

f u g u e

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ANDREW GRACE

THE HOUSEKEEPER

Cut me

shreds of linen

up attic: passel of swatch & nail

I will make you

a shawl a shell

Forget my voice

or the wash I did for you

knees pestle on stone floor

I will weave you

a hector a hell

ANDREW GRACE

LONELINESS

We rented a housing commission house.
A spamcan. Walls
patched with marl. Old movies
with the sound turned off. Unsigned papers.
A sunset like torn lingerie.

There were enough signs.
I should have known
inside of mother there was a baby boy
who had to slash through the branches
of her safety to get out.

Sonny was the only man I ever loved.
He touched me like finessing the spanner
on a crescent wrench. I should have known
oneness to him was don't say a word
in the algae-like dark of his basement
and no more.

I am blameless
in the matter of the botched attempt
at tenderness with the vacuum salesman;
for the vigorish I took on mother's fentanyl
I accept my punishment.

Make it last as long as it takes for fat to render
or for the hurt of the white owls
to reach the horizon.

And when you come tell me about my penance,
lock the door, don't mind the cold. Just tremble.
Sonny was my younger cousin. Rent was
mother slept with the commissioner.
That baby might still be on a train for all I know.

We're going to have a long talk, you and I.

ANDREW GRACE

WHAT THRIVES

Stray cats and toenail polish.
Talcum and snooker. Dresses

only worn once to a wedding
no one believed in but there was deviled eggs

and wine and men with glassy eyes
trading fields over a card table.

Givers of shit and takers of shit.
Mice that crawl up through the gas pipes

of stoves. Raffle tickets. Theories
about the soul that involve apologizing

for what others have done to you, as in,
I'm sorry you cut me this way, I'm sorry

for every word you brought me tonight.
Year-round Christmas ornaments.

Metaphors that end in *as steel, as heaven*
and *like a motherfucker*. Now sit some.

Now get blind awhile. Now pour moon
down your throat, put a little fever

under your tongue. Hothouse
your little hope for a city job

or a way to duck the horizon like a snake
and vanish into the woods to ride out

a rickety winter in a socket of salt.
What thrives here are white flags: tissues,

undershirts strung up on their ghost procession,
pale flowers that drink dark

under trailers, that know no seasons,
that surrender to nothing.

ROBERT BOSWELL

SOME SOMETHING WITH WINGS

TOMMY STERN

I've known Likey literally all his life. We domiciled in the same neighborhood. Had the same identical teachers up to middle school. No way I'd crave harm come to Likey. I'm not claiming he was my bosom acquaintance all that time. We flew with different flocks. There's the racial element intervening between us. Ninety percent of the children at Gary schools is African descended. Not all of them care for the few of us white types that stick it out. This time or the other, I speculate even Likey had some attitude toward myself. I know it ain't personal. It just my cross.

We been out of high school ten years now, and ain't many of us witnessed much of him in that long decade. Oh, we heard about him, sure. We ascertained how beneficial he was doing in California, but I never would of expected him be calling on me. He and Boo had been like two bones in the same leg all they lives. Went straight to Northwestern out of Theodore Roosevelt—no army, no jail, no detour of any kind. Even shared quarters together in Chicago and then for a stretch way out in L.A.

That was before Boo regressed back to here.

"Sure," I tell Likey when he phones me, "I got the time for you. Even if certain others ain't."

Likey was roosted in for the night at the Moseley over on Melton, which is much too retiring a locale for a man like him. Ought to be at the Majestic Star, I tell him, and I could even procure the man a discount. Doing which is one the ways I make my livelihood. But he don't require the casino atmospherics of the Majestic Star.

His folks is long gone from here. Subsiding in Arizona in a whole city of elderly types. Likey pay for it. They good parents, so they had that much coming.

And now this business here. Don't nobody's parents deserve this.

I couldn't tolerate Likey being bored upon his return home. That ain't the right way to treat nobody. I telephoned a woman friend of mine to join us and requested if she could think of a girl to accompany Likey. I knew he was married, but this wasn't no date. Just a night out. A re-visitation of the old haunts we used to go to.

But Kayla didn't have no notion who might desire to escort Likey. She like me, known him since day one. Grown up in the same identical neighborhood. These days of today, she has her a dwelling in Merrillville, not too far from the country club. (When they make the country a club? You ever marvel at that notion?) Kayla, she divorced, but she doing good. She drive a Prius. You know what I'm saying?

No sooner do I put the phone back in its crib then there come a pounding on my door, and who could it be but Jolene. She not right for Likey—that was my very first intuition. But she didn't have no pressing commitments, and when she got a sniff of what was up, I had to let her participate in. It was my honest conjecture that she and Harold Best were some something long dead.

Not that none of that mattered. It wasn't no date, like I said previous.

I wound up proceeding to the Moseley with Kayla and Jolene both in tow. When Likey stroll out to the car and scrutinize us all, he say, "This affair wasn't nothing like what all I had in mind." You be certain to tell his wife. Said it plain as daylight. Him being with Jolene was what you might call the intervention of bad luck.

The remainder of it go fast—even, you might say, precipitous. We drive by the old habitations, acquire some nourishment, and while navigating down Broadway past the now extinct Hotel Gary—I and Kayla in the front, Likey and Jolene in the back—along come Harold

Best in that archaic type Buick he been driving forever, and he start vocalizing at us. Jolene, she screech something back. What transpire then is like this. Likey's caught between the two of them, turning his head back and forth like a man watching tennis. Who knows? Likey might of been the kind of guy who like tennis.

To make a long story petite, Harold Best pull a gun out and shoot. Bam! A loud shot. Bam! Likey's head rattles round the back seat like some kind of scared animal. Falls in Jolene's lap, who produced a sound like you never heard a mortal creature make, a galactic type squawk, like some something with wings.

What you might call a piercing kind of excretion.

Nothing you don't ever aspire to hear. Trust me.

Kayla, she pitch herself into the back seat to tend to Likey while I depress the accelerator, but, funny thing, Harold Best do the same. We stay level a ways, him staring at me, me at him. I dampen down the brake till the car bucks to a stop.

Likey has already made the turn. Deceased. I think he dead by the time we hear the shot. Bullets travel faster than sound, don't they? Seem to me don't nothing travel faster than a bullet.

I drove him to Methodist over on Grant. They come out with this shiny gurney whose front wheels lock up. They get Likey on it, but it won't roll. One of them finally has to get under and rickshaw it inside.

Was just for show anyway. We every one of us knew that Likey, he gone.

KAYLA LIGHTNER

I don't date Tommy Stern. He said it was a "get together" to welcome Likey. When he picked me up, there was a woman in the back seat, obviously strung out. I didn't want to get in, but Tommy claimed he was merely dropping her off. A lie, and to be honest, I saw through it. Tommy doesn't lie to fool you; he lies to provide room for you to fool yourself. I wanted to see Likey, and that put me in the car.

The woman scraped herself off the seat and shoved her hand at me. I shook it, which made her laugh.

“You smell like toilet bowl cleaner,” she said. “Don’t she, Tommy?”

He backhanded her across the face. “Kayla don’t want none a your language,” he said. He leaned over my way while he steered. “You smell fine.” His fingers brushed my chin, touched the collar of my blouse.

Tommy Stern is one of those white men who like to think they know what it is to be black. When it’s convenient, they think they are black. He grew up in Midtown with the rest of us, which couldn’t have been easy for him. But some people—I hate to say this, yet it’s true—some people are just no good.

This woman Jolene kept erupting into language, her voice sharp, the words slurred. “Every goose need a gander to slap her round. That you what you think?”

Tommy eyed her in the rearview mirror. “Keep a lid on it,” he said. He talked to me in a different voice, as if I hadn’t seen him strike this woman, as if nothing were out of the ordinary. “Likey can’t wait to lay eyes on you,” he told me.

I tried to keep the conversation impersonal. I couldn’t believe Likey wished to see either of them. Likey is the best person I’ve ever known. I’m not saying this because he’s dead. Everybody felt that way about him.

When we were in high school, a long time ago now, Likey and I went out once, a sort of date, the night of our graduation. He and Boo had scholarships to Northwestern and I had one to Southern Illinois, which meant we sat together on the platform. Likey asked if I wanted to join them afterward for coffee. He offered me that grin of his. He was handsome enough, but he had this other quality. I don’t know what to call it.

Beauty, I suppose.

Boo came, too. You couldn’t see one without the other. We sat in the diner, talking, laughing, making plans. Other kids came and

went, sliding in beside Likey for a while. But he didn't skip out on me. Later, at the door to my house, I asked him for a graduation kiss, and he gave me one. A real kiss. The kind a man gives a woman.

I've thought of Likey often. I've imagined scenes and possibilities. Really, though, there's just that one kiss. It's the only tangible thing that ever passed between us.

WILLIAM BOSEMAN

People from the neighborhood still call me Boo. I prefer William.

It's true that Likey phoned me from the Moseley Motel. I suppose he expected me to drop everything. He'd been in Chicago several days. I hadn't been able to get away, and so he came to Gary. But I already had plans with my fiancée.

As it turns out, of course, I'm happy I had nothing to do with the evening.

I haven't seen Likey since I left California. We didn't part on the best of terms, but that has nothing to do with this. He may have come here to see me, but just because I wouldn't eat with him doesn't make me responsible for what happened.

Look, I've loved Likey for a long time. Longer and better than the others. I'll never again have such a friend. Something about being a child, your friends, if they last, become a part of you. Adult friendships don't have that kind of intimacy. In my experience, that's how it is. Me and Likey, well. . .

He has this way with people. He listens to them on a frequency the rest of us just don't have. He hears them so well they love him. He and I were going to take on the world, be wealthy, famous, and. . . and good. We were going to be good men.

What children we were.

And I loved him the way you love a child, that deep blistering kind of love.

He wanted to sit and chat. He thought if we'd break bread together, we'd be right back where we were before: partners, brothers, pals.

All right, fine, he came here to see me, and I wouldn't see him. That much is true.

Likey wouldn't normally turn to Tommy Stern, but he wouldn't want to waste the evening. He was in his hometown so he called up the boys, maybe even some of the girls, but not for anything but talk. Likey wasn't one to fool around on his wife.

I have to admit, though, that Kayla is a surprise. Likey had this grudge against her. She was made foolish by her love for him, and all he could see was the foolishness. I'm the only person alive who knows that Likey would rather see Tommy Stern than Kayla Lightner. He was lonesome, I guess.

