Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 11 | Issue 2 Article 36

January 2012

Shelter

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Our neighbors own two dogs, snaggletoothed Dalmatians who claw through our trash heap. We own a .22 caliber rifle. The rifle is nothing more than a bauble, really, meant for squirrels and small birds, raccoons maybe, and it fits in our hands like the air rifles we shot as kids. The bolt action clacks like it hasn't been greased in years and the sights guide us a little to the right.

We shoot after work, after we have spent the day moving brick and block in the heat. After our muscles ache in the smallest places. After the sweat has dried to a white crust on our cheeks. I went to community college before I worked brick. But education does not pay. But I miss things that do not pay, sometimes.

We own two trucks between us. One, my sallow-faced friend's, a purple jeep with rust around the tires and no canvas top. He got it for cheap at a wholesale auction. The other is mine. A little Toyota without a stereo. We rent this house together. Pool our pay. Split everything. We split so much we don't know what is ours and what is not. We do not care.

Afternoons, we snap open lawn chairs on our back porch and shoot into the woods for no reason. My sallow-faced friend just watches and drinks more than us. He sighs when he downs the liquor, like it is a slow relief. We array beer cans on stumps far off into the marsh. The reeds and seagrass bunch from still

water, and, in places, trees cluster and sway. Here and there bro-
ken cobwebs catch leaves and spin them endlessly. My friends'
shots are forever going astray, a little to the right, the fault of the
crooked sights, and the reward is nothing more than a pucker
on the water, a lonesome echo.

I am the best shot. I can peg a beer can from about one hundred meters off, tear a hole right through its metal gut and leave it singing.

One cold afternoon we sit outside drinking Everclear, shooting the water, making the water jump, our shots cutting to the side, far off the mark. Leaves fall in the wind, whole torrents torn from the boughs. The water reflects the gray sky in a dull sheen, like unburnished metal. This is November on the Chesapeake, a cold November, tight in on itself, the tidal marshes frozen at their ragged edges. Ice sits in clear ridges along in the crumpled trash bags. We wear hats, thermal layers, gloves with the fingers clipped off, and we smoke cigarettes and drink until our words run together and the sun begins to fall.

The neighbors' dogs walk into our yard and tear into our trash heap. If they eat at the bags long enough they may swallow glass. This would be a slow death, a death cut from the inside out. My sallow-faced friend tells me I should shoot one, hang the thing up. I fire a round over the water. The dogs scamper off. We drink more and shoot more, let things flow until night falls.

Later, I pass out somewhere upstairs, near my bed, with my coat and gloves and hat still on. The heater does not work and our windows rattle at their poor fittings. A hollow space echoes where insulation should be. The thin carpet stretches in worn, tattered mats, stained brown or vomit red. The couches and the mattresses smell of old beer, body sweat. This is our home, this is where we live. It is a weak shelter, a poor shelter, a place the air bores through, a tattered plaster heap. Some nights, I wake with my breath diffusing in clouds above my face, the framework shaking below me, and I wish for a good shelter, a warm shelter, a still, quiet place. It is a small thing, shelter, a little thing.

But there are other nights I cannot sleep. Those nights I sit on the porch and drink liquor until my eyelids drop. When I have them, I bump painkillers to help me float away into the night. I hold the gun, the .22, sometimes, and press the muzzle to the roof of my mouth to see how it feels. I think of slamming a round in the chamber and nailing it to the back of my skull to end the thoughts of doing so.

Once or twice, when my skin feels like iron and my brain locks tight, I break a beer bottle to a sawtooth edge, white on the rim. I open my chest. My arms. My legs. I study my wounds. The muscle underneath. The blood pumping from oblong veins. They hold like pensive mouths. What they say I cannot know. I wonder how my bones might be. My lungs. Rotted through, maybe. Shredded and black. I wonder if I can cut to those darkened places between my organs. I wonder if I can dissect myself. See what is missing. I wonder.

One night, my friend finds me sitting with the gun roofed to my mouth, drinking on the porch, watching the blackened water. Substances churn through my veins. Alcohol and pills and nicotine. He asks me what I am doing. I tell him. He tells me he does the same things, sometimes. We drink until the light rises and we fall asleep, right in the same place where we spent the night. Some nights, nights when we both feel like we have eaten glass, we sit there and talk, the gun in the dark somewhere between us, both of us forgetting it together.

Months pass, then years.

