

## Bullfrog Stew

Memories summon me through the camera lens. Triggered by a scene, a setting, a fragrant breeze, a sound, they lure me back through time, taunting and teasing me. Sometimes I reach out to a divine memory and feel the delight again. More often than not, I despise them, knowing what's there in a past etched in stone; the unchangeable, unbidden truth. No matter the memory, it's hard to turn away. I haven't the strength. The trigger commands my mind to grab it and my heart to love it or hate it again.

Tennessee mornings are my finest memories. We were up before the sun, while the night-birds were still singing. Me and Trent rushed through breakfast to get to the barn and finish our chores before school. There are certain sounds from my childhood I will never forget, and the old screen door slamming behind us is one of them. We raced to the barn past the giant hickory tree. Trent always won, so I always had to muck the stalls. Sometimes he would pretend to trip and let me win, so I could feed instead. Mucking was no work for little girls, but it built my muscles bigger than any of the other girls. I ran faster than them too. Trent was older than me by three years, but we got along okay. I could have done worse for a brother.

Our barn was like a giant mound of kindling. There were gaps in the boards so big you could fit your arm through, and the floor had holes. When we led the horses out we had to watch for the holes. If they stepped in one they could die. That's what Trent said anyways. It never did happen so I never did find out.

Some of the old farms in the Northeast remind me of the farms growing up in Tennessee. The images I shoot through my lens hold bits and pieces of my childhood; each

## Bullfrog Stew

frame a scene from my life's story without me in it. I am the absentee star in my own movie.

Last year I took a photography tour of barns and covered bridges. Many of the barns I captured were as beaten down as ours. I couldn't help but wonder if the floors had holes.

We weren't the poorest farmers around. We had electric and an indoor toilet. Most of the farms near us were not so fortunate. Our fences were down more than up, and we chased a lot of cows. Trent rounded them up on his horse most of the time. I remember watching him wave his Brave's cap with one hand and hold the reins high in the other, like a cowboy in an old movie. He laughed the whole time, except when he fell off. Daddy would stand on the porch watching until my mama would make him get the truck and go help. Sometimes I would jump in the back and hold on for the ride as the truck flew out through the pasture. Mama would give me holy hell with her switch when I got back, but Daddy just laughed. Daddy had bright blue eyes that looked like the ocean. When he smiled they just got brighter. Mama was like too much sun, or too much rain.

As with most kids our age, we went exploring. There was a lot of exploring to do in Tennessee. One Saturday we left around noon and walked clear up the river to the shed houses. The farther we walked, the muddier we got and the thicker the flies got. Those black flies hung in the air like clouds. They were thickest near the water, and if you weren't careful to close your mouth you were sure to end up with a few. The hem of my dress was all but soaked and my sneakers were covered in that dark Tennessee mud. I kept telling Trent we had to go back, we were going to get lost. He said you could never get lost if you followed the river, so that's what we did. We cast out our lines along the way. Trent had three nice catfish by the

## Bullfrog Stew

time we reached the little houses. Daddy said when the fish saw Trent coming they jumped onto his hook. I believed it was true. I never caught a single thing.

The river water was brown and lazy. It flowed like it had nowhere in particular to go, and was in no rush to get there. Tall weeping cypress heavily laden with golden moss hung low over the still water, urging it along. Sometimes a little whirlpool sucked in a stick and it got hung up bobbing and turning in slow circles. As I grew older, that was how I began to think about my life. I felt just like one of those sticks. There were snakes too, but Trent said to never mind them and they wouldn't mind you neither. I hated snakes and the riverbank, so I kept telling Trent we had to get back. He ignored me like usual, until we reached the last bend before the shed houses. He knew as well as me that we were forbidden to go there. Daddy sure as hell wouldn't laugh at that and Mama, well the damn switch would come out for sure.

