



INVISIBLE GEOGRAPHY

by Wendy Gavin Porter

Another person's physical pain may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography...

—Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*

JOHN Haines, six-foot five and half Blackfeet Indian, works up in boxland during salmon season, flipping cardboard so fast his arms blur. Thigh-high stacks of white and brown cardboard sheets, precreased and strapped together in bundles of ten, are lined up on the floor by his foot. White for number ones, best fish, and brown for number twos. He grabs each bundle as he needs it, pops the plastic strip with one hand, grabs the top sheet, thunks it into three dimensions, and folds in the edges—two short, two long—to make the box bottom. Then he slams one end of the box into the tape machine, and before the machine gun *crrrack* of tape along its bottom seam is through, he's got another box folded and ready to

slam. *Fold fast, fold faster* cracks like wood on bone in his mind until he reaches full speed and his mind stills. Each finished box shoves the one before it further along on the conveyor belt, until the fifth box sends the first careening down a chain-held metal chute to the production line below.

“Ho, boxland!” Henry, the assistant foreman, shouts from the factory floor, holding a long rubber tube to his mouth like a microphone. John slows and stops, walks to the hole in his floor, their ceiling, and holds the other end of the tube to his ear, his head bent down and to the side, eyebrows raised.

“We need number twos now, number twos!” John looks down at Henry’s ashen, exhausted face, and lets one hand rise and fall.

Zack and the other freezer guys can’t figure out why this big strong Indian got a job where all he has to lift is cardboard. The only other box makers are women, the old Russian ones who get cranky downstairs because it’s too noisy to gossip. On the other side of boxland, behind a wall of cardboard-stacked pallets, he can hear the clack of their staple machines, their shrill work chatter and songs. Every morning John climbs the stairs with them in a hush of rustling skirts; they might nod in his direction, or even smile, but mostly they avoid him. They’ve heard secondhand the stories he’s told in the break room about his old days,

when he used to hang out in Anchorage bars, waiting till some guy got juiced up enough to want to fight. He loved to fight back then, he said, loved to feel a blade graze his arm or blood in his mouth, back two, three years ago when he was seventeen. He never mentioned what he did to his father with a baseball bat the night he left Browning, Montana. His factory friends laugh at the stories because now John won't even kill flies. Still, it's easy for people to imagine John doing those things—maybe something in his face, maybe just his size—and even his friends, most of them, keep a distance. He doesn't mind.

He could have pounded frozen fish until they loosened, and pushed racks. He could have thrown boxes seven layers high into the cold storage vans. But other big guys can do that. No one else can run the boxline all by himself, eighteen hours a day, with no conversation but the whistle and scrape of cardboard in the dusty air.

Today is slow, the line stopping and starting, and he's listening to Bob Marley on his Walkman when Lisa comes up to see him. She's wearing jeans and a blue flannel shirt, its tails brushing her thighs, and brown curls foam against her shoulders.

“Hey boxman, you're sweating like a pig.” She smiles, her face still brown and freckled from living in Florida all winter.

“Hey Lisa. What you doing?” He circles his aching shoulders, waiting for the line to clear.

“Racking’s *so fucking slow* today, that’s what I’m doing,” mock punching him with every other word. “I had Sally cover for me for a while.”

“Pretty dangerous.”

“Hey, I live on the edge, baby,” she says. Racking is a fast job, grabbing cleaned fish from the sorting table, whirling around and slapping them 69 onto metal sheets till the rack’s full. “It’s a good dancing rhythm,” says Lisa. She sings “Billie Jean is not my lover” or whatever comes into her head, and the first eight hours seem like one. Except when it’s slow.

If the line were to speed up now, of course, Sally would spin herself dizzy around that sorting table, dropping fish, and mild-mannered Henry would start bellowing for Lisa’s ass.

“You know we’re supposed to get out early tonight? Five thirty, man. Bristol Bay plane needs repairs, so they’re gonna have to sit on their salmon till morning. Which means I think we should go play pool.”

John plays with her pretty often, especially after the midnight workdays, when most everyone else is sleeping or icing their swollen wrists, but he and Lisa can’t hold still. At first he could mop her up pretty quickly;

after a month of nightly practice, she hardly ever lost, even to him, and they started playing doubles with the fishermen at the bar. Now she's cocky, cigarette clamped between her teeth as she chalks up her cue saying, "Okay boys, bets on the table." John likes watching her float around the pool table with her cue, trying different positions, measuring her shot.

