from Juked #5, Spring 2008

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Quillwork, Artifact #949494

Porcupines yap like terriers, sharp and hard and loud. That's what I say when she walks in and takes my hand like it's hers, like it's always been, only I just forgot. If this were the Western it would like to be, I'd say she sidled, but this is the Midwest, and the *she* in question is limping. If this were the Western it would like to be, we'd start with horses, with galloping. But this story starts with porcupines, who are not horses, and a nun, who is not a dance hall girl. I'm no cowboy. There are no barstools, no swinging saloon doors, only tired linoleum and folding chairs with their prison-issue numbers. I'm Blackfoot; she's a nun, Sister Mary Alice of the Sacred Heart, and this is my last chance at allocution.

Before the porcupines, the car that hit them, the quills flying out, useless, the robbery attempt, there was my name. Leland Jesus LaRue. It's not HEY-SEUS like you might imagine but is Jesus, as in Jesus on the cross. It's okay, though, if you say it wrong—everybody does. I address this remark to the row of three men and one woman in suits, who call themselves the parole board. I'm trying to try to make them feel at ease. It's important to make the audience feel at ease, and these four, though they were in the room before I was, seem to have just arrived, to feel out of place. Are they the audience for this Western? The townspeople? The sheriff's family? Overdressed extras of some sort?

Sister Mary Alice says to start with my name, the date. She says the porcupines don't matter, but that just shows how little she knows about me, the story, even after all these years. She scratches a mole on the back of her hand and looks at the table in front of us. She is

trying for optimism and failing. She wears black and white, but not penguin gear, just black pants and a white turtleneck that looks scratchy. Her small eyes plead with mine to begin, to tell it right. "Tell the story like it really happened this time, Leland," she says. "Tell it and go home. "

I have been here thirteen years, and I've been telling it like it really happened, so I know it's not truth they want but a story that's familiar, a story they can believe in. I've been taking correspondence courses from the university—I've been reading up on their stories—and I know they want a Western.

In their Western, I am drunk when I pick up Katherine from behind the school. In this version, she is my girlfriend; I love her desperately. In the Midwestern, the story that I say really happened, I love her desperately, and she is not my girlfriend, is something else. In both, we are seventeen, and I have a gun tucked down the front of my Levis. I tried putting it down the back of my jeans, but I was worried I'd lean back too far into the car's seat and shoot off my ass somehow.

I'm driving the car of my dead brother Frank, also seventeen, my twin, and newly dead, the car newly resurrected by Fat Steve at Fat Steve's Auto and Tire. But no one wants to hear about Fat Steve. And no one wants to hear about Frank, certainly not Sister Mary Alice. Frank is extraneous. Frank is beside the point—there is no place for a dead sidekick brother in this Western.

I am picking up Katherine behind the high school. She's tall with long brown hair she never remembers to tie back. In the Western, Katherine would be blond, if white, or raven-haired, if Indian. Either way, her hair would be braided, denoting innocence (if blond and white), ethnic authenticity (if raven-haired, if Indian). In the Midwestern, Katherine is neither, is both. She's métis, an in-between, with green eyes and fine, medium-brown hair.

Sister Mary Alice clears her throat. "The date," she says, "and the place?" She taps her fingers near the tape recorder.

It's 1989, the year I go to jail, the year Katherine graduates high school. We're in south-central South Dakota, in Talbot, so the wind keeps Katherine's hair in a perpetual swirl, which sounds romantic, but really only makes it all knotted-up. She's in the car now, irritated with her hair, wetting her fingers and pulling apart a snarl.

"Your ends will split," I say. My mother owns our small town's only beauty shop though in the Western, we live on a reservation, of course, not seventy-eight miles from the closest one, and in the Western, there are no mothers in sight, only distant fathers on horseback.

Katherine shrugs. "So? No one here to look at my hair, anyway." She sighs, big and dramatic, her feet up on the dash, and looks out the window.

We are skipping first period, aiming for the closest liquor store. I have a new fake ID that I found, which belongs to some guy from some small West River town I think is over by Rapid City. Katherine thinks he looks enough like me to fake out the new clerk. She's been on me for a week to try it out. She's been on me for a month to quit drinking, though, too—since Frank—and it's just like her not to see the contradiction.

