

2014

# Bestiary

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## Recommended Citation

Stabile, Susan M. "Bestiary." *The Iowa Review* 44.2 (2014): 146-159. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7498>

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## *Bestiary*

*When we see ourselves through the eyes of an animal, we see ourselves for the first time, and in a sense, take it out on the animals.*

—*Kelly Oliver, Animal Lessons*

I used to kill animals.

I sank into the faux-fur bucket seat of my silver Pontiac Sunbird, buckled my lap belt, and adjusted the rearview mirror, my hand knocking the fuzzy dice affectionately attached by my father. I rolled down the windows, popped up the sunroof, and pulled the manual gear into reverse. I looked over at my captive sister riding shotgun. Her green eyes blinked tears as I punched the accelerator.

We headed down scenic Route 23A, the winding mountain road dotting the Hudson River Valley between Palenville and Catskill, toward St. Patrick's, our parochial high school. A daily route since childhood, we knew it by heart. We anticipated every turn in our bones, felt each gradual climb and sudden descent in our bellies, leaning automatically into the smooth, intimate curves that hug the unbounded mountain-side. The road's familiar rhythm was pleasing, but its faunal surprises made it the perfect obstacle course in 1983.

I aimed the Sunbird's nose at the wildlife skittering across the road. I flattened greedy squirrels and chipmunks, their cheeks inflated with foraged nuts and seeds. I smashed songbirds and swerved toward single-minded crows, ravens, and hawks that swooped for prey or feasted on other roadkill. I squashed raccoons and possums that waddled into the car's headlights at night. The opossum rehearsed its approaching demise, falling with its legs curled up, lips drawn back, and prehensile tail wrapped around its lifeless perimeter before the car struck. And skunks, cruising for food or sex, stood determined, warning me to desist. As I sped toward it, the skunk would straighten its tail and squeeze its packed anal sacs, pungent, oily, yellow-green fluid streaming from its backside as it died.

But the amphibians were my surest targets. Slimy wood frogs stopped still in the road, stunned by the car's imminent lights and sound. Knob-warted toads followed, hopping to their deaths. And blue-spotted

salamanders slithered into the spinning tires, while inch-long peepers speckled the road with verdant polka dots.

As we zigzagged up the mountain toward home, I fixed my eyes on the road, ignoring the carnage in my rearview mirror. Excepting the slight vibrations under the driver's seat on impact, I didn't feel a thing. Only the satisfaction of hearing my sister scream, begging me to stop.

*Every day in the U.S., one million animals are killed by motor vehicles. Reduced to a euphemism, "roadkill" homogenizes flattened, scattered, and unrecognizable bodies under a single term, according to geographer David Lulka. We distance ourselves from the violence, making their death palatable.*

I shared a bedroom with my sister, Bonnie, for seventeen years. Eighteen months apart in age, we were and remain opposites in every way. Squirreling us together in a ten-by-fourteen-foot space fitted with twin beds, two dressers, two desks, two mice, one hamster, two dogs, and a cat didn't make us any closer. I didn't care much for my sister, and I cared even less for her menagerie. An unnatural equilibrium among natural predators and prey, we were like Barnum's Happy Family. Louie and Mousie, Nibbles, Missy, Fluffy, and Caesar. Add to this her two invisible friends, Shommie and Tinnis, whom she entertained nightly. Bored with their silent replies, she pretended to be a cat and crawled onto the foot of my bed, meowing and kneading my calves until I kicked her to the floor. Mice squeaking, hamster racing, cat purring, dogs snoring, and Bonnie trespassing.

*In 1951, psychiatrist Karl Menninger explained the familial nature of totem animals. Because totems are kinship-related, every animal represents a person's relative. By extension, one's cruelty to animals is an emotional displacement. While animals suffer the physical abuse, the "real objects of mistreatment" are the family members toward whom such behavior is prohibited.*

Our bedroom was like a mouse cage. A room within our room, Mousie and Louie's plastic home, outfitted with an exercise wheel, elaborate tunnel system, and piles of shredded paper, reeked of urine. When Louie and Mousie died, Nibbles, a Syrian hamster, moved into their Habitrail. Like a hamster rooting around in its recycled bedding, Bonnie created a warren for herself, tunneling and sniffing her way through nests of laundry on the green shag carpet until she lost her own scent.

