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Of Blood and Bone

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OF BLOOD AND BONE

OVER THE YEARS, we have left many things at my father's grave: flowers, agates, and fossils found out on the prairie, an old pair of boots he loved. But not everything makes it through the winter or the wind. My drawing of our old sheepdog, Sam, was gone in a few days. One spring my mother tried to get a batch of moss roses to take; they went brittle in the sun. Yet what has never left is the fact of his body, or what remains of it, in this prairie earth. This is where we come because we want to remember he was, like us, a born and living thing of blood and bone, and now he is dead.

I grew up in eastern Montana, on the wide, rolling teardrop of bunch grass and sage tucked in between the Yellowstone and the Missouri that everyone calls the Big Dry, a place where blood and bone still matter, still make sense. Even as a boy of five or six, when I watched Sam kill my kitten with one quick snap of his jaws, I knew the reason: the kitten had tried to eat from Sam's food bowl, something every other cat and child on the farm knew not to do. My mother dried my eyes and patted me on the back and sent me out with a bucket of soapy water to clean up the mess as best I could. I can remember, as well, holding down the wide-eyed,

heaving ewes as my grandfather slipped his scrubbed hands into the birth canal and gently eased a new lamb into the world. He'd pull the caul from the small mouth and nose, set the lamb on a bed of straw near its mother's warmth, and stand, his bloody hands held steaming in the air. And on the other end of the shed was the bone yard, the place we piled dead sheep and lambs to keep the stink and flies and disease from the living.

This cycle of birth and hard life and death, this turning about of blood, was not always pretty, but it made sense. Even more than that, it mattered. The antelope we hunted and butchered in the fall fed us through the winter. Each lamb lost in the spring was mourned, as the drying river was come summer. We saw our own mortality, our own delicate lives, mirrored in the real world around us. Funerals on the Big Dry were always huge occasions. The family sat with the body for days, and all the old cowboys wore their best brown suits. Births too were community occasions—from the Congregational Church down to the Sportsman Bar, we all gathered 'round and drank deeply and danced in our boots and sang. And after either, we turned back to the world, knowing all of this was the hard and wonderful way of things.

Yet I fear I may lose this knowledge. I now live in the midst of our suburban, consumerist, and entertainment-driven culture designed to insulate everyone who can afford it from even the slightest engagement with the raw essentials of existence, a world where blood and bone no longer matter. We lie to ourselves. We are dishonest in our refusal to take a look at the lay of things, to pick up stones and weigh them in our hands, to bend down to the dust. We no longer admit or remember our blood-roots, and by this false witness, this failure of the most basic empathy, we condemn others to lives of compounded brutality. How are we to understand the rotting bodies in the Ninth Ward or the burnt-out streets of Baghdad—images of a world not only hard but horribly wrong—if we know nothing of blood? How are we to know what to do? Our shock and outrage and capacity to comprehend have no depth, no breadth.

I come back to my father's grave because I want to remember. Though my shoulders still fill out his old snap-shirts, one day I too will lie down on my deathbed. I want to carry the weight of this truth into each day. For this is the way it is, the way it has been and will be, and I want to remember in a world that has forgotten. ✎