Sometimes John stays home in his rusted-out camper van near tent city. He lies in his fishstink sleeping bag, listens to Bob Marley, and watches candle shadows wash the quotes—Sartre, Bono, Tolstoy, *there was a young Russian named Rosie*—that old homesteader Jimmy printed on the walls in black magic marker when the van was his. On those nights, Lisa will be out at the Salty Dawg, and come two or three in the morning, he might hear her kicking stones back to her tent. She might stop by his van and think about knocking, and she loves it when he knows it's her, comes out to hear about what hairy ass fisherman got mad when she beat him or bought her beer and tried to feel her up. If it's not too cold, they might walk over to the beach and lie on the sand, listen to the ocean.

"Yeah, okay," says John. "Dawg's gonna be packed, though."

"All the more reason to go early, while the pansies are still taking showers. Plus the Cook Inlet boats came in today." Her smile drops, and when she pulls it up again, it's tight and mean. John nods, turning away. He

makes a box and shoves it through the tape machine, sending a *crrrack* between him and Lisa.

“Robbie still on the *Hunter*?” he asks. He’s back into his rhythm now, new-made boxes bumping each other forward until one slides down the chute.

“Wake up, sleepyhead,” Anna, one of the line workers, calls from below.

John rolls his eyes at Lisa, who breaks into her full smile. “Yeah, he’s sleepin’. Damn slacker’s always sleepin’ when I get up here.” She dances toward him on her toes, punches his shoulder, and pulls his Raiders cap down over his eyes, laughing when he grabs her arm.

“Yo watch it man,” she tells him. “Don’t make me hurt you.”

He’s never been this easy with a woman before. When he smells her strawberry shampoo he lets her go. He knows she’s feeling bad and that she wants and doesn’t want him to know.

If John still had a family, it would be Grayson, his skinny cousin, two years younger, more like a brother. John lived with Grayson and his father, Samuel Roan Horse, on his ranch about five miles northeast of Browning. Albert Haines, John’s father, lived there too. Like many Blackfeet, Albert

leased his own land to white ranchers. Some leased after years of bad luck, drought, not enough hands. They needed money to feed their families. Albert did it just after John's mother, a young, white school teacher from Bozeman, ran away from him, too early for John to remember much but flashes of that life: crooked sunflower curtains, a gleaming pot on a stove, her rough skirt smelling of bread against his cheek. John also remembered white plaster dust and blood on someone's hands. His stomach leaving him when the ground tilted and he flew into a pile of bedclothes. Broken glass.

Albert moved in with his brother and worked for a while. John remembers riding squeezed between Uncle and his father in the front seat of a jouncy old pickup, Grayson crowing on his lap, on their way out to stack hay. The carpet of sweet hay made the field look like a golden streak in the endless miles of grazing land, slough grass and bluejoint, and Uncle said, "Look at this, boys. This is beautiful."

Albert, laughing streams of Pall Mall smoke, said, "Boys, want to know what this is?" He toed up a clump of hay. "This is money coming out the ass of a rich man's cow."

Uncle also grazed ten head of his own cattle, and when John and Grayson were a few years older, they would ride the two swaybacked horses, Chick and Roan, out to bring in the herd. In summer the distant

mountains shimmered like a river above the prairie, and fine dirt whipped their faces when the wind blew, smelling of sage and manure. In winter hoof prints, leaning fences, trees, and ten bony cows stood black against the white snow. John had memorized Grayson in all landscapes, slouched and swaying with Chick's footsteps, his thin face calm. They never talked much, but there was peace between them. At the cottonwood grove, they split up, each circling wide to call in the cows, gather stragglers, look for a rabbit or pheasant worth chasing for dinner. They stayed out late.

Grayson was just seven, John nine, but they hadn't been to school because Uncle needed full-time help. He taught them to read nights after the chores were done, his enormous crooked fingers tracing lines in a falling-apart Boy's Life magazine. His leather vest brushed the tops of their heads as he bent over them, breathing a smell of alfalfa and sweet pipe tobacco. He kissed their foreheads goodnight, and they would lie together on the double bed they shared, grazing the dark, listening for Albert.

