

Brutality of Desire

*Cory Brown**

In the kitchen out of the rain of loud voices I crawl under my mother's umbrella dress. Here ... then here ... then here Then at five, I am above the yard, a jet pilot spinning and straddling branches and then I'm on the ground. With my face against the back seat of the car I take the bumpy ride to the hospital. The doctor resets my jaw.

I am four running down a hall chasing my brother ... chasing the cardboard box he's pulling by a string. I am a train car. I am the caboose. Rooms are flying by... in one of them my sister is playing a piano... the sounds all ablur. I stick out my arm and ... the sound of breaking glass. I grab my bicep and watch the blood ooze up between my fingers.

My family lives on the first floor of a house on a TB sanitarium. My father runs a dairy farm on the same grounds. On the floor above us, in the same house, are good-behavior state prisoners. Sometimes they babysit us. One older man—Isaac is his name— I am told years later takes a liking to me and sings me negro spirituals while rocking me in his arms.

Forty years later my sister tells me she is twelve or thirteen and alone in the house when one of them has her cornered in the kitchen. He just stares at her a long time and then lets her go.

I am sixteen and drop a hundred-pound sack of feed in the trough for a small herd of cattle that my father likes to keep. I empty it and leave to go water skiing and drink beer with girls in bikinis. One cow gets to the feed before the others and two days later she'd look pregnant and laid out for labor if she weren't stiff—her one eye fixed on the sky and her tongue out on the ground like a piece of rope.

Four years later I've been in this hospital bed two months—thrown from the front seat of a jeep full of drunken college friends and losing a pound a day. Four abdominal operations no food no water by mouth. Kept alive by a tube of amino acids in my aortal artery. I sometimes ask for the Demerol directly in that tube and when the nurse complies it makes me feel in love. My roommate is a pancreatic cancer boy, just fourteen and screams a lot at night but last night he's quiet and in a flurry of shoe squeaks they wheel his body out.

The second operation causes an abscess that necessitates a third, which leaves a hole in my side a doctor packs and unpacks with gauze three times a day. I spend much of the day listening for his

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footsteps in the hall. I will grasp the bedrails with both hands and scream when his whole hand vanishes into me. Years later in a poem I describe it as him fucking me.

Twenty-one years later my father's toes stick out from the sheets. The sheets are white, his toes blue, his respirator loud. When I put my fingers to my ears I am underwater again and four years old holding my breath in the town pool. A few days later it is January and cold and I drop a handful of dirt into his grave. It makes a soft thud. The prairie grass bends in the wind.

We're in college and the way my friend Mark tells it he and Terry are watching the Ozarks fly by backwards in the bed of a pickup truck. It's a spring break adventure with camping gear, and these local men carry on, as he tells it, waving a bottle around in the cab. When my friend knocks on the window to signal that they want dropped off the men ignore them. After more and more knocking they hold up a gun and that's when Terry picks up his gear and says I'm outta here and jumps. Mark says the truck was going fifty-five or so. When the men finally stop, seeing that Terry has jumped, Mark hops out, walks to the driver's side window, holds up his hands and says, I just wanna go see to my friend. The men point the gun at his chest and he turns around and walks away. Terry has broken an ankle and both femurs but heals after several months and goes on to graduate from college, join the Navy, and eventually become the captain of a nuclear submarine.

It's 1985. My first wife is three months pregnant with our son and I abandon her to live with another woman. My wife still pregnant a thousand miles away, I am standing at the foot of the stairs calling up to my girlfriend in another room. I call and call and finally my girlfriend says hey I'm not her.

Five years later I am carrying my son on my shoulders under a big Oklahoma sky. I pulled him from daycare for an afternoon visit and his little voice above me asks why can't you live here all the time. He's in his early twenties now, a college student. We're talking philosophy in a dark restaurant in downtown Oklahoma City, discussing definitions of virtue and such, drinking margaritas and eating shrimp, and he asks me what the legal age for sex in Oklahoma is.

