

*Blue, winter, Minnesota*  
Gabe Gordon

Winter in Minnesota is cold but not that cold for the people who live there year-round and have their ways of keeping warm. Paul did so by burning things. With clubbed fingers he rolled himself a joint. Tightly, taught, still thick as a forearm. Something someone could have choked on easy. But the night was smooth like maple syrup (Paul kept four bottles tapped and ready). He floated to the bathroom and turned on the shower. He paused while the water warmed to look in the mirror. He fingered through his beard, picking out crumbs and twigs and clumps of dirt. He shaved the day before.

Paul was barely 80 gallons into his shower when it happened. Underneath the running water and his own singing voice, he could not hear the crash that came from the kitchen. A wandering blue stranger drawn to the smoke and steam stumbled dizzily through the door. In a failed attempt at stealth the stranger fell, his back like a tail catching the end of a frying pan which hurled, flipped, and tumbled along with the measuring cup Paul had used to cook flapjacks on Sunday. The door closed behind the stranger but the coldness did not leave.

The bathroom air began to smell like ice and the steam wafting around the curtains started to crystalize mid drift. The hot water turned to hail. The pipes froze. Paul stepped out of the shower. One towel was not enough so he wrapped himself in the shower curtain, a map of the world in plastic colors.

Paul built the house himself a lifetime ago. When he was young he quickly traded Lincoln Logs for decaying tree trunks. He built forts in the trees out of other trees for himself and his friends but they were too high for anyone else to climb to. He spent many nights in those towers all alone watching stars and drawing maps of made-up constellations. Now, with a house (purposely) of his own, he had a visitor, curled up under a pile of cooking supplies and snow on the kitchen floor.

It was hard to discern ice from broken glass (both have the ability to break skin). The stranger's torn up palms spread a creamy mix of blood and ice water across the welcome mat. Paul lifted him up, he was light, and draped him over his shoulder. With his other hand Paul kindled the fire.

Paul spread the shower curtain across the bed and lay the frozen creature down gently upon it, his head resting on the Amazon (he was naked). Paul wrapped his cuts in Tyvek. The stranger said thank you with his body which relaxed into the bed. His limbs spread apart and crossed the oceans, leaving traces of condensation over mainland like glaciers. He was blue and cold but getting warmer fast, with the body of a younger ox. The ice crystals holding his eyes closed changed state into tears. The rest evaporated. Weathermen couldn't predict these types of temperature shifts. Paul slept on the couch.

Thawed, Babe woke up on a damp plastic shower curtain to the smell of flapjacks. Mountains of them. The kitchen table set for two, a giant man was washing dishes. *What a clean and cozy house* he thought. *But how did I get here? Should I pretend I am still sleeping? I'm naked.*

"Morning."

The pancake man acknowledged Babe's presence. There was no reason to hide, no turning back now.

"Y'can keep sleeping if you want. But I'd eat these while they're hot if I was you."

Babe slouched into the flannel robe waiting for him at the foot of the bed and creaked toward the kitchen. The house was small with only three rooms, barely separated by any walls. Kitchen, bathroom, bed, as if built for maximum proximity to each from all points in the house. He sat down at the wooden table in front of the smaller of the two heaps.

"You're awful quiet. Mouth still frozen shut?"

There were indeed traces of ice on the creases between Babe's lips but his mouth was juicy and red at this point. He coughed. He had not used his voice in a long time, he was afraid it would come out in cracks.

"Sorry, no. My name's Babe."

But it came like milk.

"Paul."

"Thank you."

"Don't bother, make myself a meal like this every morning. Might have overestimated the ingredients without a measuring cup."

"I'm sorry for coming into your house uninvited and"

The house was clean and dry with no traces of bodily fluids on the ground but Babe looked at his wrapped hands.

"For making a mess."

"Here."

Paul took Babe's hands and slowly unwrapped them, sufficiently healed and able to clasp a fork and knife.

"Stay here as long as you need. But you have to work."

Paul looked into a set of sapphire eyes nestled into sky-blue skin. *You were less than half alive last night*, he thought. *And already you seem stronger. But you're still blue.* Clearly the kid was lost and not from around here. Paul refrained from asking questions as the boy ate. Paul watched Babe eat sheepishly, embarrassed to reveal his monstrous hunger. The curvature of his back was delicate, his jawline precise, his feet bruised. Babe interrupted the silence with an unexpected, un-relentless belch. It shook the hills and knocked against the sky.

"Gosh, sorry," he grinned.

