

InsomnIraq

C.R. Beideman

She tells me to journal. She says it helps. It doesn't help me sleep but she means it helps psychologically. It helps me look normal, keeps me from staring into walls. I'm Autrey, a soldier. I live under bridges in Montana, and I don't sleep. Too many dreams. They flash in my brain, incoherent and sickening images. So I don't want to sleep but I don't want to be awake either. I just feel so bad all the time. Like my heart is armored. Not unfeeling, but heavy. I can't even eat.

I used to care.

"We want YOU!" they said.

And I said, "I want you to want me. I want to make a difference."

And they said, "Man up."

And I said, "I want to kill sand diggers."

*

This morning was cold so I got up early, stuffed my sleeping bag in my pack, and pissed. I always pack before I piss. It's good to be ready. It bugs Gabriel when I piss in the creek. He soldiered in Vietnam. "Parasites swim up your dick hole. Not choice."

"Gabriel," I said, looking over my shoulder while I shook. "Gabriel, you awake?" He didn't answer. I've been with him for a month and we live by routine. But I feel this tension building. It's too quiet. Either Gabriel or me is going to do something.

I stripped my long underwear and washed with a green bar of soap that I keep in a plastic case. The creek water ran colder than the fall air. I squatted like an ape and felt vulnerable. I tamped my pits and chest with a blue shammy. I like this time, in the dark before dawn, when it's just me awake. The water and air on my skin clears my head, and I feel something like clean. The light comes on until Gabriel and the creek and the concrete bridge are fully materialized, and I'm anxious to get moving.

*

I jumped over Parasite Creek and nudged Gabriel with my boot.

"Hey, get up."

Gabriel farted. I lit a cigarette. He pulled his arms out of his bag like a molting insect. He has black hair on his shoulders and Mexican skin, a stumpy build and gumdrop head.

Gabriel lit a cigarette and rubbed his temples. "Another beautiful day," he said. He blew snot out one nostril, slipped out of his bag, and marched over to the wall to piss. He walks around camp letting his penis flop under his gut. He's older than he looks and gives way less fucks than me about that stuff. *Better Dead Than Red* is tattooed around an eagle on his back. Gabriel pukes in the dirt. Splat, all at once. He has one hand up high on the wall for balance. "You writing about me again?" He spits and it stretches to the ground like worm silk. "A love poem this time?"

BOZEMAN ROUTINE:

0500 Roll bed. Bathe. Walk to Town Pump. Coffee.

0700 Walk to Café M. Coffee.

0900 Walk to Co-Op. Shit.

1000 Walk to public library. Internet.

1200 Shuttle to Wal-Mart. Cigarettes. Tylenol. Panhandle.

1500 Shuttle to mall. Watch Mexican girls.

1700 Shuttle to campus. Watch white girls.

1900 Walk to public library. Stay (warm) until close.

2000 Walk to Co-Op. Coffee. Stay (warm) until close.

2100 Walk to Haufbrau. Drink until close.

0200 Walk to bridge over Parasite Creek. Unroll bed.

Last night I blacked out for an hour before the first train crashed through my skull and into my dead dreams and woke me. The rails moaned under the train's weight. The wheels screamed for lubrication. "It burns!" they cried as it passed above.

*

I don't read the paper but it's always on the counter when I get my Thermos filled at Town Pump. The headline got me today. A train derailed near Helena. The engineer pushed it right through Toston Dam and it flooded Toston. It's an environmental disaster. He left a note. Said he didn't want to work holidays anymore, didn't have time for his son. I get that. I keep a lot of rage.

Much of our gear is military issue. Our packs take up space in Café M but it's early. Gabriel reads a Salvation Army L'Amour while I jot. The sun comes through the windows lighting all the dust-heavy plants. The music isn't on yet and it's only the straightedge college kids in here.

Gabriel showed me this. He leaned in. "Eh, Trey." He pointed at students with water bottles clipped to their heavy bags, looking like recruits fresh off the bus. "The early birds," he said. Then he waved his hand between us. "And the worms."

*

"Quit gaping," I say to Gabriel. The food court is dead. It's bright like a house with nothing on the walls. Malls were darker when I was a kid. I'm wearing sunglasses. Gabriel sits across from me in a sun slant coming through the skylight. The girl Gabe's gaping at is looking at dream catchers at a kiosk. She has gold-infused skin and purple stretch pants. Bubble butt.

