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Filters

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JOE BLAIR

Filters

The Cedar River flooded last spring. It's funny how a flood works. It snows all winter. It snows and snows and the snow never melts. Then spring comes, and the snow melts. The guys on the news start talking about a flood. But it doesn't flood. You know it won't flood. You tell yourself, "We had our 'hundred-year flood' fifteen years ago. Do the math. We've got eighty-five years to go."

But the spring is especially dour. It's not so much a new season as the shadow of the preceding one. It sleet a lot, and rains. Every day it rains. The sun never breaks through. Everyone complains about the crappy spring. And the guys on the news are still talking about the flood. But when you drive by the Cedar River, it looks fine. The river looks fine every day. Every day the river looks fine. It looks fine until, one day, out of the complete fucking blue, as if it changed its mind at the last second, it floods. I don't understand it.

A tornado will tear a building apart, which isn't a good thing, but it's easy to understand. "My home," says a man wading through the rubble, "has been completely destroyed." Fire has the good grace to relieve a structure of the very materials that allow it to exist. But a flood works differently. A flood infects a building with itself and leaves it standing. To rot and fester and steal away hope from those who venture inside.

The days of the flood are the most beautiful days. I know that's blasphemy. How could I say a thing like that when over one thousand city blocks in Cedar Rapids were underwater? When the Quaker Oats plant shut down? When retired people who lived a mile from the Cedar River, so far from the river that they never even had a fleeting thought of buying flood insurance, lost the largest investment of their lives and were forced, in some cases, to live on the street? But it's true. At the very moment the river, at the last second, changed its mind and decided to fuck everything up, the sun broke through and the winds died down and there was a blindingly beautiful lake where a city used to be. Incongruous street signs and tree limbs surfaced gracefully like that photograph of the Loch Ness Monster. Rooftops reflected on the surface of the beautiful new lake

and houses floated along like swans directly into the railroad bridge, which collapsed like... a collapsing railroad bridge.

The news reports couple the word “disaster” with the word “flood.” They interview people who have lost everything. They call these people “victims.” As if the river broke into their houses and stole everything from them and should be hunted down and brought to justice. No one talks about the beauty. I guess it wouldn’t be right.

A strangeness falls over the city, like the strangeness that must have fallen over the creatures living on the highest peak of Mount Ararat when the Tigris and Euphrates conspired to make Noah famous forever. And all the things those little mountaintop creatures had been telling themselves their whole lives not only came into question but were swept away. They did not live high on a mountain at all. They lived on an island.

But things are revealed in a time of flood. All around the flooded city, there is an atmosphere of an irresistible passion. Everything is different now. Bottles and bottles of rum float on the water. Speedboats tear up the river, their rooster tails drenching the front entrance to the library. Everything is free at the hardware store.

The flooding meant overtime for almost every union pipefitter at local #125. That’s time-and-a-half on weekdays. Double-time on weekends. The chillers and process heating and cooling units at Quaker Oats needed to be repaired or replaced. Same at Cargill and all the other businesses within the thousand or so flooded blocks of Cedar Rapids. Gringo’s Restaurant. Hosier’s Refrigeration Supply Company. Boston Fish. Iowa Air Filter Sales and Service. The Southside Tavern. Walk-in coolers and freezers floated away from back loading docks of restaurants. Condensing units were completely submerged by the deep brown floodwaters, as were boilers and water heaters and furnaces. Everything went under. What this all meant, apart from the twenty-five thousand people who were evicted from their homes, and hundreds of businesses that ceased to exist, was overtime for us pipefitters. It took pipefitters a hundred and fifty years to cut and weld every joint in every production facility in Cedar Rapids. Then it took hundreds of mechanics like me to keep the crucial equipment in operation. And now, lots of overtime.

There is a forty-ton Carrier compressor in the basement of Gringo’s Restaurant. I rebuilt that compressor last year, replacing two pistons

and rods, as well as the rod bearings and oil pump. I spent three days in that cramped, dank mechanical room, and when I was done, the space was air-conditioned. It was mid-summer and the change from before to after was miraculous. The compressor was a 1950s model. An open drive machine, it was beautiful, like sculpture. It had oval heads and perfectly round end-bells. Its shaft was coupled to an equally beautiful sixty-year-old, forty-horsepower motor. The people who had designed these things, who conceived of their shape and built the castings, were long dead. Then their machinery had died and I was Jesus to the Lazarus of their compressor.

