

*Kelly Rutherford*

**An Anatomy of Wood and Lead Paint**

I must write this.

She is built in layers; I find this unsurprising. In rural Ohio, a white barn with a stained metal roof sits empty off Pitts Road, flanked by cornfields on either side of her. When my uncle died, those who were left behind wanted to part out her corn-row fingers because the man who cared for them was no longer there.

Eight years later, her fertile bed remains barren because my aunt refused to part with her. The Catholics keep Relics; altars of the flesh and bones of their saints.

*"Canon 1190.1: It is absolutely forbidden to sell sacred relics."*

I don't know what her phalanx bones could've gone for at auction, but it wouldn't have been enough. My aunt refuses to sever and package up her limbs. The cornfields will remain ours until she no longer has a say. I remember my mom asking her why. There is no one left to plant on it or tend to it. After all, the dead have no use for harvest. My aunt had scrunched her face and clenched her teeth and said that farmers don't sell land. It's a point of weakness and a point of pride.

There is still so much of her, this white barn, on the roadside.

Prometheus

If Prometheus made us from clay, who is to say he didn't make her from wood? Where we are complex and squishy, with organs stacked and hooked as plugs to machines, she is mostly air with sprouts of bones made of wood used, once, to cradle horses and hogs. Her heartbeat went out with the last horse. The lungs, once inflated by the shouts of my uncle, thud of tossed hay bales, and the sliding-slam shut of the barn door—expelled their last breath when he died.

The epidermis is white because lead paints last longer than red. It was easier to blot her bruises or scars with powder puffs of paint. The skin shields her from infection from the rain and spores and moss and rot. But she is old now, so it's split open and peeling, exposing the basement membrane of her flesh to the air in splinters of raw subcutaneous tissue and milk white paint.

Her ladder of vertebrae, found in between two horse stalls and smack in the middle of the room, rockets up through her torso and splinters into an endoskeleton of barn beams formed under her slate stained roof to provide an internal support structure. While she sleeps, she dreams of hay in the loft of her mind. When the switch is flicked in her guts, the cortex lights up with bad lighting from old wiring, illuminating the mounds of golden hay stored for feed.

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### Organic

Her history is in the housing of both the birth and death cycles. If I'm silent, she is silent too. Sometimes there is an echo of long-since slaughtered hogs nosing in the pen nestled in her breast. Slaughtered long before we met.

When I was a child, I would bolt from my mom's truck the moment we came to a halt in the roundabout dirt drive and I'd make a beeline up the short set of stairs and into the farmhouse, bursting into the kitchen and diving into her fridge. I would fill my hands with as many carrots as they could hold, and clutching them to my chest, I'd dash back down the stairs and outside.

I'd scamper across the roundabout, across the tractor hold, and into the small incision of a side door that led into her chest. I always left the door open for light—because it's dark inside a body. I'd go left to the horse stalls, climbing clumsily up the side and into the stall, dropping carrots into the dirt and shit, whispering to the horses my greetings.

*Hello, I'm sorry dear hearts, it's been so long. I should've written. I know. Take these as penance.*

They humored me. I know that now.

How patient these beasts were with the child who behaved as a small mouse, scurrying between the barn's wooden rib-caged stalls and creeping under them and over them and tickling their velvety noses and stroking their muscular cheeks where their jaws bulged and shifted while they chomped my carrots. They minded me while she, their home, minded them. I imagine she watched me then; amused as a mother would be watching their young child so naive in love.

### Mirrors

She made me believe that buildings reflect their owners. I found my aunt's multiple sclerosis had worked itself into the space in the loft. The fried nerve endings as pitfalls in the flooring, causing miscommunication between brain and body, and forced caution in every step. *Please, mind the shadows and your footing.* There are lesions that form the shape of termites. Where they fester, less of the structure remains.

My uncle had a stroke that left him paralyzed on his left side and forced his body to suddenly droop off, melting to rubber limbs and clogged gears of joints that no longer obeyed the operator. The stroke can be seen on the barn's right side in the suddenly sloping decline of the roof over the tractor hull.

Her cells die as mine do. Fifty billion cells die each day and each day they are replaced by other cells. It's called cell death; a finely orchestrated biological mechanism, for us, creatures of clay. For her, the Vermont Barn Census calls it a "slow, steady decay." They call it termites. They call it wood rot. They call it time. We divided sheets of wood to become boards, multiplying her cells with a saw blade, hammer, and nails.

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### Systems

Before my aunt was sick, I helped her tend to the horses and sell their produce. I was proud of my job at the roadside stand where we sold corn. We had a tin pail and people would throw their money in and take their cobs and I was so *proud* to be such an adult and to be such a big help. When the rain came too hard and we'd run inside, my aunt always left the pail on the slanted table. When I made a face, peering at it through the downpour from behind the farmhouse glass, she asked what I was wearing that look for. I asked what if people steal from us and she said if they needed it that bad then they could have it. I didn't understand that until I got older.

In the barn, the horses would head to pasture from their stalls through the drive bay, the long and wide corridor of artery in which the animals pumped through, gushing out the barn door into her stomach of green pastures.

My aunt always had me climb up and stand on top of the tack box. I'd be out of the middle of the drive bay, preventing my drowning by the surging of pent-up blood. My aunt would unlock their stalls and they would take to the bay on a singular path, never diverting from their course to bruise or blister her. Kept in the vein, they would clip-clop right past me and I would marvel at the height of them even when I stood just as tall.

Their shining, glossy brown backs rode by my chest and I knew my heartbeat matched hers in that moment, and once the horses had all gone, the doors would be shut and she would be still. In the morning brightness, her wooden, lead-sheltered heartbeat would go out with the horses. During those hours she stood empty, I imagine she drifted into a deep, comatose sleep, awaiting their return in the evening. When the horses all died off, I know she fell off to sleep and never woke up.

They say that's the best way to go but I've seen it, and I don't know



I miss her, but I don't think I could ever see her again. I have discovered that what I miss most is no longer there. I miss what I remember about her; the steadiness of her breath and the beat in her chest and the vibrance and the life that swelled within her.

I miss the farm dogs chasing me through the twists and turns of neighboring tractors and the bustle of coming and goings of townsfolk and corn-buyers and horse-shoers.

I miss my uncle's ripped jean overalls and my aunt's sharp horse whistle.

My uncle is gone from here, of course. My aunt lives in the dimly lit basement of her daughter's house because she's unable to bathe or walk on her own, a stumbling fall from the farmer's wife she once was.

Returning to the barn would be like seeing a loved one's funeral for a second time; while their body is there for your eyes to remember their face, you will, once more, relive the reality of their death all over again. To

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hold the memories the closest, you have to be willing to stand inside the shadow of the dead and accept the price of passage.

I am familiar enough with death. I no longer want to pay him any more dues in order to rent a place the living don't belong. Instead, I write so I do not forget, and in that way, I preserve my memories as relics in which I worship privately and share with no one.