

## SLAUGHTERED COWS

You are lying with your cheek on concrete, shivering in the thin shift you wear to sleep. Grey light bleeds through the night, silhouetting low buildings, lampposts. You raise your head. On your right is the Hudson River, on your left, Fourteenth Street, beneath you, the median strip of the West Side Highway. You don't know how you got there.

The highway is empty. You rise to your knees, then to your feet. Out of nowhere a car roars by, then another, and then the highway is filled with cars racing towards you. You gasp and throw your hands over your eyes and the roaring stops. In the silence a light breeze rattles a street sign and tugs at your shift. You lower your hands and a storm of cars roars by. You cover your ears but the noise grows louder. Then you close your eyes and it stops.

All is quiet but the pounding of your heart. You try to breathe. The air smells of the river, garbage, exhaust, but the exhaust is not stronger than the other smells. You listen again. Silence. Eyes still shut you throw yourself from the median and run.

Within steps of the other side you slip on cobblestones and your eyes open. A truck is heading straight at you. Brakes screech as it swerves and slams into a lamppost. The highway is empty again, quiet beneath the rose-tinted sky.

A thud comes from the back of the truck, and another, and then the truck erupts in a violence of banging and crashing and the rear doors burst open. You scramble to the sidewalk and crouch behind a lamppost as cows pour out, the sure-footed trampling those that stumble as they stampede down Fourteenth Street.

The shallow rays of the rising sun graze the fallen cows, shimmering over pools of blood, glinting off of vacant eyes. Absorbed by the horror and the beauty,

you cannot look away. In your mind's eye you frame photographs. You've never taken such pictures.

A bang comes from the wrecked truck and you jump to your feet. Pain shoots through your right knee and blood runs down your leg. You look back at the truck. A small, wiry man stands beside it smoking a cigarette. He wears a white tee shirt and blue jeans. Tattoos cover his arms.

"You a working gal? I got no time for that now. If you need money go round up those cows." He is suddenly beside you, his hand gripping your arm. You close your eyes but the pressure remains. You make yourself go limp. His grip loosens. You jerk your arm away and run. At Ninth Avenue you turn north, running, running, until, near collapse, you grab onto a lamppost and sink to the ground.

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A hand touches your shoulder and you jerk away. You look up into the face of your neighbor. You think his name is Bill. Behind him is the building where you live. He helps you stand. Pain shoots through your right knee and blood runs down your leg.

"I think it looks worse than it is," he says. You realize that you are wearing only the thin shift you wear to sleep. You blush and cross your arms in front of your breasts. He touches your shoulder. "Were you walking in your sleep?"

Bill walks you up to your apartment. A few minutes later his wife comes over with a bottle of mercurochrome and a cup of tea. You think her name is Maureen. To please her you take a few sips.

Once she's gone you limp to the bathroom, fill the tub, and sink in. You try to think of nothing but your mind fills with streaks of salmon colored light shimmering over pools of blood. You've never made such a photograph. You are not that bold. Your photographs are gently beautiful, but beauty doesn't sell.

A knock on your front door jars you from the tub. Bill has brought over the Sunday Times. You spend the rest of the day on the couch, reading the paper, dozing.

You wake at first light, your knee throbbing. You take three aspirin and make a cup of coffee that goes cold as your mind drifts to Fourteenth Street. Your nightmare has scrambled the images so that you can't tell what's real.

You throw on jeans and a sweatshirt, load your camera, and walk over.

The street is busy with thick-armed men off-loading carcasses from tractor-trailers onto conveyers of hooks that carry them into long, low buildings. The carcasses are covered in hide but have neither heads nor legs. Scraps of flesh litter the street.

You photograph trucks and lampposts and carcasses, shooting most of a roll before something blocks your lens. You lower your camera. A wiry man with tattooed arms stands in front of you. He asks what you're doing. Your heart starts to pound.

"I'm a photographer."

He doesn't move.

"Life as art," you say.

"They're dead," he says.

Beyond his shoulder the sun glints off a hook that protrudes from a carcass, looking like a soul escaping. You start to raise your camera. The man pushes you towards the conveyer until you're so close you can see the hairs on the hides. The man's breath is hot on the back of your neck. You stand still, waiting for it to retreat. Then you bolt. From across the street you shoot a picture of the man, then take off at a dead run.

After six blocks you stop, gasping for breath. In front of you is a payphone. You pull a quarter from your pocket and dial.

Tom lives in Tribeca in a loft with a darkroom. It's been two years since you were lovers, but you are still friends.

"Come over," he says.

You head towards the subway but an image of cattle cars pushes you back. Despite your knee you decide to walk, picking up bread and cheese along the way. When Tom opens the door you hold these out along with a roll of film. He asks if you are alright, his voice as calm as ever. Only then do you realize how fast you are still breathing.

