

# The Days of the Fair

Minutes moved and everyone on the farm continued as days came again. The winds continued to chip the rock. The Supersaurus bones lay still under dark, dense earth. The cats stalked through the fields of sugar beets for mice. The velvetleaf weeds rose over the sugar beets and Claire yanked them from the earth. The seeds flung denser by the minute. Michael became as predictable as the lip of light that lined the Great Valley every morning and evening. He balanced on a perch as much as he could and walked a crooked line. Through his blood ran the water, grain and corn and Claire's voice. Her voice swam and batted up and down. He gurgled and pecked at the ground and could grasp nothing.

## **A day came**

The woman whose head sat small under tight curls lifted herself out of the iron and linen of her bed and visited her window. She did not visit much beyond the glass because if she moved too much it chipped at her bones and the chips streamed through her, colliding with muscles and ligaments. She wondered *if my bones keep chipping this way, what would be left? What will my absence look like?*

Through the window she watched Claire leaning against the barn, holding Michael, dropping the water, grain and corn down the hole. She

watched the grasping of nothing, the froth of his gurgling. When Claire placed him on the ground, she watched the headed chickens part as he walked his crooked line. They were learning to stay away, creating space for his darkness.

Through the window she watched Shotgun Foot walk further into the field. She watched him grow small in the distance, a dot of himself.

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On this day, as he walked, Shotgun Foot knew what should be done with Michael. He took what he knew and limped forward as far as his eyes would go. A silence hung heavy at his edges. He liked this silence, how it asked no questions. He arrived at several cracks in the earth. He traced the cracks that branched further than his eyes would go. An urge came—to control where the cracks ended and how deep they cleaved the earth. He wanted to control how the earth sat around him and when the silence came and went. He knew that such a day would never come. He knew what to do with the chicken, but there was so much he did not know.

He did not know how the Supersaurus bones rested under his walking and that the bones rested under a wrinkly fold of earth. A little hill of them sat under his feet, over the cracks. He would never know that many hills sat under the earth, everywhere. He would never know what lived along this pebbly red and green-gray hill, scrunched in folds of rock—all the woodlouse spiders piercing through the woodlice with the sharpest points of their mouths, all the colonies of termite Queens weighed down by their abdomens and their loyal soldiers, all the stunted eggs of moths, all the hornworms and darkling beetles. They would never take part in his world. He did not like that there were things he did not know.

Claire walked to him, holding Michael, lifted the silence from his edges.

*I know* he said. *I know what to do with the chicken.*

From his pocket he pulled a newspaper clipping. The fair was in town and the side show of *Nature's Mistakes*.

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And so, as the day began to merge toward the cold blue of night, Claire and Shotgun Foot drove Michael past route 340, toward the fairgrounds and the *Tent of Nature's Mistakes*.

Claire thought the sky seemed larger from the road; Michael tried to peck at her lap. He gurgled and mucus moved in milky bubbles, some popping as they met the air, some jiggling with every gurgle. She aimed the eyedropper down the hole, letting the water, grain and corn stream down, drowning the bubbles and soon the gurgle stopped. Then Claire could see it in the distance—the fair. The steely pinpoint of lights and motion. All that laughing and metal.

Claire felt something deep, a fast turn inside her, a thought of when she had a mother and father, how they had taken her to the fair and the fair had brought parts of the world to her. It spun in wide, shiny, sugary circles. The Ferris wheel, the hotdog stand, the kooch show, the games of chance.

As they climbed from the truck, and walked the fair's midway, Michael jerked in Claire's arms. The fair swarmed him tightly—the hammer of bells, snow cone machines, penny arcades, ice cream puddles, lemon smells, baby skin, the blinging gated piglets and the strong brown neck of bulls. And as he approached the siren red *Tent of Natures Mistakes*, the show Talker stood at the canvas opening, a roll of blue tickets in one hand, thick black cane in the other.

Within a glance, the Talker swallowed him whole. Michael jerked inside the swallowing Talker until he spit him back out. Dust and a stickiness kicked up and over his jerky limbs. The Talker licked Michael's limbs with his thick black cane.

Shotgun Foot nodded. Claire could not watch.

