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## Penance

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# Penance

by Eric McCollum

*“ . . . a great cry:  
‘Lazarus, come forth.’  
The dead man came out,  
his hands and feet swathed  
in linen bands, his face  
wrapped in cloth.  
Jesus said, ‘Loose  
him; let him go.’ ”*

Here, it is winter. The landscape is white and flat; drawn in. The snow is deep but has frozen on top and will support my weight as I walk. Occasionally though, and often near a buried bush or tree stump, the crust is weak and I break through it, plunging to my waist or chest in the snow. A branch will sometimes give me a foothold to climb out. When there is none, escape becomes difficult. The crust breaks away easily under my grasp from any point of fracture and its edge is sharp. I have already torn my sleeve in this manner. It lets in the cold air.

I have a thick coat that keeps me reasonably warm, even when the wind flattens itself into a gale across these long stretches of barren land. I do not have gloves of any kind, however, nor anything else with which my hands can be protected. I try to keep them jammed up under my arms but balance is hard that way, especially in the wind, and when it is calm, the tips of my fingers are still exposed. When they begin to freeze, the pain is excruciating. Once I tried pulling my arms inside my coat, leaving the sleeves empty, flapping beside me as I walked. Again the pain was searing as the backs of my frozen

hands began to thaw. When I walked over a weak place in the snow's crust, I fell headlong, unable to break the fall with my arms, and lay at a downward angle, my face pushed into the snow. I had to struggle several minutes to free my arms from my coat and push myself to my feet. So I have continued with my hands under my arms, stopping from time to time to draw them in to the flesh of my belly to warm. The pain each time makes me grimace. I move them rapidly across my stomach as if to ease the pain and feel the soft hair on my flesh twist and snarl.

This land is unfamiliar. I have never lived in a place where winter is so severe. I have seen no one, although last evening I did see two lights. They were some distance away and bobbed and shimmered as if carried by men making their way on foot. I turned toward them for a moment. But they disappeared quickly and I returned to what little shelter I had been able to find for the night.

Now it is the evening of the third day. There is a stream or river at a distance that looks to be less than a mile. I have already made the gentle descent into its wide valley, carved by a meandering channel and years and years of spring flood. The watercourses are easy to spot from a distance. They support thick growths of oaks and willows that stand black against the white snow. Barren of leaves, they offer a stark sketch of entangled trunks and branches. I have passed through several of these thickets before and have found them sheltered from the wind. In some places, there is little snow, making a good place to spend the night. It is nearly dark and the air is beginning to chill as it loses what little warmth the sun gives it. The food I have, that I seem to have brought with me in a bag hung from my belt, is nearly gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

She is small. In height, she barely reaches the middle of my chest. I could hold all of her face in my hand if I wished. Even she can circle her arms easily with her thumb and forefinger. I fear my hands will hurt her when she takes them by the wrists. My mouth feels awkward as I bend and kiss her. With a finger, I trace the edge of her eye. The pupil is wide; deep brown framed by a line of white. Some of its liquid overflows at my touch. I can feel the wetness.

\* \* \* \* \*

My village. The brown color of earth and the white of clouds against the sky.

"Will you tell me about your village again?"

The thick odors of cooking food drift through the room. The girl stands at the stove, stirring meat in the pan as it cooks over a low fire. Through the window, I can see traffic moving on the avenue in front of the tall apartment building across the street. It is late afternoon. The light is yellow and dim with smoke that has stained the building stone, the cafe awnings, the window glass of the city.

"You must have heard it so many times by now that you could tell it yourself if you wanted."

"It's different when you tell it."

"Only because I forget more and more each time."

"No, that's not what I mean."

Sitting in the doorway of my house in the village, I can feel warm sunlight on my arms. It is intense, almost audible; crackling on the wooden door and lintel above me like a flame. My feet, softened with an oil upon returning home, have also warmed in the light.