I steer the El Camino up Main Street, out of Talbot, population 987. The liquor store lingers in an almost deserted strip mall on the northwest edge of town. Snow drifts against the low brick buildings—the library and hardware store, the café and post office—and the wind licks the snow's top layer, fanning it out through the air. It is early morning, the sky not yet blue, and the streetlights click and hum, waiting for first light, which comes late this time of year. Beyond the streetlights are the streets, the Midwestern streets, and because they are Midwestern, this version of the story is freed of its need for mountains, rising up, symbolic, majestic, bright even in darkness. Where there would be mountains are, instead, sandhills and plains—snow-covered plains with yucca and bluestem sticking up like antennae in the depressions between tall, white drifts.

In the Western, I'm wearing a giant cowboy hat, or braids that dangle their way down my back, snakelike against denim or sheepskin, maybe, depending on the temperature, the degree of romance expected. In the Midwestern, I'm wearing my hair chin-length because my mother is working to perfect her version of a bob. I've got on a flannel shirt with the sleeves unbuttoned but am cold and think about buttoning them; I won't, though, because to do so might make me look weak, uncool. Katherine wears red and black sweatpants and a matching sweatshirt two sizes too big. She is skipping first-period gym for at least the sixth time this year, is expert at slipping out the locker room door, slipping back in just before the bell.

Since this is not a Western, no one needs to die. Though Frank, of course, is dead already. Since this is not a Western, I could keep the gun next to my belly.

I steer the car into the parking lot. Big Sammy's Liquor Mart and the Casey's General Store are sandwiched in between dark, empty storefronts. The lights go on in Big Sammy's as I turn my headlights off. It is not quite 8 a.m. The El Camino idles loud like maybe a smallish helicopter has taken up residence in the back. It was a loud car before the accident—if you can call what Frank did an accident—but now it's almost impossible to have a conversation while it's idling. The front bumper curls up like a snarl; the back, left side is absent of paint and trim; and below, the muffler bounces where it should be tight, the tailpipe curving down like a question mark.

Katherine is saying something, pointing off behind the stores. I smile and nod, trying for cool, and her frown becomes more firm, her gestures larger. I shrug, swing the door open, and am in the store, my hand under my shirt, on the handle of the .22, when I see what all her pointing is about.

In the Western, the bad guy—me, at this point—wears a mask that shows only his eyes. We all pretend his identity is disguised. I don't know why I didn't think of a mask; I thought of the gun. I am thinking of Frank, always of Frank. How he gunned his engine. How

the back of the school bus must have looked as he accelerated up to it, under it. How he left no skid marks.

Sheriff Jeff Richards stands in the back of the liquor store next to Big Sammy and a dolly stacked waist-high with cases of Coors. Even in the Midwestern there is trouble in the form of a sheriff, but he's not tall and dark, sneering yet romantic, though he is all these things, of course, in the version for Sister Mary Alice, who sighs and flushes and fans herself. In the Midwestern, Sheriff Jeff is short and starting to bald on top. In the Midwestern, the sheriff once went to high school with my parents.

"Hey," says the sheriff.

Big Sammy nods my way, too, leaning onto the handle of the dolly, draping his arms over it like he's tired, like he's sorry to have customers so early. I wonder where the new guy is, but this is how the day is going so far.

I look over my shoulder, out the glass door to the El Camino. Katherine has scrunched herself down in the seat, so all I can see are the tops of her shoes on the dash, the static-filled edges of her hair. I take my hand off the gun and pull down on my flannel shirt in the middle, below where the last button meets and closes. I do it slow, trying for casual, but I see Big Sammy's eyes go wide.

It is fair to mention here that I've been in some trouble before, though strictly smalltime—a neighbor's broken window or two, a trashed hotel room once in Rapid City, some minor defacement of a teacher's garage and pet pig. Frank was the good one—everyone says so—the one who never got into trouble, who studied hard and played ball harder. There is also the time when I beat up Big Sammy's son, Little Sammy, though it is also fair to point out that fight was the only one I've ever won, before or since.

"Hey," says the sheriff, "you not in school?"

He says it even and friendly, but I break out into a sweat, anyway. Big Sammy's eyes have gone from wide to narrow, and he's

white-knuckling the very full cart, positioning it in front of himself like a shield, or so I think.

It is my fault that I think this way. Even I have seen too many Westerns. The sheriff becomes the enemy, Big Sammy the poor sucker caught in the middle.

I'm ambling over to the glass doors, the ones with Coke behind them, trying to look like a Coke is all I've come for. I'm trying to regulate my walk, to stop my knees from doing anything crazy, and I'm looking at the sheriff. And I'm smiling. I'm still smiling when the full cart—not at all a shield but, in fact, a very fine weapon—comes hurtling toward my knees and connects, and Big Sammy yells, "Gun!"