Okay, I am overwrought. There's nothing miraculous, really, about replacing a couple of pistons and rods. But it did feel miraculous. Fixing a machine is one of those instantaneous feelings of euphoria and validation that can become addictive. No one could have argued, when the old compressor was whirring again, and the refrigerant was being compressed and then condensed and evaporated and the patrons were saying "wheeeewww!" as they relaxed into their seats, that what I had done meant nothing. No one could have argued that point. Or, if they had, I wouldn't have been listening.

This morning, after I complete a job at Quaker Oats, I meet Lannie Conn at the Sough Pit for lunch. We call it the Slough Pit. You can get out the door for five dollars if you order water instead of Coke. And they always have some sort of "home style" lunch with green beans and Wonder Bread with butter and some sort of greasy potato dish and goulash, or meatloaf. The waitress has dyed red hair. Bright red, even though she's in her sixties. One of her eyes stares off into the far blue while the other doesn't. You need to find the eye that doesn't and pay attention to that one.

"Hey fellas," she says, "long time no see. You made up your minds yet?" I find what I believe to be the appropriate eye and order the special. Goulash, or meatloaf. Lannie does the same. Every single maroon seat cushion has been split open and repaired with duct tape.

After lunch, we smoke a cigarette in Lannie's truck. I watch him haul the smoke into his lungs, the way he's been doing since he was fourteen. I watch the way his right eye squints during inhalation. The way he looks out over Sixth Street as he holds in the smoke and then gradually releases it in the general direction of the cracked driver's-side window. The weather is gray. Lannie smokes 100s

because, he says, he times it and a 100 takes two minutes longer to smoke. "That's two minutes more cigarette break each time," he says. "Now, you take that two minutes and multiply it times twenty, and that's forty minutes more cigarette break per day. Almost an hour." I'm not trying to make fun of Lannie. When you finish lunch, even if you eat at places like we eat at where you don't especially like what it is you're eating, you still don't want the lunch to end. It's a shelter in the middle of the day, looked forward to with anticipation and then looked back upon with nostalgia. I look forward to lunch all morning. And I don't tend to look too far beyond it, because when it's over, I'm forced to do the thing I've been avoiding, which is to think about what I need to do in the afternoon. And that extra time with the cigarette is like a last, lingering kiss of a lover before you get out of bed in the morning.

After Lannie and I say our farewells, I start my truck and make my way toward Little Bohemia, where they sell air filters. I need air filters. On my way, I pass the little seafood place on Diagonal that has been closed down since the flood. The front door of the place still hangs loose on its hinges, having puked the entire contents of kitchen and dining room onto Eighth Avenue. An antique dinghy, its deep hull built for rough seas, is still mounted to the gabled roof, the water having never risen that high. The two words painted on its hull are *Boston* and *Fish*. The water never reached that high, but if I were a kid, and it were my fifth-grade assignment to write a fairy tale about the Little Dinghy, the Little Dinghy would wish for the water to touch her hull. "If only the water could touch my hull again!" she would say, even if her planks were rotting at the stern. Even if what was left of her would have foundered in the sucking current. Wasn't there a chance that the Little Dinghy might still have been seaworthy? Might she not have been borne away by the raging floodwaters? Southward through the flatlands, through the sudden hills along the Mississippi, then down the great river itself?

A few blocks from what was once Boston Fish, stands what was the Southside Tavern, which is right across the street from Iowa Air Filter Sales and Service. From the street, the Southside doesn't look all that different from the way it looked before the flood. Just another gray, peeling tenement, its ridgeline sagging, its window frames drooping. Its rotting stairway staggers down from the second floor and ends up in a puddle of grease where the maroon dumpster once

stood. In the nappy weeds that have pushed up between the cracks of the ruined parking lot, someone, maybe as a joke, has shoved a Barack Obama sign with its snazzy Madison Avenue logo for hope.

