

LUKE PATTERSON

Between Fronts

Sometimes the street's gray concrete
starts to creep up over the grass,
rolling over the lawn all the way up
to my front door, killing the green.
I see it moving and I flee the city,
taking air in big, panicked gulps
until the rot rolling through
my car windows is replaced
by grass and rain-wet air.
The pavement at my back
urges me into the country,
onto dirt roads and our house
above the lake, where I
can stand on the balcony
and lean into cool wind.



“Go.” You told me. “You’re always better
after you get out of the city for a while.
That’s the reason your grandfather
bought a ranch, right? That’s why he built
a house on it. He knows you need an escape
every once in a while.
Things are easier out there, slower, cleaner.
I promise, you’ll come back
feeling whole.”



Just northeast of the house
two large weather fronts
converge each year
to mark the end of spring:
storms of early summer
that can last for months.
Storm windows line
the northeast wall,
large enough to admit a view
of the horizon in panorama,
thick enough to face directly
into a hard, constant wind
that you can watch
heave thunderheads
straight at you, watch the storm
eat up the horizon, its shadow
racing across the lake
and up the back porch,
and at night, the lightning burns
your storm-dark vision
with such remorseless detail
that the images linger
briefly in negative,
a too-vivid memory
ignored by eyes grown
accustomed to only grays
and dull edges.



Out on the balcony,
I sweat in the coming dusk.
We've spent the day in the pasture
uprooting mesquite trees
and stacking them into burn piles.

Grandfather says that once the fields
are clear we might plant some cotton.
Then you'll find out what real work is,
he tells me. Just last week
I saved a man who hung himself
down in the Huntsville state prison.
Hangings will usually void their bowels,
but when we cut off his pants
there was nothing but a little blood,
so we checked him for wounds
and found that he had recently
suffered severe rectal tearing.
The mass of fresh sutures around his anus
prevented any rectal prolapse
or involuntary bowel movement.
I want to tell my grandfather,
No, I do know what real work is.
I can feel it sometimes,
just waiting for me
to step out of the ambulance
and see it there staring back
at me with dry, motionless eyes,
like it wants to tear me up
by the roots and toss me aside,
heaped onto mounds of kindling,
drying with them in the sun.
I stand with him,
watching the sky change,
and say nothing.
In the fields behind us
piles of dead mesquite
quietly wait to be burned.



I used to watch the stars out there.
They were clearest in winter,
when it would get so cold
that the air molecules
would freeze, still
and let the starlight
pass right through them,
unbent by motion
or the glare of a city,
landing like snowflakes
on upturned eyes.
It was like that for years,
until oil was discovered
in the shale deposit
that ran through the county.
Then, giant still derricks
lined the horizon
like a dozen skylines
in miniature
sprung up so suddenly
the surrounding air
was startled into motion,
waving, pulsing with the heat
of the gas flares
that lit up the night.
The flames were bright
and constant and slipped
like a blanket between
me and the stars.



Thunder wakes me from a dream
of King Lear in the squall.
Rain and wind pound storm windows

and I'm starting to remember
where I am when my grandfather
bursts in the room wet and naked
shouting that the fields are ready
to be planted and it's time I found out
how real men earn a living.
I'm up and words of protest
begin to form in my mouth
and stop as I look down
at my own nakedness
to find my body hairless,
exposed testicles prepubescent.
A bolt of lightning fills my vision
and the storm window
behind my grandfather erupts
in a shower of glass.
I blink away the light
before seeing him on the floor,
still yelling—his admonitions
frantic, deranged. City-life, he says,
has reduced me to nothing
but *a poor, bare, forked animal*,
and why, he asks, won't I let him
teach me to be a man like he did my father
and looking at me his mouth
twists into that old and hard reserve
for weakness nurtured by privilege.
His eyes are dull and unblinking as they
watch me pull on my uniform
and open the trauma bag to get an IV started,
but when I do he rips out the needle,
and when I try to stop the bleeding
he pulls away the gauze
and claws open his lacerations
until shock and blood loss

drag him into unconsciousness.
When I begin mouth to mouth
my teeth crumble and fall
into his airway, suffocating him.



I say it again to be sure: It's not real.



From the balcony I watch the lake
slowly grow darker as red algae spreads
through it like rust. It will kill every
living thing in the lake before it dies.



the smell of the diesel won't come out
of my fucking clothes it follows
me like a deathwatch clinging
to my hair and my skin
I kneel behind the ambulance where
I wrap my mouth around the tailpipe
and inhale lungfulls of exhaust
with desperate heaving gasps
that wrack my chest like spasms
and burst the vessels in my eyes
until the white of the sclera
is replaced with a red hemorrhage
that spreads across my face like rust
and turns tears pink with blood
until black finally starts to creep
around the edges of my vision

and all I can see are twin streams
of smoke rising out of my nostrils



I say it again, it's not real.



I can smell summer coming
in the wind, cooled
over the lake and sweetened
by the cattail, the little bluestem
reeds circling the water.
It catches dovecalls,
the low cicada-hum,
and I know the heat
is not far off now,
that our brief respite
is drawing to a close,
that I am once again
tilting to face the sun.
I spin toward summer
growing restless, growing mad.
Even the wind knows it.



My grandfather takes me to the middle
of our property, where a long burn
has been cleared for the pipeline
that now runs beneath where we stand.
This is where we'll plant it, he says.
You're too young to know it,

but things are about to get real bad.

I can smell it in the wind—

*soon we're gonna have to be able
to take care of ourselves.*

He laughs. *You might just have
to do a little bit of real work.*

The ground is muddy,
and has been cleared for twenty
yards on either side of us, ending
where the mesquite forms a wall
that stretches along the burn's edge
The mud has bubbled up in places,
forming pools that give off
the dark, unnatural sheen
of chemical infiltration.

I imagine pushing my fingers
into the earth to make
way for seed. Black
oil rushes in to fill the hole.

Old fields lay fallow,
the crops of the past
are consumed and forgotten.

The ground is poison,
it kills all its children.



24 hours without sleep
and the lights are burning
out my night vision
I can feel them like needles
behind my eyes
I smash the headlights
and walk over the shards
in my bare feet

—
I say it again

—

I'm in the back
of the ambulance
with a patient while we
transport him to the hospital
but he is screaming
he won't stop and my god
he's been at it the whole ride
I make sure the straps
fastening him to the stretcher
are secure
then open the back doors
and roll him out
onto the blaring
freeway where
the oncoming traffic
grinds him
into the pavement.

—

I return to the city just ahead of the rain.