Albert had long ago given up work to walk into Browning and get drunk on the street and then walk to the north side of town, where there were lawns and picket fences. He picked fights with men on their way home from work or sitting with drinks on their porches. Mixbloods had stolen his wife, his ranch, he said. They were worse than whites because

they still called themselves Indian. Just like his stingy bastard brother, who wouldn't even lend him a dime. He'd spend the night in jail, or the week. He'd come home crusty with dried blood, rancid, thirsty, and fix his eyes on his half-breed son.

Uncle was some protection. He'd broken Albert's nose once. But he wasn't always around.

Come six or so, Lisa raps on the side door of his van, three times hard. The noise makes him glance up at the postcard—wood fence, prairie grass, long brown land—taped to the low metal roof just above where he lays his head, so he can remember the distance between him and Montana every night before he blows out his candle.

“Hey partner, you in there?”

He grunts and pulls on his other boot. “Yeah, hang on, I'm ready.”

They walk together to the bar, smelling fish and damp, the bite of her cigarette. She pets his long hair like she always does when they're off work, pulling at a handful of dreads, and like always he shrugs her hand away. She laughs.

Jimi Hendrix blares from the Dawg's open door. It is packed: old fishermen puffing up their chests and shouting, kids from the boardwalks

wearing college t-shirts, green and brown beer bottles crowding the bar behind them. Lisa tosses her hair.

“You go put our quarters down while I get my beer. You want a soda?”

“Coke,” he says. He watches her wade into the crowd. She spills a man’s drink getting close to the bar, and the man’s glare has settled into a leer before John follows. Lisa stands on tiptoe, chin high, turning her head. She’s looking for Robbie.

John blinks: for a second, the bar’s noise and stink pull back into silence, and he feels himself inside her, his own shoulders tight, his own stomach raw. In her, his gaze darts from one shadowed face to another. Then a thin man stumbles and slops his beer onto John’s arm, and he’s back to himself. He shakes his head, frowning.

John spots Zack as he ducks into the back pool room. Zack Bayer, with blond dreads thick as John’s but not as long; glasses with huge frames; full lips and clear pale skin that in dim light make him look like a woman. Folks at the factory call him Bunny, a name he hates, but he’s a gentle guy. The most he’ll do is shake his head and smile like he knows something you wish he didn’t know. Once he found a hundred dollar bill crumpled up in

front of the first boardwalk and in five hours he'd drunk it all away. Once he staged his own crucifixion, fake blood and everything, to piss off a bunch of fundamentalists come from town to preach. Tourists took pictures.

“John, man, this night is looking *good*. Working freezers two weeks straight, now it's time to celebrate!” Zack's toasting him with a shot glass, already unsteady on his feet. “Look who's here.” He gestures with his free hand towards the pool table, where Robbie is chalking his cue.

“Haines!” says Robbie. He's a little on the short side, stocky, with bugged-out blue eyes and a scraggy blond beard, wearing a baseball cap backwards so the strap makes a little window on his forehead. “How's my favorite Indian? I hear they got you up in boxland, man. What a drag. I'd rather eat shit than work that fuckin' job.”

John just shrugs. Last year they got along okay, working opposite sides of the Header: a forklift dumps iced fish onto your table and you grab them one at a time, belly to the left, and position them under the big curved knife that comes slashing down to cut off their heads. They were so fast the Russian ladies shrieked when more fish than they could gut piled up on the slime line. On breaks, Robbie gave John cigarettes and told him dirty jokes that were sometimes pretty funny.

But this year Robbie doesn't like John because he's stuck on a boat that doesn't catch fish, and when he gets back to Bates, people tell him about John and Lisa hanging out. John knows Lisa threw Robbie out of the apartment they shared in Florida. He cheated on her, drank too much, some other things. In old days John would have been tempted to kick the shit out of him. But not these days. Robbie and Lisa can both think what they want. John doesn't even know what he's doing here.

Robbie misses his shot. "Shit, I been on the boat too long," he says, laughing loud above the bar noise. Lisa walks in with her beer and John's can of coke, and the three of them turn.

"You put our quarters up?" she says to John, handing him the can. To Robbie she says, "Hey."

"Hey yourself, Miss Lisa."

Lisa takes a slow sip of her beer, staring at him.

"Robbie, screw this game," Zack says. "You were losing anyway. Let's play doubles."