She saw our room as communal property, assembling animals two-by-two as if populating an ark. I once divided the room in half—ceiling to

floor, window to closet—with masking tape, demarcating my bed, my desk, my dresser, and my half of our shared closet. But like most sibling boundaries, it was transgressed. Her dirty laundry, defaced Barbies, filched centerfolds, and cigarette-butt collection spilled over the dividing line, littering my neatly kept space. We returned to living in a Habitrail.

More like a hamster than a mouse, I preferred solitude, craving the privacy a younger sister can never respect. Sometimes I escaped to our little brother's room on the other side of the wall. But Bonnie read my diary daily, recorded my sleeping habits nightly, and broke my treasured Virgin Mary figurine weekly. She followed me, studied me, mimicked me; sat on me, spat on me, and spied on me.

*Syrian hamsters are vehemently antisocial. Females are aggressively protective of their nest. Solitary and territorial, they are housed alone from the time they are six weeks old. Kept together, they will fight and eventually kill one another.*

I saw my father kill Louie and Mousie. Under the fluorescent lights glaring above the mirror and across the Crayola Flesh-colored sink, he didn't hear me approach, the bathroom faucet rushing like Niagara Falls. He was up to his elbows in water, plunging his hands up and down.

“What are you doing, Daddy?”

“Nothing!” he shouted, slamming the door shut with his foot. “Go back outside and play!”

“Why are you using so much water? The well will go dry.” Vigilant about the water table, my father was breaking his own rules.

The mice had developed an untreatable form of mange and had begun barbering themselves, gnawing patches of fur into oozing lesions.

“Go outside and play!”

“But Dad.”

More shushing, splashing water from behind the closed door. The toilet flushed.

I was still standing in the hallway when my father emerged from the dark bathroom.

*Much like plastic Habitrails, road tunnels and overpasses are preventing roadkill across the U.S. New York is among the states creating appealing passageways for amphibians and mammals by simulating their wildlife preferences for light, temperature, and substrate. Prey species can move in their natural patterns while decreasing their collisions with humans.*

My father also murdered moles. The subterranean insectivores uprooted the hostas and ate promising spring bulbs in search of grubs, insects, and earthworms. They dug elaborate tunnels, pushing small mounds of dirt to the lawn's surface until our yard looked like a detonated land mine.

As he sat at the foot of his and my mother's queen-sized bed and strategized, my father laced his black, steel-toed combat boots issued to him by the U.S. Army National Guard in 1965 (he joined the year before I was born to avoid the draft).

He was never deployed to Vietnam, but his combat boots transformed him into a foot soldier. While American soldiers were dropping Agent Orange over the Viet Cong guerillas, my father battled moles in our yard. He'd march out of the bedroom, down the hall, out the front door, and onto the front steps, standing at attention to ferret out his enemy. The star-nosed mole eventually poked its head out of the dirt mound's mouth. Its hairless snout a battlement of twenty-two fingerlike projections, it looked like it had inhaled a squid. Without external ears, the beady-eyed mole relies on touch and smell to navigate the world. It couldn't see my father leap from the steps onto its unsuspecting back.

*Cornell Cooperative Extension's best practices for controlling moles are trapping, repellents, exclusion, and habitat modification. Other regional folk methods—castor oil, pickle juice, crushed red pepper flakes, chewing gum, mothballs, hairballs, razor blades, smoke bombs, and sonic blasters—have proven ineffective.*

Now that he's retired, my father putzes around the yard, gardening and poisoning nuisance wildlife. I caught him in action last summer. Staying in the bedroom I shared with Bonnie—now outfitted with bright tangerine and aquamarine peace signs for the grandchildren—I looked out my childhood window to the world. I saw my father sneaking alongside the rock wall abutting the woods.

What is he killing *now*?

I snuck up behind him.

"Dad, what are you doing?"

He spun around, eyes twinkling as his mouth spread into a smirk.

"You don't wanna know," he replied. "Go back inside."

"What are you killing?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"Is there peanut butter in that jar?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Something always dies when there's peanut butter."

