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Cannonball

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SAM OLSON

CANNONBALL



Photo by Will Adams

1

CROWDING AROUND THE propane heater in the mess hall
eating stew, someone steals my gloves. No, they just disappear.

A voice in the crowd asks where our ancestors call from.

“Minot, North Dakota,” I say, even though my family stayed

just one generation before continuing west.

• • •

ALL NIGHT HE feeds the wood stove. In his wheelchair in the corner of the wall-tent,
an army blanket across his lap, he waits for rounds to reduce to coals.

It took us all day to split that cottonwood.
He lets us lay our sleeping bags here as trade.

• • •

WIND SHAKES THE walls of the tent. He's fallen asleep, but another man
crouches in longjohns, loading wood.

I watch the stove's open mouth glow across the ceiling,
smelling cottonwood catching. The ceiling canvas rolls,

nautilus in deep, deep water.

• • •

IN THE DREAM, the red outline of a man stomps at my feet, pistols held high.
Only shadows surround us. "You're sleeping on my bed!" he yells.

"No, I'm only scratching this Earth," I say, finding he placed
a coho salmon in my hands.

WOMEN START WHISPERING about the airplanes
that circle the camp day and night.

An elder has a heart-attack and is driven to Bismarck. Someone says
the doctors find traces of pesticides in her bloodstream.

• • •

AFTER SUNDOWN, WALKING by the row of portapotties behind the mess hall,
a woman throws a water bottle at me.

“Fucking white woman,” she says, striding past, spitting
in the frozen straw. I look my palms over and turn to ask why

she saw me as a woman. She’s nowhere to be seen.

• • •

Besides the drone of the surveillance plane, it’s spotlights
on low hills, fencing the camp in white light.

You can see their towers miles down the highway.
They remind me of nightmares I had as a child.

• • •

I SEE WILL on a hilltop with his camera. The crowd, mobilizing, singing. Militia mounting against the barbed-wire.

After sunset the temperature drops below fifteen. I split cottonwood until protectors begin shuttling back the wounded. They ride down the flag-road in the beds

of pickups, blasted by fire-hoses, their jeans freezing to their skin.

• • •

IN ONE DREAM, my brother and I stand together in the bathroom of our childhood basement. The floor is checkered black and white.

My brother points to the shower curtain. A yellow mayfly clings to the vinyl. It leaps to my fingertip, then speaks: "Learn the deer tracks.

Learn the pesticides."

3

DOCTORS ORDER COATS for the hypothermic. To avoid the medics' pickups, I run weaving through flagpoles to the supply tents.

A young woman is tearing through boxes of clothes, seeking anything non-cotton. She doesn't say a word as

she piles coats and blankets into my open arms.

• • •

THE KITCHEN SENDS vats of today's dinner to keep protectors fed.

Eating leftover soup by the campfire, a man catches me with his eye.

"I'm going back up," he says, standing. He hands me his cup and walks towards the white glow above the hill.

• • •

TOO MANY VOLUNTEERS crowd around the healing tents waiting for orders. Everyone makes way when a pickup returns.

A teenager steps off the bed and wanders into the open frame of an unclothed teepee. Medics catch him and lift his shirt.

Around his left kidney, a constellation of welts from rubber bullets.

• • •

At midnight, none of my friends have returned. I go to the wall tent to wait.

When I part the canvas doors, I see the man in the wheelchair

isn't there. Only a pile of sleeping bags, a bucket of cottonwood scraps in the corner. My hands shaking inside the stove, I build a small house out of kindling and light it from the center.

• • •

DAN STOOPS INSIDE the tent. Standing by the radiant heat of the stove, he complains of nausea, struggling to remove his frozen coat.

An hour later, Isabel, Amelia, and Agate return in iced-over jeans and coats. They were holding tarps over the protectors' fires, defending them from water cannons, protectors from rubber bullets. We barely speak, circled around the stove. In my journal, I write,

Who's here to stop the police? It could happen anywhere.

• • •

WITH EVERYONE ASLEEP, I leave to gather more firewood. Crossing for the splitting pile, I see Will approaching, his camera

still hanging from his neck. When he holds me, I smell mace on his collar, in his hair. He presses his palms together before parting the doors of the tent.

IN MISSOULA, I suspect tiny cameras have been drilled
into the plaster walls of my apartment.

I cover the pinpricks with photographs and postcards
and wait.

• • •

I DREAM I'M lying on the frozen clay of the flag-road.
A thousand flags knock together in the wind, but I can't hear them.

Grey wolves lope between the flagpoles, their formation never tightening.
I realize they've circled there forever.

The wolves don't scare me, but I wake in sheets cold with my own piss.

• • •

AT NIGHTTIME IT'S below freezing, but I somehow stay warm lying under the cottonwoods
by Rattlesnake Creek. Beads of ice form and reform on the tips of branches.

Heading to my apartment at dawn, I see a man circling
behind the canary grass by the hair salon.

I say, "How are you?"

"Drunk," he says, walking down the sidewalk towards the railyard.

I'm not drunk, but to his back, I still say "Me too."

• • •

I WAKE AS the coal-trains ease into Missoula. Their brakes
string and bow off the walls of Hellgate Canyon, their dissonant notes

hovering below and above one
another.



Photo by Will Adams

FIVE DAYS.

• • •

NEW SNOW FALLS across the floodplain, wall-tents, and campfires.

At the entrance gate, a woman swings a coffee tin. Smoke rises

from the tin. When I lower the window, the smell of burning sage rolls through.

“Welcome home,” she says.

• • •

CANNONBALL: THE NAME Lewis and Clark gave this river for the shoreline
boluses of sand and calcite they saw only as shot for cannons.

• • •

WHEN WE LEAVE Oceti Sakowin Camp, Will pinches his last tobacco into cigarettes
and passes them around the car.

Isabel and I don't smoke, but keep taking the skinny cigarettes
across North Dakota, setting them aside.

Now whenever I smell a roll-your-own, I see fields outside Mandan,
rusted over like the roof of a fallen shed.

• • •

I DREAM THE woman laughs when I lie, telling her I'm writing poetry in Salish.

“For you,” she says, “learning Salish is consumptive, but deep down it destroys the colonizer while feeding it on top.”

• • •

It's night when we pass Billings. In the parking lot beneath the oil refinery, in the still pools of melted ice, everything is mirrored. There are two silos, two labyrinths of pipes,

two steam towers. One cloud rises over the refinery. I see its twin cloud cross the standing water and disappear into the shore.



Photo by Will Adams