Robbie's still got his eyes on Lisa, watching as she chooses her cue. He holds out the chalk, but when she reaches for it he jerks it away. She grabs

his fist, he reels her close, and John smells the tequila on Robbie's breath, feels Lisa's stomach twist at the smell.

"Don't fuck with me."

"Oh, *I'm* fucking with *you* now?" He lets her wrench free.

"Cool it you guys," Zack says as he's racking up, shuffling the balls into position. "Peace." He lifts the rack from the table slow and careful, as if it's a magic trick. "Lisa, you break."

"Break those balls, girl," says Robbie. He's sweating, his face a little red. Lisa ignores him, but he's staring at John. John knows Robbie sees meanness in his neutral face, the face Lisa sees some kind of mystery in, but what does that have to do with him? He smiles a little, knowing that looks mean, too, to Robbie. The poolroom is ringed with watchers now, like it always is when work ends early and there's nothing to do but drink. When Lisa breaks clean, some of them hoot. Dim light, lit cigarettes, dirt and sawdust on the floor. Lisa sinks three. Zack misses. John sinks two, and he's starting to feel sick, thinking about what it means to make fear. He wants to leave, but Lisa touches his shoulder.

“Man, I know this sucks for you, but thanks for being here. I’m not playing games, you know? I just wanted to remember how I’m supposed to feel.”

For a while John figures he can stick it out, for Lisa. When Robbie starts calling him the Red Man and Lisa his Squaw, the red of Robbie’s own complexion makes it funny. But all at once, the music and voices punch at him. He’s sick of the game. When he takes his next shot, his eyes are closed. Only Zack notices, and gives him a strange look as the crowd’s “awww” cascades around them. John shrugs, sets his cue against the wall, and heads for the men’s room.

It’s unoccupied, so he locks himself in, sets the toilet seat down gently, and sits, thinking maybe he can brace himself and get back out there. He breathes in the smell of smoke and urine, watching the faucet’s slow drip, the brown stain beneath it.

Once, John asked Uncle, “Am I not Indian if my mother was white?” An hour before, Albert had caught him reading library books, called him a stinking mixblood, and cuffed him all over the bedroom. He’d run to the barn. Uncle said, “What do you feel like? White or Indian?”

“I don’t feel white.”

The hay bale prickled John's thighs. Uncle had put a salve on John's cut lip, so swollen it was big enough to be a man's now, and John wished the rest of his body would follow it, puff up big overnight. He licked at the salve's peppermint sting, his tongue browsing past newly loosened teeth.

"Being Indian is not just blood," Uncle said. "Trouble is, what is it? Some say an Indian rancher is acting white when he works his land and doesn't give away everything he owns. Then the bank won't loan him money, cuz being Indian, he's a high risk. And his white neighbors'll say, *He's a pretty good guy, for an Indian.*"

Uncle dropped his inch of rolled cigarette and placed his hairy knuckled hand on John's shoulder.

"Those people don't know shit who want to tell you who you are." His fingers tightened and loosened. "Best thing to do is what I did. Get a patch of land to graze."

Albert kept drinking up Uncle's feed money. A drought two years running. The banks stopped lending. Then Uncle got cancer. He leased the ranch at last when John was twelve, and they all moved into a two-room plywood house in Browning, where greasy dust coated the kitchen walls and nothing would ever grow.

By now someone's shouting, "Hey, quit jerkin' off in there!" so John gets up and unlatches the door. He steps back into the poolroom, brushing past the skinny guy whose glare turns neutral when he sees John. Zack says, "*Finally*," and holds a cue out to him, but John shakes his head.

"Where's Lisa?"

"She left already, man. In a bad mood." He pulls at his cigarette and squints at the table. His eyes look puffy under his glasses.

"What's going on between you and Lisa, anyway?"

"Nothing," says John. He shakes his head. "I'll see you later."

On his way out, he passes Robbie, who's standing at the bar with a twenty in his hand. "Hey, don't do anything I wouldn't do," he calls.

At first he doesn't think he wants to find her. The sun's still high over the mountains, tide low. He thinks about running along the beach, past the tents and people feeding campfires, numbing his feet in the bay. He passes Morgan Todd walking slow circles around his red truck with all flat tires, picking at his strapped-on guitar, and growling some animal tune, half blues, half bear. Morgan raises his eyebrows and nods at him just as sun flashes on the strings.

