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Back in Berwin

Nebraska, halfway between home and Berwin

BYRD TURNED THE MIRROR IN HIS PALM and shot sunlight around the inside of the car. There'd be no bringing her back. It was a dish of polished steel that showed the world upside down. He set it back on the passenger seat.

Byrd was headed to Berwin, where he'd worked on a government Hantavirus survey the summer after he met Moriah. He collected mouse shit from reservation schools, cattle barns, and the capitol building in Helena, but the season ended in Berwin, Montana. It had been a coal town, then a ghost town, then the Keyhole Ranch and by the time Byrd saw it, the buildings had started to sit down into the clay. The mirror came from his favorite house, the one he wished he'd been raised in. It was the one with gray flowers in a dry jar on the table.

He learned their names before he wrote to her: paintbrush, lupine, and mariposa — picked some spring day when the mine still ran. The mirror had unscrewed easily from its backing in the lantern and showed his face upside down in its curve.

Wyoming/Montana line

RAIN CLOUDS HUNG IN LINE CREEK, but the main sky stretched pale to the east. He turned off at Torgrimson's place, who had managed the Keyhole Valley Lease, from Berwin to where Grove Creek came out of the mountains. In addition to cottontails, coyotes, and occasional rattlers, Keyhole cattle had wandered like red ticks through the greasewood scrub. Some junipers filled shadows in the pleated desert, but Berwin was in the depths of a rain-shadow from the state's highest mountains. Antelope country.

Now the rabbit-brush and bunchgrass was growing back. Torgrimson's trailer was as faded and empty as town used to be. Byrd rolled down the windows and let some sage air pass through. Up on the bench the collapsed shafts still spilled skirts of coal. He'd written to Moriah about the nighthawks thrumming as they dove, but not that those dark triangles looked like inverted pubic hair. Or that he imagined her doing a headstand, naked.

They'd just started seeing each other before he left for the job. He wrote letters from a folding desk in the middle of Main Street, with long phrases that linked loosely related observations. She opened new compartments in his heart, he said. The desiccated country, he wrote, is yet alive. He knew he wasn't the first to say these things, but he was the first to write them to Moriah Fisher.

He had written to her of mule deer milling in the broken-hearted street and the wrecked bowling alley with fallen pins and warped wood on the lanes. Wide, shattered panes, he wrote, staring into the desert for someone to love it. Anything that fell under his eyes was sanctified by communicat-

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ing it to her, and this long form, near-poetry poured out of him without line breaks and almost without punctuation.

His boss, Elver, was a sun bleached man who'd done seasonal biology long enough to believe it was a real job. When Byrd met him outside the office in Helena, Elver was antiquing a new hat. He rubbed dirt across the brim, slit the crown and sewed it shut with imitation sinew. He had long, curly blond hair and a moustache too much like George Armstrong Custer's to be accidental.

Elver had worked on a brucellosis project before joining the Hanta-virus survey. He said that he had outrun charging buffalo several times. Because he was over six feet tall and skinny it seemed plausible. In the wind, and presumably in high-speed chases, his hair flagged over his ears and resembled blond wings.

"Always run from a buffalo," he said. He wore wire-rimmed glasses with tiny frames. "Don't zigzag or any shit like that."

They spent ten hours a day with mice and their derivatives. All Berwin's interior surfaces were covered in mouse shit, though he never wrote her about that or the bat shit and the dead mice. Not because he was hiding anything from her, but because they didn't occur to him while writing. They set and checked mouse traps. They picked up mouse shit with tweezers and dropped it into glass vials.

He wrote that Main Street opened into sagebrush and the buildings framed dark, steep slopes cut with gray limestone palisades. The abandoned town had a church (St James Lutheran), a store (Slav's Merc), a bar (BAR), and two rows of square houses with roofs that came to a point in the middle like hats. It's just waiting for us to come, he said, and bring it back to life.

"Quit swaying," Elver said when Byrd got too absorbed in his cursive. "The damn chair squeaks." We could fix up one of these mining houses, he wrote, and make it work here.

"Women?" Elver said. Most of his eye seemed to look outside the lens. "Feed 'em, fuck 'em, forget 'em." When Elver squirmed from his sleeping bag in the morning, hair matted from sweat, he resembled Jesus Christ.

Last crest before Grove Creek

BYRD CAME THROUGH THE LAST LITTLE PASS and met a billboard that announced: "Crow Chief Estates." A strand of decorative barbed wire separated it from a smaller sign — "Buyers be advised: there will be no new drilling in the subdivision for aquifer protection." Byrd let the car roll to a stop.

He had trouble acting decisively. In moments when he ought to have chosen firmly to do one thing or another, he found himself lost in thought until the urgency had passed. It was, to others, an annoying, relationship-ending habit. Privately, Byrd considered it a superior coping mechanism.

The mountains looked like a curtain rising out of the desert to a flat plateau. They looked like the sky was pressing down on them. They looked like muffins with their tops cut off.

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At a work retreat he'd learned the word *phlegmatic* and sometimes described himself that way to new acquaintances. "What do you do for work?" they might ask, and instead of listing his resume (Hantavirus assistant, homebound travel agent), he'd say, "Well, I'm a phlegmatic type, really." Whether or not the other person knew the word, they usually left him alone.

The valley was dotted with houses. He knew the type, because he and Moriah had lived in one. Sealed so tight that you had to remember to throw a switch to turn the air over. Or else you'd use up all the oxygen and drown in your own fumes before you could crawl to the door.

Wind blasted through the pass and rocked his car on its tires. Each house had its own tract of green turf in the rolling sage. He imagined the wells and each building with its proboscis plunged into the desert. It took him a minute to place the draw where Berwin had been.