Understand, I never quit loving Likey. It's something else. Something different entirely. We were starting a business together, a production company. We'd spent a few years in the industry, and it looked like we might get a break. That's how Hollywood works. Your break is always just around the corner, just out of reach. The truth is, it isn't always easy being Likey's friend. Being the other guy. No one sought me out. No one invited me to executive dinners. No one ever looked at me like I might sprout wings.

No one, that is, but Likey.

His name is Lawrence Elliot, but he wouldn't use it. "Likey and Boo," he'd say. "Same old, same old."

I got tired of being a nonentity. That's all. I came back here to start over, do something for my people, my hometown. Be my own man.

I don't see any of the old crowd—with one exception. Now that I'm getting married, I won't see her, either. The wedding is in the spring. My fiancée and I were eating Chinese when it happened, when Likey was murdered. Sweet and sour pork.

Look, I didn't want her to meet him. I don't need to explain that, do I?

I don't know that I can imagine the world without Likey in it. Though I guess it doesn't take imagination. That's the thing about the world. That's the goddamn thing about it.

JOLENE JONES

What kind of stupidass name be Likey? Don't sound like no human person's name.

That cunt in the front seat like to bust into flames when she see him bend over me. But he wasn't no prize, just some toothy nigger in a suit.

The bitch say, "Likey, you haven't changed a tit." She mean to say bit, but she shaking her little bunnies at him and cain't help herself. He pretend he don't hear it, and she pretend she don't say it, but I reaches up and give one a squeeze.

Likey grab my hand from her, and that bitch say, "Should we take her to the hospital?" Like I'm bout to heave out a baby.

"I ain't stupid," I tell her, which another way of saying I ain't pregnant. But her and me on different planets even if we in the same car.

Bout then the road start careening all to hell, and I cain't keep my head to up. I puked out the window. Not one drop on the seat. Them people got no right thinking they better than me. They couldn't none of them held themselves together as lost and over the top as I was.

I gone to Tommy's trying to get Harold some kinda cure. Some partial cure, anyways. Some shit. Everybody everywhere has some night they need some kinda shit to get through it.

But Tommy, he don't never want to help nobody less they help him. Usually, what he want—besides money—is gossip. He got to know the inside of peoples. Like with Harold. Did his old man really beat his mother to death?

"What the fuck difference that make now?" I ask him.

"I have a predilection for knowing," he say.

Tommy funny with words. He think they do for him things that cain't nothing do for nobody. Words for him is a circus, like with tigers and clowns and men that got whips. Hell, nobody care bout no fucking tigers and clowns cept Tommy. But he cain't help it. It's just what he is. You a skinny white boy in Midtown, you got to lean on something, and Tommy, he lean on words.

This particular night he want me to see this Likey who Tommy growed up with and who, cording to Tommy, his shit don't stink. He need somebody keep this man company.

"Talk to him," Tommy says. "Inquire bout his life in Hollywood."

"I got a sick man at home," I tell him.

"That man gone have to wait," Tommy say. "Once you meet Likey, you won't be reflecting on no addict in your partment, anyway."

He get me off before we go. He ain't a complete snake, like some people say. He ain't no good person, but he better than a snake.

I don't want to say nothing bad bout the dead, but this Likey don't make me forget nobody. People all broke up over what happen to him. What bout what happen to me? Harold love me, and the kinda prison he looking at, he might as well be dead. He took me in. You hear what I'm saying? I came looking for some kinda forgiveness, and he took me in like I wasn't never gone. I went out for him that night, and I wanted to come through for him. Wanted to take away his pain. That ain't no crime. How can that be anything but right?

Harold quit waiting for me after a while. That there's the downfall of everything.

Fuck Likey. He had the whole world on a wire, didn't he? For some while, he did. And when he go to the grave, he take with him the man I love and who love me.

I got no tears for no Likey.

KAYLA LIGHTNER

You need to understand that Likey wasn't the kind of man to say, "Stop this car, and let us out." He thought he could find the good in any situation. He gave me a wink that was saying, Isn't Tommy something else? Hasn't changed a lick.

Likey believed he could calm the waters of most any storm.

That was his undoing, I suppose.

The woman threw up—out the window, fortunately. Then she passed out. Only she seemed to slip back and forth, as if waking herself from a nightmare and then returning to it. Likey held her up as best he could, uncomplaining.

"Jolene have a head start on us," Tommy said.

Likey shook his head at that, rolled his eyes. He asked how I'd been, and I told him about my job, marriage, divorce, my little place in Merrillville.

"No children?" he asked.

I explained the circumstances of my miscarriage, how painful that episode was for me. I was tempted to tell him something else, a story I've wanted to tell him for a long time—how I'd tried to get together with him once a few years ago.

It's a story I should be ashamed of, I guess.

I'd heard he was going to St. Louis for a job interview. The drive over only takes a few hours. Five hours, I guess. I made a reservation at his hotel and invented a story. I wanted it to appear to be a chance meeting. He wasn't married back then. I was, but he wasn't.

Boo showed up at the door to my room. "Saw you in the lobby," he said and invited me to join them for dinner. You can guess how it turned out. Likey didn't make it to the restaurant. I drank too much and told Boo things that I meant to keep secret. I went there for Likey and wound up in bed with Boo.

You might think I wouldn't be able to face him after that, but Boo and I became good friends. We would see each other whenever he was home. Most of the time, we'd talk about Likey. That was our topic. Occasionally—not every visit—we'd make love.

Since Boo has moved back, we've seen each other now and then. He claims he never told Likey why I was in St. Louis, but I know those two told each other everything.

Anyway, I wanted to confess to Likey about the whole fiasco of that trip, but I couldn't do it without bringing up Boo, who was refusing to see Likey. That's one of the topics that Boo and I had talked about, why he had to get away from his friend.

I'm the only one, really, who knows the whole story.

Of course, I couldn't talk about any of that. Instead, I asked Likey about his family. He described his children and wife. Boo had told me that his wife was a beautiful woman. The kids, too, beautiful. Likey had pictures, but he couldn't get to his wallet without letting Jolene slide to the floorboard.

I thought about that later, how if he'd shown me the photos, he'd have seen them, too. He would have seen the faces of his children one last time.

WILLIAM BOSEMAN

Now his life has a shape you find in melodrama. A stupid death, and it's as if all that came before is ruined, as if life were a string of numbers to be added and by fouling up the total you make the whole list worthless.

When Likey and I were kids, we decided not to waste a second of our lives. Being back home had to be an opportunity for him. Don't squander the moment. He might have genuinely wanted to see Tommy, drive the old streets. Nostalgia is as deadly as jealousy, greed, avarice. I tried to teach him that. He didn't want to learn.

Jolene will not trouble his wife. She knows him too well. What she'll want to know is: Where was Boo? Why wasn't he with Boo?

What answer can I give her?

I'd like to blame Tommy. Malicious, lying, dope-dealing Tommy. White when he needs to be white, but in his heart thinking he can pass for black. Self-educated, self-serving. A genius at working

both sides of the street and blind to the vacancies on either side. There was one time that he shaved his head, the son of a bitch, and covered his face with some self-tanning cream that left his palms the color of mud. But nobody can live in two worlds. It can't be done.

Still. The thing about Tommy. . .

Look, here's a surprise for you. I love Tommy Stern. Likey did, too. I don't like him, and I'll be happy to never lay eyes on him again, but I do love him. I don't know that I can explain it.

There was one afternoon when we were in high school that Tommy came to Likey's house carrying a puppy. Likey and I were studying and didn't want to be bothered, but Tommy said something like, "I can't discern what particular action to pursue with this canine." Some kind of Tommy-Stern-construction like that. I tossed him the phone book and told him to look up the humane society.

"And let them aspirate the little guy?" Tommy gave me one of his looks, not a trace of genuine feeling in it. "I was ruminating how we might make a gift of it to that girl Brenda."

Right off, Likey accused him of not being straight with us. "Whose dog is this?" he asked. Tommy claimed he had found the puppy in the street, but Likey interrupted him. "I can see where its collar goes." He traced the circle in its fur.

Tommy let the act drop. He tossed the dog onto the sofa beside me. "Was on the porch of that big green house over on Delaware by the park," Tommy said. "You know that house?"

"Why'd you take their dog?" Likey asked.

Tommy shook his head mournfully. "That Brenda, she in possession of some something I want." He eyed Likey. "I seen you and her in the school yard."

Likey raised his hands, as if in surrender. "I've got no claim on her, if that's why you carried that puppy over here."

"Don't know why I did that. Was just circling round her block, and I espied that stupid dog, and Hey, I think, maybe I can convince Likey to convoy with me to Brenda's and give her that dog. She does

have a yard at her place.” He shrugged in an embarrassed way. “I’m a go over there right now and ask her out. You spare a ten spot?”

That’s what it was all about. The puppy, Brenda, the whole story—ten bucks we didn’t have. Likey and I lent him two dollars. Tommy squeezed the bills. “When I get up proximate to her.” He shook his head in awe. “I can literally smell her snatch.” Then he was out the door and gone—heading the opposite direction of Brenda’s house, the puppy chewing on the papers we’d been studying.

See, that’s why I love Tommy and want nothing to do with him. It’s always the con with Tommy, but that means he’s always thinking, plotting, devising a plan for his eventual triumph. He’s utterly transparent, but we let him take us for a ride anyway. White boy Tommy Stern long ago made it his job to be the consummate nigger, and because he did, the rest of us could let all that go. Likey and me. Kayla, too. We let Tommy Stern carry that load.

Maybe—it’s possible—that Likey needed me in some kind of similar way.

And maybe that’s why I had to flee him.

TOMMY STERN

If you inquire at the drive-in, you’ll discover Likey purchased a chipped pork sandwich on a bun. Profuse sauce, too, though he managed to keep his shirt pure immaculate.

What I’m saying is: that barbecue was his last meal.

Also for the record, Kayla didn’t crave no barbecue. It was I who recollected that it was a favorite of Likey’s. I don’t speculate you can get home barbecue in California, no matter how much coin you turning. But Kayla, see, she don’t want to eat any cuisine too familiar with being black. That’s one of the things I know about her. There are advantages to being a white man in an African descended circumstance. Permits you to see the trees and the woods. And it’s a dark woods around here, if you get my insinuation. Which means, if you me, you better not miss a bush.

Kayla and Likey did most of the conversing. Everybody acquainted with Kayla know she got a flame for Likey. Had it ever day of her life. When we was youths, she played the piano, and I'd tell Likey she play louder whenever he saunter by. I'd say, "That girl got extra sensual perceptions for you."

