched long like the plains, but thick and strong, rather than thin and battered.

Gar break the surface to breathe the hot Oklahoma air. It's a unique trait. Their gills are fully functional, but like yogic masters they prefer a variety of breathing patterns. Their bladders function as lungs. Occasionally, when they surface there will be a hillbilly with a bow and an arrow waiting for them. The arrow is connected to a long line that's used to reel them in once it's sunk. After you get one with a bow, it has little chance of surviving. But they put up a good fight, notoriously good, bleeding and twisting, struggling until their very last moment when life escapes them and they are left to the whims of the current. They say gar are good eating.

I would tease my sister when she was out in the water behind the boat, water skiing or tubing. "You know there are gar in there. They are probably swimming below your feet right now."

"No, they aren't. Are they?!" she'd scream.

I'd laugh until Dad told me to shut up.

So, it was springtime, and I was fishing the Arkansas. Thick vegetation crowded the shoreline. I was pushing my way through undergrowth carrying a rod over my head, so that it didn't get caught up in the sassafras and spicebush. I came across a baby vulture. I sat and

watched it try to fly. Its feathers were a light brown. Its head stuck from its body like a pruned toe in the bathtub. Moving forward, the water was warm and slow enough to wade across to the eastern shore. The rocks pressed into the arches of my bare feet. There was a fork in the river. I followed it, continuing east for half a mile. A crawdad sat half-exposed from its hole, shoveling detritus into its mouth and playing an invisible piano with its eight skinny legs upon the river rock.

Then I came to the pool filled with gar. The river was low, and the gar were big. Magnified by the clarity of the water, their four feet looked like six feet, their six feet like eight feet. They writhed and flopped as noodles in boiling water.

I dropped a worm right in the middle hoping to get a bite. But they were transfixed by sexual impulses. Some had waited a long time for this. I had seen those bow hunters stick them in the side and pull them to shore, and I thought I could do something like that. If I used a big hook, I could sink it between the ribs and reel it in. I'd find out if what they say about the taste of gar meat is true. I'd had carp. If I could stomach that, I could swallow just about anything.

Gar have navigated these waters for millennia. They are slow to pass themselves on. The females can't reproduce until they are a decade old. This long period of infertility has served their longevity. Alongside sturgeon, they are one of the oldest species of fish existing today, dating back to the Paleocene. Humanity's accelerated evolutionary rate is indicative of an early extinction. Our rapid growth, our never-ending interspecies colonization. We aren't adapted for longevity. Gar, on the other hand, take their time. They bathe in the uncertainty of existence rather than consuming it. Gar have been mythologized. People have said they grow twenty feet long and feed on unsuspecting swimmers. They are the sea serpent of the South's folklore.

After casting out a number of times with no success, I gave up on trying to hook one. Instead, I waded out into the water. I let the gar move in wild, swirling circles around me. I felt their age. In the interlocking circles that they swam around my legs, I saw their lifecycles creeping though millennia, tied to their ancient memories of copulation, birth, and death.

I've never been one to besmirch the transcendent experience of a well-cooked meal, but within that moment I began to feel something far more sensuous and exhilarating than a mouthful of Cajun fried gar. In that pool where the flowing water of the river had been stopped, still and glasslike, there was one hundred million years of genetic history flopping around, splashing water into the air and chomping at the bit with bestial energy. There were thousands of razor sharp teeth that could leave me lying in ribbons if they chose to. They rubbed against my pale legs, against my sore feet.



Like gar, the freshwater drum lives with the designation of trash fish. In their head is an otolith, a unique ear bone commonly called a lucky stone. I used to go fishing with my old friend Sid. We would tie the boat to a wide bridge that passed high above Lake Texoma. The sound of the vehicles overhead triggered a hollow, chugging vibration that bounced between our ears as we sloshed around under a dark sky that rubbed against black water, illuminated only by the reflection of the streetlamps overhead and a robust full moon.

That night we were on the water with Sid's dad. We'd celebrate when we reeled in bass or catfish, but the drum were subjected to Sid's idea of a game. The challenge was to knock the lucky stone loose from the center of the drum's head. He did this by hurling it against the side of

the boat or against the thick concrete pillar to which we had anchored ourselves. If the lucky stone was jostled free through the thin layer of flesh between the fish's eyes, it would make a *bloop* noise as it splashed into the water. On calm nights you could see the small ripples dancing on the moon's reflection.

I did nothing. Laughed even, mildly entertained by the spectacle of savagery. Though I never partook, I felt no real sense of remorse. I never had the urge to speak up, to say, "Sid, why are you killing those poor things? There is no reason for that!" I just sat back with a smirk, watching them bounce off of the fiberglass of the boat, twisting and contorting as they ricocheted through the air.

In voodoo rituals, lucky stones are used to conjure up good fortune. Maybe someone came across those lucky stones after they tumbled out of Lake Texoma and down the Red River, washing up on a Louisiana shore, and maybe they stuffed them deep into their mojo hand, and maybe they carry them still. Maybe the voodoo deity, Kalfu, who guards the crossroads, waves his bottle of rum and gunpowder at bad luck saying, "You can't cross here. Not if you're gonna be bothering this one." One can imagine such things. One can hope that some good comes from all of this.

We arrived back at the dock around two AM. The chill of night rode the southern wind across the muddy water, whistled through trees and over the state line. The swells pressed themselves into the reflection of the full moon, all the brighter now that the night had aged a bit. Along the shore, tall grasses bent and swayed, flicking the water's surface.

Sid's dad was short, bald, and athletic. A deeply Christian man. He had thirty pounds of fish flung over his right shoulder. We had pulled in enough to feed the entire family at the fry the next day. There was a station at the marina where we were cleaning them on small wooden

cutting boards. We'd apply pressure to their bellies until we heard a pop. The thin blade of the filet knife penetrated the scales. Blood oozed out. We cut filets and tossed what remained into the water. We couldn't see the blood through the blackness.

As we were cleaning the fish, I saw an odd rippling on the lake's surface. I looked closer. Had it been daytime I'd have seen what was crashing through the small waves that were coming and going with the breeze at this the witching hour. But without the light, their twisting bodies, hungry and streaming with cytotoxic venom, blended into the blackness of the cove. A den of water moccasins, a southern breed of pit viper, were in the waters of the marina. It was shallow and brackish, and they could live off the discarded scraps of the fishermen's catch.

I had come across water moccasins before, but I had never seen them so aggressive. They began slithering onto the dock. Quick, frantic curves tremoring through their bodies and propelling them forward. Writhing and turning, tangling over one another in a blood-fueled delirium. We had little time to collect our things. We pulled our bag of fish from the water and ran for the shore. There was a snake with its fangs dug into one of our sand bass. Sid's dad wielded his cutting board. He crow-hopped and swung for the fences. The snake went sailing in rapid circles like the hands of a clocking moving in fast forward, its body a blur in the night. There were moccasins blocking our only way off the pier. We joined him in swinging our wooden cutting boards, still dripping red with blood. Every impact sent a snake hurdling into the water. We fought our way to shore. We kept running through the parking lot until we were clear on the other side. We dropped the paddles into the grass, stained with snake and fish blood alike. We stood tall with our hands interlocked behind our heads, winded and tingling with the buzz of adrenalin.

I wonder, what is the meanness of boys, cracking open the skulls of drum fish, to the tenacity of ancient gar that pass their fortitude unseen through waters and time? A flash among the stars. The trash fish flips, slippery in the boy's hand. He's wide-eyed with bloodlust. Thinking he's seeing into the future, seeing himself having his first fuck as he grabs that slippery, flopping thing and hurls it with his teeth clenched. He's figuring out what the world is all about.

The morning sun rose over the shoreline that rested in the water. The dirt sucked up the blood, and the entrails settled into the lake bottom to be picked at by water bound scavengers. The night never got cold. Texoma looked like a bowl of leftovers covered with saran wrap. The water was hushful and pink with dawn. A gar's head touched the surface. The smooth ripples spread toward the shore in all directions, merging with the flatness beyond. The rippling swept up my nerves, still caught up in visions of poisoned limbs, convulsing bodies. The gar broke the water once more and breathed deep, its bladder filling with the moist air, as the dew dripped from the riparian grass onto the water, rousing a faint dance, a silent ballet.

VI. GODHOLES

If you follow the plains across Oklahoma to the southwest, you'll have the misfortune of finding yourself in Texas. You keep going long enough and you'll run into a town called Wink. In Wink you'll find a big hole. As a matter of fact, you'll find two big holes. I may have said it before, but the plains stretch too far to be poked on much. The ground starts moving in ways it shouldn't, and before too long you're going to have yourself a sinkhole or two. And then there remains four-thousand miles of beat up geology surrounding those sinkholes that's at risk of caving in and consuming everything that rests on the surface.

As people reflect the place they came to be, all the flaws pierce through their character, and their faces become marred by the holes in the hills, in the plains, in the skies. But the holes aren't carried only by the face, they open up inside, and, like those punctures in the land, something black starts coming out. When your spirit is thin, pulled like Oklahoma in every direction, it doesn't take much to let the blackness loose. We've been swimming in it all our lives, damming a river with a dish cloth. At some point we let it go, and it takes us away.

