

Skull Mount

Clean-shot, it should have dropped. The deer
 trailed blood thirty yards. My nephew tracked
 his kill to the bank of the brown water-grave
 of the swamp. With his dad hauled it home
 in the bed of the Polaris. Eight points.
 What struck me was how fast, how far from life
 it had come. Congealed blood stuck like a fat tick
 to the bottom lip, eyes dry as paper, nostrils still.
 “Remember Walter? Used to be
 I’d take him venison,” my brother, Scott,
 is saying, “and he would clean our rifles.
 Didn’t hunt, though—fished.”
 And Robert, my nephew, as if on cue:
 “What do you call a fish with no eyes?” His joke
 since he was five. “Fssshhh,” he grins,
 his boy’s head now atop a six-foot frame.

How had I never before *looked*?
 Years on the farm. Brothers who hunted.
 Why this Christmas, the one without our father?
 A week’s gathering there in the house
 where we grew up. Sasanquas, now roof-high,
 laid fuchsia blankets over the brown grass.
 Come night, Cold Moon. Full
 frost-silvering moon of my girlhood.
 Our father refused to hunt. But how he praised
 my brothers’ kills—the mallard’s emerald head,
 the turkey’s crimson wattle, the deer’s broad rack—
 then put on jazz and turned up the volume.

Butchering done, beside the bone pit, Scott
 goes at the spine with a hacksaw
 beneath the skull. In the backyard,
 water set to boil over propane. It takes all day
 to scald away skin and flesh. A twisted wire
 scrambles, hooks out the brain.
 It takes a case of Bud Light, chain-smoked
 Marlboros, a barrage of hunting stories,
 around the steaming pot. Two more days
 in a pan of bleach. One day to dry in the sun.
 With a toothbrush, peroxide (Clairol, No. 40)
 where bone meets bone. A bubbling.
 I can’t get enough of looking.

Most days toward the end my brother
drove our father in the mud-splattered Polaris
down dirt roads alongside fields,
through timber and into the cypress swamps,
his life's landscape. It never failed,
according to Scott—that fallen-in shack
where pasture met woods tricked time.
A boy again, our father, along with his father,
lays those pine floorboards for Walter,
our cowman who loved his horse, but never
a woman. On a salvaged pine slab
that knew our father's hands and knees,
my brother mounts the skull. Hangs it
in the dated kitchen, against the wallpaper's
floral mauve. Beside the cuckoo clock,
which nobody now troubles to wind.

(*Wild Juice*. Original publication in *Literary Matters* 13:1, 2020.)

Gone to Wild

Not like young folk—manic kids or feverish teenagers—
 but old women, those I knew back when I wasn't one.
 Great-Aunt Millie, “the pretty sister,” my grandmother sniffed.
 Sly-eyed, secrets pushing to sprout from her tight-lipped smile,
 her cheek to my kiss a pollen-dusted rose.
 Or my best friend's thin too-friendly Aunt Irene,
 teeth stained red (her lipstick wandered),
 whose fingertips, new-growth tendrils of jasmine,
 grazed our arms if we got too close.

Or the ones whose names I've long forgotten—
 cousins twice, thrice, who knows how many times removed—
 who never missed reunions at Antioch Baptist Church.
 Dressed to the nines in sky blue, peach, mint green, lilac,
 hair spun and sprayed into fine and fluffy clouds,
 they won all the door prizes: Oldest Descendant,
 Traveled Farthest, Perfect Attendance.
 Chatting among themselves, notes rising, falling,
 depending on whether or not they wanted you to hear.
 Tearing up generously, equally, at drooling babies
 and toppled headstones in the gone-to-wild graveyard.

I picture them rooted, both garden and gardeners,
 pruning, feeding, clawing up weeds in a fury.
 Their perfume reeled me in.
 Arms strong from the hoe—how else to explain such force?—
 squeezed me to stalk-stiff corset or peony-cushioned bosom.
 They weren't about to let go.

