

Fall 2016

Bloodlines

Maxim Loskutoff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Loskutoff, Maxim (2016) "Bloodlines," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 85 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss85/20>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

BLOODLINES

THE HUSBAND

This is what it is to be married to a Romanian: on Christmas Day, my mother-in-law takes an old videocassette from the cupboard beneath her wood-paneled television set. We gather in the living room and she slides it into the VCR. Ah, I think, home movies, my wife and her sister when they were children.

No. Two white lines waver in the center of the grainy footage; it has been watched so many times. Nicolae Ceaușescu looking dazed in a black winter coat and gray fur hat; his wife Elena babbling ceaselessly in a long fur coat and yellow scarf, her graying hair escaping from a bun. Young soldiers tie their hands. They are led from the classroom where the trial was held to a courtyard. The camera shakes. They stand beside each other against a yellow concrete wall.

When Elena begins to beg for her life, my mother-in-law raises her index finger and shakes it at the screen. "Listen to her," she says. "Listen to her now. Not once did she give mercy when the people were dying in the streets."

The Ceaușescus asked to die together. They also asked for their hands to remain free. My nephew squirms in his mother's lap. Nicolae looks directly into the camera. Elena continues to beg, struggling against her bound wrists. The soldiers are off-screen, invisible. "Shame," Elena says, suddenly. "Shame on you. I raised you as a mother."

The soldiers respond with a volley of machine gun fire. The bullets knock the President and his wife back, shaking and twisting their bodies before dropping them to the ground.

Nicolae and Elena lie angled together through a haze of smoke. Their arms are pinned behind them. Their heads nearly touch. The yellow scarf and the yellow wall. A trail of blood on the flagstones.

The two white lines linger on the screen after the image has gone. “That woman,” my mother-in-law says, shaking her head. “She said she was our mother.”

THE MOTHER

A woman was stoned to death yesterday, halfway around the world. I hate to think about it. But we must, mustn't we? Open the paper, the magazine, suffer a bit over our morning coffee.

“I killed my daughter.” This was how the father's statement began, and thinking of my own, I had trouble reading on. “I killed my daughter because she insulted our family. I have no regret.”

Briefly, I considered regret. How it comes later. How it grows like a tumor in your heart.

A picture of the father accompanied the article: his stringy body pitched toward the camera, mouth open, blood on the sleeve of his robe. Looking at his face, I wanted nothing so much as to hit it with a rock. Cave in his cheek. Watch him go to his knees. The urge seized me so powerfully that I looked around my kitchen, saw the cast-iron frying pan hanging above the stove, and thought *that will do*.

I saw myself seizing the handle, lifting the pan above my head, and hurling it down end-over-end. But my aim is not so good—my son will tell you that—and the harder I throw the

worse it gets. What if I missed? Would I pick up the pan and try again?

The father would try to avoid the pan as his daughter tried to avoid the stones. Ducking and twisting her body. Holding her arms in front of her eyes, choking on blood. Feeling parts of herself go numb while other parts came alive with pain. How long was she awake? Did the men—her brothers and uncles and cousins—have to go and gather more rocks? Did she watch them? Did she try to crawl away?

Oatmeal was heating on the stove but I couldn't eat. My husband came into the kitchen. He looked at me, then at the article. He kissed the top of my head, poured himself a cup of coffee, and walked out onto the deck. Men! I work in a hospital; I know how long a human body can function in shock. How strong the will to live can be. I've seen children.... No. I'd have to pick up the pan many, many times. My arm would grow sore. I'd forget who the father was, where he came from, what I was doing.

I'd rather see him shot. On television or from a great distance. Quickly, without a word. Neat and contained and in the right order of things, his body dropping like a windless sail.

THE SON

When I was still in the army, at the beginning of the second conflict, after the statues had fallen but before the city was burned, we patrolled each morning from the perimeter of our barracks to the village of F—, and each morning we encountered the worst sniper in history.

Certainly there have been others who never hit anything, but did they discharge as much ammunition, did they cause the opposing army as much comfort? I think not.

His shots pinged off the corrugated roof of the four-story warehouse across from the chemical plant where he was stationed, so high above us that we had to strain our eyes. And endless, a fusillade, like he was hunting a skein of geese except there were no birds in that country, nothing alive except what could burrow into the sand.

The high, wild trajectory of his bullets reminded us of home. We searched the sun-struck broken windows for his face. Some men waved, others raised their middle fingers. We called the factory The Banana Factory and him The Man on the Moon.

One day we stopped. Got out and stood in the sun cursing and shouting and using the few snatches of K— we'd learned in training. The dust settling from the tires whitened our faces. We kicked rocks and called each other names. We were young; everything was a test. In response, he fired a single shot into the tank's open turret hatch, threading a hole through the bottom of the periscope.

