

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 10 | Issue 2

Article 32

January 2011

Tracks

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Recommended Citation

Blakinger, Kate (2011) "Tracks," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 10: Iss. 2, Article 32.
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol10/iss2/32>

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TRACKS

Kate Blakinger

All that winter they drove into storms. Rex steered them through snow and hail to Lake Erie, while Angela smoked his cigarettes one after another until she was dizzy. She always felt a little lightheaded sitting next to Rex. Smoking just buoyed her up faster, floating her through the drive toward the moment of arrival, when his hands would hold her instead of the wheel.

Even with a storm coming on, their car was never the only one on the road. Other drivers would honk at them at stoplights, laughing at Rex's surfboard, which was tied to the roof with rope.

You could surf on Lake Erie when a winter storm churned it up—otherwise, there were no waves worth catching. The water was the color of milky coffee, and a chemical tang hung in the air around it. After surfing, sometimes Rex would get ear infections or pink eye, and once he got a rash that started at his hands and neck and spread up his arms and down his chest for days, like a slow-moving parade of tiny red ants. Angela remembered how he'd clawed at himself. She'd spread calamine lotion all over him, and it stained his clothes. She still let him touch her with those red-spotted hands.

Her mother told her Rex was trouble. "You better open up your eyes, Angela," her mother said. "Take a good look at what you're getting into." That made the girl laugh. It was what she liked about him: all the trouble he stirred up. Her mother told her a sixteen-year-old girl belonged in school. She sure didn't know what to say to change a person's mind.

Rex had a fancy dry suit he propped up in the backseat like a third passenger. He had to wriggle into it through the zippered slit that ran from shoulder to shoulder, across the back. That day in January, as he wriggled, he told Angela that divers peed in their dry suits.

"Liar," she said. "They'd be wet inside, then, and what would be the point?"

"I'm serious. There's this condom thingy you wear with a tube on the end of it, and the tube attaches to a valve at your knee." He told her it was called the P-valve.

"What about girl divers?" Angela asked, but she was thinking about condoms, how they hadn't used one that time in the backseat, her sweaty butt sticking to the vinyl. She hadn't made him stop.

Rex shrugged at her question. "Diapers, maybe," he said.

It wasn't snowing too hard yet, so she got out of the car and walked with him through the drifts from an earlier storm, which gave way to sand as they approached the water.

There were a couple surfers already out on the lake; probably people they'd seen around before, but it was impossible to tell from the beach. Not a lot of folks surfed Lake Erie; you had to be a little crazy to get into that water. The waves were highest right before a blizzard, pushed up by the wind. Icicles formed on the surfers' suits, and their goggles froze to their faces. They had to watch each other for the glazed eyes and slurred speech of hypothermia.

Snowflakes caught in Rex's eyelashes as he leaned down to kiss Angela. She frowned and he asked, "What's with you?"

"Nothing."

"You'd tell me if something was up, right?" Rex's hands were huge. He cupped one around her cheek.

She wanted to tell him that she felt sick and scared, that lately each time she pulled down her underwear she looked for blood that was never there, but all she said was: "There's nothing, really. Go surf before the snow gets too thick."

Rex waded into the water, slid onto his board, and paddled through the whitewater to beyond the breaker line. Angela listened to the lick of the waves against the shore. When she closed her eyes, it was easy to mistake that sound for the ocean. She'd never seen the ocean, except in movies, but her mother had a tape of ocean waves that she listened to as she lay in bed, trying to sleep. When Angela was little, sometimes she'd sneak into her mother's bedroom, crawl under the covers, and

snuggle up to her big warm body, listening to the waves crash again and again. Her mother would scold her, tell her not to touch her legs with those cold toes. She'd ask Angela why she always went barefoot in winter. Did she want to catch her death?

Angela walked a little further up the beach, the wind whipping her hair into snarls. She wished there were shells to collect, but all she found was a used Band-Aid by the edge of the water. She nudged sand over the Band-Aid with the toe of her boot.

