

Red Rim-Daley

By Virginia Bellis

I am awake, but don't want to open my eyes. Pete's warm skin touches my breast, my stomach, my thigh, heats the air between our bodies. His legs sandwich one of mine; his arm over my shoulder holds me in place, firmly, here, now. In this moment we are not separate, just somehow more solid.

He tickles the back of my neck. His fingers feel like warm oil on my skin.

I open my eyes; his blue eyes watch me. I close my eyes again and bury my forehead into the curve between his neck and shoulder.

I am cold. Perhaps Pete has already gotten up, and left a pocket of cold air in his place under the layers of quilts and flannel. I quiet my breath, listen for his, hoping to hear the silence that will tell me he has left the bed for the first time in days.

He is still here, beside me. His usual shallow sleep-breath imitates the whistle of the wind around the cabin; the way the wind sounds when there is nothing else to hear.

I know I must have dreamed him touch, his warmth, the way it was before. If I were to reach over to him now, he would not feel warm. This second winter has brought a cold with it that seems to have worked its way into his hands, chilling them, chilling him into a quiet more solid than that ice gripping Separation Creek outside. If he were to

Red Rim-Daley

trail a touch across my skin, my flesh would shrink from the shiver left by his hands.
Perhaps he knows this.

I do not open my eyes. The winter days in Wyoming seem barely here, the sky big with day-blue for only a few short hours; I could blink and the light would be gone. If I open my eyes I know what I will see through the skylight above our bed: the clouds hanging low and heavy, a solid sheet of drab behind the bare fingers of branches that stretch from one corner of the window frame, grasping at empty air. The square of sky will turn from black to periwinkle to lavender to gray, as I lie here, waiting for him to wake up, to move, to do something other than sleep.

An orange-red light illuminates the back of my eyelids. When I open them, sunshine glints through the patterns of frost on the skylight; beams of gold, red, blue reach down to me. I touch my bare feet to cold floor, pull on thick clothes, leave Pete tangled in flannel, hidden beneath quilted covers. I make my way outside, blinking.

*

*

*

I noticed the motion of Pete's hands first.

Before we moved, the day we met, three years ago. I stepped into his studio wanting refuge from the Santa Fe sun.

His strong fingers wrapped around the soft clay on the pottery wheel, graceful curves of his palms making beauty out of only dirt and water. He transformed the clay into shapes that echoed the arcs the wind made of the landscape; he dripped color onto each bowl the way the morning light dripped color into the New Mexico desert.

Red Rim-Daley

Before we spoke, I walked around the small space of his studio, touching. The sun came through three big windows from the south, warming the glaze on the bowls lining the shelves, making each bowl feel alive in my palms, like hot stones in the sand. I picked up one the color of sunset after a forest fire; its sides stretched up tall, making a whirlpool of orange-red in my hands, its warmth rubbing up my arms.

He sat in a corner of the room, his knees on either side of a wheel, the sun glazed his hair brilliant blond, slipped liquid along the curves of his arms, pooled on the surface of the clay at his fingertips: a circular motion of light. When he looked up, saw me there with his orange-red bowl in my hands, watching him, his fingers slipped, and the beginning of the bowl wobbled.

That was the only time I saw the clay misbehave in his hands.

He told me he wanted to teach me how to make pottery. I wanted him to show me how to make something out of nothing.

*

*

*

The morning outside is pink with dawn. No snow; the winter seems determined to pass us by without so much as a touch of white. Before the cold can seep too far into my bones, I make my way down the stone path to Separation Creek. A snaking sliver of ice crusts over what has been a mere mud-red wetness since late September. The idea of drought in this desert place seems redundant to me, but I know there should be more moisture than this. Still, the landscape feels wintery; the desert grasses stiff with frost, their crunch underfoot the only sound; what is left of the creek has been silenced by ice.

