

K A S S A N D R A M O N T A G

At the Veteran's Hospital

“Everything we travel through is thorny and rough. There is no chance to save your clothes.”

—Elizabeth Smith, traveler on Oregon trail, 1845

Father's hospital gown lies on the bed.
Skin hangs loose on his hands, spreads thin
over knuckles and creases at joints
like crumpled silk. Both hands shake
and fumble with the suspender buckle
at the top of his jeans, silver clasp
glinting in florescent lights.
Plaid shirt with pearl snap buttons,
coffee colored cowboy boots, the filigree
on the side ornate as a Chinese rug.

Ready to haul hay, to ride one of the horses
to the south pasture. Eighteen years ago
he crushed the skulls of my kittens in the barn.
Too many, he had said.
I buried their bodies in the backyard,

but not deep enough, the coyotes still dug them up,
left bloody fur scattered about the forest behind our house.

Hospital bills pile on Mother's kitchen counter.
Insurance, she says, her eyes darting,
not frozen like a deer's, but wild,
still full of hope, looking for a way out.
Some animals know their end,
some don't.

During our first hunting lesson
I couldn't see the doe,
her coat blended into elms and maples.
A blue moon in a blue sky.
After the bullet lodged in her chest
and I knelt beside her, my first,
I noticed how quiet she was,
no air coming in and out,
I saw she was finally naked.

Are you ready to go home?

He looks up at me, his eyes clouded,
focused on me, and yet not.
My hands are broke. He lifts the clasp
in his palm, holding it up to me
as a gift, or permission, or a request.

After we gutted the deer, we hung
her in the barn. Her legs splayed
and her torso open like a wide red mouth,
her head jerked up by the wire,
stretching her graceful neck taut.
When father butchered her,
privilege, responsibility,
were his words, as his knife
separated hide from meat and bone.

The organs piled in the field,
her meat piled on the table,
her hide now a rug at our feet.
Her body now a string of bones.
If only he could divide his heart so neatly,
my mother once said.

A privilege, being let into their bodies,
your hands separating the layers of flesh.
Each cut not an orifice, but a prized entrance.

Uncle

You preferred to die alone,
the nurse said, adjusting
the morphine.

When I thanked you for the book
you gave me on my sixth
birthday you were embarrassed

and took a long gulp of beer,
as if you were pouring yourself
into the liquid.

On car rides I would read
it and think of you,

while you slept with a gun
under your pillow and woke up
screaming out the window.

In the end, we were as scared
of you as you were. We took
Grandma out of her house

to get away from you and she wept
for her son, as you starved in your childhood
home, it now dark and quiet.

Among the siblings curses
skimmed the edges of teeth.
What do you do with the prodigal son

who won't come back from Vietnam,
from his father's suicide, from divorce?
the memories like skinned animals,
bleeding from the robbery.

Ten years ago you sat outside
smoking a tobacco pipe,
laughter from your throat
like German syllables,
and your hands shook from the image
of so many people moving across the lawn.

It was so slow, your leaving.
At first we didn't notice,
but then, you couldn't put your shoes
on the right feet, and this,
this meant you weren't coming back
to us with your swearing

and diffident gift giving,
your stubbornness and acid humor,
your eyes brightly veined,
sore from seeing so much.

On the china hutch sits a photo
of you when you were young,
standing on the scrubland
of Vietnam, watching
the camera through sunglasses,
a skinny, camouflaged boy.

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