

New Fiction by Jessie Carver: “A Natural History”

written by Guest Contributor | July 24, 2017



- 1 -

The act of bearing witness. Typically, to witness something implies observing criminal activity or observing a spectacular event. When often, the most profound act of bearing witness resides in catching sight of something as mundane as a young child reaching to graze the prickly softness of a caterpillar, an old man bowing with pain as he lowers himself onto a bus seat. A girl scattering wildflowers on the grave of her pet rabbit. A person laughing so hard his eyes clasp shut. A pigeon lying lifeless on the snow.

She accepted this role of witness with resignation, but sometimes felt she couldn't contain all the moments of joy but also of loss that resounded within her, competing and colliding and flapping inside her chest like the wings of innumerable birds trying to escape.

- 2 -

When she was eleven, she woke up one morning to the frenzied barking of her family's dogs. It was autumn, and underneath the snarling she could hear the crackle of leaves below their paws as they raced back and forth along the perimeter of the fence near her bedroom window. She parted the cold metal blinds to look out into the weak light, the sun threatening to crest the horizon, and could discern a skunk outside the yard charging the wire fence over and over and over again, its white stripe marking its path straight for the dogs on the other side. Its movements were bizarre, lurching. She felt as though she was dreaming and not quite able to recreate the way skunks move in real life.

Two gunshots rang out in rapid succession. *Crackcrack*. She jerked back and her fingers fell away from the blinds. When she looked out again, she saw the rabid skunk's body crumpled against the fence, heard her dad yelling "Shut up!" at the dogs, who had resumed their barking after being momentarily startled into silence. She watched as he pulled on his heavy leather work gloves to pick up the dead skunk, carried it to the fire pit, lit a fire, and stood with his back to her while thick ropes of smoke shuttled into the air.

He threw his gloves, too, into the flames after a few minutes.

Leaving the fire to incinerate the carcass, he headed inside. She ran to greet him at the back door, eyes wide with questions. He said nothing as he barreled past her to the bathroom, shutting the door with a sharp bang that made her jump, the gunshots still reverberating through her rib cage.

- 3 -

She once dated a man who collected his cat's fallen whiskers and kept them in a little jar on his dresser. Every so often the man would line up those wiry white hairs side by side and admire them, then gather them and place them back in the jar. Years later she read that, unlike human hair, whiskers are actually touch receptors, sending information directly to the cat's sensory nerves. That jar, then, was full of tiny lifeless messengers, stripped of their utility but nonetheless adored. She was almost envious of them.

- 4 -

Watching the cows get slaughtered was something she dreaded every time it came around, but she felt obligated to witness their deaths, the only female present among her dad and uncle and cousins who were all enthusiastic hunters and unfazed by the taking of life. She didn't feel particularly attached to the cows, and harbored no serious reservations about eating their meat, but remembered them fondly as calves with spindly legs and earnest velvety faces. She thought they deserved to die around someone who could say a few kind words to honor them, even if the words were just offered silently. By the time she reached high school, she could no longer bring herself to stay for the bleeding out. The thing about death is that on a dying body, the glint of blood and the final shudder of breath looks the same on an animal as it does a human. When the 0.38 pistol was traded for hunting knives, the ground was swallowed by rivulets of blood that eventually merged, becoming small lakes. And afterwards she still had to walk by those dark spectral stains on the ground, and the sickening smell of death clung to the air for days.

- 5 -

Two different times with two different lovers, at some point when she was having sex with each of them for the first time, they wrapped their hands around her neck and tightened their grip until she could barely breathe. The first time this startled her, but she didn't try to stop the man. The restriction of oxygen to her brain, the blurring of sex and death with the touch of a stranger's skin, was confusing.

The second time it again startled her, but after a few seconds she reached up and put her hands over the woman's and contributed pressure, simulating control but not in control, liking it, fearing it, complicit. As she lay trembling in the sweaty sheets afterwards, she thought of the cat whiskers and wondered what messages were being transmitted to her sensory nerves through their fingers around her throat.

She never saw either of them again.

