

More Praise for *Communion*

When writing about the modern world and our shared human condition, it is one thing to find the magic in the ordinary and the mundane; to pull, like a dentist performing an extraction, surreality out of the real. With *Communion*, TJ Beitelman takes an entirely different tack. His is a more nuanced more delicate style. Here he writes about our normal world normally and carefully and clearly; he forces the very plainness and starkness of his world to evoke a much more palpable sense of wonder or grief or terror in his reader. Beitelman writes in small earthquakes that, while subtle, are no less cataclysmic than their Richter-breaking brethren. He creates entire histories, relationships, townships and metropolises simply in the way a couple pumps gas, fails to tie a tie, shares a plate of sushi or reads the morning newspaper. Beitelman's great gift is in allowing his reader to experience his stories as intimately as his characters remember their own pasts: "There was a boy in second grade who lit his own right hand on fire. Sometimes in our travels I believed that this boy was me."

—B.C. Edwards, author of *The Aversive Clause*

Communion

stories

TJ Beitelman



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Arctic Circle

The young men and women of the high reaches of ice devised a party for themselves. In a very cold freeze, a group of ten or twelve gathered in one boy's father's barn. In amongst the smells and shuffling of the livestock, the girls dared to unwrap the bundles they'd become. As they watched them do it, the boys tried very hard to breathe, then they themselves quickly remembered to follow suit. Without those many layers, all of them were like pupae, naked in a new skin. They pretended it was summer, very far away, that one of them might, at any moment, break into a sweat. The boys fanned the girls; the girls blew cool breezes into the boys' ears. One girl, at the height of all this merriment, fumbled through her discarded parka. She found the dimpled orange globe she had buried there. When she ripped the skin, tore it off in one long, curling piece, the smell—that of a faraway, foreign summer where things are light and sweet and very warm—filled the barn. The rose-fleshed girls and the scrawny boys watched, rapt, as she took the sweet sections, one by one, into her cold mouth.

Masks

This was the game: they took turns by the black-ice creek. One boy unwrapped his carefully muffled head and turned his back to the others. He proceeded to hold his now naked head out against the blue-cold elements. His mouth curled into a long, thin grimace. The tips of his ears turned red, threatened purple. When he could stand it no longer, he brought his hands to either temple and then worked the skin inward and down. In the freezing cold, the skin had lost its elasticity. His forehead held the wrinkles. He had aged by decades. He then turned and presented this new old face to the circle of his friends, all of them presumably unblemished and still young beneath their bundles. The warm ones pointed and convulsed, delighted, and the one who'd made his face turn dead could then scramble for his coverings, blood slowly returning to warm and rejuvenate his cheeks, his ears, the very tip of his nose. Then another boy turned his back and the game started again. One boy after another. Face after face. In the relentless, impossible cold, near the very top of the world. This, a simple sacrament of defiance and resurrection.



VOWS

He was a very handsome man. In this way and in others, he was a man of extremes. It was something she knew about him.

When they went to visit his mother, the old woman made them split pea soup with fatty ham hocks and she treated them like two children. There was the smell of wood smoke. Store-bought pastries for dessert. Then the long ride home along the bucolic state roads.

—I just want to know why you said what you said. He did not take his eyes from the road.

—I haven't said a word for ninety minutes straight, she said.

—You know what I mean. What you said about the light coming in the window in the morning.

—My god that was Wednesday.

—It was Friday.

—Wednesday and Friday are the same thing, nearly. She turned her head away from him and caught a whiff of her own hair: salon shampoo, traces of wood smoke. The sky was gray. The trees had leaves but not many.

—It's a free country, he said. You can say what you want. But when you're with another person, in that context—

—Everything is pregnant with meaning.

—Something, yes. It's pregnant with something. I wouldn't have picked that metaphor.

—I think it's not a metaphor anymore. It's just a cliché.

—You're not going to tell me why you said it, are you?

—I'm almost positive I don't know.

And that was it for a long time.

He was tired. It was almost nighttime. They found a service station at a crossroads and stopped. He rubbed his eyes and she pushed open the heavy door.

—I have to pee, she said.

—You're driving the rest of the way, he said. I can't keep my eyes open.

He took her silence as acceptance. Then she broke it.