Isaac and I were sunk into the ground, lying in the shadow of an old rig that was still bobbing and creaking a couple miles south of Kitchen Lake. I had just returned from two years wandering around the Balkans and Eastern Europe. I was already itching to leave and eyeing Montana as my next destination. The wheat grass rose up around me, swaying lazily with all the time in the world. The rig's ceaseless mechanical moan was a metronome that jostled memories of my Grandpa Bruce's wife, Martha. She chiseled into me images of children who were

dismembered while scaling the chugging parts of old giants much like this one. It's technology of a bygone era, an aging appendage of industry before the fracking boom transformed the state and the way it extracted resources.

Isaac tapped me on the shoulder and handed me what could barely pass for a joint. The sky was a blank slate of pale blue. The sun had burned through the last stand of the wheat grass. I hopped up and dusted myself off. I leaned over the chain link fence that enclosed the old rig.

"Wanna go for a walk?" I asked.

"Sure." He said.

Sutton trail runs about a mile and a half around a large pond in what they call an urban wilderness park. Along the shore, we hopped from boulder to boulder. The sun was setting, casting a shadow across the pond that bled through the light of dusk. Somewhere, ravens in conversation. Their croaks and caws almost sounded intelligible. I'm certain that long-ago people could decipher their meaning. I stuffed my shoes into my backpack and began to walk in the shallow water along the shore. The last leaves of autumn were riding time in slow motion down, down toward the pond's murky waters.

"You think you will be happy up there?" Isaac asked.

"Where?"

"Montana. You think you'll find some peace?"

"Peace... I don't know. Mountains, at least."

"Yeah, I hear it's pretty up there. You get used to that shit, though. Eventually it will just fade into the background. You need people, community. You got that here," he said.

"Yeah, I've got that, I guess, but this place is too flat. It's like it's endless in every direction," I said.

The algae and mud squeezed through my toes. The tadpoles swam in frantic circles around my ankles.

“It gives me anxiety, all that emptiness, unbroken except by the tower downtown and the oil rigs. You know how they call that area over near the panhandle Llano Estacado? It’s Spanish for Staked Plains. Travelers had to put markers down, otherwise they’d walk a hundred miles in one direction and end up in the same place they started. It’s too flat here. Too open. Plus, I’ve got to get out of this relationship. We hate each other, but neither of us have any place to go but home every day,” I said.

“I don’t have much desire to leave Oklahoma.” He said. “It’s always felt right. You know I was raised a Jehovah’s Witness. I even met the mother of my first two kids through the church. They take the Jesus shit pretty serious. I told them I was beginning to question my faith and they dropped me. They dropped me fucking quick.”

There was a small splash in the water. A ripple lingered. Isaac stared into the water looking for some sign of what had been there.

“They dropped me quick. I mean you know the story. It was friends who carried me after, particularly friends with amphetamines. And it wasn’t just my family I’d lost. I lost God then, and everything that came along with that. Purpose, morals, answers, an afterlife. You lose certainty in all those things and you’ve got to find a new way to sketch out your existence. The drugs would do it, you know, draw everything out for a little while. I had myself a blueprint of the cosmos done in disappearing ink. But when the high recedes and all those structures just...vanish...you feel more lost than the last time. Nevertheless, you just keep doing it for those moments of certainty, willing to have it all come crashing down again and again,” Isaac said.

He stood up, his long legs extending with a stiff pop. He approached a tree and locked eyes with a fungus that stuck out from the bark. He touched it.

“I think that’s called alders bracket,” I said.

“It’s been a while since I’ve gone back to the drugs. You know that, though. Third kid straightened me out pretty good. Guess I let him give me that purpose, answer all those questions about the universe and life and all that shit. Not saying I’m right in doing it, just saying caring for a child has gotta be a better purpose than cradling that nasty pipe.”

I took Isaac’s moment of vulnerability and made it about myself. I was leaving this place because I was seeking a solution to my own desolation. Like Isaac, I had a Godhole. It had opened up inside. It struck me that I could be wrong, that place and wilderness may not bring me solace. And even then, if God was something I was supposed to see everywhere, why was I so unnerved by the expanse of the plains?

About a mile into the trail we ventured into the woods to find a tarp strung up between two crooked trees. Inside was a pile of beat up old sleeping bags and piss-stained blankets strewn with various bottles of cheap vodka and malt liquor. Twigs snapped below our feet and something wrestled from the pile. We jumped back, startled. A possum froze and flipped on its back. Its lips pulled from its teeth, and its anal glands started secreting that rancid odor to mimic a rotting body. We left it like that.

The sun was just about gone as we approached the lot where we’d parked the car. It was just as empty as when we’d arrived. The plastic of the door handle was already cold. I was afraid of going home, so I didn’t.

The ambient neon was pressing into the stench of cheap beer and American Spirits. The Deli is the pulse of Norman, the hub of its various subcultures. There's an aura that emanates from the place. It's almost magical. The town would lose half its character if it ever closed shop. It's a gathering place for the artists and eccentrics. The people who make Norman a haven of creativity among the sweep of capitalist decadence. The music floated just above drunken chatter. Everyone was sorting out who they were going home with for the night. A little empty lust just to kidnap time. Everything was caught in that tangled web of flirtation, and I was on my fifth beer. It was all I could do.

Rez Dawg was standing outside smoking a cigarette. Rez Dawg is a hippie hustler. An Osage with a ponytail that runs along the ridge of his spine like a great stallion. He was standing outside of the Deli with one hand shoved into the pocket of his jean shorts, nodding his head and sniffing occasionally. He's a lot of man. He takes up some space. He would order lotion in bulk and rebottle it in little containers that said things like *Spirit of the Wolf* and *Native Knowledge*, then resell them for 15 dollars a pop to white kids in drug rugs.

Beside Rez Dawg was Space Dog. Space Dog was wearing tie-dye and a head full of thinning dreadlocks. He curates Norman's music scene. He has big parties on his land at the outskirts of town, and if you're invited to play, you've achieved local stardom. He plays folk music that is lyrically pornographic. It makes me think of old Wavy Gravy songs.

The music was pouring onto the streets from the inside, absolutely inspired that night. My shirt was wet and cool in the autumn breeze. I saw Margo. She's another one of the oddball characters that frequent the Deli. I was swaying a little bit. She's missing her two front teeth

from a bicycle accident that happened years ago. She has five dots tattooed under each of her eyes, and the phases of the moon spread across her chest.

“Hey Margo, how’s it going?”

“Door man won’t let me in.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s an asshole.” She looked over her shoulder at the door man and raised her voice, “Yeah, I’m talking about you... asshole!”

“Really, I’m the asshole? You took the tip jar and face planted before you made it out the door! Shit, you can’t come in for at least a month, Margo. Why don’t you take this time to dry out a little bit, huh?”

“Prick...” she muttered below her breath.

I left the Deli, and I walked through the streets, through the bricked alleys marked with graffiti, hearing the dull throbbing of music from clubs and cars. The street lights cast a milky orange haze across the cracked concrete and crumbled red brick. There was a bicycle tied to a lamp post. Behind it two people were embracing, kissing deeply against the wall, only half hidden in the shadows.

The old local businesses were being run out one by one. I looked at the “For Rent” sign in what used to be a head shop. It was raided by Norman PD. They had become increasingly militarized. I had seen it myself during my years in town. More expensive body armor and a growing number of assault rifles. They had once suggested a quarter million dollars of tax payer money be spent on the acquisition of a BearCat. A tank equipped with gun ports, battering rams, and methods for delivering tear gas.

I looked up and couldn't see the stars, excepts as a few specks faded through the cover of the town's light. I walked to Lion's Park. There were people spinning fire. The flames melted into a single sinuous pattern morphing from circles to Xs to a pulsing, fluid sign of infinity. The fire dancers were in a deep focus, a flow state, or *wu wei*, as the Taoists call it. No mind. A meditative, primal connection to the element of fire shone through, exhibiting its beauty and a reverence for its destructive capacity. The spinning flames were captured in countless reflections in the beading sweat on their skin. I sat and watched for half an hour before I walked home.

I fell into my bed feeling blissful and satisfied. But in the morning, I woke up. My head was too swollen for my skull. I thought of greasy food. The window unit couldn't keep up with the heat that morning. The window unit could never keep up with the heat. I was sweating into the jersey sheets. All jammed up in a web of grim mindfulness.

I couldn't handle the plains any longer. It was a good idea to move. I was sure of it. The sticky heat swept across the mid-American stretch, picked up everything, and that hole revealed itself inside me. I had come of age on the buckle of America's deteriorating Bible Belt. It was cinched tightly around the necks of pregnant teenagers and emaciated opioid addicts. Over this flat place we were suspended in disbelief, undulating above the pools of oil, swimming with the piranhas of the plains.

I often felt like shit. When I did, I'd stare at something far away, a cypress or a star, and think how incredible it was that that distant thing was part of my perception, and I'd feel a little better, as if the world was at all times sending itself to dance with my senses. But those meditations were becoming less reliable.