"Read your cowboy book," I say. Her boyfriend has no idea.

"I would lick her asshole," Gabriel says. He's gross but I'm not the better choice. Our hobo packs make us equally ineligible. Maybe if we were backpacking Europe or something. "Taste the jalapeno."

"Stop," I say.

"Why do you write all this?" Gabriel wiggles his finger in a circle to mean the food court with more employees than customers, with no music on. Gabriel has a family, a wife and kids. He talks like they're beyond reach, over the wall in Mexico, but I doubt it.

"She says it's to make things real." I glance at Gabriel's puffy, lidded eyes.

"Did she know?"

A baby screeches somewhere in the mall.

"I think she did."

"This isn't real." Gabriel wiggles his finger again.

I'm not sure Gabriel even reads. Maybe he just looks at the words, looks through them.

Dad used to smoke in the mall, back when ashtrays were provided, filled with sand. He would take Kristen and me to Burger King where we'd sit in the same raised booth each time and gape at shoppers. After dinner we'd go to KAY-BEE and I'd buy football cards and trade the good ones away to smarter kids. Kristen would buy Lego sets and lose the pieces. The knight's lance, the space gun. On Nickelodeon we'd watch lucky kids win shopping sprees. They'd stick out their arms while running down the aisle, toys cascading into the cart, mounding up. They would scream with happiness. I used to dream about winning a shopping spree. In Basic I dreamed about the armory.

*

When I met Gabriel I'd just arrived in Bozeman. Colorado Springs was a veteran suicide factory. Had to get out of there. As I crossed from Wyoming to Montana, all these white crosses appeared along the highway. I leaned forward in my seat behind the driver. "What are all those crosses?" I asked.

"Death markers. For drunk driving and what all."

"Everyone who dies gets a cross?"

"That's how it works." He'd been looking ahead the whole time, but now he glanced at me in his mirror. Soldiers get crosses too. The bus smell gave me headaches and after a two day ride on single lane highways through scrubby ranchland and scary low populations, first thing I did

was find a dive called the Haufbrau. Gabriel sat at the bar. He bought me a drink. A good drinker buys everyone drinks so it will come around when he's broke.

"Why you in Montana, Metal?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I needed space."

Gabriel gave me a look like, "I get it." I was nervous about him. "You picked the right town. Real white. Real choice." But we got drunk so I stopped worrying. "I got a camp spot, Metal. You carry a gun, bro?"

Later he farted in his sleeping bag and giggled like at a sleepover. Tonight his spot is empty. The police took him away. I'll go to the station in the morning, sober, but I'm scared. They say what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, but that's just fucking bullshit. I keep lifting my headlamp to look for Gabriel. I imagine him in his bag like a big grub on the other bank. The air smells like snow. A train's coming. And I'm alone.

*

When it came I closed my eyes and rocked back and forth with my knees up. I covered my ears and wailed into the noise. It was a panic attack. Then the quiet returned, swift and final like god. The train blows its whistle in town and I imagine the sound softly falling on Bozeman's dreamers in their beds. Maybe some are stirred. They glance at the digital numbers on their phones. It's hours before they have to wake up. And by the time I write this they're already sleeping again, boarding the same dream.

*

They didn't have Gabriel at the police station. They put him on a bus to Missoula. They said that's what they do when no one presses charges. Then they offered to drive me to the bus station. I took the ride.

The sky is sharp blue and the air cold enough to make me sneeze. As the bus rides the highway I look at the mountains, frosted from last night's snow, mid-elevation trees like an old man's stubble. They say it's big sky country. You can't see all that much from a bus window, but I begin to feel it, the space and the quiet. It's the opposite of pressure. Going after Gabriel isn't a loyalty thing or a military thing.

My first night in Bozeman he told me about Missoula. We were in our sleeping bags drinking flasks each on our own side of Parasite Creek. A campfire burned, yellow tipped and green at the coals. When sap popped it echoed. I felt like I was in a cave. Gabriel had his L'Amour book open. "It's green. The banana belt. The river flows through town and goes under choice bridges. Hippie city. Everyone's young."

"Like a festival," I said.

Gabriel got quiet. I looked over and his book was closed. His back was turned. I studied his breathing to make sure he'd passed out.

