

Lines to cut by



Would you rather have too much work or not enough?

Too much.

Strike

In those years the forests turned red
And the winters stayed warm
Silt gathering on snowless asphalt
The dust from it thick in our throats
The trains had no logs to run
So Dad sank into the couch
A stain carved into the cloth
Eyes glued to news networks
American advertisements
Stories about shut down mills and schools
Gordon Campbell's mugshot
Painted across the headlines
Styrofoam mugs of hot chocolate
On picket lines stretching out
Across newly fallen snow



We stayed

At Christmas dinner
We talk about the railroader who died in Saskatchewan
Her third year on the job
“The first five years and the last five years are the worst.”
Missing some piece of the puzzle
That keeps your coworkers from picking you up off the tracks

Here
You mostly hit moose or deer
Which is better than people
So we stayed
Bought boats and quads
Working all the hours it takes to pay for them
Not many left over to enjoy all the toys

Some dreams look like a John Deere in the driveway
Until that gets stolen too
They found it out in Beaverley
Might have been someone at the company
But we'll never know

My brother buys a house at nineteen
Becomes a conductor
Then a locomotive engineer
Like his Dad and Granddad before him

The only time my Grandpa ever told Dad he was proud of him
Was the day he got a job on the railway
Lied about his age
Beat stealing sardines from the grocery store

Still short of nineteen
He picked his friend off the tracks
Head come clean off
And climbed back into that locomotive chair

Before I die

Mom goes on strike some days
And we wake up to the crash of pans in the kitchen
The white ceramic plates with blue flowers along the sides
Clashing against each other in the cupboards
She always wanted to redo with pine beetle wood
Blue streaks running through the yellow
Nights spent in the hospital
Don't leave much room to be patient
With kids demanding dinner
A husband who goes out for KFC
When she tries out a recipe with eggplant
Three degrees later and she makes less than him
Grade nine drop-out
Works weekends making soup for the clients
Brings it in in old yogurt containers
Freezes squash and sneaks it into the spaghetti sauce
Crochets baby blankets and hides them away in cheese crates
The cedar chest she bought from a man she taught at the prison
"Up on the hill"
A different hill than the university
This one leads out of town
Out towards the rockies
We once drove out there just to see them
Parked on the side of the two-lane highway and let them take our breath away
As a kid I'd ride in the backseat
Watch mom staring out the window
"I could look at this all day and not get bored," she told us
It's not until years later that I'll understand
That look in her eye
At the trees and rivers blurring past
The exhaustion that comes from filling up all the cracks around you
With parts of yourself
"I want Vince to make me my coffin *before* I die", she tells me,
"So I can paint it with flowers"
Me, fresh from "helping" him to build another coffin
For Linda's son
Plaid fabric stapled on the inside and black paint on the outside
To match the clothes he always wore
I ask her where she would put it
"In the garage."
She tells me
And I can only roll my eyes in response



The ring

Back home
Drinking is a sport
The flick of your wrist on a shot glass
Don't make a face
Hold steady
Wait for the return
Too much money
Too little time
Debt mounting like the snow drifts used to do
So high you had to arch your neck
To see oncoming traffic

The thermometer outside the kitchen window
Is stuck at minus twenty something
And who can blame you?
For wanting to warm your bones
With something more than lined Carhartts
And high-vis jackets

Mom frets over
Unpaid bills and kids
That no one takes to the dentist
Holds everyone together
With family dinners where she doesn't say a word

But in the dark-lit corner of a pub
There's still a touch of summer
In the way he leans back
Smirk sliding across his words
Mohammed Ali
Fists poised
Laughter twisting up out of
Every jab
Swing
Slide onto the ropes

Tumolos

“La tierra es todos”

She tells us

And my fledgling Spanish jumps with joy against my jugular

Words picked up like stones

Tossed with the flip of a wrist

Into the gaping waters of misunderstanding

It’s all a blur of dust in the creases of my teeth

The lines of my cheeks burnt orange with it

Gazing out the window

Dad’s sunglasses resting against the bridge of my nose

“Tumolos” they call them

The speed bumps in the road people construct on their own time

Regulation is a different matter here

Impunity

Eight letters

Four syllables

Spreading like a rash along the soft parts of your skin

As we climb up through the mountains

The thick wet green of it

“My home is everywhere”

One man tells me

Gesturing to the rise and fall of land around us

While the young men bow their heads beneath the opened hood of the aging Toyota

Later he recounts the stories of the multiple attempts on his life

For speaking up

The bus jolting along with his words

“Do you know why they call it sitting shotgun?”