That desolation, the Godhole, that Isaac was talking about, I held it too. I hopped in and out of that void hoping to find something like a ball pit or a trampoline. Instead, I was mining

myself for scarce resources. Looking for a quick fix to a problem that would mar my life if I didn't figure out why it was so keen on haunting me.

I looked into the mirror, and I saw my Grandpa Bruce. A round nose and thin hair fixed onto the ghost of myself. A hundred different pieces held together by the poison that flows underneath the plains. Deep inhalations to fill a balloon ruptured by legions of pinholes, light headed and out of breath.

The Devon Tower rises from downtown Oklahoma City sending a stern message to the people of Oklahoma: your future is in the hands of the oil industry. It rises and pokes a hole in the sky, right beside those holes in the ozone layer. Through that hole, a bright light comes shining through. You'd think that someone had opened a window to heaven if you didn't know that it was just the sun reflecting off of all the veneers in the conference room on the 50th floor.

Likewise, there were holes in me that needed to be reckoned with. They never seemed to fill up no matter how much beer and whiskey I poured down them. When I lay in the Oklahoma grass, feeling the trembling earth beneath me, I got pulled in every direction, and those holes got bigger.

After the fracking boom Oklahoma went from three earthquakes a year to two earthquakes a day. Dormant faults shook to life. They keep doing what they're doing and Oklahoma will be a sinkhole too. It'll peer through the shining plains. That sweet-smelling golden wheat that once blew in the wind, now blown away, where the plains stretched, strained and sweating at the foothills of elder mountains. A stronghold to those barons in the sky looking down, gazing into the sinkholes of a future they've manufactured. It'll be America's very own Godhole right through the belly of this country.

VII. KENT COOPER FONDLES THE ARISTOCRACY

Kent Cooper is a dealer of catline booms, hoist lines, drilling lines, monkey boards, traveling blocks, top drives, masts, drill pipes and doghouses. All the parts that keep the oil rigs of the great plains achuggin'. When Kent Cooper looks to seduce the out-of-state sleaze that comes in to sort through the logistics of their plundering, first he orders a stretch limousine. Not just any stretch limousine, but a pearl white twenty-passenger Cadillac Escalade named Angel. It's a thing to behold. Celestial. Kent Cooper gets these big wigs a suite down at the Skirvin, a newly renovated hotel smack dab in the middle of Oklahoma City. It is only a few blocks away from the Devon Energy building, extending from the Oklahoma City skyline, a phallic eyesore, short on subtlety, but a neighbor to the heavens, seating the CEOs damn near divinity just the way they like it.

I know this because, in the recent past, when Kent Cooper wanted Angel, he called me. I would pick up his potential clientele in that heavenly extended sedan and drive them three blocks to Oklahoma's premier restaurant, the Mantle, serving the upper crust since 1994. Kent Cooper is morbidly obese and the restaurant's small portions of artisanal cuisine never quite hit the spot, so we would regularly finish the night at iHop, drowning plates of pancakes in maple syrup with extra sides of bacon.

After dinner at the Mantle, I would drive them to the Trophy Room, a gentleman's club off interstate 240. It was a two-story palace of debauchery in south Oklahoma City, the so-called Mexican part of town, gang territory belonging to the Southside Locos. A fine place for rich white men to get downright dirty while eluding the gaze of their bourgeois brethren.

As we drifted through town inside Angel, that hallowed chariot of decadence, they would talk of the cocaine and thirteen-year-old prostitutes in Guatemala. A place they'd fly their private jets on a whim for a weekend of hedonism on the company card.

After a few hours inside the Trophy Room they would stumble out with dancers on their arms paid to accompany them back to their hotel room. One evening we returned to the Skirvin, where I opened the limo door and the ladies started filing out first. One of them looked at me and said, "Mason? It's me, Jenna. From high school? Remember me?"

"Oh yeah... what's up Jenna? How you been?"

"Pretty good. Makin' money. I'm pullin' in like 5 G's tonight, and this dude is taking me to Dallas tomorrow for a new set of tits, so I can't complain. Man, I miss the old days though. Miss those high school parties we used to have. We were so crazy! Are these guys paying you alright?"

"Not that great, apparently."

She turned to the swaying assemblage of lusty barons. "Y'all, I know this dude. You better take care of him, 'cause we go way back."

I gave them a nervous smile and raised my eyebrows.

They staggered forward pulling out their wallets, "Of course, baby, of course." They started passing me 100 dollar bills. One of them turned toward me and added, "Can you go pick up some condoms, though?"

His bloodshot eyes exaggerated the blackness of his pupils. The rippling and gurgling of all that black gold boiling with lust. Saturated visions of sex on the monkey board, catline booms showering his libidinal hunger from the sky on everything below, drill pipes pumping to pull

excess from untouched earth, and a doghouse to keep warm bodies when he has pumped himself dry. Below it an emptiness that'll reveal a hole before long.

I returned to the Trophy Room to pick up Kent Cooper. He insisted that I get a lap dance from three women simultaneously. After a brief expression of reluctance, I concurred. Yes, I'm aware that it was unprofessional. I also knew that Kent Cooper wouldn't accept an outright dismissal of his offer, that it would be taken personally, and it would have cut into my tip at the end of the night. What do you want me to say? I was a product of my environment.

Kent Cooper had a wife and kids that he would leave for weeks at a time. While we were together he would get phone calls from his children asking where he was. He would respond that he needed time to himself. That he would come back home when he got his head cleared. He kept his pencil-thin mistress at the Holiday Inn two blocks from the Trophy Room.

VIII. COMMUNION

When I was young, our church would practice communion in the form of the Eucharist. The large hall of worship echoed and shook with the guilt of the real estate agents and the booze-soaked general contractors. It felt like the whole damn place could come crashing down under the weight of all that guilt like Sodom and Gomorrah. The grape juice was sweet. The crackers were bland. Flesh and blood to re-assimilate the presence of Christ in our lost little souls, courtesy of Sam's Club. I never really understood the idea of transmutation, but I wanted to keep that divinity burning inside me, so I snacked and I slurped and I hoped that, that would do the trick.

The preacher who blessed the wine and crackers got in some trouble for shooting his neighbor's dog. It wasn't in cold blood. The mutt kept coming over and killing his chickens, so he got fed up and shot him. I remember the preacher's big red moustache, and I remember the way he talked over my head like I wasn't there. I guess he suspected he couldn't fish a tithe from the shallow pockets of a teenage boy.

We'd walk in on those warm Sunday mornings when the sky was blue and puffy, bloated with the heat and the sunlight. The service would start with music, the dimmed lights glowed from the stage and sent a shadow behind a thin man who banged wildly on his tambourine, mad with divine inspiration. A tuft of hair stuck from his balding head, waving back and forth with his crazed gyrations.

At the end of each sermon and before communion the preacher would perform baptisms. There was a pool on the back of the stage that rippled and sparkled throughout his sermon. "The wages of sin can only be washed away through acceptance of the savior." He would wade in wearing long red robes and the soon-to-be reborn would follow in white. They'd stand in the

water as sinners and come out as servants. I wondered what they were in-between, as they were submerged. A Schrodinger's cat of divine redemption.

I remember diving in the warm waters of the Caribbean. It was so clear I could see for a hundred yards, like looking out on the plains in autumn when the heat wasn't burning through and singeing the clarity. Except there were seahorses and eels floating around me, and all the sounds were throbbing and intensified like I was listening to a trombone filled with jelly. The seaweed danced to that tune with a flowing dexterity.

When I dove I paid close attention to my breath. Made sure I breathed slowly so I didn't waste oxygen. Don't waste oxygen. All my hair would stand and dance in the salt water. Once, a green sea turtle soared beside me. It looked at me side-eyed, aware that I didn't belong, knowing that I was out of my element. It drifted in the water barrel-chested, flippers spread out as if it had just done a belly flop and was floating in a state of empty-minded bliss.

I grabbed a handful of sand. It drifted through me like I was a ghost. Something half there. The sand settled back on the floor of the ocean. It would never be the same again, misplaced by my weightless fingers.

I wonder what goes through the mind of someone under water during the moment of baptism. Are they filled with anxiety and mulling over the thought that they'll emerge from the waters with an obligation to the rigid morality of a demanding God? Or are they just hoping the water doesn't get in their nose on the way up? I guess everyone is a different sort of Christian.

My folks never had me baptized. They always said it was a choice that I should make on my own. By the time I was old enough to make that choice my faith was starting to fall to the wayside. I got saved a couple times, when I felt I was in need of it. But I never took the plunge, so to speak.

After my faith waned, an irking void revealed itself. That Godhole. All those answers and certainty disappeared, collapsing in on one another, and the structures that held up my understanding of the world around me went away, giving no warning of their impending betrayal. Like all the angels turned out to be police informants that'd been having a party in my cerebellum since I was able to think. Initially there was a sense of loss rather than liberation. I went looking for other means of finding communion.



It was summer. It was night. I was lying underneath the stars in the Czech countryside somewhere outside of Kutna Hora, home to the bone church, the Sedlec Ossuary. They have chandeliers and furniture made from the bones of those killed in the Black Plague and the Hussite Wars. There was a meteor shower that night.

