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Boundaries — A Lyric Essay



BY ARTEMIS SAVORY

Idaho is borderless; there is no fee, no permit demand to enter Sawtooth Wilderness.

Where the Salmon River snakes beside Route 75—deer sprint—across the highway.

The town, in summer, is 100 people, a few restaurants, dirt roads, two bars for dancing. Open mike and failing darts at Kasino Club. Lawless Rod & Gun has Smoking Allowed and old-fashioned bar brawls.

It is your first summer away from home, 2,000 miles from Massachusetts, which is the only world you have ever known. You escaped the confines of your boyfriend, your shared apartment, your together state. You will not be his girlfriend for much longer. You are in Idaho to serve in the dining room of a ranch and to find out who you are.

The ranch in Idaho gives you three rules:

No strangers in housing

No cooking in kitchen after hours

No sharing employee food outside

—each of which you and others break repeatedly.

Friends bring boys into their rooms after dancing and play behind closed doors. Late nights in the kitchen you sneak leftover carrot-cake and homemade granola. You gather a plate of glazed morels and bring it to a boy met in town, a boy who prefers meat and beer, a boy you will not know long.

You hike several miles near Challis; the trail leads up and up and up. Shallow pools of green-clear water; cold stream mixing with hot spring; bathtub water. Pool here, at trail's end, and a little lower. A woman in a bathing suit takes the trail back the way you've come as the moon rises. The new boy you like calls to his dog, and she trots: sheepdog ears pricked.

Weekends the crew drives down the driveway to drink around the hot spring pool where sometimes boys leave beer bottles or open knives on the dock, almost losing you all pool privilege. In the barn, where wranglers sleep, you play stump and drink warm PBR. You flip a hammer—catch it—slam it down, try to get the long nail into the stump. Your friend Cristine flips it; it comes in your direction—almost hits your knee—you dodge. Keep to the wall on her turns where distance protects.

Supervisor is hiker snowshoer cross country skier. She was once city-girl, long skirts and fancy clothes, she was anxiety and always-prepared and proposed to. Now she lives in permanent paradise. She found Idaho and became wild and free and herself. She is who you think you may be.

You hike with friends: Andy Cristine Yourself. You dance with them. Sober at first.

Around town, and among ranches and restaurants and bars, everyone swings. Cory teaches you to follow: he swings you fast and always catches you—you never fall. Allen knows more twists and turns: "the window" where arms together form a window to look at one another, and another move where you dance like trees in the wind, moving under—over—around—spin—over—under—spin. Everyone swings from bed to bed from boy to girl and girl to boy. Thursday Friday Saturday Dizzy.

Between serving guests who pay fifty dollars a plate, and no tips, you discover trails: trail to giant tree. Lose the trail and find yourself amidst fallen giants and gnarled ancients, trudging through White Clouds.

Sawtooth lakes deep and cold and clear: reflecting sky and jagged mountains and your dark hair and eyes: surprise at your relaxed face in reflection.

You find burnt-forest trail: still standing, hollowed logs all around, debris; bright flowers bloom from destruction.

At summer's end, you will simply return home to live in your cousin's playroom at your aunt's house for the next seven months. The ex-boyfriend you once lived with will never speak civilly to you again.

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The following summer you leave home for the west again to continue the search.

Wyoming is windy and looks dead. Yellowstone National Park is made up of rigid boundary lines. The park border is under patrol. Permit required. From outside the park looks flat with low hills. Here, do mountains rise and trails wind? Do hot springs and rivers flow?

It is "America's First National Park" and buffalo-in-the-road and black bear country. It is soft dull colors and unchanging landscape. Some areas smell of ash and here the black trunks of trees still stand. Spots of green, and later yellow, red, and white, will push their way up from charred earth. It is a place trying—failing?—to be reborn.

Your new home—Roosevelt Lodge—is a rustic resort with a thirty or forty table dining room, log cabins for guests, and horses for trail rides. For employees, it offers three-person cabins, where weeds sneak in and duct tape blocks long cracks; where mice will nibble their way through unpacked sweatshirts, and you will never fill the stove to keep warm, choosing instead to suffocate beneath blankets.

