

Common Ancestor

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Black
Lawrence
Press

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For Magan

I
Wreckage

Red Wreck's Writing Has Been Described as Associative

For effect, Red Wreck writes in rabbits, because they're quick and quivering and soft. The power of association: Do they bring to mind a human heart? A cow's heart is tough, she knows for a fact, two handfuls of dark muscle, the veins like plastic tubing, all of it wrapped in a netting of fat. To make a cow's heart edible requires basic dissection. The ventricles must be removed. To chew them would be like chewing cuts of garden hose. Pulling them from the meat makes a noise like heavy Velcro separating. Split, the center of each half resembles a lily, wax-white with a faint living glow. Once the major components are loosed, the heart can be cut in strips or steaks. Every year, when Red Wreck's parents were still married, her mother gave their cow's offal to the same woman who boiled it with potatoes and carrots. Now, having exchanged one life for another, her mother buys a heart on occasion—"This," she says, "takes grill marks beautifully"—as she will on occasional buy the cheeks of pigs, or the head of a lamb, or make a trip to a specialty butcher for the game meat she used to gag at. "Don't you love," she asks, rhetorically, "a nice rare piece of venison?" She hosts dinner parties with sides of common vegetables prepared in unusual ways. She has a subscription to *Gourmet*. A boy once said to Red Wreck, "I like you so much I could eat you." She asked, "Would you?" Neither understood the innuendo. He posed naked in his bedroom, curtains drawn against people passing by on the sidewalk that met the foundation stones. "Eat your heart out, Red," he said and laughed so the dim space was lit with it.

Red Wreck Pursues Education as an Avenue of Escape

Later—during graduate school—Red Wreck was at a professor's house, invited to a little dinner party for the students who did research for the woman's book. No one knew anyone past their name, and some, not even that. The professor went around the table asking friendly by-the-by questions. After each answer she offered a brief anecdote, some little fact or tidbit of personal experience that suggested she and her assembled company shared common ground. When a man said he grew up in Maine, the professor smiled generously and told a story about a summer vacation there and how on the last day a whale had beached itself in front of their hotel. The professor sketched the shape of shingled towers with her hands, outlined French doors that opened onto sand, and described the amber emergency lights, the black waves rolling forward and folding back, and the whale, a dark shape, with no defined beginning or end, without top or bottom, spreading edgeless across the sand and sky. It was still so dark, and the light so peculiar, that it seemed, she told her guests, that the whale was both crawling up from the ocean and tumbling down from the stars. "I thought it was the end of the world," the professor said. "I was," and she looked at her children then—a boy and a girl, adolescents, called in from the backyard where they'd been slashing one another with flashlight beams, to join the company for dinner—"terrified." Her hands overlapped her heart. It was a moment, broken, by the man from Maine. "Did they get it back in the water?" The professor laughed, "Oh no—" making a loop-the-loop with her fork. *Oh well*, the gesture said. Across the table her daughter gasped. Or gasped is the word closest to the thing she did, which was to make the sound of a debarked dog trying to warn off a stranger. A terrible suffocating sound, like, but worse than the gasp a person makes when roughhousing gets too rough and somebody is hurt and then retaliates, flipping somebody else to their back and laying a forearm across their throat. The sound that means: *You're hurting me—Stop—Stop—You're hurting me.*

Red Wreck Learns Through Secondhand Experience

Once, Red Wreck stood behind a girl in the tight space of a toilet stall, twisting her long blond hair to keep it clear from her face while she vomited. They were not friends—Red was a sophomore, and the other girl, older, a senior—but a sudden, temporary bond was formed. When school let out, Red walked home with the girl through a cold spring rain that fell like pencil lashes, gray lines from cloud to earth. There was still snow on the ground, gritty and off-white, breaking down around their boots. They bent to pick up lost things loosened by the melting—buttons, a set of eyeglasses, single, matchless mittens and gloves. The girl found a sapphire earring. Red found a fake pearl necklace, shiny paint peeling from plastic beads.

