

# The Oval

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## Environment

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# ENVIRONMENT

*By James Davenport*

**F**ootball.

We are not Texas. Let me begin by repeating what we aren't: Texas. The small town, Friday Night Lights. Driving home from practice in the evening, livestock like ants in green fields. Topping out the Chevy on a dirt road. Burger joints. Waitresses in red checkered dresses and country music from a tinny speaker. Walk a block. Get your haircut there. Dad will let you inside now.

Not here. In Deer Lodge, MT, the streets are lined with trash from the week's drunkenness and the air smells of a grease fire. Here, the local paper makes headlines of distant relatives having once met Jodie Foster. Here, the social constructs and expectations are chaotic and bent, last decade's high school graduates imposing their will and their memories—less distinct and more whimsical with each passing day—upon the impressionable minds of young, aspirational football players. Someday, I want to be like Mister Chilcott, and work on my snowmobile in the high school parking lot too.

Farm boys with big muscles are half a lie. Most just milk cows and all the young fellers already have that kind of muscle for one reason or another. Big forearms don't win football games. Well, everywhere except here, in Deer Lodge, Montana. Problem is, most our cows are specifically reserved for slaughter.

"Dedication! Dedication! Enthusiasm! Enthusiasm! Blue and gold! Blue and Gold!" We gather our dirt-smearred football helmets in the air. Coach Cutler leads the call and we echo it, satiated with the night's figurative blood-letting. "Victory! Victory!" I watch the Loyola Rams take a knee in the darkness of the end zone. The lights are off and I can only see the moon's light reflecting from their helmets.

Cutler's face is flushed. His adrenaline is contagious, natural, and we all follow suit. He begins to cry and so do we.

"Tonight, boys, tonight you remember the face of your father," he says. I don't quite understand the concept; some of my teammates don't know their fathers. Some choose not to remember. I remember mine. I remember his. I remember the shed.

*Lineage*

Once, my great grandfather lined my family up behind the

shed with an intent to shoot them each in the head. But he didn't, instead he just fell into a crumpled ball of saggy skin and tears. This was after he lost his marginal plot of land bordering Flathead Lake in a bad poker hand with the big boys. He died bouncing off the walls in Warm Springs and left the family in a hereditary monetary trench. Funny thing is, knowing I was a hairline crack away from non-existence doesn't bother me, it's not knowing what that damn shed looked like that does.

### *Hunting*

The truck bounds along the frost-glazed gravel road. I am in the back, sleeping, generally unaware and nonchalant about blowing away some innocent wildlife. My slumped posture and intermittent sighs clue my father and his long time buddy, Steve (hell of a mustache), into the fact that I don't want to be there. Hunting had always been a chore, albeit a heavy one, that I followed through with only to keep my father from spiraling into a deep depression. I worked maintenance, primarily the day shift. Mom took the night.

I wake up to my father shaking me. We are on the perimeter of the allotted hunting grounds. Behind us, an exit from I-90 that peels off towards Gold Creek. A school bus has stopped there. Children are waiting for their parents to pick them up, occupying themselves with the hunters in their immediacy. To the front, a small gathering of deer. I see the buck my father is squealing about, lie down on the hillside, and perform the conflicting, mundane process. I ready myself to take a life and blame him for the vapid lack of forethought and subsequent absence of guilt. The smell of metallic fire and the echoed clap of gunshot. The buck drops and the school children cheer.

### *Fishing*

I pull my finger through the gills and out the mouth. I hold the fish up; it is a small Cutthroat, seven or so inches long. Pulling the knife from my vest, I make a small incision near the urethra and slide upward towards the gills. The small teeth prick, but never tear. I rip hard, evacuating the small trout's viscera and throw the guts into the roiling brew of the spillway. My father pats me on the back and lights up his portable Coleman grill. I'm so goddamn tired of this. The shed. What if?

### *And Baseball*

I'm up to bat. Oh, goddamnit, I'm up to bat. I hate fast pitch.

They expect too much from a fourth grader, especially the pitchers. I'm up to bat. I can feel my father in the stands; his eyes are boring holes into my confidence. The first pitc-ohshitohshitoh-ball. Second pitch. Cower. Ball. Third pitch. My father screams from the benches. "Swing the damn bat!" he says. I do. The ball strikes my index finger, splitting the fingernail open. I begin to walk towards first base, assuming the call. Foul. Bleeding and budding tears, I step back up to the plate, back into my father's gaze. I strike out and walk several blocks home. Top of the second.

### *Teen Angst*

It's amazing what full-throttle teen angst can do. Before the rebellion, the arm through my door, wall, that upturned bookcase, my arm through it all, bleeding; before the mirror was shattered and my mother told me what that meant (seven more years of this I guess); before I took the truck to the highway in the midst of her menopause and his midlife crisis, during that blizzard we still talk about today; before I walked to Beck Hill Road and the cops picked me up and then I got home and threw my brother to the ground, him crying, red-faced, almost purple, wondering where the hell his brother went; before it all, I only remember holidays and the first hours of school.

### *Oh my god mom get the van we have a Radioshack.*

In Sixth grade, I boot up Oregon Trail on a yellowed Macintosh. The keyboard's lettering had faded into unintelligible specks. I get dysentery, but still manage to pull an "A" for the day.

Every street side shop is in a slow metamorphosis, a convergence to second-hand. A Sega Dreamcast, introduced to market around 2000 or so, sits on a shelf in J&J Variety for its original MSRP and every time I walk in, I still want it. Maybe, if I mow enough lawns—Nope. "That shit will rot your brains."