## **Under the *Tent of Nature's Mistakes***

Showtime. A thud came from the middle of the dirt pit as the Three-Legged Tiger jumped from a royal blue pedestal and more thudding as the Earless Elephant circled the room. A trumpet trembled and then the Talker flopped away from his thick black cane. Michael's belly fell fast against the velvet blue pedestal, his reflexes and impulses batted up and down. Michael fell from the pedestal and gurgled. Claire came fast. She came, tipped the eyedropper into a mason jar of water, grain and corn and tipped the dropper into the hole where Michael's head would be. Her hands shook and it was difficult to aim as the crowd, waves of loudness, oscillated. She wiped the dirt from Michael.

So much darkness and Claire came through the ringing. Her voice grew and he tucked his phantom head under his wing. Claire felt the last of his claws at her arm, felt her skin open.

Michael, the Mystery Finale. *He is alive* came the Talker.

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As they drove back from the fair to the farm, the road and sky were one black, endless. No mountains, no lip of light. Shotgun Foot's pocket held the density of a hundred quarters. He felt the heaviness of all the quarters at his side. He felt tacked to the earth. He controlled this tack. He controlled this long black drive. Claire and Michael at his side, both awkward in their sleep.

As they arrived to the farm, the woman whose head sat small under tight curls stood on the porch, a blush of pale waiting.

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That night, as Shotgun Foot slept, a stony, resolute sleep, Claire followed the dark stream of blood and water from the kitchen to the barn. At the barn, she took Michael into her lap and leaned down toward the hole where his head should be. A permanent scab, dark in the moonlight as dark in the sunlight, rimmed its edge. No smell, just blood congealed to a hardened gristle.

Looking in the hole she saw the younger brother's skin as she imagined it looked lost in the Normandy hedgrows. The hours and days of his body as gaping holes where arms, legs, a face, a firm jawbone had lived. She never would know what that looked like but she knew how a chicken's neck scabs over after the head has poorly been axed away. Claire placed her head against the hay and sighed.

The sigh said *if not bones then this absence of bones will do.*

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Dark in the moonlight as dark in the sunlight.

They did not know, in the darkness, mountains kept rising, new granite edged up. The cats bellied the timbers of the barn. Beneath the soil slid the cool, fuzzy roots of the velvetleaf weeds, feeling around for the rocks to clear, elongating where the detours occurred.

### **These became the days of the fair**

On each of these days, as the sun began its fall, Claire and Shotgun Foot drove Michael past route 340, to the fair. Michael jerked in Claire's arms as they passed the hammer of bells, the snow cone machines, penny arcades, ice cream puddles, lemon smells, baby skin, the blinging piglets gated against the strong brown neck of bulls, arriving at the northern most corner of the fairground, at the siren red *Tent of Natures Mistakes*, where the show Talker stood flapping his blue tickets, his thick black cane, his ballyhoo promises to clear up the mysteries of the world,

nodding through the tent's opening, its center, the dirt floor, the pit, the staging area, the 5 in 1 show. He swallowed Michael whole.

The Three-Legged Tiger jumped off a pedestal and the Earless Elephant circled the room, Michael's belly fell fast against the velvet blue pedestal, his reflexes and impulses batted up and down and the Talker came through his speakerphone: *Michael, the Mystery Finale. He's alive!*

Michael, falling from the pedestal, gurgling, mucus pushed up in milky bubbles. Some bubbles popped as they met the air, some jiggled oblong with every gurgle, only drooping. Then, Claire, from the crowd's edge with the Mason jar, swept the mucus away and aimed the eyedropper down the hole, letting the water, grain and corn stream down, drowning the bubbles, stopping the gurgles and choking. The crowd, waves of loudness, oscillated.

And each day, before the fair, the sugar beets and the velvetleaf weeds still waved for attention. Claire and Shotgun Foot bent to each weed, took the purple tinged stalks with a corn knife and flung them far, seeds scattering out. They pulled the roots above the earth and the velvetleaf weeds and their seeds were denser by the minute. They wrung their dirt-cracked hands above the sugar beets, peaceful in their rows. The velvetleaf weeds latched to their feet.