"Naw, man," he'd say. "She don't have no torch for me. She covets you, Tommy Stern."

A lot of people used to think that.

Me, I never been fooled. I make a point of seeing the world just exactly how it is.

Bout seventh grade, Kayla blossomed and she retain that bloom to this day. She's nicely framed, you might say, an appealing constructure. But Likey, that man always had his eye on some other beauty.

Where we at? The barbecue, sure. Back in the day, we frequented to Porky's Pit, but I take him to Big Daddy's. We ate in the parking lot, beneath that corrugated yawning. Kayla sat sidesaddle, staring at Likey, informing him about practically every minute of her life.

Not all of it true, I might be persuaded to add.

I have taken it upon myself to keep tabs on certain persons with whom I have been acquainted with. Why I do it, I don't care to precisely explain. It's my manner of figuring our mutual headway in the world. Like the way a cat want to know every inch of the kitchen, and which mice got the cheese and which mice got none.

I'm that cat.

Kayla asserted about having a miscarriage, which is not the factual reality. She has devised to keep anyone from knowing about her abortion, but my information is from her ex. The horse's mouth, you might say. I looked him up after they were estranged apart from each other. We had a few drinks, and he began to emotionalize. I know some properties about Kayla that seldom few are aware. Including things even her husband never guessed.

In particular, I know that baby she got rid of wasn't his.

That baby belong to Likey.

Not that Likey procreated with Kayla in the physical sense. Could of been her husband, could of been Boo. Boo and she were known to sexually conspire. I'm guessing she didn't know with whom of those men she'd formulated that baby. Which is why the abortion.

Her ex, did I mention, is white. As you might presume, he and I, we had a lot to dialog about. But the way I construe it is like this— whoever it was Kayla was fucking, she was fucking Likey.

I will confess that the thought did intersect with my mind how if the night had turned out otherwise, I could have been her next, let's say, surrogate.

Needless to mention, it didn't work out that way.

When we got arrested in traffic on Broadway, Likey and Kayla went quiet. I wrested my head around to take witness. Jolene had the zipper to Likey's fly and was tugging. "Anything in there?" she says. "You like them boy dolls that just got a smooth spot?"

Likey removed her hand away and helped her hold on to vertical. He spoke at the simultaneous moment that Harold Best yelled from the next car. I don't think anybody else heard, but I was staring back there and listening hard.

I listen the way other people pray.

"I've got all the regular parts," he said.

Those were his ultimate words. For the record. **f**

BRUCE KIRBY

WALLFLOWER

the smiling distance
she projects
protects
I say
hello
it takes two to tangle
uh, to tango

*The group glides
for dancing
they circle for
search and find
and
before the end
each hopes to win
just one of
affinite mind.*

awkward grace
the frozen face
the accusing chest
and when
she hears the
music
she poses

SARAH SLOAT

CROSSROAD GHAZAL

At the crossroad of lamplight and frost, my compass fails.
Let the chasm lull; let the landscape adjourn for sleep.

The ticking stops. To be kind, the phone goes dead for those
who surrender breath, surrender ash and urn for sleep.

A hot wind becomes me. I sit shiva with flood.
I wake to snow, but it's to rain I return for sleep.

Like filament windows, remembrances rise into
the heat. Stars play arsonist where cities burn for sleep.

The wine sits unstoppered, the banquet laid: pears, empires
and incense. More than pleasure will be spurned for sleep.

Ruin suits me. Threadbare, I run from sun-up straight
to the lowest voltage, feigning unconcern for sleep.

Reverse through the labyrinth, the book back to front.
Set texts, charts, and topographies we unlearn for sleep.

WHEN WE TALK ABOUT BEARS

Geese are making a ruckus on Jackson Lake in Grand Teton National Park. They honk their 2 a.m. warning in turns—one goose, then another joining in, then a third and fourth, as if in a round, until the flock reaches a crescendo. Wings flap like hands clapping as they skim the water, splashing with their webbed feet. My body tenses. Yet from the moonlit tent with its fly off, I see only a shadowy pine. Above its branches, clear sky bright with stars. Still, it's hard to breathe. There's a nightmare sensation as if I'm unable to move, my limbs weightless, useless, my breathing shallow. Fighting it, I force myself up on one elbow. I've pitched the tent here because in this clearing I can see exactly what's coming.

What I fear startled the geese has rounded ears, a dish-shaped face, a mouth dribbling saliva. It pads next to the pines, leaving clawed tracks that show its pigeon-toed gait, muscles rippling beneath its shaggy hide. It can stand up to seven feet on its hind legs, and though it might weigh up to 800-900 pounds, it can move at the speed of 35 mph, so I'm not likely to outrun it, but it can't climb trees. (I chose this flat spot for the tent—I also chose it for the pine outside, a possible refuge for me.) The predator that takes this shape, *Ursus arctos horribilis*—the grizzly—can bite through my bone, crush my skull, rip flesh from my limbs.

LITTLE PARK OF HORRIBILIS

My fears are not unfounded. A few months ago, in late June, 2010, two men and a woman were attacked by a grizzly near Cooke City, Montana, the Northeast entrance of Yellowstone Park, about 120 miles from my site in Teton Park. At 2 a.m., twenty-year-old Ronald Singer awoke in a tent as he felt the pressure of teeth on his leg.

When he began punching the bear, it released him, after which, at 2:15 a.m., though she'd been sleeping in another tent, Deb Feele awoke outside, her face to the ground, something big biting her and driving her into the dirt. She heard the snap of a bone: her arm. She screamed for help, but the more she struggled, the more the bear forced itself upon her. In response, she made herself go silent and limp, playing dead. A neighboring camper ushered his frightened family into their car. Perhaps because of that commotion, the sow let Feele go.

Both Singer and Feele were in the 27-site Soda Butte Campground where 24 of the sites were occupied. Kevin Kammer, 48, camping alone in a tent a quarter-mile away, was not so fortunate: he was killed by the same sow, his body partly consumed.

Earlier today at the Lizard Creek campground, before I put my payment in the brown envelope, I said to the host, "You haven't had any grizzly bears here, right?"

He was a gray-haired man who had the clean hands and face of someone whose RV included running water. He paused for a beat, pocketed those hands, and avoided eye contact, as if wishing to evade my response to unwelcome news: "Not for six days," he said.

He'd watched the sow and two cubs amble along right next to his RV, he explained. He thought she was looking for food. Warning signs asked campers not to leave anything out on picnic tables, not even to spit toothpaste onto the ground, but that didn't mean they'd obey. Maybe like the sow at Soda Butte Campground, because of the late summer, she wasn't finding the usual harvest of berries, so she'd had no choice but to root around among the tents. The sow had wandered almost to the site where I'd be setting up and then rangers had chased her away with a recording of a screaming cougar, a more fearsome opponent to her than him or me or a flock of honking geese. That's what the Park Service always used to scare away bears, the host said, and I tried to imagine the campground's quiet filled with the sound. I'd never heard a cougar scream, but supposedly it sounded like the scream of a woman.

After hunters had caught and “destroyed” the murderous sow in Soda Butte Campground, examination revealed that she was malnourished and full of parasites. The campers had done nothing to attract her—except set up their tents in the wrong place at the wrong time. Would that be my story, I was wondering now?

At age 52, I’d been in the wrong place at the wrong time before. However, the closest I had come to my own demise didn’t involve a wild animal. When I taught English at Virginia Tech, I tutored Seung-Hui Cho in my office, not knowing that he would—six months after sitting just a few feet away from me—kill 32 people and himself in a classroom. After the massacre, but not because of it, I’d taken a teaching job at a university in Washington State, and now, because I’d been doing research for a novel, I’d traveled to Montana. Since the research site was close to Yellowstone, I’d taken a detour through the Tetons. I didn’t have the money for a motel room, and I wanted to linger for the scenery, so I camped. Besides, I thought, it wouldn’t be a bad thing to face my fears.

DREAMS

I’d had recurring bad dreams about grizzlies for years by the time I’d set up my tent next to the pine tree. Sometimes the dreams were typical nightmares during which I was chased and tried to run but couldn’t move. I was trapped in a cabin, a bear’s silhouette framed by a window, or the bear had entered the cabin, and I was running up and down sets of endless stairways that seem so often to manifest in dreams. Or I’d fallen on the ground with the animal’s hot breath on my neck. But always I woke from such dreams just as the bear was about to attack.

When I’d camped in Yellowstone and Alaska in a hard-shell camper with my six-foot-tall husband, I’d rehearsed my escape route: through the sliding windows into the truck, where I’d stand on the horn and start the ignition before I drove away fast. But that was twenty-some years ago. Should my dreams take a real shape here, now that I was twice divorced and in a tent, my closest escape would be that pine tree.

STORYTELLING

I knew I wasn't the only person who feared bears and other predators. In his book *Monster of God*, David Quammen examines human mythmaking and behavior regarding man-eaters, including crocodiles, lions and monsters of yore, like dragons (think *Beowulf*), as well as *Ursus arctos horribilis*. When I found myself wishing bears absent from Teton Park (or at least absent for that night), I wondered if I fit, however peripherally, into Quammen's grouping of those colonists for whom "the extermination of alpha predators is fundamental." He says invaders taking over new territory "try to make themselves comfortable, safe, and supreme in unfamiliar surroundings" (253). Further, Quammen observes that if we "bring this notion [of extermination] back to America," it casts some light on the murderous loathing that many ranchers (of European extraction) in Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho continue to harbor for the grizzly bear. . . . "You haven't conquered a people, and their place, until you've exterminated their resident monsters" (253-254).

I don't wish to conquer "a people," or to be more monstrous than the monsters, but my childhood notions of Smoky the Bear have certainly gone by the wayside. How can I feel at ease when Smoky has dragged Deb Feele, a middle-aged woman like me, out of her tent, and partly consumed a grown man, Kevin Kammer?

Some Native American stories about bears offer a different emphasis from than the stories of European colonists. In her novel *Ceremony*, writer Leslie Marmon Silko-herself raised on the Laguna Pueblo reservation in northern New Mexico-tells the story of a boy called Shush whose name, according to the medicine man in the novel, "means bear." As a small child, Shush wanders away from his family in the mountains and goes into a cave with a sow and her cubs. To retrieve the little boy, his family seeks the aid of the medicine man. The medicine man has to act like a bear to get Shush to emerge from the cave:

He grunted loudly and scratched on the ground in front of him
He kept watching the entrance of the bear cave.
He grunted and made a low growling sound.
Pretty soon the little bears came out
Because he was making mother bear sounds (130).

