Tracks

Up in the deer stand, we dreamt of warmer places.

Even the trees seemed to protest the chill of Nebraska winter, voicing shouts against the wind, swaying audibly from root to branch—that cracking noise of cold. I watched several branches give way and crumble to twigs, coming to rest in crude piles on the surface of the snow. As if falling were a comfort. As if the ground were a contingency, better than the sky. To keep from shivering, we plugged in a heater opposite the frosted windows. Hailey used the warmth of her breath and the sleeve of her jacket to wipe them clean. Through scratches in the plexiglass, we watched her father move across the snow and dump a bucket of dried corncobs in the clearing, bait meant to attract undernourished animals. Jack continued toward his post, the stand with a view from the south.

On the drive, the three of us had discussed deer and the best ways to kill them. I sat in the backseat, listening to Jack, retaining what I could. He handed me a stack of dark pictures he had captured by placing a camera in the woods and setting a timer. As I flipped through the prints, Jack pointed to a large buck that appeared in several shots. It was as if that deer could see through the lens, my gaze reflected back through glossy card-stock. Against the darkness of the photographs, his eyes glowed metallic and orange, his body a ghost. Jack told me he wanted a deer like that. Broad shoulders. Big antlers. The clever tendency to walk through the woods only at night.

*He’s taunting us,* Jack said.

On the radio, we heard the evening forecast. That night, temperatures were projected to dip 17 below, and with the blunt slicing of the wind, we could expect to feel colder. What light
the day had managed to bring was dissipating, fast, as we drove the thirty miles in Jack’s company truck. He worried about our timing and about the deer. They would be huddled, he knew, bodies forced together by instinct and into small clumps, warming each other, wherever it was they made their home in the woods. Hailey worried that because of the weather, the deer wouldn’t have the energy to move. They would lie there, half frozen, drawing in silent, long breaths. The cold might cause their bodies to still, and we wanted to see movement.

We were running out of time.

Only days remained on hunting permits across the state. Black powder season would end with the month of December, and either Hailey or Jack had to get a deer before the year was through. They had been hunting on a friend’s property every night for several weeks. When she could, Hailey would leave early from work, peeling off her heels and wiping away a smear of lipstick in the rearview of the Mustang she’d been driving since high school. Sometimes, she hunted alone. Sometimes, Jack did too. She and her father had spent money on permits and bullets and guns, and for Christmas, Hailey asked for a pair of boots to match her camouflage pants and jacket, each piece of the ensemble trimmed in a dark, rosy pink. She was wearing the boots for the first time when she told me shooting just one deer would be worth all the effort, all her time. Already, her father had come close. Jack shot a decent-sized buck a few weeks back, but so many things had gone wrong. He accidentally shot the deer in the gut, and it ran off. Even though Jack tracked the buck all night, he couldn’t find it until the next day. By that time, the coyotes had gotten to it, and the meat was ruined. Jack lost his tag.

Hailey pulled a pink hat over her hair, and I recalled prompting her to grow it out— it only gets harder after 25. I remembered repeating the generic advice I’d read online. She had
listened, acted. She hadn’t cut her hair for over a year, except for an occasional trim in the bathroom mirror. Now, those long blonde waves served as her defense against the winter.

_We’re thinking Cancun next January_, Hailey told me in a whisper. _Kyle and I want to go with another couple. I like his friends, but I can’t stand their wives... and everyone else has kids. I’m not dealing with that._

I imagined my toes in sand instead of snow boots. I’d borrowed them and a pair of coveralls from my parents, whom I was home visiting. I tried them on the living room with a red stocking cap, still unsure if I would go hunting. The coveralls seemed to fit, the pant legs fully adjustable at my chest, long enough to cover my ankles, unlike the pair I used to wear on family ski trips. After assessing the length, I removed the coveralls, suddenly too warm inside the house. I removed my hat and my thick, waffled sweater. Fanning my face, I sat down on the couch.