Ahead is a hollow thunk followed by a clang of metal and then he sees her crouching in the parking lot across from the factory, his baseball bat lying beside her. She's trying out stones in the palm of her hand. She looks up, and his arm lifts before he realizes he's waving. She squints, looks down. When he gets close enough, she hands him a stone, and he stoops for the bat as she rises.

"Let 'er rip," she says. He tosses the stone, swings hard, and misses.

"Strike one," she says.

"Where's centerfield?"

"Oh, we're goin' for windows tonight." Her mascara's bled faint black smears under her eyes, and her mouth looks pale and soft. She's tired, a little drunk.

"Sorry about that bullshit in the bar."

John shrugs. He tosses and swings again, and this time the stone cracks off the factory's metal wall, maybe ten feet below the window to boxland. He hands her the bat.

"How come you were crying?"

She snorts. "Is my makeup smeared that bad?"

She belts three in a row, twirling smooth out of her swings, stooping for stones, her eyes bright. She'll cry if she blinks. Her boots carve circles in the ground, she's swinging so hard.

"Your shoulder's gonna kill."

She swings late on the fourth throw, twirls, and sets the bat's fat end on the ground, holding the handle like a cane.

"John, why'd you come here?"

They scan the ground for more stones, walking toward the factory.

"I like to be near the water," he says. "Why'd you?"

Lisa breathes deep then sits down, right there in the road, sets the bat in her lap, and rests her chin on her knee. John looks down for a second at the pale part in her hair, then he sits, too.

"Last year, because Robbie wanted someone to share driving and gas money," she says. "Plus Florida was boring as hell." She smiles. "This year because I didn't want this place to be *his* after we broke up. God damned bastard telling everyone I'm a crazy bitch just because I threw him out."

She picks up a stone and squeezes till her knuckles turn white. All season she's never talked about Robbie, at least not to John. When they play pool or walk on the beach, she's sometimes quiet, sometimes talk

comes out of her in waves: college stories, stories about waitressing in Florida, stories about the slime line. Anything she thinks of. *Look at that stone, it's exactly heartshaped. You hear about those guys who tipped their canoe in the bay? Oh, I love this song, I wish they'd turn it up. It reminds me.* John listens. The sound of her voice carries him the way quiet carries him at work, until she asks him a question. After a while, when his stories never went past a couple years ago, she gave up asking.

“I had to,” he finds himself saying. “That’s why I came here. My dad was crazy. He made my Uncle lose his ranch. Then my Uncle got sick. I got into trouble.”

Albert kept beating John, once right in front of Uncle, who shut his eyes. He and Grayson had to go to school past barefoot kids playing in their dirt front yards and ragged crowds of men talking and drinking.

Grayson was an A student. He cooked and helped Uncle eat, nursed him when he was sick from chemotherapy, steadied him on his way to the bathroom. John was dead inside by then. The weaker Uncle got, the less John felt. He skipped school a lot, even though he was good at it. He threw rocks at car windows, stole money from passed out drunks in doorways. When kids kicked the shit out of him for being a half-breed, he learned to defend himself. He started picking the fights with half-breed kids from the

north side of town. He learned to drink, and he kept on getting bigger. Albert started leaving him alone.

Lisa's looking at him now. "So what was that trouble?" she asks. Her look feels hot on his skin. She's slouched, her mouth open, teeth just touching the inside edge of her bottom lip. It's like her lungs are empty and she's waiting for John's words to give her air.

"One night my Uncle was really hurting, and me and my cousin took him to the hospital. He should've been there the whole time." John pauses for a long time, blank. "When we got home my dad said something, and I just went crazy on him." He touches the bat on her lap. "I used this."

He doesn't look over at her, just waits for her to leave or say something so he can leave, but she's quiet and they sit together. She holds the bat in her hands for a moment then gently sets it down on the ground in front of them. At dusk she gives him a cigarette, lights it for him, their cupped hands touching and laced by the lighter's flame. She lights one for herself. "For peace," she says.

After their cigarette she says, "Well, we got work tomorrow," and stands up, holding her hand down to him. "Come on, boy." He takes her hand, but instead of pulling himself up, he rubs her rough knuckles back

and forth against his lips. He's not thinking anything. The skin between her fingers is soft. He turns her hand over and breathes into her palm. She cups his cheek for a moment and is gone.

