

My Better Nature

It was February and the melt was months away. There was a certain quiet, a lonely beauty of which my telling cannot do justice. Imagine the word tree or swing the only thing on the page. Surrounded by white, the few things left showing become objects of art. Snow ribbed the overturned vessels stacked at the silent boathouse. The lakes were deeply drifted; we had a falling feeling until our boots finally touched ice. Our tracks were deep. By the time we reached home, they were already covered with fresh snow.

The sun burned copper when she led me to the garage. I was too spent and sorry to argue. Perhaps for her safety, perhaps for mine. Perhaps she just wanted to let me die.

I knew the pain I'd caused. In flats along the parkway, families—normal families—were having birthday parties, cooking stew, playing bridge and mending mittens. But they weren't packing their thermoses and skates for the warming house and hockey boards or heading to Matt's for a burger and a 3/2 beer. Normal families were staying home. The Catholics took to wearing medals of Saint Hubert. After the attacks increased, even the Lutherans adopted him.

I climbed into the trunk. She showed me a straw-like tube jimmied through a hole in the floor.

“You'll be able to breathe,” she said. “It's just until dawn.”

We didn't speak much anymore.

I curled fetal and she closed the lid. A little orange light crept through the cracks. I closed my eyes and tried to remember fairy tales Mormor told me as a child. Soon, the trunk went black. I couldn't remember the morals of the stories. I scratched and kicked. Though the metal was bitterly cold, I was sweating. My heart throbbed disyncopated and

frantic. Blood pumped hot. The tube slipped from my slick hands out the hole. A creamy light shone through. The bristles under my tongue were first.

I was braver and hungrier. I could not be contained. And these modern cars are equipped with panic handles in the trunk. You don't even need opposable thumbs.

I was still my other self when she found me. She followed bloody pawprints which had eaten up the snow, punctuated by inedibles: bit of denim, silver medal, toddler's shoe. My lips were greasy with fat, my whiskers sticky with frosting. She cupped my muzzle and turned my face to hers. I growled her away, but there was no menace in it. My tongue was singed. Something was stuck in my canines.

She sighed. Like the mouse prying the lion's thorn, she plucked the blue birthday candle from my teeth.

"He had just turned three."

The hunters were coming. I smelled them. I stood on all fours, belly full and taut, and licked her ear as gently as I could. I ran from the warming house, bounding through the drifts. I headed for the woods, trying not to think of the man I would be at dawn. A man naked and alone.