The glow of the campfire accentuated the cosmic dance happening before me. The sparks lifted themselves toward twilight on a soft wind. I sipped from a bottle of Becherovka, a Czech herbal bitter that tasted like sweet ginger caught in a whirlwind of spices. The evening was warm and dynamic.

The horizon was pregnant with a purple aura, the remnants of the setting sun. Meteors appeared through the sky like celestial paper cuts. The matrix of night lit up in a robotic dance, moving about the sky in tune with my senses. There is something here, I thought. Something in the sensuousness of this experience.

The next morning, I was hitchhiking back to Prague when a field of blossoming nettle caught my eye. It was glowing in an erotic, swelling purple. It pulsed in the heat of the sun. I was

into its presence. Its way of being. There was a self-effacing beauty to it. I ran out into the field. I caressed its blossoms. I let it wash through me. It penetrated my skin.

Before long, my face was swelling up, contorting and becoming discolored above my left eyebrow. Not all nettle has this quality, in the sense that they will cover you in a set of biochemical irritants, but this field of nettle was of the stinging variety. *Urtica dioica*. The metamorphosis blew any chance I had of catching a ride. I looked like a creep who had just crawled from the backwoods. I went to the train station and spent what little money I had to get back to Prague.

On the train ride, I had some time to think. The fields stretched out before me in a collage of greens and purples, rubbing shoulders as they swayed, drawing me in like a siren. Maybe the pleasure of the meteor shower at dusk had left me intoxicated with the beauty of the universe and vulnerable to the field's song. There was a sense of self enmeshed with the nettle, and I had no choice but to embrace it in some fit of eco-erotic delirium.

I sat there sweating, face contorted, twiddling my thumbs until the train got back to Prague. I wanted to become more aware of my connection to things around me. To keep rehearsing the dance that happens when you push the boundaries of your senses. It was a conscious decision to become more cognizant of how far my eyes, my nose, my ears, my tongue could take me. Really put my neurons to work. Become bigger. I'd also realized that the planet didn't owe me anything and that it could be adept in its deceit. There are boundaries to its generosity.

You get puffed up like that, wanting to feel everything, and you'll eventually take in the bad stuff too. When I returned to Oklahoma, I was too willing to feel all the anxiety of the tarnished plains. My environmental imagination became shaped by the burden of our impact on

the aquifers, the shale formations, the wolves, the monarchs, the watersheds. I was witness to the constraints of my senses and a sadness in my inability to process the grief for things so much larger than myself. Climate change and mass extinction. I had to face the chaos and madness of the turning tides that are leaving our ecosystems awash in the uncertainty of catastrophic environmental changes.

The plains are a mean place, and the people who stick to them tend to get hardened. The needs of others become a burden and self-preservation the primary ambition. All that Christianity doesn't seem to evoke much empathy. Your soul stretches across the land and with all that flatness it becomes thin. If too many people start pushing on it, you get afraid it's going to pop and your spirit will come leaking out into the world, so you keep everyone away, except your family, who end up doing most the pushing and popping anyway.



Back in Oklahoma, my time became a practice of blotting out days and counting away the seconds of my life in a meat freezer while working at a self-proclaimed health food store. I'd walk in the door and enter a fugue state until I left eight hours later, only to go home to a relationship that made me wish I was still blacked-out. There was a large field outside of town where I would lay in on warm afternoons, so I could avoid going home. The sun would bake the meat juice into my clothes. I'd kick over the "For Sale" sign and wander around collecting rose rocks. Some places call them desert roses. Swirling composite crystals made of gypsum, baryte, and sand.

I was a vegetarian and a butcher. Fortunately, it wasn't something they asked about on the job application. I worked with a group of guys who were perpetually tired of the boss's shit. We'd talk for hours about our miserable work conditions, but we would never do anything about it. We were rewarded with insufficient health care plans that sucked up a quarter of our paycheck every week. We received a ten percent employee appreciation discount, but the store still wasn't meant for people of our economic status.

The head meat cutter, Robert, was dedicated to the butchering profession. He had tattoos across his knuckles that read "dead" on one hand and "meat" on the other. He said that on the same night he got that tattoo he talked his girlfriend into getting the "USDA Prime" emblem tattooed on her ass. I thought she probably went on to regret that.

I'd get there at five AM to check-in and unload thousands of pounds of cow and chicken parts. This wasn't supposed to be my job. It was above my paygrade, but the manager didn't feel like doing it, so every week the task fell on me. Sometimes literally. I'd emerge from the meat freezer covered in blood, guts, and juice. A good work ethic means I was to do whatever they ask for as little pay as possible. That's what the hard-working American does.

I worked with an obese, fiercely right-wing man named Craig who would disappear into the bathroom twice a day for forty-five minutes. He would leave during the busiest part of the shift, about five o'clock, when people were rolling in after work to pick up rotisserie chickens and organic soda for dinner. He always wore camo pants with a pocket knife that he would sharpen on the department's whet stone while making passes at the sixteen-year-old girl who worked in the bakery. We once had a long argument about removing Jackson from the twenty-dollar bill. He was convinced that he was thirty and still single because women in Oklahoma

couldn't see themselves with a conservative man. One day he left to go to the bathroom during the evening rush and he never came back.

At least once a week there was woman who came in and ordered the biggest filet mignon we had. She asked us to cut it into little pieces. She had thick make-up smeared on top of bronzer and purple, permed hair. Ten pounds of jewelry hung from her leathered skin. One evening she came in and said, "I'm going to have to watch you cut it this time. Last week the pieces weren't small enough and my little Taffy choked on it."

"Excuse me, Taffy?"

"Yes, Taffy." She pulled her phone from her oversized purse and showed me a picture of a Yorkshire Terrier.

"Oh, I see. So, this filet mignon is for Taffy... your Yorkie."

"Yes, and last week the pieces were too big and she choked, so now I have to watch you cut it."

A couple hours after dicing Taffy's filet mignon I was hit in the chin by a flying wedge of asiago cheese. There was this grey-haired, coupon-clutching germophobe on the far side of the meat counter. Her name was Karen and she was a minor celebrity among the staff. She always gave us grief about the position of our beard nets or the sterility of our rubber gloves. She demanded that we put them on in a certain order, so as to reduce contamination of her uncooked meat. I wondered if she forgot that she had to cook it. Or maybe she ate it raw in the darkness of her home, on a bed of expired coupons like some sort of grotesque, vampiric baby-boomer.

"You want some flies for lunch?" she asked.

I looked down to see a dead fly on the vacuum wrapped asiago. I didn't even work in dairy. The corners of her mouth were curled up in a smile. It was one of vehemence and pleasure.

I went to lie out in the field after work that day. The clouds were moving past my eyes riding the heavy breaths of the plains' forgotten gods. Great wild horses moving through the sky. A stampede that sent wind gusting across that flat, desolate, broken world. It was all I could feel. The wind caught dust and moved it through the air in a haze that shook and trembled as it changed shapes before me. Projecting itself in an image that was gone as the seconds drifted away from me. It was all I could feel. The seconds drifting away from me.



I fled Oklahoma in a haze of desperation. In part, to escape my partner. She was a mean ol' gal. She used to beat me up and down, leaving me lying with my head tucked into my stomach waiting until she wore herself out, and crossing my fingers that she didn't find something to start wailing on me with. I can't blame her. She'd taken her share of whoopings. After so long, a person just isn't the same. You get left with a bad head even if you've got a good heart. And I can be a hard person to get along with. Still, I used to have thoughts of her pulling out the old .22 revolver in my closet underneath the blue and white quilt handed down from my mother and leaving my thinker spread across those sweat-soaked jersey sheets, her eyes upon me pale blue like suffocated lips.

We didn't know each other well when she moved in. She was in a rough spot and didn't have anywhere to go. She'd been floating around from one couch to the next, so I said she could

stay with me for a while. My apartment was small, dilapidated, barely standing. In the beginning everything seemed brighter because of the chemicals we brought out in one another. The colors of the world more vibrant, more consuming. We filled our apartment with orchids and ivy. There was an herb garden that lined the window in the kitchen. We got a fish. The place almost seemed livable. But things went downhill pretty fast. Everything became dull before long. She killed the fish when she pushed over our shelf in a fit of rage. Eventually it was like I was seeing the world through one of those nets that old ladies wear when they go to funerals.

I'll tell you about it. I'll tell you about the night I knew I had to get out of there or one of us was going to die in that shithole apartment. Maybe in the clogged-up shower or on the toilet where we had to cover ourselves with an empty trash bag because of the leaky pipes upstairs. Or maybe it would have been at the bottom of the stairwell where the wood ached and moaned every time we took a step. Either way, it wouldn't have been glamorous.

I was being fussy, being a real bastard, because she was lying to me about seeing another man, and I was jealous. So, she took to swinging on me as I was sitting on the couch hurling mean words. I got up and walked to the dinner table, hoping she wouldn't follow me to the kitchen. She followed me to the kitchen. We continued hollering and cursing till she ripped the wire frame glasses from my face and stomped them to pieces on the linoleum tile of the kitchen floor. Then with a scream she shattered our Tibetan salt lamp, and I remember thinking that was ironic.