(*Wild Juice*. Original publication in *Nola Diaspora* 8:2, 2018.)

Dementia: *American Pickers*

2 a.m. He's awake.

Don't need the walker hell no.

My brother catches him mid-fall.

For Dad, it's sunup. No matter we show him
the pitch dark outside, the clocks, our phones,
the four watches he's placed in a perfect row
on the kitchen table. Finally, he has enough
of us and our so-called truth.

*You believe what you believe. I believe
what I believe.* That shuts us up all right.

We make coffee. Camp out in the den,
let the always-day of TV take over.

One episode after another of *American Pickers*.

Mike and Frank, who take road trips and
bargain for "rusty gold" in the wilds of rural America
and sometimes cities, too. Lord, the stuff they find!

The crazy-as-a-fox backwoods folk they meet!

There's Lester the Taxidermist

with his stuffed miniature horse. Big Bear

and his World War Two samurai sword.

There's Goat Man and Mole Man and Hobo Jack.

Backyard shacks where Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots
lurk. *Planet of the Apes* lunchbox, pristine.

An honest-to-God dinosaur bone. Not to mention
a 10-foot fiberglass cowboy boot.

Sunup for real, my brother helps our father
to bed. The teepee with red handprints holds me,

this stage prop belonging to Iron Eyes Cody,

the "Crying Indian" from those early '70s

anti-littering commercials. Truth be told,

he was a Louisiana boy with Italian roots.

His tear was glycerin. I googled him.

(*Wild Juice*. Original publication in *Literary Matters* 12:1, 2019.)

Turtle and Snake

I let go of his hand that stayed curled like a shell,
the hand I pretended was holding mine too,
took the dirt road toward the swamp.
At the edge of the field, to my left, a turtle.
To my right, a snake, five-footer, stick-straight.
Cottonmouth, if I wasn't mistaken.
Without thinking the thing through,
wanting nothing more than to *fix*,
I moved the turtle out into the tall green.
Then saw in the road the lip of loose sand,
the hole, the clutch. The snake,
it came to me (I'm a bit slow), was waiting.
Why, if it had to, it would wait all day.
I set the turtle back—tried to, anyhow—
the way she had been. I wanted to believe
she would blanket her eggs with soft dirt,
camouflage the nest, outwait the snake.
I walked on, hauling my hope like a heavy shell.

(*Wild Juice*. Original publication in *Literary Matters* 12:2, 2020.)

Strays

I walk between downpours this overwet,
 overwarm September, the swamp risen
 into the farm road. Trees lean
 as though they have spines that won't straighten.
 Gnats by the hundreds drown on my skin,
 stick there.

My father's latest stray, half-grown
 half-Husky racing through puddles,
 won't last long. They've taken stock—
 the far buzzards circling.
 They know the highway out front, its many scents,
 its barreling log trucks and bored kids speeding.

Ahead not scat but a spill of grapes.
 Limb overhanging, entwined—globe-heavy vine
 (stray seed rooted, climbed)—purple muscadine.
 I follow my footprints back, my cupped hands filled.
Smell them. My father hears with his eyes. *Eat.*
 I mouth again: *eat.*

Wild juice baptizes our chins,
 and we are born again.
 My father's back straightens.
 The highway refuses the stray.
 Fingers grow sticky in bee-giddy arbors
 of girlhood. Left with what's left, we spit out
 sour pulp, bitter seed, crushed skin.

(*Wild Juice*. Original publication in *Image* 101, 2019.)

Dirt Eaters

Their time near, Delta women with no use
for doctors know to gather dauber nests
for a silty tea to ease their child
into this world. To heal the navel,
a poultice, rust-brown, like raw clay,
that dries brittle—
a shard some keep and treasure.

Summer's end, my daughter leaves home.
As in the weeks before her birth, I clean
everything in sight—even the porch screens
of our century-old house. Unhinged,
hauled outdoors for their first scrub-down
in years, they reveal, clotting the channels
that anchor our floor-to-ceiling louvers,
clumped fingers of mud dauber nests.
I hack at them with a screwdriver.

