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JAMES MCKEAN

Bound

Uncut this could be Whitman's hair—the grass on this gentle slope overlooking oak trees that mark the boundary of Hickory Hill Park. I remember its trails, the limestone foundation of a settler's house long abandoned, all the seasons of falling—leaves, then good snow.

We could lie here, my love says, pointing to a number at the far corner of her map that has led us down a single lane road to the back edge of Oakland Cemetery in Iowa City. We are in our fifties, our only daughter married a month ago and moved, leaving a roomful of silence. And my love, who plans every day, would like a stone for our names and a marble bench for anyone who might stop here to sit and think a moment and watch—chin in hand—the morning breeze wash the leaves to gold. Such tidiness.

“What do you think?” she asks, kneeling to run her hand over the grass the same way she smoothes soil over seeds in her flower beds.

“Very peaceful.” In the distance, beneath the oaks, a broken rail interrupts a fence edging the park. The trail, the way out, must lie beyond those trees, I imagine. She tugs at my sleeve. She looks inquisitive and earnest. I help her up.

“Would we face east or west?”

I'd rather not face any way, I think to myself but don't know how to tell her this. And never have, really. This inclination to order our lives I have so admired and loved in her for thirty years, I turn from time and again to gaze out a window. “I have to go,” I say sometimes, but I'm not sure where.

She's an artist of enclosures. An artist of the beautiful box. Such as our house, a story-and-a-half bungalow built one hundred years ago, the front door locked. Inside we have oak-lined passageways and refinished raised panel doors. The floors are quarter sawn. The windows are double-hung, framed in oak, and set with blinds with which my love rations the light falling on our wool carpets, her grandmother's ancient and recovered sofa, our cherry wood table, paintings and water colors and pictures, and a pendulum clock she winds once a week.

When I meander home after work, and turn my key and drop my books and bags in the hallway and find her in the backyard, wand

in hand above buckets of flowers, I love all over again the thought she gives our space. We have mottled brick walks and a cedar-fenced yard lined with arborvitae and white pines she planted twenty years ago that sough now thirty feet up in the Iowa wind, their trunks a foot in diameter. There are heavy, fired-clay pots and beds tended and tidy, turned, mulched, and watered. She has organized the seasons to visit us, indigo and bearded iris and red columbines in the spring, painted daisies and day lilies and rose mallow for summer, asters and marigolds and sedum into fall, and for all seasons the pearly everlasting.

“Sit here,” she says late summer afternoons, pointing to a deck chair next to the cedar trellis she had me prop up and tie to the railing with twine. Time slows. The ice makes my glass of tonic weep. I watch her clematis, that distant cousin of bindweed, turn its purple flowers toward the sun and inch and coil its way around the legs of my chair, up over the arm rests, and take my arm like a shy lover.

I need to go fishing. Wander where the stream wanders. My love would want to know for how long. An hour? How little she understands about this. I have tried to show her—floating the San Juan or hiking the river of the lost souls, and even once, trolling for silvers in Icy Strait off Juneau, Alaska, where it was I who finally began to understand.

When we visited Juneau’s natural history museum, I was soon three displays ahead of her, admiring the economy of the Athabaskan sleds, their thin runners and sinew ties. These hunter-gatherers carried everything with them—pemmican, a change of clothes, such fine stitches in animal skins to keep the water out, snares and tools, and small effigies for children wrapped in fur, an amulet changing its shape for luck or the gods—all stowed in the sled behind the dogs—stopping only in places the Athabaskan named for directions to the next. Standing there, rocking foot to foot, I imagined a camp before the setting sun named “Down Stream for Red Salmon” or “Almost to Berries.”

But when I looked back over my shoulder, I saw my love with both hands on the glass, nose touching nose, admiring the elaborate, full-sized cedar house replica of the Tlingits, who never moved. They lived on good salmon and halibut from the sea. Using fire and axes, they hewed canoes from cedar logs. They wove blankets and

carved raven and eagle and bear and turtle masks and stacked orca on salmon on bear beneath the watchman of their totems standing twenty feet high outside their houses.