I hadn’t wanted to leave my parents’ to go hunting, _of all things_, but Hailey insisted. She told me every person she invited made excuses not to come. I knew she would see through the lies I was already crafting. _It’s too cold. I didn’t bring the right clothes. I’m busy tonight, shoot._ When I mentioned her invitation to my father, he reminded me that he used to hunt. His tone elevated like an ax, words quickening with the upswing. In our living room, I heard the affections of a younger man. I asked him if he ever got too cold, hunting out in the snow, and he said, _Of course, when you sit in a tree._

I could hardly imagine being so exposed. Even though the walls broke the wind, a beach somewhere seemed better, a place to relax, where exposure is the basic philosophy. I had never been to that kind of resort. Before that night, I had never been hunting, hadn’t understood how we would pass the time, how much time we needed to pass, what to bring, what to do. I had
never killed anything besides the occasional mosquito or spider. As I left my parents’ house in a borrowed coat, this prompted my husband to ask, *Will you be okay if you see something die?*

In the mirror behind my mother’s antiques, I saw myself dressing the part, layered beneath a thick barrier of clothes. I knew he was right. There was no blending in, no disguising what I lacked. My unknowing felt significant. I hadn’t told anyone about my suspicion, what I thought happened to my body earlier in the week. I hadn’t decided if I wanted to.
Jenny Boully

War Baby

I myself was a war baby; so it would seem that I should be indentured to this machinery, but I had already refused during first period history to say the pledge of allegiance. My teacher scolded me and said that we should, all of us, be willing to die for this country, that his brother died for this country. Climbing milkweed was overtaking the sky, and I walked home through alleyways, ditches, a cut in chain link. I called a suicide hotline that night: I did not want to allege myself to anything, not even life. To grow cruel and dark, a feral underling: that was my adolescent calling. The walls of my room, covered with punk rock posters and concert flyers and anti-war slogans were growing with it. The time came for loneliness; from the record shop by the college campus downtown, I took the flyer but could not attend the anti-war rally, which pledged that there should not be any blood for oil. My best friend and her best friend deserted me. Somehow, I arranged a date for myself with the college radio DJ and he let me drink beer with him and his friends in the new club that opened, but then I saw my old best friend there and she scratched at me and told the bouncer that I was drinking. I kept saying I was with the DJ and they let me go. Small complication: I was only fourteen. College DJ thought I was seventeen. I let the world go on while I wrote it all down in my diary. Using the address in Ann Landers, I sent the letter; she and her sister were always urging us to write and send care to the soldiers out there who were giving their blood for oil. The camouflage now was different from my daddy’s. The new camouflage was made for this war in a desert, not the rain forests of Asia; still, it was made for a world where everything looked so similar to everything else that you couldn’t see
what might be happening right in front of you and so the camouflage made extra sure. It was the loneliness that had set in. I sent the letter with my fourteen-year-old self, her words and her picture, a picture that showed a girl wearing a tight, black mini skirt, thigh high stockings, lace-up boots up to her knees. A man from that war wrote back. He said a buddy of his had picked up my letter, saw my picture, and passed it on to him, saying I might be the one. I wrote back immediately; I needed love; all I had was my diary. There were rockets in the sky. Teachers at school were shocked: “You could see it on TV!” But I was not shocked or even surprised. Those flickers of light did nothing to unnerve me even though I kind of had a man there in that land of sand who might or might not have been close enough to see those rockets firsthand. They illuminated green on the screen, but I was not moved; after all, I had, always, seen everything on TV. It was, I thought, a beautiful thing, my reply in its pink envelope and flowery stationary, but I had included another complicated thing: I told the man that I was merely fourteen and sent a photo of me in fishnet stockings. He never wrote back. I did not yet know that love had its limits within its seemingly empty dimensions. I did not know that sometimes, for whatever reason, people lose interest. A year later, my mother came back to me, and, for her, I let my hair grow out as it should be, put away the clothes that got me in trouble. I got perfect As in school and began building difficult puzzles. The ones with 1000 or more pieces were the ones that, being so impossible to complete with so much sky and forests of greens, kept me hidden at home, made it impossible for the boys to find me.
from “Words First Seen in Print in 1987,” first published in Black Warrior Review