—I said what I said because I couldn't think of anything else to say.

—And that's what you managed?

—I couldn't think of anything else, she said, and then she went to pee.

With no ceremony, he climbed out of the car to pump the gas. In the far corner of the lot, almost behind the station, three wiry young men drank beer from silver cans and leaned on a muddy pick-up with oversized tires. One of them crushed a can and tossed it into the bed. She walked in their direction, toward the women's restroom. As he pumped the gas, he noticed the dress she was wearing for the first time. This dress was wasted on a visit to his mother. A pale yellow thing, almost but not quite white. It clung close to her trim torso and then billowed into sheer whimsy around her long legs. The weather was a fraction too cold for this dress and she was not wearing her coat. She hugged herself to keep warm. Until he heard the low whistle and the accompanying muffled guffaws, he had not even seen her in this dress. The figure she cut. After she disappeared into the restroom, he found he had been holding his breath. He exhaled and returned to the duty at hand, inserting the nozzle into the tank and trying to push the moment out of his mind. A stream of pink leaked across the sky, near the horizon. The adjacent field was bare and stubbly, plucked clean of whatever it once produced. He was wide awake.

—I thought you wanted me to drive.

—I'm not tired anymore. The fresh air woke me up. I can go the rest of the way.

He twisted the gas cap until it clicked several times and took two heavy strides toward the driver's seat.

It wasn't that he heard what they said. He did not have to hear it. Young men—men of any age—achieve a tenor and a tone in the general proximity of other men. This is older than tribal. Therefore he did not need to hear the words to know in an instant that they were directed at him, as were the raucous, astringent peals of laughter that followed.

He was a man of extremes. Capable of profound silences, silences in which he disappeared completely. But a vein of intense feeling—a full volume intensity—ran through it. Or just underneath it. In circumstances such as these, he could dredge up a wholly different version of himself. He paused, stood straight, and raised both fists—middle fingers erect—in the direction of the truck. He held the gesture for several seconds, lest it be mistaken for something other than what it was.

And then he got in the car and drove away.

The last act of this particular gray sky was to break into an astonishing range of reds and yellows and oranges just along the horizon line. She found that she had—almost without meaning to—placed her slim pinkie finger on the cool, flat passenger's side window. The unselfconscious gesture of a child. Though it was, of course, impossible, she wanted to somehow touch these bright colors that had burst from nowhere and nothing.

—You'll make a smudge, he said, without looking over. Months or even weeks before, she might have teased him for being so predict-

able, so stuffy, and then she would have squeezed his knee or even ran her hand up his thigh, to see if she could get him to react. But now she simply allowed her finger to curl into her palm, which she dropped into her lap. With the stubby digit of his thumb, he depressed the button on the steering wheel that brought the stereo to life. Brahms. The music was too loud for her, she could not think, but he turned it up. She closed her eyes and put her head on the rest but it was too hard for even pretending to rest, and, with her eyes shut, the music became that much louder. She decided that the day had turned finally and irrevocably bad.

At first it was a persistent sense of manic, unbridled energy hulking too close behind them. He did not even bother a glance at the rear-view. He kept calm. He took his foot off the accelerator, allowed the car to lose a fraction of its momentum, and then again put his thumb to work, this time setting the cruise control. They had just entered a long stretch of straight, flat road, and the enticement seemed to work. The truck accelerated, crossed the double yellow line, and growled up to pass them. He tapped the brake to disengage the cruise and the car faded back. A signal of deference. But instead of passing, the truck edged ahead just enough so that the bed was in line with his window. He tried to fight the urge to look over, but he looked. Three young men crouched there. All three of them wore broad grins on their faces. His gesture at the filling station was an invitation they accepted with what could only be described as profound joy. He turned away from them and kept his eyes forward. *They will throw something at the car*, he thought. He resigned himself to it. *Beer cans, probably*. He hoped the cans would be empty. The dents and dings would require a week or more in the body shop. This could no longer be helped. He began to construct a feasible reaction for her sake, something that conveyed surprise and indignation. In his periphery, he

felt her lean forward and look past him to see what was happening.

She made a noise—a small, startled noise—and she trailed off.

