

**Skinned: A collection of linked stories**

by

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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Skinned*, a collection of linked stories written as my thesis for the MFA in Creative Writing and Environment Program at Iowa State University, is about a shortgrass prairie reserve in northeastern Montana, and a group of young scientists who come to live and work there for a time. It's about humans becoming intimately acquainted with a place, and the inseparable nature of interpersonal dynamics and ecology. It's about imperfect people in a fractured landscape trying to find themselves and preserve a little bit of wildness.

These linked stories are based on my experience living in Montana for two months as an ecologist and getting to know the shortgrass prairie ecosystem. For my thesis, I did extensive research about Big Sky Country, reading anthologies, memoirs, and fiction to inform my impressions of this quintessentially Western state. I also researched the natural history and ecology of the prairie flora and fauna.

These stories are primarily told from the protagonist Sarah's perspective, but the point of view fluctuates as she inhabits the inner lives and voices of her companions and fellow creatures. She refers to this act as "skinning," and it allows her to imagine other realities, to slip into other bodies. Skinning is also a literal occurrence in some of these stories, and it speaks to these characters' desires to learn useful skills, and to live off the land in a small way. The other characters, Sarah's cohort of fellow researchers in their twenties, come from around the world, and the stories focus on their interactions and adventures on the prairie and farther afield, such as when they travel to the Fort Belknap reservation to visit a member of the Aaniiih tribe and help skin a buffalo. The idea of

skinning also pertains to the minimalist prose style that I strive for, a deliberate paring down and uncluttering that I hope gets to the root.

The setting of these stories is vital, because the shortgrass prairie is an endangered ecosystem, and the reserve where the characters work is attempting to conserve a large section before it's too late. The very idea of the reserve itself raises complex political and cultural questions about who benefits or loses financially, who occupied the land in the first place, and who has the right to set aside this land for conservation or other purposes. Nevertheless, it is this wild landscape—which once comprised a great swath of America, and is still a large part of her psyche—that the characters have the opportunity and privilege to fall in love with.

The short stories themselves are interspersed with “Field Notes,” which showcase the fauna that these scientists interact with, and the impact these species have. I drew from the detailed notes I took while working in Montana to form these interstitial pieces. They focus on a variety of species, ranging from the mosquitos that proliferate after unseasonable flooding to pester Sarah and her cohort; to the ubiquitous keystone prairie dogs that provide essential ecosystem services; to the grizzlies that once roamed the Great Plains and may, one day, return. These brief narratives—which combine science, history, and poetic imagination—touch on Stacy Alaimo’s theory of trans-corporeality, the idea of the interconnection between humans and the more-than-human world. Despite our best efforts, we will never be able to separate our physical bodies from the environment that surrounds us. Which raises this question: If our bodies are so permeable, and if our interactions with the natural world can be seen as directly linked to our wellbeing, what do we want our dialogue with the more-than-human world to look

like? In this age of climate change, mass extinction, and ecological illiteracy, narratives that connect us to the natural world are more important than ever. Humans have always told stories to relate to the natural world, but the dominant narratives and myths of modernity don't appear to be working.

Stories are powerful tools for inciting change. While writing my thesis, these questions were at the back of my mind: What role do stories play in spreading ecological literacy and scientific information? How can we use stories to reimagine our place within nature and forge relationships with the more-than-human world? Personally, stories have always been where I go to learn about the world. Recent research has also shown that reading literature builds empathy. I would argue that writing stories has a similar effect. If interacting with stories (reading them and creating them) imparts vital knowledge about the world and increases our ability to empathize, perhaps their role in our culture should be treated with more respect.

In indigenous cultures, for tens of thousands of years, stories have been used to reinforce relationships that humans have with the natural world and with each other. Stories told us what plants were safe to eat, how to make medicine, where to hunt for food, and how to prepare for harsh winters. Stories carried all the accumulated knowledge of a culture for how to survive in a specific geographic location. According to noted cultural ecologist David Abram:

...a story must be judged according to whether it *makes sense*. And “making sense” must here be understood in its most direct meaning: ...to *enliven the senses*. A story that makes sense is one that stirs the senses from their slumber, one that opens the eyes and the ears to their real surroundings, tuning the tongue

to the actual tastes in the air and sending chills of recognition along the surface of the skin. (*Spell of the Sensuous* 265)

I hope, with these ecocentric stories, to bring the reader a taste of the Montana shortgrass prairie, and a group of nomadic young ecologists who made it their home for a brief time. These characters are trying to reimagine their place within a damaged world, and to figure out what leading an ethical life means to them. I hope to transport the reader into a wild prairie ecosystem that is almost gone: a windy land, where endless blue skies streaked with scuttling clouds stretch above pronghorn running through the swaying grass, where the sharp smell of ozone from a retreating thunderstorm vies with the sweet scent of sagebrush, and where human lives and foibles are just one part of the web.

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Writing is saying to no one and to everyone the things it is not possible to say to someone.

—Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby*



**Field Note: Mosquitos**

*Mosquito is Spanish for "little fly," mosca plus ito, a cute diminutive for tiny insects (comprised of thousands of species in the family Culicidae) that are feared and abhorred worldwide. The oldest mosquito is preserved in Canadian amber dating back 79 million years ago to the Cretaceous period (when the first flowering plants evolved). They have changed little since then.*

*Male mosquitos live for about a week and feed on nectar and other sugars. They hover in swarms, waiting for females to enter and mate. It is only the females who need blood to produce eggs. After a meal of blood, the female retreats and rests for a few days until it is digested and her eggs are ready. Then she lays the eggs in water, and repeats the process.*

*These are the types of people that female mosquitos like: Those with type O blood, those who breathe heavily (mosquitos detect carbon dioxide), have a generous amount of skin bacteria, give off more body heat, and anyone who is pregnant. In the arctic, mosquitos emerge in such numbers for such a short period, that they can collectively drink more than a cup of caribou blood per animal per day.*

## CREW

The landscape was blurry with mosquitos. I could see only vague shapes and colors, and tripped over tussocks of bunchgrass. The mosquitos bit clean through my pants, and that sensation—a strange mix of pinprick and itch—blanketed my skin. I ran my hands the length of my body repeatedly, momentarily brushing them away. When we stood still, the hovering clouds descended en masse for their stationary feast.

This was my first transect on the prairie reserve, and I was hiking it with Mason, an Australian photographer. He was part of the old crew who had to train Johanna and me. We had gone about eight miles and were near the end of Transect 7, which was one of the few close to our home base of Buffalo Camp, and since we couldn't take the car anywhere because of the sticky gumbo mud, we decided to hike one nearby. All the transects covered different landscape variation and habitat, and Transect 7 covered a riparian ecosystem and traversed through prairie dog towns. Everyone had their favorite transects, ones that never felt monotonous, and this was Mason's, which was why he called it when we were discussing what transects to hike today, and offered to take me along.

A week ago I arrived on this prairie in northeastern Montana, and this initial image still lingered in my memory: a smoking white road leading forever into undulating sagebrush and the cloud-streaked sky of a dissipating storm. Pronghorn ran parallel to the car, and prairie dogs stood sentinel beyond the barbed wire fences. Unplowed native grasslands still exist in only four places on Earth: Siberia, Mongolia, Patagonia, and the northern Great Plains, and this reserve needed people to help with conservation efforts. I found this job on a website for field jobs after spending the last two years working as a

nanny and at a coffee shop, work that made me deeply tired. Those years, I slept for ten hours a night and still couldn't get out of bed. I was being responsible—being a good daughter, a good aunt, a good roommate—but I was over it. I decided to spend my twenties outside in wild places.

Our job on the prairie reserve was to hike transects across 30,000 acres of prairie and collect data for conservation by monitoring camera traps along fence lines and recording sightings of wildlife like pronghorn, bison, and sage grouse.

When complete, this reserve aimed to be the largest protected wildlife area in the continental United States, bigger than Yellowstone National Park. On the reserve there were already seven hundred wild bison as well as pronghorn, elk, deer, sage grouse, and prairie dogs. They wanted to bring back the large carnivores that were extirpated from the northern Great Plains in the early 1900s as well: wolves, cougars, and prairie grizzlies. But just outside the reserve we passed a ranch house with a large sign by the driveway: *Don't Buffalo Me: No Free Roaming Bison*. Not everyone wanted this reserve. Here, the term “environmentalist” was an insult.

During my first week here I started seeing the things that weren't so apparent at first: the burrowing owls perched atop prairie dog holes they had claimed for homes, standing immobile except for those swiveling necks, surveying all with perfectly spherical yellow eyes. I noticed the grasshoppers impaled on barbed wire by shrikes, those vicious songbirds. I spotted cow skulls decorating old fence posts in the valleys of the Larb Hills, and wild onions emerging from the drying mud like stalagmites.

I was getting acquainted with the landscape little by little. As with humans, I adhered to a certain level of formality with a landscape initially; it's unreasonable and impolite to expect a place to reveal all its secrets right away.

I was enjoying the human company as well. Mason was funny, easygoing, and I never tired of hearing his Australian drawl. He was a master's student studying sustainability in Germany, where his girlfriend lived. He'd found this job the same way I did, by surfing the internet and heeding his wanderlust. I got the feeling the data collection took a backseat to his photography. He carried his camera and tripod with him, and stopped periodically to record images of the flood.

Threatening storm clouds piled on the western horizon, but the sun was out after days of rain. This part of Montana had seen the equivalent of its annual precipitation in a matter of weeks. Roads flooded out and gumbo mud sucked cars into place. For instance, our supply trip to the nearest town, Malta, was thwarted when, a few minutes down the road, the tires ceased to function and we had to scrape mud off the tires and out of the wheel wells before turning back around.

Most importantly, the mosquito population had skyrocketed. People compared it to Alaska in the summertime. In another week, when I finally gave in and learned to wear a mosquito net every time I was outside, my days would be shaded by mesh, the landscape obscured. I would wear rain gear in seventy-degree weather to keep the mosquitos from biting through my clothing, would be drenched in sweat and semi-delirious at the end of every day. Sometimes my hair, braided at the nape of my neck, would get so drenched in sweat that I could wring it out. My legs would look like a case

of the chickenpox when I wore the wrong pants (a fiber too permeable) and itched welts for two months straight.

Mason stopped to take a photo of a large prairie dog town near the creek. They were on to us, the lookouts standing tall on hind legs, chirruping in high octaves. The rest of the prairie dogs looked to the danger and then went about their business, listening for a change in pitch. Huge ferruginous hawks circled above, white with rusty patches. What we didn't see were the badgers, coyotes, eagles, rattlesnakes, and tiger salamanders that rely on prairie dogs for food and habitat. They also aerate and fertilize the soil for plants, creating forage for bison.

Despite my attempts at formality, I was already enamored of this strange landscape, its weird critters and bleak prospects. The prairie wasn't sexy, none of the glamour of Yosemite, Yellowstone, or Glacier. But I'd always had a thing for overlooked places. The trick was to look closely, to see the contrast between the little prairie dogs and massive bison in a landscape that toyed with scale in such a way that at times they seemed the same size. It was a land of optical illusions.

We carried an instrument to measure these great distances: a range finder. When we saw a bison or pronghorn or coyote or mule deer, we placed them in the crosshairs to get a yard count. We also carried a GPS that showed us the invisible transect we were supposed to follow; there were no trails, only a line on a screen. We had a tablet computer to record wildlife sightings, and a radio to communicate with the rest of the crew, a compass to assist with GPS directions, and binoculars. We divided up the gear to lessen the load, and that day I carried the tablet, binoculars, and the range finder.

Mason was getting worked up about the mosquitos—“mozzies,” as he called them—and put his tripod away, swearing. I was losing my cool faster than he, tired of the constant swatting, the incessant buzzing around my head, the little insects darkening the landscape. We decided to jog the final quarter mile, clumsily with all the gear and backpacks and hiking boots. But at least it brought us closer to the RV and a (relatively) mosquito-free environment.

It was imperative to keep one’s mouth closed even while jogging, which I learned the hard way when a mosquito torpedoed directly down my throat. Another lodged in my eyeball, creating a spreading welt of broken blood vessels that would linger for days. I had never appreciated the utility of eyelashes more.

Suddenly I realized that my hands were too empty—I didn’t have the tablet anymore. *Shit*. I took off my backpack and checked to see if it was inside. Nope.

“Mason!” I yelled. He was twenty yards ahead, jogging with head down. “Do you have the tablet computer?”

He turned around, said he didn’t. We retraced our steps, trying to remember our exact route. *Fuck*. I had no idea where I left it, but I did remember feeling less encumbered, swatting at the mosquitos with more ease in the last mile or so. Six times we retraced our steps. Nothing.

“Oh no.” Head in hands, a mild panic spread through my chest.

It was my first day on the job, and I’d lost an expensive piece of equipment. We returned to the RV to escape the mosquitos and think clearly. The rest of the crew—Lucia, Jackson, and Johanna—were sitting around the little table entering data.

“I lost the tablet,” I said abruptly, needing to get it out of the way. “I’m sorry. I’ll find it.”

“Oh no!” said Johanna, looking genuinely concerned. She was a sweetheart, and I couldn’t make eye contact for fear of breaking down.

“I think maybe I left it at the spot where we recorded the sharp-tailed grouse,” I said to Mason. “I’m going to go back and look.”

“I’m coming,” Mason said. “But we need head nets. It was dumb to go without them. I just didn’t realize they’d be so bad today.”

He handed me one, and I slid it over my hat. “If you wear a rain jacket, they can’t bite through your shirt,” Lucia said, sliding on her own.

“I’ll come help,” Johanna said, even though she complained about the bugs nonstop. I thanked her, told her I’d manage, but the others were getting up too. Jackson pointed out that we had a better chance of finding it with more people. He was very practical, but still I was touched that they all wanted to help.

We headed out towards Transect 7, and I fell into step with Johanna. She was wearing hiking gear that looked like it hadn’t seen a day outside of the store, and lathered herself in Deet, even though it wore off quickly. She told me that her grandma always asked why she spent her money on traveling instead of saving up for a car.

“Sometimes, like right now, I think she’s right,” she said, laughing.

Johanna was from Germany, and we met a few nights ago in the hotel in Bozeman where they put us up. I extended a hand in greeting like a cold American—“Hi, I’m Sarah”—but she went in for the hug. I liked her. She was kind and soft, and everything she was thinking either came out of her mouth or was written across her face. She was a

world traveler and had been pretty much everywhere, most recently all over Africa with her boyfriend.

On the five-hour drive from Bozeman to the prairie reserve she rode with Dylan, our boss, which allowed me to drive solo and daydream out the windshield. The landscape just felt right, somehow. There were few mountains, but neither was the topography flat; it was riddled with hidden coulees and wooded valleys that descended to large, flat rivers. It was arid, but not a desert, and the huge azure sky provided the concept, if not the physical presence, of water.

“So, where did you last have it?” Johanna asked, scanning the ground for the nondescript square tablet.

“All I remember is inputting some sharp-tailed grouse we saw, and then running from the mosquitos, and suddenly not having it,” I said.

I paused to look into a sagebrush. This whole process was mortifying. Lucia came up behind me. She wore what she seemed to wear every day, baggy cargo pants with her hiking boots, and a black rain jacket with a hood to keep the mosquitos away.

I must have looked dejected, because she said, “I once lost a five-hundred-dollar camera on a job.”

“On your first day?” I asked, and we both laughed.

Lucia was a conservation biologist from Sweden, here to work for a few months. Her life was nomadic like that. She followed jobs all over the world: Montana, Arizona, the Philippines, Costa Rica. There were endangered creatures everywhere, and scientists studying them everywhere. Right now her blonde hair was in a low ponytail beneath her signature trucker hat. She looked very stereotypically Swedish: tall, thin, and fair, but had



a very bad attitude, which made her bearable. She had a strong “don’t fuck with me” vibe, which tended to endear her to men and alienate her from women, and was fond of dirty jokes and had a maniacal laugh.

Behind us, Jackson asked if I made sure it wasn’t in my backpack.

“Yes, I looked,” I said. “It’s not in there. I was carrying it in my hand.”

Jackson nodded. He had helped me set up my tent when I arrived, offering assistance despite his hand, which was in an elaborate cast. I liked how he was friendly in an understated way, kind rather than surface-nice. He was tall and wore loose clothes and square glasses. Even with his hand he had made quick work of the tent, which had to be lashed down so it wouldn’t blow away in the fierce prairie winds; I had forgotten how to tie a trucker’s hitch, and he reminded me, moving the parachute cord deftly through his fingers.

I walked next to him, scanning for the tablet and trying to think of what to say to him. Nothing came to me, so we scanned the ground in silence. I had a propensity of stepping into other people’s minds, and I couldn’t resist imagining his reality. Through his green eyes, I imagined the world was a comforting black and white, with science acting as the filter. I followed his gaze to Lucia’s back, and in that moment caught a brief inkling of his desires.

After the third pass, it became clear that the tablet was not going to appear. When the clouds from the west had spread across the sky and the first drops began to fall, I decided to call our boss. I explained my mistake to Dylan as we hiked back to the RV in the prologue of thunderstorm, the smell of ozone wafting over the sagebrush. He was understanding, and refused my offer to pay for it.

“Don’t worry about it, Sarah. These things happen in the field. I’ll bring up the spare from Bozeman in a few weeks.”

But I was sure it was a bad omen, wondered what else I would lose on the prairie.

Back in the RV I glanced at our humming corner of gadgets, now one tablet down. We stripped off our hot layers and head nets, and spent the next five minutes methodically killing the mosquitos that had followed us inside. Unfortunately for these loners, we did not have much sympathy for their plight, for they represented the blood-thirsty masses outside that had already siphoned off what felt like ounces—nay gallons!—of our blood. Somehow there were always stragglers in the RV, despite our ritual killing sprees.

Johanna found a deck of cards and proposed Rummy 500, and everyone squeezed into the little booth that constituted our kitchen table. We fit there, albeit snugly. Because we were all swatting mosquitos while trying to hold the cards, Mason proposed a new rule: every dead mosquito was worth ten points. Killed mosquitos were stacked in neat little piles for counting at the end of the game. Thus Mozzie Rummy was born, a game both practical and entertaining.

**Field Note: Black-tailed Prairie Dog & Black-footed Ferret**

*A prairie dog looks up from his foraging at the sound of a warning bark. He stretches tall, pudgy form lengthened to a svelte torso with tiny, limp arms. He is a keystone species on which a whole ecosystem depends. Does he know this? Perhaps he gets flashes of an ancient, collective memory in which the towns stretch forever and there are hundreds of millions of him, and the warning calls echo into eternity. He ducks into the tunnel system, travels quickly from room to room surveying his coterie. The females are there, as are the playful pups, all accounted for. This is his domain, where predatory ferrets, badgers, and rattlesnakes enter at their own risk.*

*These tubby rodents have an outsized effect on the health of the ecosystem at large, and without them the finely-tuned system crumbles. The largest prairie dog town ever recorded was in West Texas: one hundred miles long. Europeans have been trying to eradicate them from the beginning, ever since their vocalizations reminded them of barking dogs, and they found their burrows treacherous for livestock. And that rivalry still stands: ranchers versus prairie dogs, which are vermin in Montana, shot for fun like an arcade game.*

*Black-footed ferrets—one of only three ferret species in the world—need massive prairie dog colonies to support a healthy population. Considered extinct until 1981, when a colony was found in middle-of-nowhere Wyoming, their comeback has been miraculous but also full of tragedy. Disease and lack of habitat continue to hinder reintroduction efforts.*

## EYESHINE

Lucia drove and I sat shotgun. The massive old truck clunked down the dirt roads that wended through prairie dog towns. The moon was gibbous, a burgeoning disk in dark sky, and this night was truly dark, no large concentrations of artificial light for miles, no towns nearby. We were in the boonies, known as the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge.

We were also engaged in a very boony-ish activity: spotlighting. Two massive lights protruded from the roof of the truck, with handles so they could be swiveled by whoever sat in the front seats. The window was rolled down, my arm out, holding tight to the handle and swinging the spotlight to and fro across the stubby shortgrass prairie. Mosquitos, somehow still active at this hour, attacked my arm, probing through my sweatshirt. Tussocks were illumined, gold and dappled. Shapes emerged that were not animate or solid, just a play of light in the dark. But the shapes we strove to see evaded us. Where were the black-footed ferrets? Out and about hunting prairie dogs, loping around somewhere out of range.

We were out on the wildlife refuge for the weekend helping Randy, a wildlife biologist who studied endangered black-footed ferrets. Normally, we lived in tents on the nearby prairie reserve collecting wildlife data, but we decided to turn nocturnal for a few nights in order to work with doomed weasels.

It was three a.m. and I was very tired. We all were. The adrenaline and excitement kept me alert in half-hour increments or so, but in between my eyelids wilted of their own accord. I snapped to with my eyes closed twice, then sat up straight—slapping my cheeks

briskly like my dad used to do when he got drowsy on long drives—and grabbed a package of Shot Bloks from the glove compartment.

“Black-cherry-with-caffeine flavor!” I shouted, offering one to Lucia.