“You know what a pearl necklace is?” asked the older girl. More, from her tone, than a necklace made of pearls. Red shook her head. The girl said, “I’ve got pictures.” Water beaded in her blonde eyelashes. Dry they’d been nearly invisible though they were thick. She said, “Come on. I’ll show you.”

The girl’s room was decorated with a pink Hollywood bed, a white dresser, and side tables that matched. On each was a porcelain lamp, painted with roses and gold-veined leaves. “My mother picked it all,” the girl complained, crossing the room, to wind herself in the long lace curtains. Muffled, she said, “It’s like Grandma’s house in here.”

Red thought it was beautiful, like what she imagined a room in a bed and breakfast would be. Tidy. Each thing paired with its proper partner.

The girl’s window looked out over a field where the snow had drifted in waves shaped by the tall grass underneath it. Everything was the gray of animal fur when it’s called blue or lilac. The rain stuttered and was gone. Snow was falling.

From inside the curtains the girl told Red she'd never done *it* with all her clothes off, but that sperm were like vampires. "You know—" behind the lace she moved in a way that suggested a pair of hands gliding up her body and affected a spooky, accented voice "*—a mist, a vapor.*" She said there were a dozen virgin births a year. "Goes right through your underwear," she said. "I swear."

She unwound herself from the curtains. Her hair clung to them, alive with static electricity. When she touched Red's arm a charge jumped between them. "I'll show you my stuff," she said.

Down on her hands and knees, the girl crawled across the floor. Dropping her shoulders, swaying, she lowered her chest until it was flush with the carpet, her back in a sharp curve. "Sometimes," the girl said, "I pretend I'm a cat." She stalked to the bed then lay flat, lifting the dust ruffle and wiggling the top half of her body underneath. She came out with a photo album full of swampy Polaroids.

The first page gave Red an old feeling—that wanting to go home that comes at a slumber party when everyone else has fallen asleep. The feeling of being alone in an unfamiliar dark.

Red Wreck is Too Young to put in Preschool

Red Wreck knows that her mother loves her, but will always love her less than any man passing on the street who whistles. She has heard men appraising, *there's a looker*, and sees a sewing thread, fine and white, unspooling between male attention and her mother's habit of running errands without a bra. A tangle begins to tie itself, loop over loop, the first knot so tiny it could slip through a needle's eye, then growing as knot catches knot catches knot, into something sized like a rock, polishing itself smooth on the inside of Red's still knitting skull. During the summer, her mother shimmies out of wet bikinis and ties herself into unstable halter dresses made from fringed sarongs. At the grocery store, the bag boys do not ask perfunctorily if Red's mother needs assistance to the car; they take the loaded cart and trot deferentially behind her, saying *ma'am*. Where the slanted light of the late afternoon strikes, her makeshift dress becomes transparent. Then Red, in the basket of the cart, legs dangling, bare feet, too young yet to put feeling into words, knots and unknots bits of thread-thought—*pigblind, ladyswine, heartfind, lovemineunkind*—seeing in her mother a cheapness that excites, offends, and wounds in equal doses.

Red Wreck's Sexual Education

At the start of the fifth grade, Red Wreck had a friend whose mother sat the girl, her daughter, ten years old, down at the kitchen table. "I want to talk to you about your changing body."

An extended silence followed, ending when the mother said, "You're excused." Later, she gave Red Wreck's friend a book. The girls were still playing with pony figurines, still took them, sometimes, into the baths they still took together. Alone in the friend's bedroom they flipped through the book's shiny pages, stopping to read the cartoons. In them, anthropomorphic sperm cracked jokes beyond the girls' grasp.

The same year, another friend's grandmother took the girl, her granddaughter, ten years old, to the park for a hot dog for supper, and while they sat on a bench pinching off bits of roll for the pigeons that came down to bathe in the dust at dusk, her grandmother recommended that a girl wait, not for true love, but for a boy with lambskin condoms. Her grandmother reasoned the purchasing of lambskin—which, when the girls were older, and looked it up, were nauseated to learn were made from the shaped membrane cut from intestines—was a genuine way to gauge interest. She, the grandmother, said, "No one's getting one of those for a quarter and a crank at the gas station."