Steve from Vancouver asks me

Afterwards I watch the passenger seats in every car

With narrowed lids

As we drive further on

Through fields bursting with sugar cane and rubber trees

Planted over people’s homes

Or maybe just the shadows that are left from them

Dislocation

The word sinks beneath the surface

With little more than a ripple

As we take a boat across the reservoir made by the Chixoy Dam

Hear stories about the people who were buried up in those same mountains

The same people stacked up in boxes full of bones in the *Fundacion de Antropologia*

Forense

Waiting to be returned

I sit next to a man

Who walked to us for half a day

Only to lead us back up into the highlands

That surround what used to be a river
All of us panting from the exertion
As his fifty-something legs race ahead
To tell us how he lost everyone
A day earlier he sat behind me on the bus
Tried to teach me Achi words
Quite a process of translation
As the Spanish ones stick in my throat
“Mis condolencias” doesn’t feel like enough
So I try to ask him how he goes on
It must be a day or two before I can translate his response
“No tengo hermanos ni hermanas, pero tengo muchos nietos”
And I think about the fireflies
The way they flicker in the quickly fading heat
Bright against the black of the sky
I think about the way violence sometimes looks like a well-kept field
Like a border only some of us are allowed to cross
About the young man
Dark eyes and quick darting grin
Who asks me about the north
“Es un difícil camino”
I tell him
Think about the woman looking for her son
One of *los desaparecidos*
The disappeared
And how one of the men sorting through warehouses of police records
Came to apologize to her
For only finding one document with his name on it
The way she cried and held it in her hands
Thanked him
For the proof that he exists



The creator made it easy for you, gave you lines to cut by.

Source: Vince Prince

The cut

Cut along the bone
All of these families could use the extra meat in their freezer
Fingers hooked in the gills
Knife sliding up just the right angle
Another cut in the tail
Catch the bit of sinew there
When you take out the guts
That way it all comes out clean
Snap the head back
Feed the eggs to the little fishes
Swarming at your feet
Mostly you just clean out the spleens
Bits of burlap left to dry out in the sun
Spray it all off at the end
So bears don't come
Cuz then you'd have to shoot them

By the time the salmon make it up to us
They've bashed themselves smooth going up the Fraser
There aren't any scales left
All hook noses and pink cheeks
Flesh that slides into ziploc bags
Pinch out the air with your fists
Slide don't squeeze
Brown paper wrap
Masking tape
Tape's cheap, meat's not



July

When the fires come
The sun rising up
Like something out of a sci-fi novel
Plumes of it plunging up over the ocean
All blue sky and gray rocks
And a highway that won't lead you home
Not when the roads are closed
Not when the canyon's burning
All sage-grass and black-limbed trees
Mom calls to say
That she's making stew
For all the evacuees in the Walmart parking lot
Knocking on RV doors
Two new knees
And a laugh as sharp
As the burnt taste in your lungs

The river

“You’re not as strong as you look are you?”
He wonders aloud at me
My arms straining hopelessly at the end of a rope
Tied onto the limbs of a moose
It kind of looks like a horse up close
Only with antlers as broad as my shoulders
And that funny old nose
Elders sometimes ask for the tip of it as a delicacy
Or maybe that’s just what they tell white people so they’ll eat it too
Blood running like watercolours among the weeds
As Blondie strips down to cut it up where it lays
Tossing the liver off to the side so it settles into the silt
Slicing handholds out between the bones of the ribs
Another between the big and small bone in its calves
Makes it easier to carry
Fat, thick and yellow on the haunches
A lace blanket of it coiled up around the belly
Like striking a gold vein of ground meat for stews and casseroles
The sun just a memory now
The river black like one of those movies about the Viet Cong
Or maybe just something I imagined while reading Danielle Steele novels
Rustling in the bushes
As we paddle out shining our flashlights
The moon is missing tonight
So we end up sleeping curled up next to the moose quarters
The boat tied onto a tree
Me, snoring loud enough to keep the bears away
“Don’t get wet, don’t get cold.”
Easier to do when you’re not sleeping in a motor boat
After slicing up a moose carcass waist-deep in water
Shiver awake
Rebalance the moose quarters so the boat won’t tip
Blondie yelling at me the whole time over the thrash of the engine
Eagles gusting along in the white-blue
The sun still hidden beneath the spruce and pine
Staring silent at us up along the cutbanks
Littered with elk trails
Over the rapids
“You better put a lifejacket on, not that it would help if you fell in.”
Stomach tipping upwards alongside the bow
Overloaded with dinner for a year
Pull up on the dock
Double-hitch knot
Around once and again

