

Flood Tide

Lauren Van Schaik Smith

The new tar road edges past our house the summer after my sister buried our momma near the back fence, laying her head past the slats to keep her feet out of the beans. It was the lion half of March when she died and high July when the road lolls in, a river of stinking tar nosing through the low ground and scrub. We watch it for a week, first from the roof and then from the beans, Zora and I both squint - pinching its black neck in our fingers and counting the thumbs between its roll and our momma's head.

Zora is shorter than me by a nose but she has sharper eyes and if she wobbles up on her toes she can see men where I see only a dark ridge, silt at bottom of my eyes. Zora says the men followed a truck with a steel rolling pin and rubbed out the pleats in the dough it left behind. She had gone down that road when it was still dirt, pitted and half as wide. She'd been all the way to St. Louis on it, or on the road that fed into a road that bumped into that one, and she was an expert on all the places they flow.

I know roads as cat's cradle strings, tangling, crossing and then running back to the knot, but Zora always knows how to find an end. She sleeps in our mother's bed now, with the money hidden in a coffee tin underneath, and, when I couldn't dig the grave as deep as the flood plain needs, she walked into town and called the cousins down from Des Moines to do it.

The roadmen are from Zora's end, or further away by the looks of them and the blisters that bubble pink on their backs and their hands. They come to the house the day the tar stench settles into its corners like musk and I can fit the space between their road and our momma in a pinch. There's one who calls himself W.E. and he has a high - stepped clip to his walk like he's bicycling flat on two feet. He won't look me in the eye, not through the screen door or when I snatch up the baby and come to stand with them on the porch. "Zane, miss" is younger, with a head like a cat's back, slick with spit pomade. He looks at me, hauling Cal from hip to hip, and he snatches up the corners of his mouth like he's grabbing skirt hems.

"Do you know you have a body under our road?" he says.

I'd thought about this day for a week, lying still in my bed with the warm weight of dirt above me, imagining wheels rutting distances into my head forever. Zora had fanned herself across our mother's bed, curling her hands like fiddleheads, and said she'd love to be buried under a road. It would be like she'd gone somewhere and it had actually stuck. Zora had always wondered about the vanishing point, the hairline crack our daddy and our brother slipped through, the way our momma never had. She was content the unsounded gullies of their absences, the shortsighted reach of her eyes, and we'd never even seen the cousins who clanked down from Iowa to bury her. There was one with a gray - webbed beard who talked about her like she was a child, and two with heavy, lagging limbs and slack faces like boys', just as incurious about her as she had been about them. "I've seen it," I say. "She's down too deep for my sister and I to move and my husband is in St. Louis." Zora and I have always been married around strangers. Another lesson from our momma, who could conjure up our daddy like ghost for repairmen and tramps: boots on the porch, rifle on the mantle, old clothes clipping on the line. I have only Cal, and he's a crawfish in my arms, wriggling and slipping unhooked. I have to nearly squeeze the guts out of him to hitch him up.

"That's why we came," Zane says. "They told us in town you girls were all alone out here and weak as reeds."

"We want that road straight as a whistle." W.E. whistles like a bomb falling.

"We'll do it respectful. Our pa was a minister," Zane says.

I think about the quarters ringing in the coffee tin and the wide appetites our Iowa cousins worked up digging that grave, the way they sat with their knees pushing our kitchen table from the ground and their hands flattening the bend from our spoons. Zora would know what to do. She'd learned certain things about men in St. Louis — how they ticked, where they went when they disappeared. But she'd also learned to wear fur indoors, to kiss by batting her eyelashes against our cheeks, and how to eat. Our momma let out the seams on her new dresses and fed her from her own plate and said it was good luck to be fat in lean times and she was proud. She was still proud when she held Cal in her arms, fat like a molasses jug and almost as sticky. She'd still be proud of Zora, prodigal daughter with her feet up on the kitchen table, listening to the crackle of distance in the radio stream. Our men were too far for momma and I was too close, but Zora had been just right — magicked up from the ether, rewritten into the Bible with her kid.

“It would nice to have Momma closer to the house,” I say. They still want to dig and I fetch them shovels from the shed, green - rusted things of my father’s I have to drag. Cal and I watch as they dig, Zane on the inside and W.E. on the road. Momma’s in the furthest turn of the fence, in a patch where the ground is bald and sun - boiled and even the clover driven off. I can see the road from here, lipped and burned like lava flow stopped suddenly. The dirt is still loose from March, but already a foot down W.E. is steamed and dripping, gulping air uselessly through his mouth like a carp. He leans on his shovel and pounds spit up from his lungs. Two feet down and the stench slithers up, rank and muddy like the aftermath of a flood. Once a raccoon died under the house and Zora and I nearly fainted before the reek reached our momma through her stopped nose. It smells like that.