I am watching a woman climb the steep street in front of me. She is returning from the well with water drawn into a large, stoneware jug. A dog follows her, waving its tail as it circles her feet. Sometimes it comes close to snap at the bottom of her long skirt. She turns on it then, speaking harshly and threatening it with her upraised arm. The dog cowers, playing, retreats but still follows. The woman continues to make her way up the hill. Her breasts jostle with her stride beneath loosely worn clothing. They are full and heavy with milk. I know her. This summer, she is feeding her first child.

\* \* \* \* \*

Today, there is blood on the sidewalk in front of the building in which I live. There is not much; a small stain the size of my two hands placed side by side. It has the appearance of the flow from a wound in a large, slow-moving animal though it has now soaked into the cement and dried. A woman with a large shopping-bag passes it and does not notice. It is not an uncommon sight in the city. I stop to study it only because it has attracted several of the short, segmented centipedes that infest the buildings in this neighborhood. I do not understand what has drawn them to the dried blood. It is a cold morning and I have always found the centipedes seeking warmth in cold weather. I have unwillingly killed hundreds of them underfoot, crossing the threshold of my room, when they have crawled in and packed themselves into a solid, squirming mass beneath the door to escape the temperature in the un-heated hallway. Unless they are completely crushed, they curl into a circle as they die. Droplets of body fluid drain from cracks in their brittle, beetle-like skin. And, perhaps already dead, they curl into a tight coil. I have often wondered if there is agony in their deaths. They never move as if from pain but simply bend into their coil at any injury. It seems to be reflexive, like fingers as they curl when relaxed.

An old man, a retired doctor, uses a room on the bottom floor of this building for his work. I sometimes find one of his bloody parcels wrapped in newspaper in the trash bin. He is careful to scatter them throughout the neighborhood in order not to attract attention to this location. His work may have been responsible for the blood on the sidewalk. In any case, the centipedes must have found it when it was fresh. Earlier, I might have watched them find the warmth of the blood, gather at its edges, feed on it and then crawl away, trailing the liquid after them out onto the cement where, joined to the larger stain, it dried and began to make a design.

I have been staring at the bloodstain for several minutes now. It seems familiar. Angry. An angry wound. Or, with the interwoven centipede paths trailing out from it, it is like the cross-hatch of pencil marks on heavy paper. An organic figure. The drawing of a maddened child.

\* \* \* \* \*

Her odor lingers in the rooms. It is a musky scent that she has taken from a small bottle of oil. The bottle bears a design cut into the glass and behind it the oil is light and translucent as deep brown smoke. Sometimes, it was heavy enough to taste when I put my tongue to the soft spots on her neck. A bitter taste; more of the oil than of the scent itself.

It comes to me on a current of warm air. From my shirt where she has laid her cheek against it. From the armchair where she has been sitting. Or, when I have put out the lights and am ready for sleep, it rises from the bedclothes when she has been next to me, rises and thickens like the still, heavy air caught in the thickets beside a river on a humid day in summer.

The scent-bottle is small in my hand. I touch its design. It shows a figure. Turning it, I watch light bend through the etched lines. Here the glass has been cut and then polished smooth to show a bathing-scene. I can hardly feel the ripple of the lines with my finger. She has left it behind and I am afraid to open it, afraid to let the scent rise.

\* \* \* \* \*

The pistol has not been cleaned. And I have nothing with which to take the grit from the barrel, the small spots of rust from its metal handgrip. I have put it in the bag which, until this evening, held food. As I walk restlessly, I can feel it bump against my leg. I have difficulty controlling its motion. There is hardly any movement left in my hands. The tips of three fingers have already turned black; an aching freeze. And the clear, starry night promises a deep cold in the hour before dawn.

Several times, I have practiced plunging my hands in through the drawstring of the bag at my belt and fitting them around the pistol as if to fire it. I think that if I do find game, I will fire through the thin cloth because extracting the pistol with enough speed would be impossible. I have not tried this however. There are only five cartridges left in the magazine.

A few moments ago, a rabbit broke cover in front of me and began to run zig-zag through the brush in the riverbottom. I reached for the pistol. My fingers tangled in the drawstring. The rabbit disappeared. I ran to the burrow the animal had made in the snow and pushed my bare hands into it, hoping to find a little body warmth lingering. But the rabbit's burrow held as little warmth as the one I have dug for myself on the lee side of a fallen tree. I returned to my little cave to prepare for the night.