Shush is among those little bears that emerge from the cave, and the boy returns to his people shortly after this, though never does he come all the way back, never again is he the child he was before he wandered away. Unlike the typical story told by European-American frontiersman, Silko's narrative shows that the way to save the child is not to destroy the bear but to become more like it—the medicine man and his assistants wear “bearweed” and behave like bears in order to lure the boy out and call him back to his human community.

Someone who may have needed such a medicine man was Timothy Treadwell. While he was not raised by bears, like the child in Silko's tale, he was won over by them in some mysterious way. In his memoir written with Jewel Palovak, Treadwell says that, even as a child, he fantasized about becoming “a grizzly, roaming the great north, or a Bengal tiger in the lush jungles of Asia.” As an adult, the real-life protagonist of Werner Herzog's film *Grizzly Man* developed what could certainly be called an obsession with the creatures. On numerous occasions, he camped alone in a tent among the great bears in Alaska. Finally, he and his girlfriend Amy Huguenard were killed by a bear one Fall in a place called the “grizzly maze.” Treadwell, a filmmaker, had his camera running, but the lens cap was still on, so only the sounds of the attack remained.

In *Grizzly Man*, director Herzog dons a pair of earphones to listen to Treadwell's last moments. We look past the back of Herzog's head at Jewel Palovak-Treadwell's longtime friend and previous lover who has given Herzog the tape. She is dressed in a scoop-necked black T-shirt, blonde hair cut pixie style, earrings dangling. Her eyes are glassy as she waits—apparently trying not to

think about what Herzog is hearing. She herself has never listened to the tape.

Earphones on, Herzog briefly describes what he's hearing—Treadwell's voice saying, "Get away, Amy, get away." Only a few seconds later, apparently overcome, Herzog says to Palovak, "Turn it off," and raises a hand to his face. He's crying, and in response, Palovak sobs, her face revealing her pain. Herzog says simply, "You must never listen to this tape." He tells her never to look at the photos of the mutilated bodies from the coroner's office either, and she nods solemnly, responding, "I won't."

Herzog's portrait of Treadwell raises the probability that the man was mentally ill, yet Herzog also theorizes that Treadwell—like Silko's imaginary child of the bears—may have been motivated by a longing for connection to the wild, a return to a state of savage yet innocent grace. Or perhaps that's a romantic interpretation that doesn't take into account Treadwell's lack of respect for the animals themselves, his seemingly selective awareness that he was, in fact, prey. I wonder if he kept a climbing tree in his sights.

In the film, Treadwell gives the bears names like Rowdy and Mickey. He expresses love in a silly, high-pitched voice dripping with sentimental emotion ("I love you, Rowdy," "I love you, Mickey") as he watches them fish for salmon, fight and mate. At one point, he reaches out to pet a passing bear and nearly loses a hand. At the same time he acts so foolishly, what he says on film shows that he understands his own endangerment: "Once there is weakness they will take me out," he says into his camera. "So far I persevere. . . most times I am. . . non-invasive. . . a kind warrior. . . When I am challenged, I must become a samurai. . . even the bears must believe I am more powerful." Some see Treadwell's self-aggrandizement as another symptom of his mental illness, and while Herzog acknowledges that possibility, he is also aware of what he calls the "astonishing beauty and depth . . . ecstasies and turmoil" that draw Treadwell to the bears. In his desire to bond with them, says Herzog, Treadwell seeks "primordial experience." On camera, the ecologist

Marnie Goede likens Treadwell's quest to a religious experience: "He wanted to mentally mutate into a wild animal," she says.

Quammen offers an alternative to mutation: rise to the occasions provided by our monsters, which—like our gods—offer challenges that sometimes create heroes. Such a challenge can result—as with Beowulf and Grendel or the Soda Butte campers in their tents—in all-out battle, whether with swords or bear spray. Alternatively, the desire to become that which is feared may result in surrender to the beast. Surrender occurs as humans become prey or give up their sanity, like the child Shush and perhaps like Treadwell—ego dissolving into animal.

The example of Frank Craighead, Jr., a pioneering grizzly bear researcher, illustrates a more intellectual relationship with the creatures. The epigraph to his *Track of the Grizzly*, an account of his and his brother John's work on grizzlies in Yellowstone Park, reads, "This book is dedicated to kindred traits—the inquisitive nature of the grizzly and the imaginative nature of man." It's a version of the bear—"inquisitive"—that is without threat, a curiosity that could apply to the creature's own survival (one can imagine the bear being "inquisitive" in order to determine whether something is food, like a bin on a picnic table, for instance, or the limb of a man or a woman). The bear's "inquisitive nature" is "kindred" to "imaginative," but Craighead doesn't pretend the bear is capable of reflection and fancy, as is the human.

The only mystery in *Track of the Grizzly* for this reader is what drove the biologists to risk their own lives repeatedly in the quest to gather information about grizzlies. The book includes harrowing accounts of their near misses, cage doors slamming shut just seconds before a grizzly lashes out, having awakened from a sedative. They surprise a bear whose radio collar's signals are muted, rousing her from her daybed. They startle four grizzlies, knowing their .357 would be useless if all the bears attacked. These risks would be enough to discourage most human beings from such research methods, but Frank Craighead's description suggests he, like

Treadwell and Shush, has fallen under the spell of the creatures he studies:

. . . all four grizzlies, now less than 150 feet away, abruptly rose up on their hind legs and stared intently at me, definitely startled. For a few long seconds they seemed to tower above me attempting to pick up a scent, a clue to whether I was friend, foe, or food. Their behavior reflected first surprise, then curiosity, but not belligerence. That wonderful inquisitive look reassured me somewhat. Then, as quickly as they had risen, they dropped down on all fours, and I sensed the crucial moment had passed (67-68).

“That wonderful inquisitive look” mirrors Craighead’s own as he peers into dens, weighs sedated bear bodies, and examines the guts of dead bears, just as biologists and then a coroner did after the bear that consumed Treadwell and Huguenard was killed. Somehow, for Craighead, such acts of observation were worth the risks they demanded.

As I fixated on the pine tree outside my tent, unable to sleep, my rational mind reminded me that I was in Teton Park, far from Treadwell’s and Huguenard’s “grizzly maze.” Further, I reflected that my chance of being hit by another car as I drove the road toward home far exceeded the likelihood that I’d expire in the jaws of a grizzly. My rational mind asked me what was real, what was out there right now, what was I really afraid of? What was actually likely to kill me?

SCHOOL OF NIGHTMARES

Though I was now a 52-year-old professor on research leave from Central Washington University, just three years and three months earlier, I’d been on the way to my office at the now infamous Virginia Tech when that student—to whom I’d been so near just

six months earlier—murdered 33 people, including himself. I'd just come out of the community pool where I'd been swimming laps. Messages on my cell phone alarmed me as first one and then another friend warned me away from campus. The news was sketchy at first—there'd been a shooting, a number of people had been killed, though what number still was unclear. Initial reports said two had been shot in a dorm, and now maybe as many as 20 had gone down in a classroom. By the time I became aware that there was trouble of any kind, campus was on lockdown.

I was certain the reports were exaggerated. We'd had another gunman on the bike path earlier that year, an escapee from jail who'd shot a couple of his pursuers. Campus and schools had been locked down then, too. It had been scary. He'd been in our neighborhood, but we'd been all right.

I phoned the friends back, learned what they knew, assured them I was safe, and returned to my house. My son called on his cell phone—locked into his local high school, because no one was sure what was going on, whether there might be another gunman, an accomplice, in town.

Then I spoke on the phone to more friends who were gauging the danger—should they stay locked in their campus offices or make a run for their cars?

Word had gone out that the shooter was Asian and wore a baseball cap, but authorities weren't yet sure of his identity. One former student had contacted me to say she suspected it might be Seung-Hui Cho, but I didn't want to believe it. Though I had worried that he'd be a victim of his own isolation, I'd never imagined him capable of killing others.

Was it the next day, or the day after that? I was sitting in a chair, across the table from my son and my boyfriend Jim, phone to my ear. My body once again felt heavy and then light and then beyond my control—frozen—as I registered the news of the shooter's identity and understood how near I might have come to my own demise.

Who conveyed that news? Was it my second husband Ed, who had also been Cho's teacher and would go on to direct the creative writing program in the wake of the disaster? Could it have my good friend Gyorgyi who hadn't known Cho or any of his victims but taught creative writing in our English Department and would continue to feel the impact on campus for years to come? I can't remember either the words or the voice, only that I felt just as I had in my dreams as the bear was closing in—so completely shocked and afraid that I was rendered insensible.

Cho had been a student in two of my English classes. Because he literally refused to speak when called on in class—avoiding eye contact from beneath his ball cap and sustaining a stillness so strange that I had no idea how to respond other than to move on to another student, I'd required him to come to my office. I'd asked him in during an earlier quarter by writing a request on his papers, but because he'd never responded, this time, I'd blocked his exit from the classroom to say very clearly, "If you don't come see me, you won't pass."

How, I'd wondered, could I run a discussion among ten people when one not only refused to speak but wouldn't even acknowledge the request to do so? I wondered if I could refuse him entry to the class. No, I was told, but I could offer him the option of one-on-one tutoring in lieu of his attendance. As I was trying to work this out, a colleague who observed the class, as was usual to evaluate my teaching, said he didn't think Cho's presence was disturbing the other students. "They're just treating him like a piece of furniture," he said.

That hadn't always been the case. I'd seen them reach out, but they'd given up after they'd received the same strange, stony silence that I had.

In fact, during my three 45-minute tutoring sessions with him, I got him to speak only two words: his name, Seung, which he pronounced song, and his place of origin—Korea. These two words

were spoken in stuttering whispers, as if they came at a terrible cost. Otherwise, I either spoke to him or we sat in silence as I waited, hoping he might offer something more.

I asked him, both in person and in emails, if he'd like me to walk him over to Disability Services or the Counseling Center. He communicated "no," with a shake of the head, evading eye contact from beneath his signature ball cap when I spoke to him in person, and to the email offers he didn't respond at all. Head nods and shakes also conveyed the information that he could speak English but had had trouble speaking in general.

He was remote and unreachable, but I could see that he cared about his writing, which nearly always featured powerless young people who were victims of violence. So he came in, and I talked about his stories. He certainly listened, but I couldn't tell how he was responding, except to see that he did his work, took my suggestions to revise, and turned in a portfolio that mentioned future plans for his writing. I was glad to see that, thinking it meant he had reasons to stay alive.