Antelope and rabbits moved through the streets when he knew it, and the mine shafts were unassuming. Berwin is part of the land, he'd written, but Byrd saw now that he'd been fooled. There was no water here, just as there had been no cattle, and no coal. He let his foot off the break and the car picked up speed downhill.

The night before they left Berwin it was storming hard. Elver drank a quart of whisky, threw his ostentatious turquoise earring into the night, and burned his hand on the stove. They had everything except the wall tent packed into the truck and would leave in the morning. Sometimes things took on cosmic significance and Byrd felt like he was in a film. He played a misunderstood villain who wouldn't have time to explain himself before the credits rolled.

Byrd cleaned and wrapped Elver's blistered fingers. "Wild things don't like to be stared at," Elver said. "Don't stare." The rain had slicked Elver's hair into a beatific border for his contorted face.

Sometime in the night the rain turned to quiet snow on the tent. Byrd dreamed that he walked very slowly through Berwin on an evening when the town was still alive. There were small flowers in window boxes lit by lights inside the houses. He stood outside his favorite house and saw that its paint had been green. In the warm light of its main room, Moriah moved the vase of flowers on the table and leaned down to turn the knob on the lantern. She was naked as a fish, as he had only seen her once, the night before he left for Montana.

A man's shadow moved in the bedroom and Moriah went in to it. Her shadow joined his and Byrd thrilled not to the thought of touching her skin, but at sneaking a peak of his future self. He wanted sidelong views of the possibilities. To imagine that someone else was living his life to the best of his abilities and that he'd found a way to watch.

By morning the tent flaps were drifted in. Elver grunted nastily from his cot but seemed deeply asleep. Byrd poked his head out where everything was cold and still. There was a buffalo between the truck and the tent. It nosed a bare patch in the snow and tore grass. It squared one eye to him and chewed.

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Grove Creek steamed in the cold. The bison's haunches steamed also, and its breath rose to meet the loose ceiling of mist that hung in the town and hid his hump and everything above in gray. Early light fell through in all directions so no side of anything was in shadow. Fat water droplets stood on his coarse hairs.

Elver had said to run, but if he stood up he'd be in the mist. Like this he could keep the animal in sight. He stayed still and waited for something to change.

All its weight was in the front. It seemed uninterested in moving. It did not move for a long time. It blinked and breathed and was alive but did not move. It looked like it grew out of the meadow. Like its back legs were alder and the front a boulder. Its hump was hidden in cloud, so that its fore parts bridged the brief gap between white snow and white cloud with immobile, dark muscle.

Byrd didn't look down or away. He stared at the rough thick lock between its eyes. He looked where its ankles sunk into the blue pockets of snow that covered the scrub. He was in love with its steaming bulk. The mist dropped over it. With a living mountain lost in cloud.

He heard it breath for a bit but the mist muffled that, too. He knelt until a breeze came and pulled the fog out of the valley. First the morning star broke through, then the returning half-moon, and eventually the sun came up to reattach shadows to everything. He stood, took a few stiff steps and peed. The bison was gone and wind coming out of Wyoming drifted over its tracks.

By the time Elver woke up the whole thing seemed like a possibility more than a memory. His hair had dried overnight into blond explosion from one side of his head. Byrd told him that he saw a buffalo.

"Implausible," Elver said, and without tracks Byrd couldn't prove how real it had felt when they were both hidden in the mist.

"This snow is hard to run in," Byrd said. "What would you do. Just in case there was one."

Elver patted his hip, where he wore a replica cavalry revolver in .22LR with which he occasionally potted mice.

"I don't have one of those," Byrd said. He felt the round swell of the lantern mirror in his pocket. Maybe someday they'd come here together and she would see the possibilities.

"Stand your ground, then, and maybe I'll be close enough to shoot it." They packed up the tent and drove slowly out to the main road, then to the highway and Helena, where Byrd picked up his paycheck and hitched back to South Prospect and married Moriah.

Mariposa Way

BYRD ROLLED SLOWLY DOWNHILL into the driveway that used to be Main Street. He had met a buffalo here and felt no need to run or fight. Now he wanted to knock on the door and see what happened. The fence line was hung with signs that suggested he would feel like fighting, but running

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might be safer. *Mariposa Way. Beware of Dog(s). Got Gun, Got Shovel, Nuf Said. Me for President.* He parked. The air smelled like wet brush from the rain in Line Creek.

Before being shot he wanted to say, "This is a mirror from a mining lantern I found before you demolished a town for this miserable ranchette. I thought once I wanted to live here." And show whoever came to the door how the mirror flipped everything on its head. He'd shown Moriah the mirror, but she'd never understood how Berwin's broken windows looked like eyes.

His dream had been a warning, he realized. That she wouldn't always be there, waiting to provide for him with whatever finite gifts girls are given at birth. The modern house flashed like a reflective satellite. Its windows glared out proud and intact. There are two types of dreams, he thought — warning and inspiring — but we think they're all inspiration.

Elver had died a few years before in a crash. Both he and the driver of the other truck were drunk, and they both died. The police said that there were no skid marks from Elver's side. Either he was too far gone to see the lights headed toward him, or he wasn't backing down.

Run, Byrd thought. This time, I'll run.

The gate was locked with an electronic pad, so he stretched two strands of plain wire and ducked through the fence. He was halfway to the house when a woman stepped onto the porch. Her manner seemed unaggressive, so he continued. When he was close enough to be heard he cleared his throat and tried, "Howdy."

A pack of dogs came around the house. The lead dog had a huge head and his followers ranged from Great Pyrenees to Pincer. Coyotes ran here, once, Byrd thought. And Bison. He kept walking and held his mirror forward at arm's length, like a charm.