You pay for this home.
Packets of rules.

Quiet hour.

Security.

You pay \$300 a month for scheduled meals: sandwich meat that is not refrigerated; and boxed mashed potatoes that run through your system like waterfalls.
Cafeteria opens at six a.m. Closes when dark falls—when hunger sets in.

You search for escape on trails: zigzag around the lodge; through shallow forest and meadow, next to a small dark lake. You do this first with others, then, alone.

Mid-season trails are buried in mothers and fathers, children and grandparents, cameras and picnics and screams and laughter. You long for solitude. Try to forget.

You and Nathan—a boy with red hair and a beard—find a less-known trail along Yellowstone Canyon. One side is open land: grass, sagebrush and sand. Here, buffalo droppings spread like puddles. The other side is a cliff: sharp drop to green ribbon river. What is it like at the bottom? How many have tried to get down this cliff—sharp edges, weak places where rock disintegrates into dirt. If you ran the other way, through open meadow toward hills, how far could you get? If you run long enough, will you hit another wall you'll need to climb or knock down or accept?

You sneak pictures of Nate. His face: high cheekbones, clear glasses. He is pointy elbows and strong arms. He is fragile, you think, because he is kind and you are not. He does what you ask of him. He does not question you. Would he make it across the plains to the hills beyond?

He has stopped cars with his sun-tanned thumb, pack over shoulders, clothes stinking from sweat and dust, weeks on the road. He cooks breakfast for families of eight in under as many minutes and sneaks French toast to you at counter's end. He has quit putting cigarettes in his fingers, in his mouth, behind his ear so you will listen to music with him on stairs, consider a kiss, and touch his hand.

At night you sneak into his cabin like a mouse.

There is only dub step or hip-hop in town. No one here swings. Or maybe it isn't apparent, because you refuse to swing. You are still: you look for exits—look—but they are in the periphery, and he is your focus, the constant keeping you in place.

You like being alone with Nate. Hearing his hitchhiking stories and dreams to photograph travel and write photography. But sometimes you need to be alone. Forget.

Forget whispered glances in the kitchen. Whispers about your strange stories and disinterest in social parties.

In the rec hall on that first night, you danced for fun and energy. Blonde and ditzzy Lyndsey saw you and joined in—she tried to dance-off. You stopped and waited for her to stop. She changed the music to something she wanted. It was hip-hop ick and you cringed. She was a fanatic, wiggling and moving and screaming. Quiet hour slammed against the door. Security took numbers. Joe took your number down and you left. It was like getting a ticket for being in the car with someone who is drunk.

You snuggled under blankets and closed your eyes, wondering how you would survive "vacation." That was what everyone else thought it was.

Forget whispers about Nate, the boy who loves you. Together, you cuss out Yellowstone and rules

and low-quality food. You do this in the cafeteria, in the cabins, on the trails. Hatred binds you together, it blinds you. Hatred of this place that boasts wildness and freedom, but tells you when to leave the park, when to take a shower, and when to sleep. No one wants to spend time with you and this critical boy. But you don't realize until later when it is only you two at lunch and another couple joins. Nate begins to complain. The couple is uncomfortable, tired of the complaints, tired of your and Nate's dissatisfaction. And you say, Can we not bitch for ten minutes? At this moment it is clear that you have both burned the bridge to peace, and will continue to.

In the cafeteria, the mindless drone dishes out tuna sandwiches and he seems incapable of smiling. Bryce liked you once, wanted you. He lay down next to you on the grass, pretending not to notice you inching away from him. When he was demoted to staff kitchen there were stories. He dropped dessert and picked it up and tried to serve it. He doesn't always wear gloves. He sniffs a lot and you feel nauseated. You eat the food he serves.

Every night, employees drink and drink and smoke and some play music. Nate wants to stop. He wants to be without being clouded. But it is the norm, it is the way.

Anxiety threatens to slip down your throat. Management doesn't smile at you. They're buddy-buddy with the girls who come in drunk, who sing high-pitched, which is grating. But you are the enemy. You tell too many stories, and ignite discomfort. Your stories are too personal, and they wish you would just shut up. You prefer talking to guests than to those you see every day.