I had thought he might be autistic. I hadn't imagined he'd become a murderer or, as the newspapers said, go "on a rampage."

In other news stories that surfaced after the shooting, I would find out he suffered from something called selective mutism—a condition that can be caused by social phobia, in which the sufferer is capable of speech but truly cannot speak in certain circumstances.

There is much more to be said about Cho's and his instructors' and peers' experiences at Virginia Tech. One can read the Virginia Governor's report and find my small part in the story—that is, that I was among his teachers, that I inquired about him, was advised to tutor him, approached the dean's office about him but was given no information (perhaps because of privacy policies), and offered him assistance in getting counseling, all to no avail. Lucinda Roy's book *No Right to Remain Silent: The Tragedy at Virginia Tech* or the wide variety of news accounts can fill in other gaps. My concern here is not to examine the particular experience of sitting with someone

who would, six months later, become a mass murderer but simply to notice that while I was with him, I did not experience terror.

It wasn't until six months after the shooting, when I taught my first class at Central Washington University, that I sought windows where the students and I might escape if a shooter entered: we were on the first floor and would not be harmed by our falls, as were some of the students at Virginia Tech. Good. I closed and locked the classroom door. No one would interrupt us without our permission. Good. I scanned the faces before me. Were they responsive, did any appear hostile? They did not. Good.

As I taught Introduction to Literature in that small university town 2,000 miles away from Virginia Tech, I was not paralyzed so much as I was on edge, my senses working overtime, as I'd imagined they might if I were alone in a tiger-rich jungle. Here, I was telling the class, was the definition of a literary allusion. I glanced at the door. Closed and locked. The windows? If we had to use the windows to escape, as had the Virginia Tech students in Norris Hall (yes, Norris Hall, Norris like my last name, but this appears to have been coincidental), at least we wouldn't break our legs. I checked the students' faces. Bored, not hostile. Still, I felt like a target. If I'd had a holstered gun, my hand would have been on its butt.

It took considerable energy, that fear. When I imagined my life in danger, there was a surge of focus that—if it did not lead to paralysis—might inspire extraordinary action. Surely altruism is, in part, inspired by such a response, like that of the engineering professor Liviu Librescu, a 76-year-old Holocaust survivor who died trying to block Cho at the door of his classroom so his students could jump out the windows. Other times, of course, extraordinary action means the actor himself might survive.

FREE FALLS

Are we really more likely to survive, or at least enjoy our lives, if we face our fears? The climber Dean Potter faces his fear of falling by free climbing (that is, climbing without a rope). He climbs with

a parachute on his back. If he falls, he can pull the chute, and he might survive—that is, if he can control the fall well enough to avoid smashing into the rock wall on the way down and if he falls from a great enough height that the chute has time to open. The feeling of strength and control he experiences as he takes such risks make the climbs worth his while.

Adrenaline, a hormone, is an evolutionary adaptation that enables animals, including humans, to better cope with dangerous situations. It stimulates the heart rate, dilates blood vessels, and opens airways so the body is better able to perform in short bursts. The first hormone ever identified, it was synthesized in 1904 and belongs to the biogenic amine family. That family includes serotonin and histamine, among others. Serotonin is the “feel good neurotransmitter.” Many of the drugs used to combat depression and anxiety work by increasing levels of serotonin in the brain.

People can become “adrenaline junkies”—craving the sense of well-being that can result from the release of adrenaline. Such people may, for instance, drive at excessive speeds, take high pressure jobs, sky dive, climb mountains without ropes, or live among grizzlies. Reading or listening to stories of man-eaters may also cause a sympathetic release of adrenaline.

When you are in a room with Big Trouble, however, you might be as oblivious as I was when I sat with Cho. Even if you’re not oblivious, you might be adrenaline-free because (a) Big Trouble hasn’t yet arrived, and (b) if it does, you’re prepared: Deb Feele had her bear spray at hand in the Soda Butte campground, but by the time she woke up, the bear had dragged her away from the tent, and she couldn’t reach her weapon. In the end, of course, we are merely mammals at the mercy of our physical bodies, whether those bodies are sitting in classroom chairs, hurtling from rock walls, or sleeping in bags within tents. There hadn’t been a grizzly bear in my Teton Park campground for six days. That didn’t mean she wouldn’t be there on the seventh. Maybe I didn’t drive to a motel that night in Teton Park because I understood that nowhere was my safety guaranteed.

WHAT'S IN THE STARS

Greek mythology tells us the bear in the constellation Ursus Major—originally a beautiful woman, Calisto—has been transformed by Hera, Zeus's jealous wife. Later, Hera's son Arcas nearly shoots the bear, but to prevent her demise, Zeus hurls them both into the heavens, preserving them and their stories for as long as we keep telling and retelling them. Iroquois myths, on the other hand, imagine three hunters pursuing a bear, revealing a culture that sees itself in control of predation.

The Great Bear constellation, whose seven brightest stars form the Big Dipper, would have been visible as the geese raised their alarm in Teton Park if a bright moon hadn't lit up the sky. What wasn't visible that night, of course, regardless of the moon, was a real bear. In fact the only bear in my tent was the one I created. Instead of telling myself stories of predators that Greeks or Native Americans had recorded in the stars, I imagined those in which I, the protagonist, would die.

By the time I stepped out of my tent, sunlight had erased the stars. Dew moistened the picnic table, and I zipped up my jacket to keep off the chill. Mist rose from the lake, whose waters lapped against the pebbles, and my neighbors across the way—having also survived the night—stirred their campfire, moving closer to its warmth. I wondered if they'd heard the commotion of the geese. I wondered if they'd worried about grizzly bears. Perhaps they were as blissfully unaware as most drivers on the freeways—their chances of injury much greater than ours at our campsite.

The monster I had feared hadn't arrived, and the one that had set my nerves jangling didn't need to arrive, for it was the one I still carried with me. She was a storyteller who delighted in frightening me, in producing images and sounds more hair-raising than the cougar's scream. My storyteller wouldn't say to me, "You must never listen to that tape," or "you must never look at the coroner's pictures," but would play the tape over and over to keep the awful things that could occur looping continuously, as though such persistence might prevent my demise.

Even as I packed to leave bear territory, I knew the only way, to “make [myself] comfortable, safe and supreme in unfamiliar surroundings”—as Quammen said the “exterminating colonists” wished to do—was to create a different set of stories.

In a dream once, I encountered a blue bear who looked into my eyes as I lay paralyzed face-up on the ground, communicating not murderousness, not curiosity, and certainly not imagination or love as she looked at me and then left me be, but indifference, as though to say it was not yet my time, but someday, when she so chose, it would be.

At home now, I consider the crumbs from breakfast left on my tablecloth, the keys carelessly tossed aside, the print of the dog’s nose on the sliding glass door, the sound of her breathing as she stretches out at my feet: clear indications that I’m still alive. The real monster isn’t the thing feared but fear itself, of course, and that thing (imperceptible save my fear of it) that finally, inevitably, will take me—that shadowless unshape which, even at this moment, is passing me by. f

MEG DAY

TORMENT MY HEART, TRANSGENDER'D GOD

Torment my heart, transgender'd god, for yours
is the only ear that hears: place fear in my heart
where faith has grown my senses dull & reassures
my blood that it will never spill. Show every part
to every stranger's anger, surprise them with my drawers
full up of maps that lead to vacancies & chart
the distance from my pride, my core. Terror, do not depart
but nest in the hollows of my loins & keep me on all fours.
My knees, bring me to them; force my head to bow again.
Replay the murders of my kin until my mind's made new;
let Adam's bite obstruct my breath 'til I respire men
& press his rib against my throat until my lips turn blue.
You, O duo, O twin, whose likeness is kind: unwind my confidence
& noose it round your fist so I might know you in vivid
 impermanence.

MEG DAY

AUBADE

As if one is a shadow stitched to the other,
they sit, knees bent & parted, cradled in the basin
of the clawfoot, her belly to his spine. She leans
into him, her cheek resting against the blade
in his back, & watches the window above
the pull-chain warm from bath water to blue.
He hangs his head & keeps his hands under
water, covering all that might split their silhouette.

JEFF TIGCHELAAR

HE REALLY LIKES YOUR JESUS

That's a badass piece you've got there.
Me, I've got him here on my shoulder.
The cross is way down on my ankle.
He *rose*, I tell people.
No, but I was engaged to a Muslim chick once
and it's not like I was gonna get the tattoos removed –
even when *I* was Muslim too.
I studied the religion
to make her dad happy, but I wasn't ever
that Islamic, really.
We're still friends, he and I.
He's my Muslim daddy. Anyway,
they believe you can't take shit that's holy
into the bathroom. So I had to
hide my art from the dad all those years.
He still has no idea.

My real dad, though – there'd be no hiding
his tats. Not that he'd need to:
guns, tits, and ass – that's what he's got.
All over his arms and back.

My “real” dad...I don't know why I call him that.
My dirty old white man, maybe. That'd be better.

I hated him, growing up.
He was one mean bastard.

But now I get that he's just
a badass, I guess. He races these boats
down in Florida. Cigarette boats.

Did you know Florida has no basements?
Very few basements in Florida.
I don't know why
I told you that.

MAYBE YOU'VE BEEN THERE

Summer in Yellowstone: steam rises into snap-cold morning air, shards of light glint off scattered patches of mountaintop snow. Elk graze. Bison preside. Sunlight shimmers through sulfuric pools, goldenrod and aquamarine. Geysers billow white across the blue-drenched sky—a sky so expansive it dwarfs the jagged mountains below. Clouds sweep wide over the brittle landscape. This is a primal place, a wise place, a place where the earth steams and seethes with pristine indifference.

Maybe you've been there. Maybe one morning you abandoned your briefcase and your dry-cleaned clothes to flee to a place with thin, clean air and sunlight so bright it could shine right through you. And maybe as you milled around the airport in your flannel shirt and hiking boots, you allowed yourself—though you knew it was ridiculous—to feel somehow more authentic and insightful than all the pressed and pleated business travelers dashing toward their connecting gates, wheeling their luggage madly behind them.

Maybe you landed in Jackson Hole and drove your rental car through the elk-horn arches, then through a hundred miles of moonless night. At Grant Village, you fumbled in the dark with your tent stakes and sleeping bag, fell asleep hardly knowing where you were, and woke in the stillness of the early morning to the smell of pine trees and extinguished campfires. When you stepped outside your tent, the supersaturated blue of the lake left you breathless.