My mother likes to tell the story of when I'm in grade school and "cheat" on a school form—I look over the shoulder of a friend and in the space for 'father' write my friend's father's name. The next time the principal sees my mother he says he didn't know Mr. Goucher is my father. My mother laughs when she tells it. Years later this same friend, a bricklayer working with his father, gets strung out on crack and runs down a man stealing his motorcycle. He takes brick tongs from the back of his truck and beats the motorcycle thief to death. His father posts bail and takes him home. They argue and my friend takes a deer rifle off the wall and shoots his father in the face—both barrels take half his face off a local policeman tells my sister. I have a memory of my friend and me, twelve or so, dancing on his bed and singing at the top of our lungs to a song on the late-night radio.

I am fourteen sitting on a curb on 10th street with my first girlfriend, around the corner from her house. I'm holding both her hands in mine and we're kissing, our tongues fat little snakes wriggling under a rock. I don't ever want to stop—I am delirious with joy and as I write this I can smell her perfume.

My father was a foot soldier in Italy in '44 and '45. He was awarded the silver star and will die fifty-two years later with German shrapnel near his spine. If you ask, he'll hold up his arm to show you a

scar where a bullet went clean through as he was waving up his men. He raised sheep and cattle growing up, so they chose him to steer a string of supply mules up the Apennines. One of his memories is of being stranded behind enemy lines with his mules and lying in snow all night hugging his M-1 for warmth. Never as cold before or since, he'll say.

I'm a sophomore in high school. My Future Farmers of America instructor is ambitious and proud of the long history of his students' stock show winnings. I am showing a steer he thinks should win the top prize. He has shoved analgesic up the steer's sheath to make him hold his back straight, so I'm having trouble getting him to stand still in the ring. I lose to take second place and back at the stalls the instructor, a big man, strong, rears back and with his forearm strikes me in the face. I am stunned. For the rest of the day I stand brushing my steer.

It is 1974 and despite the Paris Peace Accords U.S. casualties in Vietnam are up from last year. I will register for the draft next year without a girlfriend. If I could know what the source of my pain is I would say it is that I believe with all my being that there can never be anyone whose passions, needs, and desires for love match my own. One summer day during a lakeside get-together with friends, I am driving one of them on an errand. It's just she and me in the pickup, she in her bikini. We're driving over the lake's dam, the water stretching out beside us like something from *Genesis*, and the radio is playing "Saturday in the Park." I am lost, for I know nothing of what she and her body could mean to me. I have no vision with which to sculpt my desires.

At fourteen I lose my virginity to a girl my age who had had sex that night already with several other boys. My friends tell me later that they'd made this arrangement with her a few times before. She's lying in a motel bed half asleep. I strip and crawl in. She opens for me like a book called innocence and experience. I do not know this book, but she seems to read the words easily and understand them.

The events in that motel room that night become common knowledge in my high school and in the whole town, it seems. It's a small town and the girl takes a job in a government office as an aid to my mother, of all people. My mother too becomes aware of the events of that night and will sometimes, in my presence, refer to the girl by name then look at me sternly. At school I sometimes see the girl in the halls laughing with her friends. She dyes her hair red and curls it tight, a thin figure, a pretty face. Years later my shame and confusion abate and I wonder what it all meant to her.

I don't think I ever saw my father cry before this. I am in the hospital still after two and a half months, though I will begin to heal soon. I am on the toilet, the bathroom door closed, and beyond the door I hear my mother enter the room and tell my father that our family's longtime dentist has killed himself in his back yard. A shotgun blast to his heart. I hear a chair scooting on the floor and my father sobbing.

My five-year-old son by my second wife swings in a hammock in the front yard. Dust rises to his face from the road as cars pass by. His mother and I will divorce within the year.

I'm home from college for the summer, to cut wheat for the father of a friend of mine who is studying medicine. He explains to me a condition called supination, when the patient believes his or her hands are turned up when they're in fact turned down. That condition has stuck in my mind all

these years, his explanation next to the combines, dust in the air, cold milk, potato salad, and sandwiches. Maybe I know why—it is that I want to believe I'm more open to the world than I actually am.