He gets up, takes his boots off, and stretches out in his van, hands behind his head, and hears again and again his own voice telling her the story. *I just went crazy on him.* Underneath those clean words was blood and the crack of wood against his father's head. How Grayson looked down at the old man and said, "He's dead," his black eyes electric, and was gone a long time while John stood over Albert in the kitchen and watched bubbles of blood wing from his nostrils. He came back with the keys to an old junked out '77 Mustang some friend in town had let him borrow. "You better go far," he said. He'd grabbed John's bloody fist and told him not to stop driving till he was out of Montana and not ever to come back. John had shaken him off without a word.

And now Lisa, a white girl.

He thinks about her fingers. He travels slowly up her arm, tracing the curve of her collarbone, her smooth neck, when he hears a faint tapping on the window. "Don't say anything," she says and climbs in. Her shoes are off already. She lies down beside him, so much like his new dream of her that he reaches for her right away, and they bump heads and she laughs till

he kisses her. His hands hold her too hard, too hungry. She says *slow down, let go*, and he lies back wide open, trembling for her weight, her soft mouth, her melting inside him as if he were the woman.

She slips out just before dawn.

Alone, breathing her scent, he closes his eyes and again sees her body curled against his in the summer dusk, her smooth tan hip, her breasts curved like old mountains. His own stomach is the dry creek bed, dirt blown into ripples by rain and wind, and he imagines himself grown small, walking beneath the shadow of her arm on his chest.



Once he'd come home right after school, sick of the gang of boys who were his friends. Albert and Uncle were nowhere in sight, and the tattered kitchen curtains had been tied open, letting in light that turned the dusty air gold. The small room was so clean and still, it looked like a reservation museum: warped plywood table, four rusty folding chairs, bald broken-spring couch. Hung on the wall above it, a framed photo of Uncle, young

and smiling, posing in cowboy boots and hat in front of his two horses, a boy on each horse. At first John didn't even see Grayson sitting at the table.

"You're home early," Grayson said, stiffly. His hands were in his lap. John had thought, with an itch of sadness, of the distance between them.

"Where's everyone?" John walked closer. An empty sugar bowl sat on the table in front of Grayson, its chipped porcelain top lying nearby. "What you doing?"

"Sam's out visiting," Grayson said. On his good days Uncle sometimes walked around the neighborhood, waving at the women out in their backyards, smoking on porches or hanging up washed clothes on lines. They'd invite him to come sit in the good chair, give him tea if they had it, water if they didn't. After the visit Uncle would come home looking more like himself, with clearer eyes, even laughing. So it was a good day.

Grayson's cheek twitched because John was closer still. Just a couple of times, mainly at school with his crowd, John had beat on him a little, called him *wannabe white boy*, *Mister A is for ass-kisser*. He didn't really believe that stuff. He looked at Grayson getting up out of the chair, backing away, his fists clenched around something, and thought of Uncle's voice saying,

“Boys, go get the herd in,” and his throat closed with an urge to cry that instantly became rage.

“What you doing, squirt? What is that?” He grabbed Grayson’s fists, pried them open, and a thick wad of bills fell down on the floor between them. Grayson lunged for it, but John shoved him hard aside, and he fell into the folding chair. John bent and scooped up the bills, and counted three hundred dollars before he stopped and looked up, laughing. “What the fuck is this? You been hiding this? You steal money and hide it?”

Grayson’s face was the color of ashes. “Give it.”

“What the fuck is it? Why’d you hide this?”

“Why, cousin? You think I should give it to you?”

It was money saved from Grayson’s after school jobs: working for his science teacher, filing charts at Indian Health Services, probably a dozen others. When Grayson told John the money was for getting Uncle’s farm back, John laughed. He stuck the money in his jeans pocket. Grayson came at him head down, and John, still laughing, hit him in the jaw, too hard. Grayson fell back and rolled onto his side.

In that moment John, standing over his cousin, was filled with the silence and golden dust of the room. He felt the cold, smooth pressure of

linoleum against his own cheek, a pain in his own jaw. He blinked, and the room blurred. He slowly laid a hand against the side of his face.

