Under Stones, Under Water

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THE ONE THING HE KNEW was he was sick of the rain. Before he’d left home the last time, it had snowed up in the hills, late summer, on a day nobody would have expected it: sunny until two and then cold air moving in, in one burst like a refrigerator door being opened. The snow had been like cut tissue paper, the kind he remembered using to make things in grade school, light, lingering in the air, taking its time in descent, almost showing itself off. When the snow landed and melted almost on contact, it turned the orange of the earth one shade brighter, deeper, like the difference between a navel orange and a blood orange. But the rain in this place was different: metallic in its weight, like bullets, and unrelenting.

The night he saw geese for the first time was the first night without the rain in what seemed like weeks. The geese, so white in their loose V, as if back-lit. He was alone, as he almost always was now, but he wished someone had been there so he could have elbowed that other person, pointed up, and said, “Look.” He’d decided, that night, to go home for good. It wasn’t that he’d looked at the birds as a sign, telling him to act or change or do something differently.

Everyone he’d met at The Catholic Center, where he had slept off and on for the past few months, seemed to think everything was a sign of something. His friend, Joseph, who ended up staying at The Center in between on-site construction jobs, saw sticks in patterns in people’s front yards dragged up by flood water after heavy rain and read them like letters. And then there were the old women who looked for signs in the bottoms of coffee cups. And the younger women who said the fact that the old women did that was a sign of something, too. Ray didn’t know what. But he didn’t believe. None of it meant anything, Ray thought.

Earlier that day, before the rain had stopped, before the geese, he’d fallen, not quite passed out, but just lost his footing, fallen
on the cement sidewalk in front of someone's house and the police had come.

From his spot on the cement, he'd looked up at the house he'd fallen in front of and had seen a woman and her son with their faces pressed up against the window pane in their front room, and wondered, why don't you come and help me. He'd looked right at the woman, asking that of her with his expression, and she'd looked down. She'd looked familiar, and he'd thought that maybe she went to the school where he'd tried to take classes, maybe he'd seen her there, taking her kid to classes with her, setting him on the floor next to her and letting him play with pieces of paper or draw patterns on the backs of her notebooks while she took notes about poets or history or how to use computers. So many of them did that at the school: came to class with their kids.

Ray had been kicked out of the school twice. Now he couldn't even go back on the grounds or in the buildings. He could walk a circle around the perimeter, but he couldn't walk in, and it made him feel edgy, even desperate. He was thirty and wandering, and so he'd started to think that life was a trick, a bad joke he'd stupidly fallen for, even though he could remember one of the teachers at the school telling him, before he'd been kicked out, that life was indifferent, that things just happened, and if you were in the way you could get hit and it would never be anything personal. It made him think of the time he'd seen a man at home just sit down in the middle of the orangey dirt of the road out by Ray's parents' house, then lie flat, spreading his arms out like some kind of prehistoric bird. He remembered the man's sisters coming for him later that day. They were so far out in the middle of nowhere that no cars had come; the man had never been in any danger. When they stood him up, his back had been covered with the dust from the road, and he looked like two different people, one coming and one going. That was just how Ray had started to feel: split in two, the old part of him no longer had a place and the new part of him felt crumbly, like the orange dust on the man's back, impermanent, like only a suggestion of something instead of the thing itself.
That day at the bar, before he'd fallen in front of that house, people had been making so many jokes about the rain, talking about Noah and arks and pairs of animals, and each time he forced himself to laugh as if each time it was funny again. Each time he forced a grin, he thought about his wife who was not the type ever to laugh only because it seemed polite to do so. That was what she'd hated most about him: how quiet and polite he was to everyone. Sometimes, she'd made a scene just to bother him. He could remember her, at some truck stop, slipping salt and pepper shakers in the shapes of red rock buttes into her bra, laughing so much in the aisle as they projected out in front of her like those triangular bras women wore in movies from the '50s. He'd walked out into the parking lot and sat on the bed of their truck, looking at the scrappy dried-up grass that came out from the cracks in the cement like the protruding hair of someone who had been buried alive.

Now, even though they weren't divorced, she was living with a police officer in a ranch house that Ray had never even seen. He'd talked to his wife, Ellen, on the phone that one time, when she'd told him about the cop, and she'd described the house, the brushed dirt back yard, the concrete slab it was propped up on. He'd seen houses like that, with the cement shooting out around the sides of some manufactured siding, the whole structure looking a little unreal, like a prop house constructed for the sake of a scene in some movie. It made him think of the wolf in the children's story, how the house would probably go down with just one huff and puff, and there the cop would be, standing with his hands out, his baton ready, in what had been the house's living room, the wind making dust clouds around his ankles and around the felled walls.