You collect dirty looks like lint.

You ask Nate if he will go with you when you are fired. He says he will. You fear missing him.

Security circles at night. Quiet hour sets in before work ends. You and Nate look at pictures and discuss adventures and road trips. But every whisper is heard through un-insulated cabin walls. Security takes down ID numbers. Not names. Enough of this, and you might lose your job. You are afraid to get caught again. Stay quiet in your cabin, or in Nate's, or sneak into dark woods, less afraid of bears or mountain lions than of being controlled.

You think of ways to describe your Nathan. He is innocent looks and lustful thoughts and rough touch; he is sweet aggression, temperamental masochism and slight sadism. He is I-want-to-learn-everything: cooking, hiking, music, pleasure. He is homeschooled Christian-no-longer, anarchist, and conspiracy theorist.

The first time you and Nate were alone was in the rec center. Playing pool. You—losing, of course. He came up behind you with the pool stick, held it against your chest, pulled you against him. It was hot flashes and excitement and oh-no-this-can't-be-happening. He let go and saw your face and knew.

The next time, together, you danced to dub step, and went wild on the dance floor. He would have reached out if you told him to. He would have done anything for you. He would make you dinner and tie you up; he would make your bed and follow you anywhere.

Now, he asks for restraint, that you will control him; that you will hold him down and make choices. And you take it: free to lead someone in the land of rules.

Every other resort in the park offers employees their own bar; but yours doesn't. So you are allowed to gather on the porch and drink together with the guests; those who pay—like you—to be here. But if you are too loud, this too will be outlawed. Some cooks and wranglers play guitar and sing. You sing songs that you know: Merrill Bainbridge and maybe "Hotel California."

One morning a sign on the employee bulletin board announces: If employees want to sing on the porch, they must play country-themed songs, must be well-rehearsed, no practicing or jam bands.

Summer is not over, but you consider your car, and Nate, and the open road.

A new sign appears in the same place—handwritten—a poem: Art is food you can't eat it but it feeds you. Bread and Puppet 1984 Why Cheap Art manifesto.

It is agitation. It is subversion. It is "we will overthrow those who try to control us." And even after they tear it down and tell you that only office-approved papers may be posted, you feel as though you've won.

On your last night at Yellowstone, you wear a purple dress, black boots, and closed-lipped smile. Nate wears his orange shirt and leather shoes and escorts you to the restaurant. The one you have been working at all summer: him with food and you with guests. You have decided to each order an entrée and share; you will purchase the cake you have been dying to try all summer. The employee discount is fair, and yet you have never eaten dinner here.

The restaurant is decent-sized. There is a small bar near the door; a fireplace at either end of the room; and log walls. Wooden square tables arranged in rows. Two swinging doors lead into the kitchen. The view out the window is nothing like Idaho—there are no mountains, no snow-capped

peaks. There are grassy hills, a land of subtle wildness.

But Evan, tall and anxious host, gives you the wrong server, the last one you wanted. She is strict, the kind of girl who cares more about herself than others. Before ordering, this girl you have worked with all summer asks if you have your employee ID, so you can get the discount, and you fumble for words. You turned it in early, in order to leave next morning. You beg her to ask the supervisor, the manager, the owner—please do me a favor, please pretend like we know each other.

She refuses to give it to you. Is afraid of trouble. Chooses the rules over you.

When she leaves, you cover your face with hands and try to breathe. But it is impossible. The restaurant is filled with people you know, care about, who don't care about you. And the boy is angry. He hates them for you, he wants to hurt someone. He wants to stop your tears. And you want to love him for this, but right now there is only you and no one else and you would leave if you weren't tipsy. You ask for a box and take only one meal. Pay for only one meal. Outside, you ignore the hem of your pretty dress around your knees and kick over the cigarette-butt ashtray—hard.

It is the first time you have attacked another's territory without consent. And doing so does not help you to breathe.

When it happens, when security knocks at Nate's door at midnight, they demand that you leave, you who put in your two weeks' notice, and are technically no longer an employee. You are trespassing. But you are leaving at sunrise. You lie there and feign drunkenness. And there is no choice: You, they, must wait.



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