That morning, she'd lifted her shirt, unbuttoned her jeans, and looked at the pale dough of her belly in the cracked mirror hanging in the gas station restroom, trying to detect changes. She touched her breasts, and they were tender. Her period was late by three weeks, maybe more. She almost wanted to talk to her mother, but she'd stopped buying new minutes for her cell phone long ago, and Rex's needed to be charged. Besides, she could just hear her mother. "That boy's a rotten apple," she'd say, "and you went ahead and took a bite."

Angela retraced her steps across the beach, returning to the car to read her magazine, but she couldn't concentrate, not even on the pictures. Wrapped in a T-shirt at the bottom of her backpack was a home pregnancy test she'd bought at the drugstore next to the gas station. She'd purchased several candy bars, too, setting everything down in a pile as if chocolate could camouflage what she was really there for.

She hadn't had the guts to use the test while she was in the restroom. She'd stood there, dancing back and forth on her toes, her bladder bursting, trying to work up the courage, but finally she just sat and peed, unable to hold it any longer. She pulled the box out now and stared at the pictures on the back: a plus sign would appear if you were pregnant and a minus sign if you weren't. As if bringing another person into the world was a simple matter of arithmetic.

She didn't want a baby; she didn't want anything growing inside of her. She could picture her belly ballooning outward, stretching

her belly button wide. Rex wouldn't dump her and tell all his friends she was a big slut—the fate of Angela's lab partner sophomore year, a Chicana girl who'd stopped coming to Chemistry when the baggy overalls she wore no longer disguised the round push of her pregnancy. Rex would never do that, but she wasn't sure what he would do. She wasn't even sure what she'd do. She'd need her mother's consent to get rid of the baby. There was some kind of law.

She shoved the test deep into her backpack when Rex returned. He retied his board to the roof with the knots he'd learned in Boy Scouts and eased into the backseat where he proceeded to strip off his dry suit, dripping lake water everywhere. Some night when it wasn't so cold they'd end up sleeping back there. She'd stretch herself out and the smell of the lake would push into her nose, taste like car exhaust in her mouth.

“Couldn't you change outside?” Angela asked.

“It's like negative degrees out there.”

“You're getting the seats wet.”

He shrugged. “It's just water.”

Angela balled her hands into fists and stared at them in her lap, curled and small, as Rex climbed into the driver's seat. She'd already started the ignition and heat was pumping from the vents. He held his hands in the streams of hot air, his fingers white and pruned, the skin shrunk close to the bone with cold. Then he patted a hand around under the driver's seat, looking for the film canister he kept his pot in. Once his fingers were thawed and nimble, he rolled a joint.

“We should go,” she said. She didn't want to get stuck on the road in the storm. She imagined snow piling so high around them that they couldn't open the car doors. Someone would find them during the spring melt. They'd be naked, maybe. Angela had heard that freezing people ripped off their clothes near the end because they felt so warm, like their skin was burning.

Rex nodded but lit the joint. When he passed it to her, the end was soft and wet with his spit. She hesitated for a second then put it

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to her lips. They smoked with the windows closed, letting the car get foggy and pungent, the scent of the pot overwhelming the lake smell on Rex's skin. He put a tape of the Ramones into the tape player. The snow was really coming down now, and the wind rocked the car. "If you squint a little," Angela said, "the flakes look like flower petals." They squinted at the snow together.

"You want to go to Tino's tonight?" Rex slurred his words just a touch, holding each one in his mouth a fraction of a second too long.

"OK," she said. Tino was a friend of Rex's who had a studio apartment that was a straight shot up Route 90, a fifty-minute drive in good weather. Everything in that apartment was all piled up in one room: the bed, the fridge, the rickety kitchen table with its sticky stains and the folded napkins slipped under one leg. Tino was a slob. When the garbage can started to overflow, he'd pull out the bag, tie it, and set it on a chair. Sometimes all the chairs were taken and there was no place to sit but the bed, which was just a twin mattress in the middle of the room. But Tino was also a gentleman. He let Angela sleep on the mattress when they crashed there, and in the mornings he'd get her a coffee from the mini-mart on the corner, done up hot and sweet how she liked it, with six sugar packets. Once he showed her his wrestling trophies, a cluster of plastic towers on a shelf in the closet, a tiny gold man shining astride each one. He'd flushed when she touched the tallest. Tino had been state champion.

