

ZACH WESTON

Fort Ord Quarry, 2014
Black and White Film Photography, 16 x 20 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

Once, in the late afternoon of a particularly hot summer day, while I was loading the last few pallets of the day into a container, Harold left this voice mail on my phone:

“Eric? This’s Harold. Next door. There’s been mayhem. MAYHEM! In your backyard. I don’t know about murder,” he chuckled here, “but definitely mayhem. You get home, you might want to check it out.”

I listened to the message on my way to the parking lot, and when I made it home, I stepped out back. Our small sheepskin rug, which I’d left hanging over a chair after beating the dust out of it that morning, had been shredded. Fluffy strands dotted the bushes and the leaves of our sweet gum. Some still wafted in the air. Sparrows swooped down to scoop up pieces from the ground, but Emily paid them no attention. She sat proudly in the center of the concrete patio, clutching a large fragment of the rug between her front paws, tearing at it as if devouring a fresh kill. White, woolly fur clung to her snout, and when she looked up at me, her jaws and tongue working rapidly to spit the fur from her lips, some of it stained light red, her eyes gleamed with dirty pleasure. Centuries, barreling down through history, rising up and taking charge of her brain.

“Careful,” Harold warned, peering over the low fence that separates our backyards. “Dog gets a taste of that animal flesh, it changes them. Blood lust.”

I knelt next to Emily, and she wagged her tail. I pried open her mouth and pulled one of her cheeks back to look at her teeth. A small measure of blood was seeping from her gums.

“There’s no blood in a rug, Harold.”

“I see,” he said, and pressed his lips together as he considered this. He turned and walked back toward his house.

* * *

Harold Griffin, in his early sixties. A bald, splotchy white head, and on most days, a scruffy hint of gray beard. He complains of asthma, of an irregular heartbeat. Says he struggles to keep up with maintenance on his house. Talks of rotting window frames, water in his basement. He lives alone and, for all I know, has since he entered adulthood. He has never mentioned a former wife or partner or children. I know little about the life he lived before we became his neighbors, what kind of work he did or what source of

income he has now. I know only that he bought his house some twenty years before we bought ours, so he must have known the people who lived in our house before us, and perhaps the people before that, although he’s never spoken of any of them.

His house. A tall, old two-story dating from the turn of the twentieth century, chopped into a split-level duplex during the Second World War, or shortly after, when housing became scarce and the economy of this town briefly soared. The upper unit has not seen a tenant in years, serving instead as yet another storage warehouse for Harold’s various scavenged treasures. The exterior of the house is covered head to toe in beige aluminum siding, with thick green ivy stretching skyward in several places along the outer walls. There’s a twelve-foot section of rain gutter missing on the side nearest us, exposing a long, narrow access point into the attic.

Mornings, when the light is still fresh over the distant hills, I sometimes see squirrels poking their heads out through that gap. Larger heads first, then smaller ones, the babies. They gaze at the sky, as if dreaming of flight, then contemplate the ground below. They chatter feverishly in a language that must be so simple one could come to understand it with a small measure of patience.

But come evening, as the reds and oranges on the horizon give way to encroaching blackness, after the squirrels have vanished, small bats begin dashing out of the opening. First one, then a few more, and then dozens, maybe hundreds, in rapid succession. Momentary flashes of shadow, fluttering madly and disappearing into the night sky. It takes little more than a few minutes for them all to leave, and it’s rare that we see them after that initial burst from the secluded darkness of Harold’s attic. But in those brief moments, shortly after they’ve opened their insufficient eyes to greet the night, they appear like an indecipherable omen, at once sinister and angelic, in their urgent departure.

“Good to have bats,” Harold told me one day as we talked over the fence. “They eat a thousand mosquitoes a night. Each one.” He imitated the sound of a bat’s wings flapping, waving his hands at his sides. Then he puckered his lips and made a quick slurping sound, “Shhhhhooopt.” He set his elbows on top of the fence and chewed the stem of an oxalis flower he’d plucked from the ground.