You shook off sleep and set out driving again, buoyant with light and space and clean, clean air. Old Faithful erupted as if it had been waiting for you, and somehow it seemed like a sign, the entire park erupting with so much promise—so much promise that you hardly noticed the two disheveled hitchhikers you passed later that

morning, thumbing for a ride and holding a sign that said “Park Employees.” You thought you had been like them once, and that even now, in your flannel and hiking boots, you were like them. You smiled at their exaggerated, pleading faces, each one trying to outdo the other’s desperation, but you didn’t think of stopping.

And it didn’t really matter whether you did or not. They had been thinking they might ride horses up at Tower-Roosevelt if they ever made it there, but it wasn’t the horses they were after. It was the sun, the vagabonding, each other. A pair of elk foraged in the pines behind them. Steam rose from thermal pools in the distance, and the river shone white in the sunlight.

It didn’t bother them when sneering children, faces sticky with junk food, pointed and laughed at them from the windows of huge RVs. They didn’t even care when the occasional car would pretend to stop, then speed away. It became a joke to them to think how complacent and sedentary the children were, how petty and unoriginal the speeding drivers were.

If you had offered them a ride, you might have noticed that the woman’s right eyebrow was pierced with a silver snake, hissing in an endless loop above her eye. She had a small birthmark on her right cheek and the tiniest wisp of a scar on her chin, and she wore a black knit cap pulled down tight over dark, unruly hair. Her name was Vanessa and she smiled at the man in exactly the way you might have wished someone would smile at you.

The man’s face was too tan and too thin, but the whiteness of his teeth inspired Vanessa’s confidence.

“You look like an Egyptian princess,” he said, and she believed him.

“My parents would kill me if they knew I was hitchhiking,” she answered, giddy.

“During the winter I teach golf in Phoenix,” he said. “They say I’m the best in town.” Then he winked in a way that was meant to imply that he was the best at other things besides golf.

“You must be in high demand,” she answered, thinking this was the way adults talked to each other—all this winking and innuendo—and she felt lucky to be a part of it.

Only a few months later she would begin to see things differently; only a few months later she would wonder what was wrong with him, working at a snack bar and spending all his time with a nineteen-year-old girl. But for now, when she wondered anything at all, she wondered about fate and how it had brought them together at the Yellowstone auto shop, where he was trying to get his transmission fixed and she was getting an estimate on repairing the rear bumper and broken taillight of the car she had borrowed from her friend Kate, whom she could hardly, at this point, call a friend.

She and Kate had driven here together from Raleigh, where they had been neighbors since fourth grade. They were familiar to each other, comfortable, which is not to say they knew each other very well. When they were younger, they had shared the delirious sleeplessness of slumber parties and had spent summers walking together—pink flip-flops slapping against the white-hot sidewalk—to the neighborhood pool. They had held each other’s wrists in Vanessa’s back yard, each taking turns spinning the other dizzily into flight. Once, Kate lost her grip and sent Vanessa tumbling. Vanessa stood up giggling and didn’t even realize her chin was bleeding until she saw the look on Kate’s face.

By high school the slumber parties had stopped, and when Vanessa went to the pool—if she went at all—she usually rode in the passenger seat of any would-be boyfriend. She and Kate nodded at each other, sometimes, in the hallways at school, but they were more likely to hear about each other’s lives from their mothers than from each other.

So after Kate had finished her first year of college and Vanessa had finished her first year of not going to college, it was Vanessa’s mother who mentioned, disapprovingly, that Kate had decided to spend the summer working at Yellowstone. Vanessa, who would

rather go anywhere than continue working at the mall and living in her old pink bedroom like a constant flicker in her parents' peripheral vision, picked up the phone to call Kate.

Vanessa announced her decision during dinner one night, and her mother pursed her lips in worry. "Honey," she said. "There are bears out there."

Her father said, "You are not going to Yellowstone."

"People get lost out there," her mother said. "There are wildfires. And also bears. It's not like it is around here."

Vanessa, who had been forbidden to pierce her eyebrow but had done it anyway, took a deep breath. "Exactly," she said.

Her father glared at her. "You are definitely not going to Yellowstone."

In the end, she discovered that there wasn't much they could do about it. Leaving turned out to be not one bold action, but a series of several small ones: filling out the employment application, placing a stamp on it, stuffing her clothes into a duffel bag, walking down the sidewalk to Kate's house, opening the car door. The day came when she found herself speeding down the road to Wyoming, the windows open and the stereo turned up so loud it hurt her ears. She loved the chaos of it, too much wind and too much noise and a sense of slamming the door on unfinished business. And maybe, like her, you have tried to imagine yourself elsewhere simply because you could no longer imagine yourself where you were. Maybe driving down an open highway in the safe company of an old friend, you once felt full of nameless possibility.

But by the time she had backed Kate's car into a post, denting the bumper and breaking the taillight, Vanessa's sense of possibility had shifted. Standing in the auto shop, faced with a hefty repair bill on the one hand and the man's alluring, white-toothed smile on the other, it suddenly seemed to Vanessa that she and Kate had never really been friends at all, and repairing the car started to seem more like a favor than an obligation.

At night, Vanessa sneaked sips of the man's beer while they played darts in the employees' pub, calling each other baby and kissing ostentatiously to celebrate every point. After midnight, they played chicken by moonlight, walking across the sulfuric, steaming landscape where the earth's crust was so thin they could plunge any minute into boiling water.

"I'm magic," said the man, drunk. "I can't be burned."

"I'm floating," laughed Vanessa, drunk. "I can't feel gravity."

Rumor had it that the previous summer, an employee had fallen in and received third degree burns up to his waist. But instead of scaring her, the story made Vanessa bold. Until then, she had imagined that if the crust broke, she would instantly be engulfed, liquefied. Knowing a fall like that could be survived gave her a certain courage.

So they drank and played chicken, then crawled into the man's single bed and woke up shivering in the morning, the one thin sheet twisted between them. On their days off they cursed the auto shop and hitchhiked their way around the park. Sometimes in between the sunlight and the immediacy of it all, Vanessa thought about her mother and father, and it scared her to think how a series of small decisions had turned out to be one bold action after all—how she *just picked up and left*, she could almost hear her mother saying. In the sunlight, with the man's smile and the crisp, clean air and the thumbing for a ride, everything seemed only tenuously perfect; she knew the ground she was standing on was flawed.

Eventually, long after you had driven by, a pickup truck stopped for the hitchhikers and didn't pull away as so many others had. The driver motioned them into the back, glancing quickly at the person in the passenger seat, who gave them both an appraising look. The look made Vanessa uneasy, though she didn't know why. It seemed too late to change her mind—too hard to explain why, after two hours, she didn't need a ride after all—so she climbed in the back. As the truck pulled forward, she faced the wind and started, with the fresh air and the rhythm of movement, to forget the look

she had seen. The man put his arm around her waist and together they scanned the passing landscape for elk or moose or buffalo. And then, as they passed more and more overlooks and the road became more and more open, it seemed to Vanessa that the truck was going faster than before, faster than it ought to, and then it kept going even faster than that. She saw that the men in the truck were laughing—that the driver glanced smugly in the rear view mirror to see her worried face—and she looked at the man who was with her, hoping for an explanation that would make things less dangerous than they seemed. But he looked as scared as she was, and before she could say anything, the driver jerked the wheel to the left, sending both of them slamming into the right side of the bed. Then he jerked the wheel to the right, and the hitchhikers scrambled to lie down and brace themselves as well as they could across the careening truck.

Scraps of blue sky alternated with flashes of the flat black rubber of the bed liner, and for a moment Vanessa felt a detached curiosity, as if a mystery had been revealed. Then the detachment faded. Tears streamed onto the black rubber where her face was pressed, and she thought of nothing but the endless swerving, the jarring slams against the side of the truck.

Later she would reason that they couldn't have meant to kill her. It had to have been their idea of a joke. *But that's how accidents happen*, she could almost hear her mother say.

When the truck finally began to slow down, Vanessa felt a new fear rising in her. Who knew what horror lay ahead? Rolling over to try to get her bearings, all she could see was the strangely placid sky.

"Stay down," the white-toothed man hissed. He was terrified, unrecognizable. And then, "We're going to have to jump before they stop."

If she hadn't been sure that the driver wanted to kill them, she probably never would have had the courage to jump out of a moving truck onto the side of the road. Lying in the truck bed, her body already bruised, she prepared to run for miles until she found safety.

“On three,” the man said. She was already in the motion of jumping when she saw all the dumbfounded tourists’ faces turning from a herd of buffalo toward the two people leaping from the back of a pickup truck. Even as she leapt, she felt herself wondering if she had imagined it all—it didn’t seem possible in that sea of ordinary, unbelieving faces. But it did happen, though even with all those witnesses, no one could agree on the color or make of the truck, which had sneaked unobtrusively away through the snarl of traffic.

Later, as she sat in the hospital having her broken arm set, she ran the events over and over in her mind. When she looked at the man now, all she could see was how scared he had looked in the truck, how withered and small.

That night they went to the employees’ pub because they always went to the employees’ pub. “You should have seen the look on her face,” he said to the people lining up to sign her cast. Everyone at the pub laughed in a way they almost had to, because most of them also spent their days off thumbing for rides and holding signs that read “Park Employee.” She reminded him that he was the one who decided they should leap out of the truck, rolling into a field and startling a herd of buffalo in front of probably fifty—no, more like a hundred—gawking tourists, but he pretended not to hear her.

“You should have seen her face,” he repeated, laughing and shaking his head.

After the crowd had faded, Kate approached her. “You’re all right,” Kate asked flatly, which made Vanessa start to cry because even though everyone wanted the story, no one but Kate really cared which way it ended. She wanted to thank her, to apologize, but before she could say anything, Kate just walked away.

As Vanessa crossed the parking lot later that night, the car with the broken taillight caught her off guard. She lay awake most of the night, colder than usual and bruised. The summer would be ending soon, and she saw herself then as she knew Kate must have seen her.

By this time you did not remember the hitchhikers at all, but if you had, you would have remembered Vanessa as a blond and the

man as much, much younger than he actually was. Back in Raleigh, Vanessa's mother was sitting in her daughter's bedroom for hours at a time, crying over baby pictures, and her father was taking longer and longer drives to no place in particular. They would have bailed her out of this mess—of course they would have—but if she had called them, she would have been a different kind of person from the person she wanted to be. If you've been there—and surely you have, if not exactly there, then someplace similar—you know that the same small steps that made it so easy for Vanessa to leave home also made it impossible for her to go back.