Rex drove slowly into the snow.

"You ever think about what you're going to be?" Angela asked.

"Be?"

"When you grow up."

"I am grown up, Ange." Rex was three years older than her, and he liked to point that out.

"So this is it? This is what you're going to be?"

"What?"

"Just some surfer who's never been in the ocean?"

He laughed and reached over to burrow his hand under her shirt, but Angela pushed him away, saying she felt carsick.

The night she'd met Rex, he'd taken her to the 24-hour Kroger. She waited in his car until he came back with a chocolate cake. He'd gotten someone from the bakery to write her name across it in neat, blue letters, the name he'd learned only an hour earlier. Slipping into the driver's seat, he started unzipping his pants. He reached into his jeans and, as though he were doing a magic trick, pulled out two bottles of shoplifted beer. That night, for the first time ever, she missed her curfew. They ate the cake with their hands, licking icing off their fingers, and she couldn't stop smiling. She smiled so hard her face hurt and Rex smiled back, dimples popping up in his cheeks.

The first time they slept together, Angela thought about all the things she should have been doing instead. Rex fumbled with her bra clasp and pressed his weight on top of her, and she thought about how she should be reading *Madame Bovary* for English class, or picking the dirty clothes off her floor, like her mother was always after her to do, or even gossiping on the telephone with her friends. But soon Rex was the only thing she thought about, Rex and his hands on her.

The snowflakes looked like angry white insects now, attacking the windows.

They drove past a warehouse. Except for the sharp tips of the 'A's, each block letter of the MATTRESS GIANT sign was peaked with snow. They must have missed the entrance to the highway. She didn't say anything, though. Rex hated it when she tried to direct him.

"Are we moving?" she asked, after what seemed like hours had passed in silence. "I can't tell if we're moving."

Rex laughed. He pointed to the speedometer, which showed they were going 27 miles per hour.

"That's fast."

He didn't answer. He was staring out the window again, getting hypnotized by the snow.

Angela saw the lights first, headlights cutting through the white air

straight ahead of them. The collision vibrated through her an instant later. Her head jerked forward then back, and she was thrown against the door. The car spun. Then stillness.

"Are you OK?" Rex asked, gripping her arm. She nodded.

"What the hell was that?" he said. He rubbed his head gingerly. A lump swelled by his temple, the skin going purple with blood. Angela touched the sandpaper of his cheek, but he was already turning away, getting out of the car.

Outside, the snow fell in thick curtains. She could just make out the glow cast by the headlights of the car they'd hit.

Rex knelt by his old Volvo, cursing. The whole front was crumpled up, like a wad of tin foil. He tried to lever the hood free with his palms, but the metal was twisted and stuck. "Are we in the middle of the road?" he asked, suddenly agitated. "We have to get out of the road."

Angela couldn't tell where they were. She walked through the snow to the other car. The battered hood had been pushed back, exposing the car's engine, and the bumper dangled. The impact had pushed the car's back tires up over the curb. Rex must have let their own car drift across the road into the wrong lane.

She brushed snow off the windshield and saw a web of cracks, the glass green where it was broken. She ran her fingers over the glass and chips fell away under that slight pressure. Through the jagged gap, Angela could see the driver: a woman, all twisted around backwards, her long black hair falling over her shoulders, her face buried in the back of her seat. "Ma'am? You OK?" Angela realized she was whispering. She jerked the car door open and reached out to touch the woman's shoulder, her hand trembling violently. The woman's shoulder was damp. That's when Angela noticed the blood. Matted in the woman's hair, soaked into the fleece she was wearing, and there on the fingertip of Angela's glove, a red smear. She took a step back, air hissing out of her mouth, her tongue pressed against the back of her teeth.

