The Basalt Bison of Mississippi
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The sports bar had been emptied of its patrons. The waitress wipes down the smooth opaque surface of the bar with a bleached terrycloth towel. We exchange familiar nods greeting one another. She kindly smiles and the latest word of mouth chimes upon the air relaxing work related nerves. Overhead the TVs are synchronized in station identification. Muted speakers make no sound. There is nothing of interest to capture my attention. My friend is far more interesting. Our minds are filled with the emptiness of the day. The mugginess of the artificially cooled air feels clammy; with an open mouth breathing in, it leaves a moldy aftertaste.

Outside the August atmosphere is fevered and newly asphalted streets heave and crack where wintertime potholes once resided. Volcanic basalt rock comes forth from the grassland and lulling hillside. Rich soil and irrigation, from the Columbia River, gives life to the Sun Basin, a dead riverbed standing testament to a time of glaciers and great catastrophe. Somewhere a giant lies beneath the surface. When he thaws from the cold, the earth shivers.

Driving across country the basalt heaps appear to be large bison slumbering in the sage, wild rye, and cheat grass. Pale gravel roadways crisscross the landscape. Chuckholes sink with quicksand stealth. It is typical summertime weather in the desert of the Pacific Northwest. The sun is forever trying to invade interior spaces and control temperaments of the people within. Garbage cans can become fetid. Quarreling couples voice their discontent out into the streets. Somewhere a stereo plays bouncy rhythmic Latino music, “Te quiero, mi car-eee-da! Aahhh ha ha haaaa!”

The jukebox in the bar is a Wurlitzer. Mom and pop have stocked woebegone wannabe biker music, songs reminiscing for tokes, smokes, and a shared woman amongst best friends. The Billboard favorites are there, but no one ever plays them. In the corner of the room sits a pool table. The bumpers are worn and in need of refurbishing. There is electric tape on the coin depository as it is now seventy-five cents a game instead of a dollar twenty-five. To use the pay phone is two dollars. When my shift ends I call. Calling in an order to this den was a personal victory, once I figured out the system. When I sit at the bar my order is hot and ready because my experience has trained the mind to know just when and where a person needs to be in order to make it just so. The cook knows me as The Usual.

“Here ya go,” she says. The moment has arrived. The order slides down the bar to where I am seated. They are clever things, plastic picnic boats. Checked paper lines the basket and cradles the hot content within. Ah, bar fare! A deluxe cheeseburger with all the trimmings and shoestring fries. The oil pops and sizzles over the spud surface. Small granules of salt bounced their way down to the bottom of the luncheon basket, down, down onto the paper below.

These ingredients are a token of much labor and diversity: one hundred percent all Texan beef patty, home grown lettuce and tomato, topped off with Pennsylvanian dill pickle slices and a Walla Walla onion. It sweetly brings tears to your eyes. Thank you, Canada, for an evenly seeded sesame seed bun on which these agricultural wonders meet. A daub of ketchup and the ritual dressing is completed. The aroma of a fit sacrifice can gladden a heart. Don’t forget to pray.

An all American girl smile crescents my face. The detail of a small delight that matter to me is a choice I make in freedom’s blessed name. Grace needs to be said. For what I am to receive...thank you, O, Lord. It’s the American way...a life of simplicity is to be relished.
Neon beer lights glow eerily. The corner of my eye glimpses the TV. All I can see is yellow blocks. *What are those? What is so yellow?* Hunger awakens from a stifled sleep. The burger is a siren’s call to my hunger! It is blessed and our communion is an epiphany. Each tender bite preludes bliss. Flavor erupts.

The caution yellow shapes flash on and off the screen.

Tongue probes finding succulent citrus. A nightly ritual is interrupted by a faint remembrance of the now. “Oh, my God...” a voice trails off in the distance.

“Oh!” it is the waitress. She is praying too. I glance up. There is a large tacky piece of pawnshop jewelry on her slender middle finger. It is ill fitting. *How does she keep that on without losing it? I would have to wrap yarn around it, to size it to fit!* Trembling hand covers lipstick faded lips. Her fingertips are rosy from hand washing pints in lukewarm dishwater. The glasses are drying on a towel by the stainless steel sink.

*Chew. Chew. Count to twenty-two!* I sing to myself. The waitress hasn’t said anything more.

*What is she doing?* Her face is a mirror upturned toward the idiot box. Spectacles reflect school buses. Her once small happy eyes are darkened with sadness welling up as if from a medieval pool of emotions. A free falling tear rolls over her anemically waxen skin. It makes a patting sound as it contacts polished wood. Stiff necked I turn to the source of her attentions.