Despite himself, he looked again. One of the young men had raised up, almost to his full height, as the other two helped anchor him. His black hair whipped and he squinted from the force of the wind. He had loosened his fly, and reached into his pants. What he pulled out was ropy and thick. Impossibly long. Equine.

—Jesus, he said. He pressed the accelerator and pulled forward but the truck soon matched the smooth, quiet precision of the car's German engine with its own loud American thrust.

—Slow down, she said. Let them pass.

—They're not trying to pass. It's a prank.

—No, she said, there's another car.

The sun had set and there was now just the blue pall before the full-fledged night. She was right. In the distance, a set of headlights advanced toward them. He eased his foot further into the accelerator but the pick-up surged forward with him.

—Slow down, she said.

He knew nothing good could come of this, that there was no graceful extrication. He knew that he must slow down and that, in the end, he would. Still, he allowed himself a few more seconds of rash, reckless, and unrelenting speed. She put her hand to the dash, closed her eyes. A deep thud sounded from the rear flank of the car and she let out a loud gasp. Two more deep thuds. They were throwing full beer cans. He let himself believe they were now perhaps, in fact, afraid and—he could not help it—he felt himself grinning.

—Stop it, she shouted. Stop.

The oncoming headlights were close enough now to see that they were attached to something larger than just a car or even a pick-up truck. Something big, industrial. He brought the car into a pronounced deceleration. Her seatbelt caught her slight lunge forward and pressed her back into her seat. The pick-up zoomed ahead in that instant and made an S-shaped swerve into the proper lane.

He braced for one last salvo, lobbed directly into the windshield, but it never came. Instead the pick-up motored on. Moments later, the oncoming vehicle—a passel of logs stacked high in its long bed—rumbled past. The car was now nearly stopped on the empty road. It gave a small shudder in the wake of the passing logs. A moment later, in the irrevocable stillness, it moved forward into what had become a vast but simple darkness.

Manna

The boil of his brain and an afternoon constitutional, up the long hill. His heart a flibberty-gibbet in his chest. A flapping bird. The ocular symptoms: a flutter in the middle of his visual field. Most days it is all he can do to trudge down the hill and back up again to his small house, the house he shares with Millie, who is addled, who can sometimes be mean (through, it must be said, no fault of her own: neural plaques), who he is (*after all these years*) still married to. But today. In his periphery. The bright, wet periphery following a sunshower. The black street still slick. Someone—a teenager, most likely, jettisoning contraband in a moment of: pique, panic, pre-science—tossed a bag full of problems into the thick, wet grass near the bottom of the hill at the entrance to the shabby subdivision. He is old enough, near enough to his final dispensation on this earth, to believe in fate. He was meant to find it.

It is a plastic baggie full of: Swisher Sweets, matches, loose hashish, and one full hand-rolled illicit cigarette. A plastic lighter. He is not too old to know what it all means. The children today are the source of such glorious trouble, such things that he could not have imagined when he was just a boy their age, dreaming what it might be like to kiss Josephine Maldonado on the neck. What that might taste like. The feeling it might make all the way to the tips of his fingers. God bless them, these children. God bless them. He collects it. In the four seconds it takes him to stoop and grab it (the sore spot

he ignores in the small of his back; the audible pop in his left knee) he is again fourteen years old.

Millie is a mere lump in the bed, shrouded by thin blankets, sheets he rotates—with precision; the ritual in it—every other day. He pulls the old chair next to the bed. There is not much light in the room. The blinds are three-quarters drawn.

—Juice, she says. This is what she says when she means she wants water.

He reaches for the water on the bedside table, taps her cracked bottom lip with the straw.

—You need some lip stuff, don't you, darlin'?

She sucks the water down, spits the straw when she's done. When he applies the balm, her face squeezes. A dreadful mask. Much more than a simple frown. She hates for him to touch her face. Not least her mouth.

—I know, he says. Life is a hard business.

A quick pass of the tube over his own lips and then he slips it back into his pocket. Millie's face softens again. She is awake, what passes for alert. He would read to her now or pretend to reminisce. If it was any other day. This day has proved itself to be unusual. He takes the plastic bag from his pocket—not the pocket where he keeps the lip balm, the other pocket, the pocket that is almost always empty—and puts it on the bed. Millie is or is not aware of it. Not what it is, but that it is there at all. He scoots the chair back a little, rises to crack the window, then returns to the chair and the bag.