We find her three feet down, parceled in her pine box, not nearly deep enough for the flood plain. It was the Iowa cousins, with their mitt hands and their idle hugeness, and Zora watching them from porch. I hadn’t had the nerve to see and when they came back into the house, palms and boots red with Ozark mud, they said they’d weighed her down with the biggest stones and heaviest prayers they could find, and I believe them.

“One flood and she’d be in your tomatoes, particularly with all this dirt they’ve been shifting here,” Zane says.

“Nature doesn’t give a fuck.” W.E. peddles his bowed little legs; he has the hang onto toe fence slats to heave himself out of the pit.

The water was here once before, so high here it washed into the house and skinned our momma’s wallpaper up from the baseboards in sopping curls. It crowded us upstairs and she wouldn’t let us down past the fifth step until the water slunk back, even to rescue the cat marooned on the bureau, and for three days we paced upstairs, half - starved. It was dirty water, she said, and sure enough, when we edged down the stairs after it had ebbed, the mud scum on our carpets was seeded with things we’d never seen before: stones as heavy as bookends, red -toothed arrowheads, wish pennies from the creek, even the head of the hoe. But the terrible prize was the bone: whittled with a carefulness God only gave to men, bigger than anything I’d ever gutted from a fish. I looked for it later in the diagrams in the encyclopedia at the library, to make sure, and then I couldn’t stop seeing it — sneaking over the neck of my sister’s Sunday dress when she fiddled it low, jutting out from my skin in the bath as if it could pop out like a paper doll piece. The flood

drowned an entire family we knew from church and plowed up burial plots across the county but no one ever came looking for a clavicle. If the Mississippi ever burst again, it would be pieces of our momma scattered through the yard.

“Won’t be so bad if she came up,” W.E. said. “I was in France. Bones everywhere, yours, mine, the thighbone of the guy 30 feet down the trench. I saw my own bones, white as that kid’s teeth, punching out of my knee here.” He’s proud of it. He prods a clod of dirt into the hole. It skitters on my momma’s box. W.E.’s juddering knees can’t keep him up anymore, so Zane and I fill in the burrow under the fence and drag the pine box to the flowerbeds beside the house. Zane throws the shovel down then like he doesn’t mean to pick it up again and slides down onto the box.

“I have a story for you. Make this go down easily.”

Dusk has slunk up now. I’ve left Cal behind on the grass and I can’t see him; he’s still as a cicada shell, sniveling faraway. I should holler for Zora. She has the radio on and I can hear it. “Make what go down?”

“Hush. I was working on a fishing boat in Newfoundland once and the whole sea sucked back, baring all this beach no one had ever seen. People came down from their houses to look, scavenge things. There were these beautiful shells and these flat, smooth stones but iceboxes too and dinghies sunk so long ago no one remembered the dead and bones, lots of them. There were people who looked for Spanish gold or just wanted to see the lay of this new land. Then waves came back huge and they all drowned.”

“That’s horrible.”

“No, it was beautiful. I can swim and when the sea flattened out again I went back there, filled a boat with everything I found on the seabed. There was bullion too and for a while I was rich.”

“W.E. is coming around with the truck,” he says. “We’ve been watching that road for a while and that little grave marker you had in its path. It would have lapped right over your momma if we weren’t here. You can still think of it as a favor.”

I’m frantic but I can’t be loud or Zora will hear. She would have known and my own stupidity stings. “Momma doesn’t have gold teeth. She doesn’t have jewelry.

“There’s a guy at the fancy university in St. Louis, and he pays for bones. They use them for the medical students. Sometimes they crack them just so they can learn how to mend them. W.E. has this madness for medical sciences. He wants to be mended some day.”

I think about my momma, drifting smoothly over those new tar roads on the way to St. Louis, being disassembled piece by piece, her bones cracked, set, sketched. I always wondered who the skeleton in the encyclopedia was, when we're all so different, even when we have the same bones and blood. I almost like that it'll be our momma.

When they've driven away, I find Cal asleep in the grass and we wake Zora, straggled across the divan, dead in dreams, and I tell her the roadmen came and they said momma was fine where she was.