

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.