*According to the April/May 2011 Science & Technology Review, biodiesel fuel—made from peanut, soy, and canola oil, as well as animal fats—is keeping more cars on the road. Even Planters’ Mr. Peanut drives a peanut-fueled, solar-paneled, wind-generated Nutmobile across the U.S. to promote green living.*

My father made our school lunches. An electrical engineer, he arose in the dark every morning while the rest of us slumbered. His routine ablutions complete, he shuffled on the dog-eared heels of his leather slippers into the kitchen, poking his clean-shaven face into the refrigerator.

He engineered exotic sandwiches from leftovers. While other school-children ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, we had slabs of liverwurst, coated with mustard and onions, sandwiched between brown slices of bitter pumpernickel. He cut hunks of chicken or meatloaf, deboned lamb or pork chops, or carved wedges of boiled tenderloin or well-done London broil. He smothered the cold meat with Heinz ketchup before sliding it between papery sheets of Freihofer’s Old Fashioned white bread. Too thick to bite, too tough to chew, the meat sat idly on my tongue as the ketchup bled between my fingers.

*Food loathing is the most elementary expression of abjection. The gag reflex, sweaty palms, racing pulse, and churning stomach insulate humans from defilement and death. Based on the primal repression that separates us from animals, aversion keeps our threatened boundaries intact.*

I dreaded lunchtime. Mrs. Bertolucci loomed over our grade-school cafeteria’s giant, aluminum garbage can, listening for the telltale plunk of wasted food. Four-foot nothing with a police whistle around her neck, she puffed out her chest, pursed her red-lipsticked mouth, and blew gusts of moral judgment into the metallic opening. The shrill vibrato pronounced our public shame. The mortified culprit would climb into the can and rummage for her discarded lunch, holding it above her head for the entire school’s reproof as Mrs. Bertolucci commenced her customary sermon on China’s starving children.

Because I couldn’t throw them away at school, I began burrowing my uneaten lunches around the house. Like a hamster hoarding its cache, I hid the scratchy brown bags of food until I could bury them in the kitchen garbage undetected: under living-room furniture, in shoeboxes of class valentines, behind my Nancy Drew collection, or between pairs of Buster Brown shoes in my corner of our bedroom closet.

My mother discovered my hamster-like habits and monitored my mealtime behavior. A modern housewife shoveling a triumvirate of

overcooked vegetables, minute-made starches, and slabs of greasy meat onto our plates, she provided tastelessly balanced dinners. I was scolded each night for my ungrateful gagging but was forbidden to leave the table before *cleaning* my plate. I stuffed my cheeks until they resembled engorged hamster pouches, swallowing chunks of meat with gulps of icy milk or slipping them into our dog's mouth. Bellies full, my siblings were excused from the table as I stared at my tepid meal. It seemed to stare back, taunting me. My brother and sister finished their homework and readied themselves for bed as my parents washed the dishes, cleaned the countertop, and dimmed the lights. Even the dog retreated, bored by my reluctance. I sat alone. My tired head drooped over the congealing remains as the overhead lamp glared, a spotlight on my disgust.

*Hamsters are weaned from their mothers at just three weeks. They quickly learn to fill the small flaps in their cheek skin with seeds, fruits, and greenery that they burrow in their cages. Fully grown, hamsters can expand their faces to three times their width by cramming the pouches with up to twenty percent of their body weight in scavenged food and bedding.*

My grandfather was a butcher. The fourth of five children in an Italian household in Brooklyn, he quit the eighth grade when his father died in 1927. He began working for Louis Burrell, the neighborhood butcher, delivering meat on his bicycle and working his way up to meat cutter to support his mother, siblings, and four immigrant grandparents.

He joined the Navy and completed the sixteen-week Cooks and Butchers School in 1943, moving his wife and two-year-old twin boys to the base in Jacksonville, Florida. As Ship's Cook B, Second Class, he oversaw the ship's butcher shop. He was responsible for the sanitary preparation of meat, poultry, and seafood; for creating palatable meat substitutes, including SOS (shit-on-a-shingle); for providing balanced nutrition and preventing food poisoning; and for occasionally helping the ship's cook plan the day's menu of three square American meals. With the 1944 *U.S. Navy Cookbook* at hand, he "conserved food to avoid great amounts of leftovers" through simple math: reducing a recipe's measured ingredients by five percent for messes of 500 men and by ten percent for more than 1,000 men. It wasn't the amount but the constant variety of nutritious foods that would make strong and happy sailors.

