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Albertan Gothic

Your truck rattles across the Texas gate, jostling your ass awake. Passing through the threshold from one land to another just like it. You crossed into Alberta hours ago but the jarring assault on your body, and your truck's suspension, is worth more than one hundred "Welcome to Alberta: Wild Rose Country" signs.

Cow.

Roadside memorial.

Tire-tread on offal.

Grain elevator.

A faded red relic, overlooking a dead canola field like a tombstone.

Here lies Alberta. Unable to live in the new world. Died in the old one.

The former name of the town, etched into the elevator in large white stencil print, is erased by overgrowth. The railway behind it is buried under a mass grave of threshed wheat, derailing any potential newcomer. The dark shadows of the elevator's spired roof casts a shadow on the ground below. Where generations reap and harvest the fortune of the generation before them.

It is gone now. The powdery, sweet smells that filled your adolescent nose. Replaced by a burning sting from colored chemical smoke leaking out from loose lumber. The elevator doesn't serve a function anymore. Except as a launching pad for its new tenants, trying to ride the elevator up to their highest high.

The hairs in your nose crawl as you fight to hang on to the clean air in your lungs.

On the dashboard, a small red “E” flashes.

The gas station you were going to stop at no longer exists. As you drive by you see curved chrome pumps on their side pumping black blood into the soil. Holes in the giant sign that says “Husk” illuminates the darkness inside the dilapidated rest stop.

You see people inside skittering around. They have turned the station into a temple to their god: Alienation. The will of Alienation is channelled through the shaky hands of The Oracles of Aerosol. Alienation pulls the strings on its puppets painting with profane colours. Their arms become dowsing rods for mislaid anger buried deep in the soil.

You know Alienation well. There is no needle long enough to siphon out the hereditary disease spreading from the roots of the tree.

You push the weight of your boot through the gas pedal’s shaky resistance.

In the rear-view mirror, the grain elevator has taken on a bright red shine. Reflecting the sun and the words “Home, AB” printed on its side. Even when though the sun casts light into every corner of the plains, it will always create shadows.

The outside of the house doesn’t look too different from the smouldering pile of ash you remembered. Whoever rebuilt your childhood home made only marginal improvements to the burnt pile of lumber that used to sit here. The roof was ready to come crashing down and the holes in the walls replaced any need for central cooling. The Alienated folk at the gas station must have chosen this house as a new temple. Graffiti covered every surface from root to roof.

Yet, someone from this address sent you the letter rifling around in your pocket. Despite the decay, someone still lived here.

You take the cold door knocker in your hand and bang on the door.

A knocking sound echoes across lonely hills. The door silently opens. Through the crack in the door you see something impossible. Something that makes your heart go arrhythmic.

The inside is exactly as you remember it.

No scorch marks. No smell of burning flesh. The hardwood floor was polished and missing all the scratches you put there as a kid. Mom's tacky ottoman had been cured of its cigarette burns and wine stains while Dad's bookshelf, which kindled the fire that brought this house down, had every book replaced.

A gallery of familial picture frames is arranged into a large tree on the western wall. The top of the tree shows your great-great grandparents, the ones who built this house. Rows of familiar faces culminates in your own picture at the base of the tree. Each picture is different but the pose taken in each shot is the same.

Peacefully sitting on the porch while the front door opens like a gaping black maw.

The space on the wall below the tree, where the roots should go, are scorched. A lone remnant of structural trauma.

That can't be possible, you think to yourself. You pull the letter out and scan it, looking for an address. "Painful memories...Family...Rebuild...Pick up possessions...Nostalgia value." Unsure of whether you are in the right place.

Surely enough, you are.

Your mind slips into a dark place. Thinking about what the Alienated might have done here. You know their god and you know what it incites in the hearts of desperate men. Perhaps they moved on from artful expression to violent expression and the people living here, in this old house, refused to join them.

You walk through the door, stepping over a welcome mat asking, “Why didn’t you come over sooner?”. Passing through the threshold, from a lonely land to one populated by smiling faces hanging on walls.

The air inside is heavy and puts the taste of iron on your tongue. The light switches don’t work so you make your way around the dark house purely from memory. A picture on the wall catches your eye. Picking it up, the picture is in worse condition than the others on the wall, even though it is a more recent picture. Looking at it is like peering through a looking glass, reflecting back a young face which used to belong to you.

The loose clasp on the back of the frame gives way. The picture floats to the ground gently along with two small items.

A small rusted razor blade and an empty packet of matches.

Those couldn’t be the same matches, you think to yourself. The smell of phosphor turns your stomach upside down. You kick the matches out of sight relieving yourself of nausea. Instead, you turn your attention to the razor blade.

Holding the cold metal blade makes old bruises pulse on your wrist. Long forgotten purple tallies marked in flesh, brought back to the surface. A painful *memento mori*.

