

A Long Time Ago

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All of this happened though where memory stays home imagination drops in.

Green

A long time ago it was summer. The sun came down wet upon the reservoir. My friend Len and I paddled on the open water, our thin clothes damp to our bodies. Len was of the type to have hair curled high on his head and toes splayed. He leant backwards against the rubber wall of the raft and I leant backwards against the other, the both of us sculling over the side with our plastic oars.

Near the shoreline waited the mouth of a broad and sluggish stream. We turned ourselves in its direction, now watching the weedy floor of the water rise up to us. A snapping turtle the size of our bellies skimmed below, smiling from its horned jaw.

The stream narrowed 15 feet in and our boat was vulnerable to snags. We paddled slow and careful as the bugs thickened on our arms. In all the green, how nervous and young.

At once we saw the bird perched low in a tree. Talons like the color of cream held to a branch of ash. It had seen us minutes before and the salt and pepper of its feathers shone. It said danger to us from its horned smile. Its eyes said go back, and go back.

For a moment we were stuck. We were raptured to the hot bottom of the boat. For a moment everyone waited, and then we broke again for the open water.

Nazi

A long time ago I went to my Swedish friend Per's apartment in the Tenderloin. It was in a tall cement building in the middle of the block, outside of which the junkies and the drunk lolled and slept on the sidewalk. There was a sign just beside the blue-smelling elevator which warned us all the building was not retrofit for earthquakes, unstable in the event of sudden trauma.

Per sat on the brown linoleum floor with his German friend. The German was of the kind to sport a loose-knit pullover, string-tied at the neck, and smooth and expensive pants. He smiled through his sunny eyes and sat with his feet in his lap. Per's face seemed to have been shaped by winter.

We got drunk, the three of us, as Per's Iranian girlfriend played music down the hall. There was a general stickiness to the air, the product of such a building in such a neighborhood.

The topic must have been politics, or was about to turn that way. I said the word—Nazi. The German, sunny heretofore in his loose-knit shirt, became red in the face. He demanded I not use that word again.

I was drunk, surprised. I misunderstood the force of his caution. When I used the word again, he punched me in the chest, once fast, and then twice, with great force.

Weight

A long time ago I was locked in a basement with my friends Peter and Alice. Peter and Alice were of a kind to play together each day. They would rarely boss and would rarely tattle. I knew them for one year when that was one fifth of our lives.

The basement was empty, only dust on the floor, and dust in the rafters, and dust on the empty shelves, in the light that came through a window over our heads. The dust and a black umbrella we found on a hook.

How did we get locked in the basement? The door was open to the alley and then it was closed. Whose basement was it? A man or woman who lived on the block.

We sat on the floor and waited. How quiet it was, the sound of blood in our bodies. We got up and started to wail, to shout and kick on the door. How unnoticed it was.

We stood in the corner and waited. Alice needed to pee and she went in the drain. Some hours, or minutes, or days went by. We played with the black umbrella.

Nazi (again)

Sometime later but yet a long time ago I was traveling with my girlfriend. This was Idaho. It was dark and winding on the mountain road and we were happy to make it to a hostel that smelled like butter and toast.

Next door was the low bar where the locals, in their typical patterned shirts, sat at the rail and drank from cups. They were speaking among themselves about the standoff up on the ridge. The agents had killed a man these people knew, and that man's relative had wounded an agent in return.

Two Germans also staying at the hostel played pool. They were dressed in the fashion of backpackers well-prepared for the weather. My girlfriend asked if we could play a game with them.

Later in the evening the locals began a debate, whether the man who was killed on the ridge was a Nazi. Was he a Nazi they argued, or just a man afraid of the world? In either case, they agreed, the agents should not have killed him. He was a neighbor, and the fact that they did not approve of Nazis was beside the point.

Each time they said the word, the Germans would laugh, high and nervous. This happened many times, the locals saying the word and the Germans, leaning on their cues, laughing.