“Yum!”

We found it very funny that these were marketed as health food by the same company that made Clif Bars. As far as we could tell, Shot Bloks tasted and acted pretty much like gummy bears, down to the uncomfortable way they adhered to one’s molars.

I chomped a few saccharine squares and felt my blood sugar spike unpleasantly; my body wanted to be prone and unconscious at this hour, not force-fed sugar.

“I’m awake!” I yelled, wildly swinging the spotlight across the quiet night.

“Where are the critters?!”

Lucia shifted into third gear as we turned onto one of the main dirt roads. She enjoyed driving stick, I could tell, even though she wasn’t smiling. Lucia was deeply cool. I took a photo of her yesterday, leaning against the crew vehicle and regarding a rattlesnake in the road. She was the only human in the frame, a dark-clad scarecrow with the dirt road wending to nowhere behind her, the coiled diamondback her only adversary. She looked like a guerilla soldier.

In stark contrast to Lucia was the other European on our crew, Johanna, who was afraid of mosquitos and being dirty. Dozing in the backseat, she groaned loudly as we went over a bump and her head jounced against the doorjamb.

Next to Johanna in the backseat was Jackson, trying hard to stay awake but not entirely succeeding. Head tilted back at an unnatural angle, his Adam’s apple protruded alarmingly, broken hand resting gingerly on his thigh. I enjoyed looking at his cast, a

strange contraption with traction wires to prevent the tendons from hardening into a gnarled fist. He had nice digits, olive skin giving way to shapely nails. He took the traction cast off at night, and I wondered how he positioned the injured hand in his sleeping bag, if he slept on his back with it on his belly, the other below his collarbone.

Lucia saw movement to the left and stomped the brakes, waking Jackson and Johanna. A black-footed ferret hurried through a prairie dog town, and instead of balking at our lights, it paused, stared, then kept moving toward us. When it crossed the road in front of the truck, fearless, we noticed the kill dangling from its jaws: a juicy prairie dog, twice its size.

Lucia radioed Randy, and he told us to use the binoculars, see if there was dye on its nape. He put a splotch of hair dye on the ones he caught in order to easily ID them and know not to recapture. We saw no dye on this individual, but based on the location and description, Randy was fairly certain he knew who it was. We waited for Randy's truck while the ferret in question slipped into a burrow with its fat prize.

I watched Randy's headlights approach, emerging from the maze of prairie dog towns like a vigilante; if I didn't know there were roads out there, I would have thought he was off-roading through the short-grass prairie. We stepped out of our truck as he stopped in the middle of the road and disembarked, a lanky man in his fifties with a handlebar mustache walking stiffly as though his hip pained him.

We helped him grab the chip reader from the truck bed. It was a ring attached to wires that read the microchip embedded in the ferrets' scruff. Then we would know exactly which individual we were seeing, whether she had been caught and tagged before. We would set the readers up at a few strategic holes, including the one she

disappeared down, and hope that she reemerged, a curious pointed head examining the bright lights.

Despite the Shot Bloks, I could feel my eyelids drooping again, so I switched to my backup method for staying alert: imagining my new friends' inner lives. It was a habit I'd picked up in my days as a barista and nanny, a way of combating boredom. I had taken to calling this game of mine "eyeshine." Later, I thought of these acts of ventriloquism as "skinning."

### *Lucia*

Randy handed me the chip reader because I'd set it up before. I hoped he would walk with me over to the holes because I knew which one she disappeared down, but wasn't sure which other holes would be good options for the reader. Randy had a way of reading the lay of the land, of guessing which holes a ferret might choose to emerge from. It was all underground, far out of human sight. How did he know? Had he studied the building patterns of ferret burrows? Probably, I wouldn't be surprised. He'd been doing this for thirty years.

We walked over to the hole with Johanna behind us, asking idiotic questions. "When do you turn in for the night, Randy?" "Are there snakes out right now?" I wished her English was worse so she would talk less. She gave us Europeans a bad name as over-domesticated softies.

Randy answered good-naturedly and in no hurry. He was a very soothing man, halfway between withdrawn cowboy and goofy science geek, with his cowboy hat and plaid shirt tucked into belted jeans. There weren't men like Randy in Sweden, with

handlebar mustaches and trucks and conservation records of his caliber. His worn boots creaked as he bent down to examine the burrow.

He let me lay the ring and pointed out other holes that could be promising. That was the extent of the preparation; now we just had to wait until the ferrets emerged or they didn't and we gave up. Randy clambered back into his truck, and we headed back to ours.

"I'm so cold!" Johanna moaned and I said nothing; Sarah gave a sympathetic grunt of assent.

"Johanna, that is completely beside the point. Shut up and take a nap," is what I wanted to say but didn't.

We sat in the car, watching the burrows, waiting for a ferret head to pop up. My legs were too long to sit comfortably in the driver's seat while stationary, and if I moved the seat back it would run into Johanna and she'd ask questions and I'd have to explain about my legs and she'd get overly concerned and really I didn't want to talk about it at all. I just wanted a little more space. But it wasn't worth it, so I tucked one up onto the seat.

We waited like this for hours, trying hard to stay alert. Everyone else in the truck fell asleep. My fear that Randy would be disappointed kept me alert, mostly, and I methodically ran through memories to keep me awake. I pictured Sweden in the summertime, the bonfires burning through the short nights and the long parties outside, pictured the lit-up faces of friends who never left our small town in Sweden and didn't know what the Grand Canyon looked like up close, or how to spot a healthy Ponderosa pine ecosystem in the mountains of Arizona. I told them about my travels—the sticky



nights in the Philippines when I danced with a tiny local guy who had a great sense of humor and stood on a chair so we could be eye to eye—and they seemed envious, but also content with their rooted lives, grounded in family and the familiar, versed in the subtleties of local politics, the parks that needed maintenance, the open space that needed to be designated, the best new pubs. In short, they knew the place and the people in a way I didn't anymore. Where I had breadth they had depth, and this made me unaccountably grumpy, as though I was a hyperactive gerbil and they were native rabbits who knew which gardens were best. For all my wandering, was I happier or just incurably restless?

But these thoughts of home were making me drowsy, so I concentrated on men instead, like Josh who I worked with in Arizona counting birds. The day we found an acorn woodpecker nest, he insisted we come back with a ladder. He climbed up alongside the snag and snaked a hand into the nest cavity, emerging with three pink blobs which he swaddled in his handkerchief as he quickly descended. It is a myth that birds reject offspring touched by humans, but a myth that is beneficial for most bird species; people would probably let their children handle chicks more often when they found a nest.

I remembered the startlingly pink birds against the lurid red of the handkerchief, how I picked one up to feel the tap-tapping heartbeat and gaze at the pulsing organs beneath the sheer skin. That night Josh and I fucked, tussling between sleeping bags. The next day it was as though nothing had happened and we continued with our routine, rising before sunrise to record birdsong. It was perfect.

I hadn't seen Josh in months, though we emailed occasionally, and my mind tacked sharply to a face that reminded me of Josh's, had the same subtly receding hairline: Mason. He was in the truck with Randy, and I could see the two of them talking

animatedly, heads bobbing through the dark glass. Mason finagled his way into riding with Randy, used his charm to get what he wanted, a chance to talk to Randy all night, which would no doubt end up on his blog. Mason was infinitely likeable (Australian men tend to be), and he swore the secret ingredient was that they were “laid back,” which was amusing, seeing as he had the most ambition of us all.

He had a girlfriend back in Germany, a small brunette fashion designer who made him fitted leather jackets. I think he secretly loved to be clothed in style, to be a chic city boy *and* an outdoorsman.

Mason and I were in close proximity all the time, and it just sort of happened that we gravitated towards one another, sat together at dinner or in the car, cuddled when we watched movies in cramped quarters. It wasn't weird. Sometimes I had to catch myself though, not lean in too deeply, stay away from him when we were drinking.

He was a filmmaker and always had his camera on him. When we saw the northern lights one night at camp, he set up his camera on a tripod for a time lapse. To our naked eyes, the northern lights were merely a whitish glow on the horizon with streaks shooting upward like the eerie glow of some distant city. It was nothing spectacular, almost like the Milky Way hovering above the horizon, and eventually we all climbed into our tents and went to sleep while the camera remained on its tripod, snapping incessant photos of the night sky. When Mason showed us the time-lapse the next day, it revealed unearthly greens intermixed with purples, and we could see how it undulated, pulsating up and down like heat lightning or a heart monitor.

Disasters were Mason's friend. When rains in late August flooded the prairie, he was out there with his camera, filming the washed-out roads and new-formed lakes.

When the massive thunderstorms ripped across the prairie, he set up a shelter and took photos as they approached, hit, and dissipated. There was something about how confident he looked behind his camera, how it transformed him into a documentarian with a purpose. One day, when I got the crew vehicle stuck in the mud way out by the Missouri River Breaks, he gleefully snapped photos of me under the car in the mud in my tiny orange shorts, trying to put wood under the tires for traction. Eventually, after he had taken all the photos he pleased, he suggested we radio Lars, who came with his truck and pulled us out in a few minutes.

I came back to the ferrets when the radio crackled: Randy said they had a read. I bolted upright, trained my binoculars on the burrows, saw movement after a few seconds in the right hand corner of the lens and adjusted the focus. A ferret had its forelegs and head out of the burrow, sniffing the air. It dove back in, popped back up. The white-tipped ears and black mask stood out like stage makeup in the spotlights.

The radio crackled again and Randy's voice came in: "It's the female with kits."

The anthropocentric part of me was disappointed because we wouldn't get to catch her, to see her face to face. We wouldn't lay out the wire traps and wait for her to get caught; we wouldn't approach the traps and see her shining eyes and fierce teeth and smell her overpowering musk; we wouldn't transport her to the impromptu animal hospital in the RV and watch Randy handle her. These ferrets didn't need any more vaccinations or microchips. They were set for the season. This female we only got to see from a distance, which was probably for the best since these black-footed ferrets seemed more like pets than feral weasels. They reminded me of the pet ferrets I had as a kid, which would fall asleep in the sleeve of my hoody, content in the makeshift tunnel. Most

of these black-footed ferrets had little fear of humans, would get within a few feet of us sometimes, a combination of their fearless nature and being captive bred. I had assisted Randy a month ago with this same work, helped him catch and handle the ferrets. He worked out here all summer with occasional help from volunteers like us and environmental organizations like the World Wildlife Fund. We would come out for a weekend and step into his world of nightlife, coffee, and the trailer camp he had rigged to run on car batteries.

We collected the chip reader, put it in the back of the truck, and then Randy headed off and I started the truck and headed in the opposite direction in search of other ferrets, scanning for eyeshine.

### *Randy*

Tonight was like any other summer night for me, although it was nice to have assistance from these eager young people. They reminded me how exciting it was to be some of the lucky few who would ever get to see black-footed ferrets in the wild.

I was just a regular guy from Montana who was into animals and wanted to study them. Over the years I tried to stay down to earth and close to my roots. At least I never got airs like those scientists from the East Coast who waltzed into rural Montana and started criticizing ranchers, politicians, and the state at large for their lack of conservation awareness. I looked like a rancher, could talk to ranchers, and made a concerted effort not to be a prick, which was more than most outsiders could say. I also thought my salt-and-pepper mustache didn't hurt.

I called my wife every day in the afternoon on speakerphone and updated her on the project. She lived without me during the summer, and has for fourteen years now. The winter was our time, a few months of hibernation and cross-country skiing to recuperate from an exhausting, nocturnal summer.

“I’m pretty sure I know the general vicinity of the last kit I have to give a booster vaccine to. It’s just a matter of finding a good spot and sitting there for a few hours.”

“That’s great, honey. How are the mosquitos now? Are they dying down?” Jeanie was as soothing as ever, and I felt my blood pressure drop. If her voice had a taste, it would be caramel.

“Nope, still here in droves.”

“Well, let me know if you need me to send more bug spray.”

“Oh no, I’ll be fine. How’s Rob doing? How are his summer classes?”

“Oh, he doesn’t tell me a thing, but I think he’s doing all right. Said his truck broke down last week and he was ordering parts. There’s a big wildfire up by Missoula, and I told him to take his asthma medication....”

We went on like this for a good half hour, and I pictured her looking out the window at the garden, thinking about which beds needed weeding, and how many carrots to harvest for dinner. Jeanie was the only reason I wasn’t stuck in a deep depression after decades of working with weasels on the brink of extinction. It had been year after year of decimation from diseases like the sylvatic plague, brief rebounds, and the dire long-term view that within a warming and crumbling world with a myriad of disappearing species, the funds for this work could very well dry up.

*Jackson*

The adrenaline from finding a ferret kept me alert in the back of the truck for a while. I was especially intrigued by the chip reader and how it worked. It used radio frequency and was made of an integrated circuit encased by glass, about the size of a large grain of rice. Part of me wished I had never gone to a liberal arts school for undergrad. There would have been so many scientific research opportunities at larger schools. But then I never would have met Chloe, never fallen in love, never had my heart broken and ended up on the prairie trying to wait it out. It helped that Lucia was here, though, as she was the kind of girl who made one happy to be single.

Johanna sat next to me in the backseat, already drifting off again. She was so fragile, reminded me of my little sister. She packed three ham sandwiches for lunch every day when we hiked transects, but must have a fast metabolism because she remained tiny. She was not a down-and-dirty type of environmentalist like the rest of us, but we needed all types, including the urban strain, the ones who made sustainability look sexy, fun, and easy for mainstream adoption.

I glanced at Lucia in the driver's seat, trying to guess which way she was going to turn. I needed to walk around, needed a job to do, or I was going to fall asleep again. I leaned forward.

"Can you drop me off at East Prairie Dog Town?" I said to Lucia, my voice coming out much softer and lower than expected. I cleared my throat.

"Sure."

Sarah turned around to look at me. "If you want company, I'll come with ..."

Her face asked a question, but I wasn't sure what it was. I had a hard time reading her in general, and the darkness didn't help. Her greenish yellow eyes reminded me of an owl's, wide and steady. I wasn't even sure if Sarah liked me, but we seemed to be paired as a team quite often. You would think I would know her better by now but I didn't; she didn't talk much about herself when we were alone, and I wasn't a chatty person either, so we mostly talked about plants and their medicinal uses.

"Either way," I said, turning to look out the window. I preferred to go alone, but if Sarah wanted to come that was fine too. She wasn't hard to be around.

When I glanced back she was still looking at me, her eyes searching. What had I missed?

Lucia drove up a gradual hill and stopped at a red reflector on the side of the road. This was the marker for the prairie dog town, which lay pretty much due east of it.

I jumped out of the truck with my backpack and got a hand-held spotlight from the bed.

"Pick me up in an hour?"

"Yep," Lucia said.

Johanna woke up and frowned.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm checking the East Prairie Dog Town for ferrets."

"Ok.... You shouldn't go alone!"

"I'll be fine."

Sarah didn't make a move to come along, so I closed the door and switched on my headlamp. As I set off into the sagebrush, Lucia drove away. I switched on the heavy

spotlight and scanned the dark for another reflector in the distance—it should have been directly back from the first one, but I wasn't catching any glint of red in the dark, so I moved forward, scanning in wide arcs.

I thought of Lucia's hands on the wheel, long fingers, close trimmed nails, pink nail beds, bracelets resting on the prominent bone of her wrist. Though I was a little embarrassed, I couldn't help but see it as a good sign—I hadn't thought about another woman since Chloe and I broke up months ago. We'd been together for two years, senior year of college and post graduation, and she was my first real love. And all I could think about, especially when drunk or stoned, was how no other intoxicant compared to being in love. Nothing came close.

A glimmer in the dark, a flash of red reflector way off in the distance, and I turned in that direction, alternating between shining the light at my feet so I didn't trip, to keeping an eye on the red beacon to maintain my bearing.

I didn't see why it couldn't work with Lucia. She was a bit taller than me but not by much, and though I was thin she was wiry too. My mother was European, so we had that in common. We could be a science power couple, traveling the world for fieldwork. Chloe had been a psychology major, and although she liked to be outside she was never that interested in science, the Latin names of plants for instance. *Artemesia tridentata*, I muttered to the sagebrush, silvery in the moonlight.

I reached the reflector and looked for the next one, turning in slow circles four times before I spotted glinting. It was a bit eerie out here in the dark, the white road invisible now too, no light but the moon and the reflectors, without which I could wander



off in any direction, lost. I did have a GPS in my backpack, though, so I could figure it out.

A spark of piercing red in my periphery: the next reflector. When I reached it, I knew I had arrived: the prairie dog town stretched in front of me, a landscape trimmed neatly of vegetation. The burrows at the edge were the lookouts, slightly removed from the main town to provide early warning from predators like rattlesnakes, coyotes, and humans. I slowly rotated the spotlight, looking for pairs of eyes. The prairie dogs were asleep, but I was looking for the nocturnal ferrets.

My left hand, immobilized in a cast, twinged as it supported the spotlight. Mason's Australian drawl echoed through my memory, *Chicks dig the hand!* It was true. In grocery stores women noticed my hand and gave me sympathetic smiles. I just didn't really know how to take it further. *Want to come take care of me? Or, I may only have one hand, but I know how to use it...* The problem was I didn't feel confident as an invalid, felt small, silly, and even more shy than usual. Especially since the women inevitably asked how I hurt it and I had to tell them it was in my parents' basement building a model airplane, making the mistake of turning on the propeller inside and then, unaccountably, reaching for the whirring blades. So juvenile.

### *Johanna*

I was so cold. Honestly, I had never been so cold. In Germany yes, it got cold, but I lived in Munich, and there were always the warm buildings to go into. In Montana, I hadn't been to a single city, unless you counted Bozeman, which was just a town with a university on top of it. Montana was all empty space and big trucks.

I had never slept in a truck before, either. The metal was so cold it froze me even when it wasn't touching my skin. I tried to stay awake at first, and made it a few hours. But the others never let me drive, and I was pretty sure I would get lost on these roads that looped in and out of prairie dog towns. It was hard to stay awake when you weren't needed.

What I had been thinking about all day was Andy, my boyfriend. He was working in Wyoming, at Yellowstone, which was why I was here in the first place, so we could be near each other. Andy was the kind of guy who liked taking care of people, and he took care of me so well. He thought my little fears and anxieties were endearing, whereas the crew just found them annoying. Oh well, I tried to not complain.

The other thing I thought about was my cat, Minka. She lived at my mother's house but I grew up with her, and she was everything to me. People thought this was extreme, but I loved this cat. Anyway, a few days ago my mother told me over Skype that Minka was sick and had to go to the vet, and now all I could think about was her.

Something about Montana made me paranoid: I kept thinking about Andy meeting a cowgirl in Wyoming and never coming home to Germany. And I pictured my Minka dying while I was here and didn't have the chance to go home and say goodbye.

These were the things that made me cold. They also made me want to sleep. Nothing—not Lucia's angry laugh or her sarcastic comments or the possibility of seeing a ferret—could keep me awake. I was bone tired: of this state, of this country, of this job. Lucia obviously hated me, and I appreciated that she was up-front about that. With American girls it was harder to tell—they faked it more often, smiled when they didn't

mean it. It was impossible to know where one stood when a person didn't express how she felt.

"Next time we're near camp will you drop me off?" I asked Lucia. "I need to sleep on a bed for a few hours. I'll set an alarm to get back up and come out."

At least I would try. Last night I didn't hear my alarm and slept soundly till eight a.m.

"Sure. It'll be half an hour at least because we're pretty far out."

"Can you drive a little faster?" I asked, and she glared at me in the rearview.

I thought about Jackson hiking out there all alone in the dark through the sagebrush. He was crazy! I would never do that, but I guess he liked it.

### *Lucia*

At six a.m. we headed back to camp. The stars were fading and a few birds vocalized. I parked the truck, turned off the spotlights, uncoiled from the car. I had never been so excited to sleep. Johanna and Sarah were in one RV, Jackson had his own, and Mason and I were in another. I climbed onto the top bunk and pulled a sweatshirt over my face to block out the early morning light. The trailer door swung open.

"Dude, Randy and I just saw a badger! And two more ferrets before that, one of which I actually got a good shot of. There were also heaps of burrowing owls. Tonight was epic! Also, guess who we found walking along the road?" Mason said, plunking his camera gear on the table.

"Uh..."

"Jackson! You forgot to pick him up."

“Oh, shit.”

“He was alright, seemed perfectly happy strolling along in the moonlight.”

“Wow, I totally forgot.”

“No worries, he’s fine. How was your night?”

“Well, Johanna started snoring in the backseat and talking in her sleep about her cat,” I grumbled, cranky at the thought of his exciting night with Randy.

“Ah buddy, I’m sorry. You should ride with Randy tonight. That guy is the coolest,” he said, collapsing into the lower bunk.

I lay on my back on the lumpy mattress, and couldn’t stop calculating the odds for these ferrets. What would happen when Randy retired? What would happen when funding ran out, or the conservation community collectively decided that with climate change we were going to lose so many species that we had to do triage and save only the hardy ones that had a greater chance of survival in a warming world? Would trying to save the last black-footed ferrets be regarded on as an extravagant (if altruistic) failure?