Behind me, I know the profile of the cabin looms black against the morning sky, the pottery studio next to it yet a collection of timbers, just a line-black sketch against the

Red Rim-Daley

horizon, waiting for Pete to fill it in. I turn to look at what has taken two summers. Two summers we've worked, building the main room, the kitchen, our bedroom, all big spaces of solid wood: smooth dark pine spreading out across the floors; the curve of golden Lodge-pole making walls of thick, horizontal stripes; the rough rawness of new ceiling beams holding us inside.

So many trees, each one selected as if he were choosing a gift for me. Each one cut down, carried home. Each one he seemed to touch in the same way he'd touched his clay. Standing in the low sun of the long summer evenings, bare-armed in his t-shirt, he'd peeled their bark in long, ropey strips, the handle of the ax rubbing his smooth palms rough.

*

*

*

When Pete put his fingertips to my bare skin, that first time, the residue of clay made his hands feel like the surface of a smooth stone.

"I want to pick you up," I said, "and carry you with me."

He traced the bumps along my spine, and told me that touching me was like feeling the texture of another place.

"How?" I said.

The morning sun slid across the bed, illuminated his legs, heated my skin. "Where you come from," he said, and then paused to sketch the line separating shadow and sun on my hip. "The light is different, there."

I thought of sunshine in forests coming through trees trunks in long, thin fingers of shaded rays. "It is," I said.

"I want to go there," he said.

Red Rim-Daley

In the end we didn't leave the desert, or move to the forest, just went to a place on the edge, in between.

*

*

*

I start up-stream, along the bank of Separation Creek, toward the boundaries of Red-Rim Daley, where the desert finally disappears into a forest of a few thirsty trees. The Red Rim-Daley Wildlife Habitat Management Area is a jagged rectangle of land that straddles Sweetwater and Carbon Counties, nearly butts up against Interstate 80 to the north, and sits far enough outside of Rawlins, Wyoming to be considered remote even by local standards. Separation Creek bisects Red Rim-Daley almost perfectly from the southwest corner to the northeast corner, and then spills out from that protected rectangle and trickles south onto public land.

Our land, these days.

Even the birds and snakes seem to have abandoned the place this winter. Only muted colors live - nothing green, not as far as I can see, and with this low-lying sagebrush I can look out to where the haze of the mountains bleeds into pale sky. In between, just slight hints of hills, rolling up and back down, like ocean waves before a storm.

As I walk I look for motion on the crest of those hills, hoping for a herd of antelope feeding in the light of dawn, not even animals from this distance, just tiny ghosts of movement, faint blurs of life. I do not bother my eyes with color or shape. Color and shape lose their meaning in this vast distance of land, where everything is only a variation of the same few colors, only a variation of the same few shapes. Instead I try to remember how movement works out here in the desert, because this is the way to

Red Rim-Daley

recognize what I see. Deer are quick, but don't move as quickly as the antelope, and the strange elk, the herd that has come down this year from the drought-thirsty mountains to winter in these lowlands, they move the slowest of all.

*

*

*

I sat on the stump that made up the step to our front door, that first summer, and my fingers shelled peas into Pete's orange-red bowl. I watched him notch logs across the clearing; waited for his blond hair to flop over his forehead each time he brought the ax down. The last rays of sunshine caught the arc of the ax, glinted in half circles; scattered like shards of dazzling glass from the sweat on his arms. The dusk wind tickled me, plucked goose bumps from my sun-warmed skin. The peas fell into the hollow of the bowl, small, soft bumps, then the sound of ax hitting wood, then peas falling, hard followed by a rhythm of soft.

Chunk - bump, bump, bump. Chunk - bump, bump, bump.

Pete glanced up at me, and his grin flashed white between us in the darkening light. "Soon you'll be swinging on a porch, over there."

