

Saudade: 1983

for Phil, Brian, and Steve

February

The weathermen had tracked its march across the continent for days, watched it scoop moisture from the gulf and turn up the coast, slamming into winter so hard it exploded snow. They said it wasn't a blizzard, but we knew different. Thundersnow and sleet and lightning swirling above our soaked and frigid fingers, we shaped the nor'easter into a room four boys could cram their hearts into. We were powerful, solid in all that white, self-reliant in snow pants and extra socks and eyes tearing in the icy wind. Down in that little gully by the kitchen of Steve's father's church, we made our stand against God and nature's anger, working stinging hands that were well past frozen, our toes long given away to frost inside our ice-block boots. Panting steam like thoroughbreds, we crawled inside our polar womb. Cross-legged in silence against the history raging around us, we saw the work in each other's faces, the four of us feeling for the first time the real potential packed in our arms. We sat a long time in that hut, knowing the use of work, listening to the violence of what waited for us outside, emerging just as the winds died to struggle our separate ways home through waist-high drifts to warm living rooms and baths, and steaming mugs of instant chocolate. That night we plummeted into achy sleep, never more alive, having met peril bigger than us and made it ours.

June

In June we were all sweat and shovels, delving ourselves down into the cool ground, covered up by plywood and old rugs and earth in the back corner of Steve's yard between forsythia and white pine, where the neighbor's fence dissolved in barbs and rust. We sat in the darkness, talked of girls and bikes and music. We wore brown clods home to dinner in our hair and under our nails, a bucketful

in each shoe, ochre clay smeared into our shirts.
I think often of our fort with its rooms and alcoves,
shelves carved into side walls, candle chimneys
and food stashes, nestled between roots. Alive
in that subterranean shadow world, we dug our
collective grave together, escaping life above
for a little while, for just long enough.

August

That last August Saturday morning before
we returned to gym uniforms and lunch money
and homework for another school year, Steve's
brother Howard drove us in the squeaky yellow
Chevy Nova with black pleather seats that melted
onto the backs of our bare thighs and dropped us
off upstream, ten miles north into horse country.
Shoulders slung with fat old truck tire tubes, we
descended the weedy banks to the Gunpowder,
low in spots after weeks of drought, and set
ourselves into the clear currents. Summer

leaned over us from the riverbanks, green-dappled
and leafy, silent and still. In the cooler, humid
stream bottom, Converse All-Stars reeking
of algae and swelter and soaked through, our
heels trailed vees behind us as we drifted
backwards towards autumn, aimless as leaves.

Rambling awkward as foals over pebbled shallows
and ages, chuting fast down the old wooden mill
race between boulders, we were still boy enough
for splash battles and laughter, skipping flat
stones, and mooning everything that moved.

Each of us was Huckleberry Finn. Each of us
was runaway Jim. High school and college and real
work loomed like cops and grandfathers, but we
held the years before us at arms' length, shut our
eyes, floated across those waning hours like
milkweed silk. Covered in dreams and lies, we
leaned our ears into the distance for a sound
that would call us away to ourselves from
futures that would choose us, from the
demons we would not outgrow.