My older brother is the whole town's best friend and even more best if you drive a pickup truck. It's 1973 and today he's handing me a cigar with 'it's a boy' on the wrapper. The baby will cry for the next three days and nights then die from an undeveloped lower intestine doctors hadn't noticed. Twenty years later my brother will be betrayed by one of those pickup-truck friends that he started a meat packing business with. The friend will take his part of the investment and leave and a few months later my brother will lose the business, his house, and his wife of twenty-one years, all in the same year.

My best friend growing up has qualities good and bad like the rest of us. One day he's telling a small group of us college friends news about a former love rival of his. It's lung cancer, he says. He's going to die probably within the year, he says, then he can't restrain himself, he bursts out laughing.

I'm in my mid-twenties doing seventy-five along Old Perkins Road between Stillwater and Oklahoma City, rushing between my current girlfriend and an old girlfriend I'd been pining for for months. The old girlfriend had broken up with me when I was in a three-month stint in the hospital, multiple abdominal operations. Then two years later—me living with another woman—the old girlfriend called with a scared tone in her voice and I'm a fish on a hook. I tell my girlfriend I have to go see a sick friend and on the way back—it's dusk and the stars are coming out early, summer bluestem and buffalo grasses growing wild along the highway—it happens like a revelation, the way the deer on impact whips around the side of the car. I stop and find the deer in the grass no longer suffering. I pick her up by her long torn-tangled legs and hip-thrust her into the trunk. I take her to a friend in vet school who's done some butchering. He tosses out the bruised side but within a week my freezer is venison-packed.

A few years later I am wooing the woman who will be my first wife, going down on her, when who should burst into the room, my former girlfriend back from a trip to Austin, Texas with her new boyfriend. She had found my front door unlocked. She had dumped me six months ago for the new boyfriend, a musician. These two women in the room are best friends—my new girlfriend and old girlfriend. I crawl out from under the sheets. The old girlfriend says to me oh I'm sorry I just had to see you, Cory, I made him turn around halfway to Austin, I decided I love you instead. My future wife begins to dress, insists on leaving us old lovers to talk it out. I guess we do, but the only thing I remember after all this time is that when the old girlfriend leaned over to kiss me she said you smell like *her*.

At my father's funeral service I read from *Ecclesiastes*—it seems fitting. He and I had been watching a TV show about some villagers in Asia who often live to be over a hundred. He turned to me in one of his moments of sudden vigor and said, "what they're not tellin'ya, is that those people are gonna die too!"

Three pieces of wisdom from my father I remember most:

- if you're not early you're late
- nothing good ever happens after midnight
- you can't tell somebody what they don't already know

It's still early in my hospital stay. I've had a spleenectomy, a partial pancreatectomy, and the second exploratory surgery to patch up a hemorrhaging duodenum. I'm not abscessing yet but have an NG tube in my nose and two or three drainage tubes in my abdomen, and who should appear next to my bed, my old high school girlfriend proclaiming her love for me. I'm in an open ward, a children's hospital because I'm under twenty-one, nothing but curtains separating us and sick screaming babies. I don't see what she could see in me, one whole side of my face nothing but scab, but there she is asking my forgiveness for having sex with a good friend of mine studying medicine. I don't really care, I'm just thirsty. All I want is water and morphine, but damn she looks good when she moves her lips the way she does and whispers in my ear and smells of the Estée Lauder she wore in high school. Before she leaves she puts her hand on my erection and lifts up my NG tube to kiss my parched mouth, tongue and all, but I won't hear from her again for months.

