

blank spaces

March 2020 Volume 4, Issue 3

FILLING THE GAP WITH STORY & COLOUR

FEATURING CANADIAN

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AND PHOTOGRAPHERS

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about

Blank Spaces is a celebration of Canadian talent, featuring the work of artists—writers, musicians, painters, photographers, designers, etc—as a means of encouragement and collaboration. With new issues being published every quarter, we are continually accepting submissions. Please follow the guidelines on our submissions page available at the back of this magazine.

Blank Spaces Volume 4, Issue 3
ISSN 2371-3917



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blood red

by James Patterson

Hours before the first light cracks the night and peels back the sky from the earth, from within the darkness of my parents' house I hear the muffled, stirring sounds of a winter morning ritual.

There's the familiar clump of the coffee urn against the kitchen counter, the rising swoosh and rumble of the kettle being filled and heated. The clatter calls to me from another time, as though I've put on an old set of ears and with them, my youthful dreads—of school, of my father's barely hidden rage at my morning apathy, of exchanging my warm nest for the cold world—but in a moment, they're gone. All those old things, gone. Jet-lagged and time tangled, I have no trouble removing myself from the unfamiliarity of my redecorated childhood bedroom.

The hallway is as it's always been, but still I let my hand graze the wall as I follow the soft glow of light to the kitchen. I pour myself a coffee and hold the mug tight between my hands, warming them. The frost on the window has grown overnight, curling away from the pane in a crystal foxtail.

In the living room, a charred log smoulders in the fireplace. Sitting quietly in the corner, his back to me, my father is haloed by the glow of a small television. Like me, he's sleep deprived and disheveled, although for different reasons. He's leaning into the monitor, concentrating, ignoring the steaming coffee beside him. On the grainy screen is a panoply of cows in black and white, their breaths wafting upwards in puffs of wispy haze. Unaware they are being watched, they lie comfortably on the large straw pack, staring blankly and chewing their cud as they wait for the farmer and the bales of fresh hay he'll deliver clutched in the great jaw of his tractor loader.

Just now, he's looking for any peculiar behaviour that could indicate an imminent birth. Manipulating a joystick, he pans the camera over the herd. Like all subtle things, the signs conveyed by a labouring cow are invisible until you know what to look for. The way she holds her tail, a certain way she stands, a general uncomfartableness: they are all clues, but there's no substitute for knowing the individual animals. Watching my father watch them, I try to remember all the signs, the distinct personalities in the herd, but remembering is like knocking loose stones from the footpath of an old house hoping to find a key underneath. I had the key once, and had kept it proudly in

rumbling tractor engines.

"Number 44," he says. "I've got a feeling she's doing something."

In the garage, we pull on insulated overalls, thick gloves, toques, and stiff, winterized rubber boots. These old clothes are familiar; they were once mine, before I left for greener pastures. Here and there, I recognize tears, faded smears of placenta, and bloodstains, both mine and others. Like a tartan, these crosses and knots of discoloured stains are a reminder of everything I did on the farm, and everything my father continues to do.

The walk to the cattle yard continues my renewal of spirit, but not of my body. The boots are more unwieldy than I remember and I'm unused to the cold. It burns my face and makes me feel fragile, as though I would shatter if hit. Dad lurches on ahead, his scarred and bark-like skin inured to the weather, his steps driven by a sense of duty I could never rouse in myself.

When 44 sees us coming across the paddock, she holds her head high and trots to the far end of the pen, stirring and unsettling the herd, who haul up their solid masses, leaving a sculpted hollow of steaming straw where they'd lain. Their hairy muzzles

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my chest pocket, but in leaving the farm, I'd unconsciously lost it. Working with animals is not like riding a bicycle—stop for a time, and the ability to wrangle and the strength gained from the constant lifting, carrying, pushing, pulling, and schlepping is lost. More than anything, the confidence needed to work around such powerful creatures is lost. Now keyless, I'm nothing more than a visitor passing through on this cold mid-February week, a voyeur in my old house and into that world where my father, after generations, is the last lifelong resident.

His expertise is not just a matter of farmer's pride. Failing to notice the signs of a coming birth could be fatal. Outside, the temperature is a bracing 31°C below zero; a calf born into that cold would lose its ears and tail in a matter of minutes, its life in not much more. Newborns need the warmth of the insulated barn immediately and a soon-to-be mother is much easier to wrangle into the warm shed than a new one. For months, between watching, feeding, and bedding the animals, Dad has had little time for sleeping, eating, or anything else.

When he straightens in his chair and turns around, he's surprised to see me. I've been quiet and he's half deaf from years of

are covered with a touch of frost and the air is full of steam from their mealy cud chewing. 44 stares at us. Suddenly, I remember her—a tough, haughty cow—and feel glad I'm there to help. The memory of when she nearly bested the two of us is vivid. Only a few years before, she had calved on a corner of the straw pack. Trying to recover her calf, we were both charged and knocked down in turn by her tawny battering ram of a head. We'd had to deke around her, feigning left and right like clunky, snowsuit-clad matadors to distract her and reach her shivering scion. Finally, with Dad thrusting and waving his walking stick like a crazed fencer, I'd been able to scoop up the calf and dash with it to the humid warmth of the barn.