The moon is in its last crescent and does not give enough light for me to expect to find any game at night. I lie down and pull my clothes tight around myself. I take the pistol from its pouch and grip it. If my hands freeze during the night, I want to be able to hold the gun anyway and fire it perhaps with a small stick levered against the trigger. I do not expect comfort this evening.

Through the small opening of my den, I can see a portion of the sky. The stars sparkle in it like drops of summer dew catching sunlight in the dark shadow of a tree. I name aloud the few stars and constellations that I know. Orion is there.

\* \* \* \* \*

"It seems so cold tonight. Look how the glass is covered with frost."

She stands near the window. I can see flashes of headlights from the traffic below play across her face, building and re-building it in different configurations of shadow and smooth white skin.

"Yes, the air makes the frost when it comes against the cold glass."

"It frightens me to think of touching something so very cold. When I was a child, I put my tongue against a metal pole on a very cold day. I don't remember why I did it. It fascinated me. It froze there, of course, and in pulling it away I tore the soft flesh on the very tip. My blood froze to the metal too. I saw it everyday as I passed the pole on my way to school. It stayed for several weeks, I remember, until the thaw. I can still taste the blood. And, perhaps because it happened to me, I saw many such stains that winter, where warm things had been caught to the cold."

\* \* \* \* \*

From this place, the village is nearly indistinguishable from the landscape. The woman weeps in the shade of a tree. We look level out toward the cluster of buildings. Stopping here, at the side of the route that comes across the plain from the south, I have found her waiting for me beneath a tree. She is weeping, glad at my return. She has softened my feet and arms with oil. Its odor is thick with herbs and musk. Heat shimmers from the dry soil around us. Dust. We catch the village in our sight. Behind it, mountains rise in shades of green, mottled with shadows of clouds. They are like a backdrop, a sky of themselves. I cannot recall how many times I have climbed into them. Tight willow thickets in the ravines. Snow at high elevation turns the streams to torrents at thaw.

A thunderstorm moves across the tough, parched plain. It passes over like a fertile hand. Seeds of the tall grasses that catch at our skin and clothes with their abrasive leaves when we walk through a field, begin to break their dormant state. They sprout among other stalks that have broken the ground, grown soft and tuberous only to parch and dry and suck at the moisture of each rain, smelling faintly of rot. The thunderstorms come too heavily, dry too quickly. There is never enough moisture here for growth.

In the spring, when the nights begin to warm, she takes water out to the walled garden behind the house. It is the last light of dusk. She stands beneath the blossoming apricot tree. She takes off her dress and hangs it from a limb. Through the doorway, I watch her as she bathes. She is oblivious to her nakedness as she bends and splashes water onto herself. It beads on her dark skin like the moisture that condenses on the shade on a humid day. She is womanly. She has borne a child, barely alive at birth. It was dead after only a few days.

She dries herself. She dresses. She breaks a cluster of apricot blossoms from the tree. Its smell is sweet and light. Her hair is black; the molted feather of a bird.

\* \* \* \* \*

Movement in the snow. I awaken. Deer moving

through the thicket where I have dug my den. They startle and run when I emerge from the drift, breaking away the snow above me, fumbling for the gun. There are five deer. They are too far away for a shot by the time I have raised the pistol and put my finger to the trigger. I do not fire. I watch them as they separate, run through the brush and disappear. After I have alarmed them, their movements make no sound. Looking for their tracks, I find a wide pathway, too deeply trampled to have been made only by the five animals. More, perhaps, will follow.

Finding a perch from which to watch over the trail is difficult. My body has stiffened from the cold during the night. Too great a climb is impossible but by staying on the ground, I increase the chance of frightening away more animals before they come into my gun's range. I move away from the place where my shelter was dug for fear its human odors will signal my presence. I walk for some distance along the deer's pathway, finding at last a tree that has broken mid-trunk but not completely fallen. Its branches make a rough ramp over which I can climb to a place to crouch ten or twelve feet above the ground. I hope only to be able to control my body enough to remain still if any animal approaches.