1. **Potty-mouthed**
   : given to the use of vulgar language

When we met you warned me you liked to curse. Maybe it was more brag than warning. It reminded me of my mother; with her, I was always waiting and cringing. You were brash. I liked it and hated it. It made me remember. My mother cursing at the sink; my mother cursing as she folded our laundry. My mother waiting for me to say, *Mom!* on the other end of the phone after she said something vulgar. When we met, you wanted to get your doctorate in psychology. You wanted to get your doctorate in theatre. You wanted to be a psychiatrist. You wanted to move to London and write plays. And smoke cigarettes, you said. That part was very important. You were so tall and wanted so many things, but I only wanted you. My mother, too, wanted big things; she was a hardscrabble tennis champion who grew up in Flatbush. We were the Bad News Bears, she said, of her team playing the suburban kids. I had never seen the film but I knew what she meant somehow. She got into Cornell and could not go. It was the money. I grew up with nothing, she said. I was embarrassed to bring my friends over to our apartment. You don't know how lucky you are. My mother cleaned and cleaned; I can hardly remember her doing anything else. Nothing ever shined enough. The six of us were not allowed to curse. I disappointed my parents greatly, my whole life, but I never cursed in front of them. You did not get your doctorate. You did not write any more plays. You became a nurse. My mother was thrilled. Nursing, wow, I should have done that, she said mournfully, folding laundry and looking out the window.

5. **Degenderize**
   : to eliminate any specific reference to gender in (something, such as a word, text, or act)

When I am no longer your girlfriend I don’t just become your boyfriend. I am in between and I intend to stay that way. I am a partner but come on, people just think that means lesbians, right? I am a lover but people our age do not say that in any kind of seriousness. I have never been a wife or a husband. When my mother has trouble remembering to use the right pronoun you advise: *Just say his name a lot. That’s what I do.*

10. **Deathcare**
    : of, relating to, or providing products or services for the burial or cremation of the dead

I did not see your mother when she died. I only saw her in her living coffin, a bed in the middle of the living room where she slept away most of the day. As far as we could tell she was not in pain; her brain went out slowly, like Christmas lights on a string, dimming one by one. We’d never had much to talk about and this day was no different, somehow. I sat in your parents’ living room in Queens building an airport out of Duplo blocks, cleaning up as our
kids moved from one of your childhood toys to the next. Your parents have never had cable, but the boys found a jar of a hundred tiny Pokemon and dumped it everywhere. Eevee, Magikarp, Mewtwo, Charizard rolling like dice and banging against the foot of the hospital bed. One of my mother’s biggest lessons: when you don’t know what to do, clean. You kept feeding the kids fruit: quartered grapes, tangerine segments. Each kid took a turn snuggling your mom in her bed. I knew it was my final goodbye when I shuffled our kids out the apartment door, into the hallway where we put our shoes back on. I only waved and said goodbye like always; your mother thanked me for coming, like always. I’ve always felt that your parents feared I might take you away and never bring you back home. They will never accept that already happened a decade ago. I could not be at the funeral but my mother could; she texted me because she could not remember your mother’s name. I called her back to tell her. I had never said it aloud: \textit{Ewa: brings life}
Michel Foucault must have been rolling in his grave. That, or he was winking. The order of things? A dark-skinned black bartender, old enough to be my grandfather, glasses, mustache, stately carriage, appeared in the parlor and inquired about our drink selections. Camille ordered a Cabernet; I declined. Puzzled, she asked, “Isn’t Zinfandel your favorite?” and ordered a glass for me. I wouldn’t make eye contact with the bartender. What must he think? What must he have endured over the decades, suffered, borne, to have matters come to this, to this, serving a black woman less than half his age in a tony parlor? This was, decidedly, a patent disorder of things. Helter-skelter, topsy turvy, downside up.

~

One Cab, one zin. Clear view of the curving staircase with gleaming bannister. The sofas, plush as mittens. Queen Anne graced everything else. A neat array of hors d’oeuves
on a three-tiered carousel. Camille helped herself to a small saucer of cucumber-and-cream cheese squares. Whole wheat.

Beyond the introductory remarks on the landing page, the web site had been inaccessible. All of the whitebreadly cargo tucked away behind a Members Only log-on screen. The intro said the club had been founded a century ago, and had a true country counterpart in the North Georgia mountains. Robert T. Jones, Jr. golf course, stables, tennis, six-lane pool. The deep end, fifteen feet.

Drinks only, Camille insisted, just try it for drinks. We don’t have to eat there. They don’t do cash or plastic, we’ll charge my husband’s account. It’ll be good literary fodder, don’t you think, you might use it in a story some time. Just want you to experience it. This was Atlanta, chocolate city extraordinaire, and she was still color blind. Now, some would call that sort of vitiated vision progress, but not I. My preference? That folks see the import, see the impact, the implication of the questions they ask, the overtures they make.