While he takes the film to the darkroom you wander into the living room. The coffee table is covered with magazines. You flip through them, one after another, unable to focus on anything until you come to a catalogue from a recent art auction. You photographed some of the pieces for the catalogue: the slipper beside a pile of dog turds, the bovine ribcage covered with hide, the mound of manure skewered with dollar bills. You throw the catalogue to the floor as Tom comes into the room. He says nothing, just holds out the contact sheets. The pictures show no shattered lampposts, no wrecked trucks, no cows. When printed backwards they do not say 'Paul is dead.' You tell him about your nightmare.

"You've always had nightmares."

"This one was different."

"Because you walked in your sleep?"

"Because it was so real."

Tom leads you up to the roof, bringing the bread and cheese and a bottle of wine. It is late afternoon. The low angle of the light sculpts the buildings, pushing doors into shadow. Its warmth softens brick and concrete. You sit and stare, absorbed by the light, but do not get your camera. Tom hands you a glass of wine and asks you what you've photographed recently, besides dead cows. You've photographed nothing.

"If I mounted the pictures of the carcasses on rotting cows I'd be famous." You start to laugh, but your laughter turns to tears which you wash away with wine. Tom touches your shoulder, refills your glass.

A second bottle replaces the first and your eyes drift shut. Tom leads you back downstairs and you fall asleep on his couch, waking in the morning with a blanket tucked around you.

By the time you get home the clock says noon. Something nags at you and you open your appointment book. It reads: food shoot - Mercer - noon. You grab a dozen rolls of film from the fridge and toss them into your camera bag, then race downstairs and hail a cab.

A vast table covered with meat fills the studio. You spend the next two hours photographing steaks and ribs and roasts and chops, all looking like dead cows sprawled in the street.

The minute you're done you rush home, stopping only to drop off the film. For the next two days you hole up in your apartment watching movies on T.V., one after another. You doze off, wake to the flickering of the screen, doze again.

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You are leaning against a lamppost, shivering in the thin shift you wear to sleep. The sky is barely light. Dead cows litter the street, and walking among them is the man with the tattooed arms, holding a knife. He stops at one, cuts off its head and legs and stacks them beside the curb, then moves on to another. As he raises the knife you step back. He looks up, then starts towards you, knife still raised. You step back again but something blocks your foot and you gag on the stench of rotting flesh. Holding your breath, you turn and run. The cows disappear and you are running on pavement and then you stumble and fall.

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You are lying on the sidewalk in front of your building. The main door is propped open. You stand slowly. Pain shoots through your knee and blood runs down your leg. You feel nothing; not fear, not despair, nothing but the throbbing as you limp to your apartment.

You wash and bandage your knee, then put up coffee to brew, but when you try to pour a cup it sloshes all over the counter. You use both hands to carry

the cup to the table where you sit and stare out the window. The courtyard below is empty but you continue to stare until your eyes start to drift shut.

You wake in darkness, curled up on the couch, your heart pounding. You've no memory of a nightmare, only the terror. You are home. You are safe. You cannot breathe. You get up, throw on jeans and a sweatshirt, then load your camera and leave your apartment, locking the door behind you, checking the lock.

It is late, the streets empty. Eyeing every shadow, you walk down Eighth Avenue to Fourteenth Street, then turn west. At Ninth Avenue an Irish bar is still open, spilling light onto the sidewalk. Across Ninth the street is dark save for a sliver of moon. You walk on, taking pictures of shuttered buildings, broken street lamps. Approaching Tenth Avenue you see, near the curb, a large bone. Against the darkness of the pavement it appears luminous. You raise your camera. An engine roars behind you and light floods the scene. You turn and are blinded by headlights. A car screeches to a stop beside you and a man sticks his head out the window.

"You a working girl?"

You step away but he grabs your arm. You jerk it back, wrenching his shoulder. He screams and lets go and you run.

At Ninth Avenue you plunge into the bar. The bartender asks what happened. His voice is calming. When he's convinced that you're alright he walks you outside and hails a cab. He hands the driver some money and closes the door.

At home you lock the door behind you, check the lock, then check it again. You turn on the T.V. and pace the apartment, waiting for morning.

You buy another lock, the kind with a metal bar to brace the door against the floor. It is awkward to use, just as you'd hoped. You check that you can open the window that leads to the fire escape. Fire used to be your worst fear.

For the next few days you sleep restlessly but wake in bed. Then you wake in the entryway clutching the bar. The next night you slip a chair between the bar and the door and jam it under the knob.

Early the next morning an ambulance stops in front of your building. Your neighbor, Bill, leads the EMTs to the courtyard where you lie, breathing but not conscious. Your face is as pale as the thin shift you are wearing. Against the dark grey of the pavement you appear luminous. Despite his distress, Bill cannot help thinking what a beautiful photograph that would make.