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Autopsy of an Engine

for Kevin Rashid and Matthew Crain

This is how it is when she awakes from her travels. She has been to see the moon, a long journey from tip of star to tip of star. It leaves her breathless. She says to the moon: my nights are not long enough. The moon says to her: you ask for everything; you give me nothing. Not so she tells the moon. I gave you lovely shiny red trinkets when I visited last night. The night before, I danced rumba for you on the back of a dog. Before that I gathered flowers and chased the rats from your doorstep. You have a habit of turning your cold back to me, she tells the moon. It is when you leave me in that way I forget your glow.

The Chevrolet Engineering motor room is high-ceilinged with criss-crossing dirty beige beams, boxed fans, bright blue air hoses, and yellow electric chain-falls with bulbous motors that dangle over strategic work areas like the fat asses of old women. It is a carnival of shapes and colors and fluorescent bright lights if you look above your head. If you look level, your eyes parallel to the floor, your head straight forward, you see a clutter of aluminum and cast iron engines in various stages of being built or torn apart. There are red tool boxes, blue work benches, blue cabinets called kits which house the parts that are used to build the engines by hand. Other cabinets house big scales, little scales, dial indicators, torque wrenches, pushers and pullers. On the floor there are oil spots; you have only to lower your eyes to see them. And the room smells metallic in the areas where engines are built and like ashes in the teardown sections.

I am lost in this place. Like a stray seven millimeter bolt under a bench. Like a used tie strap waiting on the floor to slip an unsuspecting foot. Like a cockroach. It's so big compared to Cadillac Engineering where I started out before it closed, and we were shifted to another General Motors location. Now more than ever I nestle in my work space, cling to my work bench. The space around it is my womb. In my womb there is always an aluminum Cadillac engine in some phase of disassembly. I have a card tacked to the bench with the picture of a blond woman and a brunette. It was a birthday message from a blond friend of mine. The card says that as women we are not ditzzy. We are works of art. This is the vernacular of the motor room, the direct language of survival: I am not a bimchette, not a bitch. You don't understand that?

Don't you understand that nearly every day I report to an operating room for steel where I dissect engines as if I were at the morgue autopsying a murder victim? A John or Jane Doe found in an alley? Although it's not fair to compare the engineering engines to abandoned bodies. The engines have after all been coddled, written about, studied, killed in specific ways, on specific test schedules, at the Desert Proving Grounds, in sub-zero temperatures in Canada.

I can recite from memory the contents of my bright red tool boxes: the Snap-on box sits atop a Proto roller-wheeled bottom box. I can tell you exactly what goes where from the top row of small drawers in the Craftsman to the last space in the Snap-on.

It is there in the Snap-on that I keep my check stubs and bandaids. Four small drawers hold my drills, taps, tap handles, lathe bits, an easy-out kit for

when I fuck up and break a screw or bolt in a part, epoxy glues, extensions and assorted other junk. Then there are four drawers that run the width of the box that house: in the shallowest drawer of the four all of my ratchets, all of my large standard wrenches from 15/16 up to 1 1/4 inch, a few little special tools like pulley pullers and installers, a 1/4 -inch-drive beam torque wrench that torques up to 12 Newton Meters. In the second drawer: hammers, pry bars, a flywheel turner, a 24-inch breaker bar, a self made 3/8-drive spinner. Next an extensive collection of files: itty-bitty fine ones and large raspy ones, the necessary interchangeable wooden file handles, odd nuts and bolts and doodads in the back of the drawer, an assortment of wet and dry emery papers, steel wool, a hack saw, a pretty little saw-blade holder with a pale green handle and plastic cover made for me by one of the guys. On the lathe he also made me a beautiful steel etcher with a brass screw-on top. Another made a belt buckle with my name on it that I must buckle flap side on the right as a man would. I was also given a 3/8-drive, three-inch ratchet (very handy for tight spots) the same day that someone else gave me a King Pleasure album (I think he had the right idea). Then all of my electrical equipment: soldering gun, terminals in a homemade tray, connectors, solder, an assortment of but splices in a nivea jar, every value of fuse known to auto humankind in another nivea jar, pieces of conduit, a roll of electrical tape and bits of shrink tubing. I also keep my impact there. The final space in the bottom box is a deep catchall with a flip-out lid. In it is a box of lamenating sheets, extension cords, ear plugs metric/standard conversion books and drill/tap charts, whiskey, rum and wine bottles.

Should I go on? What's the use? It's true. I know more about the range of sockets in the top box, the screwdrivers, the ratchets, the allen wrenches than I do about what is on this paper. I remember who I am by opening drawers and finding a wrench or a hacksaw. By smelling the musty sock odor from tools coated with dirty oil or stale gasoline and locked in the Snap-on and Proto boxes over the weekends, over the holidays, over the years. By the feel of a knurled ratchet handle in the palm of my hand.

How easy it is for me to stare at a wrench for a long time and it becomes a ballerina. I learned that from my daughter who can turn a pencil into an old woman, a pan into a condominium, a rock into an infant. She can devise all manner of tragedy and comedy with actors that she finds in trash cans or under the couch.

I know that you won't believe me even if I were to tell you how terribly frustrated I have been the past few days struggling to fix my car, a raggedy heap of inner-city blues. It's a simple problem, apparently gone berserk because of an even simpler problem. Layer upon layer of engine mystery. I uncover one and another emerges. After seventeen years in the business each time I approach a car it is as if I know nothing. As if I barely know steering wheel from axle, distributor from throttle body, oil dip stick from oxygen sensor.

Oh how helpless I feel when I raise the hood. Ugly demons merrily await the opportunity to nibble away at my ego. In the same manner I boot up the computer, to write this story, for example, and I am a fumbling mechanic. I find myself raising a car hood when I begin a story. Who knows what lurks

greasy and rusted?