At first, Angela thought she was making that sound, that howl. But the howl came from inside the car. In the back, strapped into a car seat, was a baby. His eyes were squeezed into little slits, and his round face reddened as he cried.

The back door wouldn't open, though it didn't look damaged. Angela went around the car. The doors on the other side were locked. She walked back to the woman's side and stared in at her, glad she couldn't see her face. Maybe the woman had pulled over to tend to the baby in the backseat; maybe that's why she was facing backwards with her seatbelt undone. Angela tried to lean over her and unlock the opposite door without letting their bodies touch, but she didn't have enough reach. She had to get close to the woman, intimate. Her breasts pressed against the woman's back, her nose near that dark hair, inhaling the wet-metal smell of blood.

Finally, Angela unbuckled the straps and lifted the baby awkwardly, careful to support the head. He flailed his tiny fists, still wailing. She couldn't imagine something like this coming out of her.

She looked the baby over for scratches or bruises, but he seemed fine. He smelled like baby powder and warm skin. His poof of black hair was the softest thing.

"Maybe your mommy's sleeping," she whispered to the baby. "Let's find out." With the baby balanced against her shoulder, she slid into the passenger seat and reached toward the woman again, lifting her limp wrist. The woman was wearing a wedding ring. Thinking of a husband waiting for her, worrying, Angela's stomach flip-flopped. She couldn't tell if she felt a pulse or not, her hands were shaking so badly. She got out and backed away from the mangled car.

Rex materialized out of the snow, dragging his surfboard by the leash. His face was white, and he swayed slightly as he stood there, looking at the car and the woman inside. "Is she OK?" he asked.

"I don't think so."

Rex pressed his fingers against the woman's wrist. "No pulse," he said. "I don't feel anything." His voice wavered.

"I can't believe it," Angela said.

Rex dropped the dead woman's wrist. His breath fogged the air in quick puffs. Angela could hear him panting. Embarrassed, she glanced away from his frightened face and looked down at the child she held.

Fine, translucent lashes lined the baby's tiny lids. "Look what I found," she said, but Rex's gaze was fixed on the woman and her bloody hair. Angela touched his arm and he jumped.

"We have to get walking," he said.

"How old do you think he is?"

Rex didn't even look at the baby. "How would I know?" he said. He kicked at the snow with one foot and muttered about how the car wouldn't start and they had to move quickly, before the cold got to them. "Maybe you should put the baby back. Maybe it would be better off in the car."

"I'm not leaving him here."

"The police will come. We'll call them from a convenience store or a restaurant."

"No," she said. "You're not making sense." Who knew how long it would take the police to show up? They weren't on the highway, where the state troopers patrolled.

"That baby's going to be too heavy for you to carry very far," Rex said. "It's going to slow you down."

"What's wrong with you?" Angela could hear the rise in her voice. "You're taking your surfboard, but you want to me to leave behind a baby? The baby is alive, Rex. Your surfboard is just some foam and fiberglass."

Rex threw up his arms in a gesture of surrender. "OK, chill out. Lug the damn thing around if you want to."

"It's not a thing."

"I'm just saying that it's freezing out here, and we don't know where we're going." Rex stared past her as he spoke, twisting the leash of his surfboard around his fingers. His eyes were glassy and strange.

Angela turned and started to walk, slinging the diaper bag she'd found in the car over her shoulder and hugging the baby to her chest. Rex just stood there at first, but then he stumbled after her.

She should have been scared, walking into the blizzard with a baby that wasn't hers, the wreckage of two cars collecting snow behind her. Thinking of the woman made her feel sick inside, but some other feeling was there too, smoothing the edges off that sorrow. Lifting her feet high over the accumulating snow, she strode forward, following the chain-link fence that ran alongside the road, a nothingness of snow yawning open beyond it. They might be headed back toward Cleveland, or they might be headed toward nothing at all. They could be walking in the exact wrong direction; it was impossible to tell. She wondered at how this didn't trouble her, how her feet didn't falter. She let the snow fill in her tracks and erase where she'd been, and she made her way into the storm.