We were about to turn around when we saw a man beckoning to us with his hands. I couldn't tell if the old man was waving us to come closer or waving us away. His arms flew above him in wild circles, and he was mouthing words but no sound escaped him. Trent moved toward him, all big eyed and curious. The man was pointing to something at his feet, and I noticed he had no shoes. He wore dirty overalls with no shirt underneath. I saw that he was pointing to a very large brown snake. It looked to be dead but I screamed anyway. It was longer than any snake I had ever seen before, and the head looked smashed, like he had just killed it. The man's eyes were wild, like crazy had taken over inside him. He grabbed Trent by the arm and pulled him toward the snake. I was still screaming and people were coming towards us from the little white shacks. Trent jerked free of the man and spun me around, pushing me

## Bullfrog Stew

down the bank and yelling at me to shut up and run. As we started running a boy Trent's age appeared in front of us and blocked our escape. He was about the same height as Trent, but his hair was long and blonde. He was dressed in denim cut-offs, and tan as tan could be. "That's only Jack", the boy laughed, "Don't be so chicken shit". Trent reached over and took my hand and started walking around the boy, but the kid stepped in front of us, blocking us again. Everyone always said how much Trent resembled our mama, and I saw it for myself just then. He grabbed the kid by the throat and threw him out of the way. The boy landed in a messed up heap on the riverbank. I thought Trent was going to pull my arm out of its socket he was pulling me so hard back down the river. When we finally stopped to catch our breath I discovered I had lost a sneaker. I was not inclined to go back and look for it, so Trent carried me on his back the rest of the way home, all the time warning me not to let on where we had been.

When Mama asked where my other sneaker was I told her I lost it in the mud. It wasn't really a lie so I said it straight to her eyes and I thought she believed me because she smacked me once, and that was the end of it. I learned at an early age that self preservation relied heavily upon creative presentation of the truth. It was about a week later the boy from the river showed up at our door. He was holding Trent's fishing pole, and we ran to the porch where he was talking to Mama. He said his name was Nathan, and he was returning the pole. I think if Trent ever looked more scared I never remembered it. I stared at the ground in silence. Mama returned to the kitchen like nothing ever happened. Later she gave Trent ten and I got the same for lying. Still, we walked back up the river every chance we got and Trent and Nathan became friends.

## Bullfrog Stew

When I first moved to the Northeast I could not get enough of the ocean. I photographed a storm once that cast ten foot waves onto the rocky coastline. The sky was as black as coal and the wind sounded like a freight train. I stood on the shore and let the cold spray soak me, shooting frame after frame until the gale forced me to run to my car. I sold one of the images to a local newspaper. I didn't make much from selling it, but it was my first published photo. The editor called me crazy for standing out in a storm like that. He said I was damn lucky I wasn't killed.

When it stormed in Tennessee the rain fell in big heavy sheets that seemed to pour down all at once. The river rose quickly and the mud on the banks slid down into the rush of angry water. Like a sleeping serpent the river woke, racing away to nowhere. I was nine that year and Trent and Nathan were already twelve. Trent didn't always like me hanging around; it was Nathan that convinced him to let me come along that day. Mama said "no wandering around the water, and stay away from those shacks!", but Daddy let us go. I could see Mama was mad. It wasn't often Daddy put in for us, and I wondered if he was home getting his ass whopped. I thought it must be pretty bad for him back there. I was walking and dragging a stick in the mud, and Trent and Nathan were fishing. They were talking about girls in whispers but I didn't care to listen anyway. It started raining without any warning. It fell quick and heavy and the sky just opened right up and let it all go. Mud ran down at us and the thick sludge was up to my knees before I knew it. It was hard to move but we ran as fast as we could. I kept falling and even with Trent holding on to me I was afraid I would be swept away any minute. I lost my footing and ended up face first in the mud. I could feel the river pulling me in, and my head

## Bullfrog Stew

went under the water. Suddenly I felt myself being dragged up the river bank and Trent slammed my back over and over. I told him I was ok but he just kept hitting me until Nathan finally stopped him. When I could stand we ran alongside the bank until we reached Nathan's house. The shed houses were a bunch of small white cabins connected by rickety covered walkways. Nathan led us to the last one at the far end. There was a small porch attached and we stood there watching the storm. When the lightning flashed it looked like a giant whip slashing down from heaven. Mama said when it stormed like this God was angry. She said that sinners would be struck down by lightning. Daddy said it meant God was happy. He sent the rain to wash everyone's troubles away and make things grow. I wanted to believe Daddy, but I still hoped I hadn't sinned.