The coals on the grill smelled like hot sun on sand and I could already taste the rabbit he would cook, marinated with the wild sage I gathered, and cracked pepper, and wine. The sun shifted down behind the dark curves of distant mountains, and the bowl in my lap melted from orange-red to black in the changing light. The peas felt cool in my hand, smooth, round; they rolled effortlessly from the pod. I watched them fall from my fingers into the bowl, but didn't say: we should start the pottery shed, first.

The ax thunked. Three peas hit the bowl, and then, before another chunk came, three more. I looked up. The ax head had stuck in a knot in the wood. Pete worked with

Red Rim-Daley

both hands to pry it loose, easing it slowly one way, then another; it made a small squeaking noise of metal against wood. The head came loose, suddenly, and Pete took a step backward, off-balance.

He began chopping again, but the chunk of the ax no longer landed between the bump of the peas.

*

*

*

A sharp bark jerks my head from the mountains to the way ahead of me, stops my feet mid-step. Below me, in the creek bed, a cow elk lies in the mud, as if bedded down, but she is not sleeping.

Her eyes, dull as the mud around her, hold mine, and her salt-crustured nostrils flare quickly, breathing as if she were running. But she doesn't run. She doesn't heave to her feet, doesn't whirl on flexed haunches and bolt into the sagebrush. Only her neck moves, slightly, weakly, as if she would lean into getting up, if she could. One foreleg splays out in front of her, at an angle that might pull her up, but she doesn't move it. A rear leg stretches behind her, lies still.

A circle surrounding her head and shoulders has been completely cleared of any plants, as if locusts had descended and eaten everything in sight. She lies near the creek, but not close enough. Even if her neck could stretch that far, the ice wouldn't let her drink. She'd have to move her hooves to paw through the ice to the trickle of water. It looks as if she tried, at one point, to get to that water, to get up, as if her hooves had been churning weakly for hours, or maybe days, shaping the mud bowl that cradles her now.

I can smell her, a thick muddy animal scent, musty and acrid, as strong in my nostrils as if I'd put my nose to the neck of a spooked horse.

“Hey, girl,” I say, my voice cracking through the cold air between us. Her neck rolls weakly. She blinks at me. Our breath comes out in white, soft cloud puffs.

This is February, not November -- not hunting season. No blood mats her shoulder; no bone protrudes from either splayed leg. From where I stand, there is no reason she should not get up, leave me with only a whiff of her musky scent, a flurry of hoof prints in the reddish creek dirt, the echo of motion. I circle her, searching. Her head follows the movement of my crunching boots, but by the time I reach her shoulder, she seems to lose interest. She turns her head away from me, drops it like a heavy weight, her fawn-colored chin hits the dirt, hard.

On her rear leg, I see a small lesion, barely visible along the raised tendon, only a slight tear in the fur, a spot of blood. I want to step closer to see if it is worse, bad enough perhaps to keep her here. But when I start toward her, she panics, waves her tired head wildly, makes bleating noises. The rest of her body stays still, paralyzed, only her sides heave with the fear of her breath. I back away, stand still. Her neck continues to wave weakly, and I realize she cannot see me where I am standing.

I move back toward her head, sit down in the brush right in her forward vision. The earth feels hard through my jeans. I can smell the wild sage. After several minutes, her breathing slows. She blinks at me, and lowers her chin again. The cold of the morning sifts into the openings between my scarf and collar, my gloves and sleeves, creeps over my skin, seeps into my bones and holds me in place. I wonder if she is cold. When the sun gets high enough into the sky and blinks over the creek bank, and warms her fur, will she get up?

*

*

*

Red Rim-Daley

The spring light touched the morning sky with yellow, revealed green buds on tree branches that beckoned like fingers to me through the skylight. When I slipped out of bed, my toes touched smooth wood -- cool, like dipping them into a stream.

“How does it feel?”

I turned from where I sat on the edge of the bed, looked at Pete’s face peeking out from the thick cover of blue-red blankets. His eyebrows curved up, expectantly.

“Like river water in the summer,” I said.

He grinned.