Suddenly it felt unbearable to be up on the top bunk, all alone.

“Hey Mason, can I come down there? This mattress is super hard...”

Pause. Long pause. “Yeah, sure.”

I launched down the ladder before I could think too hard and crawled into the lower bunk with him.

“Johanna’s voice,” I moaned, clutching my ears. “I’m going to murder her.”

“I know—she’s annoying as hell. I reckon she’s just homesick and misses her boyfriend, but still.”

I looked out the window, past the checkered mustard yellow drapes pungent with the smell of ancient cooking grease, at the dawn hitting the adjacent RV, and I slid the drapes shut. Mason smelled like sweat and slept-in clothes, and I pressed my nose to his sleeping bag.

It wasn't immediate. We chatted and then dozed companionably for a few hours. But then I woke up, turned, bit into his scruffy neck, and it was all over. Maybe I was an asshole for blindsiding him like that. But was it fun? Yes.

We slept all day curled up together, and I dreamt of long winters and warm dens. At three p.m. he got up and made breakfast, scrambling eggs and frying sausage. Even his back looked guilty.

Eventually we met up with the others and went for a hike along the Missouri River, looking for birds. For a long time I watched a female indigo bunting hop along the eroding bank. Jackson got out a deck of cards, and we played Rummy 500 until ten p.m. when it was time to gear-up for ferret searching again. I climbed into the car next to Randy, and while the others loaded into the other truck I watched Mason's cute butt in those tight black jeans: No regrets.

### *Mason*

I didn't even ask if anyone else wanted to drive anymore, just climbed into the driver's seat and made sure my camera was in arm's reach. Jackson's hand was in that crazy cast, Sarah always said she'd rather be a passenger, and Johanna I didn't ask anymore because we'd spend half the night lurching along outlying roads hopelessly lost. Johanna had been a pain in my ass since the beginning, and it took all my willpower not

to snap at her. The problem was her boyfriend, Andy, was my best mate back in Germany. Andy was in Wyoming working at Yellowstone, and when Johanna was looking for a job in the area I told her about this one in Montana I had found. Andy was a true friend and a genuine guy, but why he was dating Johanna I couldn't figure out, and it took me spending all this solo time with her to realize the full extent of my dislike. I was never a big fan, but I had become anti-Johanna. She was incredibly needy, always asking questions and voicing concerns about her personal safety. She was afraid of the mozzies, of not packing enough lunch, of forgetting her sunscreen. She was constantly asking heaps of questions like: How many miles is the hike? How long is the drive? What is everyone else bringing? All of her questions could be answered the same: *Chill out*.

I had been living in Germany for almost three years, and Andy was my oldest friend there. Andy, Johanna, and I were all in the same master's program at the university, studying sustainability. Germany had all sorts of funding for programs like this, so I was basically going to school for free. But I didn't move from Australia to Germany for the school. It was for a girl.

I met Katja while traveling in South America. I rarely regretted moving to Germany for her since she was about the chilliest girl I knew, and on top of that she was a total babe, curvy and dark-haired. But what I didn't admit to most people was that I loved her because she was incredibly kind. I'd had a lot of hot girlfriends—a Japanese snowboarder who cheated on me, a Colombian dancer with the perfect body, an Israeli actress—but none of them took care of me like Katja did. Sometimes I thought Katja was the most like my mum, who raised me single-handedly on a farm in Newcastle.

Which was why hooking up with Lucia last night was a terrible idea and could never happen again, or be spoken of to anyone. I had been so careful! I shouldn't have let her into the lower bunk, but I didn't know she would go *there*. Just the other day Sarah took a photo of me and Lucia entwined on a picnic bench.

"Don't put that on Facebook," I had growled. "My girlfriend would be pissed."

But it had always been a simple physical friendship, important to keep off of social media in case it was misinterpreted. The problem was that now it *had* become something else.

I was driving too fast for Johanna's taste and, of course, she piped up from the backseat.

"Mason, I think maybe you should slow down? I just saw a rabbit that you could have hit. Also, it's making the ride back here very bumpy."

I didn't answer, but eased off the gas a little. The radio crackled: "Ferret in one of the traps."

I grabbed the radio and asked Randy where he was, then checked to make sure my camera was right beside me.

"Copy that. We're on our way."

Driving fast in the dark reminded me of being a teenager in Australia, tearing across country roads with my mates. The landscape outside of Newcastle used to be dark in those days, unflooded by streetlights and blinking cell towers. It was a miracle we didn't die, although once Caleb almost flipped his dad's pickup one Friday night on the way back from playing video games at my house.

Finally Randy's truck lights appeared, and I barreled towards them. Randy and Lucia stood near the truck talking, and I killed the engine and jumped out with my camera. Sarah followed, but Johanna had to put on her jacket and find her hat, talking the entire time:

“Has anyone seen my mosquito net? I put it down right on the seat and now it's gone....”

When we were all finally gathered around, Randy told us about this ferret: a kit born in the wild that he had caught last year but needed to update on vaccines. The trap was a long metal device, very basic with a flap that closed when they stepped on the lever. It was similar to what my mum used to catch rabbits in her garden. Crouched in one end was the ferret, hissing ferociously as we neared. Her eyes gleamed green in the flashlight. I squatted down to get a shot of her and she hissed and backed up farther, tail raised high. I could smell the musk coming off her in waves. As I clicked away she seemed to get more agitated so I paused, then considered how there were only one thousand of these animals left in the wild and resumed taking photos until Randy draped a brown wool blanket over the cage for warmth and to keep her calm.

I was looking at the ferret through the lens, but what I kept seeing by accident were vivid flashes of Lucia's unclothed body, my eyes waging a mutiny against my brain. It began with a bite in the dark, her lips on my scruff, plump and chapped. God, she had undressed me so quickly, no nonsense. Her hair smelled like sun and salt, her body lithe and strong. I couldn't see her pale eyes in the dark, couldn't see much of anything, but my hands remembered her body.



Randy asked who wanted to carry the cage back to the truck and I jumped. *Jesus, relax*, I thought. I clicked away as Lucia carefully hoisted it and walked gently to the truck bed. She kept an eye on the uneven ground, her long legs dodging holes and tussocks with self-assured strides. The smell of musk was overpowering. Randy secured the trap in his truck and told us to meet him back at camp. We turned off the spotlights on the roof and just drove for once, ignoring the wildlife on the periphery.

The sky was lightening almost imperceptibly as we pulled up to camp. This was usually how it happened, according to Randy: ferrets were most active in the early morning hours and usually got caught then, which meant you had to be most alert after a long night of work. He had been in charge of the reintroduction of ferrets on the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge for decades now, and had followed this nocturnal schedule every single summer during the field season.

I jumped out of the truck and jogged to the trailer where Randy had the ferret exam equipment set up. Sarah followed, and Johanna ran to get her camera from the RV.

I opened the screen door, then the thin door itself to enter a tiny trailer, the kind that was usually hooked up to massive pickups, a contraption men in Montana took on hunting trips. Filled to the brim with medical paraphernalia, it smelled of disinfectant, glowed with fluorescent lights, and hummed with equipment. The paneling was peeling off, and the upholstered booths were threadbare. This well-used workspace was where Randy processed ferrets.

Lucia towered in these small quarters, almost grazing the roof in her baseball hat. She looked splendid in that strange tepid light, hair gleaming, profile stark. She was in the corner with Randy, helping him administer anesthetic, and I was trying not to regret

what we did; it felt so natural. In the midst of helping to save these mammals on the brink of extinction for decades, we did the opposite of giving up. We gave into natural impulses: hormones, pheromones, the mysterious chemistry of attraction. It was our own little fertility ceremony for these critters. That's what I told myself.

The trailer was unpleasantly crowded, and no one knew where to stand. I was taking photos and had no problem about being in the front and blocking everyone else's view. *I'm working, dammit.*

Randy moved about swiftly, his work boots clicking on the linoleum floor, unconcerned with the limp ferret on the table in front of him with an oxygen mask over her nose, the cutest little anesthetized patient ever.

"I'm just going to give her the booster vaccine for canine distemper and draw some blood for samples," he said.

This ferret already had a transponder chip under her skin, so no need to insert one. She looked so malleable and soft, her lanky body draped in Randy's hands, the dark fur of the legs blending into her tawny body and black mask. She looked like the prairie itself, the same hues and contrasts.

I planned on writing a piece about the black-footed ferrets and their reintroduction to go along with photographs for my blog. I got some great photos of Randy and the ferret. Though he talked us through the process slowly, he moved quickly, handling her with expert gestures and as little as possible. Soon he was done and turned off the anesthetic air, set the ferret back in the cage, ready for release into the wild as soon as she revived.

Randy said he would take the ferret back to where we found her, and that we could call it a night. We had spotlighted for more than nine hours tonight, and a similar amount last night. The relief on our faces must have been evident because he chuckled.

“Go get some sleep,” he said.

We all stumbled back to our respective trailers, and Lucia and I didn’t talk until we entered ours, with its signature yellow curtains and mussed sleeping bags. As she climbed into her bunk all she said was:

“I could sleep forever.”

“Me too,” I lied.

I sank onto the rumpled bed with my camera, flipped through the photos I took. There was one of Lucia striding across the prairie dog town holding the ferret that I almost deleted because it seemed so incriminating. But no one else would notice the camera angle but me, how it took in too much of her long legs. So I removed my thumb from the trash button and continued flipping through.

**Field Note: Elk**

*The Larb Hills echo with the bellows of bull elk, something between high-pitched screams and fluty wind instruments. They bugle to attract females, assert dominance, and fight. They prance, massive antlers, dark necks, and white hindquarters on full display as the females graze, mostly disinterested. Each male elk wants his own harem, a family of cows and young. The young bulls are in search of it, must prove themselves capable, and the old bulls must demonstrate their continued competence.*

**HOLZHEY***Jackson*

One morning in October, I woke up to find a dead kestrel in front of the outhouse. I had seen that individual before, a bright young male that liked to glide around camp and perch in the eaves. The temperature had dipped to twenty-eight degrees the night before, and there he lay, a tiny falcon, cold and perfect. He fit in the palm of my hand, long rusty tail feathers protruding past my wrist, big shiny eyes hidden behind yellow lids that closed upwards and were ringed in bristly black lashes. I pulled the eyelids down and saw my own face reflected in his pupils, hair whipping in the wind, the morning sun a pinprick behind me.

I knew this onset of cold weather meant migration, leaving our campsite for the Holzhey Ranch. For a month my home had been a compact two-person tent in the middle of 30,000 acres of prairie. My tent looked over a small drainage with riparian trees where songbirds congregated in the mornings. The leaves were starting to fall and the creek bed lay coated in bright yellow and brown many inches deep. It was here that I went to bed at nine p.m. and woke up at five a.m.

To keep my tent from blowing away in fierce winds, I had lashed it down with parachute cord at all angles. It was so windy some nights that the rain fly flapping against the tent drowned out my dreams. But I had grown to like the white noise it created, akin to sitting on a cliff above a crashing ocean—the sound of rock eroding, the unceasing creation of sand. The wind was also the only thing that kept the mosquitos away. On still nights they pitter-pattered against the nylon tent, mimicking the syncopation of rain.

Sometimes herds of wild bison roamed through camp, laying the grass low and leaving patties everywhere. Sometimes this happened while we slept, and we would wake to a snuffling herd in the early morning, essentially stranded in our tents until there was an opening. Getting too close to bison can be dangerous as they are immense, strong, and surprisingly fast. We waited in the islands of our tents as these behemoths grazed through at their own pace.

On a typical day, I'd wake to my alarm, worn green sleeping bag sealing in the warmth of my body. Sometimes in the dark I would hear someone else's phone buzzing off a grating melody, church bells or cheerful marimbas.

The birds would be up already, testing the first notes of song in the dark. I would lie still for ten more minutes until the snooze ran out. Those minutes were sweet, a blip between sleeping and waking where time moved differently, stretching and folding, so that when my alarm rang again it felt like both an hour and only a second after the first sounding.

I'd find my jeans, the black ones I wore every day, and pull them into my sleeping bag, warming them against my legs before shrugging them on. Then I'd find my sweatshirt and down jacket. At that point I'd put on my headlamp and locate all the gear I needed for the day.

Before going further I'd find the brace for my hand, strap my fingers into it gently. It was sore, the skin red and peeling, but had healed quite a bit since I first arrived. I had cut a ligament while assembling a drone, but decided to come to Montana for this field job anyway, and was able to do most things using only one hand, albeit awkwardly.

With the brace securely on, I'd unzip the tent, locate my boots sitting outside, shake them out for any creatures that might have crawled in during the night, and set off toward the trailer.

Generally the first one up and moving, I'd watch the small beams of headlamps dancing inside other people's tents. We were all spread far apart, and Lucia's tent was closest to mine, thirty yards away. Her dot of light would stay steady for a minute, then skitter up and down as she moved around. I thought of her dressing in the dark and wondered what she wore to sleep—in my mind, a very worn, thin white t-shirt and nothing else. When I thought of her nipples imprinted against the fabric in the cold morning air, I'd stop myself and take a deep breath.

I'd walk the hundred yards to the small trailer that served as our living/working area. It had a kitchen, table, and bed. Our equipment was stored here: all the radios, computers, GPS units, compasses, range finders. Sometimes I'd have time to cook myself some eggs, sit at the booth and eat while the others trailed in groggily. Eventually we would all pile into the massive Toyota Sequoia that was once upon a time silver but was now streaked with dirt and mud. The grill and front license plate were obscured by dead mosquitos, fuzzing the metal like fungi.

Mosquitos swirled like visible dust, filling every possible sphere of airspace with humming wings and demanding proboscises, the sound alone maddening. They landed on head nets and perched there, searching for a gap, an opening, a slip, and bit through all but the tightest weave. They settled on long sleeves, rain jackets, any barrier between human skin and their mouths, forming dark mats of hungry insects.

Inside the car the protocol was this: close the doors quickly, blast the air conditioning to immobilize them, squish the rest against the windows. Human blood covered the glass in minute smears that dried a rusty brown. Every day it seemed like each of us took turns falling apart, slapping frantically and in vain, yelling, sprinting off into the distance to escape the swarm. The others soothed the one panicking, waited out the phobic moment. We only killed female mosquitos because only female mosquitos bite, never desist in their pursuit of that essential ingredient to create offspring: blood.

Whoever was driving would drop pairs of us off at different transects, which we would hike until the early afternoon. The drivers would pick us up again, and we'd head back to camp to spend the afternoons as we liked.

The best days were when Lucia and I hiked together. I usually outpaced my partner, but with her long legs and competitive streak, Lucia kept up. I think we both enjoyed sweating and working hard. And though I did most of the talking, which wasn't much, I never got the feeling she talked because she had to; she said only what she wanted, and had no compunction about abruptly ending a conversation she wasn't interested in, or responding with monosyllables to questions she didn't care for. With Lucia I always knew where I stood.

Camp consisted of the trailer, a large white tent, a pit toilet, and another trailer with two portable showers. This spare, rugged reality was about to be replaced by a doublewide trailer next to an old ranch house—civilization in a way, or at the very least indoor living.

\*



On the day we moved to the Holzhey Ranch, a ten-minute drive west of Buffalo Camp, we packed our tents and the first load of gear into the car. The prairie reserve we worked for had recently purchased the property, and it would serve as our housing over the winter. It was only September, but by late fall camping would be far too cold, and our crew of rotating scientists gathered data on the prairie year round.

When we pulled into the Holzhey driveway for the first time, Mason paused at the entrance to take a photograph of the cars rusting against windswept clouds. Lucia opened up the oversized mailbox and found a mouse nest brimming with squirming babies. I scanned the two-story ranch house in the distance and the doublewide to the north of it where we would be living. The whole property made me uneasy. The Holzhey family had only been gone for a few months, and it felt like they had left much of their life behind, as though they were fleeing an oncoming tornado. The Holzheys were an old ranching family that had been on this land for decades, but found the offer of a buyout by a conservation group too tempting; perhaps they were broke. Perhaps there was a squabble between siblings about who got what when their parents died that made it easier to sell the whole thing and split the profit.

We all piled back into the car and continued up the long drive. Off to the side an ancient snub-nosed school bus rusted in the weeds. The doublewide had a porch built onto it, across which Betty the barn cat paced. We had been warned about Betty's zealous affection. She had no qualms about her new tenants, and it was almost as if we were expected. She rubbed against our legs mewling incessantly, and Johanna dropped instantly to her knees to pet her while the rest of us pushed through the door and into the living room.

Beige carpeting covered the floors. I plopped my backpack down and wandered the narrow hallway. We would have a real bathroom instead of an outhouse, and a normal-sized kitchen instead of the cramped one in the hallway of the RV. There were four bedrooms, and I grabbed the one farthest away from everything, with a window looking out on massive rotting hay bales that stood like giant golden-brown wheels of cheese, aging for eternity.

It was Lucia who discovered the liquor in the kitchen cabinets.

“They left us a present!” she hollered, lining up the raspberry vodka and coconut rum.

“Do they have anything that isn’t flavored? Any plain whiskey or anything?” Mason asked, wrinkling his nose at the girly flavors.

“Doesn’t look like it!” Lucia said cheerfully, rummaging deeper and pulling out a bottle of Kahlua. “It’s free booze. Don’t be such a snob.”

“This looks like a massive hangover waiting to happen,” Mason muttered.

We went back and forth from camp to the Holzhey Ranch a few times until all our gear was in the doublewide. Sarah took charge of cleaning the trailer at camp for the first time in months and found another mouse nest in one of the kitchen drawers. Mason claimed he had known about it for months but hadn’t said anything because he knew Johanna would freak out.

When the sun set, we made the final trip to the ranch, the gravel road smoking as we sped towards pink clouds on the western horizon. Sarah pointed out a great-horned owl perched on a tree by the road; for some reason it didn’t fly off when we drove by. We

passed a truck whose driver, a rancher in a Stetson, raised his fingers slightly off the wheel at us, face unmoving and grim.

This time when we went by the Shores cemetery, it felt even more gothic than usual. It was a tiny patch of prairie, about twenty square feet enclosed by a spiked metal fence and gate with SHORES in large metal letters curving across the top. In the middle of the enclosure was a massive boulder with a plaque that read:

*Shores Homestead 1911*

*Earl and other loved ones now at rest on this land they loved so dear*

A hundred years ago, people were living off of this land, and dying. The fact that Earl was the one name remembered amid a host of loved ones was eerie, but spoke to the propensity of this place to swallow people up. And yet, they loved it *so dear*. The last name Shores was oddly suited to this oceanic landscape where the grayish-green grass rippled in the wind and the sun fell on it in waves between the scuttling clouds.

I wondered how much the Shores and the Holzheys had in common, and if they had inhabited the prairie at the same time. When did the first Holzheys arrive? When did the Shores descendants leave?

Hereford cattle grazed near the road on the remaining working ranches within the reserve. I stared long and hard at one with red patterning on its white face that made it look like a human skull, the colors arranged in such a way that the eyes were dark hollows and only dark splotches for the nose and mouth. It was the eeriest cow I had ever seen, a calavera in the flesh.

We arrived at the Holzhey ranch with the last load of gear, and Mason parked the car, pulling the e-brake zealously.

“Honey, I’m home!” he hollered at the doublewide, hopping out of the car.

Inside I watched Lucia. She didn’t seem to know what to do, and slid down the wall to sit on the carpet in the furniture-less living room. It was Mason’s turn to cook dinner, and he was making the only dish he ever made: spaghetti with marinara sauce. He had cracked a can of Montucky “Cold Snack” beer and was singing along to the Pandora station playing on his phone. *Right*, I thought. *Back in the land of Wi-Fi*. We used to have to drive an hour to Malta just to sit in a coffee shop and check email, and now the router in our doublewide was making me unaccountably depressed.

Sarah had logged on to the internet and was looking for jobs. Johanna was out on the porch again petting Betty, and we could hear her murmuring through the thin walls. I sat down across the room from Lucia and tried not to watch her overtly as she adjusted her ear buds and fiddled with her phone. I knew what kind of music she listened to: Swedish hard rock, punk, and heavy metal. She had played it for us on the way back from the reservoir once.

For awhile I listened to Mason rummaging around trying to find a pasta strainer in the new kitchen, then walked across the living room, down a little flight of carpeted stairs, and exited through a side door. The stars popped from the pinky blue sky like specks of mica in granite, and I meandered over to the old ranch house, situated on a little rise above us. Small grain elevators stood in the yard next to the rundown stables and paddocks.

When I tried the front door of the ranch house, it opened. There was musty carpet here too, and pastoral pictures on the walls, along with an old couch and two chairs. It wasn't a place I wanted to spend time in, but I opened some of the kitchen drawers and found silverware and table settings. It was almost as if the Holzheys had left without cleaning it out, like it had been half-abandoned for years and when they sold it they refused to deal with any of the stuff. It felt like a living monument to bad blood.