I never saw the wasps at work,
welding their nests into these grooves,
toting stunned spiders
to cradleboards where larvae hatched and fed.
On hands and knees, I sweep
catacombs crumbling with leggy remains—
wasp or prey?
The nest-dust salts my eyes,
grits my tongue.

(The Garden of the Fugitives. Original publication in Shenandoah, 57:1, 2007.)

Alchemy

Spring 2020, Caddo Parish

I was walking the dog
when overhead a live oak shook.
A hawk lurched to the nearest roof,
dangling a fat limp squirrel. Its talons
kneaded the grey fur. In its glare: “Go home.
Stay there.” This was March,

Mardi Gras barely past. Costumes,
beads, feathered masks stored
for the sober, hungry days of Lent,
which coincide with the outbreak of spring:
explosion of pollen, azaleas on parade,
the sudden manic Louisiana green.

April brought floods, tornadoes, hail
that shattered windows, broke records.
With May’s sun, masks that return us
to fasting, that distance us.
And I begin to find near things,
which I’d forgotten were lost—songs,

for instance, had as a child by heart:
the jay’s scolding, the sparrow’s caprice.
I track the red dash of chattering,
nest-building cardinals. Flinch
as the wailing kites glide low.
The candles in my neighbor’s magnolia—

the one that all year sheds
leathery leaves over the fence—
open into a hundred white birds.
Shade like the laying on of hands.
Perfume thick as cathedral incense.
Speaking of cathedrals, I found

faith enough to plant bulbs, ugly things
like bristly fists. In rotting leaves,
fall’s leavings, the alchemy
of ants, slugs, earthworms. Ironic,
the nearness within separations,
recognition beneath strangeness,

feasts amid fasting. ... Bees swarmed
a friend's eave. A beekeeper pried off the boards,
tugged loose the combs. Honey poured
and poured. Bucketsful.
It looked, she marveled, my distant friend,
as though it would never stop.

(*Susurrus*, 2, 2021. Commissioned by the Shreveport Regional Arts Council, as a response to the Covid Pandemic, 2020.)

Festival

I watched my small daughter's hands
 plunge into jars of paint on sheets
 that covered the kitchen floor. She was two.
 Play of color, surprise of shape and motion ...
 She made a dance of red, blue, green,
 transformed the sheets, her face, her body.
 And I thought of the hands of ancient cave painters,
 hands palpating stone to life.

Before play, there was no art.

Not children but, still, children of the species.
 Eyes fresh enough to see raw beauty
 in the skills of antlers, fangs, wings, claws.
 In season the woods and grasslands grew fat
 with horses and stags, cattle and bison.
 Season of strong days that lifted the sun,
 held it high and long. Season of births,
 a woman's rounding with young.

Before clay made a pot, it formed a figure.

Eden Gardens Elementary. Art
 with Mrs. Hackenberg, where my child grasped
 texture, tone, pattern. With brush and paint
 formed what she alone saw. A tree leafing
 stars into a purple sky. The rust-red river
 of the city a snake with flamelike tongue.
 Self-portrait: straight brown hair and bangs,
 shorts and cowboy boots. Inside the box
 of her chest, her heart the yellow shape
 of a dog, our dog who died.

Before dog was guard or hunter, it was playmate.

For the painters of the walls of Lascaux,
 Altamira, Niaux, Chauvet, play
 was prayer made visible. Into these caves,
 arteries that fed the deep beating heart
 of the earth, they spirited the sacred animals.
 Torchlight enlivened them.

Stampede of bulls, horses at a gallop,
keen-eyed lions on the hunt. Such magic
in the story, the dance, the song.

Before the bow became weapon, it made music.

(Susurrus, 2, 2021. Commissioned by the Shreveport Regional Arts Council for the Artbreak Student Arts Festival, 2019, Shreveport, LA)