BRIAN ROUNDS

Russian Ridge, 2016
Oil on canvas, 11 x 14 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

ALEXANDER BARRY

Fence

The world has golden fur. They say the drought will end soon and the grass will grow green again, but they don't realize that the hillside is a hide, with beautiful gilded hay for hair and suntanned skin. That's just how the valley lives. Any trace of verdure is gangrene, cold and dark. I've always had an eye for warm colors. I could see the heat coming my way even years ago.

My commute took me north and out of the valley, so naturally I would pass the golden hills at dusk on my way back. The sun lit their wicks at that time of day, and the light would travel along the invisible strings, burning from the apex down, until it was right in my eyes. I like to imagine I glowed then. Another festering fantasy of mine was smooth talking my car off of the freeway three stops early, convincing it to wait on the shoulder of a shaded dirt highway, and exploring the radiant amber hills with my own two feet and my own gold eyes. Each to and fro along those roads was a back and forth between mundane responsibility and feral curiosity. The whole thing probably wasn't such a big deal after all, looking back.

Finally, decisively, and with great satisfaction, after a thousand consecutive concessions, I flicked my turn signal upwards, and the right light blinked. After some poorly paved blocks and a few hundred meters of dirt, really less than a mile out of my usual way, I left my car at the base of the closest hill and climbed. The whole of the hill was tough: sturdy grass, dry soil, gorgeous brambles. It was a magnificent experience and a magnifying one. That which was visible from the freeway simply grew in my eyes, but new nuances spiraled around me in the interlocking of the various slopes. There was a beautiful fluidity to the form, as exists between life and dreams. I sat down.

I fell asleep in the sunshine, although the surface was not comfortable.

I dreamed I was standing again and that the changing light stayed for too long. Over the crest of the hill approached a mountain lion, form barely discernible from the matching coat of the hillside, radiant marigold eyes trained on me. In its gaze I saw a calm peace. I misinterpreted its intentions, and it attacked me with its most ferocious force, a brutality I have yet to see in waking life. And so the lion and I fought, teeth and claws bared. We rolled and roiled up and down the hill, drawing blood and then drawing with that blood on the papyrus slope.

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.

* * *

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 sables' 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

The beautiful youths of today had yet to be born, and lots of graves were still just glimmers in their fathers' eyes.

speed-regions so as to not stop. The Impala sprints leftward, seeking the path of least resistance. But I also move left with great urgency and he cannot help but swerve over a lane to avoid hitting my car. Now he's boxed into a left-hand turn lane and my job is done and it's time to eat. I watch the Impala peel away as I continue on toward the restaurant. I'm probably going to be early now, so I decelerate to a reasonable pace.

Within the mile, the restaurant comes into view, and there's a parking space on the street.

Pulling into the space, I see that Walker Lawrence, my most grandiosely named associate, is even more punctual than I am. Walker lives for events. I'm of the opinion his life has been blissfully uneventful. His car is right in front of mine.

I step out of my car and sidle around the front carefully to avoid becoming roadkill. The restaurant door is a pull door and I pull it. Walker unsurprisingly greets me with a viscerally warm smile and a jovial, masculine hug.

"Richard! How've things been? A little abnormal, at least?" he pries pleasantly. "I hope Jenny is keeping you from stagnation. And your boy, and Emma? Why it must almost be her birthday. How old is she now?"

"Nine." He nods. He knows.

He always remembers my daughter's birthday.

Before I can respond to any of Walker's other unanswerable rhetorical quandaries, his retinas pick up a heat signature behind me. "Hey, Bill! How've things been? A little exciting, at least?"

"While I'm happy to stand around with you boys, we might as well get a table. That'd be mighty swell," Bill says sideways as he rushes past us and to the usual table. He likes to lead by example in order to promote order. "Let's order our drinks now while we're just three. The logistics of six drinks is a nightmare."

Before Bill can have his way, our party's other half arrives simultaneously. All of a sudden we have our drinks and we've talked about something and I was apparently too engrossed in the conversation to have looked at the menu. I'm ordering first. Out of pure instinct I request a flat iron steak, medium. Murmurs of disapproval encircle the table.

"You don't come to a barbecue joint and order a common cut!" Walker exclaims, his culinary prowess sending carnivorous ripples through our fellow diners. "I'll have the beef rib special, please!"

The pressure and intrigue are too great, and the next four orders are all for beef ribs. These guys are all about the communal experience. They've never worn masks. Those can't be shared. Gold is too malleable to split.

The food comes quickly enough to satisfy Bill. The talk turns off: it's a laborious meal, and there's only so much energy to be utilized. I can see that. The entirety of my focus goes toward gingerly sliding the fork into the pristine meat in sensible increments, cutting along the latitude and longitude of the thing until it's squares. The meat cannot touch the asparagus and the asparagus cannot touch the mashed potatoes. I look intently at my plate and ensure that the juices stay firmly within their cuboidal domiciles and don't redden the porcelain. I fan a napkin out over my lap, take a carefully curated bite, and look up.