I climbed the stairs to the second story, which was why I wanted to enter in the first place, to get some height on the prairie, to see far over the flatness. There was one window in the pitched-roof loft, and I pulled up a chair. It faced the Larb Hills, which from here appeared only as nondescript bluffs. Really they were full of conifer-forested valleys, creeks, and exposed rock, now brimming with bugling elk for the fall rut.

I was reluctant to switch back to indoor living, longed to camp, and seriously considered pitching my tent in the tumbleweed-strewn yard, orienting the door towards the Larb Hills so that every morning I could pull the zipper and see them instead of carpet and wallpaper.

When the sunset faded and the stars began to overpower the colors, I left the ranch house and headed back to the doublewide, from which Mason's jocular voice issued. Inside was mayhem. The spaghetti was in a large communal bowl in the middle of the carpet and everyone sat around with forks, trying to get twirl-fulls into their mouths without spilling.

"Jackson! Where the hell have you been? Grab a fork," Mason said. "Couldn't find the bowls, so I hope no one has anything contagious."

They had already gotten into the alcohol, were maybe on their second drinks, giggling as forks tangled in the communal bowl and pasta fell on the carpet, leaving lethal trails across the beige.

Lucia sat next to Mason, but to her right was an empty space. Normally, I would avoid such an opening because I didn't want to make it too obvious how much I liked her, didn't want to make her uncomfortable. But tonight seemed like a night for openings, for shifting spaces and categories.

I put my fork into the bowl at the same time as Sarah and we made eye contact briefly, her eyes searching, flitting between mine trying to get a read. She always seemed to notice when I disappeared for awhile, went on long walks or retreated to my tent. Often she asked about my solos, if I had seen any wildlife. Now we would all be only a door-knock away. I couldn't tell what she was thinking and she looked away quickly.

Spaghetti finished, there was talk of better mixed drinks. Johanna offered her carton of orange juice as a mixer. Sarah poured me one and I took it to be polite; the flavored vodka was mostly drowned out by the citrus at least. I wasn't a big drinker, enjoyed craft beer but that was about it.

"Let's play strip poker!" Lucia said, and I was pretty sure I flinched visibly. There were few things I wanted more than to see Lucia naked, but the idea that she, in turn, would see my skinny legs was out of the question. No way.

I was, of course, dealt in despite my quiet protests, and since I was fairly good at poker I didn't panic, just concentrated hard on my hand. I won that first round with a full house, and watched with little satisfaction as everyone took off a layer, as Mason's hairy chest emerged from his t-shirt, as the girls shrugged out of their tops, laughing.

I sipped my drink slowly, while the others pounded theirs and poured more. With each round, my basic poker skills looked more and more advanced as everyone else got sloppier. After a few rounds I was shirtless, which didn't bother me too much. In the past, girls had appreciated my hairless olive-skinned chest, and twice I caught Sarah looking at me, then blushing and looking away. She was mysterious, and I didn't think we'd had one full conversation, though she seemed to interact with the others just fine. All the girls were down to their underwear. I didn't look at Lucia once, though out of the corner of my eye I saw her bright sports bra and panties like beacons.

And though Sarah sometimes glanced my way, the girls were focused on Mason, who was one round away from being buck-naked on the beige carpet. He was perfectly at ease, as usual, and drinking made him even more confident. I got up to go to the bathroom, but when I got inside the spacious little room with its flowery wallpaper and everyone's toiletries lining the counter, I turned right back around. Instead I walked out the front door, headed down to the old school bus, took a piss looking at the Milky Way with the school bus at my back, feet wedged between tumbleweeds. I leaned back against the bus and felt, for the first time that night, relieved.

I heard their laughter before I even opened the door. Inside, the cards were scattered everywhere, the aftermath of a faint yell of, "Fifty-two card pick up!" Everyone's hands were now otherwise engaged in a massage circle, Mason's hands on Lucia's shoulders, waist, neck, everywhere. Sarah massaged Mason, and Johanna rubbed Sarah. For a moment I entertained the idea of sitting down in front of Lucia's idle hands, expectantly, nonchalantly. But I knew the absence of her touch on my shoulders would burn. Or if, by some miracle, she took pity on me and started to work the knots in my

shoulders, I would be able to feel her distaste through the very pads of her fingers. So I turned and headed down the hall to the room that was now mine. I took the cast off my hand and let it rest on my sternum where, for a moment before the blood rushed into the pinched fingers, it almost felt like someone else's hand, not part of my body at all.

I stared out the window at the dark night for a long moment before I noticed the tear in the screen, a huge rip stretching along an entire side. Without too much forethought I opened the window, stepped through the ripped screen into the yard. I started walking and found myself once again at the old ranch house. Turning right at the front door, I traced the foundation of the old house, skirting the abandoned flower beds, tripping over a decrepit garden gnome. A door appeared, and with a little nudging it opened to reveal a descending staircase that probably went down to the basement. I searched for a switch along the inside wall, but when I found one and flipped it up nothing happened, so I decided to go get my headlamp.

Now able to see the steep concrete stairs clearly, I descended. The first room was narrow and filled with shelves of jars. There was ancient peanut butter with sketches of smiling children on the lids that must have dated to the 1950s. One row was filled with mason jars of pickled vegetables: cucumbers, beets, cabbage. This did nothing to assuage my inkling that the Holzheys had abandoned ship to avoid nuclear fallout or a murder charge.

The narrow passage gave way to a square basement filled with old desks and various ancient implements of academic torture. Disintegrating textbooks were scattered about, and rulers that looked like weapons. There were four three-legged chairs, large



sheets of lined paper with *GOD* scrawled in wobbly red crayon, and a tricycle with streamers on the handlebars and deflated tires. It was all nightmarish childhood paraphernalia. Ancient cribs. Generations worth of junk. A house haunted by intergenerational family dynamics. But the maimed dolls were the last straw—blonde hair matted and torn out, eyes lollygagging every which way, limbs missing. One had makeup smeared all over her face, the lipstick wavering onto the cheeks.

Shivers went up my spine, and the basement abruptly ceased to be a welcome distraction from the activities going on in the doublewide. This was not a place I wanted to spend any time, so I held my breath and sprinted comically until I was outside in the clean night air again, could breathe deeply.

I couldn't bring myself to go back inside yet, so I sat down against the trailer looking out at the spherical hay bales in the moonlight, listening to Mason's music pulsing from the living room. I didn't have high hopes for our re-entry into civilization.

**Field Note: Coyote**

*These are not dog tracks: the oval prints follow a straighter line, the claw marks are faint, and they stop at an old badger den, which coyotes often co-opt. Sometimes badgers and coyotes will hunt together, digging to unearth rodents. In fact, they often appear to form friendships, and coyotes have been observed laying their heads upon badgers and licking their faces.*

*Coyote is a Nahuatl word from the Aztecs, to whom they were tricksters—deceitful but hilarious—and Aztec art has documented the coyote-badger relationship. To European invaders, however, coyotes lack nuance, have always been villains. And although the public's attitude toward its relative, the wolf, has improved, the coyote is still maligned, and the U.S. government kills (poisons, traps, shoots) 90,000 every year for preying on livestock. Their pelts are worth a few dollars, and are used for trim on women's clothing.*

*But no matter how many they kill, the coyotes thrive. Adaptable, generalist, crafty, they are one of the few species that we can't seem to decimate. In fact, their range is expanding as they take up residence in urban areas on the East Coast and spread farther south down the isthmus of Panama.*

## SKINNING

Lucia and I loaded a dead coyote into a car in the middle of a wide gravel road. The wind pushed hair into our mouths and eyes, and the sky stretched for miles. Dust from the empty road swirled. The coyote was killed a few hours ago at most.

When we drove this road to Malta, Montana in the early morning, there was no road kill, just an empty road in the middle of 30,000 acres of prairie with a small town at the other end. It took us an hour to get to Malta, the closest town, and we headed to the Albertsons and filled up five-gallon water jugs. Lucia did her grocery shopping for the week, and I filled the jugs and lined them up by the water machine. Then I shopped—choosing from the abundance of potatoes, corn, and canned goods, tossing in a quart of yogurt and some granola—and we loaded all of the full jugs back into the Toyota.

After a few weeks of working on the prairie, I could now carry one jug in each hand, and since each weighed forty pounds I felt good about this. *I can carry eighty fucking pounds!* I thought, even as my arms tugged at their sockets and I pondered why the hell I felt the need to be a badass. *Because I enjoy it,* I thought. *I love these sore muscles, this high.*

Next, we headed to the wildlife refuge just outside of town, cruising slowly around the perimeter of the lake looking for birds. At one point we parked and followed a marshy path to a little inlet where avocets foraged in the shallows. American avocets were a “lifer” for Lucia, and she stood for minutes in silence, taking them in through her binoculars as they picked up their impossibly long, blue legs and placed them delicately. Their rusty heads bobbed as they thrust long, upturned black bills into the water.

“Sarah. These are my favorite North American birds,” she said emphatically. “Better than greater sage grouse and shrikes, better than acorn woodpeckers, even.”

We talked about birding all the way back to the prairie. The coyote blended in with the road, and it was only after we passed that we realized what that lump was. Lucia was driving and she turned the car around, pulled up before the animal. We were scientists, this curiosity about dead things justified, so we both got out of the car and stood above the stilled mammal, then squatted down to look closer. It was a beautiful canine, petite, tail raised, legs spaced as though still in motion. A small pool of liquid shit spread from under the tail, but there was no blood, no open wound. It looked like a napping dog, splayed out under a juniper tree in some dusty yard on a hot summer day.

We glanced at each other. Lucia said, “It’s in perfect condition.”

“Do we have any trash bags in the car?” I asked, even as I got up to check. I found a box in the back of the car, brought it over.

We had been looking for an animal to skin for awhile now. Lucia knew how to do it, mostly, and I wanted to learn.

I had an inkling of how this coyote had met her end. Locals hit coyotes with their trucks on purpose, aiming their massive shining grills, accelerating towards any unfortunate one who happened to cross. It was the same idea behind shooting prairie dogs for target practice: any species that wasn’t conducive to ranching was disposable and something to eradicate. Coyotes could pick off chickens, maybe attack a calf in numbers, and moreover they represented the wildness of this landscape before settlers. People didn’t understand that coyotes were important predators in the ecosystem, that they kept

other species' population numbers in check and healthy. The antiquated view of predators as evil persisted here, as it did across much of the country.

I opened a trash bag and we shuffled the limp body into it. It felt undignified to slide the coyote nose-first into a scented trash bag—that sickly floral aroma forever associated with decay—but we did it anyway. I carried the weighted bag back to the Toyota.

With this coyote, my habit of “skinning” would transform from the metaphorical to the tangible; here was a creature I could truly look inside of, whose skin I could literally slip into, if we managed to prepare the pelt successfully. My palms began to sweat with nerves and anticipation.

Lucia picked up the pace for the last few miles home, fishtailing slightly on the abrupt L turns of the gravel road.

“Well, now we have to do this,” she said, looking straight ahead. “I hope I remember how to skin.”

It had been a few years since she'd skinned anything. Rabbits and squirrels were the extent of it, but she had watched a friend skin a coyote in Arizona once. Her father in Sweden was a hunter, though she never went into the field with him as a child, only heard his stories. She thought about everything that could go wrong—nicking the abdomen and causing the intestines to spill out and contaminate everything, for one. Making a cut that caused the pelt to come off in sections rather than a sleek whole.

The car didn't smell like anything yet, but we sniffed shallowly at the air, trying to detect some odor of death coming from the back seat. We rolled down the windows preemptively and let the billowing dust in.

Lucia pulled into the Holzhey Ranch driveway too fast, the body in the back thumping against the side of the car.

“Oh fuck!” she shouted.

“It's okay,” I said, craning over the seats to check on the trash bag. “Just might be a little more shit-covered.”

I had never skinned anything before and was excited, anxious. I wanted to know what it was like to peel back the layers of a creature and see the hidden form beneath. I wanted someone to tell me exactly where to cut, how to remove the skin from something—someone rather, an individual with a history and a family and an abrupt end. I wanted to see Lucia in action, knife in hand, face implacable.

Lucia parked and we sat still for a beat, watching Betty the barn cat nap on the porch.

“Let's deal with the coyote first, then the groceries,” Lucia said.

She carried the bag to the barn, and I walked next to her, feeling unhelpful. It was cool and dark in the old barn, filled with the remnants of stables and feed. She set the bag down on a workbench, hoping the elevation would help keep away marauding critters.

“We'll do it tomorrow, since it's already four o'clock,” Lucia said.

“Agreed,” I said. “Dealing with blood and guts right now sounds hard.” I wanted to be fresh and energetic when the process began, wanted to remember each step, how each cut made me feel.

“Yeah, I’m going to make myself a sandwich.”

We went inside and washed our hands in hot, sudsy water. The rest of the crew helped unload the water jugs.

That night, both of us dreamed of coyotes trotting through sagebrush. In my dream, the pack of coyotes converged in the road, emerged from the ditch cautiously, tails low and noses to the ground. They smelled the lost one. The pups tarried, circled the spot where she fell. The adults knew how it happened, how she was careless at the crossing, how the beast with the shiny metal teeth sped up when it saw her, how she was not expecting danger, did not have enough momentum. How the reflective maw angled toward her, struck her side-on, careened over her body, left as quickly as it had come, whooping. The gravel where her body once was smelled like rabbit blood and the sticky oils of sagebrush. Long wails echoed across the prairie.

I awoke to the treble yipping of coyotes outside, corralling a rabbit perhaps. Though I peered out the window, I couldn’t see their forms.

The next day, we waited until afternoon to begin the skinning. It was a bright and windy day, brisk but not cold. We entered the barn and found the bag where Lucia left it.

“We need someplace to hang it,” Lucia said, looking around for rope.

We wandered the property for a few minutes, examining the small, windswept trees and anything at all with height—old grain elevators, rusted-out windmills. We settled on the old paddocks, which we had to enter by scaling the railings made of two-by-fours.

Lucia opened the bag for the first time, breathing only through her mouth. But rank odors have a way of being felt through the air, whether or not the nose is inhaling, and the putrid smell still wasn't there. This coyote didn't smell like death yet.

I couldn't help but think of the coyote's pack. Did they see it happen? Did they have a chance to let her go? Or was there a group of coyotes on the prairie that spent all last night yipping and calling for the lost one? I hoped we didn't take her away too soon, before her death could be confirmed and properly mourned. Sometimes unexplained disappearance was worse than witnessing death.

Lucia tied the rope to the coyotes tail and hung her from the side of the paddock. The sight of her dangling body was not pleasant, but her fur moved in the wind like prairie grass, the kind of brown that was not basic at all but a shifting spectrum of rust, tawny, and silver. This was the prize, the end goal: a soft, stunning pelt.

Both of us gripped hefty knives. Lucia started with a cut up the hind leg, gentle, as I watched closely. The tip penetrated the fur but not the muscle. Lucia cut a few inches up the leg, then set down the knife, grabbed the edges of the cut, the flaps of skin, and began pulling them apart. White underside of pelt began to separate from red muscle and tendon. I was, for some reason, shocked. How could skin peel away so easily from the body it protected? But it did, separating with a satisfying ripping sound, like duct tape pulled off a Nalgene.

Quickly, I made a cut on the opposite leg, starting above the bony ankle, inching the knife below fur. I peeled and cut all the way to where the leg thickened to haunch, and only then did I pause and examine my work, the pelt hanging off of pure leg, tiny without the fluff of fur, a mere bunch of sinews and toned ligaments.



We exchanged few words except for monosyllables about the process: *Soft. Torn. Wow.* Sometimes the knife nicked a cluster of veins and arteries, and a little stale blood fell. Lucia worked much faster, trying to remember where to make the best cuts. She decided to tackle one of the most difficult while I worked on a foreleg.

She started at the anus and prepared to make a shallow cut all the way up the belly to the neck. If she punctured the intestinal sac, this process would get a whole lot more pungent and gross. Instead of muscle beneath her knife, there was delicate belly skin housing all the important organs that, less than twenty-four hours ago, were whirring and pumping, shrinking and expanding. She moved her knife slowly, cautiously, lightly, feeling through her hand for the right depth of the knife tip. It found a rhythm of its own and slid to the neck without incident, and Lucia let out a long breath.

This was the biggest cut she had to make, and it was over. We continued, cutting and peeling, distancing body from the fur. Lucia showed me how to cut off a paw to keep as a talisman: it was a matter of slicing through the tendons and cartilage, finding where the anklebone connected to the leg bones. But I couldn't find that softer give of tendon, that sweet spot of less resistance. I grew impatient and pressed the serrated edge of my blade into bone, sawing through it. It took much longer and dulled my knife, but eventually the small paw came loose. Lucia explained how we would submerge the paws in a bag of salt to desiccate, and after awhile they would be dry and preserved. I loved the feel of the pads, rough but squishy—so many miles of prairie traversed by this foot, so much playing, hunting, and sleeping curled into it.

Years later, living in Seattle, I will still have this paw. It will sit on my windowsill, even though it never fully dries, always carries a faint smell of rot. I will squeeze it in moments of anxiety, pacing in front of the windows, imagining the distance covered by this slight appendage, and the skinning it represents.

The undressing of the coyote became more grim. Its two front paws were gone, and an impossibly thin, bright pink body emerged from beneath the fur, which hung down like a jacket from the creature. It looked demonic.

Finally, we reached the head. Lucia did one side of the face, and the other was up to me. My fingers tingled and trembled at the dread of messing up. How to sever the beautiful ears intact? I cut as Lucia had, mimicking her lines. The eyes were the hardest. I had to cut around the eyeballs so that the beautiful lashes came away still attached to the fur. My hand, cold and tired from repetitive motion, shook slightly as I went in for it, but I managed to separate most of the eyelashes from the skin, and only made one mistake, leaving a small, eerie section of lash attached to the naked eyeball. Lucia made the cuts around the nose, removing the black triangle.

Finally, Lucia held up the pelt in its entirety. The tail was orange and bristly, and at the other end the head was jarringly lovely. Thick, dark eyelashes circled empty holes. Ears stood up, alert. Whiskers and nose looked wet and alive.

We left the terrifying red body hanging and went to wash the pelt, scrubbed out all the shit and dust in the bathtub, though for the most part it was clean. We rinsed the small dabs of blood off the underside as well, then stretched the pelt flat on a slab of warm concrete outside the ranch house to dry in the sun and wind.

“What should we do with the body?” I asked, reluctant to return to the uncanny red creature with lidless eyeballs and no nose.

It was the stuff of nightmares, but fascinating at the same time to see all that pure form exposed. I fancied this might be what medical students felt when they dissected cadavers, the same awe and horror, respect and disgust.

“Let’s put a camera trap on it,” Lucia suggested, motioning towards the one that was already set up in the old snub-nosed school bus.

Jackson had found coyote scat in the bus when we first moved to the ranch and was curious to see how they, and other creatures, used it. Though we hadn’t captured video of any creature yet, everyone enjoyed checking the memory card periodically, just in case.

We went back to the paddock and took down the suspended body. It was tiny without fur or tail, about the size of a large tomcat. The walk from the paddock to the junkyard felt interminable, and I noticed that Lucia held what remained of the coyote at arm’s length despite the fact that it swung eerily at that distance. We walked in the direction of the Larb Hills glowing in the sunset, passed the school bus with its vintage rounded hood and busted-out windows as familiar as the ranch house itself, threaded through the rusted cars and scrap metal. Lucia chose a car she could easily pick out in the junkyard—the baby blue Ford pickup truck that looked like it was manufactured in about 1930—and set the body down in front of it.

I affixed the trail camera to the side mirror and pointed it in the direction of the body, estimating the angle. We hiked to these trail cameras every day, set up on barbed wire fences miles from any road where they captured images of bison rubbing against

them, deer leaping over them. Sometimes the cameras captured western meadowlarks perched on the barbed wire, sometimes pronghorn. We hiked out to these cameras and changed the batteries if they were low, took out the memory cards to look through and replaced them with new ones. Later we sat at the computer and sifted through the motion-tripped footage, labeling animals of interest.

What would happen to the skinned coyote? Would it be taken by a fellow coyote? Scavenged by a turkey vulture? Or perhaps it would simply decompose silently into the weeds of the junkyard, another permanent fixture of the disintegrating Holzhey Ranch.

The next day we rubbed salt on the pelt, massaged it into all the nooks and crannies of the still-damp and tacky skin. The salt would help cure it, and then we planned to light a fire and finish the process with smoke. We were on our knees beside the pelt for so long that Betty climbed up my shoulder and perched across my neck like a sphinx, surveying the coyote with what could only be interpreted as smug satisfaction.

It was a many-day process, and each day we were more in awe of the beauty of the pelt, what we had created with our own hands. Lucia worried about who would take the pelt when the job ended.

“I’m not taking it. I was just the assistant, just happy to help, to see how it was done. All I need is a paw,” I said.

Lucia planned to roll it up in her luggage for the trip home to Sweden. It would nestle next to the bison horn she found. All of her prairie artifacts would go with the other

tidbits she had collected from around the world, reminders of why she chose to work as a conservation biologist, and all the ecosystems she was privileged to get acquainted with.

