

REAL CREEK: A WEEK AT SHOTPOUCH CABIN

Dennis James Sweeney

DAY 1

I want to be in the warmest place.

I want the rain to fall around me like bats.

The seasons to pass like cars.

A bauble in your arms —

We'll decay like fish on a pier, eyes disintegrating first, then insides, the stoney scales last mixing with the water to shine.

Ankle deep, we make a house in sinking.

Hang bananas from the towel rack.

Curl in expensive blankets while Herb Alpert toots and sways.

Watch: Tiny pupa-bugs pop up in clouds when we sweep our hands across the mattress.

A ways down the gravel road, the forest eats an abandoned van. Three tires are still there, tired and green, but where is the fourth one? What is the horror of an axle?

The floor whispers with dust. Faces grin from the walls.

Soon enough, I can tell, one of us will feel empty while the other is full and we will treat this as a zero-sum game: Who gets the most from the sound of air knocking down grass blades?

Whose tiny jet engine.

Whose slanted roof.

And down or up? Does the water fall or return home?

Every storm a myth. The toilet tank refills with creek, smell of mold, sometimes tiny leaves in the bowl.

Nature is a stomach.

Hello! I call down into it. I'm here!

The answer is a flat pane with a race of droplets blurring what is on the other side.

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You soak the couch with want. I stand up, soaked with you.

The night walks in like a passenger: I don't know you, or anything about you, but we are going in the same direction.

In another era, Gordon Lightfoot croons, stops to roll a joint, and croons again. We are coated in him until the needle rises and it's just the wind — of the wall-mounted heating unit.

Black against the windows doesn't so much swallow you up as reflect you.

I already know I'm small. The world knows it better.

Silence undoes us like pants. We're naked from the waist down but cooled. Now: Unpack.

And sleep. With the headaches and the promise that the light will wake us.

A pen on the table is the Cold War, is burning oil fields, is a college town overrun with mourners.

We blink at such promises. Call them certainties. Our one open palm.

We take Gordon Lightfoot in our arms, where we rock rock rock him nearly to death until our own breaths remind us of our role here, subtle but required.

Pupa, pupusa, papoose. We carry something everywhere.

Or: The hair on our legs keeps growing, the same as in the calm decline of the city.

DAY 2

I want to say something like: The mindlessness of the forest is a violence.

But the forest is a little boy throwing rocks into a pond. If I get hurt, it's because I swim toward the ripples.

For example:

DON'T SHOOT
HOMES PAST
THIS POINT

I keep running past the sign, up the hill, through the red-and-blue gate like there's something behind it I want.

Concrete homes — we're talking horror films. Moss draped up the sides. BEWARE OF DOG. Smoke pours from a tiny, round, metal chimney. The only sign of life.

Except, you know, the woods.

I know you're waiting for me, and that is why I press further up the hill. I can be your boat, lingering on the horizon. When you get aboard, I make you sick.

Our hopes and dreams (they're really just dried beans) spill out a hole in the hull. A pickup with a wooden sign that says REDNECK in the back window sprays gravel.

Our ocean floor. I can't be here *and* with you.

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Mice pour out of our wounds, and wooden traps are already there to catch them.

Trees bloom with lichen, which means they're dead.

Am I cool enough? Am I smart enough? Do the purple stalks dancing in the wind of the heat pump like me?

And it's begun: I want to write, you want to walk; I want to run, you want to eat. We want past each other.

The birds twitter — they actually do.

Logs fold under.

We go on a marshy walk, and we consider the blue light our universe is bathed in and, as the only intelligent life, whether to punt a flowerhead off its stem. Mostly, though: Are there mountain lions here?

The rocks around the firepit are heavy, and I'm not even carrying them.

Snap! (Mouse.)

With this emptiness, I only want to make more empty. Generations of artists would laugh if I said there was nothing in the woods to respond to, but why respond to trees?

No response requested, desired, needed. Only: suchness. Trying to write here feels like picking a fight with a Buddhist monk.

Feels like wrapping wire fence around the yard's young trunks, which (admittedly) they've done.

Mauve lengths of fabric billowing in refusal. The beauty comes from the lack of fear.

When there is so much to fear!

You are a catfish sucking beneath a bridge. You are an explosion of sticks against the green. You are the slight variations in the gray sky. You are the suggestion of a path — that I follow only to end up where I began three minutes before.

The problem is me. I ran it, but these paths are made to slow us.

I wonder who these people are: the ones who collect empty wasps' nests and hang them from the rafters.

