

Spring 1986

Hosting the Beavers

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Recommended Citation

Whalen, Damien (1986) "Hosting the Beavers," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 26 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss26/8>

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Hosting the Beavers

From this clinic
I can see the huge chunks
of snow still melting in the mountains,
waiting like salmon
to make a run.
That is where it starts —
past the fat rivers and up canyons
where waters, crystal
on crystal, gather,
gush in chutes,
cut igneous tracks, fork
and unfork and are a creek
trotting itself through cottonwoods
and meadows like a green horse.

I hug a knee to my chest.
A finger as big as a scroll
is shoved up my ass,
clicking high in my head
the clear purpose
of their flat wide tails,
like stove lids, shielding
their inside world.
And a world it must be.
I have seen their work —
crazed water stilled and widened
into ponds like paw prints,
mammoth trees felled and kneeling
at stumps over mounds
of their own white tears,
gnawed concentrically
from their hearts.

Like wide, white teeth pinching
life from bark, things
tear in my stomach, splinter
my guts. Parasites, they think,
sent by beaver,
time-released, bobbing
microscopic from beaver shit
to my own chilled lips —
invisible,
until one day
they quicken
and ball me up like an egg.

I swallow four feet
of encapsulated
string, one end taped to my face.
I must wait like a cat
five hours, the string uncoiling
in my bowels, winding
itself into place.
They say the gag reflex
is the trick
when they pull it out
to check, finally,
their catch.

I think about beaver country,
how a life must pass now
without seeing that rippling
of back into water.
I think about a ranch
I worked hard on one summer.
The Resistol hat I bought
with my first wages
tipped back high
on my head for a week.
Then — one day the hot work
and my belly too young even for beer,

(no stanza break)

and my puke knitted bale by bale
into a looser and looser haystack.
The dark ride home on the Greyhound.
The stops in Absarokee and Columbus
and the crumpled hat — 100% beaver —
spinning into the blackness
just outside Laurel.

The string pulls on my face,
biting into the corner of my mouth.
I pull up some slack
and with it a green bitter taste.
My insides are alive
with climbing this rope.
They swim my dark channels.
The string tugs.
I am pond.

— *Damien Whalen*