Voices whisper out beyond the porch. The Alienated have returned.

Even though you were technically invited, you don't want to see how they treat guests. Quickly, you dodge into your old bedroom. Posters of dead celebrities watch you scramble under your bed where the monsters used to live.

"...come here all the time" A man's voice could be heard in the living room.
"Occasionally got to kick out the odd crackhead, but still not too bad."

"...don't look like any crack den I've ever seen." A woman's voice trailing behind.

"They don't like to spend too much time here. Say that they see some shit."

"No shit they see shit. They're crackheads."

"I mean. They *see some shit*. Either way, whoever owns this place takes good care of it. Even though the outside looks like trash."

"Who owns this place anyways?"

"Don't think anyone does. Guess that's why its such a good hangout."

She laughs. "So which is it? Did you bring me here to hangout, or to show me some shit?"

Their hushed voices are replaced by frantic unzipping and the soft thud of leather hitting the floor. Loud breathing and panting permeated through the walls which have started to pulsate along with the young lovers. The paint from the walls began to peel revealing a pink hue hidden under the wallpaper. The lights started to flicker, feeding off the electricity of passion that this house hadn't seen in a very long time. Ebbing and flowing along with the respirating walls.

Her moans grow louder.

Furniture scrapes across the hardwood.

And louder.

The house groans.

A woman's climactic scream devolves into ear-piercing shriek. The front door slams open and the house is empty but not silent. Soft breaths can be heard through the hallways and warm air caresses your face. You follow it into the hallway then into the kitchen where you believe is the source of the sound.

A lone voice escapes from the lips of a sink. Mechanical grinding and whirring to form words and vowels pronounced awkwardly. Its timbre shook your knees and the house along with it.

"Welcome home...Triad complete...Circle mended...I live...I die...I live again...You...Ungrateful...End line." It said.

That voice buried in the soil for time immemorial. Watered by the blood and tears of those who lived on this land, manifested in your own ancestral home. That voice that you heard in the womb and in your dreams. Burrowed deep into your genes. You thought leaving this home, in a pile of ashes, would exorcise your familial demons.

Yet, here you are.

Two lonely silhouettes were sitting in the living room, holding hands. Walking closer you see melted skin making it hard to discern where one hand ends and the other begins. Charred black skulls peaked through gaping holes in the face. The smell of putrefied flesh left in the sun

filled the room. Their skin hung loose from calcified anchors providing a walking feast for worms and maggots.

These were the last people you expected to see: Your parents.

Dad stood up slowly, careful not to lose his balance.

“Welcome home. Despite the circumstances, it really is good to see you. Ain’t that right dear?”

Mom shrugs and slides a cigarette into a gaping hole in her cheek. She makes it airtight with the rest of her hand, takes a deep drag of fiery smoke and lets it exhaust from the cracks in her forehead.

“You’ll have to forgive your mother. She doesn’t forget easily. I don’t think the house does either.”

“A pact...is...a pact.” A voice roars from the kitchen.

“A pact is a pact.” Dad goes on. “My great-grandfather came over to this country on a floating fucking raft with nothing but his name and his word. They made him change his name, but he always kept his word. Something you have no respect for.”

Dad walks over to a picture frame on the wall, opens the back of the frame. On the back of the picture of your great-great grandfather are words written in crimson ink.

“Blood builds nations.” Dad read from the picture.

“Blood...is...cheap. Legacy...expensive.” The voice from the void added.

Dad delicately puts the frame back on the wall and walks over to you. His rotting hand rests on your shoulder. Your hand is covered in warm liquid, gripping the razer blade in your pocket.

“Thanks to this home, it was never our blood up for auction. It never asked for much in return. Hell, we were going to fill this place with kids anyways. This house watched the culling of families and the decimation of a people. Yet it still stands and us along with it. Did you really think a pack of matches would kill it?”

You see your chance.

You slash his mangled face with the razer and leave it lodged in his eye. Following it up with a kick to the sternum, and an elbow to the neck, you easily shake off his hand and run for the door.

Over your shoulder you hear three voices laughing.

Your feet get caught up in a rug, that wasn't there before, and a bloody imprint of your face decorates the hardwood.

Dad pulls the razer blade out, careful to leave his eye in and drops it beside your head. He puts his knees on your shoulder pinning you down to the ground.

“Seeing as how you clearly have no interest in continuing our family. And well, your mother's womb is scorched earth.”

He chuckles to himself. Mom lights up another cigarette.

“We had to renegotiate the terms.”

Darkness covers your eyes pulling you into a closet lying in the bottomless depths of the basement. Walls peristaltically push you farther down into the earth, muffling your screams. Your skin strips away and drapes over closed windows. Bones grind into cement for ancient foundation and your blood seeps into the pipes running under the floor made from your teeth.

You are nowhere.

You are everywhere.

Your last words are spoken through a grinding dissonance.

“I...am...home.”