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# from The Ghost of Eden (“Sleeping Paint,” “The Pools,” “The Smell of Snow”)

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# From *The Ghost of Eden*

CHASE TWICHELL

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by Arturo Patten

CHASE TWICHELL

## Sleeping Paint

When I began to paint the pictures,  
there was only one of me,

a twelve-year-old slamming  
the door to her bedroom  
so her parents could go back to

their beloved argument in peace.

The door was blue, color of secrecy  
and the furled flag of the self,

and the brush a spastic wing  
that stabbed and scrubbed.

But when I was a little older  
and married the paint,

colors I forced from the stubs of tubes  
the art teacher saved for me,

its disobedience became my joy

and my second self,  
its staining oils under my nails,  
its turpentine headache,

the white rooms I could dream in  
as long as there was color to spend,

rooms I could even trash if I wanted to

with wasteful spurts and smears,  
rooms in which I might find

the boy I'd lie down with naked  
if he were real, the mother and father

dead of their green and crimson war.

But I was half a child and the paint  
scared me, carmine breaking into black

like a bad spirit muscling me  
up against the smooth pale wall,  
its kiss a man's kiss, not a boy's,

slipping me the secret of my secrets.

It laughs at me now, old love,  
from the light sleep of its exile,

whispering of emptiness, of pleasures  
and dangers, but mostly of emptiness

and the faint tracks my words leave  
as they cross it.

Wherever there are two, says the paint,  
one will abandon the other.

## The Pools

I used to look into the green-brown  
pools of the Ausable, the places  
where the pouring cold slowed,

and see a mystery there.  
I called it god for the way  
it made my heart feel crushed

with love for the world outside myself,

each stone distinct and magnified,  
trembling in the current's thick lens.

Now when I can't sleep  
I say as a prayer  
the names of all the little brooks,

Slide and Gill and Shadow,  
and the names of the river pools  
I fished at dusk,

working my way upstream through  
slow sliding eddies and buckets of froth,

the flume, the bend, Hull's Falls, the potholes.  
It's like saying the names  
of the dead and the missing—

the Ausable, the Boquet, the Opalescent—

though their waters still  
rush down over the gray ledges  
toward Lake Champlain.

The flume was always  
full of bark-colored shadows,

shafts of green light fallen  
from the pines, and the silver swirls

of rising trout where now  
 the gray-fleshed hatchery fish  
 feed on the damaged magic.

Sleepless, I call to mind  
 the high granite walls  
 scored in the thaws,

the banks of black-stemmed ferns.

I lie again on a warm rock  
 and feel the hand of god on my back,

and feel it withdraw  
 in the exact instant the sun  
 withdraws its treasure from the water—

a tiny dissonance,  
 like bad news forgotten for a moment  
 but the shadow of its anxiety holding on,

making a little cloud of its own.

It was the thing outside the human  
 that I loved, and the way

I could enter it,  
 the muscle-ache of diving

down into the cold, green-brown spangles,

myself a part of the glimmering blur,  
 the falling coins of light.

Scraps of that beauty survive  
 in the world here and there—

sparks of rain in the pine candles,  
 a leaf turning in underwater currents,

then lost in the smoke of faster water.

Sometimes I glimpse the future  
in the evenings. It appears  
like a doe on silencing moss,  
foraging among pocked leaves,  
drinking the last light in the pools.

It doesn't even raise its head  
to look at me. I'm not a danger to it,  
trapped as I am in the purely human.

## The Smell of Snow

There's a dream I keep dreaming,

in which Russell and I  
are walking with flashlights  
through a stand of young birches.

There must be a low moon—  
it's not quite dark.

Even without our lights we can see  
animals moving through the woods,

and each appears in slightly  
heightened color, as if its spirit  
were manifest—

the fox nearly magenta,

the sleek bear anthracite,  
deer the color of banked fire.

But when an animal moves  
into one of the long, weak beams,  
it turns colorless,

pale and indistinct, like falling snow.

Only in the dark does the spectral magic  
survive: pack of bronze coyotes,

the raccoon's burnt umber rings.

So we turn off the flashlights  
and wander among the animals,

and neither we nor they are afraid.

That grove of birches  
exists in the actual world.



It's up on the ridge above the house,  
an hour and a half's climb.  
Russell and I hike up there often

to stand in the stripped white trees  
in winter, or to lie in summer  
in the frail plumage beneath them.

We were rash to be up there  
with deer season just opened,

cardboard skeletons still up in the town,  
wreckage of pumpkins on the roads.

My shirt chilled me,  
damp from the long climb,  
and I remember thinking

it must be cold  
up in the blue river where the hawk  
banks on currents I can't see...

Then a door opened in the woods  
and he came out, the color of charred bark.

At first I thought it was a dog,  
a wild dog, then an instant later

a bear, but it wasn't a bear.  
Whatever it was, I'd never seen one—

long, low-slung, heavy-muscled body,  
muzzle a dark wedge, big delicate  
rounded ears, brush tail like a fox,

thick curved claws in the dead leaves.

He took a few steps toward us,  
his coarse coat rippling,

and I felt myself slide  
into the slow-motion  
story of an accident, thinking

is this my death? surprised at the way  
detachment and fear were of equal size.

It was a fisher,  
what the local people call a fishercat,  
though it's not a cat and doesn't fish.

It's a cousin of the marten,  
a tree-climber that feeds on porcupines,  
snowshoe rabbits, mice and squirrels,

not yet extinct but almost never seen.

And then I smelled him.  
He smelled like snow.

Not the faint industrial  
sea-tang that haunts  
storms blown in from the east,

but the scent of the strange  
uncivilized light that billows  
down from the vast

and citiless woodlands of the north.

When I was a child I thought  
that was the smell of god because  
it obscured what was human,

taking everything into its cold cremation—

the long road-scars, house lights  
coming on, pickups filling in the yards.  
I looked into the small black

god-eyes of the fishercat

and saw they were empty of  
any language I could extract.

In the ten seconds or so  
before he slipped back

into the world inside the world,  
I felt my body long toward his,

a sudden carnal ache

that seduced me away from the thought  
of my ashes sifted  
together with my husband's,

gritty sleet blown into the leaves

and grasses, into the earth on which  
the fishercat sleeps, ruts, feeds,  
though that image comforts me.

But at that moment I wanted instead  
to be the single

creature of his desire,

the one he would tear open,  
drag off in pieces to devour,

and thus disappear  
in violence into the world of his flesh,

go where his flesh goes,  
even into the coyotes' hunger

when they finally pull him down,  
into their scat

with its clots of hair and berry seed,

living on a while longer  
in blood, piss, fur, musk,

before my bleached dust is abandoned

to the roots and leaves, and I become  
the words the wind says  
to the birch tatters, the song

the hawk's shadow sings to the ground,

an animal of ash dispersing  
like snow in moonlight,

its spirit free of any human  
vision of the afterlife,

here and then not here, like the  
innocent flame of the red squirrel

crushed out in the innocent jaws.