They live in the beauty outside themselves. Or die in it, falling away like trackless trains to trace a red-lit spiral in the darkness.

They wear spectacles, I think, and are so earnest as to clear entire corners of cocktail parties with stories of the shapes of leaves.

They take photographs of what is beautiful, and it is always the thing in the photograph that is beautiful, never the photograph, though the photograph is beautiful in its own way for not having beauty, for not wanting it.

The difference being: I don't take photographs. I don't even try.

Because when the stream weaves among itself like blood cells —

When the sun graces us with empty pockets —

When I can't name a single bird in the entire preserve and the grasses are rising, growing like mice —

I tell myself, what am I going to do with forever? And retreat, retreat, sweeping over my steps with a frond.

I mean simply that I don't have a camera, and I'm afraid of what I would take with me if I did.

It looks like the truth is, you go out in the woods to find yourself and find only what you brought with you. A little shocking, that you consist of so little and the world is so big in spite of it.

Our sex migrates the leather couch across the floor.

The headaches come with. The hungers come with. The constant flapping of the mind — who could believe it! — comes with too, always finding some wind to put under its sore wings.

We've named the mice Maya Angelou and Federico García Lorca. They are not lovers, the story goes, but once had too much to drink and went home together and act followed act. Poetry followed poetry.

Eddy Arnold, perched on his album cover like a bat forced to stand right-side up, asks, "Where have all the flowers gone?" He responds, "The answer is blowing in the wind."

On to the next one, then — if we fuck on the table we'll break it.

If there is no sacred space, where do we go to lose the sludge of old habits? How can I cleanse myself, become a citizen of the infinite? What is the magic word, drug, country?

I tell you about ten days in Thailand without speaking. Wooden pillow. Two meals a day and hours on hours of sitting.

That's the answer, if there is one. Think in your own dark until the mind burns out. Finally, humbled, you're prepared to live again.

An upright monk — the Eddy Arnold of Thai abbots — gave unintelligible sermons, his syllables like champagne bubbles.

A second monk, mossy and bitter like the many-broken-armed tree on our walk this afternoon, told us in an English accent how to lose ourselves completely.

I glanced around. People were nodding with a hunger.

Three and a half years later, spring descends on a couple in a cabin in the foothills of the Oregon Coast Range.

They sweat on each other, but not enough.

The mice huddle in their burrow. You can see their black eyes when you shine a flashlight on them, and you do, over and over, until they know their names.

DAY 3

When you go out into the woods to find yourself, in other words, you have to be *by* yourself. This emptiness is not enough. It's hardly even empty.

I want to stand on a ridge above the city, watching it burn.

I want the spiders to taste my skin.

Today, we couldn't even boil an egg.

I want to see no foreseeable future — then to let it fill.

We dropped the egg in after the water had come to a boil. It cracked and its white insides poured out of it until they'd cooked, hanging on like a failed birth.

I want birth. No interruptions.

This is the kind of person I am. The kind who says, "No interruptions." The kind who when you ask if I'll look at your poem for a minute says no, delves back into my own. You understand, you say, you perpetually understand, but overhead planes leave their roars and I'm still thinking about myself.

I don't want to pick you, flower, I want to leave you rooted and growing. And don't pick me too.

Before lunch, we walked up the mountainside. On the way down I saw bootprints and was scared for a moment. Who had been here?

They were your bootprints on the way up. We hadn't walked in a circle but in a straight line.

We find a snail. You touch her. I don't. I watch her pull clovers through her head.

What I mean: How can you love and make at once?

How can you build when you are holding a person in your hands?

The Great American Novel is somewhere in the yard.

Over the rotting bridge.

I thought I saw it on our walk, glimpsed it for a moment black and shining behind a far-off stump, but you were holding a twig back for me. I told you to let it go. I wanted to feel it drag across my chest.

We've been whiting out *The Origin of Species*.

Listening to cellos mourn.

Conserving water. Found out this morning that the tank's almost empty — so be sparing, you know?

If all else fails, the creek.

The creek doesn't fail. All that water comes from somewhere.

And then — across the landscape spread of my notebook — a brushstroke set of mountains in red. You made this for me.

Cue the trumpets. A woodpecker hammering as if at our heads.

I'm so sorry. You did nothing wrong but give to me.

Spider-tree: tree with many arms.

I would like to be such a tree, and someday die, and the moss would coat me, and I would be emerald, and better.

DAY 4

Just like that — the frogs stop barking.