Inside the house there was hardly any light. An old woman stood over a wood stove, stirring something delightful in a crock. The smell made my nose tingle and my mouth water. The woman appeared to be permanently bent over. Her back was hunched and her skin was leathery and ancient. She had warm dark eyes but her hands were shockingly cold. She led me to a seat at the table and dished out some of the fragrant soup. Trent and Nathan joined me, and Nathan's younger brother came in. I figured him to be about six or seven, a mirror image of Nathan. He handed the old woman a small box, which by the sounds of it, contained a frog. She thanked him and kissed his dirty cheek. All through dinner the kid kept kicking me under the table. I wondered why I had never seen him at school. The delicious soup warmed me right to my bare toes, and I thought I had probably never tasted anything so wonderful. We followed Nathan through a small living room to a tiny bedroom in the back. The two boys shared a

## Bullfrog Stew

mattress on the floor for a bed. The walls were covered in dog-eared pictures of cowboys and rodeos. There was a small table in the corner next to the old mattress. On it sat a framed photo of a much younger Nathan and his daddy, who he had not seen in two years. He was a bull rider, and Nathan wanted to be one too. When I asked about his mama, he said she left. I asked him did she die. He said no, she just left.

Before dark the rain stopped. A brilliant late day sun burst through the clouds just before it set. One of the most memorable things about Tennessee was a sunset that seemed to draw flame from the sky and set the mountains on fire. I was convinced it was God's way of showing us something beautiful right before the dark. I was still soaked and tired and this time I had lost both shoes. We couldn't take the river back home. The banks were under water that was still rising. I wondered aloud what would happen if it got any higher. Nathan told us it rose over the bank once or twice a year. He joked that the dirty water made everything clean. It came to the porch and into the kitchen but they only ever had to leave once. Nathan walked us home through town, and along the way he told us all about his grandma. Her name was Adeline. She was once a midwife at the hospital in Savannah, and delivered most of the babies born there. Sometimes people came to see her when they could not afford a doctor. She gave them remedies that healed them. Out in back of the shed houses Adeline grew vegetables and herbs in a large garden. She could cook anything with practically nothing. He told us that what we had eaten was bullfrog stew. Remembering in horror the frog in the box, I began violently retching on the side of the road. I forced it all up and swore I would never eat at Nathan's again.

## Bullfrog Stew

We arrived home well after dark, exhausted and muddy. Mama was on the porch waiting with her willow switch. I thought a lot that night about Nathan's mama just up and leaving.

I wasn't allowed to go with Trent and Nathan on any more adventures. I was kept at home and forced to stay in the house. Mama tried to teach me to sing. She had a beautiful singing voice. It wasn't long before she realized her gift did not pass on to me. One lesson I messed up a note badly. Suddenly her leg shot out and kicked me hard in the shin. It hurt so bad I screamed, and Daddy came running inside. Being around Mama so much made me nervous. I bit my nails down so far they bled. Mostly I tried to stay away from her. I think Daddy must have felt badly for me, because after a week or so he took me out to the barn with him. I liked the smell of the hay and petting the baby calves. Daddy taught me to ride Trent's mare and I got pretty good at it. I was putting her away one day when I heard laughing coming from out back of the barn. I found Trent and Nathan at one of the bull pens messing with a huge brown bull. A silver ring thick with snot hung from the beast's nose. I immediately had a very bad feeling. Nathan was explaining to Trent how to stay on. Trent had connected a bunch of Daddy's old leather belts and was reaching in the pen trying to tighten the makeshift strap around the bull's massive belly. Every time he got close the bull lurched away. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I began yelling at them and spooked the bull. He swung his enormous head at Trent and I saw my brother fall down underneath him. Nathan tried to help him up, but the bull charged Trent. This time it gored him with its horns. I heard him cry out and saw blood seeping through his shirt. I ran to the house screaming. Before I was half way there, my daddy flew out the door and hopped over the porch railing like a jackal. He sprinted to the bull pen,



## Bullfrog Stew

but Trent was already on his feet. The strap hung loose around the belly of the bull, and Trent's shirt was covered in blood. I saw Mama coming and ran to the house and into my room. I was convinced that Trent was going to die. If not from the injury, the beating would kill him for sure. The old truck tore out of the farm and onto the highway with my mama and daddy and Trent, and I didn't know if I would ever see my brother again.