And so the sheriff becomes the enemy again though he isn't, still. The cart takes me out at the knees, tips me sideways. The cases of Coors flop and bounce, landing on my legs and stomach, glancing off my head.

Later, Big Sammy will say, "All that beer and he still managed to get off a shot." But that's for the Western, the version where I'm a villain, a dead shot, someone with a plan.

In the Midwestern, I land hard, my bony hip meeting the tile, my hand still around the gun, my fingers on the trigger. In the Midwestern, I reach down to break my fall with my right hand, only it's got the gun in it, my finger around the trigger, and then I hear it—*pop, pop, pop*—like a bunch of beer cans being opened extra loud, extra fast.

I hear screams, moans, then heavy footfalls, and it takes me a minute to connect these sounds with the ones that came before. I lift the case of Coors from my stomach and hold it up in front of my eyes like a pillow during a scary movie. When I open my eyes, look around it, I see Sheriff Jeff holding his left shoulder with both hands. He's slumped in the corner, under a Coors' display—a waterfall tumbling from tall mountains, a winding, rushing stream at the bottom of stiff cardboard.

My hand is still around the gun. I think about dropping it but tuck it back into my Levis again. I think twice about *Front or back?* this time, but I put it back where it was, in the front. I'm not sure why I do this, except that consistency seems important, and I'm even less sure why I do what comes next. I walk over to Sheriff Jeff, whose gun remains in its holster, and I lean down. Blood runs in a thin line from the corner of his mouth, consistent with what happens in the movies—with what happens in the movies when the guy is not going to make it. I move my hand forward as if to touch him, then move it back. It hangs there, above Sheriff Jeff, near the waterfall.

"I'm sorry," I say.

He's saying something that sounds like "Why?" but he's having a hard time getting it out, what with all the blood. Big Sammy is in the back. I hear him telling someone to hurry. So I do, gun against my belly, burning now.

In the Western, the official version for Sister Mary Alice, none of what follows is said. In the Western, the damsel flees the car while I'm in the store; she searches the streets for help, crying "Murder, murder!" or whatever it is damsels say.

But Katherine is no damsel. When I come out, she's behind the wheel, the window rolled down, her face calm like we're heading back to second period. But we both know there'll be no heading back.

"Move over," I say.

"No," she says, "I'm a better driver."

"Move," I say. I open the door and lean down, giving her legs a shove.

"Fine," she says, "but it's your fault if we get caught."

"Fine," I say. I say it as mean as I can, trying to be tough, but I'm probably a little in shock and, also, I'm touched she said *we*. My voice wavers, and she smiles, moves over, and lets me in.

We head north, away from Talbot on Highway 86, with me driving. We both know this is the right direction if we're going to do

this, that there is not another town for twenty-two miles, only a nature reserve, snowdrifts and animal tracks and sky, miles and miles of grey-blue sky.

What happens next is not at all like a Western. There is no immediate chase, no crescendoing clacketty-clack of horse hooves as the sheriff's trusty men pull closer and closer still. Instead, the sandhills rise up and fall away beyond the two-lane, and as our speed increases, the helicopter noise from the back of the El Camino levels out, almost disappears.

Katherine is quiet, too, and when I sneak a look her way, she is rolling the window down, leaning into the wind, her hair flying, lips parted, eyes bright. I think of swinging the car onto the soft shoulder, danger be damned. I think of pulling her to me, kissing her—her letting me—but then she catches me looking, and her eyes come back to normal.

"You should have told me," she says.

"Told you what?"

"About the gun," she says. "You should have."

"Sorry," I say. "I should have." I'm not sure if I agree with her, but I'm still thinking of kissing her, of what it would feel like. But agreeing with her only seems to make her mad. She turns away from me, to the window, her shoulders hunched up around her ears. She is rolling the window back up, smoothing her hair. Clearly, Katherine wants a Western, too, complete with a take-charge man on a horse who gives orders and never, ever apologizes.

It is quiet like that for a few minutes more, the snow and sandhills clicking by, and I'm trying to decide what to say—whether to fake some anger to get her attention or to stay quiet and calm, to try for the strong, silent type. We are about six miles north of Talbot when we come to the first steep hill, followed by the first sharp turn. The road is clear as we crest the hill, and then, as we hit the curve, it no longer is.

There's a flurry of short, brown bodies, followed by a thud and that barking—sharp and hard and loud. Spike-like objects fly out, some hitting the tires and bumper, some landing, useless, on the asphalt. Porcupines, a family of them, maybe, crossing the road in tandem.