I got up and ran. She tried to block the door, but I got there quick enough. When I got into the driver's seat of the car, my senses returned, and I realized that I couldn't see a thing. The bits and pieces of my glasses were spread out in the darkness of that kitchen. The rain was coming down hard.

Then I had a bad idea. I decided to walk back in, and I went into the kitchen. The light didn't work. It wasn't the bulb, but something more serious. Some malfunction in the wiring. So I was down on my hands and knees searching for the scattered pieces of my glasses. She came from the back room reinvigorated. She started kicking me in the stomach. I could feel my organs moving around in there. Then one got me square in the face. Missed my nose but busted my lip. I was happy I wasn't picking up teeth from the cracked linoleum. That I was only spitting blood instead of incisors. I pushed her away hoping for a moment of reprieve. Hoping I could get out of there with one lens and a piece of bent frame. But her feet got caught up in the legs of the table. She fell and hit her eye on the corner of the stove. My stomach sank through my feet. Felt like it was floating in the stagnant water of the empty basement. More leaky pipes. She came up with a cut bleeding over a black eye. I felt such shame.

The white caps wrapped the peaks of the Tetons as they penetrated the horizon, as if they were cushioning the prodding discomfort of the jagged edges plunged into the grayish blue of the sky, now coughing snow and howling. I was on my way to Montana. I'd always wanted to see Montana. There was something magnetic about the promise of all that wilderness. The lawlessness of an ecology untamed by the minds and hands of men. I've never been one for authority, and I'd glamourized the old west. Inevitably, Oklahoma had hardened me too. So I took off to leave my life.

As I laid eyes on the Tetons, I was overcome with awe. I pulled over to weep on the side of the road. It was mid-July, and the snow was coming down like errant cotton balls melting onto

the lenses of my last resort glasses. The pads had disappeared long-ago and they rubbed punctures into the crown of my nose. My skin felt like it was stretching. The roots of my hair tingled. I sat on the ground resting my back against the front bumper of my car. My chin was in my hands. I couldn't distinguish the chill of melted snow from the tears that were drying on my face.

The jagged rocks bit into the blue sky that had haunted me all my life. I felt vindicated. Maybe I was on the right track to find that sense of communion that the pastor had told me I was supposed to get from juice and crackers. Something that the nettle and the meteors and gar had hinted at that led to the darkness that defined my life back on the plains. The back of my car was loaded down with everything I had. Everything I owned stuffed into a hatch-back. It was mid-July; the snow was coming down and showing no sign of letting up. I couldn't have been happier.

I was born into a funny time. I can't know the Earth as it once was. Once everything was gone, all those truths I held, I was able to see more clearly what lay ahead. They told me that grape juice was the blood of Christ. It didn't taste like blood. And those crackers, I don't know for sure, but they didn't seem to taste much like flesh either.

The reflection of the wilderness, within and without, doesn't have to provide answers, I suppose. There is no code of morality to something tarnished, threatened, and untamed. You go around caught in observation, taking everything in, you're going to feel fear there, eventually. You notice that the white caps wrapping the peaks of the Tetons aren't sticking around as long as they used to. But when the snow melts, the mountains are still here. The mountains are still here.

There are uncountable facets to the wilderness debate. What wilderness means, how it should look, where it can be found, and how to manage it. Like many philosophical questions, it

has become debated to the point that the answers no longer matter. The preservation of wild places has fallen to the wayside as the debates rage on within academic echo chambers.

They say Nasruddin, the holy fool of Sufism, was riding around Baghdad on his donkey one day. He went through the street kicking up sand looking down every alley and in every door. “Nasruddin, Nasruddin, what are you looking for?” a group of curious onlookers asked. “I’ve lost my donkey, and I am trying to find it,” he responded.

I found communion in wilderness. Found it in the broken sadness of the plains. In the slow movements of the snowless mountain tops. In the tragedy of the extinction that spreads from the oceans to the old growths. The real trial happens once we begin to see the world around us reflected in our being. When the factory farms, the clear cuts, the landfills, the deep injection wells, the plastic littering the ocean are what we see when we settle into our introspection, then how can we bear the sight of ourselves?

IX. THE SAME OLD THINGS, THEY ALWAYS REFUSE TO DIE

Grandma Parker stood in the kitchen cutting watermelon, her hair parted perfectly, always wearing blue jeans, while Grandad Parker grumbled and cursed watching westerns from behind a tall glass of buttermilk. A cedar fence lined their backyard. I was five or six.

Uncle Dale chewed Skoal then. That's when things were right with the family business. Brothers were betrayed and money was lost, so he chews Grizzly now, but back then it was always Skoal. You could find empty cans of long-cut wintergreen littering his truck or on his bedside table. He would pinch a horseshoe between his right index finger and thumb, which was maimed in '78 by the chain of his Triumph motorcycle. It ends at the knuckle with a smooth, scarred lump. He smells like molded fruit, mint, and engine grease, and he could knock the teeth from the mouth of a bull.

I was out back with my cousin Charlie. We peeled back the lid of one of Uncle Dale's dip cans. The bullfrog we had stuffed into it ten minutes before had been reduced to a lump of bloated fat. Its pocked skin reflected the evening sun, ambient and exasperated. We dumped it onto the concrete patio and stared. I was waiting for it to move, to hop out of the Void and onto the fescue under Grandma's pecan tree. We could have waited forever. My tiny index finger caressed its belly, wishing it would twitch, kick, piss, do something.

Several such moments of senseless cruelty rest uncomfortably among my memories of boyhood. Childhood's wonder radiates unbounded once I've lifted myself from the thrall of these moments. Laying on a soft layer of dead leaves in the Cross Timbers of Oklahoma, staring past the tangle of blackjack limbs to the sky. Watching the clouds race from the Great Plains as if startled by the rolling thunder to the west. My memories of wonder grow from such instances of placid chaos.

An inversion always lurks over the lights of Missoula. It causes a purple haze to envelope the valley in winter. Never darkness. Only the glow of the town reflected onto itself. From Lolo Peak, you can see Missoula pulsing among the expanse. Like a musical note from the womb, it announces itself to the blackness of empty space. A testament to the isolation that Montana can allow.

The protests at Standing Rock had just been shut down. Images of bulldozers careening into camps and detained activists were circling the internet. I was doing my best to play the role of graduate student. I focused on class. I felt my days of political engagement were behind me. I had embraced a sort of nihilism.

“Nihilism is impossible.” That’s what a buddy of mine says. He’ll tell you that you can’t keep yourself from being affected by something. You can decide not to act on your emotions, but that’s apathy not nihilism. So, I was feeling apathetic, thinking the world was bound for flames anyway, when I came across a bunch of folks marching and chanting in the park near the Clark Fork in downtown Missoula. It was deep into winter, January maybe. The nights were long but they never got black.

Like many, I had felt tremors of disgust, waves of nausea after witnessing the election of the 45th president. Wasn’t so much that his beliefs were more detestable than many of our former leaders. He just wore his racism on his sleeve rather than up it. You live in Oklahoma for most of your life, you know exactly what half of this country thinks about immigrants, environmentalists, and religious freedom, as they wallow in the contradictions of their anti-government, gung ho

patriotism, and force feed their beliefs down the throats of founding fathers. It was something I had fled, and now the entire nation was happily swallowing the same ideology that I'd watched destroy the state of Oklahoma, systemically and ecologically. I found that Trump resembled a lump of processed ravioli left to rot in the landfill of American culture, too clearly manifesting the gluttony, corruption, and decay of unfettered capitalism. It was unsettling how effortlessly he unmasked what the United States has become. Perhaps, what it has always been. Long story short, revulsion shook me from of an apathetic trance, and I found myself running in activist circles again.

Yael showed up late to the protest, grumbling about work as she crawled from her old Ford pickup. It was white and the bumper had seen a collision or two. Her hair was short and disheveled. We ended up on either end of a long, waving banner with *Water is Life* scribed across the front. As I sat leaning my back against the red brick of the office of a Montana senator, I watched her draw pictures of mountains and sunshine on the back of a cardboard protest sign. She was entertaining a group of children that had been crying with boredom. She was gruff and perceptive, sensitive to the suffering of others.

She had loaded her truck with bikes and delivered them to Standing Rock. She'd met a few organizers through her trip, and that's what had landed her there on that day. A few of us got a ride over to the Army Corp of Engineers so we could get information on the public comment period concerning construction of the pipeline.

"Yeah, I just got out of a relationship. Been trying to split up the junk we collected together. You know, you're with somebody that long, five years, it gets hard to tell what's yours from what's theirs. I got stuck with this fucking hooptie." She slaps the dashboard, "He gave me some cash for a Subaru. I got the raw end of the deal, if you ask me. Watch this."

She turns the wheel and the truck fishtails.

“Piece of shit ain’t got no traction. Even threw a couple sandbags in the back. Didn’t make a damn bit of difference. They always say buy American, buy American. Well, I ain’t buyin’ American again if this rust bucket is any indication of what we’re putting out on the streets. Gonna sell it, figure I can get a grand out of it, maybe fifteen hundred if I’m lucky. Even then I’ll feel a little bad for the poor fucker I dump it on. Just hope they got more use for it than I do... Anyway, you ever backpack?”