I paced the floor for several hours waiting for them to return. When the truck pulled in the driveway I was relieved to see that Trent was with them. He had a bandage wrapped around his ribs and had gotten some stitches. Mama spoke softly to him and helped him into the house. She even put him to bed and brought him water. Trent would not speak to me at all. I caught one hell of a lashing that night, but I wasn't sure why. Much like Adeline's stew, my mama was sweet as could be on the surface, but there was something real ugly underneath.

The Indians up here call horses *ahaso*. They welcome me onto the reservation to photograph their herd. While on the reservation, I am forbidden to take photos of any of the people. Some of the elders still believe the camera will steal your soul, and it becomes trapped in the photograph forever. I can definitely understand that.

For Christmas that year I was given a horse of my own. It was young bay gelding I named Willow. I was thrilled at first, until I tried to ride him. He threw me off at every opportunity, spinning and bucking and throwing his head down. One day I saddled up and led him out of the barn. I could see Trent and Nathan by the riverbank and wanted to go sit with them, but I knew they would just get up and walk away from me like they always did. I rode Willow out past the

## Bullfrog Stew

barn and headed for the field. Something startled him and he jumped and bucked, and off I went. This time I landed on my arm and my head hit the ground. Willow took off galloping and I began to cry. I just laid there until I saw Trent standing over me. He had my horse with him. He told me to get up and I followed him to an empty pen. Trent and Nathan took turns riding Willow. They rode him for me every day and taught me how to stop him from bucking me off. I even let Nathan borrow him to ride off with Trent. They disappeared for hours at a time. I hardly ever got to ride my horse again, but at least they were finally talking to me.

My favorite photograph is one I captured in Maine of a tiny church near the ocean. The water was choppy and white-capped waves rose up behind it. The little church had been abandoned for some time, and reed grass grew up around it. Through the lens of my camera, I could see myself standing there; a young girl of nine or ten, with blonde curls and a blue gingham dress. The thing about it was I couldn't see her face; the haunted eyes or the sorrowful smile. I haven't been to church since I left Tennessee. I wasn't even married in one. I don't really know why I put religion aside, I just made the decision and that was it.

Some of my fondest memories were of riding the bus that picked us up for Sunday school. Trent and I always sat in the farthest seat in the back. The bus flew over the bumpy dirt roads and we bounced so high sometimes we hit our heads on the roof. I lost my stomach in the dips and ditches but it was a feeling you just couldn't get anywhere else. The Reverend Myles Sampson drove our bus and we sang *Jesus is the Rock of My Salvation* and the older kids in the front passed chaw. The reverend pretended not to see them. Getting off the bus was tricky. We made it a game to avoid the spit puddles on the floor. When the old bus finally broke

## Bullfrog Stew

down for good it was the end of Sunday school. Most of the kids lived too far away and many had no way to get there. We were forced to attend church with the adults. Every Sunday morning we put on our church clothes and piled into the truck. Trent got to ride in the back. He was the lucky one. I sat in the cab between my parents. The shifter was on the floor in front of me. Sometimes Daddy made me shift. Mamma hated that. Every time Daddy yelled "second!", I pulled the shifter back and Mama would slap me. Then he would yell "third!", and I would get slapped even harder. I often arrived at church with my arms and face covered in angry red blotches. Mama told everyone it was Scarlet Rash.

One Sunday morning Mama called us to get dressed for church, and Trent asked if Nathan could come. Mama said no but Daddy argued about denying a boy the word of God, and she finally gave in. When we were ready, Mama stomped to the truck and slammed the door hard. I sat straight and still in the cab and I dared not look at her. When we arrived at church she jumped from the truck and the door slammed shut again before I could even get out. I crawled over to Daddy's door. Reverend Sampson was at the door of the church greeting everyone. The reverend was a man I respected. I enjoyed his sermons and the way he made everyone stand up and sing. At the start of every service, he raised his hands up to God and asked forgiveness for all of our sins. I appreciated that as I did not want to get struck down by lightning. I walked into church with Trent and Nathan and behind us was Maddie Thompson. She was a rather large woman who always smelled strongly of body odor. Her lips appeared permanently fixed in a crimson scowl. Maddie was in the choir with Mama and they practiced together on Sunday afternoons. We didn't make it to the front row where Mama was sitting.