Opah was a hero with a bone saw, block knife, cleaver, scabbard, and steel. He manned the butcher shop as his ship headed for Japan in early August 1945. While he conserved meat cuts for sailors, Americans on the home front planted victory gardens, canned food, rationed meat,

and ate leftovers as their patriotic duty. They recycled household waste fat, paper, and nylon; they gave up rubber girdles and salvaged scrap metal for ships, tanks, and ammunition. Then the atom bomb wasted Hiroshima and Nagasaki. More than 240,000 people were crushed by debris or cooked with burns and radiation. The larder full, Opah's ship never left California. The only carnage he witnessed was the animal carcasses lining the ship's kitchen. For these he was ultimately responsible.

*The Cornell Waste Management Institute advocates "natural rendering," or composting butcher waste. Butchers dig a two-by-one-foot hole, creating a coarse bed of wood chips to absorb the blood. They alternate layers of animal residual and wood until the pile reaches six feet in height. The covered waste sits. Turning it after five months, the butchers pick out the large bones before using the finished compost for new butcher waste or fertilizer for hay and corn crops.*

Opah opened the Palenville Market in the northern Catskills after the war. Five-foot-four and built like a butcher block, my well-muscled grandfather could swing an eight-pound cleaver from over his head, splitting a dime in half, again and again. My father remembers watching him fling animal carcasses over his shoulder, lift them over his head, and hang them from meat hooks in the butcher shop's ceiling.

He would split a carcass in half by positioning the meat saw between the back legs and sawing straight down the middle through the pelvic bone, the full length of the body. He quartered each side, starting at the hindquarter by cutting off the leg from hip to tailbone, fashioning the top round and shank. He cut the muscular flap, or flank steak, from the belly, trimming the fat with a block knife. He then sawed the meaty rump roast off the leg, leaving the top muscle as steak. After boning it with a knife or cutting through the backbone, he removed the tenderloin hiding beneath, sometimes dividing it into steaks, other times leaving it whole. Primal cuts piled up one by one on the butcher block: sirloin, porterhouse, T-bone, filet mignon, and New York strip. He arranged the edible body parts in the meat case for customers to select.

The butcher chart behind the cutting block captured the animals' transition to consumable flesh. A rudely sketched profile of a cow, pig, or lamb showed one eye looking unsuspectingly forward with the tail frozen mid-swing. It looked nothing like the faceless meat it would become: cow, calf, pig, sheep, or chicken dissected into beef, veal, pork, mutton, and poultry. Stock-still, the animal resembled the lifeless anatomy charts I would label in my tenth-grade biology lab forty years later.

The butcher's first rule of thumb being "waste nothing," my grandfather threw nothing into the garbage can. He made blood sausage from stomachs, sausage casings from intestines, gelatin from hooves, and terrine from brains. He cut and boiled visceral fat from around the kidneys, fatback from between the skin and muscle, and caul fat from around the digestive organs to make lard. He cleaned, adapted, and sold cow brains and tongues, pig lungs and feet, lamb intestines and marrow, chicken livers and gizzards, and everything in between. And he created "variety meats" from offal. Sweetbreads from the thymus glands and pancreas of calves, lambs, and piglets under one year old. Green tripe from the stomachs of cows, pigs, sheep, goats, and deer, boiled and bleached. Liver, kidneys, and gizzards; intestines, testicles, and spleens; heart, cheeks, and ears. A strange inversion of the tail and head, even a chicken's posterior, or "Pope's nose," was a delicacy at the Palenville Market and the family dinner table.

*A blue-collar household staple since the Great Depression, offal is a signature of artisan butchery, an extravagance for foodies, and a vital part of the sustainable food movement. Specialty restaurants boast "whole beast" menus featuring everything from head to toe: congealed beef tendon, salt-cured pork heart, goose intestines with artichokes, sautéed knuckles and kale, little brain with asparagus. Circumventing factory farms, slaughterhouse waste, and supermarket chains, chic chefs are cutting the emotional distance from farm to table.*

I held the embalmed frog in my bare hand.