My friends move. I move. I find a job elsewhere, a new place to live. There, the nights are calm, slow, and inside the rooms are warm and dry. I sleep better, I sleep more. At times, I feel like I have eaten glass, but long ago. Like my stomach is battered up in scars. But the pain is dull, now, old, commonplace in a domestic way. I drink less. I do not shoot a gun over the water. No dogs come to bark and tear at my trash. I put the waste bags in a dumpster, set it away from my home. My friend stays in the

same location, orbiting around the humid peninsula doing work here and there—masonry, construction, jobs with his hands. I leave and return, leave and return, more a guest with each visit. I sleep on sofas and floors, bundle my clothes as a pillow, use towels as blankets.

I work in an office stacked in paper. A medical office specializing in scar removal sits next door. Then some other business around a small lot. Insurance offices. Rental agencies. A landscaping firm. We have a kitchen with free coffee, to keep us busy. I like being busy. Being busy keeps me from thinking too much. And that is good. I wear khakis and polo shirts and shirts with buttons. On Fridays, I can wear jeans. The place smells like glue and ink. But it is well-built. Its outside is layered brick. Its inside is thick drywall. I sit next to a window that does not rattle. I can see bushes and snow and rain and light, all of it outside, like a postcard to a place I'll never go. I Xerox pages. Stack them. Bind them in plastic coils. Some are about construction. Some are about medicine. Some are about things I've never heard of. We do something for other companies, something I do not know, like an estranged limb. I never ask. The people who work here are fine. My boss tells me to call her by her first name.

On Wednesdays, we go to a bar decorated like a tropical island. Wood masks. Plastic palm trees. Tiki torches in the corners. Reggae music on the speakers. A small river runs behind the bar. Pines grow on its banks. At happy hour we can buy sweet rum drinks topped with pineapple or limes for two dollars. I buy one or two, now and then. My co-workers talk about nice things, simple things. Football. Cars. Weather. Girls they like. Men they don't. It's okay. They talk about those things and that is all. One time I drink three rum drinks and I remember what it is like to eat glass. I talk to my co-workers about what it feels like to be slashed up in the guts. To hurt. To never sleep. They look at me like I am an alien. Like I speak a strange language. I leave, a little drunk, and go home and try to sleep. I do not talk to them about eating glass. They are full things, unbroken

things, and they sit, pleasant like clear glasses full of water, light passing through.

I meet a woman one day when I drink coffee for lunch on the curb in front of my office. She speaks in a slow drawl. She wears makeup on her eyelids. Bright makeup. Her tan skin reminds me of dried oranges.

We talk for a little and she asks me what I do. I tell her I don't know. And I don't. She smiles through her whitened teeth and says, Well, I remove scars. She shakes her crazy hair. I smell alcohol and aerosol perfume. She says, I help people get ready to remove scars. I'm a medical receptionist.

We meet out there on lunch breaks for some time. Soon, we eat dinner. Then, we spend the nights together. Then she moves in.

She is a good woman. A nice woman. She is like the people at work. But the people at work care about nothing and she cares for me. I sometimes want to tell her about what it is like to feel like you've eaten glass. But I do not. She would understand. She would. But I do not want her to know. I do not want her to be a broken thing. Don't want her to be like us.

One night I wake in a sweat so wet I think I am drunk again. She reaches out to touch my shoulder. I stay like that. Watching the blank wall. Sweat running into my mouth. Waiting to sleep.

The next day I call into work and tell them I am sick, which I am. I am sick of pretending that I am normal, that I have not eaten glass. I want to go back, to see my friends. I tell my woman that I am leaving, just for a little, and that I need to go back, back to where I'm from. I do this at a pizza place in a stunted strip near the entrance to our apartment complex. She eats breadsticks and cheese sauce. She looks away when I tell her what I need to tell her. Then she says, Okay.

I take the car and cross the single bridge to the peninsula, a spindle of a rib bowing over blue water. The sun breaks on the tide, each distant wave like pages of books I've never read.

The medical records that detail the long damage to my liver. The white shoals foam on the darkened sand, frothed like spit. Empty as bubbles. My tires need realignment. I coast this way and that, over the lines, near the barricade, and then on through the pine-scented rural roads until I come to my old house.

Night has fallen and the bullfrogs croak in the dark. I smell resin and beer and the rot off the marsh. These old smells are new to me. I am a visitor. But I am welcome. I knock and my friend opens the door and we embrace, almost dually shocked. My friend has adopted a black and tan mutt with bat-like ears. He bought the dog for companionship, so he didn't feel alone. My sallow-faced friend snorts Oxycontin for that too, the loneliness. Just a little on the side. Here and there. When you mix it with liquor you get a good buzz. Real mellow, like the dog. The dog lives outside, responds only to the clatter of its dish bowl. I ask what the dog is named. My friend tells me he can't decide. When I try to pet it, the dog ducks and scampers, lowers itself to its haunches and vanishes into the wickerwork woods. I too leave, just the same, take off and return to my job and my comfortable home, and, when I pull back into the complex, right beside my woman's Celica, she is there, on our porch, and she waves and says, I'm so glad you're here.