So when it is me at midnight in the motor room I am relieved to face an engine not under a car hood, but on its stand, waiting for my dissecting touch. It is then that she looks like a gypsy lady, buxom and flirty, with hands on her hips. There is a certain point after I have stripped her of dress items- the air conditioning unit, the alternator, the wiring harness, fuel rail, and so on- that she looks young and fresh, eager and willing for what I don't know. This is when I take pictures of her; it is required by the engineering tear-down process. There is an eerie glow in my work area because I am located in a suburb of the motor room, the recipient of feeble rays from main-aisle lighting, dependent on the small fluorescent light on my bench.

Already you can see that I am slipping into my imagination by calling the engine a she. Men do that all the time. They refer to their cars in the feminine. What man admits to riding him? It is the old girl who gives out. It is she who gets him to work every day on auto pilot, faithful. What a gal.

So, on this night I have a gal too. I feel sad to see her exposed like that, me photographing her as if she were an old whore. I identify with her, yes. When I remove her front cover I can see the extent of damage, the wear on the timing chains. Cavitation on the gears. A light golden varnish on the oil pump.

I hate making obvious metaphors, a used engine and an older woman. I never would have thought about this until one particular engine when I saw patches of red along the cold grey lips of the intake ports on the right and left heads. I looked at my fingers then my hands for a gash that could identify the red as my blood. I found no cuts; then again the red was too pale, like fruit punch. Yet, against the grey dimpled aluminum in the eerie, midnight motor room light, the red looked like blood. I twisted my head this way and that. The engine swirled, as I did, round and round. Still, I was no more intelligent about the red patches. I remember the times when I worked on the assembly line many years ago that the sight of blood on an engine was cause for hooting and howling: *the blood of the workers. We are in a war.*

When I was seven years old and immersed in Catholic and spiritual holy communion days, I fell and scraped my right knee. Badly. For a few seconds after the fall no blood appeared. I gazed at the silver dollar-sized patch of white as I fingered the flap of skin dangling by no more than an eighth-of-an inch connection to my knee. White, pure white. Not a capillary bubbled. Not a smudge of dirt from the fall mingled with the slimy dermis. I was looking at my soul, you know. Lily-white, mystifyingly accessible. Right there on my knee. Not inside of my chest as I had figured because of the rantings of the Catholic nuns and stern priests of my school. Not that they said that the soul resides in my chest, but where else could a soul nestle safely but next to the heart, well protected by chest bones? Except when you discover your soul on your knee one summer day on the large front lawn of your parent's home.

Or on the heads of a Northstar engine at midnight. I don't feel at war now, not in the quiet of midnight when only a few other people shuffle around. Some to measure engines, some to build them. I rip engines open during the night when if the wolves could howl they would. I say a prayer for each piston I remove. One flops over in my hand and I jump, startled. I remind myself that this is aluminum and steel I am holding, not flesh.

I see no red on the pistons, none on the oil pick-up, none on the fuel rails. I begin the scientific process. What could be red on an engine? Transmission fluid? Has the engine hemorrhaged, sucked up one of its vital fluids and gagged? So I sniff along the edges of the intake ports, but I smell nothing except the burnt carbon funk of old used engine. I pass the tip of my index finger along a lip of the port and wipe up a bit of the red fluid. It's greasy. I wipe it on my left wrist. It becomes brown like me.

The eye of Isis shines on her as she stands at the river. Birds flutter in her hair because it reminds them of the leaves of soft trees, but her hair is the color of an autumn moon. Already the sun dances on her face in the form of gold rings and dots of diamonds shimmer from her nose, earlobes, and cheeks. From her outstretched arms fringes of rainbow flutter this way and that in the early dawn air. The air is too sleepy to carry her prayer to the heavens. To no goddess in particular for she has become accustomed to sending her wishes to the heavens on the tips of stars. Once a fervent prayer for her mother's health bounced off the moon. Silver threads of rays entered her mother's body and she was healed. Now she says all of her prayers from the main window of her mother's front room. The frogs jump in and out of that same window when the sun shines too brightly and they seek refuge in the kitchen behind a basin that is always filled with cool water.

You see how things can get away from you? Midnight in the motor room. I am completing the autopsy. The last set of parts I touch is the exhaust system. I shake the crossunder pipe for rattles; I look for holes. The crossunder is four inches across and curves like a stiff snake. It is easily cradled as I once cradled my son, then my daughter. I proceed to the exhaust manifold gaskets, flexing them back and forth, eyeing them for carbon leaks. I finger the joint where the donut seal fits on the Y-pipe. I extend the oxygen sensors and check for cracks in the wiring.

By this time, the palms of my hands are rust-colored and dusty. I am rusty-faced and exhausted. I will wait until the morning shift for the engineer's verdict on the red, but I have the unsettling feeling that things have gone too far. That I have begun to see more parts than the engineers intended in this engine and that there is no remedy for this, not even sleep.

Tomorrow night she will ask for a dream from whatever star or moon or galactic being will listen because it has been months since she has had one. Nights come and she has no refuge in other worlds. No place to put her day. So she finds herself agitated and not well-rested. Her mother says: Make a tea of ginger; it will clear your stomach and open your mind. You will go to bed calm and happy like a baby. Your dreams will flow like the river. Her sister says: Bathe in the river an hour before bedtime under the light of the moon. The river water will soak into your pores and free the dreams from every cell in your body. A friend, who has a habit of dancing naked in the garden, says that she should lie on her back on the bank of the river facing the moon. If you keep your eyes open, no blinking, the moon will enter your body and direct your nights. Then you will dream.

Lolita Hernandez