John fumbled in his pocket for the money and let it fall. He left the house and ran, everywhere, nowhere, out the long road toward Glacier Park, to the very edge of the reservation, until blisters popped and stung and bled in his shoes, and he turned and walked back in the dark to the tiny broken-glass-glitter that was Browning, Montana. Wondering if he could get a job.

He killed his father the very next day.



John looks for Lisa in the break room later on while everyone's listening to Jimmy Sloane, the hyperactive foreman for the slime line. He's got an inch of blond fuzz on his head and a goatee shaved to a point on his chin. He's wearing shorts over long johns and a purple tie-dye t-shirt. "You are machines!" he bellows, strutting back and forth before them. He pauses to slurp coffee, points to the cup and nods meaningfully. "Machines are fast, efficient, and do not wear out. Machines have overdrive!" The Bristol Bay

load has come in during the night, and this will be at least an eighteen-hour day with many more to follow. John wonders if Lisa overslept, but as the floor crowd moves downstairs to climb into boots and raingear, he sees her slip out of the bathroom, her gaze locked to the floor in front of her. He can't read her.

On the boxline, he doesn't dare think about her. Her touch has made his skin sensitive to the cool still air, his flannel shirt chafing his chest. The cardboard edges seem to cut him.

First break: again he doesn't see her. Zack crashes down next to him at the table, slaps his back and leans in close to say, "You sly old dog, you." Closer: "Just be careful, man. She's known for some pretty serious head games." Jimmy Sloane charges in, a green surgical glove stretched tight over his blond buzz. "All right people, let's get your slow asses down on that floor!" he thunders, arms out, and slowly waggles his eyebrows until the glove pops off the top of his head. People groan, take last drags off their cigarettes. "Crazy cokehead fucker," says Zack to John quietly, looking at Jimmy. "See you, man." He gets up.

"What are you?" Jimmy barks, waving his arms as the crowd shuffles past. "You are Terminators! You are Sliming Machines!" John keeps sitting, his eyes on the women's bathroom door. Jimmy dances before him like

Muhammad Ali. “Go Boxman!” he says, then vanishes. Fading footsteps. Finally the bathroom door opens and she slips out, catches sight of him. He loses his breath in the seconds it takes her to smile strangely and say, “Hello,” then, “Gotta go.”

“Zack knows,” he says to stop her turning away. She does stop for a moment. He saw her eyes only in dusk last night. Now there’s something almost too soft in the way she looks at him. The easiness is gone. “Look, I’ll meet you after work, John. Okay? We’ll talk then.”

He looks away, and she turns and runs.

The boxline speeds up. His arms feel leaden and sore, his rhythm way off. Five minutes feels like half a shift. What a stupid, ugly way to live.

John hadn’t taken the money Grayson offered from the sugar jar. But he’d turned out Albert’s pockets for a hundred dollars. He drove straight up through Alberta, old Blackfoot hunting grounds, that bloody bat on the seat next to him, and just kept going west. He slept in the back seat of the Mustang, his legs jammed over the edges of the front seats. He drank whiskey and played pool for cash in little towns on the Alcan. Blue smoke curling, silent men shuffling like cattle in the haze, he’d shoot and pool balls cracked like gunshot, like wood on bone. John would let a man catch

his eye, and mark him. Then he'd wait for after hours, the hunt in the parking lot. For a while he beat the weak ones, even if they tried to run. But he wanted fighters. He always let them land the first punch, to be fair. And to feel it.

His money ran out in Anchorage, so he stopped there and lived for a year, drunk most of that time. Some odd jobs. Some jail time. All hazy now in his mind, he'd been so numb, except for the way he craved violence the way most men crave a woman. He was in jail when Grayson finally tracked him down with a postcard: *Samuel Roan Horse died on May 12th, 1993. Buried in the cottonwood grove. Signed, Grayson Roan Horse.*

John leaned back against his cell wall and read the words, thought of early mornings, cracks lit yellow in the barn door, and limping through mud frozen rough with hoof prints, then his hand burning on the icy door latch, the creak, the shifting blades of light.

“Hi, boys,” Uncle would say. “Come in and have some coffee.”

It wasn't a sad feeling. Just the taste of that coffee. But it was enough that John stopped fighting, never took another drink, these two years since Uncle's death. He tells himself, as if it were hardly worth mentioning, that he won't drink now.