It had to be this way: Otis Redding. The rest of the salad. Quesadillas with cylinders of chicken. Artichokes, for the first time in my life — I strip their bitter petals with my teeth to get at the tiny, hairy heart. Eat that, chasing its flavor, until the stem, which is bitter again.

In other words, a fight.

Over poetry, but really over one loving the other more than the other loves the one, or so the story goes.

Otis hides in the woodwork.

The dishes get done.

But the cabin can't pop, or separate, or take time and forget. A place not made for disaster.

A trillion half-hearted lamps.

Unforgiven, we fuck, and that's a forgiveness, the roof pinnacled not so high above our heads, Lorca and Maya Angelou waiting for night to settle, the heat collecting and finally falling from us like a sun.

A doll-size, gingerbreadish house made from forest pieces.

A glass of notched wooden balls.

I dream of doing something wrong. The everydream.

Another wasp's nest, shaped like a horn.

But wasp this: The sun is suddenly alive. You ask me when we wake up if I'm over it and I say I'm over it and we spend the morning carrying pails of water from the glistening stream to the tank-trailer out front. You make a funnel out of an empty water gallon after I splash you with half the pail. You know how to do these things, you say, to craft. You cradle the plastic jug between your knees and pull the knife through with both hands.

I skip breakfast to feel hungry again.

I don't ruin the lunch rice. It's fluffy and unstuck.

The grass, when we walked down the slope to the creek to fill our buckets, was dewy and soaked our shoes. But neither of us slipped in it, and the grass has dried by now, and inside the cabin it's warm enough to turn the heater off.

If I act quickly I may yet find myself in the fullness. Or at least let myself go there, and if I am not alone in it I am sorry, though I don't know to whom.

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The carpenter ants, on the other hand, are trying madly to get out.

Reminder: The trees are preserved so they can be cut down.

Huge circular smudges between the stumps, as of a long-gone fire. So like the Lorax, you'd think they'd taken it as a model.

We think the flying ants are rising because of the heat.

That they'll be dead by morning.

We hope. There aren't enough poets in the world to name them. We'd have to name them after ourselves.

Someone built these roads, posted the laminated signs —

Planted
In 1982

— and left the woods to flourish. They'll be back someday. Though not the same men. Their sons. Someone else reaps what you sow.

Reap first.

Try to ignore the love lost between years of cut hands and yearly crushed men. Time flows away like a river but the river is always full. I'm trying to swim upstream.

Insert here: simply how tired you are.

We all are. As the lot fades, the logs carted away between thick metal arms raised to the sky, the men grow old, can see less of what's to come and more of what's lost. The years are wedding rings, promise rings. Not kept. Open to rain and rot.

An ache like layers of cloth draped over the art.

Like walking naked across the grounds, cutting your toe on something, stepping in the creek.

Real creek.

It's ice-bitter. Snowmelt, I say, because I like the word. But who knows if it is.

We shower together like sardines.

Attached/avoidant.

On the lawn the dew soaks through your blanket, but not enough to make us rise.

The hope for wonder, and the strange sickness when it comes at my own ability to be absent.

Around the firepit, the sitting rocks are still waiting. In a knot.

DAY 5

Last night we sat on the edge of the porch and got high like kids. Looked up.

The stars are jiggling. You see them jiggling too, right? Yeah, I see 'em.

God is a waitress and the stars are plates. There's a whole story there, and we told it. A diner-hagiography. We held hands and stared away from the world.

In the morning, the fog hasn't let everything through and you're sweeping up already. Clearing a space for your birthday tomorrow to land.

Along with a book, erased. Something other than what we've whited out.

And flower earrings. And a pendant. Petals smashed for keeps.

We collage for hours, snipping paper onto the picnic blanket. When I pick it up and shake it out, slivers flurry into the grass.

Adam and Eve: We stare at each other over the running water like at a grade-school dance.

You're ready, I can tell. We'll fall into celebration like it's a room of only pillows, relieved to be saved from our work. I'll still be looking for something to press against, but I'll pretend that I'm not.

A card with a squirrel holding a sign: HAPPY BIRTHDAY, YOU RASCAL.

If the sky has a problem, it's me. Nature does not hurry, and yet everything is accomplished. Why run with a river when, for all its running, it stays where it is?

Thailand, 2012: The pact of silence expired, I walked to the microphone in front of my fellow retreaters and said, Yes, thank you, I've

learned so much, particularly that I don't want to flee the world. If it takes pain to feel pleasure — beauty — give me the pain. Afterward, people put their hands on my shoulders like I'd lost something.

