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Shelter in Place

Written by Alexander Maksik

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Alexander Maksik

SHELTER IN PLACE



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This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously.

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To Madhuri in the rain.

For us back then, to live seemed almost to die.
—Galway Kinnell
Astonishment

I created you while I was happy, while I was sad,
with so many incidents, so many details.

And, for me, the whole of you has been transformed into feeling.
—CP Cavafy
In the Same Space

SHELTER IN PLACE

1.

In the summer of 1991 my mother beat a man to death with a twenty-two ounce Estwing framing hammer and I fell in love with Tess Wolff.

Now, many years later, they have both disappeared and I am alone here on this pretty clearing in the woods.

Alone, save for the tar and the bird and the other thing, for which I have no name.

2.

I'd taken my father's Wagoneer in to be serviced. This was in late August, nearly two months ago now. Tess was in the garden when I left.

Like a miracle, we had fat strawberries all summer long and she was out there filling a basket with them. I was dressed for town, standing on the deck, looking down at her in the sun.

I said, "I'm going."

She was kneeling in the dirt and, when she heard my voice, looked up at me, shielded her eyes, smiled and raised the brimming basket.

A few hours later, when I returned home, she was gone.

Her note was held to this table by a white bowl full of berries. They were still wet, as if washing them were an afterthought.

She wrote, "I am too various to be trusted. But I am safe and I love you. T."

3.

This table, always too large for that little dining room in Capitol Hill, fits perfectly here. We have six of my father's cherrywood chairs.

Four too many. Or five by the look of it.

Before me are glass doors framed in pine and mounted on tracks so that there can be no separation between the dining room and our deck, our deck and the clearing, the clearing and the forest. It is an extravagance. In winter we lose heat.

We built this house to bring the outside in. I wanted as little separation as possible and that is what we have.

We can slide back the walls.

Our neighbors are miles away.

Through the glass I look out on our green clearing. Soon to be brown, soon to be white. And beyond that, maybe a hundred yards from where I sit, is dense, old-growth pine forest. The clearing was here when we bought the property. It's why we bought it. Why we built.

The clearing at the end of the road. Like a fairy tale, a children's story of good and evil and adventure. A knight, a damsel. A witch, two children and their great courage. One way in, one way out. No neighbors nearby. Just us and the animals. Deer. Elk. Moose. Owls. Hawks. Foxes. If you sit here long and still enough, you see them all. They come peeking out of the woods, poking their heads into the open space, sniffing the air. The elk, the moose, the deer, they come to graze. The others, they come to hunt.

It is a place we're proud of. This house on a hill. Ours. All wood and glass and river rock. One long rectangle full of light. On the second floor, like a crow's nest, is nothing but our bedroom and bathroom. All the rest is downstairs—a kitchen and a dining room and a living room all running together. There's a guest room in the back. A small office. Two bathrooms. An entire wall of books facing the fireplace. We built it ourselves. That's what we say, anyway. But, of course, we had help. Still, it's our vision. And a lot of our labor too. It is a place we love, a place entirely ours. It is quiet and calm. Which is what we wanted more than anything else. Quiet and peace above all. And logic, I think.

We wanted a place of good systems. Or I did. And that is what we've had.

4.

Listen, I am trying to survive.

Days here I'm barely hanging on. Talking to myself. Talking to my parents. To Claire. To you.

I'm trying to put it all in order, arrange it into something with clear borders and clean logic.

First off, you have to understand this tar and bird bullshit. I'm nowhere if I can't translate that.

Second, there's no single word. That's the fucking problem. Or one of them.

I am trying to translate into language two experiences for which all language is inadequate.

I'm not going to tell you everything. You should know that from the start. I won't answer all of your questions. This is not every single thing. It is only one version. Please remember that.

Also, there will be no continuous rhythm.

We the erratic keep terrible time.

5.

I was twenty in 1991, living in Los Angeles in a grim but glorious studio apartment with its balcony overlooking Pico Boulevard. Two beach chairs and a hibachi. My last year at Cal State Northridge. I was happy. As far as I knew, we all were. My parents in Seattle, my sister, Claire, in London, at LSE. The brains and ambition of our family. Aside from school, I was bartending at Chez Jay, a famous little dive on Ocean Avenue where rich kids and movie stars came slumming. More than once Claire told me to transfer to UCLA. Do something with your life. Sure, I always said, but never got around to it. I didn't much give a shit. Wasn't very curious. Didn't worry, didn't plan the way she did. Wasn't a snob the way she was. I had no intention of becoming Secretary of State. Lucky for the State. I was okay to go along, wander. I liked pouring drinks. I liked my wrecked Toyota pickup, the girls who came to see me at the bar, ruling over my little fiefdom four nights a week.

But out of the thinnest air, without warning, it arrived in my body.

Landed there.

A leaden thing, whose form and quality shifts constantly in both memory and present mind.

Then, the first time, its arrival was sharp and sudden. Came with the force and surprise of a solid sucker punch. Or as if someone had spiked my drink. Or pushed a needle into my arm, pressed the plunger.

I was on my bed, back against the wall. Me and my same constant self.

And then whatever it is took hold: a sickening, narcotic feeling of terrible weight. I don't know what to call it.

I never have.

There is that word they use, but it is severely insufficient and one I loathe.

I'm not talking about sadness.

I am not despondent.

I am talking about the body. I'm talking about invasion and possession. This is a physical thing.

I am not fucking *blue*. I am not *feeling low*. I'm not *sad.*

Look, one moment I was a strong, happy kid reading a book. And then *out of thin air* it arrived in the dead center of my chest: a dull, cold pain.

It knocked the paperback from my hand. It closed my eyes and there in the dark I saw thick tar inching through my body.

Then, as the pain sharpened, a blue-black bird, its talons piercing my lungs.

Say what you will. These were the things I saw.

It is both animal and substance.

There is no logic to this, I understand, yes. Nonetheless, I am telling you what appeared behind my closed eyes in that shitty apartment I once loved: creeping tar, blue-black bird, talons.

The weight nails me to the floor. It deadens my arms; it draws me down. The substance closes my throat. It pulls at the backs of my eyes.

Now I am accustomed to it. Now I have ways to fight. Methods of battle. But not then when I was so young, on that morning when it first arrived.

I didn't leave my room for three days. Made no phone calls. I don't remember sleeping. Only sitting on my bed, or the floor, or in one of those plastic-ribboned rainbow chairs on the

balcony watching the traffic lights change, trying to decipher their codes.

And then this beast, this creeping invader vanished as quickly as it had come. The greasy film lifted from my eyes, the weight gone, the pain, too. The bird took flight. As if it had never been there at all.

I went back to work, and back to class.

I expected red wounds, dried blood, but the terror and violence of those days were like awful guests vanished in the night.