Before he'd left home, he'd been living with Ellen in the converted garage behind his parents' house where she'd planted rows of herbs and corn that always turned a dry tan toward the end of the summer when the rain didn't come. In the mornings, at that house, his father let the animals out early, chickens, goats, cows, and their noises would wake him before the alarm. He remembered sitting on the cement step that led up into the open-air
porch and watching the animals move around the yard in what, to him, looked like some orchestrated chaos.

He’d worked in a grocery store there, his first few years out of high school, stocking produce and canned goods and pop while Ellen worked as a physician’s assistant in the clinic. He’d thought there was some beauty in his work, and some sense of urgency to getting the fruits and vegetables out and arranged just right on the shelves, to making sure they were sprayed and glistening and perfect like the food you saw in magazine ads, glossy, appealing. He’d thought his work important: sustenance, he would tell her. People need food, and I am getting it to them. But she’d countered with stories of life and death situations, people with nearly severed hands bleeding puddles all over the linoleum clinic floor, a young woman with a blood clot in her leg that had broken off and gone to her lungs who came in near dawn, almost not breathing. For some reason Ellen always talked about that woman with the clot. “Having your air supply cut off like that,” she would say. “That would be the worst way to go.” It had made Ray think that maybe something was cutoff in him, that if he could just find the spot, adjust some gauge, redirect the air flow, the blood flow, that everything might start to feel fine.

When he’d heard about the cop Ellen was living with, he’d spent weeks thinking about doing something to him, something both violent and clever at the same time, thought of all the possibilities but knew he would never really do anything, because that’s just how he was, just like Ellen had said: too quiet, too nice, no follow through. “There you go, you just roll over,” she used to say to him when she was accusing him of not taking a stand. Just thinking about it made him drink.

And then he drank for days, trying to achieve something he’d only read about—the illusion of one day blurring into the next, a loss of awareness of time and the fact of its passing. But it never worked. He woke every morning with the same headache, worsened each day by his knowledge of the accumulation of days.

That morning, before the bar, before he’d fallen, before the geese, he’d woken up in the upstairs room in The Center, in a single bed in a row of so many other single beds, much like a hospital,
and someone had been sitting on the edge of the bed closest to the dormer window playing a flute. The flute had looked wrong in the man’s hands. His hands were big like someone who had always worked on cars or on farms, and the flute, even though it looked beat up and, because of that, indelicate, was too small. He kept trying to press down on the key pads and kept hitting too many at once so that the sound that came out was more blurred, like too many people talking all at the same time.

The room the men slept in was long. It looked like they’d knocked out walls and then lined up beds against the white painted wood on the house’s third story. Ray could imagine children living in the room, sick children who were quarantined, like the boy in the children’s story about the stuffed rabbit.

At night the room was full of men, limbs falling over the edges of the narrow beds, sleep voices shouting out nonsensical sentences, and then the eventual snoring. They stacked their clothes in precise piles by the beds, and in the middle of the night, in the dark of the room, the stacks, to Ray, often resembled dutiful pets, waiting for morning.

When the man with the flute, who’d only been at the Center a few days, noticed Ray was awake, he looked at Ray and threw the flute under the bed. It clattered, and made more of a tin sound than Ray would have expected, like a can thrown out of a moving car that then rolled under it as it was passing.

Ray thought then about how strange it felt to have ended up there, in that room, with that man, for everything he had done in life to have somehow led him to that place, that moment.

Later, he’d walked through the rain to the bar. He thought about his wife, wondered if she still fought with people in stores over the price of things, wondered if she insisted on everything being done a certain way. He remembered her making him get up from a restaurant one night—one of the few nights they’d had the money to really go somewhere nice—get up and walk out on their meals, just after the appetizer, because she thought the waiter had looked at them wrong.

Inside the bar, the same music was always playing, every time, over and over: some kind of country and jazz combination that he couldn’t identify or even really classify. He always thought
about two people dancing together to it: one as if dancing to the country part of the music, doing small kicks and twists and angular spins, and one as if dancing to the jazz part: smoother, slower, eyes closed.

The same bartender always gave him two for one when he came in during the day. It’s slow, he would say, his voice with that twang so that the “O” in the word sounded more like an “A”. He couldn’t get used to people’s voices in this town, and sometimes in public just pretended he was in another country, stopped struggling to try to decipher what people were saying, and just let it swirl around him like another language: unlabeled noise.

