

Bobcat Country

Also by Brandi Homan

Hard Reds (2008)

Bobcat Country

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Acknowledgements

See page 79.

For Bex and H and Bobcats Everywhere

Let us all be from somewhere.

Let us tell each other everything we can.

—Bob Hicok

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DOWN HOME

The vacillating demands of mediocrity must be satisfied
—Aleksandar Hemon

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN AMERICAN

It's a picnic. Buckets of beer, a bluegrass band, a shotgun wedding. Casseroles in covered dishes, sparklers, fireflies. Doritos and French fries. Canteloupe squares and a waitress humming in the background.

On pontoon boats, we want to waterski. We're all on ecstasy, sour cream for a smooth tongue. Everything slides into the lake. Our lifejackets are swollen, our cells blowin' up. Our Mastercards work. Our teeth sparkle.

A Simpson sister tries to sing. Half of us are pregnant. The other half are sterile. This is not a dystopia, so obviously dystopic—our knives keep getting bigger. None of us can stop eating.

COUPLES SKATE

Everybody deserves a balloon, a big one tied to a car on a sale lot. Someone is always crying *Daddy, Daddy*, but I look good on paper—put the tips of my thumbs together and relax your eyes. A two-nailed mini-thumb will appear.

I love eating crow all the time, am SO done with kissing people I don't want to. It's past the point where I'm allowed to go without makeup. The waiter is cute, though, and gentle with my earrings. He orders a Glenlivet and jokes about playing the baby grand.

Smoochy, smoochy, we make out to Dokken. I'm a smitten kitten all right, woo boy.

Guitar solo!

He tells me to tone it down but I cry until my nose bleeds. I have some screaming left. Really I just want to look pretty because you know, snow blows horizontally here and I'm tired of *The problem with my girlfriend is . . .*

He leads me back into the rink. I crossover on command, have forgotten how to toe-stop. Nice girls know to skate backwards.

GOOD CHINA

My ex-future-mother-in-law used to be a cop, but when she retired she started selling antiques on eBay. Soon, there was a whole “inventory” in her basement, with stainless steel shelves and everything. She’d show us her loot after estate sales.

Once I noticed she had a set of china like my mother’s. The good china, the kind we only brought out for holidays or if we were expecting the President or something. It was white with little blue flowers and had silver around the edges.

My ex-future-mother-in-law pointed to the china and said how beautiful it was, her favorite of the china she’d seen. I smiled and told her my mother had the same set, that she had bought it piece by piece at the grocery store as a part of an ongoing promotion.

Well, she said, it’s my favorite of the china I’ve seen. She smiled funny, and I knew she’d give it to me for Christmas.

She gave it to me for Christmas, 10 settings. Dinner plates, salad plates, bread plates, teacups, and saucers. Plus 10 little bowls I don’t even know how to use. My mother didn’t have those bowls.

I was so happy about my new china that I told my mother about it, but I didn’t tell her about the bowls.

Well, she said, if I’d have known you wanted china, you could have had the set that’s in the attic, the one from your grandfather. It was gray with little pink flowers and gold around the edges. He’d bought it piece by piece at gas stations as part of an ongoing promotion.

My mother didn't understand that I was excited about our matching china, couldn't understand that anyone would want to be like her. I don't understand why and spend a lot of time thinking about it.

I love my mother but sometimes I don't like her. I don't understand why. I spend a lot of time thinking about it.

WELCOME TO BOBCAT COUNTRY

We drove to the border just to say we pissed in the Mississippi River, six in a car to see whether a Lifesaver makes a spark. We danced in the headlights.

We had sex with boyfriends at the funeral home, slept with the gym teacher. Snuck into the hot tub at the Holiday Inn. Watched porn at Niemeyer's and went swimming and swimming and swimming, held each other underwater too long.

Our mothers chain-smoked, our fathers came straight home. Everyone spoke the same language. Everyone felt the layoffs.

We taught gymnastics at the Y, sunned on rooftops, watched MTV in the basement.

We rode our mopeds to Burger King, ate cheese curds at Totem Bowl. We sucked on Atomic Fireballs, gobbled Runts by the handful.

We waterskied at Okoboji in bikinis too big for our bodies. Were thrown over shoulders, rode piggy-backed, played chicken.

We waited outside the counselor's office trying to make the phone ring. We moved in and out of lockers. We spit things.

We bought blue Wet-n-Wild nail polish, purple mascara, wished for an extra quarter for Banana Yellow. We got our ears double-pierced.

We detasseled corn for Agri-Pro, Pioneer. Worked ice cream stands, gave friends free footlongs, sang Guns N' Roses songs.

We touched each other over our jeans. We celebrated six-month anniversaries, bought promise rings. We drove on the wrong side of the road with the lights out.

We went to every home football game, scooped the loop, peed in parking lots. We laughed hysterically and guessed who was having their period.

We didn't know for certain that others had lives that weren't like ours. We read *Sweet Valley High*.

We carved initials into our ankles, rode to funerals in pick-up trucks. We knew the deceased all our lives, whose dad beat who, whose sister got locked in the dog kennel.

Our mothers read Ann Landers and took naps in the afternoon, watched TV from a stool next to the kitchen counter.

We drove to Planned Parenthood, picked wedding colors. We listened to gangster rap in the stock room, ate at Perkins and Perkins and Perkins.

We drank in the barn, the backyard, the back room, the bedroom, the haunted house where they filmed *Twister*. We had the highest teen alcoholism rate in the state.

We let our hair bleach dry, took naps on towels, snapped pictures of our private parts. Talked on the phone for hours, ignored the flashing porchlights.

We shot each other with bottle rockets, drove T-top Trans Ams.

We ate salad bar with our grandmothers and dreamed in
waterbeds with tiger-striped sheets.

We avoided the meat-packing plant, walked the train tracks.
The only 22-year-old left in town bought us beer.

We promised we'd never tell. We believed everything we said.

DEER WANDERED IN FROM THE FREEWAY

I.

Keep your antlers up and your mouth shut.
It's tough when you've lost your spots.
What gnaws you at night?
Vertical stripes, hospital corners—

orders you're so close to taking,
faking your way through rhododendron.
Are French doors the only way in?
Tricked like a deer in the breezeway,

a beveled tunnel of glass
passed as sanctuary until now.
How to pull through rough weather?
Together, strapped to the hood.

II.

All the women in my family
going about days dealing with age-
old forces beyond our control—
oppression, repression, depression—

we don't recognize and certainly
can't name, seeing just the line of light
on the windowpane of somewhere we know
we don't belong but when we kick it cuts,

blind fury, and only a few of us will scream
our way out, others kicking in the wrong places
and bleeding in the right ones, spending lifetimes
dying on the linoleum floor.