When we lit the fire in the homemade pit beside the doublewide, we positioned the pelt too close to the flames and a patch of skin blackened, fur singing and curling. Crisis was averted, but we were wary of our pelt, our hours of labor for this beautiful and soft tapestry, incinerating in a careless blaze. What then of the undressed demon in the junkyard? If not the beauty it produced, what was the horror and hard work of skinning all for?

Five days later, we checked for the red body and found it missing. Lucia popped the memory card out of the trail cam and we hurried back to the trailer. On the crew laptop, we watched how grass moving in the wind tripped the camera, and then noticed that it was never trained on the coyote's body in the first place—the angle was all wrong, and only a severed leg was in the frame.

“That was my bad,” I muttered. “I should have checked the angle.”

We watched the video in which an unknown entity dragged the body away and the lone leg disappeared from view. What would we have given to see who took our coyote, to see the next phase in the cycle of life to death, the recycling of sustenance? Would we exchange our precious pelt to witness that moment? Not likely, but we might have offered a paw.

Two years later, I will set my decomposing paw—never truly cured by salt—beneath a tree at a park in Seattle. It will be gone when I check the next day—consumed,

absorbed, tapped by the city. I will walk back to my apartment and compose an email to Lucia beginning with, “*Remember that time we skinned a coyote in Montana?*” and smile broadly.

**Field Note: Burrowing Owl**

*The burrowing owl in a fallow field swivels toward the sound of gunfire. Unblinking electric yellow eyes bob on long spindly legs. He spends more time outside during the day than females, his feathers sun-bleached. He is busy collecting prairie dog shit to lay at the entrance to his burrow in order to lure dung beetles for lunch. Amid the dung are decorations, cigarette butts and bottle caps, shiny scraps of foil, art created from the materials at hand. Nearby the prairie dogs turn towards the violent pops in unison. The owl dips into his burrow, the noise of destruction muffled by soil. Rattles and hisses emanate from underground, clever imitation of a rattlesnake.*

## REVOLVER

Ashley and Sawyer were native Montanans, so blonde and blue-eyed it hurt. The rest of us weren't from around there, came to this stretch of dry prairie from distant states and countries for two short months.

"This is what we do for fun," Ashley said winking, marching us out under the vacant cerulean sky.

And there we were, a few beers in, shooting bullets into hay bales behind the ranch house, like true Americans. Sawyer reclined against a bale with a can of beer, cap pushed jauntily over tousled hair. Cheerfully he passed around a large bag of neon orange earplugs.

Sawyer and Ashley worked for the prairie reserve as well, but instead of hiking they guided tours for the wealthy donors who came and stayed in the tricked-out yurts. They drove large Mercedes tour vans through the prairie safari-style, looking for wildlife. Much of the time Ashley and Sawyer drank absurdly good whisky with absurdly wealthy people, alcoholism a boon for their line of work.

When they got off work, they picked up Ashley's border collie Denver and cruised the gravel roads drinking beer. They were much cooler and more reckless than our crew of scientists who, after a long day of hiking, sat around watching Disney movies on a laptop and turned in early.

Lucia and Mason were in Malta running errands, but Jackson was in the house, watching the shenanigans from the window. He opted not to shoot guns for fun because he was firmly anti-NRA. Of course he was curious, wanted to know what it felt like, but



morally he refused. Guns were not toys, even if this particular situation seemed fairly harmless.

Jackson was watching Denver, who couldn't handle the loud bangs. Her black and white form, sleek and shorthaired, could not be idle, and so Jackson threw a tennis ball every few seconds so she could careen around the trailer with the grace (and wasted talent) of a herder. She was the kind of sleek, handsome dog that everyone wanted to pet, but wouldn't hold still long enough for that nonsense. She wanted to fetch fetch fetch, and quickly exhausted her frail human companions with insatiable need.

I debated staying inside with Jackson in some lame show of solidarity—I always had a weak spot for men who were good with animals. But I chose experience over useless protest, curious to feel the weight of a gun, to see how Montanans play. This was rural America in the extreme, and I wanted to see it first hand. Call it a personality flaw, but I had always been this way, and it had gotten me into no small amount of trouble. But not enough trouble to stop doing it. I glanced back at the house, hoping Jackson didn't look out the window when it was my turn to shoot. If I was the Observer on our crew, he was certainly the Moralist.

Meanwhile Johanna hefted a revolver, Ashley's, in trembling hands. It was an impressively ornate pistol, the dark wooden grip tooled with patterns.

"I have never shot a gun before," Johanna said, because she is German and they don't do this for fun in Europe. Her shaky excitement made me nervous, but Ashley didn't seem overly concerned.

Johanna's eyes gleamed as Ashley showed her how to insert the bullets, close the chamber, cock it, turn off the safety. And now she waited with arms straight as arrows, gun far from her small rib cage, pointed at the cans perched on the hay bales.

All eyes were on the revolver, sleek and sexy compared to Sawyer's rifle. It looked like a set piece, not a weapon.

*Pow.* She missed the cans and a bullet lodged in the massive round bales of rotting hay for eternity. How many bullets did it house already? Johanna's adrenaline was contagious, and she fired again and again until the six-round cylinder was empty.

"How many left?" she asked breathlessly, having lost count in the heat of the moment. I thought of Russian roulette and the chance of annihilation: one in six. The revolver was hard to aim, whereas the rifle had a sight in which to position an empty beer can. It didn't stand a chance.

For my turn I opted for the rifle, cradled the barrel against shoulder socket. What this weapon was capable of made me light-headed. I switched off the safety so a red color appeared. *Fire red*, as Sawyer said. Red equals danger. I pictured a bison in front of me instead of a hay bale, aimed for the heart. I imagined the entrepreneurial young white men in the nineteenth century riding trains through the Great Plains and shooting into the herds of bison for sport, watching them fall and rot in place, dispatching the ecosystem and the native people who lived within it for millennia. They were surprised when the bison herds disappeared, and most of those dashing young hunters went flat broke, no one benefitting except the American government and its imperialist bloodlust, as usual.

Index finger slippery on the trigger, I squeezed and the rifle recoiled back into my flesh like a challenge. But the beer can in the cross hairs jumped and tumbled, and I couldn't help turning to smile at the others. Sawyer grinned and toasted me with his beer.

I wondered if this prairie reserve would be a sanctuary for the species that white men had extirpated. Or would it be just another land grab by wealthy white people for their own purposes? I didn't know. But it felt damn good to be outside on the prairie every day looking at bison that once roamed from Canada to Mexico. At least they had a few thousand acres here, perhaps someday would have more than a hundred thousand if the prairie reserve's vision came to pass. And goddammit I loved this country, despite its fucked-up politics and legacy of imperialism, racism, and environmental destruction. No way I was giving up on this land.

"Who's next?" Ashley asked, big white teeth flashing. One after another we took turns playing with fire. Fun, the American way.

**Field Note: Pronghorn**

*It's hard to decide whether pronghorn are more magnificent standing still, stark African patterning in full sight, or whether their fleet gait is preferable, white rumps flashing through the grass. The fastest land animal in North America, they evolved to outrun the long extinct American cheetah, which is fitting since their closest living relatives are African giraffes. Pronghorn can run more than fifty miles per hour and have light bone structure, hollow hair, and big lungs, windpipes, and hearts. They are light enough to be preyed upon by golden eagles.*

**ZORTMAN**

We struck out from the town of Zortman at 10:45 p.m. after a few drinks at The Miner's Club. We ate dinner at the adjoining restaurant, juicy Montana hamburgers. Vegetables? Only pickles. The old white church on the hill that overlooked the town gleamed under the full moon as we exited the bar.

We climbed into the large Toyota Sequoia and drove a little ways out of town, parked at a campground in the woods. It was Lucia's birthday, and Jackson, Mason, Lucia, and I planned to hike up Scraggy Peak and sleep at the top. It wasn't a tall mountain, just a ridge above the town that overlooked the gold mines that gave rise to Zortman in the first place. We shoved Thermarests, sleeping bags, and jackets into our daypacks and called it preparation.

Johanna set up her tent beside the car. She didn't want to summit the mountain at night. And though she disliked being alone, the only person she really wanted to be with was her boyfriend, Andy, who was far away in Wyoming.

"Are you sure you don't want to come?" I asked Johanna, helping set up her tent.

"No, I can't see very well in the dark. I'll be fine here."

"Okay, we'll see you in the morning then. If we aren't back by ten a.m. you can start to worry."

Our group of four called out goodbyes to Johanna and set off uphill. Jackson and Mason had hiked this mountain before, also at night. We followed a dirt road for a ways and then cut off into the tress to the left. Jackson seemed to know where he was going, though there wasn't one single trail to follow but a series of interlocking ones, and often we weren't following any trail at all. In typical Jackson fashion, he took the steepest route

possible through the woods. The moon was full and assisted our progress along with headlamps, and we moved through the woods like miners, physical bodies reduced to bobbing lights.

Lucia was turning twenty-eight years old and wore her signature black softshell jacket, cargo pants, and big boots as we climbed. Jackson was practically sprinting uphill and the rest of us started to lag, stripping off jackets and shoving them into our packs as we sweated. Ahead of me Lucia stopped to strap hers to the outside of her pack. The two rum and cokes at the bar were making me short of breath as we gained altitude. Jackson doubled back every now and then to show us the easiest route up a bluff or around a rocky outcrop.

When we reached the rocky knoll of Scraggy Peak, it was windy but not cold, and I could tell that the winds drove from the west by the lopsided conifers. I turned my back to the breeze and let it whip hair across my face and dry my sweat. Jackson had been sitting up there for a good twenty minutes by the time we all arrived and glared at him. He handed us the summit register, which was kept in a little hole in the rock. It was merely a box with notes from visitors, most straightforward with date, time, and weather. Others left quotes and poetry. Lucia grabbed the pen and scribbled a Swedish verse. I wrote, *Though we travel the world to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not*, a butchering of an Emerson quote that I wrote everywhere. Mason wrote, *Clear eyes, full hearts, can't lose*, from *Friday Night Lights* and giggled about it. He was the only extrovert for miles.

We looked down on the little lights of Zortman with all sixty of its residents. The ratio of lights to forest seemed about right to us, as a general rule for humans to live by.

Jackson said there were camping spots farther along the ridge, so we traversed the rocky spine until we reached a fire ring. We set down our packs and gathered duff, kindling, and logs for the fire. It was at this point, as the heat of the climb ebbed, that Lucia went to put on her softshell and found it was not there.

“I’m going to look for it,” she said.

Mason glanced at her. “I’ll help.”

“Careful not to get lost,” Jackson mumbled softly as they headed off.

Half an hour later Mason and Lucia reappeared, their laughter bouncing off the granite boulders. Mason had managed to cheer her up, even though they didn’t find the jacket.

“We’ll find it in the morning,” Mason said. “We know what route we took. It’s just a matter of visibility at this point.”

We all sat around the campfire. Jackson and Mason talked, but Lucia and I were lost in thought. Eventually, Lucia walked out of the circle of light and sat alone on a rocky outcrop. I followed and sat down beside her, looking out over the interior of the Little Rockies, which in the dark appeared only as soft black lumps. She seemed terribly melancholic on her birthday. Was it something we did? Or was it just a looking inward on the day she entered this world?

For the Native Americans of the area, these mountains were where they used to go (perhaps still went) for fasting, prayer, and vision quests. They often encountered monsters on these journeys, such as the notorious water monster that lived in a spring on another peak. These were not easy mountains.

“How’s it going?” I said, lamely, staring at the night sky and trying to pick out a familiar constellation that wasn’t drowned out by the ostentatious moon.

“Fine.”

“Birthdays are weird,” I offered.

“Yeah...I just wonder where I’ll be next year. It’s not like I don’t love this work, because it’s taken me to amazing places and I get to meet amazing people. But sometimes I wish I had roots.”

“I feel you,” I said. “And I’m glad we met, even if I never see you again!”

“Thanks,” she said, turning to smile at me. “Likewise.”

Eventually, I left her to her own ruminations and went back to the dwindling campfire. I unfurled my bedroll and fell asleep to the glow of coals, the rustling of conifers, and Jackson and Mason discussing the pros and cons of drones. A few hours later, when everyone was asleep, Lucia joined us—the rustling of a nylon sleeping bag, then silence. I drifted in and out of consciousness with rocks pressed against my back and shoulders, listening to the sounds of nocturnal critters.

The first to wake in the morning, I flipped onto my back and watched the swaying tree branches above, listened to the calls of chickadees and nuthatches. The sun crested the ridge and everything was brilliantly lit but not warm. I unzipped my sleeping bag, headed off to pee behind a tree.

On the way back I grabbed my shirt off the boulder it was drying on after last night’s sweaty ascent. Something had chewed holes in the armpits! Seeking salt, I supposed. I wasn’t terribly upset, nothing a few stitches couldn’t mend. This had



happened to me before on backpacking trips when nocturnal creatures filched my underwear, which I had hung out to dry after a wash in the stream. I thought of it as an entrance fee and, one hoped, amusement for other species.

The boys got up slowly, and Mason started talking about a dream he had.

“...and then I was riding with horse thieves in the Missouri Breaks, and when I tried to swim my horse across the river we both went under...”

“Sounds like a water monster dream to me, man,” Jackson said.

Lucia and I climbed on top of a boulder at the edge of the ridge and looked at the old gold mine carved into the mountainside to the west. It was hidden last night, but now the denuded soil stood out like an oozing yellow scab.

Lucia was anxious to look for her jacket, so we quickly packed up our belongings and headed down. She remembered her route more or less from the night before and we wove between the trees, scanning the pine-needled ground for her black jacket. In the daylight we could see the bright fall leaves of the boxelders, willows, and cottonwoods along the drainages. Suddenly Lucia called out, “Found it!” and we all crashed through the undergrowth to meet up on the trail.

The only missing element now was Johanna.

“One of us should have stayed with her,” Jackson muttered as we trotted downhill.

We reached the road and turned onto it, surprised at how different everything looked in the daylight. When Johanna’s tent came into view everyone visibly relaxed.

“Jo!” Mason called affectionately, despite his general distaste for Johanna’s personality.

“Yes?” came a sleepy reply from inside the tent.

“We’re back!”

“You weren’t gone very long...”

But it felt like days to us, so we plopped down on the grass beside the tent and harassed Johanna until she got up and we all went to get breakfast at The Miner’s Club.

**Field Note: Grizzly**

*The grizzly ambles around the edge of the lake, golden-tipped fur gleaming in the sunlight. He is four hundred pounds heavier than he was in spring, fattened on whitebark pine nuts, tubers, worms, and the occasional fawn or bird egg. Soon, after the first big snowfall of the season, he will enter his den, insulated with spruce boughs, drop his body temperature, and burn that fat up until March.*

*All of the West and the Great Plains used to be grizzly country, even the deserts. The California grizzlies were all exterminated during the Gold Rush, but the last grizzly in Sonora, Mexico wasn't shot until the 1970s. Prairie grizzlies used to live on the Great Plains too, but by the 1920s they had moved to the mountains for cover and protection.*

*But grizzly bears roam hundreds of miles. Build a prairie reserve full of bison carcasses to scavenge, and they may come.*

**TETONS**

Jackson and I were in his tent, warming it up through willpower alone. I thought: *Come on metabolism, burn those calories, fill this nylon balloon with warmth to buffer the cold night.* It was both an instruction and a prayer. It could have been much colder, considering there was a blizzard outside and we were camped on two feet of snow, a ground cloth the only thing between our bodies and the ice. I was reading a library book that I wouldn't be able to return in Bozeman—*destroyed*, they will say, and make me pay for a new one. I won't argue with that assessment since I hauled it up a mountain in a backpack and left it too close to the wall of the tent when I fell asleep so that the moisture from melted snow seeped into the cover, which tore easily the next day as I tried to repack it.

I was trying (so hard) to get lost in my book because it was going to be a long night and I didn't really want to be present for all of it. I wanted to slip away into another world. It continued to blow snow outside, and Jackson was out there trying to cook dinner. Last night I made dinner, which meant leaning over a frigid stream, trying to rinse the natural tannins out of the quinoa. I cursed the grain as I watched a quarter cup of it float away like fish eggs—not the best backcountry food. But at least we were a couple thousand feet lower last night, instead of atop an exposed ridge in a blizzard.

Jackson had been the one to suggest a backpacking trip. The whole crew was in Yellowstone for our week off and he said he wanted to go backpacking. I also liked backpacking and wanted to go. I tried to get Lucia to come, but her back was acting up. Mason was interested, but decided to take photos on day hikes rather than packing in all his photography gear. And I tried my hardest to diplomatically discourage Johanna from

coming. I couldn't see how she could cope with the inherent pain involved. She would be constantly asking where we were going and complain about blisters and the weight of her pack. No, I did not want to be the one to teach her how to backpack; I wanted to spend time adventuring in the wilderness with Jackson. I felt slightly guilty, but was ninety percent sure Johanna would be miserable anyway.

Personally, I was happy just munching on granola for dinner, but Jackson said he needed a real meal, and it was probably smart to put warm, nourishing food in our bellies for the long night ahead. We were going to need all the warmth we could get.

It was the thought of putting on frozen hiking boots that kept me firmly inside the tent. I'd have to switch into my pair of wet, icy socks (put the pair of dry ones safely away, for tent-use only) and struggle into the stiff leather of my hiking boots. Soon I wouldn't be able to feel my feet except for a dull pain, which would worry me, make me think of frostbite and losing digits. I preferred hunkering down in my sleeping bag and slowly burning stored calories.

"Where's your bowl?" Jackson called from out yonder in the blustery night, crouched in the little wind shelter he had found between the tent and a snow-piled boulder.

He seemed to be vaguely enjoying this test of his outdoor skills. I never should have come. He wanted to come out into the woods to find himself, and I should not have taken his invitation to me at face value.

But I was enjoying parts of it too—like remembering how to read a map, and how my mind went to strange places when my body strained under the weight of a heavy pack and my feet were complaining. I enjoyed the mental discipline I had to exercise, because

if left to its own devices my brain would mutiny with every step, dwell on the blisters forming on my heel rather than the beauty and quiet of the mountains, the unusual flora and fauna.

I also didn't hate the long nights when Jackson's body was close, when I could arch my back and move my butt a bit closer to his thighs wondering, perhaps, if he would finally turn onto his side and wrap his arm casually around my waist. We would be a perfect spoon and he'd murmur, *We have to keep warm somehow*. These scenarios cycled through my mind with embarrassing frequency during those long nights. Twelve hours we had spent in the tent last night, and tonight, in the blizzard, who knew how long it would be. Sixteen hours? When would it be warm enough for us to attempt travel again? I had asked if I should carry my own tent, but it seemed silly, all that extra weight, and he had said we could share his. I didn't know what was going on in his mind (though I often tried to imagine what he thought and felt), except that he had a crush on Lucia, which would never manifest for two reasons: Lucia wasn't interested, and he wasn't the pursuing type. I figured he had gotten over it by now.

I unzipped the tent and handed Jackson my bowl, watched as he spooned rice and beans into it. It smelled good. He had even sautéed some onion and wild dandelion greens he had foraged. He looked cold out there hunkered over the single burner stove, but then again he always looked cold, even during sweltering hikes on the prairie. It was something about the way he held his lithe body in a faint slouch, and how he always had his hands in his pockets and a hoody up over his tousled hair.

I ate while it was warm, listening to him breaking down the stove, the hiss as he unscrewed the burner from the propane. He stuffed the bear canister with the leftover

food and stashed it in a snow bank a few yards away. We should probably put our toothpaste inside it as well, but mine remained in my backpack, which was nestled between the tent and the fly. I had never backpacked in grizzly country before, but it was hard to imagine a bear hunting in these conditions. That would be a great end to this blizzard backpacking fiasco, getting devoured by a hungry grizzly that smelled our faintly sweet minty toothpaste. I had learned discomfoting facts in my research, like how sometimes grizzlies dig out the dens of hibernating black bears and devour them.

I saw my first grizzly two days ago in Yellowstone. The whole crew was driving through the busy roads of the park, where traffic jams ensued as animals crossed the road and people streamed out of their cars to take a million pictures. We had pulled off at a parking lot on the edge of a lake because Mason wanted to take photos, and we all wanted to stretch our legs. We saw the bulky golden shape a few hundred yards away, the shoulder hump unmistakable, and watched it meander along the shoreline foraging in the undergrowth. We followed, cautiously, but the bear was actually lumbering fairly quickly and soon vanished along the curve of the lake.

Jackson and I carried bear spray with us in case of an attack. We had rented it along with the bear canister, and it hung from Jackson's belt loop for easy draw if necessary. Essentially, it was industrial-strength mace, although during the hike-in we passed a family who thought bear spray was like bug spray, a repellent applied to the skin to make oneself less appetizing. I tried to suppress giggles, while a concerned Jackson explained how to use it properly.

He had concluded with, "Don't spray it into the wind, either."