On hour twelve, his arms numb and slow, he fumbles for the next box, and the next, but his fingers slap dully at the cardboard, as if they've fallen asleep. It took this long for him to figure out that Zack wouldn't have known unless Lisa told him, and Zack would tell Robbie, which is what she wanted all along.

Anna's voice stabs up from the factory floor, and he tries to shake himself awake, but he can't make his arms respond. The line is empty now. Frozen fish are dropping to the floor down there, and Henry is shouting at everyone to stop. John looks down through the chute at Anna's livid, sharp-boned face. Then he walks out.

His '77 Mustang is shit-filthy, missing a headlight, squeaks on left turns, and the muffler is wired on with a coat hanger, but it runs. He pulls it up alongside the camper van. Inside the van is her smell, a little blade against his throat as he stuffs a few pairs of jeans into his laundry trash bag. He stops. Where the fuck is he going? In one move, he's cut himself out of the weave of this place, and he slams the van door, thinking he'll run back to boxland, find a way back in, but when he turns, there's Robbie.

"Whoa there, pal," Robbie says. Rain has pasted streaks of blond to his temples. His eyes are red, feet a little unsteady. John smells Robbie's whiskey and animal sweat curling towards him through the rain. He wasn't

always so ugly. He's not a bad guy. Besides, now they have something in common. John ducks his jab. He says, "I don't want to fight you."

Robbie laughs. "Fine by me. You just stand there." He swings again, and this time John takes the punch to his right eye. There's no pain, but the blow sends him a powerful desire. He looks at Robbie, who says, "I bet you think that bitch is in love with you."

John's mouth turns bitter as whiskey. He squeezes his fists, clenches his teeth, the sweet ache rising with the rasp of Robbie's voice in his ears. *Don't you? Don't you, asshole?* His fist shoots into the side of Robbie's mouth. Robbie's head whips back with the blow. He bends at the waist and swears, then charges John, knocking the wind out of him. They crash into the camper van and slide to the wet, oily ground. Robbie rears up over him, straddling his legs, and punches John, who turns his head, the fist glancing from the temple. He grabs Robbie's shirt and slams his head sideways against the camper's front bumper. A hard metal edge slices the skin above his left eyebrow, and a torrent of blood spurts down on John, splashes on his lips, into his mouth. Robbie is gasping for breath, dazed, and John scrambles to his feet and kicks him in the stomach. Robbie grunts, clutches his stomach and falls back, legs up, the rain pinking his bloody head.

"Get up," John says.

Robbie breathes hard for a moment, curses, staggers to his feet.

“Come on,” says John. Robbie flies at him, headbutting him full in the face, and John feels his nose crack, feels Robbie’s hands in his hair. Now John’s got a mask of blood, too. He feels sadness and relief: this is all he ever was. John grabs him in a bear hug, pinning his arms to his sides. Their faces inches apart. Robbie swears, struggling, and John squeezes the foul breath out of him, thinking of his father lying on the clean kitchen floor, blood bubbling from his nose. Robbie is gasping now, short breaths spraying spit and blood against John’s cheek. He can’t move. John squeezes harder, waiting for Robbie’s ribs to crack, watching over his shoulder as Jimmy Sloane and Zack run towards them. Now his cheek presses against Robbie’s. He can feel the prickle of his whiskers, smell the sour unwashed skin beneath his shirt collar, and the alcohol coming from his pores. John’s ribs begin to ache sharply: it is his own body he’s crushing. He can’t take a breath. He feels a gash on his forehead, Robbie’s gash, flinching from the cold sizzle of rain.

Slowly, John loosens his grip. Robbie pulls in a deep breath. The body’s relief is like an escape from gravity, but neither man lets go. John begins to feel a new heaviness in Robbie’s chest: *she’s gone*. The warm tobacco-and-leather smell of Uncle’s skin, and John understands this grief

is also his own. For Grayson. For the first time, John thinks maybe Albert isn't dead. Grayson could have told John that to make him leave. Why wouldn't he? Why wouldn't Robbie turn ugly out of fear and grief?

He finds himself in a new country of muscle, the smooth grain of it curved like hills, crosshatched in intricate layers against ribs and chest bone. Some hills are shadowed with bruises. Arteries run from the heart's push like strong rivers that branch into a hundred tough, pulsing little streams. There's a phosphorescent sizzle, a million winks of electricity like heat lightning over this fragile patch of land.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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