I rinsed it in water and placed it, belly-side up, in an aluminum dissecting pan. Bloated and slimy, the frog lay waiting. I closed my eyes as I plunged metal pins through its speckled hands and feet into the black wax, its pierced skin spurting formaldehyde in my face. I picked up the forceps, lifting the skin between the frog's rear legs. I plucked a scalpel from the tray with my left hand and cut a shaky line from crotch to throat with my right. Trading scalpel for scissors, I snipped horizontal slits just above the back and between the front legs. I held another flap of skin with the forceps and carved it away from the muscle below. I pulled back skin on each side. It rolled open like wet rice paper. I pinned the venous skin flaps back toward the skewered legs.

The frog's puffed body was drained, but still I could taste the metallic smell of blood. I cut another incision up the frog's midline, twisting the scissors sideways to carve through the bone between the front legs, stopping at its reclining neck. The frog's head flopped backward. I couldn't look at its face. What if it looked back? I slashed two horizon-

tal lines between each pair of legs, yanked the muscle from the tissue beneath, and pinned it to the wax.

I jammed a probe into the frog's glottis, spreading its folds to reveal the mute vocal cords beneath. I found its lungs empty, two small sacs buried beneath the dank, gray liver. Then I disassembled the digestive system piece by piece. The spleen and gallbladder protruded like gelatinous, pink marbles shot into either side of the liver. Removing the liver revealed the frog's still-pink heart. I located its empty blood vessels, following the adjacent labyrinth connecting what was once an insect-lined esophagus leading to a coral-colored stomach and shrimp-shaped pancreas. With my scissors, scalpel, and fingers, I extracted the stomach; the invaginated and rosy small intestine; the larger, tubular gray one beneath it; and the brown-ringed kidneys, reminding me of the segmented earthworm I dissected several weeks earlier. I unwound and stretched the distended tangle on the tray. Carving into the digestive organs, I searched for remnants of the frog's last meal.

To dissect, our etymology-challenged teacher claimed, did not mean "to cut up," but "to expose to view." I couldn't see the difference. I completed the tableau by searching for the frog's genitalia. My fingers traced the small, twisted ureter to the tiny bladder to the cloaca attached to the coiled oviduct, which reached to swollen, egg-filled ovaries. Countless pollywogs that would never be spawned.

The Board of Regents' rationale for mandating animal dissection in high school seemed illogical to me: tearing, probing, labeling, and discarding animal corpses would engender a reverence for human and non-human animal life. Life Science (now called "Living Environment" in New York State) presented human evolution through dead vertebrates. How, I still puzzle, would we better understand *ourselves* by dissecting *them*? Witnessing the cumulative wreckage of each new specimen brought me into intimate contact with its profound deadness. I would watch its deflated chest, waiting for a breath. Somehow, in its stillness, I saw the animal's former aliveness. I don't recall learning anything about human evolution from frogs that year. And I don't know how to reconcile the two girls that I was in 1982—the one who flattened frogs into roadkill and the one who cringed at their dissection. I suspect it was watching my father's indifferent killing of wildlife that killed my compassion. That same indifference emboldened my revenge against my sister, knowing her compassion for animals was her vulnerability. In both cases, I came face-to-face with my own vestigial animality.

Eager to leave at the class's end, we ripped the dissecting pins from our frogs' bodies. We threw the pins and other tools into our lab kits,

closing the drawer until facing next week's preserved victim. We circled the aluminum garbage can, dumped the frogs' splayed remains, and proceeded to our religion class next door.

*Humans are one evolutionary step—50 million years—away from frogs. The human fear response, according to evolutionary neuroanatomist Paul MacLean, crouches in the reptilian part of our triune brain, which controls the automatic functions of respiration, digestion, and circulation as well as competitive courtship, breeding, imprinting, hunting, and territorial behaviors. Preoccupied with survival, frogs possess higher brain centers and neural receptors that allow them to feel fear, the most basic emotion.*

We dissected our way through the phylum Chordata, drawing the line at human cadavers. The level of irreverence among my classmates soared as we moved up the food chain, however. The earthworm, grasshopper, and frog elicited little response beyond disgust. But the recognizable mammals inspired black humor and even darker behavior. Fetal pigs floated in transparent, formaldehyde-soaked bags that were sealed with household twist-ties. We marked our names on the clear plastic in indelible blue marker, the unborn pigs' identities twisted with our own. Each week, Mr. Abate took roll call by hurling the labeled carcasses across the room for their namesakes to catch. Picking on the most squeamish girls, the boys intercepted, tackled, and mimicked field goals, tossing the packaged pigs over the embarrassed scapegoat's head. Girls ducked or dropped their open arms at the last minute, flying pigs falling at their feet.