I rubbed the soles of my feet against the new floor, felt the touch of the wood grain stroking my toes, along my arches, slipping off my heels. I stood up, skated on bare feet across the long lines of fresh reddish-wood of the new floor - Pete’s work for the winter, since the warmth and light disappeared hand in hand from Red Rim-Daley at the end of the first summer. “This is why you carried me to bed last night? So I could feel it for the first time like this?”

“No more rough cement for my girl’s pretty feet,” he said, and below me the floor felt as solid and soothing as the massage of his fingers.

I slid along the outlines of the room, traced the wood patterns with my toes, slipped over to the bedside. When I leaned down and touched his lips with mine, they felt cold from the morning air.

“Come dance with me,” I said, holding out my hand, and gliding backward across the smooth pool of wood.

“I like watching you move,” he said.

“You should feel it, too.”

“That’s okay.” He burrowed deeper into the covers. “I don’t like the touch of wood grain like you do.”

* * *

Her eyes are like the winter desert, dry and motionless. I want her to move; she wants me to move; I can’t.

“What’s wrong, baby?” I whisper. The words feel too long unsaid.

Her gaze leave mine, drifts past mine. I turn my head to see what she watches.

A man stands only a few feet behind me. He wears the grays and tans of the desert, the skin on his face is burned the same dirt-red that lines the creek bed. He carries a rifle. It rests in the curl of his fingers as if it were a hand long-held, comfortable. I scramble to my feet, awkward.

“She’s paralyzed,” he says. His voice sounds like the scratch of sagebrush against my jeans.

“I didn’t hear you walk up.”

He moves to stand beside me; his boots do not make a sound. They find the soft places on the ground, the patches between sticks and icy grass, move his stocky weight across the earth as if he were floating. He doesn’t look at me, only at the elk. Around his neck hangs a whistle, thick as his finger, simple. The same sort of whistle I have seen dangling from the rawhide necklaces of ranchers, hunters, game wardens. This man, like those others, will use its bleat to call coyotes to him, then he will use his gun to shoot them. Just thinning the numbers, he would explain.

I turn away from the coyote hunter, look at the elk. She has her eyes closed.

Red Rim-Daley

He stands so near me that I can smell him. “She has a little cut on her back leg,” I say, hoping the cause of her immobility can be so small, hoping it can so easily be healed; hoping he will agree.

He shakes his head. “Come with me,” he says.

Maybe I want to trust him because I know he kills her predators; maybe I decide to trust him because he smells like sun-warmed Ponderosa bark. I start after him.

She doesn't lift her head, just follows our departure with her eyes. He backtracks away from her, and heads up-creek. He shows me the bodies of seven other elk, one after another, three of them caught in the low barbed-wire fence that a healthy elk could easily step over. Every elk is surrounded by a bare patch, by churned earth: evidence of their slow, starving deaths. He doesn't speak, just stands for a moment, as I take in each lifeless animal.

At the last one, we disturb a big bird, a golden eagle. It flaps heavy wings, flies reluctantly away. In the lower neck of the dead elk is a hole as wide as a plate, ripped by the beak of the eagle. The body of the elk lies tangled and twisted, another of the ones trapped in the barbed wire, its flesh torn to ribbons of red hide by the struggle with the sharp spikes.

When the coyote hunter turns to go, I no longer can, or want, to follow him.

“Wait,” I say. He stops, looks at me. “How many more?”

He nods back in the direction of my elk. “She'll make 282.”

I look away from the elk body, into the rolling hills around us. I think of that number, think of how the brown of those bodies is blending into the dirt, the brush, the rocks: motionless, invisible in the desert.

Red Rim-Daley

I don't want him to say it out loud. I don't want the words to become firm in the open air of the desert. I take a deep breath of the cold air.

"Is someone poisoning them?" I point to his gun. "Shooting them?" The cold air grips my lungs.