She toured me around the club’s five floors, wine glasses in our hands. I was most struck by the chess and billiard rooms, framed photos against dark paneled walls showing row upon row of sartorial white males, rolls of prior chess teams in tight script, wizened parchment under glass. Camille pointed out some names with whom or from whom her husband’s family connected,
descended. On the top floor, the predominately Vietnamese-American staff prepared a lavish ballroom for a wedding reception. Every staff member we encountered throughout greeted Camille by name.

~

Still, privilege implies, often confers, a genuine inability to step inside another’s skin, to borrow perspectives. We had dinner reservations at the home-cooking restaurant, west end of town. I’d chosen it because I loved fried catfish. Camille liked it, too, but called mid-week to say that, when we met on Friday, she’d like us to start off at her club. She kept meaning to ask me, but it always slipped her mind, etc. Located near the downtown hub, I’d passed by or under it numerous times, an austere brick edifice, white columns flanking the double-door entrance, large balcony set with round linen-covered tables, chairs, sometimes a polished piano, Rach concerto. I met her on the club’s corner in cream chenille, en garde, rinsed in dread.

~

We returned our glasses to the bar. This time, I endeavored to make eye contact with the bartender, but he would not look at either of us. He took our glasses, one in each hand, an ounce of dignity for every heartbeat. My own beating so hard I could feel pressure behind my eyes, but he would not look, would not look. I was only a guest here; I didn’t want to be here, I was invited. Coerced, almost. I am here under duress. I am ordinary, common, simple. Stop chastening me.
“Ready to leave?” I was, and proceeded from the parlor through the entry at a smart pace, several steps ahead of her. On the sidewalk, headed to her car, we stopped when we heard music wafting from the balcony. Now on the far side of 6 PM, the tables filled with accoutered diners, a pianist and singer at the far end, ready to begin their set. A waiter in a white jacket saw us below, on the walkway, gestured behind him, both arms towards the tables, the question clear on his face. So appealing and earnest, we both laughed. Camille turned to me--"You’re sure you won’t try dining here? With the live jazz?"--and I relented. We retraced our steps back through the parlor. The Vietnamese maitre d’ met us at the balcony door, seated us, handed me the single-panel menu.

The white female singer looked to be mid-30s, close-cropped coif, perched on the balcony rail, black spaghetti-strap dress, and the pianist, a 75-year-old portly Italian native. Ought to be interesting, I thought, and it turned out to be exactly that. A gentleman in crisp, unrelieved white, bow tie to shoes, moved from table to table, clipboard in hand, taking song requests. Camille requested Anita O’Day. I asked for Love Me or Leave Me and Billie Holiday’s rendition of All of Me. The singer didn’t know either. What sort of jazz performer was she? I had no problem requesting either piece at any number of jazz clubs in the city. Topsy turvy, downside up, downside up.
I’ve become a good reader, know how to interpret body language, gestures, signals, looks, when the mouth says one thing and the body betrays the lie. I met the eyes of diners at neighboring tables, seeking hostility, dismay, suspicion. One woman grinned at me, supremely unexpected. A man did too, but his smile, only half of him in it. Ginger-seared sole was exquisite, spiced with melt-in-the mouth, nuanced undertones. The wait staff was uber attentive. The chef herself came out, long hair wrapped under a white net, addressed Camille as Mrs. Hartwick, asked how the dishes were, and what did we think of the wine pairings? She smelled of onions, peppercorn, curry.

~

After their first set, the duo took a break. The singer headed inside, the venerable pianist, in full-bore tux, headed to our table and, in fact, directly towards me. Inclined his head. I know All of Me and can play it, but Lana did not have the lyrics memorized and so could not sing it. Quite insistent that he was conversant with the song, with Lady Day, with Lena Horne. Sicilian residue coated his syllables. His grave sincerity made me pat his hand. We smiled at each other. He closed his eyes and nodded. The bartender entered, presented a bottle of Pinot Blanc to the table beside ours, folded towel cradling the glass. The guests leaned, as though they were on a sloping deck, to scrutinize the label. He turned to look at me. Over the pianist’s back, our gazes held.

~

Something is awry, given the humiliations, deprivations, constraints you’ve suffered, something is awry, so that I might even be able to enter this club;
something is awry, off-kilter, about there being only we two here, in Atlanta, just us two, in a city *like* Atlanta, only we two here, just us two, and you serving me. Sir, I wanted you to know how that grabs me, that I’ve got my mind around that conundrum. Sir, I comprehend disorder. Grasp disarray. Recognize dissonance when I hear it. I don’t have it twisted.