

Five empty things

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They were on their way up to the mountains for the weekend. Their discussions often took place in the car because it passed the time when they couldn't agree about the radio. She wanted to hear the news whereas the less news he heard the better. He would argue with the radio and then take a snit when it paid no attention. They generally couldn't agree on music, either. She wanted Billy Joel or Riders of the Purple Sage whereas he wanted some Morton Feldman thing neither of them could hear over the road noise.

He drove. It was always him. On Friday nights, after he'd packed the food and the other things, he would pick her up from work and they would go over the list of what he might have forgotten which it was now too late to do anything about. Then they were off. It would be a three-hour drive. The mountain scenery was soothing; it winkled out awkward confessions. After maybe three hundred of these trips he knew every rock and tree by name.

In the back of the Jeep the cat was bawling as usual. It's lonesome, he said. It wants to sit on someone's lap.

Well tough, she replied. It fidgets because it's too big to be comfortable on anyone's lap and eventually it gets down on the floor under the brake pedal.

The stones and the trees drifted backward. They breast-ed another wave on the dry lake of time. In an hour it would be dark.

They were solitary in their two-ness. A paradox.

At the time, his notion of solitude was not that of an enclosure in which he could be alone, or lonely, or suffocated. Solitude was not where the cat was. It was Out There. It was a palimpsest landscape, emptier even than the imaginary one. Unpeopled, unweathered, unwatered.

When he was young he spent a great deal of time alone. On the western border of town there was an overgrown empty lot, no more than waste ground through which a creek flowed, a creek as much a creek as the empty lot was a park. This park consisted of some scrubby trees and a patch of grass which the town imagined ought to be kept clear — that is, undeveloped — in anticipation of needing a place for trailer campers one day, as if anyone but Okies would think of doing that.

Okies live only in books, she said, but he paid no attention.

Slough grass, stinks of dried rotten mud, mud which was still there, waiting, along with the Okies and the cat and the real parks and rivers and people who live Out There. It sneaks off, the mud, but gets its tail caught in the door.

A boy, most days he could be found there, in the false creek in the pretend park, with his bare feet in the mud, waiting. She did not know what he was waiting for. He had never told her because, she knew, he didn't know himself.

In that town a wind was always blowing from Out There. Summer and winter, carrying with it a massive sky apparently without edges. To ask where the wind came from was as like to ask what came before the Big Bang. The wind was from Out There.

When I was a boy, he said, everything loose got pasted to the schoolyard fence by the wind, a crust which got thicker and thicker and blocked my view of history.

I never knew those places, she said. They were gone by the time I came to town.

Out There was empty, an unpeopled place where no one could go without peopling it, so it would stay empty. They would call it the Wilderness if they knew anything about that, which they did not. To the people in that town the Wilderness only a larger version of the empty lot with it's imaginary campers.

Things happened Out There — trees grew and animals died and rocks eroded to sand and rivers found other ways to go — but there was no one to sit soaking his feet in the mud, picking leeches, waiting in an itchy stocking hat and duffel coat to freeze to death. In the Wilderness there is no one to wait for anything because there is no time to wait in, and so no history for things to happen in, which are all educated notions and without meaning.

What about the wind though? For an he saw the gate though which he will not pass, and the wind from Mons Pubis, the mountain's breath, carried him away and plastered him to the fence along with the rest of the trash.

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Where they lived then, in the beginning, was less a town than a few streets of magicked gingerbread houses, harmless-looking, but with bones lying about from hermits past and none of much use for slaying lions. But there was nothing spooky there, not anything grand — no panorama of a yellow prairie lit by a slanting sun and far away, impossibly distant, the glinting thread of a river. It was a spirit-world. And in the spirit-world was a woman, unique as he thought, in her particular, overwhelming sexuality.

She was about five feet six inches, athletically built like a soccer player — though no regimen known to him then could have produced such a body. She had a wide, open face and oak-colored hair worn shorter than anyone else's. Wearing hiking boots, clothed sedately in jeans and a many-pocketed

khaki shirt, she was way beyond any known mortal's capacity to satisfy her. She lived Out There and consorted with Pan.

Is there some reason, he asked, why any woman with the power to humiliate you will always take the opportunity offered?

I imagine, she said, that before I knew you that summer, you could still grow a beanstalk? An erection a mile high with which you would flood the world and blow out the sun?

Something like that, he admitted. And don't women want to swallow creation and give birth to all time?

I suppose.

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Was Aeolus a man or a woman? she asked.

What? A man, I thought.

Not surprising.

Does it matter?

Hmm, she said.

This was a very subtle word in her vocabulary, having many complex meanings, none of which he had been able to decode.

