

The last summer I lived with my dad was the summer before Y2K, when he prepared for one millennium to shrink away and the next to begin. He drove the truck that he bought with his first check from the V.A. to Kmart and returned with carts of goods that wouldn't spoil. He joked that the V.A. had bought out his body, and he joked that his brain was nothing but a bullet shell, and he joked that we were the only black people in all of Colorado, just two dark figures against a yellow sun that swallowed up the land.

Where I grew up the Earth was red, as though always bleeding out, and we had to cross smatterings of groves and vast desert before reaching the store. The closest thing to our home was an old convent that had been settled by missionaries when they tried and failed to tame the Natives. A stone wall and a moat of gardens surrounded the convent, dotted with molding angels. When I was younger Dad would take me to see the remains. I'd imagine the pews that once sat there, slowly becoming strangled by rot, the nuns sheathed in their tight habits. My dad told me the land was probably cursed because of all the pain suffered there. Then he said our house was probably cursed too, and it made him laugh and laugh.

The summer before Y2K my father began slowly filling the basement with food as though lining the walls of a stomach. He did it quietly and with shame at first but gathered speed like a dog in a fight. He believed a threat lived coiled in every computer—he refused to drive me to the public library—and I imagined screens jumping to army lines of binary code at midnight. He bought a fleet of abused shopping carts that rattled like skeletons on every stair and took his boxes of powdered milk and jugs of boiled water down below. He reminded me of a pharaoh preparing his tomb---I was twelve then and had learned about the ancient Egyptians in school. I remember asking him if he would store some virgin servants in there too. He sent me to my room, but it made him smile the rest of the day.

I think my father smiled like that when he met my mother. They met at a rodeo--he was the only black cowboy there, and when they saw each other across the stands they both just started grinning, his teeth stained brown as his hat. He enlisted during Desert Storm because they barely had money, and when he returned she got pregnant with me. My dad's mama convinced her to keep me, setting them up in this cheap house with sheet-metal walls, but my mother had never wanted a baby. Dad said that for her, giving birth was like pulling off a tick. He also said that his dreams were so bad back then that she'd wake up with bruises from his thrashing. He'd feel bad, but she'd laugh and say, "I didn't realize I'd also enlisted!" My mom left when I was seven months old, and she gutted the fridge when she went, leaving behind only entrails of frozen sausage links and cookie dough ice cream on the counter, turned to a pulpy bile by morning.

Growing up, when my dad wasn't feeling good, I'd stay with my grandmother for weekends or weeks or once a whole month. Empty beer bottles would fill the metal trash can at the corner of our dirt driveway, metal caps and poker chips littering the ground like candles around an altar. He'd say the V.A. purposefully made his friends ineligible for compensation. "Especially us--blacks and Indians and Latinos. And one day the V.A.'ll forget about me too." He would tell me that they had stopped sending checks, but sometimes those weeks I found empty envelopes like open mouths, lying on the kitchen floor, the money gone.

But the summer before the Y2K, if my dad was feeling good, he would exhume some food from the basement and we'd cook together. In the heat the walls seemed to be peeling, like the house itself had a rash. I'd stand next to him and watch Crisco scatter in the skillet, losing its form and turning into boiling white suds. He'd tell me that he and his men in wartime were like a

cavalry. Wild like men should be. “Best days of my life,” he’d say—and he would smell like horses still, like Earth.

By July we were eating less, and more food was sinking into the bowels of the basement. He told me it was important to cut down in preparation for the Apocalypse. He also told me not to tell his Mama. “She’ll just take you from me,” he said. We were at the table, and as the light fell in thick gashes across his face, he held a loaf of bread in his fists and broke it open, twisting his wrists in opposite directions as though wringing a neck.

Dad took me to Kmart with him the next morning to convince me of his dogma. I rode in the back of the truck bed, the road twisted and knotted like intestines, and each root we passed over made all my guts jump and then resettle like sand in water. I’d lie down hidden in the piles of bagged riches on our way home, hear only the sound of plastic pinching and beating in the wind. We started going every weekend, and it was fun until a woman called the cops, shocked by the site of my father, tall and with sweat bleeding down the back of his shirt, conducting a brood of shopping carts laden with groceries. She thought he was stealing. Maybe holding the carts hostage. The police showed up and cuffed him and laughed when he told them about their impending doom, slapped him on his back. They checked his receipts--and as they undid his cuffs they noticed his tag. Shaking their heads, still coughing up laughter like phlegm, they said, “Thank you for your service.”

But my grandmother didn’t laugh when I called her mid-August and told her about the hoarding. I told her that maybe he should see someone. I knew that sometimes veterans had trouble adjusting to civilian life, even years later. She sucked her teeth at me over the phone. She advised me to pray. Then she said, “My baby doesn’t need a doctor.” There was a pause. “And the army doctors don’t care about us anyhow.”

But on the first of September my grandmother took me for good. My dad hadn't cooked with me for fifteen days. It was a Saturday, and he was out buying sheets of titanium to nail to the basement walls in case of air raids. We'd been rationing but there were still eggs in the fridge and I boiled the last two. I stood at the counter window and listened to the shells clapping each other as the water began to gargle and spit. Way off in the distance was the road, which went and went and then vanished, the land dropping into the sky. There were small scrapes and pockmarks in our windows from whoever had owned the home last and the holes were like eye sockets, and I stuck my fingers in as I looked out and waited for the eggs to harden inside and turn the shell to a film, easy to skin. And as I stood, I heard the sound of horses coming. It was common for a rancher to ride by, but this was different. I yanked the window open as much as it would go, the scars in the glass catching the light. The sound of hooves carried over the mast of the land—louder, like it was coming from inside our home, like there were cowboys caught in the walls. I craned to look out—and my breathe congealed in my lungs--and then they were before me, a whole stampede of men, and they were yelling and kicking, their feet barely held by the jaws of their stirrups--and dust came up behind, mocking the air with dirt and the sound of thunder. One of them spit a clot of tobacco at the ground as he went by and it landed on the flank of a rock just feet from our home. The window creaked and swung as they brought the wind with them, like small gods. I stared and stared until they were gone.

And when the dust settled my grandmother's gray sedan was coming down the road, small and hunched, gas leaking from the back like piss.