"My therapist wants me to talk about shit," I said. "Even if it's just to myself." I lit my lucky and burned the empty pack. "The worst was when Kristen flew in to meet me at Denver. She hates flying because she never travels, but she was so happy to see me alive. And it killed me. I had to pretend to smile. I had to pretend I could pretend. So that's why I'm here. Because I don't

care if I die." I watched the rise and fall of Gabriel's breathing. When he spoke, I got shivers.

"I know, Metal. Me too, bro."

*

"Don't go Full Metal, bro," Gabriel said. He snaked my Mezcal while I was at the keno machine.

"Watch your back," I said. I ordered another Mezcal. The bartender looked like Ronnie Van Zant with a baby face and a beard, long hair and a stretched tight t-shirt. The bartop was carved with names and dates. We sat on torn stools in front of the putrid rinse sink. Gabriel thinks the bumper stickers are funny. Once he's lit he reads them all while cracking peanut shells. "Custer got Siouxed. Choice." The shells crunched like dead bugs when anyone walked by. By the bathrooms with no doors two hobos in oversized coats shot pool, chalking up crooked sticks. Gabriel trades with them, but they get jumpy around me. I'm young so they don't trust me. We fought different wars.

"I'll play one game. Don't be so gloomy, Trey."

"Get pills," I said.

Van Zant turned off the overhead lights and in the dark I felt less vulnerable. A bluegrass band set up by the fireplace and college kids with gold miner beards and flannel surged in. They smelled the rinse sink and sneered at me. I went for a cigarette. It was snowing wet flakes like soap shavings. I thought about leaving, just vanishing, but I went back inside to watch a girl in a yellow t-shirt. Her earlobes were miniature with no piercings and her hair was wet from a shower

or hot spring. She and her boyfriend linked hands pulling each other close then pushing away and more twirling. I didn't know people really danced like that. The fiddle whined like a train whistle. It felt real. The feeling was like being a part of something. Gabriel went into the bathroom with the other hobos to get high without me. When he came out with bright eyes, the feeling went bad. I faced the bar. He leaned back against it and spit in my ear. I dealt with it because the music was loud and because I'm deaf in that one, so who cares.

"We're like snails, Trey! We leave these loopy trails from birth to death. Fast forward and you see the patterns. From here to the bathroom, to the pool table, to our bridge, to the mall, endless little loops. Loops within loops!" Gabriel wiggled his fingers in the air, eyes googly.

"You're lit," I said.

"The liver we die with isn't the liver we're born with, you know?"

I don't remember much Biology. The song ended. Thirsty people crowded me. Pints rested on the amps. Everyone loudly mingling but I just heard fuzz.

"Or like a filmstrip. Between each frame are gaps. There's gaps in life, bro. You gotta learn to stretch the gaps. So like if you get in a fight and a guy stabs you, it'll land in the gap, and you won't get hurt. It's an old power."

I poked his nose to see if it would land. It was the first time I'd really touched him. The band went into another song and Gabriel flicked my ear. "Here's how you stretch the gaps!" He handed me a shot. The Mezcal warmed my guts and I salivated. Behind the band hung a large painting blackened from decades of cigarette smoke. A woman rising from a heavy sea. She was

nude, arm raised high. Like a lighthouse her palm beamed through the darkness. There was something to her, like she held the place together.

Meanwhile Gabriel tried to pull a woman with recessed gums waiting on a pitcher. "This is my buddy," he said, leaning back. "He has a Purple Heart." Gabriel grinned. He's ugly but his teeth aren't bad. It's disarming. Dad was a dentist.

"I want to hear the story," she said. She shook my hand. Her fingers were thin like breadsticks. I just pointed to my ear.

"You wanna join us?" she asked, nodding behind.

I glanced toward cocktail tables in the back. At the girl sitting alone.

"I can't hear shit up here," I said.

Bonnie's friend's shoulders drew together when Bonnie came back with more than drinks. We sat boy, girl. Turns out they were coworkers. Bonnie and Carmella. Carmella wore a sundress in September. Her tanned thighs glowed under the back bar light. Gabriel poured the pitcher.

"We'll get the next one," I said. That was all I had.

"You have choice jobs?" Gabriel said, splaying his legs. I'd never seen him with girls before.

"We're CNAs at Bozeman Deaconess."

