

Smoked

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I learned how to smoke herrings, hung limp in the shed. Hitched my ankles in the rafters, swayed. The shed is a smoke house, I breath cedar. I hang with the herrings for minutes or days. Our skins change to puckered scales, our eyes rosin to holes – teeth protruding, sighing heavy. We watch the floor with eyelids slit split, floorboards growing a swell, damp with blood.

“It is time,” mother says. I drop and crackle down to mop up the moisture from within the wooden floor. My skin plumps and sags again.

Sheep tango

They exploded bombs at Dugway before, after I got married but before Peter was born. Dates are difficult, they didn't really tell us. "Sky dance fire. Tango," they said. "Why?" we said. "Sometimes you need to focus the moment," they said. "Stop?" we said.

Mr. Nibbs thinks the army talks like a bunch of girly poets. "In my day," he said. Paul said that the lights are love, that they will keep us safe. I liked to believe him. "Peter seems to like them, makes him giggle and cough," I said.

The bombs became neighbors – exploded as soon as we said they would not. They hear things. Sometimes bombs ten in a week, sometimes empty skies for a month. We got used to them, forgot them. We knew them.

One day it was too much for the army to keep to themselves, so all exploded during a windstorm. The air carried the dust and light like they were sisters. The wind coughed onto our fields, our water, and windshields. The town became strange under the cover.

Mr. Nibbs started reciting Gertrude Stein, or he said he was reciting Stein. There was no way for Paul or I to know. Everything was like mud.

The sheep turned the colors that fell into the fields. Red like Geryon. Green oceans. Lightening purple. We gathered around them, saw them herded, making watercolor. We stopped going to work and watched the sheep paint.

Peter yelled something about stars, and saw stars. The sheep took requests. Our favorite was the seaside, something from Martha's Vineyard. Something we could

never know to be accurate. Something like salty breeze and fiddler crabs.

Slowly but eventually, the sheep became dull then blank. They started balding. Their fur, patchy, lay in clumps at their sheep feet. The sheep cried. Peter cried. We decided to pull out our own hair, had to pull it out. We gave it to the sheep – auburn and grey and blond. The sheep did not notice. Their crying became too much for the town to handle. Last night someone lit the field on fire.

Iron county

They were called downwinders. People in deserts grow secret strangeness. Hidden lungs. Points suffocated. They say it was a time of passivity, that the downwinders didn't mind the lights and thunder that lived in the desert. They say it was a time of trust, "Bombs were for good, to keep good." The downwinders lived life like farmers – eat from fields and trade. Some grew goats on the land, too much grass for just the sheep to eat.

They were called downwinders. One day the wind carried the bright and sound and bomb across the desert. Secrets blended with air. The goats' eyes popped and their bodies fell with skin volcanoes. Goat feet epileptic.

They say goats are different than people, that they are full of salt-blood. They say that the extra salt magnetizes the floating radiation, brings the red. The red-salt says, "Come here wind, sleep in my body." So it does.

The strong goats lived on anxious legs, waited for the next coming. The downwinders gave the goats sick-goat-treatment, but it was not a cure. So, downwinders delivered legless goat babies. Slug monkeys. Crying fur lumps that breathed the same salty blood. Later the downwinders' strangeness became something like the goats before them.

His fire truck

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As a child I heard he was baseball-mitt-scraped-elbow-cootie-comic-page-American. As normal as expectations.

As a fetus he was not. He was born wet. His mother's water broke everyday for nine months. His mother took to sleeping in a bathtub.

His father said, "This is not how a pregnancy works." His father said, "I am going to leave you in the desert, maybe that will dry you out."

His father then left his mother, round pregnant, in the desert. His mother sat in a puddle of sand. Mud-red. The legend says that a pine tree grew out of the puddle and lives there now.

I have never heard the legend. I have never seen the tree.

He grew up normal. "You are something to grow into," his mother said. He will not. His mother knows this, he was born wet, that cannot help but stay with you.

Sometimes the air in the room goes missing

Everyone in the family was a different person. Hair and eyes and age and sex. Mother was a woman twice her age, her uterus sagging and airy. Father lived like a quiet that explored the screws in desks and coils in freezers. Three years ago first sister left. "Who buys the cow when they get the milk for free? This is a market economy," she said. "A childhood is all you asked for," Grandpa's ghost said. "It is time I do some marketing for myself," first sister said, "sitting here I might sour." Second sister and first son crawled on the floors and walls like twins. Gravity is less of a burden if you have nowhere to fall.

Required

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A draft means there is not a choice. Future fathers are forced to move and test and shave and build unnecessary muscles. Dugway is filled with the smell of puberty.

Boots run on desert heat and sand and rocks. Legs and bodies far above where the chemicals brewed. Forced heads in sand, hear-no-speak-no-see-no kind of years. Bombs exploding, gas leaking, wind storms, and more.

After clouds stop mushrooming, future fathers are directed to run out to recover the shells or samples or just because. Young men wear jackets with colored badges. Green to yellow to orange to red. Changing with radiation. Badges melt colors and shoes blister. Sand so scarred by testing it is screaming. The land grasps to rubber soles as its death rattle. Melting shoes are just a warning of future complications. Badges red. Warning red. Danger red.

Fathers tell stories to daughters years later. "Better to cancer now than amputate then."

Dugway brothers lay in graves side-by-side, never older than sixty.

Police report

“It is best to keep the details simple,” he said. “But why? Did she suffer? Where was she?” someone related to her said. “That is not something you want to know. What is done is done,” he said. “You are here to see her face and say yes or no.”

Someone related to her looks at the face. The face is a woman. Her eyes are closed. Yes or no. The woman is a body covered in a sheet. There is only a face. “Yes,” the someone related to her said. “Fuck.”

Tortoise

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They say that when Tortoise is old time will change – his black eyes become something new and time slows.

Tortoise knew to see time like a travel. Slow and prick-lish and burping, like that. Dugway needed Tortoise, but could not understand the in-between moments, desired to see seconds through Tortoise's black-time eyes. Dugway tested bombs on Tortoise. With Tortoise. A part. A Target. Every occasion Tortoise changed time his shell peeled and chipped and decayed. Dugway wanted to see time the way the shell understood it. Backs like toenails. Dugway needed Tortoise to split his shell more than a bit, did not ask. Demanded.

Then the bomb dropped. Time changed. Explosions like unexpected. Tortoise became a witness to the red kin of danger. "The sand runs like fear from the bomb," Tortoise said. "The bomb melts air. My shell is a horror forever now. My eyes are burned warnings." Tortoise shook like metal melting in cold, indescribable. "Bombs," Tortoise said. "You tested bombs with me. I see. I am proof. I remember."

Every night security guards let out hundreds of feral cats in disneyland to help control the mouse population

It is a city of cats. Tufts of fur roll down streets like tumbleweeds. Hair stumbled, clumped, mixed, moving. The sign says, "Feral ghost town."

We abandon our need for time, we structure our lives on the cats. We become a function of felines. A say-when-jump-when kind of thing.

Our labor is structured similarly, divided by function and need. Claw clippings are lumber, fur cotton, scratch irrigation, litter landfills. We are driven out at night with the cats, the laughter of the day are echoes. They say we are secret, that we do not exist, but I hear their rumble when the stars peek out.

It is a city of murder. We have seen them hunt by moonlight. Eyes become glows of hunger.

The cats are corralled at dawn. We mop the streets of blood, clear the leftover tails. We are hidden decorations by day, I crouch in towers and castles and shops. A life undercover in magic.