I do not stay for long.

I work the week and don't pay much attention to anything. At home my woman asks me where I am. I tell her that I am nowhere, that I am here. She asks if we can go to a movie this weekend and I tell her I have plans. She asks, Plans for what? I tell her plans with my friends. That night in bed I think I may hear her crying, just a little, and the next day she is gone before I have woken. I walk around the empty house, sit on our soft couches, eat from the stoneware bowls, watch our neighbors jog on by, totally unconcerned.

I visit again that weekend, leaving my woman on the couch, watching a simple movie about teens in love. I wave goodbye and she waves back. I turn to the porch and our door, the keys

in my hand, my bag on my back, waiting for her to trot out, her arms open, telling me to come home soon. I wait for some time before I leave.

That night, my friend snorts heroin after his housemates have passed out. I ask how the dog is doing. My friend sits with his eyes unfocused and his mouth open, so I can just see the slit of his tongue. His neck sags. His eyes dilate as he stares down the ground. He focuses on things that I cannot see, do not want to see. I ask again. He tells me the dog is doing fine, just fine, that he does his own thing, and that everyone is okay with that. He feeds it every day or so.

When I return to my woman and my apartment and my job, my woman tells me that she needs me there. I ask her why that is. She says she just needs me. I do not need her, but I need her to need me. I do not tell her that. I want her to be happy.

Months pass. My woman grows her hair out so it bats her shoulders when she turns. She wears a nicotine patch on her arm. She has been talking about things I am not ready yet to talk about. She wants a child. I want one too, but not now. I do not tell her this. When she mentions a child I shrug and say that I'm childish enough. She grabbed me one time by the shoulders, stronger than I thought she was, and dug her nails into my skin, her white teeth so close to my face I thought I could see the nerves inside them. She said, You're done with all of that. She meant the childishness, the drinking and the snorting and the smoking. I want to agree, and part of me does.

Then, one night my phone buzzes its vibrate cycle. The number is not one I recognize. I ignore it. My woman asks me who it was and I tell her I don't know. I try to sleep again but the number nags me. Something familiar about it. The area code. The hour. I don't know. I turn in the sheets, half sleeping, the pale blue light and the low hum echoing through my skull.

It could be hours before I turn the thing back on. The sun has not yet risen and my woman snores lightly beside me. I

page through the missed calls and study the number again. The area code is that to the place I once lived long ago. I walk to the bathroom and listen to the message. Nothing. Shuffling. A click. Three or four seconds long. My woman finds me in the bathroom replaying the message, listening for something, a voice, a cue, a television program. Anything. She takes the phone from me and looks at the number and asks who it is. I do not tell her. But she knows. I know. She says, I told you you were done, and she walks back to the bed with her hair scraping her shoulders.

I copy the number down on my side with one of my woman's mascara pens, digging the tip in hard so the digits stay clear. I return to the bed and sit beside her and nudge her shoulder and say, Look.

I hold the phone out and delete the number. I tell her that I am done.

When the cell phone screen goes to black we can feel each other's breath.

I memorize the number before I shower it off. At work I search for it on the internet, hoping for an address, but I find nothing other than that it is a mobile number attached to the region I'd left. I dial it from my work phone. No answer. No message. I dial and dial and dial. I dial so much that the woman who works the desk beside mine throws a wad of paper at me and asks me if I plan on doing anything today. I don't. I take personal leave, claim that I'm sick. My boss says, You're sick a lot. I just nod and leave, my insides cinched, a tension mounting in my bones.

The drive does not take long. Maybe I am speeding. Maybe I just don't care. By afternoon I have crossed that bridge and descend into the swamplands I once called home. I trace the streets like I'd trace my woman's veins, winding the shortcuts, cutting through canebrakes and gravel roads. It all seems older than before, overgrown, and, when I come to the house where I once lived, my friend is not there, not even the housemates of

his that I knew at least by first name. A young woman wearing a man's tanktop answers the door and when I ask she tells me that no one by that name lives here anymore.

I leave, disjointed, begin driving north, hoping I can make it back before my woman gets home, hoping I do not have to lie. I stop for gas, and, palming my phone, I redial the number from which he called me. No answer. Then, as I am leaving, it chimes. An address. I know where this place is, and, checking it against my memory, I follow the old roads to this new place.

I find it. It is a ranch house long neglected and overgrown with vines and weeds and on the porch there sits a couch wilting in the middle like a carcass rotting into the ground. A number of seedlings sprout from its cushions. Beer bottles and trash and empty fast food bags litter the ground. But just as the old place, this house overlooks the water. It is no rare thing here. Water is everywhere.