Under and through
Don't mess it up
Inevitably mess it up
"How can you have two degrees and not know how to tie a knot?"
Unload the quarters onto a tarp
Into the wagon on the back of the riding lawn mower and up to the smokehouse
Quick nap while it hangs
And *then* the work begins



Up north

The further west you go
The more blue signs you see
“Say no to Enbridge.”
White lettering sharp as foam on the curled end of a wave
The road bends in alongside the Skeena
Her curves
The kind of blue that refract off the edges of your eyes
Make you blink and glance back again
It’s a jumpy ferry ride
Even on a calm day
Across to Haida Gwaii
Where we buy ten of those signs to take home
Mom plants one in her garden
Alongside the flowers half-buried by weeds

At home they would elect a pig in a suit
If he called himself Conservative
But out west they vote Orange
Maybe it’s the proximity to the ocean
The way people make a living riding out the waves
Of burnt out fisheries and closed canneries

There was a time when the trees grew like dollar signs
Quit school at fifteen to own a house and a truck a year later
So much money they literally burned it
Out in McBride
Before the mills shut down
Before the banks came knocking at the end of every meal

You want to know how people vote
Look at what they do for a living
Just southwest of Prince George
The town of Wells nestles in amongst the mountains
Built entirely on hills made of mine tailings
The houses painted a rainbow’s arc of different colors
So the miners didn’t walk into the wrong one
When they stumbled home drunk at the end of a hard day
Now it’s full of hippies and holiday-homers
Near impossible to find a place to rent
Even if you’re working at the gold-mining ghost town down the road
So the seasonal workers drive in from Quesnel in the summer
While the real miners rent out the one motel
Pick-up trucks lined up across the road from the Bear’s Paw Cafe

“The best social plan is a job.”

A guy in my northern governance class used to say
Videoing in from Pinehouse
His face glitching along with the words
And I think of the way people flowed to the oil fields
Northern Alberta overrun with Newfies
To the northeast
It might as well be Alberta
Curving up into the rockies
These ones devoid of anything but the odd hunter
Sledders in the winter
The hum of their motors a bee's buzz too close to your ear
Gray-limbed trees from summer burns
And oil wells nodding obediently against small neat fields
The bridge on Taylor Hill is always under construction
The thwack thud of raw metal underneath your tires
The glare of flood lights in the dark above the Peace
What a name for a river that's brought anything but
Can't really blame a river though
For what we've done to it

To the northwest
Just outside of Vanderhoof
A sign reads
Fort St James: More than just a one horse town.
A picture of a cowboy riding his steed
Whip in the air
Alongside highway 16
That road where girls go missing like teeth
On a Saturday night hockey rink



March on

Down here
People talk about new restaurants popping up in Gastown
Like moose sightings through cracked windshields
Phone cameras waiting to snap up dishes
The way your finger hovers on the trigger
All throughout hunting season

Money flowing down Highway 97
In eighteen wheelers and spray-painted rail cars
Coal piled thick and black on shipping platforms
As the spray of pesticides leaches into the willows
Flashes of red beneath the even-spaced pine
Ragged edges on the ends of branches
From flattened moose molars

The “money wood” they’ll ship down south
Across the sea to China and Japan
Leave us the two by fours
Split around the knots
So cracks pitch down the sides

On the wall of a Quadra street bakery
A sign reads “Stop Site C”
People hiding behind computer screens in the law library
While the drums beat out on the ring road of the university campus
The smell of sage and sweet grass twining up into lungs
Tight and unyielding
A breath held in for long past a century

And I think of Williston Lake
Nechako Reservoir
The flooding of people’s homes
To build dams that heat our own
How it must feel to look at a body of water
And know that your very bones
Were sunk deep beneath it
Without warning

In spite of all the fish farms
And the river beds blasted into smithereens
Salmon keep on thrashing their way up through the rapids
Skin hanging like sticky red flags
On wooden poles
Pulpy poplar burning thick with smoke

Fans blasting
As the wind drifts through the cracks

