

CHARLES MCLEOD

Individualized Altimetry of Stripes

In memory of my father, C. Clark McLeod, 1938-2005

Me and C.R., waiting on the five-year lag. Des Moines sucks. New development everywhere and people keep leaving. It's like making a broken boat bigger to stop the leak. Chicago or the coasts; anywhere but here, they go. At least Chicago's got a lake, a body of fucking water. It takes us three hours to get to the M-i-s-s-e-t-c, and that river looks like someone switched it off. No blue in the whole thing. That river's all wrong, I tell C.R., it's not even moving. C.R. says it is, it's just five years behind.

C.R. inks; I pierce. He did my sleeves and I put 16 gauge stainless on his tongue, four fat bearings the size of blueberries, except I did it crooked and they look like one edge of a bad rack on the shot felt down at Shorty's. Told him I'd fix it when the healing was done, but C.R. says there's nothing to fix. I can do better, I tell him. You're doing fine, he says back. Wrists to shoulders I've got twin sunsets and elephants, black, in a ring around each forearm, connected trunk to tail. It was my idea but C.R. inked it in. I've got a black star at the base of my neck and my legs are done ankles to crotch; shamrocks around my areolas and eight balls on my thighs and question marks on the backs of my calves, pointing toward my feet. The only thing C.R. hasn't inked is my stomach. We're not sure what to put there. Next May we've been married five years; I met him at a bus stop, damn right, but you tell me a t-top Trans Am doesn't look good when you're taking the 46 from Connecticut Ave to New Mexico five times a week, to an apron at an Arby's. You tell me that isn't enough when you're fifteen and a good night at home is Stepdad Ray not sending his empty Lord Calvert bottle through the living room window, and a bad night is keeping him out of your bed. You try those on for size and tell me which fits better.

A full moon, C.R. says when we're naked on the futon, him drawing circles on my belly with a capped pen. A bowl of fruit. He's good with the needle but short on ideas; he did the heart on my fourth finger, small enough you can't see it under the ring. Over summer

they started new development in the lot next to our apartment building but autumn got here early and the rigs bogged down in the mud. A lot of days now I feel lonely, and don't know why.

Me and C.R. both work at Great Planes but don't own it; Bob and Lucy, C.R.'s parents, do. They're fifty-five apiece. Lucy likes to say she was a slut back when it meant something. Bob asks her when that was. The lobby's filled with his drawings and there's a stack of three photo albums next to the register, with more. Lucy keeps shots of her work in a Hello Kitty purse under the counter, the pages of Polaroids of Labrets and Medusas, Orbitals and Madisons, and pierces below the belt, Apadravyas and Perineums and Furchettes, rubber-banded together and dog-eared from age. The back room's surgery clean, the walls all white, and the twin dental chairs' red vinyl still smells new. This time of year we get college students most, boys from Creighton or Grinnell wanting a Celtic around their bicep and asking if they can bring beer in. They come on weekends, in groups, like fags, like gods. C.R. won't work on them since he got out of prison so Bob does. If they want piercings and try to flirt, I leave the gun down longer after the stud's gone through. Even the tough ones' eyes tear up after that, and if you think I wound up in this place because the world wasn't a little bit cruel to me you're stupid, and if you think I'm not going to be a little bit cruel back, have a seat. We close every night at midnight, and we're open Christmas and New Year's Eve.

The day I met C.R. he'd just turned eighteen and gotten his first piece, a rose and a dagger on the palm of his hand. He stopped the Trans Am right in front of me and there wasn't an inch between the wheels and that curb. Whatcha up to, he said. I'm waiting at a bus stop, the fuck it look like I said. My dad just gave me my first tattoo, said C.R. He held up the hand that wasn't on the steering wheel. Looks a lot like a bandage to me, I said. It's healing but that's temporary; I got what's underneath for the rest of my life. Over the door inside Great Planes is a sign that says we're artists not tailors, and what we put on you we can't take off. Proceed at your own risk. You have any yourself, C.R. asked me. The cicadas were making their dumb, metal sounds and there was broken glass on the bus stop's bench. No one else was around and the sun was bright and hot and it all seemed like the middle of winter, not July. From inside

the Trans Am, I could feel air-conditioning. No, I said, I'm fifteen. Not for long, said C.R., but I got in the car when he asked me to.