We froze like trees in the sand. As if, idiotically, this would make us more difficult targets. The ticking of the cooling engines was the only sound. Sweat burned our eyes. Then in a clanking herd, we rushed back to the tank and Humvees and clambered inside.

The rest of the day we rode in silence. Wondering what mistake we'd made, how our lives had brought us here.

The sniper continued firing over our heads for the next

month, and then one day he was gone. Vanished, like a ghost, and when we told the new recruits his story they narrowed their eyes as if he'd never been there at all. We whispered among ourselves. Had he gone home to his wife and children? Had his commanders discovered his errant shooting and piled his body among many others unclaimed in a ditch? Or had he simply moved on to sing his artillery song on another battlefield—in Syria, Egypt, or down on the shores of Lac Tchad?

A new and deeper silence fell over the village of F—. We patrolled with a sickly fear, hardly daring to whisper, the faces of our families flickering through our minds. Mother. Father. Sister. The worst. The best. In war, they were so often the same.

THE DAUGHTER

A ten-year-old girl was put back together in a crowded market today. Security officers were surprised to find her standing alone near the entrance. Twenty others also made full recoveries.

The girl returned to the men who'd sent her to the market. They unstrapped the bomb from around her stomach and dressed her in her own dress. She stayed with them for two weeks. Each night, they yanked the wounds from her body with sticks. She gained weight. The fear drained from her eyes. When she was fully healed, they brought her back to her village. They rebuilt her hut and the huts around it, and her family reappeared.

We have to go back to go forward, my therapist says. I take the little girl back further, until all she can see are colors and light.

I had three clients. The first was a red-haired, middle-aged

tax processor with cirrhosis. His skin and eyes were yellow. He had a hard time remembering the simplest things. Mostly he wanted to watch me. I don't think he'd ever had a girlfriend. He said he'd had one who died. The second client was older, seventy probably. A talker, he kept trying to pick me up, as if...

It was five hundred dollars an hour. I had an ad on Craigslist. I made them take me to dinner first to make sure I was comfortable. I was eighteen; I hadn't even had sex until that year. My parents made such a big deal out of it for so long that when I finally did I was like it's my body, I'll do what I want with it.

I'd gotten kicked out of the dorms. It was so stupid. No more—or maybe just a little bit more—than what everybody else was doing. I saw myself as a person who was always getting caught, always getting blamed. I had to find a place, pay rent. I couldn't afford it. I thought I'd do anything to stay in New York. The funny thing is, I ended up having to go back home anyway.

It did leave scars. Nothing really bad ever happened. It could've been so much worse. I didn't get any diseases. No one strapped a bomb to my stomach. But I was angry for a long time. I wanted to go back. All the way, to before I was born, before my father and mother met, before the ships and the wars, all the way to Wallachia. A mountain village. A hut with a better version of myself inside. A myth.

The third client? I don't want to talk about him. I won't. It's private. Some things are still private, even after all these years. Even between you and me.

ENDNOTES

THE BROTHER

When I was small, say between the ages of four and ten, my sister, who's four years older, when she got annoyed with me she'd grab my wrists and with my own hands hit me in the head and face, all the while saying, "Why are you hitting yourself? Why are you hitting yourself?"

And I thought, I was sure, this would end when I got older, but here I am at age thirty-nine looking at pictures of my ex-wife, pictures of her at her mom's cabin on Lake Michigan, pictures of her in our old house, pictures of her running down a sand dune, pictures of her cross-legged on a motel bed, the comforter bunched around her waist, her pregnant stomach white in the over-bright motel light, and then, even though it's still light outside and I can hear my landlady talking to her mother on the phone downstairs, I lie down in bed on top of the comforter and curl my legs to my chest and think of the place on her shoulder where I used to rest my chin, the smell of her cheek, its softness, and behind the softness I hear my sister's voice.

THE SISTER

My brother holding his son's hand and his son trips and would've fallen but doesn't even realize because my brother catches him and swings him up with their joined arms so instead of falling his son is airborne for a moment swinging through the air.

All of this in a park near my home in Portland with an evening breeze rustling the sycamore leaves that hang low over the water.

Everyone here will die, they say—the young man on his back in the grass with his legs raised straight up to the sky, the young woman balanced on the soles of his feet, her arms outspread, the couple beyond them on a yellow blanket laughing until, red-faced, they look away.

Die as our parents died, as the little girl died, as the men who sent her to the market have, or will die. I watch the people in the park, my brother and his son. Blind men walking across a light-filled room.