Borders

A long time ago it was the Scottish guy who made it possible for my girlfriend and I to have sex in the lighthouse keeper's house. He told the keeper of the lighthouse keeper's house that she shouldn't be a spoilsport. He said she should let the lovers be.

We began—my girlfriend Allie and I—in one of the main bunkrooms. The bunkrooms were empty except for us. The entire lighthouse keeper's house was empty except for us. The Scottish guy told the keeper of the lighthouse keeper's house he'd stay in her cottage with her. He told her the lovers should have the lighthouse keeper's house to themselves.

Yes, we started in one of the bunkrooms, in one of the wooden bunks. We had sex in one of the top bunks and in a minute Allie said we should move to one of the lower bunks. We had sex in that bunk for a minute and then I said we should move to the other bunkroom.

We had sex in the other bunkroom for a minute and then Allie said we should move to one of the private rooms. There was one double bed in the private room and for a minute we had sex in that bed. Then we moved to the other private room and finished having sex in that bed.

The next day we stood on the shore of the very big lake and watched the wind whip the gray waves into a frenzy. It was windy but warm and the warm wind whipped our hair into two separate frenzies. We held hands and enjoyed the gray look of the big lake.

After a while the Scottish guy came out from the keeper's cottage and joined us on the shore. He said he hoped we lovers enjoyed our night alone together in the lighthouse keeper's house. He asked us if we would drive him to Canada. He told us he wasn't allowed to be in the United States and that he needed to get back across the border. We said we would be glad to take him to Canada. He sat in the backseat and was very nervous when we crossed the border but the border guard waved us through and he had no trouble at all.

Poetry

A long time ago my girlfriend Sally's phone was stolen. It wasn't so much stolen as picked up by a passing man. We saw it wasn't stolen at all.

Sally, Bill, and I were in the park very late. We had closed down the bars and needed something more to do. In the dark we saw figures move around us, liquid and slender. It was so late we decided the only thing they could be up to was sex or debauchery and drugs. They moved about the statues in spirits of dissipation.

We were talking of poetry, the meaning or inconsequence of words. Sally told us a famous poem she had memorized. It told us things about despair, loneliness, and your body. It wasn't clear the world regarded the famous poem with praise. I decided that night I wasn't sure the worth of that poem.

We sat beneath the statue. We all of us had to pee but none of us wanted to go home. We wavered in the grass and talked about the night. The discomfort shadows slipped about the dark with an added insistence.

Two days later, I received a text from the man who had found Sally's phone in the park. He would place it in her hands for ten dollars. He said to meet in a public place. Nothing about any of this seemed unreasonable to us.

Planes

A long time ago some cows walked through the forest. Each cow had a bell on her neck and each bell went clonk-clonk as she walked. This was an hour or two after the planes had struck. No one could see the cows, out there in the forest.

Eliot

A long time ago a woman Amy was my date. We went ice-skating and her skates weren't tight enough on her ankles. We had a tiki drink and every half hour it rained on the indoor lagoon. She was of the type to wear her red hair in a long and bending braid. In general she was open to the whims of her feet.

How it came to be that she asked me out was that she asked our professor.

All the trains had stopped running and we had to ride the late bus home. It was a fast fluorescent moth that mashed through the fog. We rode the Owl forever, on in the night. She was of the kind to be amber-eyed against my shoulder when she was tired.

She took my call the next day and said she'd had a nice time, that we'd talk about literature in class. As far as I knew, she didn't ask anything else personal of our professor. This was all to be had. The always-running Owl is always running on.

Late

A long time ago my dad was dying. Although he hadn't been conscious in a week, he gripped the steel sides of his bed, holding on, as it seemed, for life. It was nine days since he took water. He was past the window of living.

My dad had been dying for a long time—three months. At first he was delirious with life. He looked at the trees, the clean mountains of the distance, and he cried. He clutched to his wheelchair and the water bounded his face.