Always when he was in the bar, he tried to think about Cora, the woman he’d seen that first day at the school, in line waiting to enroll, in white shorts and a bright red tight t-shirt, sandals that cut patterns across the tops of her feet. Then he’d seen her in the front row of one of his classes, and had thought: we’re both a little bit older, we’re both out of place here. He’d tried to talk to her a few times after class, but she always waited to ask something of the teacher and then walked out of the building with her.

It wasn’t that he thought anything would really happen with her. But she was the opposite of Ellen, who was scrappy, with no breasts, no excesses, no forgiveness in her flesh. But Cora: her hips pressed against the seams of her pants. She wore makeup, too much, so that it looked like the excess might pour off her face when you talked to her, like she had a face behind a face. Her eyes got big when she said something, unlike Ellen, whose eyes narrowed the more she said.

He imagined Cora as the topper to some bridal cake, all polished, long black wax hair waving down toward the frosting, her fingernails, the red-pink of crepe paper streamers, stretching out beyond her hands.

At the school, they’d told him not to go near her. She’d filed a complaint of some kind, said she was tired of him following her. But he knew he’d never been close enough to cause alarm, knew she was just one of those women who opened her eyes wide at everything.

It was easy to think of Cora while he was in the bar, to block out other things, to stare at the labeled spouts that dispensed
beer in all colors of yellow and brown and think about getting close to her lipsticked mouth, examining the dark line around it and the lighter gloss that filled the lips in, looking closely at the way her tongue moved when she spoke.

But every time he left the bar and walked over the train tracks that led back toward the Center in the gray light of fading day, all he could think about was Ellen, about the night almost two years before, when he'd come home from work to find her lying on the floor in the bedroom in front of a state map, her fingers circling over and over around the name of a town in the northern part of the state, close to where her father had been working at a factory that made uniforms. Her father had been hit by a semi that had jackknifed in front of him, the trailer swinging around into his lane, pushing into the front end of his car until his car looked deflated, accordion-pleated, unrecognizable.

Ellen had gone with her mother and brother, the next day, to look at the car, driven those hundred miles up to the site of the accident. Later, they'd come home with parts, small things they'd gathered from the side of the road: Buick spelled out in metal letters, her father's glasses, a picture of their family that he always kept on the dashboard when he drove all that way.

That whole day they'd been gone, Ray had sat without moving at their front window, waiting for their car in the short driveway, waiting for something. When they'd gotten home, he put Ellen in the bathtub, in hot water, covering her up with a steaming towel, half-lying in the tub with her while she cried, the sleeves of his shirt dripping water onto the floor until the whole bathroom was wet, and then they'd just sat in the front room with all the lights off listening to the wind until he heard that Ellen had gone off into sleep and he let himself do the same.

After that, for weeks, she'd followed him through their small house and the yard and through his parents' house, like a ghost or a shadow, as if the sharing of that event had created some unseen rope of connection between them. It made him think of a car he'd seen towing another car down a long dirt road. The car in tow had signs taped up to all the windows, announcing "No brakes." He'd watched and waited for the car in tow to smash up against the back fender of the lead car, but it hadn't happened.

Fall 2001
Once he’d left to go to the school, crossed so many state lines, her voice changed on the phone, and then she moved out of the house behind his parents’ house. “You remind me,” she would tell him on the phone, her voice trailing off into a silence that made him think of all the land between them.

This was the thing that immobilized him: the fact that they’d been through something that he thought felt almost like drowning while tied together, and then she’d come to the surface and let go of him. He felt like that person found up in the mountains in some other country, frozen in ice, frozen in one pose, waiting for someone to discover him and tell him what he was. He wanted Ellen to find him there, in his small single bed at The Center, to topple over his small pile of clothes and crawl under the overstarched sheet with him and say, I know you, as if her knowledge of him would fill him again with his old life and air. He pictured Ellen now, kissing the cop before going off to the clinic in her print nurse’s top and white elastic-waist pants, then getting into bed at night, waiting for him to shave and turn off the light, then the two of them lying there next to each other, legs touching, night coming in around them. All of this as if she’d never lived in the same way with Ray.

Ray had never understood this: this power to remake yourself, the ability to renew. It made him think of the blood clot in that woman’s leg, the woman Ellen had helped treat at the clinic, how Ellen had told him that, in time, the blood forced its way through the clot, made a new passage, like a ground hog finding its way through solid dirt after a cave-in.