Maybe, she said, when I fall in love with Achilles and leave you forever, you can comfort yourself with a scrambled wind-egg which the mu-bird lays.

Achilles is dead. Polyxena can't run off with a dead man.

Hmm.

Unless she's dead, of course.

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Were you lonely then? he asked. Out There?

Not until I moved to town and was among people. With people you can be lonely. And you?

I can't decide, he said, whether it's that I always was

lonesome or that there was no other way to be. Are other people lonesome even with their wives in bed?

She tipped her head downward and a little to one side, a movement which passed for assent.

For you it was worse when you were depressed, she said.

No. It was the same only more cosmically awful. I would stand under the shower to hide from myself that I was weeping.

You didn't, though. I heard you.

The time I was most lonely he said, was New Year's Eve. I always felt there were parties I hadn't been told about.

Did you go to any parties?

Nary a one.

Well there you were, then. You were just being realistic.

All the holidays were like that, he said, persisting. There would be hours and hours of church and Grandmother would bring out a lot of stuff she had been saving for company and there would be three kinds of meat which I couldn't eat any of because it all had a thick rind of fat. We would have the minister and some old sticks, or else my cousins, in which case we would eat off a rickety card table and spill pale tan coffee on the cloth and I wouldn't know what to say.

You didn't go to church on the Fourth of July, did you?

Why not? For a few years my mom took me to the American Legion baseball game at night. For the fireworks, I suppose. Then we stopped.

I think the team died. As I remember.

Now the sun was down. Where the road hulaed into a valley and back up the other side there was an ant trail of tail lights. Ridge, road and sky were all invisible, all the same charcoal color through which the ant trail swooped like the track of a light pen. He always felt he would drive over the cliff at this point because he wanted to go straight across to the far

side over the charcoal bridge.

You're the only thing left from that time, he said. You're from Out There, like the wind, full of emptiness. And you were gone for a while, during the bad time. Where were you?

Holding your hand, she said.

Were you? You weren't some inflatable person like those used to make up a car pool? While you yourself were off somewhere else, partying?

Hah! she said. With who?

One-night stands, maybe. Or with that woman next door who we always saw out running behind a baby carriage mornings, with the long ponytail and the tight ass. Maybe you were having an affair with yourself.

An idea. Keep your hands on the wheel, will you?

The tires squeaked.

So what happened to them all? he asked.

Mmm.

Squeaked again.

Imaginary, she said, relenting. What happens to imaginary people when they die? This one I betrayed, or he me, or she. That one I lost track of. That one I treated badly, others I neglected out of callousness or inattention. One had a mysterious grudge against me. Others didn't reply when I phoned, out of shame or disgust with the past, or fear.

Did you never ask them why?

Hah.

They were coming into town, past the casino and the rodeo grounds both sparkly as rhinestones, past the cemetery dark as death is, the espresso shop which closed at noon and the shop which sold homemade sausages and the Christian bookstore, all dark.

Love is empty, he said at the stoplight beside the Dairy Queen. I want some apple pie.

You're not supposed to eat that. Anyway, at this hour it will be all gone. And there's the cat.

The cat can stay in the car.

It'll yowl.

Let it.

Sex is empty, too, she said with a certain judiciousness. You meet him in the health club, you sit in the sauna together, you peek under the towel. God knows who he is. He could be anyone. And he probably is. The light's green. Are you going to go?

He started up, but then had to pull off into the parking lot of the video store where he tumbled out onto the pavement to be sick.

What on earth? Will you shut the door before the cat gets out?

The thought of her lay on his stomach like one of Charlie's sausages. He stood up.

Lost a contact lens, he said to the matron walking by.

The car cheeped like a baby bird until he stepped on it. She was looking at him a little archly as he pulled back onto the street.

It was two-lane blacktop now and the conversation became more sporadic, interrupted by the blindness of oncoming cars. After a while he turned onto the forest road and dropped down into four-wheel drive. There was no moon.

You'd think, she said, when we come up here every other weekend, we'd get a full moon sometimes.

But still, the sky was light enough to silhouette the mesa when they topped the clearing on the ridge where the cattle trough was, just past where the elk usually crossed and where they had once waited for a tarantula the size of a lunch plate to pass. And there might be stars.

It was ten o'clock when the Jeep pawed its way up the driveway and he turned it off in front of the stairs.

There were stars. It was as quiet as childhood. After feeding the cat they stood out on the back deck and looked at them.

She ran her fingertip slowly down his bare arm.

He shrugged. I'm empty and you're the wind, he said. You blow right through me and back Out There where you came from.

She was silent, if not quiet.

It was always windy out there, she said after a time, looking speculatively into the sky.