On Christmas morning when she was sixteen, she went outside to pour boiling water into the dogs' frozen water bucket, her exposed fingers brittle and her breath escaping into small evanescent billows as she crunched over the ground. Passing under the cluster of pine trees, she saw a pigeon nestled in the snow. At first she assumed it was sleeping, and thought it strange the dogs hadn't yet discovered the bird and incited it into flight. But when she got closer and it didn't move and she touched it, tentatively at first, she realized the pigeon was dead.

She picked it up expecting to find a bullet hole, perhaps, or an animal bite on its stiff underbelly, but there were no marks. Tears tumbled down her cheeks. She couldn't explain where they came from or why they wouldn't stop, why they turned into heaving sobs that overtook her body, or why the scene struck her as the saddest thing in the world. That pigeon, the most ordinary of birds, lying in an icy bundle on the snow on Christmas all alone, and she the only witness to its death.

One weekend she and her boyfriend were staying at his friend's house a few cities away while the friend was overseas. Wine-drunk and stoned late on their final night, they sprawled naked on the bed after fucking and used the last match to re-light the joint. When that didn't take, her boyfriend got up and rifled through the desk drawers searching for a lighter. Instead, he returned to the bed with a pile of Polaroid photographs and a small revolver.

"Look what I found!" he said, alcohol pulling on his words, the Polaroids tumbling onto the disheveled blanket.

She picked up the photos and examined them, tenderly, with the guilt of a voyeur peering at something acutely intimate and not intended for her. The eyes of strangers stared back at her like secrets. In one, a woman sat cross-legged on a sun-soaked hardwood floor, naked except for lacey black underwear, her face framed with dark loose hair, breasts heavy, eyes looking straight at the camera, unsmiling.

In another, three people were laughing hard, sitting haphazardly on a tattered couch surrounded by piles of books that rose from the ground like crooked towers, two of the people glancing in different directions, one of them with his eyes closed. None of the photos were exceptionally artful—although she found a certain beauty in them—but rather appeared to serve the purpose of documentation, archiving fragments of time that held significance solely to the photographer.

When she handed the Polaroids across the bed to her boyfriend, he passed her the revolver as though they had a predetermined agreement to take turns with these artifacts. She hadn't held a gun in many years, and looked at it dangling from her boyfriend's hand for a few moments before extending hers to accept it. Tracing the contours of the barrel with her fingers, its cold weight pressing against the bare skin of her thigh, the metal felt almost

sexual, even erotic, infused with the unnerving and unpredictable potential for violence. It both sobered and excited her.

Years later she would look back to this moment and wonder if the gun was loaded, but at the time she didn't consider the possibility. Long after her boyfriend extracted the revolver from her reluctant fingers and returned it with the photographs to the drawer, she could feel their presence across the room as she contemplated where those people were now, and how many times the gun had been fired, and at what target.

- 8 -

Several farms over had lived a delicate girl with wispy white-blond hair and large cerulean eyes, and as children they played together. Following a sleepover when she was thirteen and her neighbor-friend was twelve, they awoke early when the hospice nurse arrived for the day shift of caring for her friend's mother, who lay in her darkened room in the far back of the house, cancer gnawing away at her body.

After breakfast the girls went out to feed the horses and rabbits, and found one of the rabbits dead in the hutch, his body rigid as if a taxidermied version of himself had replaced the living one overnight. She couldn't stop staring at the rabbit's eyes, open and glassy and vacuous. It seemed like, if she looked long enough, his eyes would eventually blink. When they ran inside to tell her friend's dad, he told them that he had to go into town so they needed to bury the rabbit themselves before the heat of the sun started to decay the body.

"Let this be a lesson to you in the circle of life," he declared with a chuckle that felt contrived. She suspected he was overcompensating after his conversation with the nurse, and felt willing to overlook the lapse of inauthenticity.

They followed him out to the shed, where he handed them each a shovel and instructed them to dig the hole out back by the woodpile at least two feet down, deep enough so the coyotes wouldn't unearth the decomposing rabbit. The girls looked at each other, bracing themselves for the task ahead.

By the time they finished digging the hole, they were mottled with dirt and sweat, angry red blisters emerging on the palms of their hands, the sun blazing high overhead. Above them, crows circled and shrieked, uninvited funereal announcers, as they crouched next to the hole and lowered the dead rabbit into his grave. Before they shoveled the dirt back in, they released handfuls of purple alfalfa blossoms from the pasture and wild morning glories plucked from the nearby bank of the Rio Grande.