*You'll be quite a companion when you get your strength.*

Paul wove fabricated notions of youthful lovers in his daydreams. He ran the show at the lumberyard, but as he choreographed timbers and mowed down acres at a time his mind wandered. In the warm months he and Sagittarius evaded work by shooting smoke signals into the sky like arrows. Perseus kept him company in the autumn, playing catch with gorgon heads and teasing each other with oracles. He waited for Orion to herald in winter. He imagined racing over treetops with the sword-wielding cloudsman, hunting after Taurus. Paul worked late nights to see his comrades in the sky. He craved a confidant as much as he craved the smell of fallen pine and balsam.

Babe always dreamt of a man with a muscular tongue. He imagined Paul's a deadly weapon with celestial powers. Like a Hydra. He liked his beard, he liked his arms. He liked the way Paul pointed out the stars each night as they walked home from the yard together. It reminded him of his childhood bedroom where his sheets would glow in the dark when his mom turned the out the lights. Somehow this was comforting. It was winter, Minnesota, and a week ago Babe had no home.

They sat next to each other in front of the fire. Paul rolled a joint and Babe watched closely. Babe sucked in his first breath of smoke and never felt warmer.

*It is hard to breathe when I am with you.*

*We are chariot drivers pedaling through the night.*

*My mouth is dry.*

*We are rotating wanderers passing through days, months, years.*

Simultaneously, their thoughts collided,

*Gee, isn't this nice.*

Paul wrapped his arm around Babe's waist. Babe sunk his nose into Paul's clavicle. He could hear a supermassive heart beating a parsec a minute. Shooting stars rebounded across the dark blue.

On the floor, Paul slapped Babe's tongue around with his in mutual domination. They battled in saliva soaked in sugars and salts from lunch and dinner. Babe bit down to halt Paul's tongue but caught his lip. He kept it prisoner, torturing it with a delicate grind. He let go to greet the buttons of Paul's flannel, spitting out filaments of wool as he moved down one by one. Paul tickled his way up Babe's torso, sliding off his t-shirt. He traced the shape of Babe's body—all too sensitive—and forced out of him a tortured cry that woke a pack of hibernating bears.

Things got fast, fucking, pulsing, quivering, red. Faces sweat. Hard, wooden penetrations. Paul held Babe like a calf growing before his eyes. He felt safe inside the stranger inside his house. Paul was the biggest man Babe had ever had. His hands fit inside Paul's like baseball mitts. He opened himself up to the lumberjack giant. He left his body for a moment to watch. He saw the sweat drip off Paul's beard and the windowpanes condense with breath. He watched and learned how bodies work. It felt like learning to read. It felt like learning to read a new language. All linguists say that the ultimate distinction of fluency is the ability to speak erotically. When giants sleep together in a bed made from mother nature's tresses the earth shudders through itself, shakes the nearest thousands of miles.

Paul and Babe sat at a booth in Big Meeny's Diner. The fluorescent lights reflected off the metal siding on the tables and the tops of the sugar shakers, rivaling the static electricity in the atmosphere. It was 4:00 a.m.

"Your flapjacks are better."

"I was out of milk."

"I'm just saying yours are way better."

Together they shared a post-coitus appetite as big as a library. They plowed through sides of Canadian bacon and corned beef hash, grits, ten sticks of butter sped generously on loaves of toast.

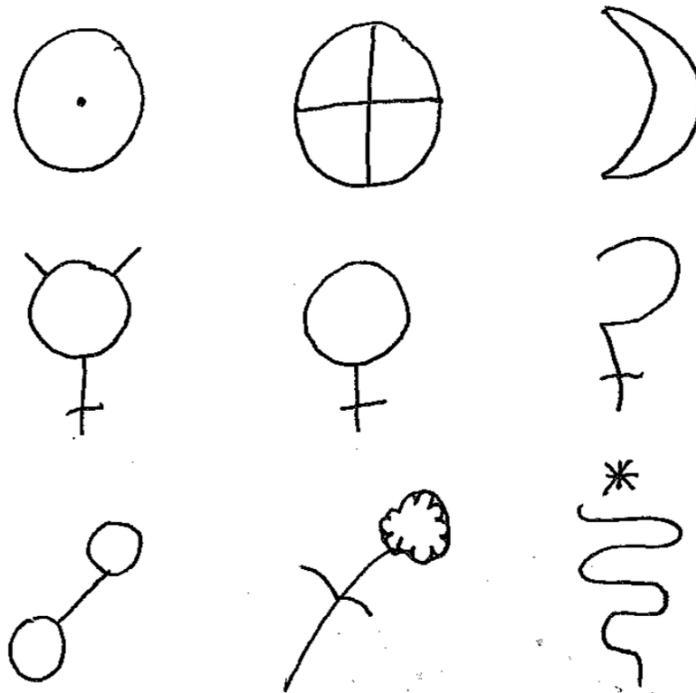
In between mouthfuls, "we call Canadian bacon *back bacon* back in Canada." The sun, beginning its morning in Ohio, made its way over Minnesota.