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Though everything grew as always, these days of the fair came different than days before. With the fair, sleep and waking collided. Only thin spaces between one movement and another, one object and another. It seemed sometimes to Claire as she looked out from the porch in the morning that objects merged until no shape existed, no air between, just endless opaque mass and murky color. Sometimes she needed to blink to catch the thinnest slit of sky in her eye.

This quickness, the dirty color of it, proved difficult for Claire. She preferred the sky and the shapes that surrounded it always there. The way birds would span from one edge to the next. She preferred the way sleep

and wake had always met before. But, still, she felt a flicker every time they climbed in the truck and began the stretch down route 340. Claire thought the sky looked larger from the road.

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When the fair had first brought pieces of the world to Claire, long before Michael, when she had a mother and father, she had found herself inside a tent just as humid and red as the *Tent of Nature's Mistakes*. Rather than a headless chicken, a woman whose bones had not grown beyond her first year of life was the *Mystery Finale*. The woman lay sprawled across a tiny rose-colored chaise lounge.

*Paralyzed from such small, weak bones, she takes in the world, never having sat or stood* said the Talker.

Her quilt of skin, powder white, bunched over and around her and flowed beyond her twisted feet. Some fingers poked out from underneath, stiff and pin straight. Her chin and torso were one.

*But what is meant by possible. Who are we to say what should be* said the Talker.

Despite her stunted bones, her head was full size and in her head lived a brain full of many facts. Over the head, over the brain came hair curled in brittle sprigs inching out from all directions.

She did not look real but *She is alive!*

She blinked her small eyes as the living do. Her doughy cheeks warped up as she smirked. She looked at Claire. She smirked as the living do. She was alive and Claire didn't know how one could be and not grow.

*How* said Claire.

*This was how it was meant to be. World travelled and more valuable than a jewel. Full of jewels of her own. More valuable than most anyone or anything. She learned and saw and took in the world without ever having to move!* Said the Talker.

Claire reached her hand toward the quilt of skin; she reached in and felt for the jewels. She felt the jewels and moved them toward the open. They hit the open light and bled into the doughy cheeks that warped up as the small woman smirked at Claire. A moment rushed beyond the humid tent, beyond the little rose-colored chaise lounge, and there was only that moment.

**The woman whose head sat small under tight curls meets the  
*hellos***

During the days of the fair, the woman whose head sat small under tight curls found new space. She would sleep until the sun began its fall. It was on one of these evenings that the lavender first trickled through the window to find her between the iron and linen. She rose and drifted to the porch, where the trickling lavender expanded outward. It felt like *hello*. Like a field of *hellos* stretching over the lavender, catching in the flung purple tinged stalks and seeds of the velvetleaf weeds. The sugar beets sat quiet, growing in their rows.

She left the porch, letting her loose rubber slippers fall from her feet. She moved her bare feet over the trickling lavender expanding in the field, over the rows of peaceful sugar beets, the flung weeds and the seeds. As the sun fell more and the lip of light wrapped in all direction, thinning as it moved, she saw so much distance. Distance and all the soft objects multiplied. She could feel her arms and legs roll out in the stretched space where the *hellos* came and gained clarity. In the clarity she saw how the youngest son moved in his absence.

The light of his absence said *hello, hello, hello...*

She could say nothing back, the chips of her bones streaming through her and the wind chipping the mountains. The seeds of the velvetleaf weeds coated the bottom of her feet. She walked inside the farmhouse and stood at the kitchen window.

*Hello* said the light of his absence.



## **They did not know, in the darkness**

On each of these nights, from the fair back to the farm, the road and sky were one black, endless. No mountains, no lip of light. Shotgun Foot's pocket held the density of a hundred quarters, left him tacked to the earth. Michael, the Mystery Finale, fell asleep in Claire's arms before they reached home. Claire could sense his exhaustion by how loose his legs hung under her arm. How he felt more like meat than life.

On each of these nights, back at the farm, walking him to the barn—the barn, edged by the dry chorus of crickets, rusted hinges creaking as the door opened—Claire wondered how it must have sounded to his one ear. She longed to know all the sounds inside Michael.

As she lay him down in the barn, she bunched some hay at each side of the hole where his head should be. Tucking him in, it seemed the least she could do. It cushioned her inside, this least thing she could do.