

Homecoming

I.

Last night I called my mother and found my first lover there —
sitting on the sofa talking crops with Dad,
asking Mom about me: Is she happy? Is she well?
Can she stand to take a phone call from an old friend?
secretly hoping, maybe, that his voice would be enough to call me home
back to the front of his green Chevy truck with the cattle bars on back,
his rough hand pressing my thigh, making it crave the dusty, hot seat,
my eyes lowered to the rusted hole on the floor,
the gravel road rushing past us.

Last night I dreamed about old lovers, men who wear flannel and t-shirts,
dog owners, beer drinkers, two-stepping smokers,
men who dream about escaping to Wyoming, Montana, Alaska,
riding in silence.

I drove alone to Madigan's Tree where we had parked,
drank TJ Swann and smoked, whispered in the space left us
by the wet summer air and stars that pressed us down
to bodies, touching bodies and cloth and not cloth.

II.

Alone, I climbed the branches of the great old tree,
walked out over the wide top of Lover's Curve,
the place where the largest branch rises high,
the falls back upon itself to touch the ground — seeking its roots.
I lay down on top of the branch, looking down,
and thick rough bark pressing into my stomach and face,
my legs and arms wrapped around the branch, anchoring me.
Below me a couple was getting married as so many couples do
in Wallace County, under Madigan's Tree, under the Lovers' Curve.

I could see how the bride's father had mowed the grass in the shape of a heart -
circling around and around the center where the couple stood.
The bride's mother had set out pots of flowers — one by every fencepost.
She had been growing them for this all summer, her fingers touching them,
seeking underneath the lush green for the one dead leaf,
pushing plant spikes — fertilizing probes — into the black dirt.
I saw the top of the bride's head, her scalp shining pink through the part,
her Grandmother's comb holding back her blonde hair,
a whisper of baby's breath under the silver tines.

III.

Under the tree I could see its roots, the thick black ropes
seeking the water that is still farther down, the smaller roots —
frayed ends like hair — reaching lower still to a bed of flat grey rocks.
Water gathered around the smooth stones and waits to nourish the tree
and all it holds. The water soothes me — but then I see,
still farther down below the tree, below the black roots,
and the gray rocks and the patient water — my great-grandmother,
the roots growing down, around and through her.
Her eyes are open, their pupils dark and still.
She is alone for just a quiet while but she wants me near.
My bones are old and dry, she says. I'm not enough for even a single tree
and I want to sleep, and she reaches up to pull me close.
The bark scratches my hands and my face as I fall,
and I remember what it was to kiss her, her whiskers scratching my chin,
her breath dank and greedy from tobacco.

I scream awake and am alone, my fingers seeking the dry stone walls.
Outside the nunnery there is a curved wall and someone has written:
TELL HER THAT I LOVE HER in tall white letters.
And I shake as I pray that they don't mean me.

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