My dad had been alive for many years, wars and children and the trails he'd hiked. He told his stories again and again, when he was older but when he was younger as well.

Later as he slept we sat near him and talked of his death. We talked of the funeral he wouldn't have, that he wouldn't have wanted the company. If dead we saw fit to honor his nature, I wonder why sleeping we'd not reckon his fears.

Once he seemed to see and speak to his mother. Once he got drunk on a swallow of beer.

I told him he should go. I begged him to go on. I was over and wanted to go home. He held to the rails of his bed. Something kept working when the nurses said it would quit.

Wheel

A long time ago I was on the psychiatric ward. The meals were brought out on large, wheeled carts—pizza, spaghetti, pancakes, meatloaf, salad, milk, orange juice. Many patients thought these meals were very good. They would intone with delight and seriousness the fine taste and preparation. Those who brought the meals were kind and generous, in their plastic hats and plastic gloves. The leftover meals were rolled away when everyone was finished. The patients would throw away their plates and cups. A few hours later, the carts would arrive again.

Hypothesis

A long time ago I made a bong out of the bottle from No more tears and the barrel of a pen. I smoked it in my bedroom. I'm not sure why I didn't care if my dad would come home and smell it. He was at work training rats to push levers for heroin. Wires clipped into their brains recorded activity.

I drove to look at the geese and fish. The drive was a wonder of sunshine. The fish were of the kind to swim with their silver bellies, no bigger than the barrel of a pen. Silver bellies and how the geese would walk, as if out of some novel of stars. I could tell you about my brain.

If I smoked in a year, I would go paranoid. Those kids over there were speaking of me. My stepmom believed I was shit. My heart was a yellow, ridiculous balloon. I could tell you about my activity.

No more tears—the barrel of a pen. My dad and his rats and the light was a soft and wonderful thing.

Ascent

A long time ago we were high in the mountains to the east. Discharged shotgun shells lay strewn about, the fur of something half melted in the firepit. It was going quickly cold, the desert scrub and pines. A rough place of rough things.

The motorcycle stood kickstanded next to a large stone. We'd ridden 600 miles, two to the bike, the passenger me. Whenever we'd pass another bike my friend Jeremy would wait for the rider to wave—or not. This was a half-functioning fraternity of things.

The flinty ground made for bad sleeping, that and our ears pricked for engines up the pass. We were of the kind for redwood groves and beaches, the mild fraternity of National Parks. This place of extravagant mortality was something other instead.

I lay in my bag, stony and breathing. And then, like that, as fast as it can, it was all new lands. The quickshot rabbits and their hunters reborn—an ocean state of the solid earth. Whatever horror I felt incompatibly reformed.

Excuse if you like my lack of transition, my incompatible mind. We move like new rabbits descending.

Transit

A long time ago I woke to hear my cat leave. There was no rattle, no shake: I was asleep, I woke, I heard him take his last breath. You might ask how—asleep—he or I could know.

Law

A long time ago I was in a crowded place. The TVs told us how to be good citizens. What to weigh in our hands to measure the hearts of our neighbors.

As we sat in our pews, the police said how they'd waited in vans. The prosecutors admonished and grinned. The defense gesticulated and scoffed. The two men were low-eyed and still, used to the formalities of fate.

For hours we argued and then suddenly we were done. The TVs said thanks for your service. In two years, we'll see you again.

Uncanny

A long time ago we hired impassionate men to take us out to an island. One man held his hand to the tiller as the other looked out at the sea. These men caught fish for a living and sat close with the green water all-round.

The island was the size of your block, rising as high as your home into an indigo sky. As I climbed to the top of the hill, my leg met the spines of a cactus. The impassionate man who sat on a stone offered a twig to set myself free.

The barracuda slashed by in silver schools, ignoring us with teeth. I swam after a puffer but could not get it to puff. We drank warm beer, regarded our knees, till our heads went empty and bright.