He sometimes just walked for hours after leaving the bar: past all those front porches with small children rolling toy cars back and forth across the wooden planks, past that one house in the middle of town with the fenced-in acre and the show ponies, tiny, so well-groomed, strutting in circles around their pen, past the man with one leg who sat, every afternoon, in front of the Senior Center and talked to everyone who walked by about the War, about the surprise of the islands rising from the water like the rough knuckles of a dark semi-submerged hand, about how it felt running off the boats and over the beach, never knowing what would hit them or what was in front of them.
Later that night, when he thought about it, from a distance of a few hours, he couldn't remember having actually fallen on the cement. But he remembered seeing his hands in front of him on the concrete sidewalk, scratched, his fingers spread out, claw-like. He thought of himself as a bear, stuffed, in some museum, for people to take their kids to see, scary only in theory.

He didn't know how long he was there lying on the sidewalk before he looked up and saw her in the window, but he knew that he'd been running through the alphabet in his head, trying to think of as many words as possible for each letter while waiting to feel ready to stand up and start walking again. And then he looked up and she was in the window of the house just in front of him, just across a small expanse of clean-cut lawn, with her forearm around her son, who was also looking right at him. Help me, Ray started thinking. Come get me up. He wondered if he had broken anything but knew that he was probably just scratched.

And then he realized it was Cora: those curling polished nails, the long lashes. He could see them even from here. Her dark eyebrows precise, shaped, arching. He could see a collection of wind chimes hanging from the front porch and a bright colored welcome mat in front of the door. He imagined Ellen, putting a mat in front of the ranch house she shared with the cop, having friends over from the clinic and serving them coffee in small cups like he'd seen women on t.v. shows doing.

He knew what they'd think when they found him there: the police would think he was following her, Cora, would think he ended up at her house on purpose. There would be hearings, questions, maybe counseling, maybe jail.

So when he saw the police car pulling up with all those unnecessary lights moving in some grotesque display, he willed himself up and started running. He went down the alley behind the house and then into the alley behind a series of small downtown stores. He did what he'd seen a criminal doing in a movie, something he'd never thought would work in real life: he hid in a dumpster and listened to the sound of the black police shoes making their way down the alley. They were making jokes about him and not even really running. They didn't care about catching him: just another drunk, they said.
It turned out, in almost a small, bird-sized miracle, that the dumpster belonged to one of the many florists on the main street, and he was sitting in a pile of discarded flowers, the sweet, rotting petal and leaf smell creating a cloud around him that he imagined was some kind of shield.

He thought of his aunt who quilted, how on his thirteenth birthday she'd made a quilt for him with all the scenes of his childhood. She'd placed it around his shoulders at the birthday party, where they'd all sat around a storebought cake and melting ice cream and paper plates, all of them sitting on the rotting wood picnic table on the dirt backyard while the sun made its day behind the hills that spread out in a ring around their land. He thought of the care his mother had taken, cutting the cake and scooping out the ice cream onto the plates with their borders of small party hats and bright crayon-like letters spelling out "Happy Birthday."

He thought of his aunt and his mother, together, sewing a quilt out of all the leaves and crushed petals he was sitting in, a quilt large enough for them to wrap all around him, until everything was covered and even his eyes weren't showing.

He waited in the dumpster, wide awake, until he could tell from the sounds around him that it was getting to be night, dark, late. He heard the people after work, leaving in their cars. He heard people leaving movies, talking about what they'd seen. He heard people leaving bars, laughing too loud, tripping a little over each other.

And then he heard the geese, quiet at first, like children crying in some corner room of a large house, and then louder. He opened the lid of the dumpster and dropped down onto the asphalt of the alley, and looked in the night sky until he located them, their wings batting wildly and the sound, loud above him and troubled, like they were sending some collective signal of alarm. But he knew, from reading something about geese somewhere, that they had nothing to really worry about, that they knew where they were going, traveled the same route every year, stopped in the same fields and marshes on every trip, every time.

This was what he needed, he decided, a route, an agenda. So he started walking west, thinking of his parents' house, the wide circle of space just before the hills, the way the hills looked against
a night sky, like arms moving in, in an embrace. He thought of himself, alone, there, sitting for hours and watching the sky turn from evening to night and to morning again and then lying under the quilt that told the story of his childhood, waiting for sleep while his father brought the animals out into the yard to make all their morning noises, the noises that would let him know he was home.