## Bullfrog Stew

Maddie suddenly reached out and grabbed Nathan by the arm and steered him back toward the door. She was saying something about disrespecting the church and pointing to his bare feet. She said there was a church for river people and this wasn't it. Everyone in the church stood to watch. Mama sat in her seat staring straight ahead. Daddy ran down the aisle after Nathan. Reverend Sampson was trying to calm everyone down. In all of my life I had never yet seen my daddy mad. His face turned redder than Maddie's lips and he stood up real straight and told her to take her hands off of the boy. Then he put an arm around Nathan and led him back to sit with us. I could hear Nathan's stifled sobs and see him shaking. I tried to hold his hand but he pulled it away and stared at the floor. The heavy door of the church banged shut behind us. Reverend Sampson marched purposefully down the aisle and up to the altar. He turned to face all of us and he looked so sad like he was about to cry himself. His lips were trembling but they broke into a smile that covered his entire face. Then he did the most remarkable thing. Slowly he reached down and removed his shoes. He kicked them away hard and raised his hands and asked God to forgive us. He said we were all God's children and all the same in His eyes. I looked down our row and saw Daddy removing his shoes. Then Trent took his off too. All around me I heard the beating of a hundred drums as shoes continued to hit the wood floor. Nathan never looked up through the entire service. Reverend Sampson read from Hebrews. He spoke about brotherly love and welcoming strangers. His voice boomed and echoed through the church. He swayed from side to side as he sang, and the barefoot congregation sang with him. The collection plate was overflowing when the afternoon sun shone through the windows. Flecks of dust were floating in the light. I imagined the floating

## Bullfrog Stew

specks to be the words of God. They were swirling in every direction as if they were dancing. I thought maybe God had a lot to say that day.

I chose photography as an elective in college while I was working on my accounting degree. It was a nice change of pace and I discovered I have a knack for it. The camera does something for my soul. At times, I am not sure if it harms or heals. I guess that depends on the memories it congers. We studied photographing people, and our instructor told us to capture moments, not just people. That didn't make sense to me at first. It seemed I could never capture a moment. Then I took my camera with me everywhere, and I started snapping pictures of people interacting. I caught one of a man and a woman kissing. They were on a bench in the park and I took the shot from behind them. The sun was just beginning to set, painting the sky in pink and orange. It reminded me of the first time Nathan kissed me. It changed my life forever.

We were behind the barn waiting for Trent to finish feeding. I was catching lightning bugs and closing them up in my hand, making the gaps between my fingers glow. Nathan got this funny look about him, and just suddenly leaned down and kissed me on the lips. I felt all fluttery inside like I could take off any second. I also felt terribly guilty all night and the next day, until he kissed me again. That time I thought for sure I would float away. We became the quietest of thieves, stealing kisses whenever we could, until someone spotted us and told my mama. One night before bed the door to my room flew open and there she stood. The moonlight through my window illuminated the willow in her hand. I knew it was bad when she started calling me terrible names. Daddy ran up the stairs behind her but she slammed my door

## Bullfrog Stew

and locked it. I heard him and Trent banging on the door, yelling frantically for her to stop. There was no escaping the eerily glowing rod. The dreaded fate of a sinner was finally upon me as lightning flashed and found its mark. I don't remember much else, except for the bite of the switch on my skin over and over. I must have passed out before Daddy broke the door down, because Trent said he saved me but I don't remember that either. The only thing I recall is waking up at Adeline's house as she covered the welts in thick healing clay. The pungent paste was coated all over my skin but for days the deep gauges still burned. I felt as if my entire body was on fire. Adeline insisted I drink some soup and I protested loudly about the bullfrogs. "Silly girl", she chuckled, "there are no frogs whatsoever in bullfrog stew". I have kept her secret all of these years.

I didn't want to leave Adeline but Daddy came to get me two weeks later. I was all scabbed up and large patches of my hair were missing where Mama pulled it out. Daddy didn't say much, but I caught him staring at me in the truck. He told me that Mama wasn't there anymore. I never asked where she went.

When I returned home life went on as normally as it could. Mama never did come back, but I was always watchful. Nathan was my ever-present protector. Sometimes people asked me about Mama. They asked me where she was, and I told them she left. They asked me did she die. I said no, she just left.