She told me how she worked as a chainsaw wielding wildland firefighter, as a researcher following pika into the mountains of New Mexico as they fled climate change, as a lab researcher studying avian bioacoustics, and a wilderness ranger spending night after night alone in grizzly country, never armed because she refused to draw on any large carnivore. I was enthralled.

The bullfrog was trying to get away from us. It was kicking and urinating all over our hands. Grandma Parker said that’s how kids got warts. They played in frog piss. We didn’t care. We were going to catch it, stuff it into an empty dip can, toss it around, and have us a good time.

I didn’t think we’d kill it. I didn’t think anything of it really. Thought we’d harass this frog a bit then carry on about our night. It must have been the Fourth of July, because there were fireworks being shot off from the Air Force Base. Big red, white, and blue explosions to celebrate our freedom. My other cousin, Liz, who is a little younger than us, asked, “Why y’all hurting that frog?”

“Go away Liz!”

Liz believed that she had a special connection with hornets. They had an unspoken agreement that she wouldn't swat them and they wouldn't sting her. She tried to show me this one day after school. She walked over to the hornet's nest on my grandparents' back porch. The same one Granddad would shoot with his pellet gun. She let a big one crawl onto her finger. She held it out to show me with a smile so big you could see her uvula dangling from the back of her throat. About five seconds into the trick it plunged its stinger so far into her finger that it probably hit the bone. Hell, it might have come out the other side. Her wide smile turned into a scream and you could see that uvula just flapping around in there. I had laughed so hard I needed to lie down in the grass. My stomach had felt like a ball of rubber bands.

“That frog didn't do nothing to y'all. Leave it alone!”

“Shut up Liz!”

Charlie walked over and punched her in the arm.

“I hate you, jerk!” she screamed and ran inside.

We considered the situation handled.

The frog was still kicking, trying to keep its legs from being stuffed into the can. We sealed the lid and with it the frog's fate.

It was late May. Yael and I were lugging Kora, her sixty-pound lab mutt, toward an ancient juniper in Utah's Logan valley. Kora was shitting liquid from her meds. A grey sky coughed fierce thunder. The booming echoed through the ponderosas, dripping from the pine

needles and swallowing the silence. Kora was anxious. For the past few weeks we'd been shooting my old .22 while stuffing her slobbering jowls with diced hotdogs, hoping she wouldn't tuck tail when we fired the 12 gauge on upland bird. Yael stroked her and said, "Don't worry, the thunder is just like a big gun shot."

We climbed higher past a trail crew cutting through a fallen cedar. Thin mist drifted upon the crest. A wheeling expanse of green trees and stone heaved up and down, tempting the patience of the stratus clouds to the east. We trekked further, losing a bit of altitude, and I ran my hand over the Japanese brome that lined the trail. When I saw the juniper, I thought of Jesus. It kinda looked like Jesus had he been a contortionist. The gnarled limbs pointed out east and west. Little organic explosions formed a green crown on its skyward spire.

That juniper was seeded some 1500 years ago during the twilight of the Roman empire. A time when they and the Persians were, once again, spilling each other's guts. Soon the Roman empire would succumb to the universal feature of every great civilization: collapse. Centuries of blood had already soaked our primate skin. Human life thrived in vast graveyards, nurtured by the vital fluid of any wayward son-of-a-bitch who dared cross the line into our territory, sexually or otherwise.

Lightning cracked through the doughy starkness of the clouds. The dog flinched, her ears fell back, and her eyes bounced untrusting inside her head. We tore apart a cheese stick and stuffed it into her mouth. They call this positive association. From now on, a loud boom means cheese, salami, hotdogs, so boom is good. No more analysis needed.

We soon realized the downside of this. Hoping to alleviate her anxiety when crossing horses and mules, we introduced her to tame stock while stuffing her mouth with whatever

greasy, fatty thing we had on hand. We succeeded. She has no fear of horses. Yet, the problem is obvious. A dog should fear a kicking horse.

Charlie and I began tossing the thing around. First in the lawn just a couple feet apart. Then a few more feet and a few more until we were on opposite sides of the yard, backs rubbing against the fence. The disc would hover in the sky like a UFO carrying an alien laboratory where they test poor, unsuspecting frogs for the affliction of claustrophobia.

“Let’s throw it over the fence. I’ll go into the yard next door,” Charlie said from across the lawn.

As he walked over into the yard next door, I kicked around pecans. Picked one up, tried to crack it between my teeth, failed, and spit it out.

“Ok, here it comes,” he yelled.

I saw the black disc. The sky was sherbet orange, wily and life-giving.

An esoteric dust swept across the slick rock as we rumbled south through Grand Staircase-Escalante. Tumble weeds crawled across a leering red infinity that swallowed and bared itself to the heat of a swollen sun. The sweltering horizon obscured, as if a translucent Jell-O was cooking upon the desert sand.

We were travelling back to Oklahoma for the wedding of two old friends. It was sure to be elegant. They have a taste for fine things. There would be music and dancing and food, drinks and laughter, and we'd talk about how much we missed each other, and then go on speaking once a year; there would be a transient grace to the whole affair. I've always been satisfied with grime and dust, sleeping comfortably on the soft bulge of the underbelly. Such concessions were necessary for a life of movement, though I am growing older and the thought of slowing down seems more colorful with every passing day.

We found a spot to park the car and build a fire. Rock curved down toward our camp to form a dusty amphitheater. Turkey vultures cut slits through the open sky. Hinds afire, driven by the day's last chance for carrion, they swept up what was left of the light, trapping dusk in the white of their tail feathers. Kora collected piles of desiccated dung in her bed and food bowl. Unashamed, she masticated the hardened patties. Her lips curled away from her teeth in a sort of coerced joy, or maybe it was blissful remorse.

Near the fire, Yael was slouched into a woven camp chair, her form half revealing itself to the matrix of night. The robust specter of twilight etched the gentle curves of her lips and chin and a small dent that runs along the right side of her face where she was kicked by a quarter horse. It moves when she talks or clenches her jaws. It comes right up to the corner of her eye. Any closer and it would've popped right out. A bottle of bourbon was stuffed between her thighs. She leered at the dog. "You better stop eating shit mutt, or you're gonna get worms." She took a long pull from the bottle and wiped the dribble from her face with the back of her hand.

Kora looked at her curious and defiant with the flames of the fire spinning like Dervishes in her eyes. She only considered this warning for a moment before she plunged her newly grown canines into a gray, old cow patty.

In the morning we walked. The echoes of the flies buzzed through the slot canyons in a ghostly chorus, as if the voices of our ancestors were speaking to us through the fabric of time. We rested at a pool of water. Rippling red and blue, the lonely basin permeated like breath, or momentary awareness, beginning and ending in a vast expansion of being. Bright moss glistened on the rock, and Kora slid unwittingly into the water. She learned to swim.

I rested under a girth of sandstone that hung over the pool, protruding into sunlight and sparing me the oppression of June's heat. Black desert varnish dripping down the rock face. A significant mystery puzzled over for decades by Darwin and leagues of scientists, the varnish is made up of clay, iron, and manganese. Its layers hold history, like the rings of timeworn trees. Throughout the region petroglyphs are etched into varnish-covered stone depicting people, animals, and odd forms that have given rise to theories of extraterrestrial contact.

Riding the ripples of the pool were the teardrop leaves from the cottonwoods fluttering above. They signal water sources for travelers of the arid southwest. A representation of the doggedness of life, like weeds through cracked concrete, or the matsutake mushrooms which grew from the desolation of Hiroshima. The fluffy seeds of the cottonwood floated overhead, little souls in transit.

As Kora played, silt rose from the bottom of the pool. Through the haze I saw tiny apparitions. Startled tadpoles fleeing her revelry. Yael was laughing, splashing water into the air that Kora leapt at, catching it in her mouth. Pushed forward by the momentum of pure joy, Kora crashed feet first into a silver cholla cactus, which left its fine needles planted between the pads of her feet. Startled by the sudden shift from bliss to agony, she plopped down, putting her ears back and stuffing her snout into the white, butterfly shape in the middle of her chest. Yael and I spent fifteen minutes holding her still and plucking the cactus needles from her feet.

Kora gyrated wildly, kicking Yael in the face and chest as I pulled the needles free. Yael said, “This is prolly gonna be a landmark moment for ol Kora.” A frantic kick caught her between the nose and eye. “Least from my experience, the bad shit never waits for you to finish living. There’s always a cactus in your god damn pool.”

The needles were gone, but Kora never recovered the blissful jaunt that she’d carried through the water. She laid down, stubborn and unmoving, so we took turns carrying her through the midday heat two miles back to the car.

As we stood later on the edge of Goblin Valley, the sun was finding its respite and melting like a stick of illuminated butter onto the sands of the west. The shadows of the hoodoos stretched, elongating across the desert. They grew long with the passage of time, those shadows thin like razor’s edge. Then the moment was gone before I ever knew it happened.

