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Riverside

“Somewhere in you,” Nantes said, “there’s a rat fucking a squirrel.”

It was maybe a colorful way to put it, but it was the same thing people had been saying most of my life, in more common ways—something missing, not quite right, defective, broken.

Lying in bed I used to feel along my ribs and my back to see if there was something misshapen, something poking out where it shouldn’t be. I know now it isn’t like that—but then, what is it like? Sometimes there are lights and music coming from I don’t know where, other times it’s just cold—footprints crunching down into snow, a field somewhere. Some place cold and empty and blown out. Wind howling past me. A Minnesota of the soul.

Nantes was tilting his head back to keep his nose from bleeding on his shirt. It was polyester or some other synthetic shit and the blood would never come out if it got down in there. He’d have to burn it.

“The fuck’s wrong with you?”

The familiar question, rhetorical, so I held my tongue. I’ve learned that much, when to shut up. I pulled the cotton out of a bottle of Excedrin I had in my pocket, a new one, and handed it to him.

“Here.”

He stuffed it in the nostril that was really gushing, and it turned red immediately; drip drip dripped into the dust where the blood beaded up and rolled when I tapped it with the toe of my boot.

“It’s a hundred fucking degrees,” he said, staring down at the scuffed leather of my boots, at the discolorations from other incidents, some I remembered, some I didn’t.

“Snakes,” I told him.

Nantes snorted, sending a little spray of blood into the space between us. His dog smelled it—a Pit, of course, Nantes was a walking stereotype—and started pawing at the dirt.

“My uncle got bit. Cost him three toes,” I said.

I worry about things like that, even if the chances of them happening are pretty goddamn slim. The odds had been the same for my uncle, hadn’t they, and look at that outcome. So why not take precautions. There are enough things you can’t do anything about, why not give a little thought to

the ones you can? I do, and people laugh—like Nantes—and get punched in the nose.

There you go, a little consequence right there that could have been avoided.

He made some more small talk, backing away already, twitching the dog's choker. He'd forgotten all about the money, which was just as well because I didn't have it.

After he was gone, I followed the horse trail down alongside the river. I preferred it to the pavement, the cushion of dust, the smell of horses when you stirred it up. You still saw a horse every once in a while; there was one rental stable left of the three or four that used to be there. They were pitiful horses, balking and trying to turn back the whole ride, but people paid for it all the same. I could understand why—to be up on an animal like that, feel it under you, alive and ancient.

I know, I know, the Spanish brought them over, they're not native. They pushed out the bear and elk, changed the landscape, but that's life, isn't it? That's nature, turning a place to her advantage.

I cut through the willows at a spot where I knew the river came in close. There was a little cutbank there. I laid down on it and hung out over the water. The face looking back even got to me—the red, too-wide eyes, the scraggly hair. I splashed some water on my face, sank my arms in up to the elbows. Being around Nantes, people like that, always made me feel like I had to clean myself up, wash their influence off. There's nothing good they're ever going to do, they're just scrabblers. Throwbacks to when all we did was grub and scrounge. I'd just as soon steer clear of all of them, but it's not so easy. It's a crowded world.

There was a fish down below the bank, tucked in underneath. A striper, it looked like, sleek and silver, its tail moving slowly back and forth to hold it in place. No hurry, nowhere to be other than right here. I leaned a little closer so I could see the pink of its gills, the flaps working. Breathing, somehow, under water. I was jealous of that, I'll admit it, living where I couldn't. These limitations that are put on us, I feel them all the time. Maybe a few minutes out of the day I can pretend they're not there, but then I see the thin skin stretched over my hands, feel my lungs taking in just enough air to keep going and I know all it would take is one little thing going wrong. The universe inside us is balanced on a pin, and it's not a steady hand holding it.

In prison, you feel that sharp edge even sharper. Every day worrying about just staying alive. It wears you down, when all around you there are scuttlers like Nantes who don't even know they're just a bubble waiting to

pop. At night it was different; instead of burying that knowledge down somewhere, pretending I wasn't one wrong turn away from oblivion, I focused in on it. I'd pinpoint one piece at a time—my heart, my stomach, the drip of adrenaline—and I'd work on sending just the right signal from my brain to reach it. I wanted to learn to control every moving part. Lying there, at everybody else's mercy, I worked at learning myself. I tinkered and tweaked, thinking maybe I'd find that one piece that had broken along the way.

The striper lolled. I could have reached down into the pocket of water and snatched it up, but why? Because I could? No, that way lies exile, and I'd already been there. Instead I stayed still and let a grasshopper work its way through the dry grass to me. When it was close enough, I shot out my hand—a quick flick—and knocked it into the water. The striper circled twice, then rose slowly and sucked the hopper in. Its left eye rolled up and looked at me through the surface film. I knew all it could see was a kind of blob standing out a little from the background of sky and branches, but who's to say we're any other than what we are in its eyes?

