

Fall 1973

## Teasing the Sand Hills

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### Recommended Citation

Christenson, Steven (1973) "Teasing the Sand Hills," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss2/20>

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## TEASING THE SAND HILLS

So far I have been reluctant to telephone Elaine and tell her I'm in town. My mother rests in bed. She told me she is not feeling well, but I sense her illness has something to do with my coming home. She wrote and asked that my wife Anne and I visit and clean out the garage stored with trunks and boxes left untouched since the divorce many years before. "It's all garbage now," Mother said. I did not come over with Anne. I admitted that things have not been well. "I'm so sorry," she said and returned disappointedly to her crossword puzzle in bed while I watched patterns of colored light from the TV across the kitchen table on which was stacked her paperback library of crossword references. In the garage I went through each of the trunks full of textbooks and mementos from my parents' college and war days. In one trunk there were dozens of dirty manila envelopes full of photographs. There were pictures of my parents getting drunk at parties, and in one my mother was being kissed by a hollow cheeked man I never knew. She was young then and very beautiful. There was another picture of my father hugging a plump pimple faced woman, but rarely could I find a picture of my father and mother together. In another trunk I found my father's Army uniform and war souvenirs from when he was in China. There were pewter mugs engraved with dragons and tapestries of embroidered silk and a teak wood opium pipe carved with a fish swimming up the stem towards the smoker's mouth. I toked on the pipe and tasted the mildewed residue. I pocketed the pipe and became eager to call Elaine. But I was anxious because of Paul who knew Elaine first made love with me a week before she left for Saint Mary's convent six years before this visit when my mother fell ill.

When I was a child, just before the divorce, my father used to take me to the buffalo cliffs outside town and tell me stories the Blackfeet used to tell before the white man came to the prairie. One was about Scarface, a poor man who loved the chief's beautiful daughter but couldn't marry her because she belonged to the Sun. She told him he would have to journey far away to the lodge of Sun and ask him to release her, and as a sign of his approval Sun would wipe away the scar that disfigured the young man's face. Scarface traveled west on foot and asked Wolf where the lodge of Sun was, and Wolf told him to seek out Bear farther in the west and Bear would

tell him. But Bear told Scarface to seek out Badger, and Badger told him to seek out Wolverine, but Wolverine's advice led Scarface to the Big Water where he saw Sun sink at day's end. Fatigued and hungry and far from home, Scarface desired to let his shadow go to the Sand Hills where all the spirits gather after death. Then Swan came and told Scarface to mount his back and he would take him to the lodge of Sun far across the Big Water. It was daytime when Scarface arrived, and Moon, the wife of Sun, told him Sun would return in the evening. In the meanwhile, Scarface went hunting with Morning Star, the son of Sun, and they came upon the fearsome Giant Birds that had killed all of Morning Star's brothers. Scarface killed the birds with arrows, and in this way gained the favor of Sun when he returned in the evening. Sun rubbed a powerful medicine on the young man's face and the scar disappeared and Sun told him to take the chief's daughter as his wife. Then Sun pointed out the short path to the young man's village known as the Wolf Trail, which the white man calls the Milky Way, and my father told me that he wished all stories could end the way the story of Scarface ended. I took Elaine to these same buffalo cliffs the night she showed me the sloppy scars on her left wrist and I told her the story my father told me. Paul was out of town, as usual, she said, selling lawn mowers to retail stores. I showed her the opium pipe I had found that afternoon in the garage and we smoked a bit of hashish and looked over the buffalo cliffs to the buttes which mark the way north to where the Sand Hills shift in the wind of shadows. "Sometimes I would rather be dead, but that's when I'm most afraid," she said. "It's when I feel playful that I can hold a broken whiskey bottle over my wrist and say, why not, let's see what happens."

All of my father's textbooks were rotten. Each book I took from the trunk was damp and warped and the ink had smeared through the pages so you could barely read the words. They were medical books describing the diseases of man and detailing their treatments. Reading them approached an incomprehensibility akin to magic. I passed each book to Elaine and she tossed them through the door into the back of my pickup truck. With each step we stirred dust from the dirt floor which would turn to rock in winter and mud in spring. Our coughs became laughs. It was so good being together again. Another trunk full of blankets and bedspreads reeked of mildew once we forced the top open. A depression between two sets of blankets was nested with white and yellow cat hairs, and I remembered the kitten I wanted the summer before my father left home. Father called me a sissy. He wanted me to have a dog, a big dog. When winter came my father had already moved to California, remarried to a Blackfoot woman, and Mother wouldn't allow the cat

in the house, insisting cats were not healthy, that my father had said so, that after all he was a doctor. So the cat spent its last winter in the garage snuggled into these same blankets where I found him frozen one morning when I came with his dish of refrigerated Puss and Boots. Elaine helped me lift the entire trunk into the back of the pickup, and together we drove to the dump across the river from the buffalo cliffs to bury years of rotten memories.