Out here, I haven't meditated for two days.

Lie and look at the stars. My body has given way.

Like the oak in front of the house I grew up in, which they cut down so it wouldn't crush us in the night. Cut off the limbs first, then took it down in sections so it wouldn't be whole anywhere. We used to touch it to be safe — the trunk was base.

I'm not sure I knew what trees were then. I'm not sure I do now.

Hairy lichen-arms arched over the trail.

Faerie Queen sex fantasies.

I come for minutes. I need to smoke more pot.

I need to give up more.

I want the whole stream on me, over me, burying me, but it's only about a foot deep, and still — freezing.

Breakfast for dinner. Black eggs and turkey bacon that looks like skin.

Lumps in the process.

Car tires on gravel like jet engines in the distance.

I don't think I'm going to be able to give you everything you need to get a year older —

And suddenly, I've never seen a slug so small in my life. He's just learning to crawl. Antlers up.

His white stomach pulses — he's a window.

He leaps a gap in the porch boards.

This is something.

The birds are back. They were never gone. I was.

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When the electricians come, I am sitting half-lotus on my purple meditation cushion, my knees on a tie-dyed blanket, my singing bowl in front of me.

They knock on the door and I get up, but you've already answered it. You wave your hand. Go do your Zen thing, you say. So I go back outside, sit down, and close my eyes. Five minutes later, two pairs of work boots clomp across the porch behind my back.

Logic is no longer a satisfactory progression.

Tchaikovsky roars — or someone playing him — and one electrician yells to the other from the hole in the pantry floor.

My mother calls.

Units of peace. That's what I hope for. Where the breath suddenly and briefly feels like enough, and though you can hear the stream hurrying, can feel the end of a hair itching your eye, the world is water under the bridge.

What is the bridge?

It falls away quickly. I start to panic at the peace.

My mom is in the bedroom of her and my dad's vacation house in South Carolina. She says she's watching the golfers struggle by.

How's it going? you ask the electrician who's not in the floor.

We wait. Tchaikovsky. Good, I say, grimacing.

I used to be better at this. Behind my eyelids my vision would pulse and glow, I couldn't feel my hands, everything that mattered would live at the tip of my nose and the air would stoke it lightly, keeping the embers just barely burning.

I think of there not being birds, water, or wind during those sessions, nothing extraneous, but there is always something extraneous. Even if it's (it usually is) yourself.

The news: My cousin's wife has just given birth to a baby girl. Cora. Like a strangely shaped heart.

My sister got a new job. It'll be so much better than the old one.

No, *I* don't have any news — but will soon.

I breathe, trying to hold the world at bay.

Probably I should embrace it. If the goals are faulty, so what about the methods?

We're done, the electricians say. Thank you, we say. Should be all set, they say and drive off.

I love you. I love you. We draw out our good-byes.

I ring the singing bowl when I judge quitting not to be cowardly anymore. The tie-dyed blanket soaks up the ring.

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I went out in the woods to dream of having sex with you and wake up next to you, already covered in your sweat, at 3:30 in the afternoon.

I went out in the woods to run something other than *from*.

I went out in the woods to become a character in my own book. Kenkō. Thoreau. Kamo no Chōmei. Things were going to happen, or they were going to not happen explosively. You go and you have no choice but to leave greener or grayer.

The simple life!

I ran to the top of the mountain to watch the hills roll bodily down the valley, but you can see them only because the mountain has been clear-cut down to its base, a shred of forest left on top like a tuft of hair. The wind grows crazily up there without trunks to block it.

Grows — I meant blows.

So hard that on my way back down down the mountain I think a storm is chasing me. I envision arriving home as the first drop hits, slamming the porch door shut as a wave of water washes across the garden. The roof dinging like it's holding off pebbles.

But this isn't Colorado. The rain has all the time in the world and will take it.

I went out in the woods. Dark clouds were somewhere but not here, where the heater spits at us, where we keep our laptops glowing for light.

I say *rhythms*, and I mean: something to sit in.

We'll meet when we dry up. Then grow wet again.

DAY 6

Loggins and Messina: "Peace of Mind."

Sex sex sex sex sex sex sex.

Now that we've got that out of the way...

The thing is, I knew this song. Even before finding it between the Bach and Vivaldi, two boys fighting on a white background. *Best of Friends*.

You like cooked fruit. Ten thousand little things.