When he was a boy, he had a friend—a Chinese boy whose parents never spoke—with whom he would traipse into the woods, down to the tracks. This was what they called treasure hunting. They found railroad spikes. Once a dead raccoon, bloated and stiff. Another time a penny on the rail, flattened into a paper-thin copper

sheet. They always found something. It was only a question of what they would find. Later he came to believe that the rest of life is not so much about what you find but what you lose instead. (What was the Chinese boy's name? That's lost now too.)

The sound of the bag is a happy, yielding sound. He pulls out the cigars and the cigarette and the lighter, careful not to let any of the loose hashish spill onto the sheet. The cigarette is stiff and light in his fingers. It is only a matter of lighting it, which he does, but only after replacing the cigars and fastening the bag again. He takes one drag and then another and then he leans into her and holds out the lit cigarette for her to see.

—Like at the dances, he says. When I'd start one for you. Like a gentleman.

Millie scowls. She rubs her balmed lips together then parts them and he brings it to her lips. She has not smoked in thirty-five years but she pulls it deep into her lungs and holds it there. The ease of it startles him. That she does not cough. That the rush of the exhaled smoke is pure and strong and alive. He is dizzy already but he takes two more quick drags and lets Millie have another turn. They trade back and forth this way for half the cigarette, ashing into her water cup for lack of a better place. The little island of gray soot floating intact for a few seconds and then spreading out and darkening over the surface.

—I say, he says, we save the rest for later.

—I'm hungry, she says. Her face is soft, as soft as it has been in years. As soft as it has ever been. No: softer. Her eyes open and aware, almost shining. I could eat, she says.

—He rises from the chair, collects the cup of water and ashes, and he kisses her on the forehead. When he leans down he braces himself on the bed to keep his balance. She smells like something more than smoke. Incense.

—I'll see what I can do about that, he says, and he makes his way through the half-dark and down the stairs.

A pat of butter, thicker than he might ordinarily use. A quarter of a yellow onion, chopped. This he stirs in the skillet with a wooden spoon. Then a large egg on top of that and more stirring. Two white slices of bread into the ancient toaster oven. Then one square slice of American cheese into the skillet mixture. More stirring to melt the cheese. He takes the skillet off the heat, pulls out the toasted bread, and puts it on a small plate. A thin, careful layer of mayonnaise on one piece of toast. He spoons on the egg, all of it, and salts it. Still it wants something. He fishes out the ketchup, taps the side of the bottle until it yields a sweet, red dollop.

It is the kind of feat—the methodical construction of something ordinary but also nearly perfect—that he might not have noticed on any other day. On this day, in this state, he feels the achievement, he wants to mark it. The kitchen faces west. Outside the sun is going down. There is something peculiar about the way the sun sets against the back of the house: just before it falls behind the horizon, it seems to brighten. For three minutes, maybe five, the backyard glows orange and red. In that short burst, there is no doubt that the sun is first and foremost a very near star, that the earth is a rock it warms.

He walks out into it. He finds that he has carried the plate with him. Her perfect egg sandwich. The warm, orange, dying sunlight. He sits on the porch step and takes the sandwich in his hands. The way to mark this is to take it in, though it wasn't meant for him. To take it in, one slow bite at a time.

Once, on the island of Guam, when he was in the navy, he went with his drunken buddies to a fortuneteller woman. She lived in something like a trailer. A small television blared in the front room.

—You will live until you are 84, she told him. You will find love. It will take time. There will be sadness. Life will be better for you after you turn 40.

Fortunetelling seemed then and forevermore like no special trick. What is to come is easy enough to see in broad strokes. Even in an empty backyard that has finally yielded to the dark:

He will rise with an empty plate and return to the kitchen, this time bathed in its fluorescent light.

He will do what he did again: butter, onion, egg, cheese, stirring.
Toast.

Condiments.

He will put it on a plate. This near-perfect thing he has made. This near perfect thing he has made again. Then, again, up the stairs. The plate in one hand. In the other a fresh glass of cold water that she will call juice. Step by step. The climb he knows so well. The climb he does not, will not, even today, take to be his own ascension.