Chewing, chewing, breathe in, chewing. *Surely, there is nothing to see. Maybe it is a soap opera?*

Emptyed hand disapprovingly let go. The burger returns to the basket reluctantly. Heartbeats drum a rhythm as eyes meet digital media. Blood rushes. No longer muted, the speakers are murmuring. “It is not the worst we have seen.” A helicopter surround sounds its way through the sports bar. Eyes dart back to the waitress.

Ophelia’s hear is breaking.

*Thud, thud, thud.*

The vapor of the cooler mimics thin whiffs of fog. Luminescent screens irradiate the spectrum of the closed atmosphere. We are neutralized. Everything around the television is faded into darkness. The lulling of the helicopter blades chopping through the combative wind supersedes our focus on what we are seeing. There is movement, like small animal going into retreat. The waitress disappears into the walk-in cooler where the kegs are kept. *The TV!* Reeling from information I am caught. Eyes that suffered fatigue roll toward unfolding the spectacle. Pupils dilate at shadowy surfaces below. *It is not shadow; it is water.* Deep waters where streets and buildings had been appear fathomless. Alone, to face the unwanted specter of destruction rushing through some urban landscape, tense muscles bulk underneath the skin.

A black man treads water within the rapidly rising street’s flow. Outstretched, his arms plead in supplication. Yellow shapes flash on the screen. He is drowning in waters that the school busses are afloat in. “Look,” cries the reporter. His jacketed arm leads to a gnarled bony hand waving in the direction of anonymous; the cameraman turns back to the man floundering. Splatters of droplets cover the lens.
How could they not see him? Where is this?

Atlantis has opened her floodgates contracting and bearing down on the Gulf Coast. Katrina is the harbinger of Pandora’s splendors mixing a rainbow of colors. The swirling oil slick surrounds the man who is pushed against his will into a tree. The top of the man’s head visible as torrents of water envelope him in what seems will be an early grave. He aggressively fights the waters for his own safety like a small animal facing a nightmarish predator in a moment of survival.

He must be scared out of his mind!

Bobbing above and then below he comes back up spewing Mississippi River swill water and the Gulf of Mexico. Again the hands open as arms splash into the currents. He cannot swim. He manages to hold onto a thick limb of ancient oak and keeps above the onslaught of heaving waters. The camera pans out, no longer focusing solely on the man. Rain pellets the tidal waters. Swirling eddies grasp the corners of houses as their rooftops become laden with people, Americans.

Pray they will not be consumed.

The food was nowhere to go.

Tight throat cannot swallow and it chokes on dried saliva. Spitting this out is wrong. White enriched flour bun sticks to crevices of my teeth like cheap chewing gum. Swallow. Again. Again!

There isn’t much to do. The countertop of the bar in its obscurity distorts images into an awkward dimensional shift. It is not the TV. It is not the waitress whom now has returned from the cooler, teeth morbidly clenched shut. We are muted. There is little to relate.

“Your burger cold?” she asks vacantly.

“Oh, uh, I don’t know.”

My mind races. What burger? Where are the boats? That man, is going to be all right? Where is the Gulf Coast? I can’t breathe. A wave of panic washes over me. My sister and her little family of three live on the Gulf Coast.

The door splinters whitewash paint into my fingertip. The cell phone has dialed my foster mom instinctively. She answers the phone, “Hello”. I speak abruptly assuming my voice is distinctly mine. “Did you see the news?” I ask. “There is a hurricane in the south. My sister is down there. They live where the hurricane is.”

“What do you want me to do, go crazy? Drop everything?” It was not what I had expected, but it was true to form.

“No, no. That’s not it. I don’t know.”

“Well, that is obvious,” she replies. “I have things I have to do. I have to go now.” The connection is severed. Numbness creeps over face and arms as shoulders sink in reply. The
metal handle of the Chevy sizzled upon my flesh as it pulled open the door. Baked on bug guts flake off the green glass. Sunbeams permeate the interior warping a slow melting dashboard. The clothed seat interior is a saving grace. *Don't think.*

Burning images of Katrina’s path needed tempering. Thought cut through mind’s eye in blinding haste. Sitting in stillness and waiting for answers can be cruel. Silence, its cohort, readies the unthinkable.

No more questions. Make believe scenarios of what the worst could be are never sufficient. Resolve can thicken the blood. It becomes thicker than water.