Eventually, Jackson joined me inside with a steaming bowl and I complimented his cooking, after which we ate—like we did everything else—in silence. I eyed his injured hand, which he never brought up, but which must have influenced everything he did. I didn't ask him about it much because it seemed to make him uncomfortable, but I was curious. Every intuitive movement had to be consciously re-thought and re-designed, which must have been exhausting.

Our situation this evening wasn't dire, but nor was it rosy. We had lots of food—Lord knows I had brought granola to feed an army—a good tent, and Jackson knew roughly where we were. We just had to wait out this storm and focus on staying warm.

In the afternoon as we climbed the pass, switch-backing upwards through alpine meadows, the sky had darkened. It started to rain, then sleet, and by the time we reached had the ridge, it was snowing. We kept going but the snow didn't dissipate; instead the wind picked up and eventually I realized we were in a proper blizzard and the trail had disappeared. Also, I was exhausted, soaked with sweat, and aching under a heavy pack after a steep climb.

Jackson had the map in hand and thought he knew where we were more or less, so we continued trekking through the snow. I squinted against the blowing shards, hoping my eyelashes would catch them before they rocketed into my eyes with stinging speed. Suddenly, a cliff loomed before us and we looked down several hundred feet to where the storm didn't rage and there was much less snow accumulation. But there was no way to get down there unless we were bighorn sheep, so we continued traversing the rim. Eventually, my anxiety loosened my tongue: I was cold, my boots were getting wet, and I



was losing sensation in my feet. A line from Rebecca Solnit echoed in my mind: *Pain serves a purpose. Without it you are in danger. What you cannot feel you cannot take care of.*

“I think we should set up camp,” I said.

The sun was setting and we were vaguely lost in the middle of a blizzard. Jackson immediately agreed, and we turned uphill from the cliff and walked until we reached a boulder covered with snow on one side that could shield us from the wind.

I was impressed by Jackson’s navigation skills, which lessened my unease about our situation. I had worked hard for every map skill I had, every ounce of orientation, and could get around in the backcountry with a map. But when someone like Jackson was around who could glance at the topography, align it with the topo lines on the map and know exactly where we were and what landmarks to look for, I happily ceded navigational duties. After all, I much preferred examining the plants and birds instead. Fast navigation was especially desirable when one had a fifty pound pack on and didn’t want to spend an extra five minutes standing around trying to identify the peaks.

Jackson was reading *Encounters with the Archdruid* by John McPhee, and I asked him about it. He loved it, talked about how great a writer McPhee was, but the conversation soon fell flat. Was this my fault? I failed to see how it could be seeing as I was asking all the right questions. It was this tension between us that made me think there could be something more. How on earth could it be this awkward to have a conversation about a book? I was done with my dinner before he was, and sat for a moment with the bowl in my lap, observing the painful silence. When I couldn’t take anymore, I picked up

*The Faraway Nearby* by Rebecca Solnit and descended into descriptions of Iceland and loss.

And to think it was only seven p.m. I read, lying on my stomach, shifting to my side and back when my neck got sore. I was curious about how he would arrange his sleeping bag—head to toe again like last night? But when he finished eating and unpacked his bag he lay down with his head close to mine. He was beyond confounding.

“The best way to dry wet clothes is to put them in your bag,” he said, as if we had been talking companionably for the last half-hour.

“Mmmm?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him shuffling around, apparently removing the damp, offending clothing. A flash of bare torso before he was completely buried in his down bag, and it dawned on me that he was buck naked in there, trying out some half-baked theory about the best way to dry clothes in a sleeping bag. Of course he would do that, try out theories for their efficacy no matter how embarrassing the consequences. I found this unfortunately endearing. But it was entirely his fault that he had so much wet clothing: he had hiked in with his signature black jeans and a hoody, like a total idiot. Cotton in the backcountry was a bad idea when there was any possibility of precipitation, and he knew it.

I dozed in and out of sleep, took short naps with my headlamp on and book popped open, then woke up and continued reading where I had left off. Finally at ten p.m. I decided to go to bed for real. I put in the bookmark—the goofy one from a friend that proclaimed *Reading Is Sexy* over a picture of a nerdy girl with glasses sitting seductively low on her nose—and clicked off my headlamp.

Jackson was still reading beside me.

“Goodnight,” I said.

“Goodnight.”

I dreamed of floating in an alpine lake beside him, the water clear sapphire all the way down to the granite boulders and white tree skeletons beneath. I tried to teach him how to float, had my fingers pressed like open water lilies beneath his back. *Fill your lungs up*, I instructed, lips pressed to his ear. But he was heavy as lead, and I watched bubbles foaming around his broken hand as he sank.

I awoke gasping into the hood of my sleeping bag, twisted into it so tightly I couldn't breathe. I burrowed up, gulping fresh, chilly air and listened for Jackson's breathing beside me but heard nothing because he slept silently. I preferred proof of a person's state of rest, the comfort of slow audible breaths, but at least he didn't snore.

I turned to face him in the dark, and eventually could make out a tuft of mussed black hair above an aquiline nose peaking out from his green beanie. He was lying on his back, and were his eyes open? I couldn't tell. He had a beautiful profile—so delicate with soft lips, green eyes, dark bushy brows, a sweetly pointed chin. Thinking about the damage those lips could do, my hand lifted, not entirely of its own accord, and hovered toward him in the dark. It lost altitude before his lips however, crash-landed somewhere near his sternum. I lost sight of his sharp profile as he turned to face me.

My heart raced and words tumbled out. “I'm c-c-cold.”

I was grateful that the stutter sounded merely like an indication of my thermic state rather than nerves.

“Can I...?”

I didn't know what I wanted, except proximity to his body. When something that sounded like assent but wasn't quite language came out of his mouth, I moved closer.

We unzipped our sleeping bags at the same time, and when I reached inside of his I encountered piles of damp clothing. I couldn't help giggling.

“How's the drying process coming along?”

“Really well,” he said, stuffing the clothing down by his feet to make room for my exploratory hands.

When I finally shrugged out of my many layers and made contact with his skin, I was magically warmer than I'd been all night. He was a furnace and suddenly I had total faith in his ability to dry even the most snow-sodden garments.

Suddenly, I couldn't wait for all of my body to be touching all of his, and I scrambled on top of him, forgetting about his injured hand. He yelled and brought his other arm up in reflex, hitting me across the throat. I fell back, gasping, while he cradled his hand.

He switched on his headlamp, and I apologized profusely.

“I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking. Is it okay?”

He was breathing hard, but his hand looked alright. He didn't speak for a long minute, during which I crawled back into the cocoon of my own sleeping bag.

“I'm so sorry,” I said, turning my burning face away from the light.

“It was healing so well...” he said, almost to himself.

“Well, thanks for making me feel even worse.”

“It's just the truth.”

“Maybe I don’t need to hear the truth right now.”

His light clicked off, and the drawn-out sound of his sleeping bag being re-zipped cut through the frosty air. Sleep was predictably elusive until I sat up and switched directions so that we were sleeping head to toe. That way our curves didn’t fit together.

The next time I woke up, it was light outside, and the rain fly was flapping in the wind. I hadn’t left the tent in fourteen hours, hadn’t peed since yesterday afternoon, so I sat up and put on my boots. I was headed back to the front country today, although I hadn’t discussed this with Jackson.

“You going out?” Jackson asked, like he had been awake for a while.

“Yeah, I have to pee... Want anything from the bear canister?”

“Not yet. I wonder if it’s still snowing...”

“I have a feeling it is.”

I unzipped the tent, put on my frozen hiking boots sitting in the space between the tent and fly, then unzipped the fly and stepped into the snow and bitter cold. It was certainly still snowing and I couldn’t see more than a few yards. *Damn*. I walked a few feet away and squatted by the boulder, watching the dark yellow stream hit the snow and steam.

Before getting back into the tent, I grabbed a bag of granola from the bear canister. Back inside, I crunched away meditatively as Jackson—his bare chest clothed with presumably dry gear—put on his hand brace slowly. I refrained from asking how it was doing.

“I think we need to get down to lower elevation,” I said, guilty for cutting short his backpacking trip, but failing to see an alternative. We weren’t prepared for snow camping and the storm wasn’t clearing. I, for one, was getting off this ridge and back into the valley that was still firmly in autumn. I would give him the option to separate if it didn’t seem so stupid, since one of us would have to leave without a tent or stove or the bear spray. And, most importantly, we only had the one map. Unfortunately, I wasn’t entirely sure I could get back on the trail and down the mountain without him, since he had navigated up.

Jackson met my eyes for the first time that day. *You look like you didn’t sleep last night*, I thought. At least I wasn’t the only one.

“That’s probably a good idea,” he said, reddening, and turned back to bandaging his hand. “Let’s break camp.”

I waited with my backpack, stuffed and zipped, as Jackson broke down his tent. My feet were already going numb and my legs, even with wool long underwear and water-wicking pants, prickled with cold.

When Jackson was all packed, he said, “You lead the way since you have better boots.”

I agreed, since for some reason he had decided to wear tennis shoes. So I set off into the wind, falling through the snow with each step. On the bright side, everything except my extremities were burning and sweating within a few minutes. I didn’t know where I going, and reluctantly turned to Jackson every now and then to ask if I was headed the right way.

Half an hour later, winded and warmed except for my frozen feet, I saw a shape in the blowing snow and headed towards it. It was a raptor hovering in the snow, gliding along the edge of the ridge we had climbed yesterday. Even just a few hundred yards below the hawk, the snow thinned out. *I know where I am now!* It was touchy there for a while, and I was glad I didn't have to rely entirely on Jackson anymore. If he fell off this ridge right now, I'd be able to get back, and that simple (if morbid) fact was comforting. Relying on others was perhaps the scariest part of backcountry travel, and perhaps life in general.

We wended down the trail, retracing the switchbacks we had climbed yesterday. The giddiness of survival, and heading toward visibly warmer climes, made Jackson talkative, and he started telling stories about the backpacking he had done in Colorado, about the time he almost got lost near Telluride. Part of the joy of backpacking was this nearness to mortality, bumping up against the sharp edge of survival and what it did to one's consciousness.

When we reached the valley, we paused and took off our packs, a risky enterprise because I rarely wanted to put it back on. But we were back in cell range, needed to call the crew to come pick us up. Jackson found his flip phone and turned it on. He was a smartphone holdout, which made him very cool if a little technologically idealistic for a guy who was mechanically minded and loved gadgets. If there was a way that he could salvage all the parts for a smartphone and build it himself, he'd do that.

He reached Mason, who was driving the car and agreed to pick us up in a few hours. Now we just had to make it the last few miles to the trailhead. I stripped off a few layers, for although the valley was cloudy, there was no snow. I could even feel my toes

again—no frostbite after all, thank God. I was a little surprised we made it off the mountain with no injuries, given our level of flying-by-the-seat-of-your-pants. But we pulled it off because we did indeed have many hours of backcountry experience between us. We (especially Jackson) were dumbasses on purpose rather than by default, which had made enough of a difference.

What I really wanted was to bathe in the creek, cold as it was. Wash last night's shame off my skin. But Jackson seemed to be in a hurry and quickened his pace. I tried to keep up at first, but fell far behind on the uphill. Suddenly, he was out of sight, and I was alone in the backcountry with no tent and no bear spray. Suddenly, I was livid. *Bastard! You don't leave friends behind without a word. If you're trying to make a point about not liking me romantically, message received. But friends don't leave friends alone in bear country without an explanation. That's messy backcountry behavior.*

When I saw the creek where we camped the first night, I took off my pack. There was a boulder in the middle of the current and a few stepping stones leading up to it. My shoulders tingled and the sweat gluing my t-shirt to my back dried in the breeze, wicking away heat. Anger kept me warm, and I could feel a pulse in my neck thumping methodically.

On the little jump from the final stepping stone to the large rock, the toe of my left boot caught and I pitched forward, hands bracing in the frigid stream. *Sonofabitch!* I scrambled onto the rock feeling the prick of tears, and pressed the heels of my palms into eye sockets until everything went black.

There was nothing left to do but peel off the already wet clothing and get in the snow melt. I had always loved the feel of freezing water, as close to being reborn as I



would ever get. Lungs seized, feet stretched downstream, hands grasped slippery river rocks, ears absorbed a different cacophonous medium, and eyes flicked open to reveal a fuzzy blue universe of bubbles.

I clambered back onto the rock, gasping, and enjoyed the warmth that flooded my body and the rush of endorphins. Despite everything, I'd always have cold water. That was never going away. I got dressed, and, after a few minutes, shouldered my pack again and continued along the trail.

When I crested the hill, Jackson was waiting for me at the little summit. He looked vaguely worried, like he'd been pacing, which gave me some small consolation. He came towards me.

"I think we're only about a mile out," he said cheerfully. *Why is it that people are always more attracted to you when you're actively pissed at them?* I wondered.

"Good," I said. *Fuck you*, I thought. But this time he had gone too far. He had been an asshole and after everything, after surviving a blizzard and spending at least twenty-four hours together in a tent, I expected better. A simple heads up, an "I'm going to charge ahead for a bit," or at least a handing-off of the bear spray.

I was going to be in front heading out of here, and set off without catching my breath down the trail.

"Did you go swimming?" Jackson asked from behind, perhaps noticing my dripping hair.

"I got in the creek."

"Wow, must have been cold."

"It was freezing."

He said nothing for a few minutes, then: "I think this is edible." He pointed to a plant next to the trail. I looked briefly and grunted so he knew that I had heard, but I didn't slow down. He knew he had fucked up, and didn't say anything else, just kept a few paces behind until we reached the trailhead and spotted the Honda CRV waiting for us.

"Hey dirtbags!" Mason shouted out the window, and we waved.

In the car, Mason asked about the trip and Jackson looked at me, but I was busy staring silently out the window. *Asshole, you answer.*

"It was amazing," he said.

*Lies.*

Mason said we were meeting Lucia and Johanna for dinner in town, but I thought, *No way I'm sitting through another silent meal with this asshole.* When I spotted a pub out the window, I asked Mason to stop the car.

"I'm gonna grab a beer. Need some alone time." I risked a glance at Jackson's face and was pleased to see it looked faintly wounded. Mason made eye contact in the rearview, trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

"Okay mate...call when you want to be picked up."

"Will do."

I shut the door. Of course the others must have speculated about me and Jackson hooking up. Of course they joked about it, said, *Gotta keep warm somehow.* I had made the move, it had ended in disaster, and he had behaved like a jerk. He could tell them what had happened if he wanted. I had nothing to say.

I headed into the pub and ordered an IPA, sat alone at the bar, scribbled on a napkin. The sketch turned into Jackson's ogre face, and I drew a series of him mummified in the snow, doused in bear spray.

Halfway through my second beer, a Joni Mitchell song came on and I teared up a little. I also noticed that a man a few seats down was trying hard to make eye contact, and figured I had a choice: descend into a pit of sentimentality alone, or flirt with a stranger. I turned to him and smiled.

**Field Note: Prairie Falcon**

*The prairie falcon banks over the bluffs, tipping for balance, feeling the airflow beneath his triangular wings. Flap flap flap glide. Dark eyes trace a trail of rodent urine, detecting colors in the UV spectrum unseen by humans. He scans for the twitch of a nervous ground squirrel far from its burrow. Much larger than the ground squirrel's, his four-chambered heart pumps rapidly, keeping his body at a steady 104 degrees.*

*He will not leave for winter, for the days of forty below zero, will instead appear twice as rotund, puffed-out feathers like the tufts of umber grass protruding from snow. When the mammals are scarce, he will switch to hunting the abundant western meadowlarks and horned larks.*

**DRONE**

It was almost the end of our two-month stint on the prairie, and a new crew would arrive in a few weeks to take our place. We'd show them the ropes—how to drive in gumbo mud; how mice liked to nest in the mailbox; how to use the GPS, radios, tablet computers; how to input data; how Betty the barn cat liked to come and coil round your legs, what a flirt she was. Since we had finished work for the month—all the transects hiked, wildlife surveys completed, and prairie dog towns mapped—we had a few days off.

“Will you help me launch the drone tomorrow?” Jackson asked last night, as he assembled his little airplane in the living room.

“Fine,” I said, more than a little miffed at myself for being so curious, but I wanted to see what the drone would look like airborne. It didn't have wheels or landing gear, and since Jackson would hold the controls, someone else had to launch it by hand. He was forced to ask me for help since Mason, Lucia, and Johanna would be in Malta running errands, and the wind conditions were too good to pass up. Also, we hadn't talked one-on-one since our awkward backpacking trip in Wyoming, and I had the feeling he was trying to make it up to me.

It wasn't Jackson's hair that I liked so much as the way he pushed it out of his eyes, a palming motion. Thick and black, it was always squashed down under a beanie or a baseball hat, and I swear it had grown two inches in the month and a half since I had known him. It was a stiff sea urchin that he swiped back intermittently.

That was just one of the strange ways he moved his body. Everything he did was robotic, from the way he ate cereal (dipping his head like a backhoe) to the way he drove the Toyota Sequoia, braking and accelerating in jerky succession. In fact, it had been a mistake to let him drive today. Mason, Lucia, or I usually navigated these slippery gravel roads, but he had hopped in the driver's seat when we were leaving the ranch, and I said nothing. I looked at the Little Rocky Mountains on the distant horizon, like a child's drawing of a blue mountain range emerging from the low rolling prairie.

"I shouldn't have let Mason do all the driving," he said, after he missed one of the turns and had to reverse. "I need the practice."

The day was bright, clear, and unusually still. I snuffed my instinct to ask Jackson questions: *How did you sleep? Were you cold? Did you hear the coyotes?* I knew I would be disappointed by his monosyllabic answers, and I was grumpy enough as it was. Jackson was playing his sentimental music at full volume, the most depressing and overproduced songs ever, suitable only for tragic breakup sex on an old, mildewed basement couch. I didn't feel like I ought to be subjected to it since I wasn't getting sex, or even pleasant flirtation, out of the bargain. It was a guy covering a classic Feist song, which in her hands was beautifully mysterious, but in his merely obtuse.

*There's a limit to your love*

*Like a waterfall in slow motion*

*Like a map with no ocean*

How a map with no ocean was an example of limitation, I had no idea. That was the problem with the music he played for me: it didn't make sense. It was always being played at the wrong time, in the wrong place, and to the wrong person. But that's who

Jackson was: a host of contradictions. And for some mysterious reason that appealed to me, at first. *This guy is a gem*, I thought when I first met him. *All he needs is time to open up.*

My first night on the prairie, we lit a bonfire in the grate outside the RV, and sat around the campfire on logs naming our favorite places in the world.

“If you could go back to any place you’ve been to, where would it be?” Mason asked.

The fire glowed warm on the soles of my shoes. Lucia talked about the jungles in the Phillipines, and Johanna shared stories about safaris in Africa.

“How about you, Jackson?” Mason prodded.

“I would go back to being in love again,” he said.

Stunned silence. It was so bold and nonsensical. That’s how I learned that Jackson had just broken up with his girlfriend. He was heartbroken and hand-broken, and I knew I was in trouble.

“That’s deep, man,” Mason said, patting him on the back.

From then on I wanted to be alone with Jackson, hoped he would unexpectedly reveal all his subterranean thoughts and deep feelings to me, and me alone. But, aside from a few sweet and random moments, it had been a month and a half and Jackson was as obtuse as ever. And after our disastrous backpacking trip in the blizzard, I could hardly stand his silences anymore, even for a half-hour car ride.

His physical wounds were more apparent. The reason he didn’t usually drive was because of his bionic hand. Or at least that’s what the cast looked like. His left hand was in a contraption full of wires and nobs that splayed his fingers out like a brittlestar. It was

in this contraption because he had injured it two months ago while building a drone. While assembling it in his parents' basement, the propeller had accidentally started up and, for some reason, he had instinctually reached for it, grabbed that whirring blade and cut the tendons in his index and middle fingers. I wondered if the propellers had spattered his blood on the wall, or his shirt or face, and if that had seemed cinematic.

His dream was to use drones for conservation by equipping them with cameras to monitor landscapes and capture footage for eco-documentaries. I once overheard him telling Lucia about them:

“Drones aren't just used by the army to kill terrorists and civilians. They're important tools for conservation, and lots of organizations now use drones to monitor deforestation in the tropics. They make it easy to detect illegal logging. They are also being used in Brazil to count Amazon river dolphins. It's so important to give the public visual evidence of environmental destruction. And in a huge landscape like the prairie, drones could be used to track the bison herd, for instance, or find evidence of mountain lions if they ever come back.”

I could tell it was his passion. Nothing else got Jackson that animated. And believe me, I had tried.

The cast was more like a traction mechanism that made sure his fingers wouldn't heal crooked. It splayed his index and middle fingers out straight, almost convex, and held them taut with wires, so they appeared perennially hyperextended. That was right before he came to work on the prairie, so I had always known him with his robotic hand (*and robotic soul*, the bitter part of me thought). It was one of the reasons his gestures were so awkward, because he had to do everything one-handed. It was that hand that had



tricked me, made me like him right away. Also the fact that he was quiet but friendly, had a way with animals, and said the most startlingly deep things out of the blue.