So I'm walking out of this bar in Stillwater, Oklahoma, a hard-drinking college town. It's the spring of '75 and I'm cocky with a new girl on my arm, a few beers in my belly, and a whole year of Tae Kwon Do under my belt. We're walking to my car and this lanky stoner sitting on a bench with a woman on his knee sneers at me and hurls an insult at my date. So (did I say I'd studied a whole year of Tae Kwon Do?) I say whadyew say assHOLE?! He pulls out a knife and starts swingin' it my way and slices off a piece of thumb-skin. I go into automatic-one-year-of-Tae-Kwon-Do-mode and throw a spinning heel kick at his head—a kick I've been practicing for a whole year goddam it—and to my surprise it lands upside his head and he's against a wall now and I go at his head with six or seven ridge-hands (I'd been practicing them as well—short little open-handed strikes). He slides down the wall and I pick his knife up from the sidewalk and hand it to his date and say something cute like “maybe you'll need this.” My date and I rush back to my little yellow pickup and start making out, our tongues roaming around in each other's mouths. I'm not that attracted to her, nor she to me I think. I guess we're responding to the adrenaline, but there we are goin' at it.

I'm in the hospital. My lung has just collapsed and the nurse is running for help. My mother sits by the bed her head in her hands. She's lost twenty pounds since I was admitted, a pale shadow of herself.

My eighteen-year-old daughter, whose mother is my second wife and the woman I left my first wife for, is a conscientious college student. Charming and smart and her spirit and energy are compelling. Her little brother, sixteen, doesn't talk a lot but is very well liked and is making plans for college. When his mother and I separated—nine years ago—she takes them on a trip to visit her family in Brooklyn. On the way back her car breaks down on I-87 and while they're all standing next to the car, my daughter actually a few feet away, another car strikes the parked car. My son, seven at the time, is dragged under the car that he and his mother were standing beside. The driver of the other car says he didn't see them in time. A couple of skin grafts on my son's foot and he heals well. His sister witnesses the accident from nearby on the grass where she was sitting. When the police phone

to tell me that my son is safe in the helicopter, they say they don't know anything about another child. It takes them half an hour to get back to me that my daughter is unharmed. I often picture my son under the car unconscious, the skin on the instep of his left foot sizzling against an exhaust pipe.

My father brings home a Nazi helmet from the war. It hangs on a nail in our garage all the years I'm growing up. We neighborhood boys take it down sometimes, wear it playing army, then put it back on the nail. I always felt its shape was menacing but more beautiful—the way it curves down toward the neck and back up—than the boring American helmets, as if that is the shape of defeat and absence: the Nazis were dead and would never rise again and I could *wear* that. I could *be* absence and defeat. But I must remember that my father was in that helmet, a hero of the American army, barrel-chested and victorious in his taciturn and statuesque existence, shielding my head with good German steel.

I am sixteen, only 5' 8" and 160 pounds or so, but because I'm quick and strong I'm nose-guard on our high school football team and come December we're in the quarterfinals playing a team from Altus, a big, strong team, favored to win. It is one hour before kickoff and my buddies and I are in a car all packed in, all six of us on the way to the stadium. I am in the front seat with no seatbelt. We're cruising through a light and BAM my head hits the dash. All I remember of that game is tilting my helmet up between plays to relieve the pressure on my swelled forehead. I learn later that we lose 55-0, but I remember my father taking me and my linebacker friend out to dinner afterwards and telling us over chicken-fried steak that one year in high school his football team lost every game of the season. They never even scored, he said.

In the recovery room following my second abdominal operation I'm remembering the nightmare I just had on the operating table, in which a kind of buzz or chainsaw made its way down again and again, a long parabolic route like some Promethean vulture to tear at my stomach, its roar relentless and mechanical. And yet I knew that it was telling a discrete truth: that all of my life as I had lived it had been a delusion, that I did not exist and never had.

One of the nurses taking care of me is from New Orleans, Anne is her name, tall slender dark hair, a sexy drawl. I'd ask her questions just to hear that drawl and watch her lips move. And her breasts oh my god her breasts. I'd sacrifice a week of morphine—Abraham and Isaac lay it on me—for just one glimpse. It isn't just lust. I am in love, the way she asks are you all right Cory, are you in pain Cory, don't you want to watch some TV Cory, why don't you ever watch TV Cory, do you need anything Cory. O Anne, it is you who brings me the form to sign for the operation, named for Dr. Allen Whipple, who perfected this procedure. The head of the pancreas, the duodenum, the bile duct, the gall bladder, the antrum of the stomach, jejunum and lymph nodes—all lifted out like so much detritus. A sixty-five percent mortality rate, you say. I say, that's some perfection, more to Dr. Whipple in my head than to you, Anne. But I do sign those papers, for you, Anne, because my needs, my needs, are so much greater than the sum of your white buttoned-up parts!