I have read that each Tlingit is a member of a moiety, raven or eagle. That smaller units within are known as clans, and names are the property of clans. A newborn receives the name of ancestors. No one's going anywhere. As subunit of the clan, "house" refers both to the physical structure and the matrilineage associated with the structure, and each house has a formal name. I also read that at one time the Tlingit held slaves. From where I stood, my love looked wide-eyed and ready to move in.

When I walked back to fetch her, she said, "Look at those bent-wood boxes. I want one." She knew already how they were made, a single red cedar plank beveled or kerfed at the inside corners and steamed so the plank went pliable enough to bend in four directions back onto itself to make the sides. A cedar top and bottom sealed the box. Made in all sizes, they served as cradles or simple storage or as small watertight canteens—or large and painted as someone's fragrant coffin. My love's a Tlingit at heart.

I shouldn't be surprised. Bookbinding is her art and craft. In a small carriage barn in our backyard, her studio holds nipping presses and board shears, machines with cast iron bases, boxes to store rolls or leather and cloth, and flat files, their drawers full of handmade papers and boards. There are glue pots and flatiron weights and knives and wet stones and spoke shaves and needles and cord and bone folder after bone folder. She exercises her arts on me. She hands me small folios of paper that fit in my shirt pocket. For my "flights of fancy," she says, and I write what comes to mind, poems about the wind, the ailanthus tree that sheds all over our house, a weed emblematic of the wanderings of my mind, fragile and messy and named for its reaching. "Give them back when you're through," she says.

When I have enough, she stacks the folios in her sewing frame and sews through the folds with unbleached linen thread over tapes, section web-stitched into section. She sews head and foot bands, the silk thread lining up turn after turn. Then she makes a case—board, spine, then another board covered in cloth. She wraps the sewn pages in end sheets and pastes the book into its case and imagines the ailanthus in spring bloom, and cuts and pares dyed goatskin to wrap

the spine of my book, green leather branches and leaves inlaid into the gray cloth cover like hands holding everything I have to say.

This is her work. Behind her bench, sleeves rolled, her apron marked “relieur,” she builds cases and airtight boxes, and repairs old books with glue and Japanese kozo paper. She rebacks, mends tears, stiffens spines, understands the grain, the verso and recto, the gutter and fold. She celebrates the margins, and stands, invisible, behind the text, her handiwork everywhere but nowhere seen in someone’s cherished book open late at night, the spine tight beneath his lamp and thoughts and wanderings.

This is why I watch her. Her beautiful enclosures tidy and brighten my life, so much so that I must not forget to look inside. Even the trash she wraps seems composed when I walk it outside to the bins. Even the cardboard boxes she packed one day after her basement cleaning were tied with string. “Please take these to the Goodwill,” she said, “and ask for a receipt.”

“What are we giving them?”

“Odds and ends.”

Oh, she means well, my love. But I made sure to look inside. No, I did not give my nestling pots to the Goodwill. Nor my white gas stove to the Salvation Army. Nor my ground cloth and tent stakes, though I have no tent. Nor my compass and trenching tool, my rain fly and twine, my backpack and canteen. Nor my iodine tablets and waterproof matches, my knives and sharpening stone—none of my symbolic truck for a wandering mind.

“Number 27 and 28,” she says, reading from the map of the Oakland Cemetery. I’m back from daydreaming, and rest my hand on her shoulder. She looks up at me, squinting for the sun. “What shall we do?” I knew this question was coming. I love her for thinking this way. How tidy. But I am loose-leaf. She is bound. One day she wishes to be dressed in silk and bound in oak boards and returned to the earth. I wish to be dust resting on her upturned hands and scattered in one breath.

“It seems so claustrophobic. I’d rather return to the wind,” I say. “Instead of ‘Rest in Peace,’ how about ‘On His Way’ or ‘Gone After Chinook?’”

“Well, I want you with me,” she says. “If not by my side, then swept up and forever held in my arms.”