

The Mammoth Steppe

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I.

That's us—that's Daddy and me. North of Coeur d'Alene, he tells me
to squat behind the scrub pines if I have to go: he and the junkyard man
hunt for a replacement for our dead Civic. I am nine. On lichened boulders

over the junkyard river I lie face up as banks of clouds coast over me.
Splotchy with pine gum and silt, having eaten all the Good & Plenties,
I see the Honda consigned to the meadow, an old workhorse among rusted
horsepower, its foam innards degrading in the grasses, the most mechanical
kind of death. Daddy and I head farther north in our jerry-rigged Fiesta,
our hatchback a rust-fleck in the frost, the scale always planetary.

II.

We're in the Kliukuk River lab which hums with box after box of fetuses
in fluid. A woman with candy-red eyeglasses raps my knuckles for fingering
the glass over C23, a twenty-month-old who stretches her legs and trunk,

her body matted with fur to warm her on the taiga. C23 looks peaceful,
the way we tell children the dead feel when they're separated from us
for the first time. The sonic generator plays the *whoosh-whoosh*

of a heartbeat across calibrated arcs of a pumped-in endocrine sea.
She doesn't know anything about the ocean's colors, a horsefly's bite,
the sweetness of pumpkin. I myself have just learned the manic state

the long light of summer leaves us all in. I am ten. In Ringer's lactate
and a polythene bag, her knees stretch the pliable limit of her world.
Even in a mother's body, we cannot know what awaits us, the color
our sky will be. Squalls spin in the dark: Daddy calibrates the generators,
assures the doctors the fetuses will be fed electric, even in blackouts.
Everyone is an animal, our hair swishing in the ionized air.

III.

I had a mother once. This was reported to me. A body tethered to mine.
A body built on a body. That is what we call the earth. My skin is thin
and shows the network of heat below. Mama played marbles on the concrete
of Sweetest Heart of Mary—I know this from photos where little moons,
cycles of pull and push, roll in glass arcs, asking to be counted, hit,
and displaced. I keep her matchbook collection as though she hadn't burned
me down. Mama sets me on the quilt spotted in motor oil in the laundry room,
under a snow of soap. I am four. *Don't make a noise.* I don't.
But this is what she tells Ford, a tenth grader. My back is clumped
with Virginia Slims burns. Ford is a crow, a failure of bird and boy:
he leaps from the balcony to what we called the City, pistons beating below.
He believed himself a machine. Mama won't stop wailing.

IV.

Light pulls round the curvature of time over long seasons of expectancy. The abundance here becomes unspeakable. Rivers of reindeer, musk oxen, ermine. The herd strips saplings, larches and alder, gnawing the forest back to grass, to wind over clods: soon sedge and cinquefoil colonize this, cooling the taiga yard by yard. C23 is Cora: she delivers her first daughter as I take my first pregnancy test—precautionary, and negative. At thirty-two, I am one of the few women here. I came for the wild horses, I tell people at the bar: just a story they recognize. I spend days ankle deep in muck carting manure and charting a thousand vat-grown consciousnesses. Grass is young—seventy million years or so. Cora's baby has punky hair, and clings to her mother's tail. Elephants are smart as all get-out, and hand down their faith mother to daughter. Cora's been shot through light years, and crash landed on an earth, deprived of language, born in year zero. The winds here blow wet and blue—and lightning strikes burn patches of sloughgrass where morels will grow.

V.

Daddy's stabbed by a tractor that hits a patch of squishy permafrost and tips. Peritonitis—it's years since drugs came in from the south—and four days of groaning. I bury him in the ice cave in the park.

VI.

Money blew off with the fractured nations, the lab's circuitry
chewed by voles. It's been nine years since my daughter was born.
She flits ahead of me, weaving round divots and turds in the grass.

Did I have a mother? Cora had none, only my father's toolbox,
George Church's pouch. Ancestral memory died before her,
but she is a grandmother. Without mothers, we are still mothers.

We have only enough diesel with winter coming on to drive south
to a school, a furnace. The herd spreads over the grasslands.
Before we go, in the bruised sky, I see a crow and shoot it dead.