It seemed inevitable, then, that she would move to Phoenix at the end of the summer; inevitable, too, that she would discover that the man did not teach golf, but rather worked at a golf course snack bar not unlike the snack bar where he had worked at Yellowstone. Inevitable that on Vanessa's night off from the restaurant, they would sit on the sagging couch in the flicker of the television, drinking beer, and Vanessa would think back to her summer in Yellowstone, wondering how she had managed to reduce her wide open life to something so small and hard.

But what if all the other things that seem inevitable here are not? Vanessa could, of course, stay with the man in whatever life he wanted to define for her, scrounging to pay the bills but passing up promotions so he wouldn't feel emasculated. Maybe having his child, his children. Staying forever. Staying until he left. Staying until he told her to leave.

She knew this was what Kate would have expected her to do, that Kate had seen it coming long before she did, and that Kate was right. Vanessa cowered in the stale, small air of the stucco cottage where the man lived, surrounded by dusted-up weeds and old tires piling up in the yard outside. In the afternoons, she waited for the bus under a blue desert sky that never noticed her. At night, she made her way home under the icy pinpricks of a million distant stars. The desert stretched in every direction, taunting her with its infinite horizons.

Vanessa's co-workers were drinkers, partiers, people who liked to talk about their own drinking and partying, people who cultivated the bravado of their own failures. In them, Vanessa recognized what the man she was living with must have been like twenty years earlier. They made her claustrophobic, like the stale, small air of the place where she lived. Claustrophobic, like her suspicion that the life she had was probably the life she deserved.

All of her co-workers seemed the same except for the stuck-up waitress that everyone hated, the one biting her nails and reading textbooks on her break, the one who refused to joke with the rest of them, who bunched up her apron and bolted for the door as soon as her shift was over, never even saying good-bye. She worked the hardest and got the biggest tips and never shared them and wasn't afraid to admit it. She reminded Vanessa of Kate—efficient, cold, mature in a way that both annoyed and intimidated Vanessa—but she softened like warm ice cream whenever children came into the restaurant. Vanessa sometimes caught her pulling pictures from her wallet to show the customers.

Vanessa cringed at the man's arrival every night before closing, his embarrassing intimacy with her, the gaunt cheekbones and sagging muscle tone that betrayed his age to everyone, she thought, except himself. She cringed at the way he hinted to everyone that he was a golf instructor, and at the way it was obvious no one cared. It had never occurred to Vanessa not to care, and now she felt foolish, duped. He stayed out drinking with her co-workers long after Vanessa herself had gone home to bed.

And that was how things went, night after night, until finally the stuck-up waitress, who had never said anything more to Vanessa than *table 15's looking for you*, stopped biting her nails long enough to say, with no apology or emotion, "Just so you know, it'll be easier to leave before you have kids. In fact, it's so easy I don't know why you haven't done it yet." And that was enough.

Now, years later, Vanessa still has a longing for big places, primal places, places that, by making you feel small, lift a burden from you.

Sometimes she puts on her flannel and hiking boots and goes to find them, though she will never again have that sense of adventure, that sense of suspended responsibility, that came so easily with youth and poverty and, as she says now to her mother when she visits, *idiocy*.

Maybe, sometimes, you've felt triumphant because you've made it this far in spite of everything and in spite of yourself. And maybe—see her now, older but not old—this is how Vanessa feels as she stands on top of a towering spire somewhere dry and red and remote and glorious, spreading her arms wide to a world that hasn't let go of her.

Maybe, like her, you've been amazed that this life of yours is a good one, better than most and better than you thought. Maybe you have seen places too beautiful for breath—crystal pools bubbling, geysers spraying, sunlight everywhere. Or city lights shimmering against a black, black sky. Or cool green islands suspended in a velvet-blue ocean. And maybe you have looked around in wonder, because of all the places to be in the world, you are—miraculously—here. **f**

ANGIE MACRI

ACRE IN ROWS

To touch
the progress from green past orange to red,
I take you to the straw-mulched acre.

The seeds are born
on berries' skins.

To touch
the runners of the cultivated rows,
I kneel with you and lift strings to plant again.

The seeds are sand
on fingerprint whorls.

To touch
the swollen rose imbued in the flesh,
I break fruit from stalks, pulling with you
from velvet fields and silver.

RIDDLED WITH NAMES

For he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.

—Psalms 107:9

Once, on a flight from Texas to Florida, the man beside you poured Johnny Walker Black into the airline's plastic cup. He grinned, told you he was a Bible smuggler, long ago,

in Austria. *I was a preacher too*, he'd said,
A damn good preacher. Once, in Texas, you gave

yourself an assignment: if possible, watch the man you think you love get sozzled. He'll stay that way for three days. He'll take an apple, a knife, his fingers will shake but he'll go slow, not cutting apart but into the apple, wedge by wedge disappearing on the pink

plate of his tongue. You will stand apart from him, thinking, *LOVE, like VINACEOUS, could describe the shade of a mushroom cap.* God's sisters wash the morning with bergamot, wheat, hollyhock. On the flight from Texas to Florida, the man's thick elbow trespasses your rib. He'd said, *You only get*

burned once. Turning close, *And then,* his hand springing open near your cheek, *Fuck 'em.* Now he sleeps. You wonder if your assignment needed an adjective: how about rip-roaring? Or an adverb,

technically, that veritable activity
of -ly, -ly, -ly, but you've fudged this more than once and,

after consideration, who was it that said the road
to hell is paved with adverbs? You'd like to think all those good
things find their way into our bird-open
mouths. God knows pain, turbulent as the long sky, stricken
with names—or, Lord-a-mercy,
ought it be *riddled*? This, after all,

is your year to be alone, names gone
wandering, modifiers plain gone. It was Stephen King,
you remember, the luggage carousel burping out another
purple suitcase. God knows you and everyone else, hell-bent
on adverbs. In Florida,
a Loggerhead Turtle has lain, recklessly,

three dozen eggs under the sand marked with yellow
flags. Come May, folks on the shore keep all lights off
at night since the hatchlings scuttle
like mad for any beam they think
might be the moon, which will lead them,
some say, without fail, to the sea.

SUSANNA CHILDRESS

SAINT GABRIEL

Here they brought thousands
of the hurricane's dead. Even the dogs
knew to stay away, low rumble in their throats,

September begun with a lurch
and a dream. My husband teaches
sixth graders, cannot explain why

here, town of the archangel, bodies
keep coming, their second
deaths: his students have started school

with *Call of the Wild*, and where in the past
girls blanched and resisted the chapters
of blood and rage, boys triumphing

with their own pubescent gestures—
they don't say a thing, quieter, he says,
in general, which, for middle schoolers, is more

a sickness than a gift. The warehouse
on the edge of town is full of drowned bodies
waiting again for water. My husband

comes home with a chestful of certain defeat,
certain joy, pulls my wrists to the pulsing points
in his neck: today on the portico he came upon

a child talking into her hands, the way
an old woman might, recalling
secrets. The girl was practicing

her vocabulary, chanting words of the frontier
into her fingers as though her body
would hold them, call them forth

for the moments that have no words, those
she cannot name, skittering in and out of the longest
vowels, like a fierce angel, setting them free.

SUSANNA CHILDRESS

UNDER THIS ROOF

My brother
has come to live with us
and how could we know
how deliberate
his hands
would be: at the sink,
thawing beans
stringy from too hot a June,
smoothing hairs
that whisper about
my sons' ears, locking the door
against the snow. His hands
move slow as a dream, the kind
where no one watches out
for you as you slip over
the edge and sprawl
wordlessly down mountains
of air or time or floors
of people doing ordinary things
like switching on a lamp
or thumbing coins
in a pocket or typing out
a dissertation on the circus
which is the only thing my brother
feels proud about doing
in his whole holy life
—and here he is, living
in our basement

and looking at me
over waffles
as though I have given him
something
to be grateful for.

JOELLEN CRAFT

THE HORSE

The wound takes up the horse's neck,
wets his white hide red, his huge face
on the girl's knee.
She's a stump in the snow field.
He's a drift whose heart broke. The cougar
long slunk back to warmth.

When he starts to rise she's
surprised as he is.
His front legs scabble,
his neck and head pump up and down,
strain at the ground, the trees, until
with a quiver his hind legs
shoulder the bulk—his blood still
shrinks snow where he lay.

Could he melt the lake's ice?
Walk, she says, Come on, boy.
From the truck her brothers watch,
holding their steel.

Make this heat with me,
make the red that eats
winter's skin. I'll be
any tool you can use.

STRUCK

I've been looking back, behind us, at the dark road already traveled, so by the time my husband, Michael, cries out—the dull thump of a body resounding against the fender—and I turn to face forward, all I can see is cyclone of limb and motion, thrown clutches of fur flying like dandelion fluff in the headlights.

“What did we hit?”

Michael is already pulling the van to the side of the highway, gravel crunching, then the incline of bank. We come to rest at a slant. The northern New Mexico sky brims with starlight while the road remains empty, the desert unfurling around us, broken only by butte and juniper. It is four in the morning on a Saturday in March. Our sons, Aidan, six, and Kellen, four, sit awake in the backseat, having been roused from their sleep only thirty minutes ago for the six hundred mile drive home.

“A coyote,” Michael responds, his hands tight on the wheel.

*

A week earlier we had traveled south from our home in Logan, Utah, in search of sun and ground without snow. It took until New Mexico to find that. The narrow cabin we rented sat on the Rio Chama, a major tributary of the Rio Grande, where, 10,000 years ago, camels and woolly mammoths bent their necks to drink. Cottonwoods and willows closest to the water were tinged with greens and reds and yellows, tiny buds curled and fisted. In the morning the boys' voices would drift down like silt from their bed in the loft above us. We slept on the edge of spring.

Our second morning at the cabin, Aidan found a brochure for Christ in the Desert, a nearby monastery built decades earlier at the end of a canyon cut by the Rio Chama. It was reachable only via a thirteen mile dirt road, most of which was impassable in winter. The cover of the pamphlet showed the sanctuary, where dark vigas wove across the ceiling and a wooden crucifix carved with the elemental simplicity of the desert itself hung on the wall. Aidan stared at the figure on the cross, then out the windows to the still-bare orchard and sky, then back to the pamphlet.

“What’s this guy doing?” he asked Michael.

“Oh, he’s exercising.”

