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State Forests

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State Forests

Abstract

I saw him standing on the Ward's Island Bridge and had to resist the urge to just stop and watch. I thought he might jump. So I climbed the ladder to the crosswalk and started walking toward him. It felt impulsive and slow at the same time – maybe it was just the heat that day, like there was a suddenness, but it was on a seven second delay. I was sweating by the time I came near. I shouted something, some sort of nonsense; it could have been anything.

Keywords

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State Forests

Fiction by David Ryan

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The air felt thinner above the river. The water below roared in ways you never hear from the ground. The sound of traffic carried with the water, as if the traffic and the river were both shouting up, as if when you listened and tried to untwine all the strands of sound you could hear *Jump* coming from below. Or maybe I said, *Jump*, even as I meant to say, *Don't jump*. Maybe *Don't* had gotten tangled up in the city sounds. I don't know. I had wanted to discourage him, to say something about being alive still. At least in the beginning. But then he was laughing. The man was laughing. Jump? Jump? he said. He'd heard the river too. Or was he laughing at me?

—I thought you were going to jump, I said. I was close enough to grab him, if I had wanted.

—I'm just taking in the view. His voice sounded exactly like mine, it had the same timbre, the same inflection. The water below seemed fraught with itself, breathless: — It's quite a view, I admitted.

Did he say anything? We were watching a helicopter above Williamsburg now. It wasn't any bigger than a fly. It approached, dangling over the water—steady, bigger now, like a dragonfly, then rearing overhead like a dragon, then away and off like a dragonfly again, then, north. Over Queens it was just a fly again, and then it was just a fleck of ash.

Traffic had stopped. People were getting out of their cars and shouting, *Don't Jump*, or something. The way the sound rose, you could just hear *Jump*—you could feel all the desire gathering up with the roar of the river, chaotic and musical.

—I drove a taxi all through grad school, he said. I always hated that parkway.

—Sometimes I drive around all day, I said: I'll just take a rental out upstate, drive around like I'm still married, like we're looking for a place to spend a few hours.

—Those were the days.

—A nice forest preserve, someplace like that, I said.

We jumped. Or, at least, we were no longer standing on the bridge. The fall seemed to never end. We were in a free fall. It felt perpetual, binding. The wind roared, like it had jumped along with us.

—We were married there, you know. My wife and I.

—There? he asked.

I pointed:

—Carl Schurz Park—over the underpass where all the traffic has stopped. It was a lovely wedding, I said.

—I don't doubt it, he said. It's where the mayor lives, after all.

—I wonder will the water be cold, I said. I suppose I was just trying to keep conversation up. Trying to keep our minds occupied.

—I never married, he said. I think I would have had an Episcopalian service. Big church. Doleful bells. He seemed lost in thought.

For how long we fell I don't know. I put on weight and my hair thinned and grayed. We lost interest in each other's conversation. We flew into little silent rages and moments of extraordinary gratefulness. It was hard to talk over the roar of the approaching water but, you know, you get used to shouting. You forget the water. You just keep falling and falling. I woke a thousand times. I dreamed about driving for miles and miles, looking for state forests, places to stop. Places with names: Loyalsock, Susquehannock, Hogsback. Would the river smash us like stone? Would our hearts explode instead, before we hit the surface?

He was singing *Wild geese that fly with the moon on their wings...*

—Never had kids, I shouted. I saw my wife somewhere waiting up. I saw her writing down names. Now the harder edges of the city had turned to dust, its yellow ghosts hung shapeless in the ozone. The skyline looked like a diorama some neighbor kid had smashed up. Like you come home from work and there's this strange kid sitting in your living room, and there's a skyline all over the floor.

I thought about an old joke I still found funny. Joke still made me laugh. Then I realized that I had misunderstood what had been funny about it. It had taken all these years. All along the thing had just flown over my head. And still, even now, I found myself laughing.

I had an unrelated thought. I closed my eyes and it was gone.

David Ryan's fiction has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *Fence*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Encyclopedia Project*, *failbetter*, *Unsaid*, *BOMB*, *Tin House*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *New Orleans Review*, several *Mississippi Review Prize* issues, *Nerve*, *Cimarron Review*, *Salt Hill*, and *Hobart*, among others. His work has been anthologized in *Flash Fiction Forward* (WW Norton), *The Mississippi Review: 30*, and *Boston Noir 2: The Classics* (Akashic). His website is: www.davidwryan.com

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