On our patio in Cincinnati: an old boom box, a two-disc Kenny Loggins anthology. My dad told me this was what he listened to during his darkest times. I tried pot once, he said later. I was into TM.

Grapefruit juice. Smoothies. A clementine torn in half, round side up on a white plate. Waffles — with the cooked fruit on top.

“Transcendental Meditation.”

It’s your birthday and you’re alive with phone calls. The land line is working harder than it ever has, and soon we’re headed for the coast. I feel a little terrible — abandoning this place on our last full day in it. But that was the agreement. It’s not *my* birthday.

We haven’t made a fire. Haven’t written the Great American Novel. Not even the Unambitious Northwestern Treatise.

There’s always time. Thing is, it’s whale-watching season.

They gave me a mantra, he said. I forget whether he’d forgotten it or not.

Blankness runs in the family like legs.

I was in therapy, then I was in group therapy, then I took up running —

Songs don’t mean as much as the lack of them. I remember listening hard — “All everybody wants is” — and detecting even in my father’s enthusiasm a gap. A small confusion, maybe over how deeply he’d needed the music. He tried to sing along but had forgotten the verses.

The sun shined down then, probably. Now it shines. Before we eat,

we pray to the Kabbalah Monster for thanks, for weather.

The agreement: On your birthday, I'll let you braid my hair before we leave. You promise not to read what I'm writing while you braid — your hands in my hair, everything tight, pulling.

Please don't. It's not about you, but today it is.

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And suddenly, jauntily, like splashing water: a whole new geography.

Mussels on clams on rock, barnacles hardening over them. The first sea anemone I've ever seen. You make me trace my finger around the circle of its mouth. The anemone puckers around my finger, sticky and rubbery, and I laugh before the tide washes over our calves and I shriek. We catch all of it on camera. What we won't remember is how cold the water was — we were playing, but the ocean wasn't.

In the bookstore the German woman gives us free postcards for petting the dogs. A miniature pincer and a strutting thing that looks like a bat. A postcard written in Swedish in 1912.

But no whales.

I had forgotten how beautiful the world is. Now we take our shoes off on the gray sand and as the waves explode in exaggerated gestures on the teeming rocks, I say: Wow! God! Amazing! I've never seen anything like this before!

Even wonder gets tiresome.

But no whales. We forgot about them until the German woman reminded us to look. They don't breach, she said, it's mostly spouts from their blowholes. If you're not sure whether it's a whale or not, it isn't.

Fish and chips and a man who's asked too many people how their food is.

Sand we can't rub from between our toes. By the time we retreat from the beach, my jeans are soaked.

I'm not sure I've given you the best birthday. I'm the quiet one, and you're the one who decorated my desk with streamers on my birthday a month ago, had the waitress that night bring out presents on a plate as if they were courses. One of them was this notebook — you made it for me, with your hands.

And what do I do with it? I try to fill it with you — but really, with me.

I try to find myself apart from you, out in the woods, and leave you warm the best I can.

But no whales.

We scan the beach distractedly. It's getting cold. Shapes (people) move on the wide strip of sand as if it's endless, which maybe it is. Someone's calves are freezing. Someone is itching, covered in dried salt.

In the Mundo Café, which everyone directs us to (my braided hair, your flower necklace), wirey waiters with peace tattoos serve us hot chocolate, kombucha, tea. A folksy band warms up downstairs.

The noise is getting to be too much.

The whales hear it too, on their way back up to Alaska to feed. They're ravenous, the mothers and calves. Though the males stay around, no longer needing to grow.

A loosening. A turning over of the soil.

A great silence when we return to the cabin, shut the car off, and unlock the metal gate to the driveway.

Gravel: Welcome back.

The big world is big, but it's not big in that direction. The direction of the ocean, I mean.

I can already feel the internet pulling. The niggling things digging their information holes.

The bigness is a smallness — I know it will be this way when we return. The more I can touch, the more I do touch, and the more I forget to watch. This is bad because for me (maybe not for you) waiting and watching is how I feel full.

The whales didn't come, but we left before they even had a chance.

DAY 7

Last night, in the middle of the night, after I got up and followed my flashlight through the cabin to the toilet, I lay in bed and thought about Kathmandu, and how it was too hot to sleep, same as here (but here it's the heater, you need it on, you're always cold), and next to me slept Kevin, my Australian friend, a confused young man with a beard and long hair and huge feet, and in the morning I would go out and buy a bag of mangoes and cut them up with my grandfather's pocket knife and we'd eat them on the porch in the morning sun while below the city revved to life. One great long day. I tossed and turned, itching and sweating — I was too aware, always.