Requisition

A long time ago she retrieved her woven bowl of animal skulls and pretty stones. I don't know how they'd come to be in my house, and she was crying. These were just two of the ways we had misplaced one another.

Drift

A long time ago I lived in my sister Gloria's house—she and her two small children. This was the same house I lived in as a child. The many nights I walked asleep into my mother's darkened room.

My sister woke her children early so they would sleep early as well. Once put to their beds, she would light cigarettes and drink beer. I drank with her and the two of us would play Scrabble. How to use the letter Q—quietus or qualm—the letter J.

For a while in that time I took to drawing. I drew a picture of my arm, a picture of the illustration on my copy of Conrad—a bald man suffused in jungle green, presumably Kurtz. Gloria praised my drawing until she realized it was only a counterfeit of the book's.

There were days that led to weeks that my sister would not sleep. She was of the kind to sink into fantastical thoughts. Did the TV speak to her? Did our dead cousin build fires in the garage? How many men were out there on the lawn? Around and around she would talk, her querulous jangle of words.

In that year I lived with my sister it was winter for a very long time. The kids brought wet into the house with their boots. Gloria thought this was fine. Why worry about nothing in a world replete with snow.

Empty

A long time ago we slept next to the gas. The empty prairie was filled with Indian blanket. Vast in the night the train tumbled by, as the coyotes sang with its heavy whistle. In the morning the mechanic found us out back, nudging us through our dusty bedding. We paid for our fuel and found our way to the west.

Fire

A long time ago my head was up to 105. I had a dream I died, that my body was covered in fresh black dirt and piled with flowers of the most beautiful kind. My hot, insensible cognizance—lupin, poppy, and columbine.

My girlfriend Laney lived in the Sunset. She brought me cups of water. Down the way was the ocean, spinning its way shoreward. She brought me Advil and tabs of salt.

Laney was of the kind: black hair across bare shoulder, eyes, in my state, I thought might kill me. My heart beat too fast, squeezing too little liquid. I believed I was becoming a bear.

Laney brought me wet rags and water, as down the way was the sea. You took an orange train to find it.

Unreliable

A long time ago the shuttered mill was on fire. It was the edge of evening and I was barefoot and in my pajamas, ready for bed. I think I remember the orange balls of flames up through the mill's broken windows. I think I remember the black balls of smoke. I think I remember the sparks falling out of the sky and onto the neighborhood. I do remember the garden hoses. How each neighbor watered her roof. I don't remember the fire trucks. I don't remember the sirens. I don't remember any noise at all. Just the hoses and their water, bent toward the declining sky.

Straight

A long time ago the high winds had come. It was the first time any of us had heard the word: derecho. It felt singular in our mouths, and it might seem strange that the word is Spanish for straight.

The winds knocked out power for many hundreds of miles. We sweated and cursed. Those with a generator flummoxed the air with their mechanical objections.

I rode my bike to the coffee shop, the one who had escaped the derecho. While I was inside someone stole my bike.

I took the long walk home through the shimmering streets and along the river and the railroad bed. I was hot, and resigned. The world or whoever could have my bike, and what could I do. The tracks were singular and strange.

Cliché

A long time ago my girlfriend Dell lived on Christmas Card Lane. In the evenings, the cars lined up to see the lights, the candy canes, the Santas and elves. Dell—or rather her parents, who she was living with again—had built a wooden Christmas card that extolled their joy to the world.

In the mornings I snuck out through the basement door and across the front lawn to my car. Dell's room was in the basement, the only place her parents had left for her. Her once-bedroom was filled with waffle irons and exercise equipment. I believe Dells' parents had little room left for her.

Dell was of the type to wear faux leopard prints on her coat, on her underwear. Her pale eyes were hardly even blue. With her laugh she encouraged no one to take her as serious.