The air has warmed a little since yesterday. I find my hands more flexible; able to hold and manipulate the pistol with less trouble. The temperature must have risen above the freezing point, for the snow is wet and soft, more difficult to move through. Its powdery covering on my clothes has melted and wet the cloth, making a chill and leaving me even colder than I was during the night. I shiver in the light breeze and spot movement along the trail.

Three deer. They do not move quickly, stop often to scent the air or try to find food where the snow is thin. Several times, one or another of the three has stopped and focused his eyes and long delicate ears at my perch. But there has been no cause for alarm among them. When they pass behind a growth of bushes, I pick up the pistol and, gripping it in both hands, push it out in front of me, pointing it at approximately the place where the deer should pass. They re-appear, still on the same path, coming toward me. My arms are weak and begin to tire from holding the gun motionless. I can feel them waver as the deer begin their approach. I see them clearly. The first, a buck with several points on his antlers, stops and gazes at me. The other two bunch behind him, testing the scents on the air. The breeze is blowing toward me. Only motion will give me away. I try to remain as still as possible and the deer, satisfied that there is no danger, come closer. The first one is under me now and I find that I have misjudged the angle of my aim. In order not to give away my presence, I move my arms slowly. The second deer passes. I am able now to see the third one over the top of the barrel. When its shoulder blades are in the line of fire, I pull the trigger.

I do not know where the deer have gone. The quiet woods around me seem to echo with my shot. Snow knocked from the branches near me by the muzzle-blast

of the pistol is falling to the ground. I put the gun back in its bag. I come down carefully from the perch. A few yards from the base of the broken tree, there is a spot of bright red blood that seems to vibrate in my vision against the white snow and black lines of the leafless trees.

\* \* \* \* \*

I watch her eyes. Her breath comes quickly. I push the buttons of her blouse through their holes. Her clothing opens. Her breasts are small and easily fill my hands. I kiss her and slide the blouse off her arms. Her skirt is held only by a small catch at the waistband. I remove it. She is breathing even more quickly, now. I kiss her again and her mouth opens against my lips. With my tongue, I can feel the sharp edge of her teeth and, beneath them, the wet, warm tissues of her mouth. Her tongue moves against mine as if we might speak now without sound. The smell of her body is clean and raw; a scented oil. When I am sure of her, I let her go. And begin to undress myself.

\* \* \* \* \*

I am able to trail the wounded animal easily by following the large splashes of blood it has left in the snow. These occur at intervals that begin to decrease as I walk farther and farther. The animal has turned from the riverbrush and thicket where I shot it. It has moved out onto the flat floodplain and the deep snow there. I can still walk on the crust without breaking it but the deer's sharp hooves pierce the icy covering making its movements difficult. I cannot tell if the splashes of blood become closer together because the deer is bleeding faster or because it is harder for it to move through the snow.

The animal has travelled less than a mile from the riverbrush but the valley is narrower at this point and I have followed the bloody trail up out of it and onto the plains. The sky is grey and low. It does not seem as though it is daytime at all although it must be the middle of the day. The light is diffused by the heavy clouds and does not give shadows. The wounded animal's trail is well marked and easy to follow. I approach a small rise in the land that I cannot see past. The bloody marks pass over it, the intervals between growing shorter and shorter. I try to walk a little faster, try to reach the animal before it grows stiff in the cold.

I am less than twenty yards away. I move slowly, hoping not to frighten the deer into running again. It has fallen in the snow. Approaching, I see the animal struggling to gain its feet. It cannot. I run to it, ready to hold it down if it tried again to rise. I put my knee on its neck. The animal strains against the pressure but I am able to hold it. Now I can see the wound from my shot. It has caught only a small portion of the deer's body, but it has pierced one of its lungs. Each breath sends a rivulet of bright red blood into the snow. I increase the pressure on the deer's neck as it struggles. It begins to make a noise as if it were gagging. And then a sharp whine, the sound of fear. By keeping the animal lying on its side, I make it hard for the blood to escape and it begins to fill the lungs. The deer is drowning in its own liquids. It pushes its tongue out, trying to clear its blocked breathing passages. A series of spasms. And then the animal is choking hard, panicked. The punctured



lung ruptures even more. More blood flows into it. The animal's tongue and gums are beginning to tinge a light blue color from lack of oxygen in its blood. It coughs and coughs. It has stopped struggling against me and I find that the strong muscles in its neck are relaxing.