It was only in the last week that his hand had healed enough to attempt driving these roads, and his jerkiness at the wheel made me uneasy. He was jumpy in general and too quick to swerve, had fast reflexes but lacked steadiness.

When I wasn't focusing on the landscape—the cutting horses on ranch signs, pronghorn grazing the sea of short grass prairie, the pale under-wings and dark wrists of rough-legged hawks circling above—I watched his hands on the steering wheel. His right one, the one not in a cast, was pretty, not large but shapely. He had effeminate hands that worked nimbly at computers and with small gadgets, hands that had a tendency to tremble slightly when he was nervous, and were usually shoved deep inside the pockets of faded black jeans. I had a friend who judged men solely on their hands. When I asked about a guy she was seeing she'd say, "He has great hands: long fingers, big moons above the nail beds. Stunning."

And those black jeans, he wore them every single day. They were meant to be fitted, but he was so slim that they hung loose on his hips and wouldn't stay aloft without a cinched belt. For some reason I could never quite parse out, I was often attracted to skinny men. There was something elegant about their slenderness, and in a way I coveted it. I thought he would look great in a suit, like Pierce Brosnan as James Bond, sleek, dark, and inscrutable. I had never been small, was born a brawny and solid farm girl, and my wrists were probably the size of Jackson's biceps.

I used to imagine trying to squeeze into his black jeans—how far they would get up my thighs (would they even crest my knees?) before stretching taut and immovable. I

imagined myself in his bedroom in the doublewide, hopping around in my underwear trying to pull on those jeans, while he sprawled on the bed laughing.

But that was weeks ago (felt like months in prairie-time) when I was still talking to him. That was back when I found his silences endearing and stoic, and thought all he needed was time to open up.

As he drove, I thought about what Jackson said a few weeks ago, before the camping trip, as we loaded up the car for an evening of wildlife surveying. I was carrying the spotting scope, enjoying the solid weight of it in my hands, the heft. I made some comment about never wanting children, never wanting the back seat to be filled with kids instead of scientific equipment, and Jackson piped up that he wanted a full brood, a whole car's worth, and I laughed out loud trying to picture him, with his dirty jeans and boy-band hair, as a dad. When we parked on a hill and took turns looking through the scope in the dwindling light and calling out numbers of bison, deer, and pronghorn, I couldn't get his future family out of my mind, the petit wife driving a mini-van full of green-eyed kids.

I watched a prairie falcon cruise fast and low along the fence line, the dark armpits distinctive. Once I saw a pair playing, tossing dry cow pats in mid-air then diving to spear them. Playfulness. That's what Jackson and I lacked.

The drone he had loaded into the back of the car was perched atop our gear like a feasting albino vulture. The parts had arrived from China in the mail about two weeks ago, and he had been working on assembling it every day after we got back from hiking

transects. The living room in the doublewide was a mess of Styrofoam, glue, and mechanical parts. While I read (and often dozed) on the couch in the evenings, he would play with the remote controls, moving the tail of the plane with a button. But he never turned the propeller on inside, had a healthy fear of those sharp whirring blades.

We pulled up to the little hill where Jackson wanted to launch. The wind had picked up a bit, and the blue sky was studded with lean clouds, stretched translucent. While Jackson unloaded the drone and attached the Go Pro, I looked out over the country he wanted to record. These grasslands would look magnificent from high up, like wind-whipped water, tawny foam cresting eternally.

“Okay,” Jackson said, and I could see that his good hand was shaking slightly. I remembered overhearing him tell someone (not me, never me) that his father was a pilot and had taught him how to fly. I imagined he would do well in a cockpit, ten thousand feet above ground. He certainly exhibited signs of what ornithologists call “zugunruhe,” the migratory restlessness that birds experience when it’s time to fly elsewhere. Perhaps his bones were hollow too.

“Hold it like this,” he said, demonstrating how I should grip the drone with my right hand and hold it high above my head. I was careful not to let our fingers touch.

“I’m going to count to three, and then launch it forward. Not up, just straight forward.”

“Okay,” I said. “I can do that.”

He set the drone on the ground and fiddled with the controls for a while to make sure everything worked. The wing flaps moved up and down, the tail twisted. Then he handed it to me. It was pretty hefty for a Styrofoam contraption, and about the length of

my outstretched arm. I stood in front of him on the little hill and held the plane aloft, planning to step forward with my left foot followed closely by my right and launch the drone as far forward as I could.

“One...” He started the propeller at a gentle speed.

“Two...” The propeller whirred faster.

“Three!”

But the drone wasn't lifting like he said it would. Instead it seemed to be bearing down, closing in on my face. I waited for directions, for him to yell, “Drop it!” or “Launch it!” or “Let go!” or anything at all. I was so strong, could hold onto anything if I set my mind to it, so I gripped that plane's malleable belly as hard as I could.

But I started to imagine that whirring propeller slicing through my fingers like it had through his. And then I imagined what it could do to my face, this white beast roaring in my hand. And then I realized how stupid I was risking my body—my fingers, my nose, my heart—for a science experiment by a boy I didn't even respect anymore.

That's when I launched it, threw that model airplane as far away from me as I could. I might even have taken a running start. However it happened, I ended up on all fours in the grass gasping while the downed drone whirred fifteen feet away.

Jackson ran toward his gadget, and I watched him fuss over his fallen project. If in that moment he had knelt next to me, apologized for everything, and asked if I was okay, I would have let him. I would have let him tell me that he had messed up on our backpacking trip, that he wished he made different choices in that tent. I would have let him tend to my internal wounds.

But there was nothing but his perennial silence. So I examined my own hands planted firmly amidst stubby native grasses: digits intact, fingernails dirty. Then I rose slowly, dusted off my jeans with exaggerated care and, with shaking hands tucked deliberately and nonchalantly into pockets, headed off for a solo walk on the prairie.

**Field Note: Bison**

*Nothing looks quite as prehistoric (or masculine, in a way) as a bison, with its massive, shaggy head and shoulders narrowing to dainty hindquarters. Immensely powerful, our national mammal can fight, gallop, and swim. It's a miracle there are any bison left at all, as ninety-nine percent were killed by European invaders. Mountains of bison skulls reaching thirty feet high were ground into fertilizer.*

*Living bison used to help create a fertile prairie ecosystem. Their wallows, for instance, provided habitat for other species. Now, a herd of five thousand genetically pure bison—the largest herd left—lives in Yellowstone, but as soon as they wander out of the park and into national forest, they can be legally shot by hunters or rounded up and sent to slaughterhouses. Their protection ends abruptly at an invisible, humanoid line. Climate change, with its drier conditions and harsher winters, will likely take a toll on this last remnant.*

**BUFFALO**

As we pulled into the little town of Hays on the Fort Belknap reservation, snow flurries snaked horizontally through the hills, dipping and hovering in the valleys. Carver met us at the only gas station in town, which also served as a grocery store with a few slot machines in the back. Stray dogs with tattered ears scavenged in the dirt parking lot. Hays was on the opposite side of the Little Rocky Mountains from Zortman, where we had been a month ago for Lucia's birthday.

Carver, a slender man with glasses, took time to greet each of us in turn. Then we hopped back in the car and followed his old pickup truck through a series of closed gates and rutted back roads. Since moving back to the reservation two years ago, he had lived with his family in a cabin built by his grandfather. Before that they had lived in Hawaii for a number of years, and before that Carver had served in Afghanistan.

When Lucia, Mason, Jackson, Johanna, and I stepped out of the car at Carver's house, three mutts trotted up to greet us, followed closely by a feisty gaggle of kids. The littlest was a girl of four, frizzy blond hair tufting above big brown eyes. She belted songs from the Disney movie *Frozen* and had a makeshift gown of blue scarves wrapped around her waist.

"Let it go, let it go-o," she sang, waltzing past.

Her mom, Emily, emerged from the house and introduced herself.

"You're going to be hearing a lot of *Frozen* songs," she warned. "We don't watch many movies, but a neighbor lent it to us a couple days ago and we've seen it about ten times. Michi is obsessed. Unfortunately, there are no movies about Montana princesses."

Emily had blonde hair, blue eyes, a slight build, and wore faded jeans and a baggy sweater full of holes. A boy a little older than Michi clung to her leg.

“This is Isaiah,” she said, patting his long dark hair.

“And that’s Noah.” She pointed out another towhead chasing one of the dogs.

The oldest, Elijah, was eleven years old and took his status as older brother seriously. He shook our hands, then shouted at Noah not to ride the dog unless he wanted to get bitten again. All ten-year-olds are beautiful in a way—a blessing of that age before puberty hits—but Elijah was striking. A spattering of freckles ran across his nose and high cheeks, and he wore his long brown hair in three braids, two on either side and one pulled back from the crown.

Instead of using our tents, Carver taught us to set up a teepee, and we carried the long poles down from the hill where the house was into a little wind-protected gulley. Carver drummed while Elijah performed a traditional dance to tamp down the grass where the teepee would sit, and we were told he had earned a number of eagle feathers for helping his father hunt, and for dancing.

When the poles were upright with the canvas stretched over them, Carver showed us how to create a fire ring, and how traditionally a woman tended the fire, guarded the entrance to the teepee, and decided who passed. He also brought us an old buffalo hide for a rug. It was thick and warm, softer than our blow-up camping mattresses, and smelled of warm summer grasses. It served as an example of what a hide could become if it was properly prepared.

\*



Carver had a big smile, and was earnest and generous. We learned this even before he invited us, five people he had just met, to crash at his small house, which was already filled to the brim. He was a teacher and a veteran, and spoke openly about his struggle with PTSD. Wounded in Iraq, he spent many years recovering in Hawaii with Emily.

Carver invited us to the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation when we met him at a conservation conference, where members of the Aaniiih tribe mingled with philanthropic millionaires and conservation biologists.

“Come harvest a buffalo with us,” Carver said. “It’s a big job.”

Scientists called them American bison—*Bison bison* was the scientific name—but the Aaniiih and many other Americans used the misnomer buffalo, though they were not closely related to the African buffalo. Europeans paid no attention to the native name for the animal, introduced the term buffalo, and now preferred bison; as far as I was concerned, the Aaniiih could use whatever term they wanted. When we were on the reservation, they were buffalo, and when we were at work as scientists they were bison, but it all referred to the same thing: a species that European immigrants drove to the brink of extinction by insatiable greed and a lack of connection to the land.

The prairie reserve where we worked, about fifty miles east of the reservation, was an ambitious project sponsored by corporate heirs, conservation organizations, and white men who had made their fortunes in Silicon Valley. They were buying out cattle ranches and encouraging the ones that were left to practice wildlife-friendly ranching, for example by using fences with a higher bottom rung, free of barbs, that allow pronghorn

to pass through easily. Aside from Yellowstone, the reserve had the largest herd of free-roaming bison in the country, which they began building in 2005.

During a question and answer session, Carver rose—not at the podium, but at his table—and asked his elders for forgiveness for speaking out of turn, for “raising the red feather,” as he called it. The recent history of the Aaniiih, Carver explained to us, has mirrored that of the buffalo:

“I am one of the Aaniiih, or White Clay People, known to many as Gros Ventre. In 1904, there were only 535 members of our tribe left. In 2000, we had grown somewhat to 3,682. Our survival mirrors that of the buffalo. Tens of millions used to roam the plains, but they were reduced to as few as 1,000. Today, there are merely 500,000, but only four percent are in conservation herds like the one on the reserve. The rest are raised for commercial purposes, and fewer than 7,000 are free of cattle genes.”

He went on to address the importance of free-ranging buffalo herds, and how hunting buffalo was essential for maintaining his culture. Out of all the speakers at the conference, Carver was the only one to address the emotional side of land conservation, and what this ecosystem meant to the people who lived here before the European invaders. Having a massive prairie reserve was great, he seemed to be saying, but don't forget that there are people tied to this ecosystem as well, people who have lived with the buffalo and who have a vested interest in their preservation for reasons tied to culture, identity, and sustenance. Unlike the European settlers, the Aaniiih had always known that the health of the bison was inextricable from their own.

A few days ago, hiking our last transects for October, Johanna and I ran into more than two hundred bison way out on Transect 3. They streamed over the hills, galloping single file along ridges, more and more emerging from the coulees and disappearing in the undulating topography. After counting the herd and taking photos, we watched them, a collection of dark brown coats curving like boulders out of the short golden grass. Seeing massive, humped creatures run on such spindly legs was still bizarre, even after doing fieldwork on the prairie for two months. But we didn't underestimate their strength and fearlessness, unlike the unfortunate tourists in Yellowstone who get gored. Bison will charge at up to forty miles per hour if threatened. We always kept back at least forty yards.

Lucia, Mason, Johanna, and I slept in the teepee, while Jackson set up his ground cloth and sleeping bag outside. We built a fire with punky wood that filled the teepee with smoke. I slept warm, breathing in the earthy buffalo pelt under my head, and awoke in the early morning with the smell of smoke in my hair, feeling mildly charred. On the way up to the house, I passed Jackson's frost-encrusted sleeping bag all alone on the brown grass. It betrayed no sign of the human within, lay still and straight as a chrysalis.

In the late morning, we drove from Carver's house—perched above a valley ringed by the snow-dusted Bears Paw Mountains in the distance—down to Snake Butte, which borders the range where the herd is kept. Buffalo grazed at the base of the butte and golden eagles circled the top. As we waited for various tribal members in large pickups to congregate, we played with Carver's children, chasing them up and down the dirt

road and through the tall brown grass. He wanted all of his children there, to witness everything. Elijah, looking serious, stood on the roof of the truck scanning for buffalo.

When everyone was assembled, we set off in a long caravan of trucks over the rough backcountry roads. I sat in the back of a pickup with Jackson and Roxanne, Carver's friend who had served in Iraq. Jackson was talkative and friendly, telling Roxanne details about his life that he had never told me. I learned more about his life in five minutes than I had during our entire backpacking trip in the Tetons. His openness with strangers, always in stark contrast to his coldness with me, stung every time. Of all the pickups, why did he insist on getting into this one with me? Why must he be so charming with everyone else?

As we barreled down the bumpy roads, looking for bison in the distance, Roxanne told us what it was like to serve in the army as a Native American, how she didn't regret it but had seen some horrible shit. She offered us Marlboros, and we smoked companionably in the wind. I pulled my hood up against the chill and hovered above the truck bed, letting the bumpy road reverberate through my body without letting it toss me overboard or crack my tailbone.

"See those mountains?" Roxanne said, gesturing to the western horizon. "Those are the Bears Paw. The story is that, long ago, a hunter ventured into the mountains to kill a deer for the hungry people of his clan...."

Roxanne spoke slowly, as though the story was taking shape for the first time, instead of the millionth.

"On the way back to the prairie," she continued, "an angry bear attacked the hunter, pinning him to the ground. Helpless, he called out to the Great Spirit, and the bear

was struck down by a thunderbolt, its severed paw rolling to the ground with a heavy thud. Nowadays, the shape of that paw can be seen in one of those buttes.”

Carver used a rifle to fell the young bull as he grazed with a group of other bulls on the flanks of Snake Butte. Rifle pressed against his shoulder, he crouched behind boulders with the other hunters, who were ready to fire if he missed. But Carver killed the bull with the first shot. He died, but the other bulls didn't run away. Bison don't run when one falls either from an arrow or a bullet; they evolved to ward off wolves and grizzlies, which attack from the outside. This evolutionary tactic, which worked for eons, made them absurdly easy targets for trigger-happy white men. The bison milled around the fallen one, and one by one came up to smell him. After each bull had paid his final regards, or satisfied his curiosity, or confirmed that the young one was indeed gone, they finally dispersed, trotting one by one over the edge of the butte.

The tribe was trying to cull the herd in order to bring in bison from Yellowstone that were genetically pure, had never been bred with cattle. Bison were too aggressive to be tamed, and never met all the characteristics necessary for domestication. But when they nearly disappeared, ranchers began breeding them with cattle in an attempt to create hardy, meaty livestock. Thus, most bison were actually “beefalo,” the result of forced interbreeding. No one was quite sure what the ill effects of cattle genes were, but one concern was that they interfered with bison metabolism which, unlike cows', slowed down during the harsh winters, allowing them to survive temperatures as low as -40° Fahrenheit.

The younger children ran around playing games as the buffalo was cut open and taken apart methodically. We watched as some of the Aaniiih drank the warm blood, an old custom. They passed out small paper cups, which were then filled with jugular blood. Then the stomachs were emptied of their contents, mounds of green glop. People came forward to receive different organs: the kidneys and the liver, the empty stomach, the heart. It was mostly the elder women who still remembered how to make dishes with these parts, had recipes from their great grandmothers.

As the butchering took place, the women brought out a picnic feast from the pickups, laying out a huge, modern, and classically American spread—potato salad, hot dogs, chips, and candy. They urged us to eat, but it was hard to get up an appetite as we watched the butchering, transfixed as the huge herbivore was disassembled into usable parts. I loaded up my plate to honor these women and the sense of celebration they created. Buffalo used to feed their tribe, and hunting them again was a renaissance, a symbol of health and culture returning. The buffalo meat stood in stark contrast to the processed sugar and simple carbohydrates of the picnic food. One was true nourishment, the other merely sustenance.

I ate slowly and, though it didn't help my appetite, continued to watch the butchers. I couldn't *not* watch. There was something about seeing the inside of things, life laid open. I had always been transfixed by the subcutaneous. The hunters worked steadily and efficiently, sweating in the cold air. The art of rendering animals into food, this skillful skinning, was a rare sight in modern times. It was a skill that seemed more tangibly useful than most things I had learned in my life.

A few hours later, we sat before the sopping wet hide, which was squeezed between the wood burning stove and the couch in Carver's living room. The hide had been washed and lay on a tarp. The hunters had removed the massive head and taken it elsewhere, and our job was to tend to the vessel of the skin. Though by Montana standards it had been a strangely mild fall, we couldn't do this messy work outside because of the whipping wind chill.

Emily and the five of us sat or kneeled around the hide, using knives and our hands to peel off the slippery membrane. Large chunks of meat still clung to the skin, along with blood vessels and sinew. It was a huge job, especially for people who had never preserved a buffalo hide before. Lucia and I had skinned a road-killed coyote a few weeks ago, but the sheer scale of the buffalo made the two tasks seem unrelated. However, I had learned from the coyote that it was more a matter of pulling than slicing, that a small cut could be tugged to remove large swaths of meat and fat.

Looking up from the small patch I was working on, the whole hide was daunting. How many days would it take to finish this? How long toiling on our knees, our cold hands bloody and wet? And what if we didn't do it right and lost the whole hide? What if we cut too deep and made a hole? I had already made one small nick and felt terrible. It was best to concentrate on one's own corner, focus on the micro. We had to leave in a few hours, travel back to the prairie reserve, and Emily would be stranded with a wet, gory hide in her living room and no one to scrape it but herself. The kids were not interested in helping, preferred racing around the house and garden, though Elijah let us borrow his knives and showed us how to sharpen them.

Johanna stood up. She had been kneeling for awhile, and rose quickly to stretch her legs. Then, Johanna was no longer upright. Her body fell, twitching on the bloody hide. Her limbs jerked, and she muttered like a sleep talker. Jackson had grabbed the knife from her hand when she fell, but nobody knew what to do as she mumbled and spasmed in the middle of the living room. She looked small, lying along one side of the swath of fur. This was why buffalo hides were used to keep warm: they could swallow a person up.

“Johanna!” someone gasped, but no one moved.

Paralyzed, I watched her, seconds passing, seeing nothing but her pale face, feeling nothing but immobility. This was beyond the realm of my understanding—what exactly was happening? What was the medical protocol? I had never seen a human body move in that way, thrashing like a fish in a boat. Was her tongue safe? I watched: rapt, guilty, alarmed.

Finally Mason sprang into action and pulled her off the hide. As soon as she was touched, Johanna regained consciousness and immediately started talking.

“Fainted,” she said. “Didn’t drink enough water today. Stood up too quickly.”

She couldn’t remember what happened after that. She kept repeating she was fine, stepped outside for some fresh air.

I imagined a stranger coming to the door, how we must look. The darkening afternoon; the dim living room and glowing woodstove; the earthy stench of damp fur and raw skin; a white girl sprawled on a bloody hide, blonde hair pressed against meat and membrane.



I followed Johanna outside to the stoop and we drank water while the dogs and cats tussled in the brown garden. The Montana sky stretched before us, a vista of wind. I worried about Johanna, and also hoped that fainting wasn't contagious, wasn't something that happened to white girls who tried to step into a culture they didn't understand and tried to perform basic survival tasks beyond their ken. Our bodies did strange things without our consent.

"Has that ever happened before?" I asked, focusing on the immense sky, trying not to scrutinize her pale face.

"No, never."

"Do you have epilepsy?"

"No. I just haven't been drinking enough water."

It was just a matter of dehydration and standing up too quickly, but it put me in an archetypal frame of mind. A dehydrated female scientist who happened to fall onto the gory project she was working on became a sort of representation of humans throughout time: inseparable from the blood and membrane and fur of the more-than-human world, an illustration of the cycle of taking life. When Johanna fainted, something inside me woke up, and the scraping of this hide became something like the scraping of all hides throughout time. Here we were engaging in a task that people had performed for hundreds of thousands of years in order to survive.