As the dissecting lesson began, the boys shouted off-color jokes. They designed puppet shows, moving the pigs' livid limbs in concert with barnyard dialogue. They cast them as dummies in hackneyed ventriloquist acts. They even forced them to square off in staged WWF wrestling bouts, reincarnating the unborn pigs as Hacksaw Jim Duggan, Junkyard Dog, Red Rooster, and Brutus Beefcake.

The following week, Mr. Abate threw dead cats at us from the refrigerator, the final species in our unfortunate phylum. I told him that I refused to do the dissection; he told me that I would fail Biology. I don't remember why I stopped at the cat. Maybe it reminded me of our family cat, Caesar. Most people find cats and dogs aesthetically pleasing (which scientists have dubbed "the cute effect"), and we call them pets rather than animals, emphasizing our domestic intimacy. We anthropomorphize cats so they resemble us.

One of the boys offered to dissect my cat while I watched, so I paid him from my babysitting coffers. Relieved, I hadn't noticed his grisly thrill at skinning not one, but two cats.

He opened the plastic bag marked "Susan" and milked the cat from head to toe, squeezing the embalming fluid from its matted fur. He pinched the skin at the cat's neck, cutting a line from its lower lip to its groin. I couldn't determine its sex while his clumsy hands fumbled over its genitalia. He carved horizontal incisions around the neck and paws, peeling away the flabby, flapping skin. His meaty fingers yanked until the skin tugged at the cat's face at one end and its tail at the other. He left the skin around the face and ears but pulled the rest from the unyielding head. The cat's mouth yawned, baring its teeth in horror.

I don't recall the remaining steps of the dissection, only blanketing the cat with its own detached skin to keep it from rotting or drying out. I returned it to the refrigerator each week, my inked name bearing responsibility.

On the final class day, the boy took my piecemeal feline from its cold bag as if he were bagging a trophy. As our peers dumped their filleted cats into the garbage, he rummaged through my cat's remains, picking through its guts, tugging on its teeth, and pulling its half-skinned tail. Then he peeled off the skin and folded it between the pages of a textbook, strutting from the lab into the manhood he had yet to reach.

*According to the Humane Society, 10 to 12 million animals are killed for classroom dissection and vivisection every year. Considered "leftovers" from breeding farms and kill shelters, "byproducts" of ranches and slaughterhouses, and purchased from biology supply companies, more than 170 species are dehydrated, starved, suffocated, drowned, electrocuted, gassed, or pithed to death. Most of these species have fully developed nervous systems, experiencing, like humans, both fear and pain.*

In the winter of 1983, my family was traveling to our high-school basketball game in a neighboring town. My sister and I, decked in our green-and-white Emerald Knights cheerleader outfits, swished pom-poms on our laps and tapped our saddle-shoed feet. The car suddenly swerved. My father pumped the brakes of our Chevy Citation, easing into the skid. The deer rolled across the car's hood and into the headlights' low beams, landing lifeless on the road. My father jumped from the car. The backseat windows were frosted with lacy doilies of ice that obscured our view.

"Is it dead?" one of us asked the back of my shaken mother's head.

"I don't know. Just be quiet," she snapped.

"Maybe it's just hurt," I offered, looking at the bright side of the dusk.

"Then the trooper will have to shoot it," my brother added.

A porch light flickered as my father knocked and disappeared into the warm house. He called the state troopers and rushed back to the car. He didn't check on the prostrate deer, determined to get us to the game on time.

Three days later, he slow-cooked our family recipe for *carne alla pizzaiola* ("snitzy pitzy" in our doggerel Italian), a Neapolitan method of tenderizing inexpensive cuts of beef in tomato sauce. We sat by the fire in the living room as the meat simmered, steaming the windows.