Mother was not getting better. Lying in bed with a book of anagrams on her lap, she looked at me with wonder. "I have a temperature of one hundred and two and I can't stop coughing." I telephoned the family doctor, a former associate of my father's, and he telephoned a prescription for codeine to the neighborhood pharmacy where Elaine worked as a clerk when I first met her the summer before she went to the convent. I used to stop after my shift at the flour mill for a milk shake at the soda fountain and Elaine would give me extra large servings and take her coffee break, and we would talk about how much we liked each other and would make plans for the evening. I didn't like going to the pharmacy anymore. Marva had been working there since the depression, and each time I came in to fill a prescription she would tell me how happy Elaine was when we were together and how she thought Elaine was never cut out to be a nun. Then she would tell me that she didn't like the man Elaine married, that she should have married me, and Marva would wink and say, "I think she wanted to marry you anyway." One night soon after our first date, Elaine told me she was leaving for the convent in a few weeks. "I wanted you to know before things got serious," she had said. She couldn't see me smile and she cried and told me how her father and her old boy friend were firmly against her going, and being the new rival I knew what side I wanted to be on. Her father's disapproval was so desperate that he forgot the restrictions parents ordinarily impose on their young daughters. She could stay out all night if she wanted to, he said, "After all, you're a big girl now." I probably could have moved into her bedroom if I wanted to. The old man amused me so that I grew more and more to like him despite his antagonism toward Elaine. Mother thanked me for the bottle of codeine and I asked her if she felt any better. No. Could I fix her poached eggs for dinner? Again, no. I returned to the kitchen and looked out the pantry window and saw the elm trees spread from our neighborhood. The elms make it easy to forget the city is surrounded by buffalo cliffs.

Every Friday at noon the air raid sirens wail. Dust drifted through beams of sunlight from the garage windows. I blew my nose, and

snot black as mud smeared my handkerchief. I took a last glance at the old blue bicycle which lay with twisted handlebars in the back of my pickup truck. Like a marker it rested on top boxes full of rusty cans of Spam and corned beef hash and baked beans and Del Monte vegetables which had been packed in preparation for that national emergency which kept the air raid sirens wailing every Friday since the Korean War. Church chimes down the street were ringing out "Summertime" when the sirens shut off. A good time for a sandwich and cold beer. In the mailbox I found a letter from Anne among the bills and advertisements. "Dear Lyle, I miss you but I'm having a good time." Dear Lyle. She said she had been hitting the taverns with Joyce, that they had even gone to the Golden Bikini Saloon for the striptease, and she said, "It looked fun." She added that I ought to hurry home because she was meeting some neat guys. Love Anne. I last saw my father when Anne and I went to California on our honeymoon. That was four years ago. Anne wanted to meet him and Audrey Lightning Strikes, his Blackfeet wife, and their children. Within a week my father asked me if I had become a Communist, then expressed the opinion that I might have found a more intelligent woman to bear his grandchildren. Love Anne. The sweat in my hands smudged dirt on the paper. I wondered if Marva ever expressed to Elaine the opinion that Lyle married the wrong woman. I wondered if I was brooding like my father used to brood. My father had teased Anne about her hooked nose and said, "It ought to be made extinct," then he asked me what I was going to do now that I had my college degree. Work for the railroad a few months. His cheeks puffed red and he sat in his recliner for two hours and chewed his pipe and stared at the sun reflecting off the still waters of the swimming pool. I heard Mother cough in the next room, then all was quiet again. Anne's letter curled from the sweat aging into the paper. Audrey was the only one who ever wrote, always near Christmas, and she would say, your father is working hard and is unhappy over life.