"Do you think he knew he wasn't going to wake up this morning?" asked her friend, her voice quivering.

"No," she said. "I think he died dreaming about playing in the field and he's still in that dream." It was the most comforting thing she could think of.

"Will the other rabbits miss him?"

"They might for a little bit, but they'll be okay. They probably don't really understand death, and will just notice his absence. Maybe that's the same thing as missing him."

"Do you think he knew I loved him, even if I wasn't there when he died?"

It occurred to her then that they were talking about the rabbit but also not about the rabbit, and she suddenly felt unqualified to impart any words about the situation. She put her arm around the girl's narrow shoulders and held her tight as they looked down at the fresh scar of earth before them.

- 9 -

Some years later on an airplane halfway across the country returning home for a funeral, she wrote in the margins of her boarding pass: "Words are all we have. Words are never enough." She found little comfort in this.

- 10 -

The day after her twenty-ninth birthday, she was on her way to meet with a new client. As she drove through a residential neighborhood, a German shepherd ran out in front of her car. She braked hard, narrowly missing the dog, but the oncoming pickup truck from the opposite direction didn't react as quickly. She heard the scream of tires skidding and the dull thud of the dog's body hitting the truck's front bumper, followed by a pained, unearthly sound that lasted only a few seconds. She slammed her car into park, ran over to the dog, and found it an unresponsive mound of fur matted with blood.

The driver, a man with darkly weathered skin, a Stetson hat pulled low over his face, and scuffed work boots, grabbed a tarp from the bed of his pickup and said, "Damn shame he had to go like that, the poor bastard. Didn't see him in time." Later, during the meeting, she couldn't stop picking at the nearly undetectable smears of dried blood on her black slacks. Every time she looked down at her notepad the words swam in front of her and she saw the dead dog and felt dizzy. Damn shame.

- 11 -

The summer following the rabbit burial was the last stretch of time before she entered high school, and it was when she experienced her first significant infatuation, igniting in her a nascent lust that surprised her with its force. She was swimming in a pool with her neighbor-friend. The sunlight was relentless, and the droning chorus of insects sent electricity buzzing through the dry air. Her neighbor-friend surfaced inches from her, and she became captivated by how the lower edge of the turquoise snorkeling mask pushed her top lip out fuller than usual, how her dripping blond curls danced on the shifting edges of the water, and tiny droplets hovered on the knob of her clavicle. The insect chatter dissipated and all she could hear was the rush of blood in her ears, overcome with the urge to kiss the glistening girl beside her.

The rest of that summer, they took turns enacting the role of doctor with the lights turned off in her neighbor-friend's bedroom, straddling and touching

and stroking and prodding each other's bodies. Their lips never touched. The girls spoke in breathy whispers, though the house was often unoccupied, and they followed a script they knew instinctively. "Tell me what hurts." "How does that feel?" "Is it painful there?" "What about here?" "Do you like this?" "Does it feel good?"

- 12 -

The truth was, it was easier for her to think about the animal deaths she'd encountered than the human deaths. The animal deaths held less gravity, less implication. She could tell people all day long about the countless animal deaths she had borne witness to. It was all the human deaths, the many people she had loved to varying degrees and in different capacities who were dead now, that jolted her awake at three in the morning and left her feeling like she'd been sucker punched viciously in the stomach, and after lying awake, sleep an impossibility, she would get dressed, lace up her sneakers, and run through the empty dark streets while everyone else slept until sweat replaced her tears and finally she could register nothing beyond her achy legs and burning lungs and only then could she go home and collapse into bed still dressed and sweaty and sleep hard dreamless sleep until her alarm went off a short time later. That was the truth.

- 13 -

One winter evening she was lying on her living room rug with her boyfriend, their bodies intersecting perpendicularly so that her head was on his stomach. Billie Holiday's "April in Paris" played on the record player, with the familiar scratch that caused the song to skip at, "Whom can I run to / run to / run to."

"I wish we were different people so we could be together and be happy," she said.

"I wish the world was different. I don't think people are meant to live here anymore," he replied.

