



The  
Lease

Mathew Henderson





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## THE RANCH

You sleep on stacked mattresses and mice run  
the floor, biting at toes; you wake, set traps  
and stack the mattresses higher still.

This is old Sask summer: flax and mustard  
paint the horizon the bright yellow colour of sun  
you find in children's pictures, and always  
the sky is just another dead prairie above you.

Everything you remember lives inside  
the chicken-farm homestead  
with its back-broken frame and that reek  
of old water sitting still. At night the house breathes  
with open windows, swells at the seams.  
At sunrise, it exhales a dust so fine  
you think of bull hearts, dried and ground.

When it's gutted of furniture, you find imprints  
in the carpet: four beds, two dressers, a shelf.  
And from those years when no one kept it,  
from before the oil and the oilmen came, the mark  
where the deer walked in, lay down and died.

## FENCELESS

There are no signposts, no old men waiting to tell you *here*. This place repeats itself; everywhere you've been is folded into grass and dirt, and you blame chance, not science, for putting the iron here, like no seismic charts were read, no holes drilled, as if wealthy men and god just wanted you sweating in the mud.

But the cows, they can find borders even under daylight's sterile sun, watch nations grow from boot prints, divide the plain by men and else. They graze away, uncountable, unheard as you walk the field, tool to tool, with no sense of what is yours, and what is not.

At midnight, under the shelter of the flare, everything is smaller; the world flits in firelight; cows gather in darkness near the edge of the site, scratching thighs against steel tankers. Gut sounds and groans fill the lease like Braille. Coyote howls leap over each other in the stark beyond your sight. The flow and whistle of the well quiets, and your world, the flare, begins to shrink. You feel your stomach tighten, a dirty man at a tundra fire, wrapped in leather, chewing meat, a thousand years ago.

## THE TANK

Squats three days at a time in white-brown mud  
that sticks and sucks, like a mouth, against  
everything it touches. The long battle,  
the bit-by-bit of urging steel to the centre  
of the earth. You dream of sinking, past  
the slow riot of oil, sand and stone,  
to the bottom of the prairie shield.

Rig out. The pylons packed, extinguishers  
strapped, the guy wires of the stack, plucked,  
swing loose again against the sky. Everything ends,  
briefly, and the iron world moves on.

Only the tire ruts are left, six inches  
deep, wet with water and an oil sheen,  
and even these are eaten over by wheat  
and flax and mustard seeds.

No mark survives this place: you too will yield  
to unmemory. Give everything you are  
in three-day pieces. Watch the gypsy iron  
move, follow its commands.  
Tend the rusted steel like a shepherd.

## WASHOUT

Across the field you can see a farm girl who might be pretty,  
stripped down and out of her father's coveralls.  
Might get you hard if she wasn't hidden so well.  
Kinda gets you hard anyway, as she climbs the tractor,  
her legs bouncing against the sides of her loose rubber boots.  
Remember where you came from? What the girls were like there?  
Now open the fucking well and walk the pipe like a healer,  
your ungloved palm hovering over the unions.

She's in the tractor now, over there, radio on,  
windows cracked, texting a guy from school while you hit  
the first sandoff of the day – ball frack, zone two,  
and Bill tells you, *Right now, down below, there's enough nitrogen,  
sand and shit to shoot one of those fat fuck thousand-pounders  
from TV right the fuck out of his bed, so open that bastard slow.*

And then, *Nevermind*, and he does it himself.  
The thin pipe rattles, your lightest pipe, the stuff you solo  
around the lease on your shoulder. The whole line kicks  
and, standing beside the flowback tank, the noise is older  
than anything you've ever heard, like you've always been hearing it,  
and just now became aware. The first time you drove a car  
the engine kicked, sounded like a coil cleanout,  
a blowdown, a frack, a bleedoff. When you learned to  
knead dough, your father's palms over your hands,  
there was a man outside punching holes in the earth,  
making your mother's windows buzz and rattle.  
Does the farm girl hear this, over there,  
in the tractor cab? Does she know it's you?

Near the end where the steel turns ninety degrees,  
goes straight up, some burr inside catches, peels off,  
and the sand cuts through the pipe and into the air.  
But your hands, they're already in an X above your head,  
when you remember the sign for *shut the fucking well*.

## FIRST DAY

Everyone can tell that you're a virgin,  
that when your shot came, you were too full  
of rum to do anything but bully your dick  
into a condom and watch it cower.  
And when Rachel said, *Fuck me*, you didn't,  
couldn't, but shucked the Trojan to the floor  
of Brian's cottage where the girls would  
find it later, make you go and pick it up.

They know all right. They see it in the way  
you wrench, the way you tie your boots,  
but they say nothing, hammering harder  
and harder, sounding off for you  
the hundreds they've taken to bed.

## BUBBLES

They called him Bubbles before you met him,  
flat-ass in the dirt working a snare, legs spread  
like a child's to catch and hold a rolling ball.  
A man from a world without children,  
he had no soft voice inside him.  
He confessed it in every word, with a mouth  
that knew only wood and steel, brick and earth.

His wooden hands grew into whatever tools  
he touched. The day he recoloured the lease:  
twelve hours of wordless painting  
in prairie heat so heavy he was caught by it  
like an insect trapped in the brush's path,  
licked into the colour of the pipe.  
At shift's end, you knew nothing about him,  
but when you heard his name, pictured fresh red paint.

He kept one eye on a gopher hole,  
closed the other to keep from blinking.  
After an hour, stood suddenly with a struggling twine,  
the noosed gopher scratching at air  
as if the thickness of it might help him scramble out.  
When he asked you what to do you spit seeds,  
said, *Retard. Eat it, fuck off.*

Into the field until his arms go taut,  
he stops, something looses inside him  
and he swings the twine against the ground.  
Five times, ten, until the string goes limp.  
Rodent chirps on the first, and the second.  
But by the third, there are already no sounds.

WHO ARE YOU OUT THERE?

The rig is between the derrick and the tongs,  
and the mouths still dry from last night's whiskey  
and this morning's dirt. They trip like it's all they know,  
like tanned gears sweating beside each other.  
This lasts forever, this rigging, this tripping.

You're no part of it. You can only watch  
as they throw tongs and catch string like conversation,  
watch steel slip into earth sixty feet at a time.  
Tilt your head to see the swab line buck and spray,  
and feel everything as the oil turns your face brown.

## FRIENDLY ADVICE

Asking for push-slaps, regardless what your supervisor tells you, will get you nothing but the imprint of the push's hand on your face.

There is no such thing as a pipe stretcher, and all thumb wrenches are left-handed – and there are no thumb wrenches west of NFLD.

Your hardhat did not come with a 'whee' in it, but a truck driver will still remove one for you by throwing it across lease, yelling *whee*.

Do not calibrate the shivs: your arms will tire of being thrown up into the air, your legs will ache from kicking off the ground, and your ass

will hurt from sitting on a bucket in thirty below while everyone laughs at you. Under no circumstance should you contact the labour board.

But, a few months from now, when a new guy shows up, way greener than you, do what it takes to make him look as stupid as you can.