He reaches into his pocket. When he holds out his hand, I see a greenish-silver crumple of something lying on his palm. It looks like dried seaweed, how seaweed might look if it were left in the sun of the desert. I have seen this before, everywhere, growing on rocks, but never taken much notice.

I look at his eyes. They are the same greenish-silver as the plant in his hand. "Lichen?"

He nods. "They've been eating it."

"Why?" I ask. I don't know whether I mean, Why have they been eating it if it's poisonous? or, Why is it killing them?

He shrugs. "Don't know. They don't usually winter here."

I nod.

"Maybe they just aren't used to it," he says, and I know he means this almost-desert, the plants here, all of it.

*

*

*

The sound of Pete's hammer flooded into the creek bed, an irregular crack splitting open the early November evening, an echo like the ice breaking under my boots. The noise stopped when I stopped. I started again toward the house, and a solitary crack spilled into the air. When the ripples of it died away, there was only silence.

Red Rim-Daley

As I came up the path, I saw him. Kneeling inside the empty shell of the barely begun pottery studio, like a pencil-sketched figure in the frame of an easel. The orange-red bowl sat beside him on the ground, grey with dust and filled with long nails. The head of the hammer rested silently in the dirt.

He picked a nail from the bowl, held it between fingers cracked from the cold air, examined it. "I finished the porch," he said.

I looked over at the house. A border of fresh wood edged the walls, as if holding it all together.

"It looks great," I said, "It'll keep the mud out of the cabin in the winter."

"There wasn't much mud last winter."

I kicked over a log, and sat down. "No," I said.

He looked at me for the first time, at the pack on my shoulders. "Were you in the forest?"

"I took a hike," I said.

The nail in his hand dropped from his fingers, clanked against the side of the bowl, fell into the dirt. He didn't pick it up.

"Did you decide about the windows?"

He shook his head.

"What's the problem?"

He nodded with his chin toward the house rising up on one side of the studio, and then toward the sharp rock bluff, which blocked the light from another direction. "I can't put windows on those sides."

Red Rim-Daley

I looked back down the path I'd just walked, thought of the soft light coming through the few trees of the Red Rim-Daley forest. "What about that way?"

He didn't look at me. The hammer lifted, slightly, banged with a soft thud into the dust. "Northern light's no good."

I kicked the log under me with my heel. "That just leaves west, then."

"I don't want to look at that."

I looked to where he meant, west across the rolling hills of the desert, toward the mountains. All muted, as if forgotten by color. Not rich, like the reds and oranges and pinks glazing the Santa Fe desert. That is what he wanted to say, but instead he sat in the dirt, still except for the slow twisting of the hammerhead.

I stood, shrugged my pack up onto my shoulders. "Put in a skylight, then."

"Why? There's no sun, here."

"There will be in the summer," I said.

"That's not enough."

"It's better than nothing." I turned away from him to walk into the cabin. My footsteps echoed behind me across the wood. I didn't stop to look at his finished porch. When I slammed the front door behind me, I felt the shock of its hard echoes, and thought of how the new swing would be rocking, awkwardly, empty.

*

*

*

The coyote hunter turns back along our path, traces a trail through sagebrush, around rocks that all seem greenish-silver to me now, toward the cow elk. I follow him, reluctantly. I am afraid to see her again.

Red Rim-Daley

This time, she doesn't raise her chin. I want to believe this is because she knows us. But by the way her head lies, I know it is because she is unable; the odd twist in her neck is the same frozen twist of the other elks' necks.

The coyote hunter studies the ground in front of him, waiting. He doesn't look at her, and I know he has shown me the others so that I will know she can't be saved.

I sit down on the hill, facing her. Her eyes are open, she watches me. I can see her breathing.

“We can't feed her? Give her water?”

He shakes his head. “There's an acid in the lichen - usnic acid - that the drought's increased. When they eat it, it turns energy into heat. Cooks their muscles, like.” He looks away from the elk, from me, off toward the mountains. “We'd be doing her a favor.”