I have a recurring nightmare that he will die this way. It's happened, even to people we know: the fellow in Plumas who was wrapped around a PTO shaft and torn to shreds, the farmer near Woodside who lost both his hands inside the round baler, to name a few. Then there are the countless instances of chainsaws kicking back, of legs mangled in augers, severe beatings dispensed by cattle, heart attacks. They are almost always alone, these maimed and mauled farmers, and often well within their ability. It's solitude that kills many farmers. Working alone,

striding that knife edge between attentive and reckless, they get hurt with no one to help them and no way of saving themselves. Like the time, trying to free a mud-bogged tractor, Dad overstretched a chain. When it snapped, the broken link zinged through the air, cut through his tractor's cab, exploding the windows like a shotgun blast, missing his head by only a few inches.

When I left, I did it for excitement, a life for myself, a desire not to be those farmers. A few weeks later, I was 5500 miles away, sleeping late in the hot, muggy Brazilian winter. No cows, no freezing in nightly roundups. When my phone buzzed, I awakened to images of Dad's cut and bloodied face, his bruised chest and arms. After pulling a calf from a cow in the dead of winter, the beast had kicked a heavy gate which had swung and caught him on the face. He'd refused to leave the calf by going to the hospital and so, after downing a tumbler of rum, he'd lain on the couch while my mother sewed his swollen face back together.

The nightmares started after that. Whenever they ruin my sleep, I lie awake waiting for the phone to ring, for the white noise of silence before the sharp intake of breath, the quavering sound of my name, all followed by the final "...it's Dad."

No one believes me when I tell them the extreme temperatures the cows live in, which over a year range from 30°C to minus 40°C. But the wild bison herds that preceded them would have lived through much the same conditions, without the benefit of being fed twice daily and having a reliable water source. In winter, the cattle grow a thicker coat of hair and, because of an attentive owner, almost all the calves are born inside the heated barn. This will be 44's case this year. I keep my guard high as we corral her into the barn, noticing as we do so the small prong of a hoof sticking from her.

Immediately, Dad decides to pull the calf. He knows 44, her moods and personality, and that she is prone to having large, unwieldy calves—she has needed help before. The next few moments are a flurry of deliberate, coordinated moves. I know the steps, but I'm unpracticed and forgetful. Frustrated and clumsy from misremembering, I stand uselessly as Dad moves around me, preparing soap, warm water, and filling the maternity pen with fresh straw and hay. With 44 secured in the headgate, he reaches inside her and pulls out one small, yellow, oily hoof, then another. Using one hand with the skilful composure of a midwife, he loops the obstetrical chains below and

above the fetlock, to prevent accidental breakage. He's calm and methodical, and seems oblivious to the piss and shit on his hands, or the metallic tang of iodine and blood in the air. Together we heave on the chains and the newborn calf emerges inches at a time. Finally, with a decisive push from its mother, the calf flops out, sodden and befuddled, a doe-eyed mess of gangly, slimy limbs, its tongue poking out dumbly between soft lips.

'It's a bull,' Dad says as he carries the calf to the pen. He's happy—he likes bulls. He furiously rubs its head with straw and shoves stalks into its nose to clear its airways. This is no time for gentleness. Later, his mother will gently cudgel sense into him, but now, he needs air and stimulation.

When he releases 44 from the headgate, Dad holds the swinging gate tightly in both hands. She's tired and slightly loopy from her effort, and streaking her hindmost is a touch of blood. Suddenly, she isn't the raging, impenetrable wall from my memory, but a vulnerable parent. Once you see something bleed it loses all its invincibility.

We leave mother and child to their introduction and make for home. After the warm, corporeal odour of the barn, the smell of wood smoke near the house is striking. I take in a lungful of the brisk, roasted air and push it out slowly, making a long white arc that disappears above me. Despite myself, I'm energized from the action and feel like breaking into a run. I don't, though. Instead I stay beside my father and together we trudge slowly back home. Realizing we've slipped back into our habitual silence, I want to say something: to comment on the herd, to ask how he's coping, to reveal why I'm back. But there's a new and careful taciturn agreement between us: if I won't say the words retirement, slowdown, or stubborn, he won't counter with legacy, workshy, or soft. And neither of us will allude to time, years, or any sense of era. The only sound is our steps crunching on the snow.

In the house, while my father stokes the fireplace and drops a fresh log of oak onto the coals, I watch through the camera as a grainy, discoloured 44 roughly licks the head of her calf. In only a few short hours, the little bull will be up and running. Preparing a new pot of coffee, my father bothers the thick, ropy scar on his upper lip with his tongue. Outside, the black drape of night is being pared back, revealing the raw blood-red sunrise underneath.



James Patterson was born on a cattle and grain farm in rural Manitoba, Canada. He has worked as a farm labourer, factory worker, and writer. His fiction was longlisted for the CBC Short Story contest and shortlisted for the Geist Postcard contest. His essays can be found in *Wanderlust Journal*, *World Literature Today*, and *Overland Magazine*.