Glancing past the sprung rear door, I can see that the kitchen looks like the galley of the *Titanic*. The sinks and reach-in coolers are deeply aged. The shelving racks upended. One lid of the make-table flipped up as if someone were in the middle of making a sandwich. And someone may have been in the middle of doing just that. About a thousand years ago. Every surface is encrusted in cracking, curling sediment. Soil. Nitrates from the cornfields. Pesticides. Fecal bacteria. All that was left by the river, although it appears to be sedimentary rock, flakes away when you touch it, disintegrating to fine particulate matter taken up with your slightest breath.

Around front, just a lurch and stumble from the Cedar River, is the entrance to the lounge. On the large window is painted a skunk. Or maybe it isn't meant to be a skunk. Maybe it's meant to be a black and white bear. The black and white animal wears a Huck Finn hat and overalls. He has a fishing rod slung over his shoulder and carries a silver pail. Despite his surroundings, he seems happy enough. The Southside was a neighborhood bar like dozens of other neighborhood bars in Cedar Rapids. There was a pool table. There was the sticky sweet smell, not quite cloaked by the odor of stale cigarettes and beer, of cockroach larvae. Even on the brightest spring morning, it was midnight at the Southside. The regulars would start showing up before nine a.m. Mayberry would be on and, the afternoons, Jerry Springer. Young guys pretending to be wizened old alcoholics would act bored while they shot pool and showed their tattoos to anyone interested and talked about their time in the army. In the corners and along the bar would sit the genuine old alcoholics who might or might not have had tattoos. They weren't saying. Neither were they spending seventy-five cents on a game of pool. Not when, for another quarter, they could get a draught beer. Not to generalize, but generally both the old drunken men and women were overweight and, generally, they smoked mentholated cigarettes, one after another. And they played those video games where you need to match the squares of naked women or sports cars or whatever with the identical square in the adjacent box. I always got the feeling, watching the old alcoholics miserably punching the buttons, that it was some kind of gambling game. That some money was at stake.

That they didn't really want to keep doing it but were addicted, and, as everyone knows, addiction can't be helped.

An older woman, who once must have been very beautiful, owned the place. From what I understood, her husband had died and left the Southside to her. I took care of the coolers and freezers for the once-beautiful woman. She liked me. I knew because she called me honey. And when she got drunk, she always wanted to hug me and thank me profusely for whatever piece of equipment I had repaired.

All of this was years ago. I stopped taking care of the equipment at the Southside at the turn of the millennium. I hated the basement, where the walk-in coolers and condensing units were kept. The basement, like all basements in that area, had that distinctive sticky sweet smell, and the concrete floors were always puddled with river water or sewage, and the patrons, always settled on their barstools directly above, were ghosts of Christmases to come. I found myself working for free more often than not. I didn't have the heart to charge the once-beautiful bar owner.

The Cedar is low today. Sandbars are visible near the collapsed railroad bridge. In places it looks as though you could wade clean across the river without getting your shirt wet. It seems a very tame river. But you can still see the high watermarks, the color of café latte, on the cinderblock walls all around the city. The watermark on the exterior walls of Iowa Air Filter Sales and Service, directly across the street from the Southside Tavern, is thirteen feet high.

There is a rusted, abandoned cube van in the parking lot of Iowa Air Filter Sales and Service. Despite the yellow sign with "Condemned" in block print taped to the entrance, something compels me to climb out of my truck. There is no movement or sound. Not even a dog barking. To my surprise, the door of the cube van pops open and an old dude in ripped, filthy coveralls lowers his feet to the pavement and mumbles something.

I keep walking, having learned long ago to ignore old dudes in ripped, filthy coveralls who mumble. But the guy won't give up. He shouts. I hesitate. "What?" I say.

"Need some filters?" he says.

I hesitate again. "Yeah," I say.

"What you need?" he says.

Through the loading doors, which have been torn away, I can see plaster peeling from the ceilings, giving the impression of ripped and rotting fabric. The mumbling old dude and I sort through stained boxes of air filters in the gray and failing light of a late fall Cedar Rapids evening. We never do find the filters I need.