

The Blood of Children

I have photographs of my son, but not many. In one he is squatting in a field stretching back to the wood line behind the farm. It's the end of summer and he's wearing a blue shirt and blue jeans. He's hunched on his knees, I think, because he likes to hide from me, though he's in plain sight. His hands are clasped in front of him, as if he's just concluded clapping. He looks old and wise beyond his years and he's only two. His legs are too short for the long walks we take to the edge of the woods, where maples, beech, and yellow birch begin.

The field has been fallow for a long time, maybe twenty years, and in that time spruce and hemlock have grown in the open places. To me now it seems like disappearing space, the way innocence or naiveté is lost with the passage of time, filled in with adult concerns.

In 1974, when our son was born, neither of us could have known he would die two years after our divorce. I didn't know Kathryn would be viciously attacked by a man named Danny Rouse in Wichita, Kansas; we didn't know he would brutally murder our son asleep in his bedroom two days before Halloween.

There is one picture of Jason in footy pajamas. He's sitting on my lap. It was Christmas, 1976. Our floor was littered with toys. I don't see them in the photograph; I see them at the blurred edges of memory. There are plastic farm animals in a farm set, with a farm house, barns, and corrals to keep the animals. Near the stove I see a toy with a wheel, and arrow that rotates. When he turned the arrow to a picture of an animal and pulled a cord, the toy said, "I'm a cow. Moooo." When he learned to talk, he took small items in his hand and said, "Put in there," and he placed things into a box or a pail. His voice a chant, a mantra. *Put in there. Put in there.* My wife and I laughed and mimicked him because we were long-haired hippie kids.

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My son was murdered at the end of October, 1979. It's difficult to say these words: *My son was murdered*. It's even more difficult to write them, to see them on the page. This is the first time I have tried to write them. The words won't allow themselves to be shaped by metaphor; the words to describe my son's death cannot be fashioned by lyricism. I am reminded of Pablo Neruda's "I Explain a Few Things," his poem about the Spanish Civil War, which reveals the inadequacy of metaphor:

*...the blood of children
flowed easily, like the blood of children.*

Any figure of speech intended here fails because the blood of children cannot be likened to something without trivializing *the blood of children*, and I cannot imagine the blood of my own child.

Kathryn's mother cannot talk about that night, not since my father received the news of Jason's death and called Roger, Kathryn's father. When Roger answered the phone and talked to my father, he said, "I can't tell my wife that."

I see the baby in his high chair. Behind him I see the snow that fell past the kitchen window, and Kathryn with a spoon poised at the baby's mouth. On weekends when we didn't attend classes or go to jobs, we waited for the baby to wake up, we put him into his high chair, perked a pot of coffee, and started our day.

We'd moved from Detroit and rented a small farm house in Skandia, Michigan, from Wilho and Hannah Salminen. Wilho was a retired National Forest timber cruiser, with high apple cheeks and wispy eyebrows. Hannah spoke Finnish to our malamute. I didn't understand her, but the dog melted under her hand and stared at her face, as if someone finally spoke a language he could understand.

It's the language of the penal system I don't understand, when every three years a letter comes to me and Kathryn from the Victims Notification Program: *Inmate Danny*

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Rouse schedule for parole board hearing on September 12. Each time, we write letters to the parole board to remind them that our family has grieved for twenty-six years; we write letters for our aging parents, who sign them. I include grisly details, hoping the parole board, the people without names, will not forget my son and the victims of his crime. I cringe at phrases like *release programs, weekend passes, minimum security facilities, model prisoner.* I'm skeptical of recidivistic programs designed by criminal justice bureaucrats. I want them to experience what we have, but I know this is impossible.

Right now I live in Mankato, Minnesota, but it doesn't really matter where I live because each year at Halloween, when I'm walking my dog with my wife, Diana, I think about what Kathryn told me, about how two days before he was murdered Jason was excited to Trick or Treat, dress up like a cowboy – six shooters and holsters, snap-button cowboy shirt, and hat. When I tell my wife that Halloween doesn't work for me, she says, "I know," as we pass scarecrows, ghosts that haunt the neighborhood kids who remind me of my son.

There is a photograph of me in 1976. I have long hair past my shoulders; my son sits in my lap. Behind us is a small, decorated tree we cut from the field behind the old farm house. We are both smiling. It was below zero, and from our living room window we could see snow-laden spruce and hemlock stretching to another farm a quarter mile farther east on Michigan Highway 94. That winter, Kathryn's present to me was a pair of Vermont Tubb snowshoes, and the day after Christmas I put them on and walked along Nelson Creek, which flows north to the Chocoley River and Lake Superior.

When I came out of the woods, Wilho Salminen was plowing our driveway. I went into the house and saw the cat, Solomon, with his head under the stove. Jason pointed to him and said "Keeeat." From our living room I watched Wilho push snow away from the garage and bank it next to the house for insulation against freezing pipes. Hannah came into the house and unwrapped a loaf of freshly baked bread for the two hippie kids and their baby. She spoke Finnish to the dog. She watched out the

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window, waited for Wilho to signal her to follow him in the truck, emergency lights blinking behind his Farmall tractor.