When the deer has stopped breathing, I take my knee from its hold on the animal's neck and begin to work.

\* \* \* \* \*

We have never really pleased each other in our love-making. But everytime she wears a dress that shows the curve of her body clearly or when she bends in such a way that her blouse opens a little revealing the tops of her breasts, I am again enflamed. I try to ignore her sometimes, turn away when she comes to waken me on the bed. I cannot. When she has come to lie down beside me. I am always aroused. Often, she is frightened. And

yet she is receptive; wanting, as I do, the pleasures which neither of us can give.

Most often, we make love in the afternoon when she has come to my room. And there is a time when we must finally lie apart. Our sweat dries quickly. We are tired but not finished even though she rises and goes to wash herself and then begins to prepare dinner. It is a time we cannot avoid, the time when the light and the air outside the window is the grey-brown of smoke from the factories. In a half-sleep, it is hard to tell where the air meets the stained building stone. It is hard to tell where the sky and the earth converge.

\* \* \* \* \*

The cold makes my work difficult. My hands are stiff and white. I do not easily manipulate the crude knife that is the only tool I have. It is a thin, flat piece of metal;

sharpened on one side and without a handgrip. It does not have a proper point and only after pulling and tearing at the carcass do I make an opening in the skin through which to work. In the cold air, the puncture gives up a little steam that rises and joins with the thick clouds of my expelled breath, warmed and moistened in my lungs.

The deer's wound has stopped bleeding. The warm blood which fell beside it has melted the snow and then cooled to make a deep, dark-red depression beside the animal. As I continue to work at the animal, more blood is let fall on the snow. I open the carcass along its belly. Already the legs are growing stiff and are hard to move out of the way. But the body of the animal is still warm and when there is enough of an opening, I put the knife in the snow and push my hands inside the carcass to warm them. My fingers gain a little movement this way. With them, I can feel the organs that must come out. They are warm and slippery. I reach again for the knife, forgetting the effect of cold metal. At first grip, my wet hands freeze to the blade. Pulling it away only tears my own skin and lets drops of my own blood fall to the snow. I keep working with no feeling of pain in the cold air. I open the carcass fully. As I remove the internal organs and pile them in the snow, they too steam like my breath but lose their warmth more quickly.

It has begun to snow. The storm came quickly and began immediately to lay down another heavy white layer. I can no longer see the dark line of the riverbrush. Even the horizon is indistinct. The sky and snow have both taken the same grey color of light coming through the heavy clouds. The only color to be seen in the landscape is my clothing and the deer carcass with the bloodied snow around it. It is very quiet when the wind dies. I can smell my own warm sweat and hear my heavy breaths.

I have almost finished gutting the deer. There is only one large organ left and I reach into the cavity to grip it. As I slide my hands around it, I feel movement. There should be none. I have taken out the heart and lungs, stomach and intestines. The carcass has stiffened even more, the stiffness spreading to the flanks, chest and neck. As I slip the knife in to separate this last large organ from the carcass, the blade grazes it. A clear liquid begins to escape. I pull at the soft, black flesh. It comes free. Taking it out onto the snow, I open it with the knife. Inside, I find a partially developed fetus.

The hair on the unborn deer is thin but already mottled with the spots that would have hidden it in the shadows after it was born. The small body is curled into a tight coil, its long legs seeming almost entangled. I uncurl it, examine it. The hooves are soft and rubbery to touch. They are a pasty grey color. The movement I felt has stopped. The small animal is dead although still warm. I put my hands to it in order to get the last of its body heat. When it is cold, I lay it in the snow beside the other organs.

