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Once the feet are frozen, they must stay frozen if one is to continue walking through such environments. Thawed feet are more vulnerable to damage. Sometimes the only treatment is amputation or debridement, a severing of this dead, infected tissue.

After returning from Vietnam, my dad brought my mom home to the reservation. Here they had land, and the agency hospital, where my mom delivered me and my two brothers. We lived in my great-grandparents’ cabin, the oldest on the Fort Belknap Reservation, until my dad built a house of our own, three miles up the hill, atop a buffalo jump.

An early snowfall of 1978 dumped day and night. Nobody was prepared. After two days of shoveling out his pickup, Dad knew we needed a snowmobile. The tribe plowed a path to our house from the highway. Dad traded a calf for a ’76 John Deere. He had to get hay to the cows and groceries and supplies for the family. My dad was on constant watch for the horses. Ten or twelve head, some still wild, grazed far up in the hills, always returning each fall. My grandpa Gus’s Arabian racehorse was the stud for the little palomino foal my father loved. After rigging up an old car hood to the back of the snowmobile, he brought hay to the cattle, then set out looking for the horses. Ice formed on his eyelashes, his facemask stiff, frozen from his breath. Squinting against the bright snow, he tried to find signs of the herd. The snow flew horizontally, heavy and fast, the temperature plummeted, forty below zero, the wind blew fifty miles per hour. His search proved useless. He shivered intensely; his teeth slammed against each other like pistons. Every muscle tensed; his spine screamed. He returned home defeated. Wrapped in piles of blankets, he shook through the night.

A short break in the weather, Dad loaded up the family. Worried we’d be snowed in, he took us to the old cabin near the highway while he went into town. Returning, he parked his pickup, unloaded the groceries along with my brother, mom, and me onto the old rust-red car hood chained to the snowmobile. He towed us home, uphill through roofless tunnels of snow, each wall taller than Dad.

Dad set out again in search of the horses. He followed their tracks down to Joe Springs. Maybe they’d been trapped in the blizzard and finally made it down in search of water. Joe Springs was frozen over. The herd was there. He walked slowly to the foals, every young colt and filly dead, frozen on the ground, his little palomino lifeless. He rounded the rest and brought them to the barn. He gave them water, hay, and blankets, but knew at least two more weren’t going to make it. He screamed across the plains. Where was the old man and his lantern now? He’d lost those horses, the daughters and granddaughters of our ancestor’s herd. Descendants of French Gus De-Celles’ string of racehorses and his famous white colt, Enchant, who’d won so many purses on the circuit at the turn of the century. The grandchildren of the wild mustang that came to my long-ago Gros Ventre grandfather, Black Dog. He’d lost those goddamn horses, he wept. He left us. For days. He got drunk. Long-term numbness persisted. He was never truly warm again.

I want to take you apart. To rip the very flesh from your bones. To make garlands from your entrails and handbags from your kidneys. I want to take you by the hand and lead you into my den of horrors. I want to sip on a gallon of your blood as your lungs collapse. To listen to the wet gurgle of your screams through the slit in your throat. To pop your stomach like a balloon and let the acid burn a path to your spine. I want to catch your tears in a jar and keep them on a shelf with your name. To dig my fingers into your eyes until my nails hit your skull. But they’ve got me locked up in a cage, love. I’ve got a life sentence on my head and tomorrow is my execution.

I want
A last meal of your still beating heart on a platter made of gold.