Before I can knock, my friend answers the door. He looks older, leaner, and, somehow, disappointed to see me. He says, I was waiting for someone else. Got something on the way.

He is quiet for a moment, looking at me, his face screwed tight, and, after some silence, he relaxes, grabs me by the shoulder and leads me inside. It smells like people, old cigarette ash, long, long years of rot and dampness. Everything seems to be a little wet.

That night we drink, but not so much. We sip canned beer. Smoke light cigarettes. We need rest, quiet. We are scarred up boys, wrecked from the inside out. Our joints ache. Our ankles pop. Our callused hands knead our tanned cheeks. We do not want to be so tired. But we are. We have not rested for years. And we feel it. We have had enough fun, those long nights ago, and now, we need to think on it, alone together.

He has moved and the dog with him. He had forgotten to pay rent for a few months, just a few. He needed to avoid some people. Just for a while. He left most of his stuff at the old place, until things quiet down. He's with friends, now, younger people

whose faces look harder to me. He sleeps on a bed without sheets, spends his mornings waiting in line at a free clinic for methadone. He needs rides there. He lost his license to a DUI some months prior and sold his truck, a purple Jeep with rust around the tires, for legal expenses. His back troubles him, keeps him up at night. Some mornings, if he doesn't get to the methadone clinic, he shits himself at work.

We sit on the back porch facing the water. The marsh grass. The withered trees. All of it is skeletal, wet, glimmering in the cold spring. The tide presses in and out like a palm on a dying chest. My woman calls. I do not answer. I expect her to call again. I wait for a long time.

My friend talks about his joints, his hands, how they hurt, how they ache. Mine do too. They hurt when I drive a car, hurt when I sip coffee. He says he just hurts, all the time. How now, since quitting, all he can feel is pain, emptiness, like being gutted and spilled out. He thinks, sometimes, that there is nothing inside him. That it has all been ripped out.

I ask him what made him quit, quit heroin, quit drinking so hard. He tells me. That one night his lips went blue. That his breath faltered. That his heart struggled to turn in its marrow cage. That the last thing he did when he called the ambulance was to finish his cigarette, to stub it out, so the house wouldn't burn down as he blacked out.

He eases the beer down his throat. His stomach bothers him, every day. He can't eat so much, hardly anything. He doesn't want to. He wants to sleep good sleep. Clean sleep. Sleep in a nice house with sheets on his bed and heat in the vents. He's cold, always, like he's been packed with snow. It's the methadone, he says, not the withdrawal, that leaves him feeling scraped out, empty. He's thin, now, and his skin sags as though deflated.

I ask about the dog. Its bowl sits under the porch, near the ash bucket and dented beer cans. The .22 sits there, too. A wilted box of cartridges near its warped butt. Rust collecting

around its small bore. The fittings slow, rusted, and the sights rent out. My friend tells me the black and tan dog is doing fine, just fine, and that he took it to a no-kill shelter up north before he sold the car, that he misses it. The dog, he says, is in a good place, a warm place, one better than this bow-roofed dump.

We sit quiet that night, not saying much, not having much to say. We take our time letting the night empty, letting it empty between us. I ask him if I can shoot the gun, shoot it out over the water, puncture the night with some sound. Even that lonesome echo. He says he doesn't give a shit, doesn't care. I can do what I want. I do nothing. I sit back on the deck and drink until my head heaves. I sleep on a couch beside an empty aquarium. I do not know if my friend sleeps or not. Late at night I hear a car pull up the drive, someone opening the front door, maybe my friend's voice, low.

Early in the morning I wake to the sound of him puking in the bathroom, coughing. The place smells of old sweat, the sick smell of vomit and diarrhea, ash. I check my cell phone to see if my woman has called again. She hasn't. Just the one call last night. No message. I'll get back to her, tell her where I've been, and, if she answers, she'll listen for a little, then tell me that we're still okay. But not now. I go out on the deck for some air. Under the verge, cornered upright, stands the .22 and a box of rounds. I grip the gun, chamber the rounds. I fire shots into the marsh, the sun just diffusing and the fog beginning to well at the reeds' feet. The lonesome pop echoing across the flat water, and the birds cawing, then falling serene. I do this for a while without knowing why. It is quiet. I hear my own heart, knocking unsteady in my chest. The bushes stir. A dog, bat-eared and mottled black and tan, creeps out from the woods. It's emaciated, swollen in strange ways, and its ribs run in ridges. I load a round. I train the sights on the dog, willing myself to pull the trigger.