

Reconciliation: Relativity

There is a story that a man and not a man
Saw and did not see a bird and not a bird
Perched on a branch and not a branch
And hit him and did not hit him with a rock and not a rock.
-Plato

My grandmother's cat is nine years old, middle aged and feeling sorry for himself again. A sardonic droop to his eyes, his paw dangles off the radiator. He watches my grandmother and I stand on the naked lawn of the farmhouse, the aphids and the milkweed gone, the brown wood barn looming overhead. She folded up the pool chairs weeks ago, and all the snakes I used to find beneath the chairs have dug hallow channels beneath the yellow grass. The cat doesn't think about snakes. He doesn't care about their winter dens, or their bodies that don't produce heat on their own. The last rays of sunlight rill through the window. The radiator buzzes beneath his belly. He thinks about the slab of concrete that warmed him two weeks ago. "How sad," he thinks, "it's all cold now."

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My grandmother has a pumice stone for a face, spongy volcanic glass formed when super-heated, pressurized rock escapes a volcano's maw. When rock bursts from the volcano, the pressure and temperature drop, and craters form. Roman engineers used these great lava flows to build the dome of the Pantheon. They are now used to condition soil and scrape off dead skin.

"The bats," my grandma says, "are coming." She stares at the barn and the craters grow, expand. The wind gets louder. The leaves talk. There is a general rustling and I worry about her religious

tendencies, that enamel bird perched on a cross-shaped branch pinned to her chest. I haven't eaten dinner yet, and late mosquito bites are flaring on my legs, turning into lesions from my scratching. I bend down to scratch one on my thigh- she senses it. Her face becomes stonier, fortified, and I realize with some dismay that she'll act colder towards me if I leave. And so, legs pink, hair standing, I stay.

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My grandfather is nowhere in this scene. He is inside, house-warmed, a collection of old movies on in a reel. He is asleep maybe, with his lips apart, mustache like a piece of coppice, hair sleek like a wombat, potato chip oil on his fingers. He wiggles his arms on the chair arms. They separate only by place mats my grandma put down, to keep from cleaning his grease off the leather.

Old pictures surround him, my great grandmother, Ms. Indiana of 1936, with a sash across her chest, my great grandfather, Mr. Wilson, holding her baby-like in front of the car she won. That was before the wedding- she was very young.

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The sky swells above my head and there is a push for its whiteness to open and fill, as if us standing here has made it so. The spaces between leaves clung to trees open and close. Space is the desert oasis, the gateway and the gate- and foremost a place for material things, in or around which all events occur. I look back in the window, just for a moment, to see the cat wink at me. He is in on this, too, I think. My khaki shorts and their broken button are abruptly apparent. I remember the snakes brumating under the house. I am aware of the scene we're making between the house and highway.

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Motion never exists in what is uniform. The cat waits in the house. The snakes brumate underneath. The aphid pupae line the trees, ready for the cold. Then the chirping comes, the feeding sound. Bats leap from the barn, barrage the air, scooping insects up in great hordes. They have cluttered, driven movement, cut loose like smoke in rapid time. They fly over us as what could be dust mites or bending sheets of plastic if seen from far above. But we're not above. We're here, on the dried out lawn. My grandmother is solemn, the only hint of reaction a glimmer of fear and excitement in her eyes. I have no such complication, and tip my head back, wide-eyed and overwhelmed.

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My grandmother has changed forms. The holes have shrunk to pores again and she is tipping coffee to her face. Her eyes are bright and shining. Cup held beneath her chin, steam rolls up and distorts her, till all her face's inconsistencies appear a soft white powder. In the arch of the kitchen doorway, I stare across the living room. Grandfather on the recliner, cat by the radio, both stuck in primordial jelly. It is pleasantly warm in the living room and I walk beneath the arch to slide down on the sofa, softly, no threat. Explosions boom on the television screen. Window light fades. Where would we go without their staying?