At each of the other five place settings steams a heaping pile of fleshy bones. The ribs are charred like I haven't seen for many years, and the restaurant's signature red-orange barbecue sauce has been liberally smeared across the length of each bone, drooling down and pooling up to the edges of the plate. In concert, the five feeders dip their hands down into the saucy cage and reemerge with blackened, reddened fingertips, balancing a bone. The ribs drip too profusely to be lifted over slacks and button-downs, so the heads and mouths extend over the table to meet the meat. Their teeth search for the proper leverage, gnawing at the inedible center two bites out of three. When the gnashers make contact, muscle peels away with a frantic smoothness. At the end of the meal, the bones soak lonely atop the plates. And each man's mouth and lips are stained red. I put down my knife and fork and fold my napkin in half.

Walker inevitably breaks the silence, still chewing the fat off his last rib. "You know, I've asserted—and continue to assert—that this restaurant is better than the old place ever was. The food is better by a mile, and I'd rather be more casual than pay for atmosphere anyway. Plus, if this get-together is only going to happen once a year, I'd like to make damn sure I've got another year in me!"

Walker Lawrence cannot help but bring it up. He's made the same comments at every annual lunch for the last nine years. I doubt he even saw the man with the gold teeth from under the table. I'm sure he appreciated the frilly, low-hanging tablecloth then.

We used to dine at a much nicer restaurant. For five years we marked our calendars months in advance and saved our pocket change in anticipation. You couldn't seat yourself like you can here, and we complained that we were always getting put in the back of the restaurant, near the hustle and bustle and heat of the kitchen. This time was no different, except that my wife was pregnant and the baby was due in one week, so I was probably less stoic and more talkative than usual, certainly more relaxed.

This was not long after the war, and cell phones had just gone back into circulation, but I had one, so I could drive and talk at the same time. It rang midway through the meal, which was dinner back then. I saw that my wife was calling, so I slipped into the hallway next to the restrooms, the deepest depth of the whole establishment, so that I could talk in peace. She told me that she was having contractions, that our daughter was on her way. I promised to come home, but she told me to meet her at the hospital because her parents were visiting and would make better time. She said she felt hot. I felt hot, too, and there was a pain in my ribs.

The war hadn't been over for very long, and I could still feel it in that hallway. The beautiful youths of today had yet to be born, and lots of graves were still just glimmers in their fathers' eyes. And like the one who came to take me years before, he came, only this man wore the rags that can only be seen in the glossy pages torn out of textbooks by teachers upon parental request. His garb was black and his guns and grenades were black and every other tooth was gold. The war raged just for him.

I heard a succession of familiar cataclysms before I saw what was happening. Upon recognizing the gunfire, I hung up the phone immediately so as to not transmit my misfortune and turned my eyes toward the front of the restaurant. I saw the fanatic atop a table, a dead host at the door and a host of others dying at the table with the nicest view. He waved his weaponry in the air and screamed from his spiral sinuses. Then came his proselytization, punctuated rhythmically by gunfire that reached ever deeper into the restaurant:

"You're all animals! You eat yourselves atop platters and pay to savor the selfsame taste. I am the slaughter, and blood is all that will leave you, because blood is all you have left!"

I know he said more in the next few seconds, as his barrel tilted upward and each subsequent bullet leaped closer to the kitchen. And I know that he was intending to lie, but it was lucky for all of us that he failed. I was certainly an animal when I ran from that hallway, just like he said, and blood was all I had left. But my blood was not to be lost; she was just coming into the world.

I pounced on the man with the gold teeth and beat him with my bare hands, even as he pounded my ribs with brass knuckles. With a decisive smash, I extinguished his will and sent his gold teeth raining down into his throat. He swallowed them. His mouth and lips were stained red. I did not kill him because I did not want my daughter to be born with his soul. There aren't any men like that in her world. Now we can have wooden fences.

Having thoroughly relived the long-ago episode, cleaned up the rib mess, and paid the bill, we six friends go to our respective cars, and at least I drive home. I have no way of knowing where they're going. I maneuver slowly across this world and the sun is setting by the time I get home. The hills are burning, and Emma is waiting for me on the driveway, soaked in light. Her mother and brother are taking their late-afternoon nap, so she and I walk together around the side of the house to the backyard. Sound carries superbly inside, so to open the door would be to wake a groggy wife and grumpy son prematurely.

My daughter sits down at the picnic table I built when

we bought the house and looks out past the fence. I look out too, as I'm prone to do. She asks me what the animals were like because she knows I've seen them. The question isn't new, and I answer qualitatively, going through the usual cats and dogs and horses, furs and scales and flippers. I describe everything in comparison to cows: there are still plenty of those.

She tells me she knows what they looked like and that there are pictures and descriptions of what they ate, where they lived, and how they raised their young. What she really wanted to know was how they were. How did they move through the world? What was it like to see one in real life? Jenny slides open the back door, signaling that the house is fair game again and that we best head inside soon. It's getting cool, and it's hard to see in the rising night.

I say that most animals were like people, only plainer: some were dangerous and some were benign and some were good and some were bad. You could tell by looking them in the eyes. But some of them wore masks, and you never knew what they were going to do until they'd done it.

We head inside.

Alex Barry is a twenty-year-old from Los Angeles, California. He has been writing since he was ten, completing his first novel in fifth grade. Barry is currently a student at Brown University and is still following his passion for writing through poetry, prose, and rap songs. This is his first publication.

BRIAN ROUNDS

Cloudscape, 2017
Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST