

Pheasants Of Detroit

Matthew Baker

Pheasants Of Detroit

In 2003, on this planet, I was a loner at a certain high school in Detroit. That was the year my father disappeared. I have never told anyone about what I saw that year, although I probably should have. I am a writer, now, or pretend to be. I publish stories nobody reads in journals nobody reads. For rent money, I pick cabbage, radishes, eggplant. In 2012, in midtown Detroit, everyone is a farmer, a goatherd, a beekeeper. It was at a farm that a financier coined that maxim. *We cannot create value until we create scarcity.* I remember thinking, houses or people? I live alone in an apartment with a mattress on the floor. I have never written about myself until now. I will mail this to my friend, who maybe will get someone to publish it. A magazine people read. That year, the year of the disappearance, I had bony arms, bony legs, a few black hairs above my upper lip. A number of worries. A tendency to twitch. I often wore my father's castoff sweatshirts, which didn't yet fit me. One night we crossed together through the field of pheasants. My father was an illegal. An unwelcome immigrant. Before any assumptions have been made—a mustachioed man in a stained apron?—I should explain. My father wasn't Mexican, Guatemalan, Honduran. My father had emigrated from Turkey, had been born in a fishing village near the ruins of Miletus. My mother had been born in Detroit. They weren't married. Officially, in this country, my father didn't exist. At the airport, he had told immigration he would be traveling, a brief vacation, five days. Approximately five thousand days later, he was still

here. My mother said he was in hiding. He had degrees in physics, but here his degrees were meaningless. For years he had worked at an axle factory for an automotive corporation. I would rather avoid naming it: I am grateful he was given work, despite his status as an illegal, and wouldn't want to cause it trouble. And, regardless, during the layoffs that autumn he had been fired. He hadn't worked in months. He spoke flawless English, but it was rare to hear it. He was quiet, communicated largely through frowns and grunts, seldom spoke sentences longer than a single word. The exception was that night we crossed together through the field of pheasants. The twilight was streaked with violet clouds. Pheasants scattered clucking ahead of us. Wind thrashed the grass. We were carrying bagged groceries. When I think of him, I think of him that night. A hulk draped with a fluttering trenchcoat, topped with a brown wool cap. Weathered skin, tangled beard, thick wrinkles under his eyes. Scarred fingers gripping plastic bags of eggs, tin foil, leafy celery. Beyond him, the abandoned warehouse. My father had led us into the field. The field wasn't a shortcut. Rather, the field was a detour, would add whole minutes to our trip home. I didn't realize until much later that my father might have needed that extra time to summon the courage to speak. Regardless, as we crossed through the field, my father abruptly began speaking. Complex, eloquent, multi-clausal sentences. About his youth. Playing among the phoenix statues in the ruins of Miletus. Being deflowered in an abandoned dovecote in his village, later deflowering another student in an empty classroom at the university. Armed robberies, political kidnappings, bombing attacks at the university, seeing a girl's hands blown to stumps. For us it was uncharted territory. Not the topics. He had spoken before, albeit monosyllabically, of his past. But that night he was speaking about feelings. Experiencing a feeling of wonder in the ruins; experiencing a feeling of vulnerability in the arms of these women; experiencing a feeling of terror at the university. That's what was uncharted: that there were emotions. He had never revealed these emo-

tions before. He was nervous. His voice wavered as we splashed through puddles. I understood even then that he wasn't trying to lecture me, teach me anything, impart fatherly wisdom. He was seeking my approval. He was trying for my friendship. He was asking me to meet him in this new place. And I wasn't able to. I listened to what he said, but I didn't react. Even after he stopped speaking, mid-sentence, I was silent. I managed to say only a single thing. As we squeezed backward through the gap in the fence—my bags caught on a bent wire—I made an asinine comment about the weather. That was it. We didn't speak again until we were home.

A month later he disappeared. My grandparents believed he had gone to a new city. My mother believed he had been mugged, killed, dumped in a deserted lot. Boys at school suggested he had killed himself. I didn't know who to believe. Before he had disappeared, I had regretted what had happened. After he disappeared, I couldn't forgive myself. That night in the field he had offered me something rare. I had been too afraid to take it. I wouldn't have another chance.

After the disappearance, my grandparents moved in with us. We lived in a squat house in a deserted neighborhood. All of the other homes were vacant, their windows boarded, their lots overgrown with rampant vines and sprawling trees. The houses were scheduled for demolition. The bulldozers were never sent. Blizzards came instead. Aside from roving packs of mangy strays, our street was always empty. We weren't alone in being alone. A third of the city's land was vacant—an area the size of the Bronx. Birches had grown through the roofs of deserted libraries. Trucks loaded with scraps of plaster sat rotting in abandoned factories. The skyline was darkened by bankrupt hospitals, bankrupt churches, bankrupt hotels. Scavengers looted the buildings of mahogany paneling, marble cladding, copper railings, vandals raced along the hallways, shattering the mirrors with hammers, spraying the mirrors with paint, squatters built tents in the ruins. Owls hunted mice in the

alleys. Opossums claimed deserted cinemas, raccoons claimed deserted prisons, foxes claimed deserted diners. Pigeons made giant coops of deserted skyscrapers. Pheasants nested in the fields. Alone, wandering, I had seen an abandoned carnival, the doors of its wax museum and haunted house and hall of mirrors gaping like mouths. An abandoned school, its bookcases overturned, its glass beakers dusty, its plastic skeletons hung from the ceiling with the cords of telephones. An abandoned shooting range, targets like silhouettes still fluttering along its backstop. Giant ferry boats rotting at their marinas. Moss devouring homes whole. Withered corpses of feral cats. Rusty shopping carts. Melted clocks. Over half of the city's inhabitants had vanished—fled the city—one million souls.

In another neighborhood, unpopular Canadian musicians had bought a house for \$100. They were recording an album in the attic. All seven of them seemed to play the drums.

Every night, I built a blind in the field from heaped tires, shot pheasants from there. I had found the rifle at the abandoned shooting range. It was an air gun, fired pellets with hollow points that left holes the shape of keyholes in the targets. So far I had killed two pheasants and, accidentally, one squirrel. I had never seen another person. Squatters had occupied the other abandoned warehouses, but squatters avoided the warehouse in the field.

I sat there, in the tires, removing parts of myself with my knife. Trying to learn where I was, exactly, inside of myself. I cut hairs from my eyebrows, carved curls of nail from my fingers, nicked flecks of skin from my arms. How much could I lose, before I lost myself? That morning, we had watched footage of our soldiers invading Iraq, searching for Saddam Hussein. Twenty-three years ago we had given him the key to our city. Now we were trying to kill him.

A pheasant crept from a clump of grass.

The pheasant stopped, pecked at the ground, stepped around a muddy puddle. I shut an

eye, pressed the other to the lens of the scope. I studied the pheasant through the rifle. Lavender tail with dark stripes; chestnut body with pale spots; necklace of white plumage; wattle like a mask. I touched the trigger. The pheasant pecked. I fired.

The bird leapt, flew crookedly past a snowdrift, dropped into a puddle. I fired again. The bird lurched into a clump of grass. I ran with the rifle, knelt at the grass. Blood was there. I shoved through. A trail of blood led around the body of an overturned barrel, across the roots of a gnarled tree, toward the corner of the warehouse. I strapped the rifle to my back.

As I was trotting along the trail, keeping a lookout for the pheasant, I heard a voice. A shout. Echoing from the warehouse. I stopped, listening. I recognized the voice.

There weren't doors on this side of the warehouse, only a rusted ladder that led past nine flights of massive grimy windows. I scaled the ladder, the rifle swaying at my back. Beyond each window lay an immense chamber of crumbling pillars, toppled pallets, forklifts with sagging tires. Pellets dropped from the pockets of my jacket, spiraled toward the grass below. Where the ladder was bolted to the building, some of the bolts had come loose. Wind battered me. The first few chambers were empty. I was about to climb to the ground, but then again I heard the voice.

At the seventh row of windows, I found that the top three rows belonged to the same floor. A chamber triple the size of those below—a rusted archway overlooking an empty shaft, pigeons nesting in the rafters, a smeared tarp swaying beyond some fallen pillars. Boys from my school were stooped over something on the floor. Freshmen, like me. One boy had a snub nose, wore an unbuttoned jacket over a basketball jersey. The other was taller, bulkier, had hands tattooed with winged wheels. The boy with the snub nose was shouting. I couldn't hear exactly what. I brushed the glass from the ledge—the shards tumbling into the shaft beyond—then scooted onto the ledge, clutching both sides of the building, seven stories above the ground.

The boy with the snub nose was gesturing at the rusted archway, shouting about a “phenomenon.” It looked as if the archway had belonged to a larger structure, once, but that the structure had been torn away. Or, perhaps, had tumbled into the shaft beyond. The shaft was utter darkness. At my angle, from the ledge above, it seemed to plunge through the lower levels of the warehouse into the very depths of the planet. It had the approximate dimensions of a pool.

The boy with the snub nose was explaining that anything thrown through the rusted archway simply would vanish. He had gathered a handful of bolts from the floor. Underhanded, he threw the bolts through.

“You see!” the boy with the snub nose shouted.

I squinted. The tattooed boy stepped toward the archway, threw through a handful of his own. At my angle, the bolts did seem to vanish, but such small objects were difficult to follow.

“What the hell?” the tattooed boy kept saying.

The boys stooped for more bolts. I was about to leave. However, as they threw another handful of bolts through the archway—which seemed to vanish—a third boy shuffled through the gap in the swaying tarp, dragging my pheasant by its legs. His name was Marcus Vanloon. The other names I’ve forgotten; his, however, I’m unable to forget. He had hair so blond it was near white. His eyebrows, even. He claimed to have shot the pheasant.

“Can we use it?” the boy with the snub nose beamed.

They told Marcus the story about the archway. Marcus laughed, like he didn’t believe it, which he didn’t, probably. Marcus tossed the pheasant at their boots.

The tattooed boy gripped the pheasant by its legs. He began spinning. He whirled, a blur of black boots, chestnut plumage, silver jacket, lavender feathers. Dust rose around

his boots. Feathers shot swooping at the floor. He hurled the pheasant through the archway.

The pheasant vanished.

The boy with the snub nose shrieked.

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” the tattooed boy kept shouting.

Marcus was hopping around, hands covering his mouth, like someone had dropped a full-court at the buzzer.

“I’m going through!” Marcus shouted.

The boy with the snub nose was hugging himself he was so happy.

They found a rotting coiled nylon rope. Marcus looped it around his waist, looped it around his waist again. They knotted it.

“Marcus, you’re a fiend!” the tattooed boy said.

“I don’t know, you’re about to, see some other world or something, warp to another dimension, drop through a wormhole to another century, get transported to a videogame, get reborn as a rock, get stretched, get shrunk, get crippled, get powers?” the boy with the snub nose was rambling.

“You’re a fiend, Marcus!” the tattooed boy said.

Marcus jerked at the knot. The tattooed boy slapped him on the back. The boy with the snub nose shook his hands, both hands, twice apiece.

Marcus climbed to the archway. The others tied the rope to a bent pipe. They stood clutching the rope. Marcus stood with his fingers touching the archway, the toes of his boots at the edge. He chewed a lip. He shut his eyes. He stepped through.

The rope jerked, tore the pipe from the wall, ripped through their fingers. The tattooed boy snatched it, got dragged skidding across splintered boards, shattered tiles, rusty nails. The boy with the snub nose dove, grabbed it, got dragged too. They slammed into the

ruins of a pillar. The boy with the snub nose shouted. The tattooed boy braced himself against the concrete, wrenched the rope over his elbows. The rope jerked, stopped, twitching.

Marcus, and his end of the rope, had vanished.

The boy with the snub nose panted, gripping the rope.

“Marcus?” the boy with the snub nose called.

The rope creaked. Pigeons cooed from a rafter. Dust floated glittering in beams of light.

“He’s not, he’s not dead, he’s not,” the tattooed boy kept saying.

The rope jerked, again went still.

“I can’t hold it anymore,” the boy with the snub nose gasped.

“But, actually, you can’t let go,” the tattooed boy grunted.

The rope jerked.

“I can’t hold it anymore,” the boy with the snub nose whimpered.

“Don’t you fucking let go,” the tattooed boy whispered.

At the archway, the rope lifted from the floor. It hovered there, twitching, mid-air.

Marcus stepped back through.

The others dropped onto the ground, their hands trembling, their fingers frozen rigid in the shapes of talons. The boy with the snub nose was cheering. The tattooed boy shook his head, laughing, quietly.

Marcus dropped the rope, his face flushed, his cheeks sweaty. Somehow he had lost a boot. His forehead was scraped. His jacket was coated with dust.

“What did you see?” the boy with the snub nose said.

Marcus frowned, knocked the dust from his jacket, nodded back at the shaft.

“Just the pit,” Marcus said.

“But not that pit?” the boy with the snub nose said.

Marcus said there was nothing through the archway but the same pit, the same warehouse, the same city.

“You wasted my bird,” Marcus said.

“But you were gone!” the tattooed boy said.

Marcus ducked through the gap in the swaying tarp.

“Let’s go,” Marcus shouted.

The others ran after him. I sat staring at the archway, dazed, until a truck backfired on the road beyond the field. Then I scaled the ladder back to the ground. I hid the rifle under the tarp where I kept it. I squeezed through the gap in the fence, then walked home.

The twilight was starry. Lit lamps glowed golden. Puddles of snowmelt glimmered on the pavement. I understood even then that something was wrong with me. I didn’t think of people as people. Didn’t think of them as being actually there. As thinking thoughts, feeling feelings. I could answer a teacher’s question, return a kid’s stare, hop a janitor’s broom, all without ever becoming conscious that they were conscious, self-aware, actual people. I was trying to fix myself. I would force myself to think about it. Walking home, I passed a girl in a backwards hat with a flat brim. The girl waited until we were passing, then spit, so her spit would almost touch my shoes, but wouldn’t. That person actually existed. A whole before and after was stretching ahead and behind of her. I forced myself to think about it. But on the porch of a brick house with leaves in its gutters, a woman tending a smoking grill was staring at me, with a whole before and after stretching ahead and behind of her, and twin kids on bicycles were weaving along the street, and somewhere in their empty neighborhood the broke musicians were banging drums, and somewhere in my empty neighborhood my grandparents were cooking meatloaf, and somewhere on a towering bridge my mother was manning a tollbooth in her plastic glasses, and if the woman tending the smoking grill actually existed, and if the twins on bicycles actually

existed, and if the musicians and my grandparents and my mother and total strangers and every teacher and every student and every janitor from my school actually existed even when I wasn't around, if everyone existed, all at the same time, all over the same planet, when I thought about it, I couldn't breathe. This didn't seem normal to me. It seemed abnormal. Like some part of me wasn't fully human.

I ate the meatloaf with my grandparents, our forks clinking against our plates.

After that night Marcus began to change. He had been a troublemaker, always, but more mischief than devilry. Funny faces, switching seats on substitutes, pranks to entertain his friends. Now the troublemaking was devilry. He broke chairs, smashed globes, refused to take quizzes. In chemistry he would spill toxic chemicals onto other students. In geometry he would jab other students with the points of a compass. During lunch, mid-bite, he would spit food onto the table, like a nauseous dog. He never smiled anymore. When his friends asked him questions, he didn't seem to hear. He often would stare at some empty spot on the wall, blankly, as if he had forgotten his mind when bringing his body back from the pit.

I don't know what his home was like. There may have been family trouble. The boy with the snub nose was avoiding him. I do know that.

My grandparents repainted the bedrooms, repaired the plumbing. My mother had the flu, was bedridden, rallied. Snowdrifts melted into the streets, streamed like creeks into the gutters. Wildflowers sprouted in the field. The air reeked of life. Instead of hunting pheasants, I spent nights perched on the ledge above the archway, thinking about my father. When I shifted, bits of chalky rubble would tumble from the ledge into the pit. I had become obsessed with the idea. That he may have somehow fallen through. I didn't truly believe the archway was a portal. At my core—wherever I was, exactly, inside of myself—I understood that if my father had fallen through the archway, he must have fallen to his

death at the bottom of the pit. Still, I invented elaborate theories. Perhaps whenever a city experienced a mass exodus, this created a massive vacuum of energy, causing a portal to appear. Always somewhere different, wherever the vacuum was centered: a stone well, a chained mausoleum, a rusted archway. If so, these portals might be connected. Mountain-top ruins in Peru, forested ruins in Cambodia, ruins amidst the scorched grasslands of Zimbabwe. I imagined that beyond the archway my father may have found the ruins of Miletus, was again playing among the statues near the village where he had been born. Sometimes, however, I imagined the portal led not through space but through time—led to the 1950's, Detroit in its prime, a city of shimmering skyscrapers and gleaming ferries. Regardless, every night, I was there, blowing breath into cupped fingers, warming my hands. On this side of the ledge, dust floated into bottomless darkness. On that side of the ledge, pheasants hurried through clumps of grass. If my father had gone through the archway, *he might pass through the archway again, back into this world*. I was going to be there when it happened.

And I was there, perched on the ledge, the night the boys came back: the boy with the snub nose, the tattooed boy, Marcus Vanloon. They filed through the gap in the swaying tarp. Marcus was wearing cutoff jeans, a sleeveless shirt. He was strapped to a backpack, which was unusual. At school he carried textbooks like footballs, in his arms.

“What happened to going to your house?” the tattooed boy said.

The tattooed boy was glaring at the pit.

“We were coming here,” Marcus said.

The boy with the snub nose was hugging himself he was so scared.

“I hate this place,” the boy with the snub nose muttered.

Marcus stepped to the archway, touched the rusted iron. He stuck his hands into the pockets of his cutoffs. He brought out handfuls of coins. At my angle, the coins seemed

misshapen, oddly sized, bizarrely colored, but such small objects were difficult to see. Marcus thumbed through, as if counting, or searching for a certain coin.

“What are you doing?” the boy with the snub nose said.

Marcus turned, facing the others, back to the archway. He shoved the coins into his pockets. He snorted, without smiling, like someone hearing an old joke.

“I wanted you to be here,” Marcus said.

Marcus stared blankly at a random rafter.

“You’re a fiend,” the tattooed boy whispered.

Marcus glanced at the swaying tarp.

“To see me do it right,” Marcus said.

Marcus dropped backward through the archway.

At my angle, from the ledge above, something seemed to drop into the pit. A flash of color. I don’t know what it was. Marcus, his backpack, *some other thing*. Whatever it was, it didn’t scream when the darkness swallowed it. Although the others did.

When I think of them, I think of them that night. The boy with the snub nose pacing between pillars, wearing his fingers like a mask, blubbering. The tattooed boy shrieking curses, spittle flecking his sweatshirt, throttling something imaginary with his hands. Already, the boy with the snub nose blamed himself and the tattooed boy blamed Marcus. I didn’t realize I had dropped the soda I was holding until I heard the bottle shatter in the grass below.

I flew down the ladder, leapt past the last rungs to the ground.

The disappearance was reported a few days later. I heard about it at school. The other boys never said anything. The truth is that I haven’t forgotten their names. But I would rather avoid naming them: years after what we saw, something none of us asked to see, I wouldn’t want to cause them trouble. They drifted like phantoms through the hallway,

always together, never speaking. Both had begun to wither, as if they hadn't eaten since. I forced myself to eat extra helpings. A few girls cried about the disappearance. Others said Marcus had only run away. For a few weeks, flyers with Marcus' face were taped to the streetlights, and then the flyers vanished too. I never said anything. I had been there, and even I didn't know what the story was. Whether it was about a boy who had died or a boy who had run away. Regardless of whether he had fallen, I never truly believed he had killed himself. At my core, I understood that he had been trying to get somewhere. The bolts, the pheasant, the archway had taken. Why not Marcus? When he had passed through with the rope, he had found his way ahead somehow blocked. When he had passed through with the backpack, the archway had failed him altogether. That, *there*, must have been the principle. Articles, objects, things, carrying these made passage through the archway impossible. The portal couldn't transport complex medleys. As complex as the body was already—carbon, sulfur, calcium, rubidium, antimony, copper, iron, gold, tin—any stowaway elements would disable the archway. But, if that were the case, what had my father been carrying? Once, only once, did I enter the warehouse myself. I crept under a rusted door of a loading dock, knocked the dust from my pants, wandered the maze of crumbling stairwells and ruined chambers. Until I found the upper floor. I stood at the archway, staring through, alone. In Iraq, our soldiers were making ruins. The invasion was over; the war had begun.

A few months ago, crossing a crosswalk near a park, I saw a man in a trenchcoat. The same face, only older. Hair so blond it was near white. Eyebrows, even. Marcus. I said his name. He frowned, sidestepping me. I grabbed him, said his name again. He spat something unintelligible, as if an unfamiliar language, then broke away, hurrying through a flock of scattering pigeons. I watched his form dwindle into the trees, become blurry, shrink to a speck. I didn't realize until much later that it may have been an uncle, a cousin,

an older brother, suddenly grabbed by a stranger speaking his dead brother's name.

Tonight, in midtown Detroit, it is summer. The crickets are droning. My nails are ringed with dirt. I have pots, boots, piles of books. I have degrees in writing, which here are meaningless. I have worn through the elbows of my father's castoff sweatshirts, which fit me now. I have a tangled beard, although weaker than my father's.

Approximately five thousand days, my father survived in a ruined city in a jobless state in a country where he wasn't welcome. He wasn't ordinary. Wherever he went, if he had wanted to, *he would have come back*. Back then I didn't understand the nature of his disappearance. I do now. It wasn't an event. It was a message. Simple, a grunt, like one word. *Come*.

So, at daybreak, I will. I will cross the field of pheasants, and enter the warehouse, and step through the archway. To follow my father. I will meet him there, in whatever is beyond, whether Miletus, Detroit, Hell.

In 1805, on this planet, the city of Detroit was destroyed by fire. Razed to ashes. Afterward, all that remained standing were the brick chimneys of vanished houses and a single warehouse. It was after that fire that the city took its motto. *We hope for better things; it shall rise from the ashes*. Detroit was built on its own ruins once before. That hope is my hope. It is all that I take with me.

About The Author

Matthew Baker is author of the story collection *Hybrid Creatures* and the children's novel *If You Find This*. He was born in Michigan.

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