"Like nurses?" Gabriel's eyebrows had lives of their own.

"What's it like?" I asked.

"We see stuff sometimes," Carmella said. "Like death. You get routine with death." The head of beer in front of her slowly dissolved. I let my legs separate so our knees touched. She didn't

react. I got a feeling like when I was in Biology. I'd forgotten that feeling. I looked down at a large birthmark on one thigh. It seemed to make her accessible. The back of my neck looks like chicken skin.

"Not to mention strokes, dementia, incontinence," Bonnie said, numbering them on her fingers. They came here to vent and bond over venting, like therapy.

"Who gives the best sponge bath?" Gabriel asked.

Bonnie wrinkled her nose. I think Gabriel saw himself in her disgust. A terrible mirror.

"Are you both veterans?" Carmella asked.

"I was in the shit." Gabriel slouched on his stool.

Bonnie: "What do you do now?"

"We're bag boys," Gabriel said. "Keep freezer items together."

"Double bag for old ladies," I said.

Their eyes signaled each other. I wondered if this was their first time hanging out. Gabriel stood up, the pitcher already drained. He came around the table and stuck his head between us. "Support your troops," he said. Sweat ran down his nose. It held for a moment, then fell in slow motion and broke on Carmella's thigh. The music stopped. Carmella's eyes and mine met in shared awe when Gabriel reached down and rubbed it in. I wanted to punch him in the throat. Bonnie like a mother pushed herself between Carmella and Gabriel. "Creeps," she said, draping her coat over Carmella's shoulders.

"I told you I didn't want to come here," Carmella said. She seemed so helpless that I didn't

feel bad for her at this point.

"Some bar!" Bonnie said. "Where you let fucking bums grope everybody!" Gabriel had already moved into the crowd to disappear on the dance floor, but Van Zant came around and lifted him by his coat like a dog. Smokers coming in brought clouds of cold breath. They held the door. Not looking at anyone, I stood under a spotlight. I retrieved our packs and exited.

"You're fucking done," Van Zant said. He pushed Gabriel down and the sound of his head hitting blacktop under the snow echoed off the building. Belly showing, he looked like a frog. Bonnie laughed, already across the street. Gabriel cried. His face soaked with snot and snowmelt.

"Call an ambulance," I said. I don't have a phone.

Van Zant went inside and called the cops.

*

I drank a bottle of Nyquil and fell asleep on the bus. I don't feel rested but I feel this intensity still. I dreamed I was in a movie theater. My naked body floated up from a seat. My arms were stretched out on wires. A point of white light beamed from the projection booth, expanding toward the screen. I flickered in the beam. I heard the flapping sound of film. My mouth opened wide and all this stuff came out.

The sun rides high in my window. I have a headache. I guess we're almost there.

*

I walked through a gauntlet of panhandlers on Higgins. I was ignored except by a woman who had a child who cursed me for not giving. I strafed along the river on a bike path. In Caras

Park, college kids played volleyball and ultimate. People fished at the bridges, but that was all. No bum camps but evidence of them: empty bottles of cough syrup, dented beer cans with burn marks on the side. I watched the sun setting way across a valley. The hills shouldering Missoula glowed pink, and I missed my routine. In light that matched my cigarette smoke I located the Legion and bought a drink. After another I felt okay. The railyard shook the brick walls and it felt real. My tight stomach responded to the grill, so I ordered a burger and thought about Gabriel. At least I'd tried. The bartender delivered my plate like a Frisbee.

"Have you seen a Mexicanish guy? Pack like mine?" The bartender made a face like a bad smell, but a vet at the end of the bar piped up.

"Reserve Street Bridge, young man." He wore an old Stetson above a shrunken frame. I imagined a dress uniform twice his size pressed and hanging in his closet. "Outside town, under I-90," he said, pointing west. He was eager to contribute. "The bum bridge."

"Cheers." I hovered over my plate but my appetite had gone. Sick from two bites, I puked in the bathroom then drank away the acid taste.