"We're talking about different things," she said and closed her eyes. She remembered her mother once saying that the Beatles got it wrong, that love isn't all you need.

Outside the window, icy fog laced through the oak tree, filling in the space around the empty branches and giving them an eerie appearance. But she liked how dreamy fog made the world, and hoped it would stay around for a few days.

When the music ended, he jumped up without warning, forcing her to lift her head. "I'd better go," he said as he slid the record into its sleeve. "See you Friday?"

She nodded even though his back was to her. "Okay," she agreed after a few seconds, disappointment bending her voice even though she tried to sound cheerful. He came over to where she was sitting and bent down, his lips brushing hers like a fleeting whisper. "Love you!" he said as he pulled on his jacket and wound his houndstooth scarf around his neck.

But the words sounded wrong, and she wished he hadn't said them. She watched out the window as he disappeared into the fog, and she imagined it swallowing him. Not him dying, exactly, but the fog gently enveloping him out of existence. She imagined explaining to his roommate why he never arrived home. "It was like he was there one second and then he wasn't. Some things are just beyond our understanding. But I think he's happier now," she would say wisely and bravely.

- 14 -

She became aware of her aversion for euphemisms for death when she was six and the baby died. Instead of becoming a big sister, she found herself drowning in thickly coated phrases that insulted her with their meaninglessness. *Dearly departed deceased expired followed the light no longer with us passed away resting in peace crossed over entered a better world with god now with the angels before her time didn't make it taken from us too soon left us slipped away lost her life laid to rest gone home gone to a better place gone to eternal rest gone to heaven gone gone gone.*

Resorting to euphemistic language to obscure the discomfort of death felt offensive, as if using different words would change the reality, as if the adults wielding them were so obtuse they might not have to acknowledge what had actually happened. It made her want to scream, "She died! She is dead! Stop trying to make it sound nice!" It made her want to break things.

One day while her parents were speaking in hushed voices with visiting friends in the living room, she went into her bedroom and closed the door, sensing some amount of shame in what she was about to do. She tried out some of the more benign words, parroting the phrases she kept hearing to see if she could understand their value. "The baby passed away. We lost her," she told her favorite doll, stiffly propped up against her pillow to receive the news. "We are bereft." It all sounded so phony that she vowed to never substitute the truth with vague words that dripped like tar with false softness. The baby was dead.

- 15 -

She had this recurring dream, for years, and it still surfaced every now and then, unexpectedly. It was late at night on her family's farm, and the sky was moonless and cloudless, stars disrupting the darkness above her with a penetrating sharpness. The Russian olive trees lining the eastern edge of the fields cast shadows that in themselves appeared to be more a solid object than the result of light. The quiet had such weight that it seemed to absorb all noise and she found it difficult to orient herself to this soundless heavy landscape, the familiarity of her childhood terrain rendered foreign.

She was wearing jeans and a shirt, or sometimes pajamas, and fear coursed through her body like fire, the pounding of her heart pulsing through her limbs with urgency. Every inch of her body was activated, mobilized on high alert. Out there, in the shadows, a strange man carried a Winchester rifle like an extension of his body, pausing intermittently to peer through the scope, searching for her, hunting her down like a deer. No words were ever

exchanged.

She knew this stranger, her executioner, would inevitably find her and kill her, but her survival instincts were racing and her only thought was to live. For what felt like hours, they would engage in a deadly match, sometimes running, mostly hiding in wait. The tractors and bales of alfalfa, toolsheds and pecan trees, chicken coop and trucks, were transformed into an elaborate, insidious maze. The only sound through all of this was her own ragged breath.

Occasionally he did shoot her, but the dream ended there, abruptly, as the thunderous impact of the bullet shocked her awake, and she never learned if he succeeded in killing her. Once or twice she watched these scenes unfold before her, disembodied and watching her own body below, a powerless observer to her impending death. She never made it to a part in the dream where daylight came and she survived the night and could breathe again without fear. Most often she woke up while still running for her life.

– end –



Jessie Carver is an editor and writer who lives in Portland, Oregon, but grew up on a farm in New Mexico. She received her master's in writing from Portland State University in 2011, has been published in the *Watershed Review*, and co-authored the book *Rethinking Paper and Ink: The Sustainable Publishing Revolution*.