"Dad, this is delicious," I cooed in uncharacteristic delight.

He beamed as I held out my plate for more.

"I don't even have to chew it! It just melts on my tongue."

I devoured a second helping.

"Did you really like it?"

"This is the best you've ever made!"

"Well," he said, dragging the word into three teasing syllables, "there's a story about this meat..."

"Remember that basketball game against Cairo-Durham?"

My fork fell on my plate.

"Oh, Daaaad. You didn't!" I cupped my gut, disgusted by my delight.

How could he cook the deer we had killed and serve it to his gullible family? And how could I have liked it? I vowed never to eat snitzy-pitzy again.

Burying the butchered deer in tomato sauce, my father served us the most primal of leftovers for dinner that night.

*Each year, more than 25,000 deer are killed on New York State's highways, 8,000 in the lower Hudson Valley alone. Offending motorists can keep the carcass with a special permit. The Department of Transportation composts the remaining corpses, spreading them beyond the roads' shoulders, outside of travelers' sight lines.*

The following year, I hit a deer with my classmate Mary McNeany's car.

A group of us had broken into the high-school gym to drink beer on the stage set of our senior class production of *M\*A\*S\*H*, and I drove Mary home afterward. More like an ocean liner than a car, the blue Pontiac Grand Prix seemed to float down the highway. We didn't think about the Budweiser cans littering the stage as we accelerated over the Rip Van Winkle Bridge. We didn't contemplate the play's political subtext about Vietnam as we crossed the sleepy Hudson River or about

what the Cold War meant for our generation as we cruised down Route 9G. We didn't question why George Lucas sued over Ronald Reagan's appropriation of *Star Wars* when the deer shot into the road. And we didn't see the irony in the well-worn acronyms MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) and MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) when we hit it, the first a tenuous equilibrium by mutual threat, the second a defensive alliance of victims. We avoided the consequences, neither calling the troopers nor finding the deer. Its fate was concluded off the road without an audience.

The next day, Mary and I convinced Tony Marsh, a twenty-something local mechanic, to fix the car for free. He realigned the front end, bent the crooked hood, and replaced the grill with a leftover from a nearby salvage yard. We baked him a heart-shaped vanilla-cream cake as a thank you. An even trade. But then he gave each of us, in strange exchange, a chunk of the wrecked grill, clumped with bloody deer hair. We became blood sisters, pricking our fingers with a horrible secret. A strange armistice, a *modus vivendi* between careless adolescents, safe-guarding nothing.

*The deer carcass is what philosopher Jacques Derrida calls a limitrophy—the fluctuating boundary between human and nonhuman animals. It is a trophy (the reward or wreck won by hunting animals) and a trophe (nourishment or sustenance). If venison (from the Latin “venari”) means “to hunt,” then what limit separates a hunter from an automobile driver?*

I buried my perverse souvenir at the bottom of my bedroom drawer. Afraid to discard it in the kitchen garbage, I wrapped the deer-meshed relic in a waxy bag from Fran's Dress Shop. Closing the drawer, I hoped to forget. But the deer haunts me still.

I don't know if the deer survived or if it suffered. I felt its body's immensity in my slender frame—a strange intimacy—upon impact. I became heavy, carrying guilt's burden. A winter idyll, deer routinely wandered through our backyard and waited beneath our kitchen window for falling lettuce and carrots. It was a pleasure to view them up close and then disappearing into the woods, their white tails flashing across the snow. They taught me an appreciation for the ephemeral, the privilege of return.

I reminded myself that it was an accident. I didn't mean to hurt the deer. Having lived in Texas now for eighteen years, I think about how that same “accident” would have been called a “wreck” here. An accident is an unforeseen and unusual mishap—out of the natural

order. But a wreck is archaeological. The persistent residue or waste left behind. More than delegating responsibility, a wreck's etymology denotes revenge. And revenge declares an enemy.

I left the souvenir behind when I went off to college that autumn. Part of the original wreck I had abandoned on the roadside, it was an anxious ruin for someone else's discovery. It was no accident that my snooping sister found it. Spreading out her territory in our shared bedroom, Bonnie continued to rifle through my lingering belongings, threatening to tell our parents about my unsettling garbage. But she never told anyone. And neither have I, until now.