

What Rises

A STORY BY IVER ARNEGARD



Marty Gotona

I.

Camped beside a game trail in the Northern Rockies. A hundred miles from the last gravel road. Forms take shape:

A sod roof stitched tight with buffalo grass. Pioneer parents working land outside Big Timber.

That north storm packing ice. Rolling over the ranch and ripping the windmill to shreds. September but it felt like winter. The air sharp and jagged.

The stench of scorched hide and smoldering horns. Pink glow of branding irons.

Our sharpening stone. A bull elk hanging in the barn. Dad's buck knife splitting the crimson flesh that separates bone from bone.

II.

Hands folded. Heads bowed. A mother's eyes searching an empty sky.

Swales and coulees. The swollen hills of Sweet Grass County cresting like waves.

The scream of a distant mountain lion.

Wildflowers bursting from cracks in the clay. And the Front Range. Towering to the west. Lifting from the prairie like a dare.

III.

A girl who would've taken my name. I'd see those eyes in the face of every woman I'd meet. For years to come.

Asleep. Dreaming of icebergs vast as mountain ranges. Breaking from the shelf and drifting out to sea.

Staring north, beyond Montana. So much potential. Never enough time.

Plenty of work but for some reason I couldn't stay. All I have are these images that won't fade:

An alpine meadow choked with bear grass. Plumes of pollen spraying from each step. Huckleberries fat as grapes. And cutthroat dancing on the end of my line.

IV.

What rises to the surface:

The burn of whiskey. Hot and bright as an ember. The only cathouse north of Calgary. In the dark. After a fifth of Jack. She could be almost anyone you wanted her to be.

My mare's saddle cracked and faded. Her ears cocked toward hungry wolves.

Mountain peaks and trout streams too remote for names.

It never stopped. Something always called, down every trail. Something essential. But unknown.

V.

Memories. I have eight decades of them:

The smell of gun smoke and blood. A whitetail slung over the back of my horse.

Way up north. A town maps didn't care about. Wealth measured in firewood and moose meat. Everyone rich. Everyone poor.

A beautiful bride with a constellation of blond hair. Skin like river water.

VI.

Clearing spruce for our cabin. Logs notched tight as fingers in prayer.

A snarl of icicles, angled by wind. Gripping the roof until May.

That meteor shower. Raining across darkness. Ripping bright signatures of fire.

Her body. Cold and heavy on top of the bed. Pneumonia had done its work. An unmarked grave in the Yukon. At the confluence of two runaway streams.

VII.

Years. Crawling by.

An amber moon blooming from a darkened horizon. Burning brighter than a dim sun.

From then on I never stopped moving.

VIII.

Somewhere back in the undergrowth all the images flow into the present. Swirling into a back eddy of my mind where my mare, nearly senile, bends down to take a drink.

She smells the miles unfolding without end.

Tomorrow she'll wake me at dawn. Already nosing the trail. Always tuned to the scent—faded but steady—of something mysterious.

Something essential. □

CHARLES HARPER WEBB

Brain Camp

—“Students will dissect a human brain . . .”

Not canoeing class and campfire sing-alongs—sawing through skulls, peeling of the dura mater, pia mater, and arachnoid to attack the gray matter inside.

Not archery, homesickness, marshmallow-dripping s'mores—carving out the cerebellum; following the curves and the valley called *sulci*.

Not splitting white-skinned tribes into Arapaho, Algonquin, Chippewa—dividing medulla from pons, left hemisphere from right.

Not pulling perch and catfish from a muddy lake with a cane pole—dropping a line in the cerebral aqueduct; dragging up the amygdala from limbic depths, dripping.

Not hatchets and whittling with Swiss army knives—scalpels; bone-saws.

Not unhitching horses from a wagon, bedding down under the stars—lifting the tentorium cerebelli, skirting the optic chiasma and Fissure of Sylvius to enter the substantia nigra, dark as night.

Not huddling in mummy bags, chewing dried apricots and jerky while dangling, tacked to a cliff-face over an abyss—bending to see the mountains of awareness rise: the mind's range moving off in silver mist . . .