There are details I remember about Jason, but what troubles me is how they lose their definition, their sharp edges, like snowy winters when the landscape is blurred. I have photographs of him, gone since 1979, four years after my marriage to Kathryn and two years after our divorce, but the images I have from memory are like photographs lost in the process of moving from one place to another, the edges torn and tattered.

We move around, and new people and experiences take precedence over the old; memories get filed away and more difficult to retrieve with the passage of time. I often wish I'd been blessed with a stronger memory, wish my images were more acute, more defined. I've heard, though, that a photographic memory is more of a curse than a blessing. I've heard that a person with such a memory recalls in detail all the wrong done to him or her, and perhaps feel regret and guilt more intensely.

Kathryn has the kind of memory I'm talking about, and it seems to me it's often equated with intelligence. Kathryn's quick wit and aptitude are impressive. When I coaxed her to play violin, which wasn't often because she shied away from public performance even though she'd been a second chair violinist with the Mt. Clemens Symphony Orchestra when I met her. I loved hearing her play. The sound of the instrument filled the old farm house; it may have had something to do with the hand-hewn logs, covered long ago with 2 x 4s and sheetrock, something to do with the solid and natural, or with the nearest neighbor being a quarter mile away, or with the snow Wilho banked against the foundation to keep us warm.

There is a photograph of Jason in my father-in-law's apple orchard. I don't have it, but I've seen it. It reminds me of Roger, who sat beside me in the old, blue Dodge Dart I'd driven from the Upper Peninsula to Mt. Clemens, where my son is at a funeral

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home. Roger and I stare forward. We don't see the windshield's glass or the car's dashboard, or each other. We look for something beyond, as if we are trying to make out in the distance what we can't describe. Several yards in front of the car is a three-sided shed filled with bushel baskets next to a gravel road leading to Roger's apple orchard. There are makeshift shelves and a counter made from 2 x 8s stretched across sawhorses. Pumpkins form the backdrop. Most of the baskets are empty, stacked inside one another. A few have apples in them, but they've lost their apple sheen. It's a week after Halloween. The apples are done ripening. The trees are bare, and their pruned branches given them a tidy, symmetrical appearance where they wrap around Roger's and Cynthia's home. From the back of their property, you can see a tall, white-bricked smoke stack, and block letters to form the words – *Mt. Clemens Pottery* – down its length.

We have rolled the windows down in the car, and though it is the first week of November there is a warm breeze. Roger smells like apples. My hands are cold, my mind numb. I'd just returned from the Swartzkoff Funeral Home in downtown Mt. Clemens, where I asked the funeral director when my son's body would be ready. I want to see him. Since we've decided this will be a closed casket viewing, I want to see my son before he's buried in the Mt. Clemens Cemetery. "The body is downstairs, almost ready," the funeral director told me. "You can come back at five o'clock." I think, *His body's in the basement*, and I tell Roger, in a manner more like a question than a statement, that I will return to the funeral home.

Roger grew up in Maine, so a lot of words end in a sound like *r* when he tells me about one of his uncles who was a mortician in rural Maine. Roger is a good storyteller, a retired Air Force man. He was stationed in North Africa during World War II, and when he finished more than twenty years in the military, he took a job as a postal carrier. Then he bought a worn-out apple orchard and brought it back to life, turned a hobby into a profitable enterprise. He is a practical man who likes to keep busy.

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He tells me a story about his uncle, who performed his mortuary skills on the dead in the small community where they lived when Roger was a boy. Roger said his uncle never gave a moment's thought to what he believed helped the living bury their dead, until he performed what funeral practitioners call "restorative art" on a close relative, a brother perhaps, or one of his sisters killed in an automobile accident. My uncle, Roger said, was never the same man after that; he withdrew into himself, became morose, the image of his deceased loved one etched across his mind. "Remember your son the way he was," Roger tells me. "Remember how I took him into the orchard and together we spliced a branch to a young apple tree. A week later we returned to the tree, and your son said, 'Look Grandpa, the tree has grown together. Look,' he said. 'Look.'" When he got out of the car, Roger turned to me and said, "I'm not trying to tell you what to do."

These details are what I remember, what I imagined about living in Michigan's Upper Peninsula before my son died. I cannot imagine what happened on that rainy October night in Wichita, Kansas. My imagination is inadequate to Kathryn's experience. The horrifying moments before and after she was left for dead and crawled to a neighbor's for help are burned into her memory, not mine. It's possible to imagine anything. That's what I tell my writing students, but there are images you would rather not create. You can create a mythology for yourself, which we all do in some form or another because we are all storytellers who envision what we think happened to us until we are confronted with a perspective not our own. In the hospital, Kathryn was told by a detective that our son didn't suffer, but he didn't tell us his death would cause suffering. We already knew.