I’m at odds with the corrupted consciousness of boyhood, not childhood, but boyhood, in which Charlie and I stuffed a bullfrog into Uncle Dale’s empty chew can and tossed it around like a sadistic Frisbee. We threw it back and forth over the tall cedar fence. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew that what we were doing was cruel, senseless. Yet, once it was there, bloated and oblong, my detachment materialized, and I was struck by my first glance at the permanence of death. A death that I had caused.

Boys seem to be stewed in meanness. Like there is a projector shining onto the inside of our mother’s swollen stomach and images of violence and brutality are all we’ve seen up until the moment they pop us out. Some men never grow out of it, channeling their rage in all the wrong places.

Wilderness, like this barren desert, doesn't demonize or reward our feral behavior. It calls for community as well as independence, a space where we feel both alone and interconnected. A mirror of the coming and going that constitutes being. Within the empty grip of the wild, gender is lost. We are at our most vulnerable and our most secure. Wonder peers through anger, through carnage, and all that chaos merges into a single thread.

The dog had worms. We drove to Moab. In the distance, the La Sals rose from a collapsed panorama like astral titans, their peaks bearing no sign of winter, dehydrated from a dry season. The place was crawling with ATVs. The endless *weeee!* of two stroke engines sounded like we were passing through the creaking gates of Hell, but we had no choice. Welcome to Moab.

Outdoor and new age shops lined the streets, and everything was glowing with the artificial vibrancy of high season in a tourist town. We checked into a cheap motel and hunkered down until the vet appointment the next morning. I grabbed a beer and hit the hot tub. The warm water bubbled around me. I avoided the jets. If I sat against them for too long, they made my skin itch. Neon lights gave the water an otherworldly glow, mimicking the bioluminescence of jellyfish or certain algae. I stretched out and let the cool breeze of summer evening make the wet hair on my arms stand straight.

Kora's young pads were too soft for the heat of the sand, so we got her little leather slippers that we tied around her ankles and hiked to Corona Arch on the outskirts of Moab the next morning. The arch exploded from the flat top of a mesa, curving into the stark lip of slick rock below. We ate dried bananas in the arch's shadow. I watched three young boys chasing a zebra-tailed lizard around a cliffrose shrub. An older man, who I assume to be the father of one

of the boys, was sitting, facing the other direction with his eyes locked on his phone. Beside him was a young curly-haired girl. She asked him if she could pet Kora. He said no.

The boys bellowed and scuttled as the lizard juked and circled around, burrowing itself in the tangle of the cliffrose.

“You run around the other side of the bush, scare it, and I’ll grab it.”

“Then what?”

“Then I’ll throw it off the cliff!”

I am cut by the certainty that this cruelty plagues boyhood. That it thoroughly penetrates our biology and our cultural hierarchies. These thoughts had arisen in me before, but in this moment, I felt it. Felt that the world has been cooked in our gluttony, in our sense of superiority. And that cruelty carries on through boyhood into old men who don uniforms and hold office. Our critiques of masculinity then feel misguided and shortsighted. It is a deeply corrupting force. It causes a rift between men and their souls. This problem is not self-contained, it spills out into our society in the form of suicides, rape, and shootings. The top of the world is the hardest place from which to fall. The destructive tendencies of masculinity are biologically and emotionally inherited, then culturally reinforced. The world wants to leave the ideologies of traditional masculinity behind. Men don’t know how to cope with it.

For the past five years I have worked to reestablish, or rather re-recognize, the intimate relationship between myself and the mesh of life constituted by atom, being, ecosystem, Earth, universe, blah blah blah ad infinitum, upward or downward, inward and out. For that, I have a laundry list of things to thank: books, conversation, tryptamines, travel, isolation, lovers, community, a backpack and a pair of boots. It’s not always pretty but a hard truth is better than a soft lie.

That night the Pallid bats swooped through our camp, swallowing the mosquitos that buzzed despite the smoke of juniper and pinyon pine rising from our fire. In just a few days my feet would be touching the red dirt of Oklahoma's mud rather than Utah's slick rock. I could already see it, an image seared into my mind, those oil rigs nodding like heads toward the Devon Tower.

X. THE GENERATIONS FORGET EACH OTHER

The monarchs were drifting through a drought in early fall. Their pilgrimage lasts generations. I was visiting home. A butterfly landed on my finger in my parent's back yard. Lightly waving its orange and black wings like opaque stained glass windows, it was likely of the sixth generation to be born on its migration. A never-ending trip across America, pit stops for death and rebirth, check points of reincarnation, grueling, moving forward toward nothing certain for the sake of flux. Their grand scheme only a patterned chaos. Their purpose is being. Their tendencies wrapped in aimlessness.

Edward Lorenz popularized the term *butterfly effect*. Lorenz was a mathematician, meteorologist, and pioneer of chaos theory. The idea that all of the phenomena in the world can be attributed to something brings comfort to many. But what good is knowing there is always a cause if you can't foresee the reaction? We love an explanation but can't bear to ponder consequences. Though Lorenz coined the term, the idea that we can alter the immense entirety of things by moving a single grain of sand was posited long before by Johann Gottlieb Fichte in his book *The Vocation of Man*. Indeed, philosophy has always been better at getting to the top of things than getting to the bottom of them. Our misguided decisions that echo through generations, rather than being stuck in time, are stuck to time.

The monarch shuffled its legs and moved up my wrist. It flapped its wings lethargically. I got swept up in an illusion. Time had momentarily slowed down. I imagined a grandfather clock tipped over across my mind. The seconds moved like minutes. Even the breeze seemed a slow exhalation. The monarch lifted its wings until they came together, pointing toward a sky empty but for a few pale clouds, almost not there like vapor distilled into trade winds. As I concentrated

on the butterfly, the green grass of the lawn blurred in the background, a manufactured landscape set aside, so I could focus for a precious few seconds on this butterfly. The seconds like minutes.

It moved its wings down and I saw my grandmother as a child coughing up the dirt of a dust storm on the plains eighty years ago. It moved its wings up and I saw the tornado that chewed through my grandmother's house twenty years ago. It moved its wings down and I saw a deep injection well and a tectonic shift and an earthquake five years ago. Wings up, the polar vortex moves south, wings down the ocean acidifies, wings up methane clathrate released from permafrost. Wings up. Wings down. Another second, another tragedy. The seconds like minutes.

The monarch's ever-moving population has declined for a number of reasons. One of which is the increase in illegal deforestation in Mexico. In the town of Cheran, the people have violently resisted illegal logging and the armed goons of the cartel that protected those operations. The people of Cheran, in the Michoacán province, mostly indigenous and disenfranchised, armed themselves and resisted those mechanisms of economic and environmental devastation. After going through their own sort of transformation from being victims of corrupt government and resource extraction, the indigenous Purepecha people drove out the cartels, the government officials, and the loggers. Government on every level had failed the people of Cheran. These were ancestral forests being cut down; the deforestation was a desecration of the sacred. They had asked repeatedly for assistance, but their cries for help went unheeded. Now they are an autonomous self-governing city of 20,000. 16,000 of which are indigenous.

While half of America was aghast after the election of Trump, a large number of indigenous peoples, many of whom were freezing in South Dakota, protesting the construction of

the Dakota Access pipeline, seemed unaffected. The tribes have endured violent subjugation at the hands of every single American president. The history of genocide that goes unacknowledged in this country, the doomed relocation programs, the conditions on the reservations, the systematic erasure of culture and religion.

The monarchs inherit their understanding of life. They know which direction to migrate and where to overwinter because they are biologically guided toward that place, and the landscape had always validated those biological inclinations. The monarch's patterned history is written into their genetics. The indigenous people of this country have inherited the trauma of genocide passed on through genes and generations of storytellers. The atrocities echo through time, permeating from the soil below my feet as the monarch postured itself above my wrist, soon to be pushed forward, driven by unseen forces that are as much a part of this planet as Oklahoma's red dirt.

Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence suggests that we should live our lives as if we are going to have to live them over and over again, like Monarchs migrating across the belly of America. Like Lorenz, Nietzsche wasn't the first to posit this theory. It was espoused by ancient Indian religions and adopted by the Pythagoreans and the Stoics. The universe expands and contracts in a way that we will do everything we do infinitely. From the big bang the molecular sprawl expands into the Void until it can stretch no more. Somewhere along the way, planet Earth whirls into a brief existence that's both miraculous and catastrophic. Then it flickers into non-being and waits until the universe implodes upon the fragility of its cosmic stretch.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera suggests the opposite. Everything we do, we do only for one fleeting moment as we ride the gust of a unique universal breath. The

conclusion is the same, that whatever we do we should do with passion and caring, either because we're going to do it again and again or because we can do it only once.

But then how can I bear it when I hear of children whose brief lives were defined most starkly by suffering only to then be taken away by bombs or genocide or starvation. Or the countless species that have been driven extinct by the recklessness of our civilization? America's history is carried on the shoulders of subsequent generations who bear the psychic weight of our endless brutality. Will they bear it only once before perishing into the finality of non-being, or will they relive their suffering endlessly?

