

Furthest Thing

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1.

The Bluetooth-wearing mailman slouches toward my door
with letters from the old town that mice around each
pothole. It's been five years since a letter has
come from the old town, and too long in
an open theatre
will make an actor out of
anyone, so after a year I laid props on the stage and began
my own town. And though the pace of city riles
me well, I wanted my town to be
village-like, composed, with farms
and a market—a bucket and a suitcase.
Every night as I'm falling sleep I have a new
idea, and the next day I add another prop to
the stage. Last night, I imagined the chapel: built in 1910
by railway companies as a halfway station, a diplomatic
rest-stop between two better cities. After the trains broke down,
a commune took over the depot. When the church folk came along, the squatters had left--though
it took much deep-scrubbing to neutralize the reek of tofu curry and the imprints left by
miniature bongos from the drum circle that's become an altar. Older now, old like a pasture, the
chapel's wood floor groans when you walk and gripes when you tip-toe—windows slope
downward, away from all stairs; doors tumble out and ceiling sags low. But, like any good
building or decent person, each hoary wall meets the roof as cathedra.

2.

As my stage crew lug around milk crates, I decide that if you travel northwest on Highway 49
past the marbled plaques for the
“Jesse James Gang Cave Hideouts” and any relics from the Precious Doll
Museum, a green road-sign labeled Exit 7B will read “New Town: 2 miles.”
Just before the Ext there's a billboard:
“AGAPE CHAPEL: Come join
our procession and get a coffee on ‘the Heavenly House from the Big Man from Up Stairs,’” and
there's an image of the pastor:
With his false teeth and fur blazer, Reverend John looks more like J. Jhon the Magician, rabbit in
stow and wand at the ready,
unfolded and folding, but unfolded yet more.
On the other side of the billboard is an ad for surgical weight-loss with a word-like phone
number (917-NO-MO-FAT) and a picture of some guy in a doctor costume who's smirking up-
and-left at photo testimonials:

one before, one AFTER, but
never just between.

A space, an emptiness, divides the two signs, and I realize that it's easier to waste time when there's plenty to be had, plenty to get back to, in a lush world you invented, than it is to keep waiting for a place you've left behind.

3.

Plus, the new town had no mailmen. All its dreamt-up people—like snails in afterglow, glorging and slurping through life—never penned a word. And as is a nomadic tribe's fate, my made-up town just vanished, and now all the little birds have fled, replaced by crows that dart above empty stage. And for a moment it gets me down. But I think about the old town, and I remember all the names, remember Sand Springs, Oklahoma, and I know a letter's coming.

I think about my Cousin Jack, who is sturdy the way a man should be, calm as late-winter evenings, with a belly laugh and gentleness, spined by hillsides and a job at the steel mill or wherever he is now.

I remember the summer noontime when some drunk weekenders raced their speedboat into Jack, he was out on the jetski with his then-girlfriend Claudia. The boat's aluminum nose struck ribcage and shoulder, and hurled him into the tan silk of Lake Keystone.

I was eight or nine at the time, so no one told me truths, but I remember how Claudia's voice shook that night in the sterile room as she whispered: "I was right there holding onto him and then—like that—he was gone and up in the air." When her voice got quieter I leaned in, "The doctor said if the boat had hit him two inches higher it would have got his head."

"Will he walk again," someone asked her.

The doctors made it sound like Legos, how the vertebrae had to find their way back in. Jack rode the bulls all his life, had traversed prairies on horseback for weeks or a season, had risen into night as it glinted untold stars, had smelled the cow manure quiver with the heat of the first sunrise. And a broken back is nothing to a mountain.

So when he learned to walk again, his stride was even better, like something you can carry.

4.

One of her letters waits outside the door.

She wrote me again and it's autumn, and a memory arises
and I'm there now again, seven or
eight, just me and my Aunt Pat, driving through one of the valleys in the town
I am from: out of small talk, we reach the top of a hill and she points to the tree line:
oceans of dark red and yellow, of
moody orange that came from
light green, a scatter of feathers across the hillside, a tawny

resplendence spreading,
and she says, “Kevin, look, look, isn’t it proof?
Doesn’t it make you feel sure?” then I
look to my right and there’s a pond
surrounded by limestone:
A tiny blue light.