

BRIAN ROUNDS

Bridge, 2016
Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

We both fought our best and uncoupled when each was done. Then we died together, for no particular reason.

Within my dream I awoke postmortem to find that upon dying our souls had switched. I was a mountain lion now, and he was a man. I resigned myself to this strange reincarnation and strode off in search of food. But suddenly I realized that there was now a man living in the world with the soul of a lion. Such a man meant carnage. So I ran back toward the road, saw him fumbling wildly with car keys. I ripped his bipedal body in two and made him a piecewise man. But as soon as he was dead, I remembered back two lives. The first time he and I grappled and died, in our first lives, he was the man and I had golden eyes.

I had the lion's soul to begin with.

When I truly woke up, a mountain lion was suckling quite painfully on my wrist, my hand bleeding profusely into its salivating mouth. It hurt like the dream hurt—wholly. I killed the mountain lion with my bare hands so I wouldn't have to worry anymore. Then I drove home.

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I have a car now, like back then, only no commute. I've gone far enough. And he went too far, and came in a car too. And we were all pulled over on the side of the freeway or stopped in our respective lanes. He said he needed men for his army. I told him I wasn't sure that I was a man. He killed the others and took me.

In the war, I wore a gold mask. They handed me two swords curved like sabres' horns, and they dropped me and however many million others on mountaintops and islands and especially in deserts, where you could see the heat rising off the sand and into your eyes. I teared up every time but was never torn up.

Anyway, the main point of that whole debacle is that I can have a wooden fence. You used to need chain link and barbed wire, but there are no mountain lions anymore. I'm the last one. There's not much in the way of terrestrial animals in general. I used that exact phrase, "terrestrial animals," in conversation just last week and ended up having to explain to my daughter that I meant land animals and that aliens aren't trying to kill her. I think we killed anything that ever even flirted with the idea of killing us.

The fence is one of those nail-in-log deals, and it surrounds my large property at the base of the mountains.

*I was a mountain
lion now, and
he was a man.*

I can slip through it any time I want and walk along the brilliant hill spines for as long as I can muster. Sometimes I take my pad of papyrus and scribble stories on it in red pen while I watch the sunset. One time I tried digging a grave on the slope, just in case I wasn't out there alone, but the dirt kept falling into any depression I made and filling it right back up. Then I remembered that my parents were beautiful and gave me golden hair from their brunette and that I needed to be buried with them near the old airport but not yet. I never tried that again.

I'm outside the fence right now, but twenty miles down, and in a car. I'm headed to a restaurant in the south of the valley to catch up with some of my buddies from high school. Our mascot was the cougar, so the student body president proposed this initiative to build a wilderness corridor so the mountain lions could travel over the freeway to mate. The only mating that went on there was between students and late at night. I got a job right out of high school while my friends went wild. Then I went wild and there were no jobs for a while. Now we've built a corridor between worlds and reached a healthy, middle-aged medium.

I spiral along the banked off-ramp and maneuver my car onto the boulevard below. The streets here are longer than most people's lives and freshly tarred black with marigold paint. A younger man driving a Chevy Impala glides along in my jet stream, drives in dashes across the perforated borderline, accelerates, and cuts back into my lane directly in front of me. He floats forward rapidly with elusive speed, but I give chase.

I pass and unpass the Impala across miles and miles of the straight road, taking strategic glances inside his car to see if he can handle the speed. His deltoids shake a bit, but he's not stopping. Traffic only exists for those who are too afraid to change lanes; I weave precisely across the four