On the topic of origins:

“I ran here. Faster than I ever thought I could. I used to do cross country in high school until I realized how slow I was. I came in last in a race once. Coach always told us *don't get discouraged; you'll always be faster than someone*. I came in dead last.”

“Wouldn't have known from that display of endurance.”

Paul and Babe lay in bed on top of the covers. Babe drew his finger across the windowpane, tracing astrological symbols in and out of condensed water vapor.



“People in this town believe in celestial beings but they don't believe in us.”

“You could take the entirety of the common sense of humans and put it in the palm of your hand *and still have room for your dick*.”

“Who said that?”

“Anne Carson.”

Winter was fading and business was booming as usual. Babe had mastered Paul's four-stroke tree toppling technique. A swift strike in each cardinal direction and *T I M B E R*. A dynamic duo, their smooth sailing

professionalism seemed to bother the other men. The loggers idolized Paul, envied Babe, and questioned the recent number of earthquakes, shifts in geographical features, and noticeable modifications in astronomical rotations and patterns. *What's up with this new kid in town? Paul's sure been acting different since he came around. What's he got that we don't? A pussy? Where the hell'd he come from? Canada. Ohhh.* Orion, and all the winter stars that glowed beneath his belt, remained in the sky well into spring. Summer. Autumn. One year went by and life and sex and a strengthening sense of adhesiveness and codependence perpetuated, along with business. As long as there were trees, there was business.

On the eve of the anniversary of his arrival Babe had a dream that began predictably. He and Paul racing through the forest, seeing who could get to the lumberyard in the fewest steps. Bounding from clearing to clearing, leaping above the canopy (trying hard not to trap innocent creatures beneath their boots). Then after a day of work at the yard he looked around. They had cleared the entire forest. No, every forest. The world became a vacuum into space. Oxygen disappeared. He watched Paul choke to death, he did the same and woke up, returned to gravity. *When all the trees are gone, where is there to go?* Trees, and time alike, were running out.

On the eve of the anniversary of Babe's arrival Paul left a note on top of a stack of 366 chocolate chip flapjacks.

I WILL DIG YOU A WATERING HOLE SO GREAT  
YOU WILL NEVER BE THIRSTY  
I WILL KNIT YOU A MITTEN SO WARM  
YOU WILL NEVER BE COLD  
I WILL CARVE YOU A PATH SO BROAD  
YOU WILL NEVER BE LOST

Paul gave Babe the Great Lakes, Michigan, and the Grand Canyon. Babe smiled.

"For me? You shouldn't have."

Over the course of the following days they talked less, less than usual. As if words were proportionate to flora. Paul noticed. He wondered if it was possible be so familiar with someone that you never know them. In his head he made a list of things they did together.

*Eating flapjacks until they could burst  
Running across country  
Stirring up the water in the river, pushing it upstream  
Stamping out fires with their boots  
Combing their beards with pine trees  
Yelling at landslides to go away  
Eating popcorn  
Making pot pies  
Straightening roads and curving them for their convenience  
Box traps made of icicles  
Footballs made of icebergs  
Catching tornados in their hands and keeping them for later  
Dragging mountains across the prairie  
Going swimming and sinking cruise ships  
Napping for weeks and waking together at the same time  
Laughing until the windows broke  
Fucking until the windows melted  
He couldn't help but feel a distance growing between them.*

They stood at the top of the hill overlooking the shrinking forest. At the end of the expanse of field Babe could see what might be Canada, the home he ran away from with an American dream. He found a harbor inside the arms of a giant who loved him and made him feel like a man for the first time. He wondered if it was possible to be so familiar with someone that you never know them. Paul was a man of myth and legend. *I grew to be his comrade, strong, but not the same. What use am I to him when the job is done? Perhaps I am strong enough to go home.*

An astronomical distance had grown between the two in the span of a light year of frozen time. In another universe they could have lived like Chronos and Ananke, titans of time and inevitability, twisting around the egg-shaped dough. Coiling and constructing shapes of continuity, linear and spontaneous. Synchronized souls spinning heaven like tops. But they were only human.

Both of the men wanted to cry, so they did.

Both of them wanted to show the other, but they didn't.

The tears fell as blue snow, layering over the frozen soil. A tinge of aqua colored the wilted grass.