It was dark when I left the Legion. Beyond the downtown lights I shivered. The cold air made my eyes water. Light shot out in rods when I looked at the stars. Noise and headlights moved on Reserve Street, merging there with I-90. I couldn't hear the river. I went down on all fours, pushed through a hole in a barbwire fence and crept to the bank, careful to stay hidden. A palate bonfire burned under the multilane bridge, throwing light on the fast river. The inclined concrete wall flickered and a hippie danced around the fire. Her whooping echoed off the far side of the

overpass two hundred feet across the river where a Hooverville of tents lined the bank. She wore a maxi skirt over ripped jeans. Her guy wore red dreadlocks and too many tattoos for a hippie. Their shadows stretched up the wall like barcode. Smelling sage I spied in silence as they smoked a pipe yellow with residue. Then I saw him. Gabriel. He sat zipped in his sleeping bag in a shadowy recess atop the inclined wall. Head wrapped in gauze, it made him look vulnerable.

"Cade." The hippie pointed at Gabriel, who'd sat up.

Cade yelled something at him. I couldn't hear, but he had a southern accent.

Gabriel scooted down the incline. "Give me a hit, bro."

Cade turned his back and blew a hit into nothingness.

"He's bleeding," the hippie said. "Gross."

"Give me a hit hippies."

"I'll give you a hit." And Cade began stomping. Gabriel lay on his side, flopping. The girl laughed. Blood rushed to my face, but I dug in my pack slow and calm. "Call me a hippie again," Cade said.

"You fucking hippie!" Gabe's yell carried.

Cade unzipped and pulled out his junk and pissed on him.

Gabriel took it.

"Kicked him too hard, man," the girl said.

"You can't hurt me," Gabriel said.

"Babe, go take a walk."

The hippie girl skipped along the bank right below me. She liked their whole dramatic thing. She unzipped and squatted. This isn't real, I thought. I used to think Gabriel was showing off like kids do. But he came here alone and he's still asking for it. Cade unzipped his fanny pack and leveled a revolver. I rose but not in time. The gunshot tore the quiet apart.

"Cade!" the girl yelled. She'd spotted me.

Cade's gun swung to me like a compass needle. He could only study me and the service pistol at the end of my arm, like a part of my arm.

The quiet reformed itself around us.

"He's my friend," I finally said. That was all I had.

The girl ran back. "Come on, Cade," she took his hand. "Let's get outta town."

"Fuck this town," Cade said.

I bet he said that about every town he drifted through. I pivoted as they orbit me with eyes like dark moons and shuffled up to the highway.

When they were gone the river stole all other sounds. I came down to Gabriel. He faced away from me. I nudged him with my boot and turned him. He looked right through me. His head bled but no bullet had entered. Cade missed. Gabriel was right about the gaps.

"It's Autrey," I said. I took off my shirt and wiped his face. I went to the river to rinse. A single headlamp bobbed on the far bank. "Help!" I yelled, but the light cut out. I removed the gauze and irrigated Gabriel's wound. He looked up at me with the kindest eyes. "*Put me in the water;*" he whispered.

"No," I said. I don't know how long I sat there with him, watching the river pass.

"It hurts," he begged.

I dragged him feet first in his bag down the riprap bank and waded in. Sharp cold followed by numbness. Hard to keep footing in the small eddy. Gabriel helped me unzip his sleeping bag. I tossed it away like a shuck and floated him. He looked up at me like a child. I remember Dad floating me and Kristen in the pool at the Y, hands under our backs.

"The river goes to the Gulf of Mexico. Choice."

I gave him a look like, "I get it."

But that's not where it goes.

*

MY THERAPIST SAID:

"What do you want?"

"Besides coffee."

"What are your passions?"

"I mean, where could you put your focus?"

"Some place more constructive."

"How might you contribute?"

"As a civilian, I mean."

"Tell me about Iraq."

"You have to deal with it."

Her office was like half waiting room and half examination room. "I am," I said. The picture on her desk showed children playing in a grassy backyard. "I get headaches," I said. She kept her prescription pad in her middle desk drawer, but she opened her bottom desk drawer and handed me a notebook from a whole stack of them.

I've heard some humans live nocturnally. It's a natural failsafe in case there's trouble while everyone else is sleeping. It sounds stupid but I like that idea. It helps. The stars are gone now. The birds are waking up. And I feel something like clean.

C.R. Beideman writes from Butte, Montana. His fiction appears in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Gray's Sporting Journal* and *Mid-American Review*, with more forthcoming. He's broken the same leg four times, and if you look real close you can see him in an episode of *1923* (Paramount+).