The butterfly moved its legs, ending the illusion of time inching by. It crawled over my knuckles. I slowly squeezed my hand closed, watching it travel over them like hills, up and down, like the Wichitas that rise from southern Oklahoma. Ancient hills that were once great mountains. The Plains Indians consider them to be holy places fit for noble tales and wondrous ceremonies. Momaday's titular *Rainy Mountain* is housed within those rolling hills. They rest modestly upon the flat horizon, like aging harlots crooking their legs into the skyline for anyone who'll look. Those hills have hidden Cherokee outlaws, no longer indentured to the flagrant graces of genocidal governments big and small.

The butterfly makes it to the end of my pinkie knuckle and stops as if to contemplate the edge. Of what concern is a fall if you can fly, I wonder. And I realize that this is the logic that gets us thinking that we can invent our way out of ecocide and extinction. Visions of space colonies, automated factories, carbon sponges, robot bees, and atmospheric shades that block the heat of the sun.

Herbicides used on huge monocrop operations across the state of Oklahoma and the Midwest have wiped out nearly 60% of the milkweed flora in the region. The Monarchs co-evolved with the milkweed and the wildflowers that provide the nectar to fatten them up for their long journey to Mexico. The fourth generation of monarchs on the yearly migration are born from the milkweed. The leaves serve as a roost for incubating the eggs until they are ready to hatch. The decimation of the milkweed leaves the monarchs to fly lost and looking for yet another home that has been consumed by human development.

I lifted my eyes from the monarch, and I looked at the old tree house my father had built for my sister and me as children. It hasn't been used in a decade or more. There are less kids at my folk's place now than there used to be. Even less kids who want to climb the creaking ladder into that rickety old thing. Swings hang from it. They move only with the wind now. The wind can get so strong it pushes them back and forth like ghosts have risen up from the plains to ride the swings into the sky, up and down, toward those thin clouds, pale and meandering.

Oklahoma was Indian Country before the land run. It was seen as valueless desolation before they discovered the oil beneath the red dirt. It was known as the Unassigned Lands that marked the end of the Trail of Tears. A brutally enforced migration across America. Then in the late 1800's they opened the land up to white settlers. The Indigenous population was isolated one last time to small sections of the state designated as reservations, and the final step was taken to separate the tribes from their ancestral land. How many times will the Cherokee, the Creek, the Chickasaw, the Seminole make this doomed migration?

In Oklahoma we still celebrate the land run. We re-enact it as grade schoolers, building our wagons and staking our claims. The mascot for the University is the Sooner; those that cheated during the land run and laid claim to the land early. Land that was then twice stolen.

I sat once in a butterfly garden in China. It was a dome-shaped green house with candelabra primrose, azaleas, and rhododendrons. I watched Chinese children slapping the butterflies to the ground, stomping them with their feet and laughing. My Mandarin was no good, but even if it had been, I wouldn't have said anything. Still, I couldn't just sit there and watch, so I left. I bought watermelon from a farmer on the side of a dirt road. I ate it and let its sweetness wash over my senses. That was the best watermelon I had ever tasted. As I sat on a rock by the dirt road eating my watermelon and watching a small truck drive by with a group of dust-covered Buddhists monks being tossed around in the bed, the children went on gleefully killing. I just wasn't watching.

Zhangzi's wanted to know, after awakening from a dream of being a butterfly, if he was a man dreaming of being a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming of being a man. Maybe it's both. Our biological subconscious pushes forward the history of suffering and brutality as well as privilege and luxury. The mess goes unseen as we bear witness to the trauma of a dying planet. All of us. The rich assholes and the poor assholes.

I sometimes have dreams too. A bright sun reveals itself to the grasslands through a haze. It watches for centuries as pride swallows our civilization and our history. It smiles as our broken planet once again looks as it should. The butterflies pour from my stomach and follow the milkweed back to Michoacán. The scars of humanity exist for a brief period, only a moment inside the breath of the universe. There are organisms, ecosystems hoping to help us in our

moment of frailty, so we can be reborn, transformed in the vision of the wild. Yet the new us always looks an awful lot like the old us. Latching onto our previous incarnations, there's no progress, only static regression. I don't mourn our loss. I mourn the loss of what we could have been.

The life of the butterfly is defined by movement, rebirth, revolution. The monarch has seen the comings and goings of eons, the passing of species, the devastation of asteroids, but nothing so foolhardy and destructive as human ingenuity and the progress of civilization. They suffer through the purification of the monocrop fields by Monsanto's pesticides. Through the harvesting of ancient forests that have marked the beginning and the end of their ceaseless journey. After 175 million years of coming and going in a cycle like breath, they are being annihilated.

It lifted itself from my finger and drifted away toward the top of a magnolia tree. There were still a couple of flowers blooming. The white vortexes holding time. Flora swirling in futures and pasts. The butterfly lands on the blossom for a moment before it carries on to go and die in Texas. No one wants to die in Texas. But so it is.

For us, this place will never look as it is meant to. The glory of wildness is now isolated to pockets of government enforced preserves. The path of the butterflies interrupted. If the flap of a butterfly's wings can cause a hurricane, then what are we doing with our mining, our monocrops, our drilling, our methane? And if the abuse we subject others to, human and more than human, can be carried through time on an epigenetic wave, then how long will the consequences of our actions echo?

The butterfly will move on toward uncertainty. The generations die only to have pushed the roost forward. Do those that reach the golden land know that they have made it? Do they appreciate the rest, or do they wish they had seen Oklahoma? When the woods are gone will they keep travelling south and find a beach in Honduras? Or will they rest in the expanse of the clear cuts, exasperated, bathing in defeat. Perhaps the next generation won't know any better. They never saw the forests of Michoacán.

I used to see great big groups of Monarchs flying through the air, resting on the greyish bark of oaks. I once saw one flapping in slow, pained movements, lifting itself up and down on the windowsill, crushed from a collision with the glass. It reminded me of wrestling as a child. When I was on my back about to be pinned, I would struggle frantically trying to lift my shoulders from the mat, so I wouldn't be defeated. The monarch kept lifting itself, up and down, up and down for the final agonizing moments of its life. I watched for a number of minutes. Up and down. Up and down. I felt little. I didn't understand why.

XII. PLAYING POSSUM

North America's only marsupial, a critter that can be found flattened, entrails baking into steaming asphalt, or stiff and salivating with teeth bared and anal glands leaking: the noble possum. Freshly killed, the possum can be used in a number of savory recipes including but not limited to possum pot pie, possum and sweet potatoes, possum chili, and stuffed possum. Its taste has been praised by such honorable Americans as Mark Twain, Jimmy Carter, and my great uncle Jed. Possum grease (or possum *oil*) can be used as a chest rub and an arthritic remedy, due to its richness in essential fatty acids. The moral being, don't let good roadkill go to waste.

Funny thing possums do, they abduct stray cats and bestow upon them their fighting style. I imagine there's nothing more streetwise and scrappy than a possum trained tom. Rough and tumble bunch those old possums, solitary drifters, finding home in a world of destitution, like old folk singers.

Possums are able to shake off rattlesnake bites no problem due to peptides that neutralize the snake venom. The Sioux have a prophesy of the devastation to be wrought by a black snake, *zuzeca sape*. It has been understood as a warning against the Dakota Access Pipeline, or a larger prophecy concerning the constructions of pipelines over sacred and wild lands.

Oklahoma is a Choctaw phrase, originally *okla humma*, which can be translated to red people. Takes on new meaning now that most the land has been pried from its Indigenous inhabitants by Republican goons. Possum, on the other hand, is Powhatan for white dog. Yes, Oklahoma is a land of white dogs and red people, white trash and rednecks, white nationalists and red communists. I rather think that the possum stands as a fair representation of Okie folk. A good number of us having grown immune, fighting off the toxic infiltration of black snakes. Too often considered a rodent (looking at you California), flattened by the reality of *progress*, not

always easy to stomach, but forever resilient. Selling our souls and our bodies, we live off the scraps of civilization.

Sometimes the winds of the plains are the only thing to break the infinite silence. They come in cockeyed, making oak leaves speak to my flesh, expanding my sense of self *beyond me*. I look at the geometry of the night sky and wonder how many times my mind has been sculpted from red dirt, how many times a child has blown the same red dirt from her cast iron cornbread mold, how many times a red-dirt covered car has run out of gas in Buckeye, Arizona, within the endless undulation of the universe?

Many believe that we can inherit the trauma of the past, carrying with us the crimes against and by our ancestors. I can buy that: consciousness gestated in a black pool of amniotic oil. When I slow down I catch residual glimpses of that void. I wonder what would happen if people felt that, you know, really understood the vitality of what we're protecting and the fracture we can cause in the shared psyche of future generations.

When the seasons change in Talimena State Park, a rolling expanse of red and yellow crosses the state line into Arkansas. Soon it'll be a sea of black bones, the oaks and elms and dogwoods having retired into their plane of rest. As for me, I have no time for rest. I'm merely playing possum. Laying stiff with kin threatened by the vehicle of industry, sustained by vice and chewing through the fuel of wilderness. Certainly, some of us have been caught up in the cyclone of the spinning wheels, mangled by the mechanisms of modernity, but the dead speak a language of prophecy, whispering across time into our cosmic blueprint.