We spent a few minutes on the stoop, breathing the fresh air and rehydrating, before returning to the crowded living room and the hide we had been scraping for eternity. This was true work. Knees and backs ached, hands were cold and rank. Carver and his family did not have running water, hauled it in buckets from the well, so washing

hands was something we did sparingly, even when they were covered with blood. We would wash when we were finished.

“There is blood in your hair,” someone said to Johanna.

“I know,” she said, not even reaching up to wipe it off.

If nothing else, Montana had taught us stoicism. A few hours later, when we said goodbye to Carver and his family to follow the highways and gravel roads away from the Little Rockies back to our prairie reserve, he said, “Come back anytime.” We left Emily with the hide, though she wasn’t alone, had called friends to help with the enormous task. We would remember the buffalo, and the people who transformed it into sustenance and invited us to witness and help.

**Field Note: Loggerhead Shrike**

*The loggerhead shrike carries the grasshopper to barbed wire and impales it, acting disinterested as it struggles briefly before going limp. A songbird with raptor propensities, she must make up for her lack of talons by using man-made ones, or thorns. Her eyes are buried in a black mask above a sharply hooked bill. Larger prey, like mice or small birds, she quickly paralyzes by snipping the spinal cord at the nape. She will eat that grasshopper eventually, or cache it for later depending on what else she catches today.*

**FIREBALL**

When the new crew arrived, we all stood around in the driveway of the Holzhey Ranch making introductions, kicking at pebbles. There were three girls—one from California and two from the East Coast—and two guys from the Midwest. They seemed perfectly nice and competent, but I felt distinctly disinterested in them. I had hiked over 160 miles of this prairie over the past two months, and they just waltzed in, all fresh smiles and entitlement. I instantly had the notion that our crew was far superior, and found myself standing much closer than usual to Lucia, Mason, Jackson, and Johanna, and making a number of annoying allusions to inside jokes.

With our boss, Dylan, we all hiked out to a camera trap on Transect 6 for training.

“Nothing feels worse than finding a dead camera way out on a transect and realizing you forgot batteries,” Mason said, like a seasoned old hand. “It sucks to have to go get batteries and hike back in. That’s why we always carry that big bag of AAs, even though it’s heavy.”

As the new crew took turns operating the camera, I thought back to my training two months ago, how nervous I had been. And then how I had lost the tablet computer during my first week. I decided to share that story with them. It was a cautionary tale about keeping your wits about you, but there weren’t any mosquitos anymore, so it was unlikely they would run into a similar situation.

“Still,” I said, doing my best to look severe, “the prairie takes things if you don’t pay attention to it.”

This had the desired effect, as all the newcomers blanched a little and checked pockets for cell phones. I didn’t want them to be afraid of the prairie, but I wanted them

to have a healthy respect for it and not to be too cocky. I listened to a western meadowlark's lilting song with a thrill of recognition: I had learned to recognize that song during my time here.

Back at the ranch, while Dylan met with Lars to talk about ranch repairs, we showed the new crew the extra camera trap we had set up in the old school bus.

"Have you ever seen anything on it?" a redheaded boy from Ohio asked.

"Nope," Lucia said. "But we know coyotes come in here because there's scat in the corners."

We all took a moment to imagine coyotes careening around the bus at night while we slept, jumping through the windows and curling up on the seats.

"Cool. Well, we'll let you know if we get any footage," one of the new girls said.

"That would be awesome," Lucia said. "Also, keep an eye on the footage from C19 on Transect 2. There's a bushy-tailed woodrat who lives in the cottonwood. Super cute."

Lucia was having trouble leaving the prairie behind, just like I was. We both had boxes full of bison bones, feathers, and rocks. I knew it was a vain attempt to hold on to the intangible, but the heft of those objects comforted me. Lucia had to fly her mementos back home to Sweden, so I sat on the floor of her bedroom and helped her choose which clothes to leave behind in order to fit the bison horn and coyote pelt into her luggage.

A few hours later, I left the prairie for the last time, started up my car and drove north to Malta. I was in the kind of state of mind where everything I saw made me

wistful, even the rundown doublewide with its shag carpet. When I saw Johanna petting Betty for the last time, I actually thought I might cry.

The whole crew had pooled for a hotel room in Malta for a night because it was the annual chili fundraiser for the prairie reserve and our last day on the job. There would be lots of Montana beef and bland chili and (we sincerely hoped) free booze. We were expected to schmooze with the donors and tell them about the great work we did on the ground, conserving the prairie.

As I packed my car, Jackson unexpectedly asked to ride with me. *Why the fuck*, I thought, but of course was a bit amused. It was classic Jackson, acting randomly loyal. Why not just drive in the crew vehicle with everyone else? Because he moved in mysterious ways, which were charming and maddening.

I may have gone a little too fast, fishtailing slightly on the curves, creating a wake of dust. It had taken me a month to learn how to navigate these unnamed backcountry roads, and all those internal maps would shortly be useless. When I asked Jackson to pick some music, he selected Gillian Welch from my iPod and “Look at Miss Ohio” started playing. *She says I want to do right but not right now*. This was the last time Jackson would choose a wildly inappropriate song to play in my presence, so instead of the normal host of emotions (irritation at his obliviousness, resentment for the memories of our awkward non-romance), I felt only a dash of bittersweet nostalgia. I had made peace with the fact that nothing would ever happen between us for reasons I couldn’t quite understand and no longer wanted to ponder, and that he was a bit of an asshole, albeit mostly unintentionally.

“Will you slow down a little?” he finally said on the third Gillian Welch song, and I realized he was white knuckling the door handle just like my mom was wont to do. I eased off the pedal, a bit indignantly.

“I’m not going that fast...”

“These gravel roads are slippery,” he said. Then, “During high school I was in a truck that flipped on a dirt road—”

“Jesus,” I said, turning to look at him, but he didn’t elaborate, and I wasn’t going to play his games and ask him about his life. *No sir*. If he wanted to talk, great, and if he wanted a long, silent car ride I wasn’t going to contradict him. I could do silence like a pro; I *invented* the silent game.

I felt strangely mirrored by him, in a way. Like we could never quite get anywhere because we kept imitating each other, deflecting and waiting. We were stuck in an eddy, caught in the circular whirling current and unable to access the main channel. I had an inkling that we were too similar, somehow, and that his social strategies made me so uneasy because they were too near my own.

I passed a pair of dead ring-necked pheasants in the middle of the road, chestnut tail feathers streaming behind them, and then spotted a loggerhead shrike sitting on a fence post—like every other interesting species, their numbers had plummeted in the last fifty years. I still remembered my first shrike spotting, with an old friend on a dusty back road in middle-of-nowhere, Utah. You never forgot that first time.

The night began innocently enough: Lucia and I perched on a balcony, legs swinging over the sidewalk far below. Only a few mosquitos buzzed, sickly and slow,

dying beneath our hands too easily, black legs and proboscises akimbo against sun-freckled arms; the town of Malta sprayed pesticides to kill them. I almost felt pity for the mozzies, our old enemies.

A whistle broke the still evening, a long loopy catcall from Lucia. The two men passing on the sidewalk below glanced up slowly, reluctantly. She paused for a moment, unsure of the next step, then raised her Montucky beer in salute. They smiled, confused, and moved along.

But our game ended abruptly when a car full of college kids I had whistled at half an hour ago came around for a second pass, and the two most intoxicated attempted to scale the fire escape to reach the balcony. Thus a fun game of giving the less fair sex a taste of catcalling came to a depressing end as we retreated inside the hotel room, locked the sliding door, drew the shades, and hoped the fire escape was truly as impossible to climb as it looked.

To get ready for the fundraiser, Lucia and I had bought a few six packs of Montucky and, inspired by an old cowboy who catcalled us coming out of the liquor store, whistled at young men on the street for half an hour. I'd miss that crazy Swede.

Soon we would head to the Stockman Bar & Grill. *Oh joy*. How many cans of Montucky on an empty stomach? At least four. I couldn't be sober the last night the crew was together, our last night in Montana. I new that, at the party, I would watch my crewmates socializing with strangers, their personalities morphing to fit the situation, and I would fall into my old habit of "skinning." I would scrutinize them, tenderly, one last time.



*Johanna*

I was not a huge fan of American beer, so I only had one before going to the bar for the fundraiser. Sarah and Lucia were fairly—how do you say? Tipsy?—and I actually liked them better this way as they were much friendlier. I had been drinking since age fifteen and it was always funny to me when Americans got very, very drunk—what a silly law, this twenty-one business. Not that Sarah or Jackson were super drunk yet. Yet.

The bar was about a block from our hotel and we entered to see a bunch of guys in cowboy hats and boots, and that unmistakable sound of heavy heels colliding with the wooden floor. I would leave tomorrow for Bozeman and from there back to Germany, and I could not wait to see Andy. He said he would pick me up from the airport even though I got in at midnight.

I chatted with the pretty girl with brown hair on the new crew, and she wanted to know what the prairie was like, and I told her that since we moved onto the Holzhey Ranch it was so much easier. I didn't mention that everyone else preferred camping, because I thought having toilets and a dishwasher and couches in the living room was a great thing. Why wouldn't it be? People can be very snobby about being dirt bags.

Sarah appeared with shots of Fireball and handed them out.

“Shouldn't we eat a bowl of chili first?” I asked, getting no response from anyone. So I said, “Prost,” and held my nose against the stinging, sticky cinnamon flavor.

For some reason I had a thought as the terrible whisky traveled slowly down: Betty the barn cat may be the only one I missed when I returned to Germany.

*Mason*

No one else on this damn crew knew how to talk to grown-ups. After taking a shot of Fireball, I left our little cluster, huddling like adolescents in the corner, and joined a conversation between a wildlife biologist and the director. I've told Jackson he needed to network before. The dude was straight hopeless, but actually not a bad scientist, so if he could just figure out how to have a lighthearted conversation with the right people, he might actually get a job after this one ended.

Sometimes at parties I liked to play this game: figure out who the most powerful person in the room was and then try to start an engaging conversation with him or her. It was entertaining and almost always worked, in which case I treated myself to a shot of tequila, and one for my conversation partner if it was going well. I was good at people, and God knows the conservation community needed to improve its communication skills since half of America didn't believe in climate change. Ridiculous.

All was going as planned, a glass of High West whiskey in my hand provided by the director who was talking about the importance of documentary photography, when I looked up and accidentally caught Lucia's eye. She winked, lifting her glass.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, I think I need a bowl of chili," I said, making more or less a beeline for Lucia.

"Hello friend," she said, draping an arm around my shoulder, and that's when I knew she was drunk. Very.

"Hey buddy..."

"Do you have a cigarette?"

“No. Well, yes, but you don’t smoke....” But she was already pulling me towards the courtyard. A small corner of my brain muttered, *fuck fuck fuck*, but the whiskey effectively hushed the feeble protest, and I wasn’t fighting.

She leaned in for me to light her cigarette and decided halfway through that she’d rather just go for my lips. I didn’t stop her—it felt damn good.

She was the one who pulled away abruptly, but I was the one who said, “This is so fucked...we can’t tell anyone about this—”

“I’m not telling anyone, asshole,” she quipped, looking irritated, and grabbing the unused lighter from my hand.

Then she actually laughed, watching my contorted face.

“Calm the fuck down. That was the last time. I’m never going to see you again,” and exhaled smoke skywards.

### *Lucia*

Feeling like a scoundrel, I slid the back of my hand across my lips to rub off what remained of Mason—faint cinnamon, strong lemongrass (the remains of his natural bug spray always lingered in his facial hair).

I took a seat at a table with Sarah, who was wolfing down the bread and looked as intoxicated as I felt. The chili was too mild, but I couldn’t handle spice anyway. Swedish cuisine wasn’t exactly big on heat, or flavor for that matter. But at least we ate a diversity of dishes, while Montanans seemed to survive on a straight diet of corn-fed or, if they were lucky, grass-fed beef and were proud of it.

When Sarah pointed out a cowboy holding a baby, and my uterus literally contracted.

“Damn biological clocks,” she said. “Dads have never looked hotter.”

“Babies aren’t even that cute,” I said. “They look like aliens.”

Sarah seemed far away, and I followed her gaze across the room to Mason and Jackson, who were talking with one of the new crew. Jackson looked very animated and it occurred to me that he was hitting on the new girl! She looked like his type—about 1.5 meters tall, which is what in feet? No idea. Americans and their idiotic boycott of the metric system—and hair as dark as his, with a little more chestnut. Sarah never talked about Jackson, but it was pretty obvious she had liked him for awhile. I wanted to tell her to make the move, to go for what she wanted. Passive people were so irritating. But hey, what did I know? All I seemed to pursue were men in relationships.

Suddenly the room felt very stuffy and close, the lights moving a little of their own accord. “I need some fresh air,” I said, scooting back my chair. Sarah said something that I didn’t catch because I was already halfway to the door.

The night air felt good and I leaned against the cool brick walls. Then I heard a sound, walked a bit unsteadily round the corner, and there was Johanna holding on to the tailgate of a pick-up and barfing onto the pavement. I went to her, saw her long silky blonde hair hanging close to the stream of vomit, and did what a good person should, held her hair back. *See, I’m not a total bitch*, I thought, and then realized that I was about to puke as well and abandoned Johanna to vomit behind another pickup. *It was that damn cigarette. And that damn Aussie.*

*Jackson*

I saw it unfolding out of the corner of my eye, Sarah talking to a guy who did fundraising. I saw her take out her wallet and proffer it in jest saying, “This is all I’ve got!” and him grabbing it and saying, “This will do for now, but I need the other hundred grand by tomorrow morning.” They were laughing. How many drinks had she had? I could still taste that sickly sweet cinnamon burn in the back of my throat.

When the friendly new girl moved off and Mason was lecturing me on the art of networking, it occurred to me that I was the most sober person in this room. Then I heard Sarah’s voice rising above the din, demanding her wallet back, so I asked Mason if he wanted to sit down and we headed towards their table.

I pull up a chair next to Sarah and she looked at me, eyes flaring, then turned back to the man across from her and said, “Give me my wallet. Now.”

“Only for sexual favors,” he said, howling with laughter. No one was sober at this point, but this guy was blacked out.

Sarah made a grab for it, but he held on tight, enjoying the tussle. She looked at me again. I should have done something, but what?

“Who wants another drink?” he said, heading toward the bar with Sarah’s wallet.

“Goddammit,” said Sarah, glaring at me. “I could really use some assistance right now.”

“What do you want me to do?!”

“Anything! Literally anything, a tiny bit of backup,” she hissed as she stood up and followed him to the bar. I didn’t watch her, concentrated instead on my hand, which

had been healing slowly, tried flexing the index finger, until I looked up to see Mason shaking his head.

“Dude, you are truly an idiot. She’s been into you from the start—”

Then we heard shouting at the bar and saw Sarah striding towards the door, wallet in hand.

“Looks like we’re leaving, mate,” said Mason, gulping his drink. “Have you seen Lucia?”

Outside we heard talking from around the corner and found Sarah, Lucia, and Johanna sitting against a wall.

“Hello, bums,” said Mason, sliding down beside them.

As the most sober one by a long shot, I realized it was up to me to suggest the walk back to the hotel. But all I got in response was a few groans. The night had a bite of winter to it, pleasant and suggestive. I sat down next to Sarah, who asked for a drag from Mason’s cigarette, at which Lucia cringed: “If anyone blows smoke in my face, I’m going to vomit all over them.”

“You hippie chicks,” Mason said to Sarah, clearly enjoying himself, “are all the same. So pure until you get drunk and bum cigs off us honest folk.”

“Oh shut up,” she said, inhaling deeply. “It’s been a stressful night.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t help back there,” I said quietly to Sarah as Mason continued his diatribe.

“Yeah, a little help would have been nice. Good thing I can take care of myself.”

I felt unexpectedly nostalgic about this job ending, not living with these people anymore, about a new crew replacing us. Would they explore the Holzhey basement? Keep checking the camera trap in the bus?

I looked over at Sarah, and wished we had bridged that gap somehow, that our efforts hadn't been thwarted by strange circumstances and our similar personalities. Mostly, I wished I hadn't blown it on our trip in the Tetons, that the blizzard hadn't permanently iced our chances.

And it occurred to me that I could attempt a thaw now. There was nothing to lose. We'd probably never see each other again, so I reached out and put my hand on her knee.

She smiled and removed it. "Stop. It's too late."

"Can I have a drag of that?" I said, and she laughed, then yelled, "Guys, Jackson wants a cigarette!" Everyone protested wildly that they couldn't let an angel like me fall, and made a big show of stubbing out the offending cigarette. Mason even got up and hopped up and down on the lit end, yelling like a maniac about lung cancer and addiction.

"Alright, alright," I said, laughing. Then, "Who's moving to Zortman with me?"

We joked about the bed and breakfast we would open in the tiny town of Zortman until the wee hours of the morning. Then we walked down the street for our last early Montana morning, wishing we were in our hiking boots wading through bunchgrass instead.

**Field Note: Barn Owl**

*Barn owls are in a family of their own, distinct from all other owls: Tytonidae. They do not hoot like other owls, but emit a descending, drawn-out shriek that is especially eerie. In white-heart faces, their eyes stand out, black.*

*Like other owls, they invoke superstition and fear, and often signify death. They have been called “ghost owls.” Despite their perceived otherworldliness, barn owls are very sensitive, easily stressed. They mate for life, and if a mate dies the survivor can go into a deep depression and even die.*

*Scientists who study barn owls report that owlets smell like maple syrup.*



**WEST**

I left before the sun rose. I was sleeping on the floor on my Thermarest, and I deflated it and stuffed my sleeping bag as quietly as possible. It was fourteen hours to Seattle, and I had to get there in one day because I had a meeting with my new boss on Monday. I had gotten a job as a naturalist at a little nature reserve, and was crashing on a friend's couch until I could find a place of my own.

Everyone was asleep, and I didn't want any sentimental, sleepy-eyed goodbyes anyway. We said our farewells last night. I left a check for my portion of the hotel room on the counter, along with a note: *So long, friends. Safe travels. Once I find a place in Seattle, there's a couch with your name on it.*

As I carried my backpack to the car, the stars in the lightening sky were bright and close, no light pollution to drown them out. I got onto Highway 2, which cuts across northern Montana to Glacier National Park. I looked forward to the sight of peaks rising out of the burnished plains, but my throat tightened at the thought of leaving the prairie. I passed Roy's Taxidermy shop next to a gas station—only in Montana.

I thought about Seattle, and what it would be like to live in a city again. I would miss the wide open prairie. But Seattle had many parks, and I was excited to see how a progressive city ran its nature reserves.

A few heartbeats later my wandering mind was diverted to a white form in the road. It sat directly in the middle of my lane and appeared to be a rabbit. All of a sudden I was upon it, with no idea which way to swerve; I had hoped the creature would move to the left or the right, and I could move in the opposite direction to avoid it. But it didn't move and I went straight over it, yelling "No!" At the last second I saw it was facing

away from me, until it turned its head to look into the headlights before I barreled over it. There was a light crack from the undercarriage and then I was past it, cursing. That was no rabbit.

There were no cars behind me, so it was easy to pull over and make a U-turn, heart racing. A rabbit would have been easy to move out of the road, to say a little prayer and ask for forgiveness, to deal with the messy aftermath of death, the guts and gore. I would have moved the limp body into the grass, a simple show of respect. I would have felt bad, but I would have thought of all the bunnies in the world and felt a little better. No creature deserves to die under a car, but better a ubiquitous herbivore than anything else.

When the animal came into sight, a white mass on the black pavement, I saw it was a barn owl, with the classic heart-shaped face and golden-white feathers. One wing stuck up from its body like a morbid flag. I hoped the crack I heard when I went over it was the neck breaking cleanly.

I quickly parked on the shoulder where my headlights could illuminate the owl. There was no blood, no gore, no lost feathers even. The bill was slightly agape. Birds tend to die elegantly, internally.

I grabbed a trash bag and lifted the owl, already cold, into the back seat of the car, atop all of my luggage. I couldn't leave this owl on the side of the road. It was too beautiful. Perhaps it was wrong of me to take it. It was certainly illegal, thanks to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, which aimed to stop the voracious killing of birds for hat feathers. But I took that owl because I felt like a monster for killing it, and because I felt that it signified something.

I thought about the fear that owls evoked, how they portended bad luck and death. But to me, they had always been beautiful. I remembered my mother pointing out great horned owls in tree tops, and how my father used to talk about our kitten being eaten by owls with a little bit of satisfaction; at least we were feeding the wildlife fluffy morsels. No, I never feared owls or the night. In fact, I often felt like a mysterious being myself who longed to be understood, to be seen. Why did I have to kill one? I decided to think of it like this: the owl was offering its magic—mystery, the acceptance of darkness, the hidden power.

There was nothing else I could do, so I continued driving west, following the Milk River towards the mountains. The rising sun in the rearview mirrors ignited my tears into painful diamonds.

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