Downtown (or Uptown if you're down from Downtown) in Deer Lodge, Montana consists of dilapidating historic buildings once converted to laundromats, once to bars, then, for the most part, shut down due to a consistent lack of patronage.

There exists a donut shop, the owner of which has been dead for the most part of my life. Somehow, there are still donuts filling the windows. Like he had a son that kept on going, kept the same love for donuts. Seems implausible.

### *Meat and Potatoes*

“Meat and potatoes. Yep, grew up on that. Norma didn’t have much experience else to make what your mother can. Yut. You kids are lucky to eat what you eat. *Spoiled.*”

The most distinct of the memories I have of my father’s memories are those pertaining to food. Open-faced meatloaf sandwiches. College. Pour gravy on that. Yeah. That Rainbow Trout from the year I was born doesn’t even begin to compare to today’s Cutthroat. Douse that in flour and spice. *Yeah.*

He recalls foods and their corresponding associations during iterative consummations of said foods. I fear that my only memory of these meals will be of my father, recalling his own memories of the meals. What do I tell my sons and daughters about meat and potatoes? What will they tell their own? I’m turning into a temporal loop, infinite and barren. Eventually, everything I am will only recall a recollection.

### *What we are*

He hasn’t actually grown up at all. Neither have I. We’re both just bottled with our anxieties, slowly pouring out over the years, falling apart, just like this place. Strange how the more my life comes into focus, the more fragmented I realize I am, as if I’ve accumulated too many memories, too many arbitrary chain-link associations, like I’ve spread myself thin across this temporal landscape. All the while, Deer Lodge—a three-legged dog, going on two—reflects this self-epiphany. The dilapidation, physical. I am my father, or at least an imperfect projection of his own father’s imperfect projection. I am the continuation of a flawed man, the accumulation of an entire lineage of anxieties. Will the shed come again?

### *The Civil War*

Thanksgiving vacation. I’m on my fourth year of college, taking a day or two to really recharge my soul, orient myself by visiting my family in Deer Lodge. Eat all day, sleep all night. It’s two in the morning and I’m stumbling my way through the dim, blurred neon at the rear of the Corner Bar. Have to piss. I’m drunker than I’ve been all semester. I see Chris standing behind a table in the back of the bar on my way to the bathroom; his hands are folded neatly, his mouth closed tight like he’s mentally reciting a business proposal. Haven’t seen the guy in at least four years. I remember him, how he held the door open for three-hundred high school students every day of the year, how he once tried to give me Yu-Gi-Oh cards in exchange for a kiss, neither

of which I desired, how he found his fourteen year old sister hanging from the rafters. He had no friends, only a shack for a home, “parents”, and a lonely mastery of the Elven language.

Chris is wearing a Civil War-era replica of a Confederate soldier costume. I greet him, ask him how he’s doing. Apparently he’d be doing better if “we didn’t have a nigger as president.”

I let him know I disagree, but he gives me a Confederate perspective on a summarized Civil War anyway. I listen, too drunk to really listen. I wrap it up, tell him to follow his dream (oops) and get in a vehicle with an old friend, a female ex-Marine from Texas, and an old friend of my mother’s; she used to babysit me in first grade when she was three-hundred pounds heavier. Twenty minutes later we’re in the mountains smoking a bowl and my friend is having a panic attack. “She used to babysit you, man. How did we even get here?”

Fuck if I know.

### *Merry Christmas*

During winter break of my senior year in college, I had checked out. At home I was either sleeping, reading (Run, Rabbit! Damn, you. RUN.) or drinking with old friends— who were exactly that: old, not unlike myself and simultaneously, as I had come to realize in the length of separation, completely unlike myself; we drank to blur the growing lines between now and then. I was home, but homesick. My bouts of seclusion were only interrupted by the insistent pleas of my lonesome father.

“Wanna go for a ride in the truck? Wanna get a soda pop? Wanna go fishing?”

*No. No goddamnit. Leave me alone.*

He would just sit there, in his chair in the corner of the living room trading glances with the television, the fly he was tying, and the window. Through it, the high school was visible across the street. It was empty now, but in a week’s time would be overrun with the thinning youth of Deer Lodge. They looked smaller every year. My father hunched over his fly. A wooly-bugger, incomplete, the circular frill of its abdomen was missing. His hair was a grey wisp, lighter than air; the weight of it mirrored the sad smile that hung on his face when I told him “No”. He looked smaller this year, too. The couch deepened and swallowed me as I fell asleep to the hesitant southern drawl of a man selling knives on TV.

My Aunt Betty called the week after I returned to Missoula. She told me my dad called and wouldn’t stop talking about how happy

he was to watch his boys sleep.

*Where we are*

I asked my sister's husband where he thought Deer Lodge would be in twenty years. With the mill shutting down and the general population spreading to bigger cities, I couldn't help but think Deer Lodge might disappear, or become something else completely.

"Right where it's always been," he said. And he's right. Everything will end, but it will take a long time. We hold on to tradition, on to who we are, no matter how twisted and scattered our identities might be. Life is shaped around one's environment. Home isn't always tangible, but it's a place.

Who am I? What am I holding on to? I hold on to Deer Lodge; both prisons, all six churches, the trailer parks, its insane occupants. I hold on to my father despite his inability to understand me. I don't quite understand me either. I hold on to the shed, because murderous intent might not always shape murderous intent and history is good for your bones. At times, these people, places, and ideas are easy scapegoats for all the scars in one's life. Sometimes, these people learn to text and all misgivings are forgotten.

*The first four texts from my dad*

"Are afraid to mastcjh minds with me? Pussuy"

"Which breed of dog is rated more iq labs or goldens?"

"Whats a can of corn refer to?"

"What was long dong silverds real name?"