A little like Christmas, today: *We're going back*, there's so much we have missed, we can drink from the tap, the internet...

My sister and I would walk down the front stairs to an unwrapped drumset or a LEGO city shining in the light of a thousand colors under the tree. And our hearts were released.

You tell me again: Go do your writing. But I'm stealing time from the cleaning, from the leaving.

Still — I go.

I dreamed of a religious visionary who'd been shot and had retreated to the end of a pier outside the city. I and a few shrouded women took a bus to visit her — I don't recall what she prophesied to us — and returned past the starving, blackened feet of exiles over ice and dirt mixed into an unsteady path of slush. The buses dropped us off, but they wouldn't pick us up. So we walked.

The morning is bright and certain for once.

For once, a bird gets closer than it should.

The dew rises like smoke.

I try to stop and feel the minutes go by, but there's so much to do. Pick up our scattered selves from the floors, sweep them, make sure no sign remains that we existed. Thank-you note. We tuck Eddy Arnold and Gordon Lightfoot in with the rest of the silent records.

I went out in the woods and found myself counting the days.

I want to hold it all in, if just for a second. Oxygen. River of blood. Summation. Conclusion. A to B is no longer a satisfying progression.

Your feet are pacing the kitchen, throwing what's rotted away. I'm on the porch, twiddling a pen.

I'm ready to go back. So that — I tell myself — I'll know what happened here. But I already know.

My bones are not quiet enough still. It's because you are in them.

EPILOGUE

Well. I *went* out in the woods. Past tense.

We packed the car and I fussed when you wanted to find leaves and

sticks and lichen to burn into a sun-photo kit — I was still sweeping. Until I remembered that I had abandoned you, too.

The air is too immediate here. A chainsaw — really probably a leaf blower — growls nearby. Cars sound like lazy waves, but they're all on their way somewhere.

Prolonged meditation.

Nothing-to-do.

Maybe I was more at peace than I thought I was.

My apartment does this unique thing: The day can be sixty and sunny but because the windows get no sun, my fingernails turn purple.

The pavement seems to be waiting for something.

We stood watching the creek jump over the old log, my arm around you, the cabin doors finally locked. We tried to sum it up.

We got a lot of work done. It was a special time. I feel clear, ready.

None of these things is actually true. I've held onto nothing. My body feels like a sieve, like the creek might as well be passing through it.

At the gate, I turned into a child. Isn't there something left to do? We could do it!

There's plenty, you said. The cabin's not going to disappear.

Sure — the cabin is still there.

Still the forest grows like a wall.

But before that — before we locked the doors, stared at the creek, drove to the gate, unlocked it, drove past, and locked it again — you yelled from the side door, You've got to come see this. Right now? I

asked. I'm sweeping. You said, Yes. So I came outside and saw.

A hummingbird banged over and over against the garage's long window. There were yards of open air behind it, but it had gotten in a corner and decided that the glass was the only way out. The pounds were loud for such a small thing.

Its beak was a needle. With every pound, I could feel the crack of the beak against the glass, bending, maybe starting to break.

I got up on the work table with a cardboard box and tried to usher the hummingbird out. It became even more frantic. As the lip of the box chased it, it flew harder against the window, but laterally too, away from the box. I thought I could coax it toward where the wall of the garage ended. Even though I thought I might be hurting it — it was so delicate, a deflated ping-pong ball, tired in its eyes — I kept pushing.

Then the hummingbird stopped.

It sat on the lip of the box. I couldn't believe it. I lowered the box away from the window, so if the hummingbird stayed still — somehow, miraculously — I could walk it outside. I moved the box too quickly at first, so the bird flew back into the window. Then I brought the box back and it perched again and I moved the box more slowly. You said the hummingbird was looking at me.

Then it was a bullet, and it flew off into the woods.

You close the gate and leave the key in the lockbox.

We drive past the pickup trucks and jerry-rigged lean-tos and logging roads, find the highway, and bring the Corolla up to speed.

We stop next to a McDonald's for gas.

Back in town, we're nipping at each other already. You're making plans for tomorrow. I don't want to make plans. The old dance.

The cow farm. The forever stoplight. Bicyclers again.

When we get out of the car, the day is full like a cabin. But the cabin goes on for a long ways.

Then we're walking through it, surveying — making sure everything is here.