I think of boiled meat, the way the color seeps out. “But she's still alive.”

He sits in the dirt next to me, and lays his gun down on a rock. He folds his arms across his knees, and rests his chin on his forearms. Together we watch the sun slip over the creek bank, and touch red-gold light to her coat.

*

*

*

Pete brought the pieces to me, orange-red shards jagged and awkward in his hands.

“What happened?” I asked.

Pete shook his head, and spread the bits on the table in front of me. I picked up a piece, felt where the cold of winter had seeped into the glaze, and thought how the Santa

Red Rim-Daley

The sun had burned my hands through this bowl the first time I'd touched it, with a warmth I hadn't known I'd craved.

I dropped the piece back into the pile. It made a small chinking sound, and split in half.

"You shouldn't have left it outside," I said.

For a moment, we both studied the shards, dull against the gleam of the polished table. Then Pete stood up, his chair falling over backward, loud in the silence between us. With a single motion he swept the pieces from the table scattering them across the smooth wood of the floor. They shattered and spread, like a shovelful of dust.

He left me there, sitting at the table, staring at the pieces on the floor, and went into our bedroom. I didn't follow him then, but later, in the night, when I climbed into bed with him and tried to touch him, his bare skin felt as cold to my fingertips as the broken shard had.

*

*

*

I think if I stay long enough, if I breathe with her, if I make my breath slow and easy, full, then maybe, like the clouds of our breath this morning, her breath will somehow answer mine, keep going. But my breath becomes labored, too. My chest feels tight.

She opens her eyes.

Across the desert comes the whine of an ATV.

Beside me the coyote hunter unfolds his arms, and brushes his hand through gray hair. "Department of Fish and Game," he tells me.

Red Rim-Daley

The whine becomes louder, multiplies. Across the desert I see three dust clouds, swirling toward us. The elk shifts her neck, a rolling motion, but does not lift it.

“They’ll want to examine her?” I ask.

He nods.

The ATVs stop, somewhere north of us, and the desert regains its silence like a heavy weight lifting.

She watches me, as if waiting for something.

“Okay,” I say, finally, to her.

Beside me, he raises his rifle. With a click, the bullet slides into the chamber.

She closes her eyes, gently. I turn my head, not wanting to see her last movement.

*

*

*

Pete sits on the swing on the porch, huddled in his blue down jacket. He startles me, sitting there, out of bed, outside. He looks different, somehow, with his cheeks flushed from the chill of the evening air. The swing doesn’t move, but even from where I stand, at the foot of the porch, I can see the steam rising from a mug in his hands.

“Hi.” His voice sounds smooth, the gentle whir of a wheel. He doesn’t ask where I’ve been.

I look behind me at the path to the creek. I feel as if she has followed me home, but the path is empty. “I went for a walk.”

Pete looks at my hands. “Where’re your gloves?”

I don’t know how to tell him about the elk, the coyote hunter, the ATV’s. I put my hands in my coat pocket, feel the soft touch of her fur brush against my fingertips. I

Red Rim-Daley

think of the way the coyote hunter smoothed the back of his fingers along her neck, rested his hand on her head for a long moment. He'd put the small tuft of fur, warm from the sun, in my palm, and then turned to wait for the game warden.

“Did you hear the engines?” I ask Pete.

“Yeah,” he says. He studies the unfinished floor of the porch.

After a moment, I walk up the steps and sit on the swing next to him. It swings, gently, with my weight, but Pete doesn't look up from the complicated wood grain. He doesn't ask me about the engines. I watch the steam rising from liquid in the mug; his fingers curve around the pottery as if protecting it. The swing comes to a stop, and we hang there.

I look at the orange-red of the sunset, and watch the rolling curve of the black mountains disappear away from me. In my pocket I touch the elk fur, hold it between us in my palm. “I found a dying elk today.”

The swing begins to move, slightly, rocking us.