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Where Do You Bury the Survivors?

Sometimes I think you're a fox
and I'm trying to row you across
a river. You're also, for some
reason, a chicken and a bag
of corn, and I only have room
in my boat for one thing
at a time. The river is
this conversation or the river
is the rest of our lives.

Or the river is just a border
between one solid place
and another where we want
to stand together. Not that
I think you're really a fox
or a chicken or a measure
of dead weight—I mean
that I'm afraid if I leave you
alone the parts of you
that seem at odds
will start consuming
one another. And
now I think of another
grade-school riddle: a plane
crashes on a border,
and where do you bury
the survivors? Back then,
we'd say, *You don't
bury survivors.*

But that's not right, is
it? Sometimes you do.

Convenience

Every day I pass
two women who
stand, hands folded,
beside a rack of
pamphlets that read,
Will Suffering End?
They face the all-night
gym, ellipticals
and treadmills
lined up like catapults
in the window.
They say it's madness
repeating the same
action expecting
different results,
yet the bodybuilders
grow stronger and
stronger and the women
marshal an army
of souls to
storm the afterlife.
So if, at two a.m.
every Saturday,
I find myself
at the Mac's on
the corner, deciding
which exotic salt
I want to lick
from my fingers,
don't assume it's
a failure of will—
I go to be soothed

by the timeless
casino light
of the aisles,
the drifting sensation
of easy rock,
like the store
has come unmoored
from the city,
a glass submarine
moving under
the surface of night,
bearing its payload
of soft drinks
and frozen burritos
toward sunrise.
Enemy territory.
The coolers
humming like two
beers into an evening.
The keno board
flashing news
of distant loss.
When I pass the gym
with my hand
jammed in a bag
of Doritos I know
I am kin to the man
stretching himself
on a rack, his face
twisted with regret,
the cords in his neck
as thick and red
as Twizzlers.
It's given to both

of us to do the work
that's done at night.
Tending the flame
of suffering.
Passing it
like a torch
from one day
to the next.

If I Wrote a Poem About My Father

I'd tell you how he taught me to know whitetail
from mule deer by prodding roadkill with his rifle,
north by the moss on trees
and spruce by the pain it caused,
to draw the thin, green capsules of nectar
from Indian paintbrush and a knife
from a trout's gills to its anus, to scoop out
the sloppy coil of intestines,
the soggy raisin of its heart.

I wouldn't have to explain how
the intimate, animal smell of his work clothes
occupied the laundry room or how his greasy
orange-shelled chainsaw ruled the basement
perched on its tarped pile of firewood
and board ends. If I said he once went
behind our house and attacked
the hillside with mattock and shovel,
carving it into a series of steps
where my mother planted
carrots and sunflowers, I would leave
out the time he tied
my brother's dog, Joey, to a post
and shot him with the .22 because he wouldn't
stop chewing on Pepper's skull.

I'd tell you that he taught me to layer
kindling over balled paper, light it in
several places and let the flame
build before adding logs, but not that he had scars
all over his arms from lighting himself on fire.

And if I said I still build fires the way
he taught me, I wouldn't mention
how the rain and the years washed out

the terraces he made behind the house.

I wouldn't say that he still

has his scars, that I'm still on fire.

Shared Accommodation

In the room for rent, a phone
cable leads the eye out
of the frame. Beds are seen
through half-closed doorways,

as if they were shameful. Stains suggest
indecent acts but might be shadows.
Small pets okay. Close to bus routes,
in the sense that everything is

close to bus routes. We're all in
our late twenties—quiet, respectful,
employed. We enjoy activities
unclear at this resolution.

Ignore the photos on the fridge—
that's who you'll be replacing.
Temporary is okay, in the sense
that everything is temporary and okay.