Kept behind the counter, like batteries and cigarettes, in theory, only the truly committed would go through the hassle of procuring them. This became the girls' phrase for years. Seeing a dress they wanted, they would say, "No one's getting one of those for a quarter and a crank at the gas station."

All this was in a place where, if a young woman showed up at her mother's back door with double black eyes and an iridescent ring, like a pigeon, around her neck, her mother would say to her, "What did you do this time?"

Red Wreck Seeks Higher Education

In college, Red Wreck had a roommate whose favorite story to tell was the story of her rape. Red heard it the first time they shared bunk beds. She had the top. There was writing on the ceiling: Magic Marker sketches of penises and broken hearts bleeding through the most recent coat of paint. Below, the roommate was closed up in a flimsy cave made of tie-dyed sarongs. Early in the morning, when Red got up to pee, she could not see the roommate, but heard her quietly crying, Red knocked on the metal bed frame. “I’m sleeping,” the roommate said. “Don’t wake me up.”

In the large room at the end of the hall that served as a dormitory kitchen—a two burner apartment stove shoved into a corner, a refrigerator that smelled of sex, plastic and aquatic, pushed not quite flush against the wall, and a card table and folding metal chairs—the roommate sat with groups of girls from the floor. She told a version of the story she’d told Red, playing to her audience. The whole building was concrete, the hallways tacked with sheets of linoleum that rippled and skidded underfoot. When the roommate sat in the kitchen and whispered, “You’re the only ones I’m telling this,” her words carried. They might as well have been said into a tin can, the string stretched into every room.

“What,” she said to Red, when confronted, “you’ve never told a lie?” Red meant to say, “It’s that you pretend that you’re a victim.” But what she said instead was, “You make people think you’re special.” It was Halloween. The roommate was dressed as a prostitute, poking herself in the arm with a ballpoint pen to make track marks, but stopped. Thinly, she said, “Well, isn’t everyone special?”

After applying mascara and eyeliner the roommate had then splashed her face with water, so her next question, “Aren’t I special?” was supported by soap-opera-style black tears.

Red Wreck has a Crush

When Red Wreck was in junior high, the neighborhood girls would gather like deer at sundown, herding together at the end of the road where all the mailboxes stood in a ragged line. It was after dinner, after homework, after the local news, the last light of the day spread thick as wood smoke, low on the horizon. The girls would bicycle—some riding double, balanced on the handlebars, legs pointed forward, or perched on the seat, feet tucked back against the frame, while another stood and pedaled—along the gravel path that edged the river, coming out of the woods in the tramped down field behind the tavern where the man with the missing finger, a local hero, drank after his shift. The girls took turns doing pony tricks on their bicycles: hopping wheelies, and figure eights at such an angle their long hair swept the grass. Their great heartthrob sat at a makeshift table, boards over sawhorses, where he tapped cigarette ash into half of a quahog's shell with the stump of his missing finger and used the condensation-wet bottom of his beer bottle to make patterns on the wood: over-round infinities, closed up biohazard symbols, the Olympic Rings. One time a pair of girls stayed behind the rest. Their front tire had picked up a nail and was going flat. Rather than ride and ruin the rim, they took turns walking the bicycle along the path. He, the local hero, pulled alongside them in his truck and asked, Did they want a ride? Did they want to see something down at the river first? Okay, they said. He said, they said, okay to everything. And it was only after, that they changed their minds. Red Wreck, for her part, ripped a sheet of notebook paper in two, wrote *slut-liar-pig* on each half, then folded them carefully into paper cranes before shoving them through the vent of the girls' school lockers.

