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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



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.