That year, the best part of my life was sneaking out of her room. No. Sleeping with her and then sneaking out of her room. No. Sleeping next to her, then sneaking out of her room.

At my mom's house, Dell and I watched movies. My mom kept out of our way. Everything that year was something out of the movies. All of it was happy and excellent cliché.

Home

A long time ago I woke up next to the herd. It stood around me staged in the shape of a constellation, chewing its gums. It was white and black and outlined in blue, in the manner of an optical illusion.

Beyond the fence-line the highway, the always (and forever) highway. The herd asked who I was with its eyelids of black. Whatever I answered, it parted ways and let me through.

Safe

A long time ago there was thunder snow. The sequoia crowns flashed with light, rocked and swayed. In ten minutes, a new three inches on the road. We were quick to the valley, safe, golden, and warm.

Temple

A long time ago the lake ice was monstrously, fantastically shaped. While out on the pier my nephew began to cry. He pleaded with and then screamed for his mother to take him to shore. He held to her arm and pulled.

Over top of the waves, the ice was a field of undulating eyes, a solution of cells three feet wide, platelets of blood. The ice-crusted lighthouse was a shambling beast, tentacled and scaled. A thousand acres of slushing eyes presided upon by our octopus lord.

For twenty minutes my nephew wept. I thought he might fling himself over the side. I went to the beach, but he would not follow. His mother bowed in petition to the wind.

Romance

A long time ago I was of the kind to buy books from the street. A copy of *Paradiso* laid out on a blanket, its homeless man an entrepreneur.

Sunday

A long time ago the bells, more bells than you'd ever heard. Bells in the distance, like the calling of your mother, and then just over your head.

Psychedelia

A long time ago the clouds made tiny pinwheels of themselves, spinning above the mountains and the mountain laurel. At the bottom of the valley the stream tinkled over stones, while in the pebbled bed the women talked of water snails. At the ancient dooryard the periwinkle remembered whose hand had sowed them, as all along the sunlit wall the bears met the ghosts of themselves. We lay in the dirt as everything was porous and the forest was everything.

Coil

A long time ago I often caught snakes. There was a piece of plywood lying in a field, and under that plywood there were often snakes. There was a lake my mother took us to and on the shore of that lake there were snakes. There was a swamp we would bike to and into that swamp we would wade and in that swamp there were often salamanders, turtles, and snakes. I caught these snakes, brought them home and put them into a ten-gallon tank. For a day I would let them wind about my arm, ease into my shirt, watch TV with that snake. Then I would take him back to the lake, into the swamp, put her back in the place from which she'd so often come.

Dinnerware

A long time ago I woke to the sunrise on the cornfields south of Chicago. The corn and the still water, the cottonwoods to their thighs.

We'd been driving since Wyoming—no rest—and the country clanged about us like dinnerware: river spoons, mountain forks, reed brakes the color of coffee saucers.

Blood

A long time ago we were in the cemetery. We sat on one of the coffin-sized stones and looked down the hill, over the standing of graves, white, gray, and pale blue. We were talking about summer, about swimming, fishing, the riding of bikes to a town 20 miles over. We were talking about our new school, starting soon.

We'd been talking all summer, so it seemed. In graveyards, vacant lots with tall grass, in the empty homes of which my mother was landlord. We lay on our backs with knees up, cross-legged style, or our feet dangling from the coffin-sized stone.

There was a grave in that cemetery that said nothing but Blood—the family name. We talked about what those kids must have looked like, wondered what they had done.

We looked over the graves as the sun sat down. It was our favorite place, both in the day and in the dark. We were of a kind, that summer, to be quiet and still. Sometimes. We could not get our fill, the three to four of us, as the summer spent down on our tongues.

Thanks

A long time ago it was the day after Thanksgiving. We had champagne, perched on the side of the mountain. The wind was a deadly thing, such tiny flake of snow. Yes, we were sure we might freeze. And yes how we drank champagne.