Frank used to like to drive out here to take walks or something. That's what I'm thinking as we hit the first porcupine. Hiking, Frank called it. We used to make fun of him, me and the other guys in our class. "Sir Frank, the Gentleman, going for his hike, " or "Sir Frank, is it time to take a hike?" And this is what I'm thinking as I swerve to miss the next porcupine, as we head for the soft, sandy shoulder, the ditch—that we shouldn't have said those things to Frank, that I, in particular, should have been better.

In the Western, I wreck the car because that's what the villain, or Indian, does—he self-destructs, makes some crucial, stupid mistake, and the heroes gain advantage. He does not swerve to miss a family of porcupines; he does not swerve because his brother is dead, a suicide. He does not swerve because no matter how smart you are, the story can end badly.

I am in the ditch, semi-conscious for a minute, maybe two, and then there are sirens.

"Leland."

It's Katherine, who still doesn't look like a dance hall girl or a damsel. She's standing over me, her hand stopping the blood that wants to run from my forehead down my face.

"Leland," she says again, and I'm beginning to worry she's not all right.

"I'm fine," she says, as if answering the question, and I wonder if I've asked it, if I didn't hear or can't remember.

"Go," I say.

The sirens' complaint grows louder. Katherine pulls away from my forehead and takes my hands in hers. She puts my right hand on my head, and I feel the blood, warm against my fingers, and the

complaint turns to a wail, and the noise and lights are making the last turn.

"Go," I say, and she does, this time without arguing.

Later, I will think about this moment more than all the others. How I lie there, the sirens coming on. How I watch her cross the road and disappear.

I am not conscious for the rest of it—Deputy Carl Simpson and his cousin Richard arriving to arrest me, the Life Flight to the hospital in Sioux Falls, where I stay until trial, until I come here.

Sister Mary Alice's eyes are wet. I take this as a good sign. The extras sit still in their chairs, awaiting a big finale. In the Western, the Indian always dies. But, even at my trial, there could be no dead-Indian talk, because it wasn't murder, because Sheriff Jeff, in the end, does not die. In this finale, since I'm not planning to die, either, I do the next best thing for the story. Sister Mary Alice is urging it; she's got her bony hand back on mine. "Leland," she says in a stage whisper, "this is the part where it's best to show remorse, to show how much you've changed."

And so I do. I play the reformed Indian, the civilized Indian—as if prison ever civilizes anyone. I say that I am so, so sorry—true, in both versions. I say I have learned a lot in prison. I say if released, I will not make the same mistakes again, which may be true or false but probably is somewhere in between.

The extras beam, shuffle their papers. I think for a moment Sister Mary Alice might weep. They file out, and I wait to be taken back to my cell. In the Western, they jump on their horses and ride off into the sunset, justice served. In the Midwestern, Extra Number Four jumps Extra Number Two's station wagon in the parking lot, and they drive off, batteries charged, but they're late getting home for dinner.

In both versions, I wait for the man to come and take me to my cell. I play back the rest of the story, the part I missed out on but

have been told, on the phone and in letters—the best part of the Midwestern, the part I keep safe.

It is the night of the "gun fight," the porcupines, the wreck. Katherine has made it back to town and withstood questioning, making Deputy Simpson sorry he bothered to ask her any questions at all.

Hours later, all of Talbot asleep, Katherine "borrows" the keys to her sister's truck. She heads north on Highway 86, driving slow to avoid deer. She's jerking and jumping at every shadow, every noise, real or imagined, but she makes it to the scene of the wreck and pulls her sister's truck in behind the El Camino. She will say that when she arrives, she does not feel alone, keeps looking over her shoulder for an interloper, a deer at least, but there is no one. We will both think *Frank*, but neither will say it. There is bright yellow police tape around the car, but Katherine is not here for it. The porcupines have been moved off to the side of the road opposite the car. She tries not to look at them; she is not here for them, either.

In between, on the asphalt lie their spent quills. The way of decorating before beads was to use porcupine quills. Women took the quills into their mouths, softening, then flattening them with their teeth before threading them onto birchbark or into cloth.

Later, Katherine will make something for me out of the quills, though she won't tell me what it is, of course. But that night, she is down on her knees in the middle of the two-lane, underneath the waxing moon, and it is enough for me to imagine her there, kneeling on the dotted line, her hands spread out, searching, palms down—like upside-down prayer—which may be the very kind a story like this needs.