Red Wreck Considers Celestial Bodies

Red Wreck's father—the gap between his teeth is hers, but not the small square shape of them. Her chest is bubbled with rough white scars—the chicken pox at twenty-four, and her father's chest is equally marked. They look like burns on both, like cigarettes laid to skin to snuff. Her father's scars are from a wood-chipper fed a board full of penny nails.

He poured iodine and then peroxide into the punctures and they turned hard, healing over white with the flared borders of stars. Red's blisters broke then scabbed. She would not leave them be. She picked and bled.

Her father, for hours, for years, stood over a machine—his shoulder, his elbow, his wrist, guiding a motorized awl, punching through and binding leather to vulcanized rubber, and so the cartilage rubbed away, the ball and socket of bone splintering. But that's what happens—our parts do not keep.

Things, Red is learning, are not made for-ever.

It is not difficult to end up adrift. One year, she does not get a call on her birthday. At Christmas, she does not call. That makes a year without speaking. How easily one year becomes five...

For the Puritans, seven years without contact was good enough to call a person dead.

For Red, this standard means she is without a friend in the world.

If there is an interruption to be made in this line of thought, Red thinks, it goes right here. Something earnest, about the soul, its nature, love, or stars burned out for all our lives, but still lighting the fields at night. Red has read that humans are made from ninety percent the material of planets, and finds that beautiful fact means nothing to her. To counter the

experience of life with hopeful larger-than-our-bodies mystics misses everything, and Red sees, for her father, for her family, for herself, for most, is pointless.

We are small, she accepts, *contained*, predetermined by the bloodwork of our creation.

Red Wreck Starts an Essay on Anne Carson's *The Beauty of the Husband*

There is a fine line between love and hate. A turn of phrase that is cliché, but before dismissing it as trite, consider how a cliché comes into being: it is an expression worn threadbare, overused because it is grounded in readily recognizable truth. It is an adage supported by science; recent research indicates that *love* and *hate* are processed similarly by the human mind. Although these emotions appear contradictory, they generate comparable responses. Each powerful emotional state is linked to irrational behavior, and the brain, some research suggests, operates similarly when exposed to a figure evoking either passion. Though scientific evidence biologically yoking *love* and *hate* is relatively new, observation of a relationship between the emotions is not. Consider the words, almost two thousand years old, of Socrates: "From the deepest desires often come the deadliest hate."

Red Wreck Remembers Her Brother as a Boy

Suddenly—

A hard summer rain falling, stripping the trees, padding everything green, thickening-up the air, and Red Wreck waiting by a plywood trough of clementines, under the leaking awning above the grocer's doors where everything smells of kitchen garbage left for a day too long, hears from the gray smear of the parking lot the metallic slide and long dull ring of a van door then the high voices of children—a girl, a boy—then the blackbirds lifting from the stunted trees in a genie's smoke-dark curl, fluttering down again like ash, barely settled when two children—a sister, a brother—run, yelling: *Race between the raindrops!* scattering them *tkkk* into the air again.

Red's father can vote, but cannot legally own a gun—though, registered under her mother's name, he kept an admirable collection—

When Red's mother left, she took it, the collection, all her father's guns, trusting them to Red's grandfather, her father's father—who when her brother went to reclaim them, refused him, but suggested the collection might be available at a family discount—

Red's brother wouldn't bite, and they did not see their grandfather again—

Five years ago, at Christmas, Red's father called: her grandmother, his mother, had a tumor in her brain then he said, "Your mother was a lying whore—"

There was a breath between, just one, to cleave those thoughts—

He said, "That's where you get it from—"

There was one time, out on the back porch of the house when Red's father, their father, stood with his hands closed over her brother's shoulders, walking him back to the edge of the little porch built over a little hill, a little fall—not bad, but Red was terrified that he, their father, would take one step more and force her brother, his son, to fall—

It was raining then, a sun-spit—*The Devil's beating his wife*, their father would say, because his father did—a hesitant rainbow blurring over the yard, Red's brother's white shirt melted to his bruise-blackened skin, see-through thin.