

"E.S.P."

Dragging the River

She was at the door one moment, staring summer in the eye beaten back by its bright severity. She clings to the doorframe like early fruit, green and cautious, while her father wanders on about the dry fields, the new man in the soil conservation office, the new methodist hymnal, sins of omission.

At 12, she knows two irrefutable facts: She knows the president's name and she knows he is a son of a goddamn bitch, she has known this for four years and is ready to learn it all over again.

The next moment, she was just a sound in their ears, buzzing while they searched for her body in the black coils of water, clonding and balling up with the plunge of rubber hip waders, searching for one body in something that had been a mass grave for cattle for 25 years.

Searching for a little ophelia with origami hands among the fu manchu fingers of the willows and the exposed bed of nerves, bruised by the river that made up the quickly receding early summer shore.

The father's face looks as if it has been scrimshawed into an ivory whale's tooth and the wrinkles spit dark with chewing tobacco. His eye is the new picture window the white tail deer jumped through in late autumn, tumbling hoof over hoof into the dining room, his finger which once shook at her across the room is the bullet that billowed her brother's goose down vest as he climbed the fence that read clearly "No Trespassing."

His mouth is the dark wound in the sandhills grass where they buried her mother, the wound that scabbed over with dust and gucca while the old bitch still kicked underneath, feathered, raising a corp of ravaged old corpses into a premature capture.

At the door, another moment, she'd watched autumn and her origami hands folded into rare white crows that picked at the strawberries, into leaves

tossed into an updraft and eventual fall, into a snake and four worms that made nests in the warm pocket of her father's hand. A pony stretches herself out across a gorge, that once housed a river, one of those vestigial extensions of the Platte that live short but virile sentences, only to be plundered away in the final revision. The ground breathes in a death of promise. The water too.

The latch falls into its cradle and the storm outside is reduced to the sound of swallowed thunder barely bucking the heavy handmade furniture. In the morning the leaves of ash trees and lesser fauna sag or have been lifted away in the sharp wind of grey (horns, nails, some as hard as railroad spikes shattered some windshields in Garden County. A barn in the distance decapitated by lightning threatens to split its dark oaken seams and the fields, where jagged bone husks jut like the stripped bodies of half-buried soldiers dust kicked over grey uniforms as the living hurried on to the next battle . . .

Something else has been lifted away he is crying for her in a voice he hopes will reach the horns of god and still it sounds like he's shouting into a bucket.

Suddenly there are many dark rooms that seem underwater, furniture floats past his eyes, pictures nod on their way to the apothic depths. There are dark rooms full of clocks stricken and quiet, their throats torn out, ghosts claw at the door of his apostasy, ossifying all life therein and the dark clouds outside flesh and dress the hard bone and fossil marrow, preparing for the archeozoic. The wind sets off to shave the land, tussle the old woman hair of tumbleweeds and pat them off to wedge in the rusted red vipers of wire that gnaw into roadides, the arcuated telephone poles, leaning to touch the fields and the river bank with a voice old and full of amnesia, yet memorable as a shock of baby hair born and taken in lean plague years.

The wind gorges a row of dust, shapes it into a mighty grey sail to propel the ship to valhalla progressing by the slap of shingles and the playing of green wood like tuning forks. The sky is backed so far into a corner it is not even the sky anymore . . .

The river pulls at one strand of hair lifts a hand above the head, struggles to make her sleek with the flow. He is a bag of memories on the second day of her loss, remembering the first dance at the now hollow barn sitting like a skull on a narrow throat of pecked brooding silt the cigarette butts launched off the thumb and forefinger toward the animal stalls where the cows pressed firmly against a far wall, eyes big and sliding up and down in a bed of mucous like agate marbles spun on a sidewalk in the rain.

Boulder hipped women sulked behind tables set with their best pies and casseroles, whispered into each other's big ears about the daughter floozies and the weak kneed sons who line opposite walls latching on to the thick barn beams with dirty hog smelling fists and pasting scrubed soft chins to the bare shoulders of big sisters. Till one calloused sore hand stretches into the narrow reach of torchlight for a hesitant clump of fingers, one brilliant face half smudged by shadow lifts from a departing shoulder and confronts a pair of blue jeans and flannel shirt hung like the blind widow's laundry on a line as knotty as barbed wire.

And her hair in the branches her fingers along the rocks the water and her breathless cheeks she used to puff to be spoiled and hold it in, dear god, just to be spoiled.

In the end, he remembers, the dance to be had was the dance of his daughter's hair as she twirled around and around alone under a dagger of clean light in a barn now picked as fleshless as her mother's buried (if still heaving) ribs. He watched her through the gaping seams and took his hand, the bullet, and his mouth, the grave, and his eye of imploding glass back to the house where the sun dissolved his recollections like lemon juice on a counter. Her hair dancing around her finest smile until the dagger turns to smoke and recedes into the sheath of twilight.

That face turned up to the sky, afloat. Which is floating, she asks herself, the sky or my body, the river, she thinks, is still, but ripples, tingles with the lay of my body, but the sky rushes on, torn rags of night clouds prod the napping moon.

Wake up, moon, there is some moving to be done, soon the moon is drowned, and the clouds have knitted into a flag which weeps and shakes with electricity.

On the moon, not a breath is taken the holes float on, dim and airless there is no resistance to the orbit to this slow drifting.

O moon, faceless your father is crying for this flaw in your imaginings, you watched a child and thought her merely floating, you watched her as if she were part of another sky, now she's bone and shaking unhinged in a bag making the sound of sand, now she's a slow trap of booted feet down and up the mud slides for more of her for more of the moon's work, curled in the center of the dripping hammock raised and tied in grim success

the little cheetah the little leopard the little panther netted unresisting.

Faceless your father is crying in a room underwater in another room of solid bone he is crying like every tear is a city and a crowd and a bus to Omaha, like every tear were the core of a big black fruit picked from every tree bending with age at one gnarled joint to touch that river.

Water, you fool no one not the fish that swim in you or the shore crumbling into your mouth like loaves of black bread surely not this father nor the dead in your graveyard the rising water's pillaged, the thousands of eager skulls that bit at the net before your daughter and her log, safety.

You fool not the dancers, who dance despite you but not unaware, you fool not the farmer, who knows your love of rice instead of wheat and corn, you fool not the merchant or the schoolboy leaking into you on his way home from school because you've earned his splendid of piss not because he cannot wait.

—Charles Lieurance

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