\* \* \* \* \*

The child is small and frail. He does not show his seven or eight years. His hair is cut so short, shaved almost, that it shows clearly the bone-white skin and smooth curve of his skull. His flesh is hot and limpid. I take his hand and lead him into the room with windows. I give

him the few things I have that he might play with as toys.

His fingernails are bitten raggedly down to the skin of his fingers. One is bleeding now and leaves a small drop of blood on the palm of my hand when I release him. He is anxious at my touch and, nervously closing his eyes, he puts his fingers to them. Finding an eyelash, he plucks it. I look more closely. It must be a habit for he has pulled all of his eyelashes out and his eyelids end in small, naked fold of skin where there should be long, black lashes.

He sits in a blue, dust-laden column of light let in through the window. He balances on his crossed ankles, his hands gripping each other, his back rounded in a slumping curve. He does not show interest in the things I have given him. He seems fearful at my approach. I stop in my attempts to make him speak.

Later, I catch sight of him as I pass the door. From the same position on the floor, he has turned his face into the light. I can see blue veins, barely submerged beneath his nearly translucent skin. He blinks his eyes repeatedly, closing and opening his naked eyelids against the light as if he were only newly used to its intensity. From where I stand, I can see a slight flicker on his eyes; a flicker like the reflections in darkened shop windows as I pass them on a walk in the evening.

\* \* \* \* \*

The carcass was small after it had been gutted and cleaned. I found the stomach empty. Forage had not been abundant nor easily found in the snow and most of the food had been needed for the strain of carrying the unborn fawn. The deer herself was thin, her flesh a dark, raw color.

I had no fire on which to cook. The carcass was beginning to freeze in the cold. Already the flesh where I had cut into it had an icy covering. With the knife, I opened the flank and took out a long, thin strip of lean muscle. It was still a little warm. I tried to eat the raw meat. It was tough between my teeth and felt like chewing the strands of a braided rope. I had not bled the animal properly and blood ran from the meat in my mouth nearly choking me as I struggled to chew and breathe at once. I managed only to swallow a few small pieces of flesh. They made a hard, warm feeling in my stomach.

The storm seems to have slackened. I decide to take the carcass back to the riverbrush, groping to find shelter and perhaps wood and a way to make a fire. I carry it as best I can, slung on my back with the hind legs gripped and pulled over my shoulders for a hold. Though small, the animal is still heavy. Its head drags in the snow behind me as I walk. I try to re-trace the path I made following the wounded deer. But the shallow footprints have since filled with snow or been drifted over. I can see the large patches of blood the wounded deer left but these too are quickly being covered. After a short time, I lose sight of them and of the bloody, trampled place where I dressed the carcass.

The storm eased only for a short time. At first, as I walked, I could see the break between sky and land, each taking a different shade of whitish grey. Now, however, the snow falls faster and more heavily. The wind has

come again. There is no question of returning to the river's thicket. I do not even know, how, in which direction it lies. As I watch, I can see the horizon, the dark line of meeting between earth and sky, broaden and then break; dissipating. All around me is the same color as the snow. It is as if I were walking beneath a large, white dome. I must stop and wait out the storm or wander in it, becoming hopelessly lost.

A slight rise in the land is all the windbreak I can find. I throw the carcass off my back. Already I am chilled. Sweat from walking and snow which has found its way through my clothing cool quickly against my skin. I work as fast as I can, turning the carcass until the deer's back faces the wind. I grasp the frozen body and break it, opening it as wide as it will go along the cut made on the underside for gutting. I can hear the ribs separate from the spine with a crack as I pull at it. It will give some shelter. I lie down beside it and tighten my clothes to keep out the snow. I curl and pull the deer around me. I enter the dead animal as best I can. And, with a last look around, I tuck my head down until it too is protected. I am cold for a moment. I shake with a spasm of shivering that rises from my heart and lungs, the warmest parts, and spreads to my jaws and my hands and the long muscles of my legs which grow tight against the chill. But the carcass breaks the wind. I begin to warm. I can feel the meat thaw and soften from the warmth of my cheek where I have pushed my face against the deer's flesh. A trickle of blood begins to flow. It is like a kiss.