C.R. sees a doctor now. He got raped during his nineteen-month bid in Anamosa Penitentiary. They had to put his intestines back in. He told me about it in a letter and all he wrote was they raped me and I had to get my intestines put back in. C.R. got caught with dope at Shorty's, holding for a friend, and when the cops asked him to talk he'd stayed quiet, and got sent up. Our time together is different since, muted or more worn, and I wonder what work it might take for C.R. to fix himself. Last month the crown on the front of a water truck working on the lot next door to our apartment building got caught on the guy wire of a power line. It kept pulling and stretched the wire hard enough the overhead lines separated, and the hot wire fell on the derrick of the truck, and didn't ground out. The men working laid down running boards and jumped clear, and it took the fire department showing up and the engine's lights playing blue and red off the darkened walls of our apartment for C.R. to realize our power had gone out.

A mother wolf, he says, a tidal wave, an ocean. But none of those sound right to me.

Lucy says the five-year lag comes and goes, that sometimes the Midwest catches up to things before it falls behind again. Bob's inked the back of her legs to look like she's always wearing nylons, a single line that curves just right and runs from her thigh to her Achilles, cutting each leg in half. Just below her buttocks are tiny red bows, drawn to look pinned on even though they're permanent. The future's all form and file now anyway, sweetheart, Lucy says to me. Pretty soon there'll be a union for the clerks at the thrift stores. I remember when t-shirts were a nickel for a pound, and the Goodwill left them in piles on the linoleum. You always have been picking your clothes up off strange, new floors, says Bob. The two of them are beautiful, and immature, and will not have deciphered enough, I don't think, before it is their turn to die. C.R. will not, either, but unlike his parents he has been damaged crucially, and most likely beyond repair, and this will make looking inside of himself for anything very painful always.

Shorty's closes at two, as is the standard in Iowa, and before C.R. got busted there the owner, Malky, would let us stay after hours and shoot nine-ball at the tables that weren't quarter slots. Great

Planes sits mid-block between a die casters and a glass factory and we get everyone, the Harley guys; the metalheads; the Alpha Pi Omegas, who all want dolphins on their ankles. It got to be enough I had C.R. ink the word DOLPHIN on my ankle and each autumn when the blonde heiresses burst in, asking for them (my hair's red but dyed black), I pull down my sock and say, this, do you want it just like this? But it's not the word they're after it's the image and I can't stay mad at them for long because that's what I'm after too, something that sums this all up without saying it outrightly. My body's almost covered. I'm running out of room.

Malky's full name is Malikai; his parents were cultists in Utah and he received, upon turning eighteen, a high sum from the Federal Government for this fact, some total that served the dual function of reparation and payoff for remaining, in regard to the media, silent about his psychotic and disallowed youth. So he opened a bar. There's nothing special in that, and we went there because it was the only thing open at night in the neighborhood, when we closed. Malky is a thin man with a spooky haircut; he has no tattoos and nothing pierced and his fine, utterly straight brown hair hits just above his eyebrows, and is short and kempt in the back. Bob and Lucy have known him for decades and the bar is called what it is for some bit of slang derived from his parents' lifestyle; the cult was housed in a defunct leather tanner's in a ghost town with no tourist appeal, and after agents negotiated the release of the children the facility was burned, with the adults in it. In this manner Malky's youth was a series of sharp impacts and deleted scenes, and when he would tell us (for we used to ask repeatedly) that he couldn't remember what "shorty" was in reference to we generally believed him, or at least understood that he couldn't yet say. The five-year lag comes and goes, and sometimes the Midwest catches up to things, before it falls behind again.

Once a week C.R. goes to a big glass building downtown and talks to a psychiatrist none of us have met: not me, not Bob, not Lucy. Here, the man examines what has happened to C.R., and what is happening. If I could, I would rape this man and ask him to tell me what has happened, what is happening; the worst thing you can do to a pervert is take them out of their element and call them on their bullshit. The evening I showed Stepdad Ray my breasts he cried like a toddler and spent the night in his truck. You take away the suit

and tie from C.R.'s shrink, the degree on the wall, and he isn't much better. My husband comes back to the shop quiet and with his eyes glassed over, and when we ask him how it went (*they had to push my intestines back in*) he says it went good and sits in one of the back room's dental chairs and I think of Malky, behind the bar, washing the same dirty glasses over and over and over. I haven't seen Ray or my mom in seven years. You don't put the bad stuff behind you by talking about it every Wednesday at two.

On my back C.R.'s done an old-time pocket watch with gold chain, the lion on the Scottish flag, and a painting by Paul Klee—*Individualized Altimetry of Stripes*. The first two are on either shoulder and the last takes up the rest of my back, starting over my lungs and ending at my kidneys. It would cost a customer two thousand dollars, or a tenth of the amount of C.R.'s total bond. Anamosa Penitentiary is forty miles from the Mississippi, the river that doesn't work.

Like Klee I have privatized my images, but found no universal truths. Around the question marks on my calves swim black and golden carp in turquoise water. C.R. has drawn them to look fluid, moving, but they are going nowhere, swimming toward nothing. Bob attends an equipment convention in Omaha and Lucy fucks strangers in the dental chair; there is not a nicer way to say this because what is happening is not a nice thing. I want C.R. to look at my arms again, and to remind him no, we'll never be able to forget what happened but the days go forward, anyway. But I don't know if the days are going forward for C.R.; I don't know if that's a universal truth. It's November now, and the bulldozer and single crane in the empty lot are wrapped in black, crinkly tarps. The lot's puddles of rainwater are brown as the Mighty Miss. The winds whip through the tarp's small tears and it sounds like they're popping and ripping apart. C.R. doesn't hear them. We sit on the futon naked, the television turned up. He and Bob have a good relationship, better than most fathers and sons, but it is trade-based and bound only as tightly as shop talk can take them. Great Planes has a brass Sailor Jerry Bulldog, a handmade bronze Cuthook, a Brazilian Black Dragon with Benzmann grips. There is the horseshoe gun, too, the standby, its metal the same red as farmers paint their barns. The autoclave is a Ritter, an upright, and can clean ten needles at once. The lobby's walls are wood-paneled and the carpet the same color as the chairs in the back. I wanted a baby before C.R. went to

prison, but now I wonder if I should leave him. Already the Trans Am's engine has been rebuilt and cold days the spark plugs don't take, and C.R. calls us a cab.

It's no vehicle for a child to ride in, I tell him.

You liked it just fine, he says back.

Bob has told me that for Christmas he is getting Lucy a dermal punch; instead of having to widen the hole in the earlobe slowly, with bolts of increasing circumference, the dermal stamps the tissue right out.

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On 35 north of Des Moines you need to be careful of deer, even in the daytime. Farmers don't want them stealing feed so they leave small plates of honey laced with poison in the fields past their property lines. They use store bought D-Con, which dehydrates and disorients. Days there's ditch water near the highway's shoulder the deer drink and walk onto the blacktop, oblivious.

In Normal/Bloomington, there is a porn store that shares the same roof as a Pentecostal church. These two institutions are divided by a single granite wall and once a month, after Sunday sermon, the congregation fetches their picket signs from the broom closet behind the rows of pews and marches around to the other side of the building, singing hymnals and demanding their opinions in strong voices. Sometimes paying customers emerge and unavoidably meet the group head on, embarrassed and adrenaline licked.

Off I-80, just over the Nebraska border and into Wyoming, there is a sculpture of a coyote sitting on its haunches, mouth open and head pointed at the sky. The sculpture is ten feet tall and set at the top of a small bluff, next to the interstate. It will be on your left if you're going west. It won't be if you're not. Custom says it's good luck to leave something small on the sculpture's pedestal, something politely important: a shoelace, a money clip, a baby's first tooth. When you pass the sculpture again, from the opposite direction, stop and see if the item is still there. If no, make a wish; you have helped someone. If yes, take it with you; it was meant to be yours forever.

At the shop truckers come in and get new color put on old pieces. They make a sad living but sell the world as hungry for the next

set of new eyes, and I think sometimes C.R. notices the intensity with which I listen to their stories. We married in a dun, blank field behind a Dairy Queen, and the blue, May sky that day carried on it a wind of big miracles. In my most selfish of moments, I am convinced they weren't enough; in my most cruel, I wish that what was done to C.R. in prison would have killed him. Instead we have become a long, slow thing, static and not worthless but I am twenty-three, and don't want to start thinking about what could have been.

Lucy left home younger than I did, and with less. Des Moines makes it on every map, she says, Bako, Oklahoma, does not. Her hometown is in that state's panhandle and I'm led to believe that if she hadn't hitched out to Highway Eighty-Three on the first day of eighth grade, and then much farther, and for decades, she would have had quite a different husband than Bob. I asked her once if Oklahoma is considered the Midwest, or if it feels the five-year lag. She said Oklahoma is between Kansas and Texas, mainly, and it feels nothing at all. I started apprenticing under her after C.R. went in for his bid, both to pass that time and because it was a certainty that I would learn what Lucy had to teach. Great Planes makes most of its money from inking, but Lucy is popular both for her beauty and expertise, and carries her own weight in currency. She says I have the hands and eyes for the work, and most importantly the patience. I worry I have fooled her on the last of these, have been diligent out of respect but not interest.

With the clocks switched back and Thanksgiving not far a necessary settling seems inevitable. The first snowfall will feel like soft electricity. Once my mother came to Great Planes, to get me to come back home. I was sixteen. Through the shop's small window I watched Ray's truck sit, idling, at the curb. C.R. has taken to watching the television into the morning hours, shows about Hun invasions and Viking landings, enhanced by computer effects re-enacting great battles, where flags fall and fake blood pools on shorelines, on cliffs. Our landlord is a large, creamy man whose bald head and small features give him the look of a boiled egg. His lust for me is obvious and sincere. I have wondered, more than once, how much sun the new building next door will block out from our windows. Behind this street's row of buildings is a bit of forest, a throwback to how the Midwest looked before it was harnessed and sewn. It seems impossible. Deer stand on its fringes. I knock on the

window and they skitter away and I fill our plant's pots with water from a measuring cup. I have chosen species that need mild light and little precipitation. Even with a wet fall drought is a constant danger. Bob and Lucy say so many farmers have switched from corn to soy that you can see farther on the horizon now, that the earth looks flatter than ever before. I do not disbelieve them. All I wanted from my mother's house fit in a single box, which C.R. carried from my old bedroom to the Trans Am while I waited in the passenger seat. I own no suitcase, and cannot remember the weight of one in my hand. The only other things I recall from the day my mom came to the shop are her voice saying my first name, and that one of her shoes was missing a lace.

Lucy lost her virginity when she was ten. Her hair is jet black and she dyes it that same color sometimes because she enjoys the process, the peroxide on her scalp, and the small tube of color like balm afterward. Bob is aware of her affairs and knows that they do not extend from spite or some other privileged emotion, but rather as mandatory release. C.R. and I lived in the second bedroom of their home, until I turned eighteen. For two hundred dollars a month they have five thousand square feet, the entire second floor of the warehouse that harbors the die casting plant. At nine in the morning the dull reports of stamped metal sound from downstairs but it is a base noise, low and repetitive, and one you can train yourself to ignore. The fire escape descends to an alley, and Great Planes' back entrance; Bob and Lucy's commute is fifteen seconds and less if haste is needed, though it never is. We open at ten in the morning, a time C.R. still finds early, and when he offers ideas for inking my stomach I remind him what a baby will mean. Since his release, now almost a year behind him, his plans for our future have streamlined. In earlier times he had promised our own shop, or no shop, a clean break and move to a new place, but these cities and smaller, coastal towns never gained names and more than once C.R. has talked of the time that Bob and Lucy will be too old to remain perfect at what they do, and that Great Planes can be ours. He's put this moment as close as five years away. His thin frame gained weight in prison until he got raped, and couldn't eat. He has Lucy's hair, jet black and with a hint of curl to it, and he goes long stretches now without blinking his blue eyes, so long that they must go out of focus. Around C.R.'s right arm, from wrist to shoulder, is inked a rough map of the

Midwest: the Dakotas to Lake Michigan, Nebraska to the Illinois/Indiana border. Our plan was to get each state done a different color but only after we'd spent a night in it together; you see these composites, sometimes, on the sides of RV's. Up my husband's left leg runs the Pacific seaboard; up the right, the Atlantic. The only state that's been colored in is Iowa. I would like a baby. That its blankets would grow softer with each washing, that it would have favorite toys each month, each day, each week. At the Hy-Vee C.R. buys diet cola and microwave popcorn in bulk. His left arm is still blank entirely. No sun has left its skin the color of lint.

The boy C.R. was holding for is named Bradley; he lives in Florida now, in Orlando. I hope to never see him again and he should hope for the same. Recently he has taken to sending postcards to C.R., asking for money from him. On the front of the latest was the Epcot Center, its dome against a deep blue sky. The back read:

CAMERON RICHARD—TOUGH TIMES ARE A DIME A DOZEN,
AND I'M DOWN TO SHITTING NICKELS. I THOUGHT I HAD A
JOB WORKING OVERNIGHTS AT A FUNERAL HOME, BUT THEY
GAVE IT TO SOMEONE ELSE. A MAN I MET RENTS A P.O. BOX;
YOU COULD SEND THE MONEY THERE. ANYTHING HELPS. I
HATE FLORIDA. I THINK I KNOW WHAT YOU WENT THROUGH
NOW, IN PRISON. —B

I have forgiven him as much as I am willing to, and his life will be a hard one for he has little to offer anybody, and does not make friends with ease. There have been over a dozen postcards in total, which leads me to believe that C.R. is sending Bradley money in secret. I take this action as just short of deceitful, just short of a reason to leave. More badly than anything Bradley wished for C.R.'s talent with the needle but had none, nor could he ever save money for more than small impersonal pieces chosen from the walls of Great Planes' lobby, and inked on by C.R. after business hours. I put a knife through Bradley's hand the last time I saw him, when he came through the shop's door after C.R. had been sent to prison. I don't know what his intentions were, whether he had thought to make amends or believed something might happen other than hurt to his person, but when he put his palms down on the countertop's wood I took the Bowie we keep under the register for emergencies and pinned his

left hand where it lay. Bradley screamed like a child when the metal went through, piercing all of it: skin, tendon, bone. We're calling the cops, Lucy said over his howling. Damn right you're calling the cops, Bradley said back, and pointed a finger on his free hand at me. Let her go be with her man if she wants to so badly. We'll say you tried to rob us, Lucy told him, holding the phone's receiver in the air. I'm dialing right now. Behind her, Bob stood with his arms crossed over his stomach; on each bicep he has a red, full heart inked on the hill of the muscle, and with his teeth set he flexed one arm then the other, the hearts taking turns beating. Pull it out, Bradley pleaded. Already the swelling had made the hand turn lightly purple. Pull it out, and it's like nothing happened.

Often now C.R. is gone for longer than the hour and a half it takes him to drive to the big glass building, sit in an expensive room, and drive back. When I asked him where he goes he told me that he buys lunch for himself at a fast food restaurant, in a shopping center across the street, and sits there and eats it alone. Some nights the tarps crack like thunder and I jump in C.R.'s arms. In better times he would have made fun of my skittishness; now he only asks what's wrong. I took a cab once, to the shopping center, to see if C.R.'s story held water. It did. From across the street, at a bus stop, I watched him through the restaurant's window. He sat hunched in his chair and had no magazine in front of him, no newspaper or book, but stared at the plastic table like one of these things was right there, open to a page. From their carton on a brown tray, C.R. took a single french fry at a time, and without looking. Each golden strip lasted three separate bites. At one point C.R. stopped and set the fry, partially consumed, back in its carton, and folded his hands in his lap.

I did what Bradley asked me to, but not before moving the blade around in the wound, and making it bigger.

On rare occasions collectors come to Great Planes; they make appointments weeks and months ahead of time, calling often from out of state or other continents, from California or Tokyo or Iceland. Bob has run his business on work ethic and pleasant ways always, and in this manner the Midwest suits him. He has thick glasses with black, unfashionable frames, and his ponytail is graying, and halfway down his back. He wears Hawaiian shirts and navy blue work pants and was wearing the same thing twenty-five years ago,

when Great Planes' first customer, a collector named David who is in the shop today, right now, came through the door with a print of the painting by the Regionalist Grant Wood, a copy of his famous work, *American Gothic*. You've seen it, even if you don't know it by name; it's the portrait of the farmer with his pitchfork and his wife standing next to him, looking off into the distance. From cost and time the piece verges on impossible but David is wealthy, having made his money in hydraulics, in the practical applications of liquid in motion, and Bob has come to view the piece's completion as something transcending a test of skill. To get the correct shade of red he blends Chinese inks with Aborigines, special ordering from Beijing, Sydney, beyond. Every five years David returns and has work added; the painting runs from his neck to the base of his tailbone, and over all the skin between.

I would like a baby, and there is the shop to get lost in: the cardboard boxes of barbells and CBRs; the small packets of Provon and Satin and A&C, used for protection on a new piece; the hundreds and hundreds of sketches. Lucy has started me reading manuals on piercing with the circulatory system in mind, thick guides on how to put a needle through anything and avoid hitting a nerve. David's back is two-thirds done but there are still figures missing, and whole areas not even begun. Though entering his older years David has kept himself in shape, and only now are the smallest hints of fat starting to sit on his hips, the muscle too tired to remain muscle for any longer. The Wood piece is not his only one but the rest of his work is below the belt, done from feet to waist, tribal pieces collected from artists in the Philippines, Chile, the Ivory Coast. David takes his shirt off and to look at him from the front you would think a needle has never touched his skin. I cannot say the same, and do not know what will happen to me. Bob puts the dental chair vertical and David lies on it, stomach pressed to the vinyl. The ink gun's switch is flipped, and the needle starts to buzz so fast it doesn't look like it's moving at all. David turns in the chair and holds a hand up, gesturing for Bob to wait. C.R. and Lucy and me are gathered around the two of them. Whoa, whoa, whoa, David says, hold on a second. This is an old joke, one that we all know. The ink gun is humming. C.R. puts his hand over mine. *Now before we start I have to ask—are you sure you know what you're doing?*