Elaine and I took the path down the buffalo cliffs to the *pis'kun* where the Blackfeet used to kill off the maimed animals with arrows and knives. When I was a child I used to look here for bones and arrowheads and in all those years of growing up I found one fragment of chipped flint. All that remained were the crumpled bodies of cars teenagers stole from town and pushed over the cliff on weekends. Elaine and I sat near the muddy river flowing past the *pis'kun*. Not far from here, I said, is the cave where Red Old Man killed the Snake warrior. Red Old Man had gone on the war path alone to avenge the slaying of a neighbor whose wives wailed through the night. Red Old Man complained that he couldn't sleep, but he didn't admit to wanting the two wives that were his when he re-

turned from battle. My father said this happened long ago in the days of the stone knives, and I used to climb along the cliffs by the river and look for the cave I never found. My father said the cave was destroyed when the white man built the railroad through the canyon. I gathered driftwood from the shore while Elaine cleared the ashes from the stone fireplace that was there when I was a child. There were stories told by the white man that the ghost of the Snake warrior still roams through the canyon and throws buffalo bones at young lovers embracing in the grass. The breeze off the water fanned the flames licking the hot dogs we held on sticks. We drank cheap wine, and I told Elaine what my father had said about beef, that we should eat buffalo and venison instead since wild meat was healthier, that he should know, after all he was a doctor. Then he would wink and pat my child's head and say he was a medicine man, and I never understood what he meant until years later when I met Audrey Lightning Strikes. Elaine said, "Remember when we were bad?" I smiled, "Yes, I remember," while watching the muddy currents curl in the river. Elaine folded her hands in front of her face and looked into the fire. The scars on her wrist seemed like rivers gone wild. I remembered squirming awkwardly in the back seat of the old Ford, and how the sweat on our bellies slopped like grease and how the mosquitoes delighted themselves on the flood of flesh. Elaine had said, I want to love once before giving myself to God, I don't believe this is a sin. I remembered Elaine sitting up in the back seat while beams of moonlight shone on her breasts. Then she said, itch, and I scratched some bites near her nipples, and she giggled, so this is what it's like. Either you give yourself up to God or you give yourself up to the insects, I said and she laughed, I'll take God anytime. That was long ago and no one threw buffalo bones at us. "Yes, I remember," and I handed her the bottle of wine. Her fingers clasped my wrist and her nails dug toward my veins. She said, "Each night I prayed when I was away I felt as though I was drying up in the sun." The coals of the fire sparkled like the stars in the sky, so we agreed, it is better to give our blood to the mosquitoes and then kill them for their lechery. Laughing made the blood flow faster and we finished the wine. Beyond the twilight we made love on the springy seat of a wrecked Impala.

I wrote Anne to say I would not be home for awhile as my mother was ill. There was not much else to say. Cleaning the garage was a bore. But that was a lie. Mother said her kidneys ached and she stammered when she asked if I would rub her back. Facing away from me she took off her pajama tops and lay face down on the bed. She was careful to cover her breasts with her arms. Her back looked pale and swollen, but I wasn't sure, I hadn't seen her naked since child-

hood. "Over the kidneys, please," she said. I rubbed over the warm dry skin and said she should call the doctor. "No, I feel better today, but last night . . ." "What about last night?" "I do feel better today." But her words were exhausted. I said, I do think we should call the doctor. "No." Her flesh felt ready to crack. She didn't sigh. When I finished she asked me to pull the covers up to her neck, then she turned around and leaned against the back of her bed and coughed. Her eyes looked like they were focusing on the flowered wallpaper behind me. "Lyle, last night I felt as though I was going to die." She rubbed her forehead with her wrist. "I kept thinking of you and how you deserve better than what you've given yourself." I said life wasn't heaven but it wasn't meant to be either. She smiled and said that sounded very Catholic of me, but she still felt I had forsaken the Church as well as Anne whom she was most fond of. I said I was sorry, that I didn't feel as though I had forsaken anyone, that there must be a misunderstanding. "Lyle, it has been four years since you've gone to Mass with me." I said I was sorry, please don't misunderstand. "Lyle?" I thought of how easy it was to tease her when she was well. I asked her what her temperature was. One hundred and one. I told her I was calling the doctor. She said it wasn't necessary. I finished my letter to Anne and said, perhaps you should have come, you cheer Mother so. I smoked some hashish in my father's opium pipe. With each toke the mildewed residue would burn off and nauseate me. The fish on the stem might as well have been laughing at me. Maybe he would swallow me. The doctor spent ten minutes with Mother and assured me she only had a touch of flu but that she was very depressed. Do be understanding. And patient. He gave me another prescription, and Marva asked me if I had seen Elaine while I was in town. I said no. Marva said, if you do tell her to drop by and see us, it has been so long.

Things were looking better. Elaine and I were barbecuing a chicken over charcoal on the patio. She didn't care whether the neighbors in this classy apartment house objected to either the smoke or the stranger over for dinner. Nor did she anticipate anyone objecting to a neglected apartment during the week of Paul's "business leave of absence from home." Elaine said, "Paul's bed beats the back seat of a wrecked car, this way we don't have to contend either with God or the mosquitoes." I suggested we might have to contend with her husband, but she laughed, "Don't be silly, he's not due home for two more days." A very long business trip, I added, and Elaine smiled, "I'm so grateful," and I thought of Anne teasing me to come home. After all, I said, Anne and Paul are probably up to the same thing. Elaine reached for my belt, and we laughed and

rolled through the thick shag carpeting, then I reminded her how our luck has never been good for more than a few days. Images of the man kissing my mother in the photograph stirred me as I thought of how faithful she had been to the Church's teachings on marriage after the divorce. For years she continued to wear her engagement and wedding rings, even on the day of my own wedding when she told me, "In the eyes of the Church I'm still married." I told Elaine that Mother felt like she was dying but the doctor diagnosed it as depression. I wanted to make fun of it, but Elaine raised her hand over her head emphasizing the scars on her wrist. The moment passed quickly. She took my hand and led me to the patio where we sniffed at the chicken turning over the coals on the electric spit. Nearly done. We smoked some hashish while the stereo played McCoy Tyner ecstatic on the piano at the Newport Jazz Festival. We were nibbling on the steaming chicken when the front door opened and Paul walked in. I felt like I was in an elevator and someone had just cut the cables. But Paul looked more funny than threatening in his brown sports jacket stained at the armpits, it must have been a hard week for sure, and the attache case might have been a bomb as he flung it across the living room where it landed so softly in the thick carpeting. But Paul managed to smile at us and we managed to look innocent as children and Paul said, "You didn't expect me home until tomorrow, did you?" He smiled like a man with everything under control. He walked down the hallway and into the bathroom without bothering to close the door, and we heard the loud piddling of a piss so long that I wondered if he wasn't pouring water into the toilet. I took a bite off a chicken leg. Elaine looked embarrassed, but she tried to reassure me by biting into her meat too. The toilet flushed like an animal choking to death, and Paul leaned on the doorway and looked into the bedroom. He lit a cigarette with a butane lighter and he reminded me of the fish on my father's opium pipe. He would have liked to swallow us like the whale did Jonah or like the sturgeon did Old Man Napi in the Blackfeet legend. The good old all-American confrontation, and as the smoke funneled from his mouth I imagined gun fights yankee and rebel miners would have in the streets of Virginia City while the girls laughed in the saloons. Then Paul dropped his cigarette into the carpeting and tried to crush it out with his shoe, but it was still smoking when he passed us on his way out the door. "My, this is good chicken," I said and cleaned the meat off the bone. Elaine laughed and bit into her breast meat. I pointed to the cigarette still smoking in the hallway and Elaine said, "Don't worry, all things pass, always."

For the first time since the divorce, the garage was cleaned out. All that remained was to rake the dirt floor of leaves and bits of



glass and paper and bolts and nails. I had piled the trunks on top of one another by the wall. I had saved all the photographs, all the pewter drinking mugs and silk tapestries, and my father's Army uniform. If I ever open those trunks again, I know the stench will still be there, that the fungi will carry on with feeding off our fantasies. Mother was getting better. She was out of bed now, working her crossword puzzles in the kitchen by the blaring television set, but said she would be a few more days before returning to work at the real estate office. I remembered how my father cried the night he told me he would be leaving town forever, how he bought me a steak too big to eat and even let me sip his martini, how he asked the club's organist to play my favorite songs. "This Old House" and "Sixteen Tons." Father cried and I couldn't understand. I wanted to say, "Hey, I'm just a kid," but he promised that I could come to California to see him in the summer. But it was several years until I met Audrey Lightning Strikes nursing their younger child from her dark breast, and she would tell me stories the Black-foot used to tell before the white man came to the prairie, and my father would puff his pipe while I listened and he would squirm in his chair as though embarrassed. I will never forget the story Audrey told about Heavy Collar who woke one morning while alone on the prairie and discovered that he had slept by a pile of woman's bones. Heavy Collar ran off afraid, but when night came and he lay down to sleep he was terrified to see the woman's bones lying beside him. He beat the bones, shot arrows at them, and the woman laughed, "I have been killed once, why try to kill me again?" The woman followed him to his village, and only Heavy Collar's aging mother saved the village from the ghost woman's wrath. She handed the ghost woman a pipe full of a medicine, and then she died, and together Heavy Collar's mother and the ghost woman left for the Sand Hills. I raked the garage floor. Many years ago the buffalo ate grass here. Now the only secret that remained was in the dust itself. The next day I would return across the mountains to Anne and probably to another good old all-American confrontation. Wherever I go I am followed by bones. Wherever I go I try to find medicine in the sun. When I die I want my enemy to slay me with a knife made of stone.