\* \* \* \* \*

Only once have we really pleased each other in our love-making. She brought home a small bottle of oil that had a familiar, herbal aroma. She put a few drops of it in her hair after she had shown it to me. She led me to the bed and began to kiss me. As I undressed her, she helped; reaching buttons that were awkward for me. When we were both naked, she made a gesture and I let her up. She left the room, saying she would return in a moment. I supposed that she had gone to wash herself but when she came back and I again lay against her, I found her chest and thighs were spread smooth with the oil from the small bottle. Its scent was overpowering and I surrendered to it, pushing my face into her hair where it had been annoyed. Her flesh parted easily beneath me. We lay together until I could feel her body relax and then begin to tighten in a way I had never felt before.

She slept, heavily, curled against me.

I dreamt. It was a cold place. She was with me. We were asleep when I heard voices calling from the doorway. I arose. They told me to come out, to come outside. I dressed and followed the sound of the voices. The door. A brilliant, white landscape. The air, filled with powdery snow carried by wind, had the same sparkling texture as the earth. I had to blink my eyes against the intensity of the light. Several figures were standing on the snow. They had gathered around a small animal. I could hear its cries as I approached. They told me it was mine. I knelt. They left. The animal lay small and awkward in the snow. Its head was round and smooth, showing clearly

the contours of its skull beneath skin. It did not seem to have much hair and the blood vessels lying just below the surface on the side of its head were swollen and blue and beginning to bleed their blue color out into the flesh around them. The animal was strangling, choking hard. I did what I could. The cries became more muffled and indicated pain and fear. I pushed against its body, hoping to force air into its blocked lungs. It coughed. A bit of bloody froth appeared on its lips and a liquid like thick water began to flow from its mouth. A speck of it clung in the palm of my hand. The animal had begun to die. I put my hands to its neck, knowing it would be only kindness to kill it. As I did so, I felt both the warmth of the dying animal's body and the cold of the snow clinging, turning to water on my hands.

I awoke. She was crying in her sleep; making small, short cries. Finally, she woke herself and lay breathing hard beside me. We did not speak and found it hard to go back to sleep. It was dark by then.

\* \* \* \* \*

The room. A word spoken softly to herself as she moves through it. Steps sound on the floor.

She is making the bed, just now throwing the sheet easily out across the mattress. It has a clean smell. She has laundered it.

On the mattress, the sheet settles to a fine landscape. She smooths a few of the wrinkles, making floodplain near the foot of the bed. Folds and crests in the cloth near the headboard suggest landlines. Hills swell and pile gently as water against a knife's-edge; the river valley. Rasp of her hand against cotton. Alluvium.

She takes a light blanket from the pile of bedclothes. She gathers it in her arms. She spreads it across the sheet and the mattress beneath. It settles in across the bed's wrinkled contours, catching at the air, catching it in its weave. She adds another blanket. It too settles, atmospheric. She makes the warm, moist, layered air under which I sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

I awaken once. Everything is dark and warm. Above me, the snow lies a foot or more in depth. The bulk of my body and the deer's carcass is the only obstruction for the gales on this stretch of plain and the windblown snow has settled here. But now the wind has stopped. The thick cover of clouds has broken and cleared. The sky is deep and cold, dotted with stars.

The snow seems to act as insulation. I feel only warmth and welcome the relaxation it brings to the long muscles of my body which had tightened against the cold. I try to turn as if to draw a thick blanket over myself. I cannot. My skin, where it is exposed on the backs of my hands, on my cheek and lips, even on the fleshy parts around my eye, has frozen to the bloody meat of the deer carcass. I cannot move.

Above me, above the surface of the drift, the moonlight is white and hard on the snow. It gives sharp-edged shadows to everything on the windless landscape. Again the snow has taken a hard crust; polished smooth. It would be a good night for travel if only I could break the surface and stand. And yet I am content here. The frozen flesh that holds me is heavy.

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