Eventually, the fish nosed out into the current and drifted away. I lay back in the grass again, the sun dropping downstream, and dozed off. I didn't dream, and I didn't wake up lost or thrashing. When I came back around, I was me. That wasn't always the case.

The first half-dozen times you wake up in prison, it's not a good thing. That feeling of a new day, of possibility when you first open your eyes? It comes crashing down, and you shrivel up under a weight you never quite push off. That afternoon, there by the river, was the first time I could remember when I hadn't felt it on me. I breathed in easily, dry air with a taste of dust and hot grass, the ground starting to cool a little and things stirring around me from having been still so long. I heard a bird—a jay maybe, or a magpie—rustling around in the blackberry vines. Up higher, a squirrel hung to the side of an oak trunk, scooting around it from one side to the other. I didn't see a hawk or an owl or any kind of predator, so maybe it was just its habit to keep moving. A couple of mallards splashed down on the far side of the river where a little bay nestled into the bank, the water still and glassy.

I was a part of the web right then, another animal making its way. Maybe you understand the pleasure of that, and maybe you don't; maybe you have to have been outside to appreciate being let back in. I rolled up onto my elbow slowly. I was floating on top of this natural world and I wanted to make as few ripples as I could. Off to my left, a little snap sounded, a branch breaking. I squinted and could just separate the deer's

coat—a young doe—from the alder saplings with their leaves turning. Her eye pivoted the smallest bit and stopped on me. I imagined I could smell her the same way she could smell me, a wild scent, earth and sedge and greasewood drifting on the falling air like a voice from far off. I made my breath slow, eased my lungs into a shallow rhythm. This is what I'd been practicing for, rehearsing to rejoin the world.

Her eye twitched again, away from me, off toward the houses on the far side of the levee. She sank suddenly back on her haunches and lunged, crashed through a copse of willows onto the trail, her hooves thudding into the dirt, sending up puffs as she zagged and cut. She was almost to me when the dog caught up with her.

It snapped at her back leg and missed. Then again. I heard the crunch of bone, saw her fall and try to get up again. Her eyes wild and black, all pupil. The dog tore at her and she kicked back at it, connecting once or twice. It yipped, but didn't let go.

I was up now, and I could see Nantes stepping down into the thicket, laughing and egging the goddamn dog on. When he saw me, the jailbird grin disappeared. He whistled up his dog, but it wouldn't leave off. I'd never heard a sound like the deer was making, a high warbling like you might hear out in the deep ocean. I grabbed up a cottonwood branch and laid into the dog with it. Nantes was whining and calling his name—*Elvis* of all goddamn things—and finally he got the message. He belly-crawled over to Nantes and the two of them slithered off, the dog acting like he wanted to take me on, but at the same time letting himself be pulled away. Like Nantes in the yard after he'd cut a skinny little Norteño kid—just nicked his side—hollering slurs and curses to get the guards' attention, making sure he'd get D-segged out of the population.

I sat down by the deer. She was breathing in quick huffs, her eyes jumping around. One hind leg was torn open, the bone showing through above the hoof. When she tried to stand, I eased her back down. I stroked her side and talked—not saying anything really, just keeping my voice steady and low, using it for something it wasn't accustomed to. Her breathing slowed gradually and she stopped kicking.

The first time I tried to lift her, she struggled and threw her head. I set her down again and calmed her. I don't know how long it took, maybe an hour, but finally she let me carry her over to the cove. I set her in the patch of grass where I'd dozed off, wrapped my shirt around her leg with a branch on either side to splint the bone. Her nostrils worked as she watched me, her eyes sharp. I tightened the shirt little by little, letting her rest in between. In my cupped hands I carried water over and splashed it

gently on her leg, cleaning the blood and dirt out of the wound. I washed a little over her neck too, and down her side.

When the moon came up on her laying there she was almost calm, her breathing steady. We both watched it rise, enormous and bright, the light spreading across the water, silvering it. A fish rose out in the current, maybe the same striper. An owl flapped over, just a shadow against the night, a flutter like a heart skipping. Peace settled down on us almost like a physical thing, like a cooling rain after months of dry weather.

I try to remember it whenever I can, that feeling as I drifted off.

The sound that woke me was a sort of snuffling, nothing violent. I didn't see the coyotes at first—or if I did, I thought they were part of a dream, something spun out of the moonlight. One had clamped down on her throat, so she didn't make any sound except a little intake of air, quick and faint. Another was pulling on her hind leg, dragging her toward the brush. When I jumped up they stopped and backed off a few paces. They faced me down for just a minute before trotting back into the trees beside the trail. Shadows of shadows, then gone.

There was nothing more to do after that. Her eyes weren't scared or curious any longer. Where that wild flicker had been there was nothing now. Whatever had been in her, had been her, was gone. Where it went, I don't know. I've heard all the speculations, all the fairy tales. I know they're supposed to comfort, but they don't. Not one bit.

She sank a little when I lowered her into the water, then bobbed back up when the current caught her. She rolled onto her side, and the moon glanced off her coat, brown shading to white, soft in the light that did its best to soften everything.