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Something for the Telling

J. V. Brummels

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What is it in us that makes us want to preserve a dead marriage in this ice?

I move to the enameled sideboard. Yes I've always been good at freshening drinks. Yes I may be the only man who keeps a pickle jar of margueritas in the fridge but I doubt it. I answer with my back to her. I clasp her glass in a shivering left hand, fight the urge to lift the rim to my lips. Ice is January in my right hand, in her glass. Tequila is February thaw, a slow week of temperatures in the forties, the steady melt of accumulated frost and ice in the joints, layer after layer of snow coming to face the sun again, each with its history of tracks of animals, the shapes of the wind's velocity and direction, until, standing in the mud, above a soggy autumn leaf, I recognize in its brittle veins the origins of love.

I turn and finally, for once, meet her eyes.

**SOMETHING FOR THE TELLING**

"An old cowpoke went riding out . . ."

In each telling the madness of it comes on me again—the sledgehammer pulse, the crystalline night vision. Even now in my old age my nostrils flare to the smell of tequila at the thought, my throat thickens in each telling, and the piebald hand that rests on my stick steadies again.
It was a Sunday the summer of the drought, after Earl died, meant for drinking a curse on the heat, the dry grass, the fireweed sprouting up in the hay meadows, on skinny cows going dry on their calves, a curse on dervish windmills pumping as much sand as water, on the wind and on Earl for leaving the place to me. That summer of the drought we woke to the wind, worked with wind around us, at our elbows, in our ears, the sand it carried in our teeth, under our skins, until, at night, it became the voices of our dreams, the voices of the ghosts of the Sioux saying our sins against the spirit of the wind. That’s the way it was, that afternoon, drinking and picking the blistered and broken skin from under our mustaches, cursing and half-scared we’d been cursed,

when Lightfoot thought to drink a curse on Wesley and his no-good brother Billy, who lived four-five mile south down on the county line, who’d put in center-pivot irrigation that spring to suck up everybody’s water at a thousand gallons a minute. The more we thought about it, those dead Indians, and listened to the wind, the surer we were that it was Wesley and his worthless brother, and just as the sun set Lightfoot thought of the dynamite.
Earl had had it around for years, and Lightfoot had seen him handle it once to blow up a stump, and he figured he’d seen enough to make it work again. We found it by match-light in the shed. The horses must have smelled our breath or read our minds and gave us some trouble, so, balancing on top the corral gate, I told them that what we were about to do had religious significance, which didn’t help until I explained the concept in terms of sparse feed and bad winds, while Lightfoot sneaked in between them and got a tight hand on each ear just as I gave the sign of the cross and fell over backwards. We saddled up as clouds, blotting out the stars overhead, moved towards the rising moon and rode off with sticks, caps, tape, fuse and a bottle in our shirts.

The gods that govern madness gave us sure hands that night as we worked our way from tower to tower towards the center of the field, placing the caps where they seemed to want to go, taping bundles together, taping each where it looked like it’d do some damage, stringing the long fuse, while first a veil covered the moon, then a haze, then a fog, on skittish horses all bunched up beneath us, ready to fly at the littlest change in the wind. We were just putting the last bundle on the pump when we saw how the gods had tricked us: we sat our horses in the middle of the field; the lighting end of the fuse
was in our hands. We cyphered two ways out:
across rows of tall corn or racing fire
back down the lane we’d come up,
a quarter-mile fuse running
through eleven bundles of ten sticks each.
Sheet lightning danced in the west.
We listened to the wind for guidance.
I was just sobering up enough to know better
when I heard nothing: for the first time
that summer the wind had paused. The match
blazed and burned in stillness. We touched
off the fuse and spurred our horses.

Oh, we were maybe thirty yards ahead
of the first explosion, so loud it was like
riding a lightning bolt through the middle
of summer thunder. The concussion set off
a thousand gallons of diesel fuel in the tank
by the pump and lifted the horses into the air.
They came down on all four just a few feet
farther down the lane, and we didn’t need
spurs again. I saw the flash of the second
reflected in the whites of the horses’ eyes.
I turned to look just once, and it was like
someone had dropped a kid’s erector set
into a coal furnace. Someplace in that ride
Lightfoot lost his hat, I lost a good bit
of the hearing in one ear, and the horses’
tails got singed pretty good. Near the end
we were blown away from the gate into the corn,
and we jumped four strands of barbed wire
on the wind from the last bundle.
Even now I’m sitting a blowing horse
on a rise two miles away, watching
a diesel fire puddle and spread
among flattened pipe, bent angle iron
and green corn. Even now I see the squat
column of water stand in the fire,
and even now the wind brings Earl’s laugh
across decades into my deaf ear.

—for Bob Carpenter