In Vermont during the Great Depression, my mother's mother nurses her own brother with tuberculosis back to health, but she contracts the disease herself and dies. She is twenty-six and my mother is five. My sister, ten years older than I, is obese and diabetic and may be suffering from Parkinson's--no doctor will tell her for sure. The tremors keep her up at night and no drugs help. My mother living in the same small town tells me in tears that there's nothing she can do. My sister spent

four years in the peace corps in Brazil in the '60s and then studied history in three different PhD programs. A vibrant intellectual but she can't hold a book now for the shaking, she says. She insists that nothing will make her better. It wouldn't surprise me to get the call sometime in the next few weeks that she's killed herself, though maybe she'd be too ashamed of herself to do that. In her twenties she had an affair with a married Pakistani, a Muslim, and got pregnant, but she terminated the pregnancy because she was sure my parents would disown her and the child, devout Catholics that they are. She tells me that years later, but now I'm sitting with her in a pizza restaurant about to order, most likely thinking pepperonis and mushrooms. I'll never know now if she is pregnant then or if she's already aborted. She's asking me, an undergraduate philosophy student, my thoughts on that moral problem, but what do I know then? Sitting in that restaurant, I know some of the arguments and now probably most of them, but they don't seem to apply.

They never come the next morning to wheel me out for the Whipple operation—they never come to wheel me out.

Homesteading in Roger Mills County, Oklahoma 1914 my father's mother is sixteen the oldest of six children when her mother—pregnant again—trips on a wagon-tongue chasing cattle that had gotten out. She falls and hemorrhages to death before her husband my great grandfather can get a doctor. This leaves the mothering to my teenaged grandmother who writes in her journal often about the beauty of the plains the landscape's generosity the cool summer dips in the Canadian River the sweet smells of the open nights and the prairie sky's grand displays of stars. They are soon driven out of Western Oklahoma by drought but she never disparages that world even the great storms of dust. Layers of it seeping in at night like ghosts to rest on everything in the house. She writes of the early days in the sod dugouts cool in the summer and cozy in winter and near fireproof but she doesn't like so much the centipedes and other bugs coming out of the walls—she writes that in the spring they'd pour boiling water down the walls to kill the fresh-hatched ones.

Two brothers: one predicts pork belly futures and is devoutly Christian we've grown close over the years. The other a loud and gregarious story-teller lives in a trailer it took him five years to allow me into ashamed as he was of it. He likes to tell about the morning after some heavy partying when he heard sweet nothings whispered to him in his dreams and woke to find one of his cows nosing him through his bedroom window. His trailer is full of boxes of secondhand merchandise and family memorabilia he intends to make a killing on someday. One item he's particularly proud of a picture of a great uncle holding up the six fingers of his left hand. He considers this material too important to throw away but the boxes make it difficult to get from one room to the next.

I'm letting the motes of dust stick to the mirror here—I'm a reflection I'd like to think not even that. The clear mirror is nowhere standing—says the old text—where then is a grain of dust to cling? These memories are tales tall perhaps even but only as dictated by memory the constraints of time and your patience. I could write of walks in the countryside through fields of timothy grass and cornstalks but.... Oh that reminds me of a walk I took one evening a few years back when my kids were small but I was out alone—the light was dying and my path through the bleached stalks tall as people took on a gruesome character—a trail of blood. I followed it half-expecting an unpleasant conclusion into the dark of the evening and the dark of the woods. But it led to nothing but darkness as it's doing here—an honest re-creation if ever there was one—and there you have it some stories are more interesting than others. It's all in the telling I suppose—its manner and shape.

I am ten and holding a half-eaten peach the juice is running down my chin, and with my other hand I am shaking a branch they are falling around me like enormous balls of hail. Thud. Thud. Thud-thud thud.