*

The wheels of our silver van have only just halted, but I have not been still. Deceleration has hurled me backwards in time so that the slower we move through the desert the faster I travel the past.

I am standing in my living room in front of the picture window, the Bear Mountains rising to the east, and my mother tells me over the phone that my father and uncle have been in an accident in the Alaska wilderness and only my father has made it out: a raft down the Alatna River, his dead brother strapped down alongside dry bags, spring waters threatening to overturn them again.

I am walking arm in arm with Michael at two in the morning. Rural Idaho. We head toward a cluster of lights, a covey of mobile homes, where we knock on every door, trying to find the owners of the dog we have just run over. We raise our hands to the last door, perverse missionaries dressed in blue jeans whose only message is how quickly, a flash of fur, it can all change.

I am laying on the carpet of our just-painted nursery, four months pregnant, Aidan’s movements still unfamiliar and new. Days earlier, our puppy, Krishna, under a house-sitter’s watch, had been struck by a semi-truck. Pale mountain light streams through the double-hung window, and I am wracked by the image of her

soft, black body being scraped from the asphalt by a city worker and thrown into the dump to conceal any negligence.

I am holding Michael on our bed as he grieves his father's death. He howls at the rude orphaning and mourns the father he never had, as well as the one he did. The clock beside the bed ushers us ever-forward, and I knock it to the floor for its unwillingness to pause.

All these bodies pile before me, gather on the floor of the van, covering the gray mats and pressing against my door. But Aidan is crying in the backseat, the wheels of the van stopped, fur settled, stars above.

"You have to be strong," Michael says.

I reach to unbuckle my seatbelt, feel the strap release and return to its slot above my head. If only grief could be so easily stowed. As I move to the backseat to console the boys, a spark of anger kindles in my belly. A familiar response to a world that refuses to follow the route I lay out each morning

*

Our first morning in the cabin I went running. My route took me up a mesa just behind our cabin, where I could see the Rio Chama snaking below at the foot of the mesa. Georgia O'Keeffe's Cerro Pedernal rose to the south, the flat-topped butte that stands ten thousand feet high and serves as a point of reference for miles around. God told O'Keeffe she could have the mountain if she painted it enough. Its steep sides appear in most of her New Mexico landscapes, her signature.

To get in five miles, I ran the loop on top of the mesa twice. At six thousand feet, the air was even thinner than the already distilled air of home, keeping me in my body as I ran, reminding me of basic needs. Several adobe houses dotted the loop, but both my road and the evidence of civilization ended at the fence marking the six thousand acres of public land that stretched between me and

O’Keeffe’s Pedernal. Five hundred feet from the barbed wire fence a small butte, jugged and uneven, erupted from the ground. Aside from the far off mountains and the few houses nearby, it was the only vertical feature in the landscape.

Back at the cabin after my first run, I told Michael about the butte, and he promptly set off to hike it. That morning he saw two coyotes wandering an arroyo, heading home after a long night of prowling. He told the boys about the coyote as soon as he returned, eager for them to see an animal that had long been sacred in our family.

*

Once when Aidan was two, he had three yellow balloons in the car with him. When I opened the door, the trio of balloons escaped from his hand and followed the winds up Green Canyon until they were but dots in the sky. Four years later, he still cries for those balloons, will say he can’t stop thinking about them when he is trying to go to sleep. It seems he’s collapsed his suffering into that one moment, into that single memory of those latex bodies floating farther and farther beyond his reach, disappearing into vastness. No longer filled with helium, they ferry all that he can’t explain.

I would have told Aidan that the man in the picture was exercising as well. Anything else would have seemed too much.

*

The entire week we stayed in the cabin by the Rio Chama, Michael and Aidan maintained a morning ritual of setting out after I returned from my run to hike the public lands looking for coyote. Aidan had never seen a coyote in the natural world, only the ones in the zoo. At the age of two, Michael had given him a stuffed coyote and told Aidan that the animal would keep him safe at night. He never slept without it. Every day of our vacation, he awoke with the

word “coyote” on his lips. “Will we see one today, Daddy?” he would ask. “Will we?”

They would pack their breakfast and some hot tea, a pair of binoculars and extra hats, and leave just as the sun reached the mesa top. Before seven in the morning, they would hike farther than Aidan had ever hiked before, climbing to the top of the butte, on hands and knees against the slope, and scan the flat desert. In silence, not moving, tea cooling, they’d watch the scrub for a flash of silver, listen for the rustle of branches.

They never saw one.

*

Kellen, the four-year-old, is looking out the window of the van into the New Mexico darkness. He doesn’t cry. Instead, he says, “Now the coyote is back in the stars and when we go back to the stars we can visit him.” This is the story Michael and I have created to explain death, though our sons have little immediate experience with that kind of loss. Back to the stars we tell them, those pinpricks of light beautiful and eternal, yet sufficiently distant. Perhaps Kellen is choosing the very star, plotting the coyote’s journey from road to sky. Two years younger than Aidan, death is even more abstract for him. His stories still end happily ever after, the cocoon not yet cracked.

Aidan, though, is inconsolable. I hold him against my body as he cries and tell him that I am sorry, over and over again. I rub his hands, his legs, stroke his hair, his cheek, frustrated that I cannot start the day again, choose a different road, leave an hour later. Michael turns the engine off, though the headlights still shoot into the darkness, twin moons. Thousands of miles of scrub brush surround us. Since leaving the cabin we have not seen another car, another person, another animal. An empty sea of blackness and the coyote jumps in front of our van?

“I have been waiting and waiting to see one,” Aidan sobs, “waiting and waiting.”

And this, I think, is the coyote he is given.

*

As I ran the mesa top on the third morning of our vacation, the morning we were to drive to the Christ in the Desert monastery, I thought about how we might explain the crucifixion to the boys. A front had moved in overnight, and the wind blew through my mittens. The day before, we had hiked in the Carson National Forest while it snowed on us, large white flakes that caught in our hair and frosted our cheeks. Michael built a fire under some trees where we traded apple slices and cheese sandwiches between gloved hands. Today, it wasn't snowing, but the feeling of spring had vanished, the air thinner and colder, shorn of warmth.

Michael was raised Catholic, and I attended Catholic school for five years. While Michael has never recovered from the steady diet of martyred saints and bloody crucifixions he was fed as a child, I still sleep with the aborted fetuses the nuns showed in religion class throughout eighth grade. The world, we thought, was bloody enough for our boys without images of Christ on the cross. Now, though, on the day they would stand beneath a body nailed to a tree, we would need to come up with something other than calisthenics as a means of explanation.

Turning toward home, an unleashed dog yipping at my feet, on a mesa that once belonged to the Pueblo People but was retaken by the Spanish through the decimation of entire clans in the name of God, the north wind screaming across the desert with no buffer, no hope, no sanctuary in sight, and the broad New Mexico sky, leaden and grey as an anvil above my head, the truth offered little consolation. We kill what we fear, I thought, but that seemed too easy, for we kill what we love as well. Fat flakes of snow started to fall, melting as they hit my cheeks. I headed for home.

*

Last summer we lived in Spain for two months in a cortijo on an organic farm in the Andalucian countryside. Aidan had just turned six, just completed the first grade. In the mornings, when it was still too chilly to play outside, I sat him at the kitchen table to write stories. He knew that both Michael and I told stories for a living, knew that when we were bent over our journals in the morning-dark hours he should wait quietly on the couch. That summer, he kept his stories in a red folder, then put them on the bookshelf in the room he shared with his brother. Sometimes he would take out the folder and read the stories to Kellen.

One day I had
a coyote. I got
him from the
mountains called
Green Canyon
and when it was
night the coyote
started to howl.
My mom and dad
were mad at the
coyote. Then the
coyote went to
sleep. The end.

Every story he wrote those two months in Spain, every story he wrote for the rest of the summer, featured coyotes. No longer just the animals that chased the bad dreams away at night, they'd entered his days, populated his imaginative play, and spoke and moved in his fictions.

*

We remain in the van, only minutes have passed, and I keep repeating how sorry I am. All of a sudden, the night explodes in reds, blues, and whites, a calliope of color that likely sends any creature, the mother's pup maybe, the coyote's mate, running from the roadside and deeper into the desert, further from the site of witness. Lights circle the ceiling of the van and create a vortex above our heads.

"The police," Michael says.

I look back and see the cruiser, watch the door open. The officer seems to have emerged from the night itself. Michael opens the front door and walks toward the whirling lights. Moments earlier he had asked me if I thought we should go back, find the coyote, make sure he died. I had said no, that the animal was surely dead, but now I half expect Michael to keep on walking, past the police officer, past the circus of color, and into the darkness from which we have come, back to the spot, the place that it happened, to assure himself, I suppose, that this is not some dream.

"I know the colors of a police," Kellen chatters, "Red, blue, and yellow."

"We have been waiting and waiting," Aidan cries.

I sit between them, rubbing their legs.

When Michael returns to the car, he tells us the police officer wanted to reassure us that there were thousands of coyotes out there. This death, the officer suggested, was nothing. Colors flash across Michael's face but leave his eyes in shadow. We both turn toward the emptiness around the van, hoping, I suppose, to see a flock of silver-furred coyotes emerge from the pinion pine. When the police cruiser leaves, he takes his color with him, returning us to blackness. I try to imagine a job, a world, a state of mind in which death can be so easily filed.

*

By the time I returned from my run to our cabin, my gloved hands throbbing with the cold, I had settled on Star Wars to explain the cross. How Obi Wan Kenobi sacrifices himself when he allows Darth Vader to cut him down so that Luke, Leia, and Han can escape. Jesus was sort of like that.

But first we had to explain who Jesus was. We went with Baby Jesus and the manger, an image they understood from Christmas displays. Then we had him grow up and die. Nailed to a cross. Just like Obi Wan. That was what we told them while driving the thirteen miles of dirt road to the monastery.

“Baby Jesus died?” Kellen asked.

“He wasn’t a baby when he died,” Michael reassured.

The Rio Chama paralleled us as we drove, winking in and out of juniper stands. Red rock lined the canyon, the red found in Georgia O’Keeffe’s paintings, color ground from marrow. It was warmer outside, though still windy, and Michael drove slowly past the tumbling water, avoiding the potholes left by freezing mud.

“People use a cross to remind them to love each other and to be kind,” I said. “Just like Obi Wan wanted Luke to remember to do good things.” I could feel my face wrinkle in displeasure by the weakness of the comparison. Obi Wan doesn’t say anything about doing good things, unless you count his lecture on being wary of the dark side. But I could tell from the silence in the backseat that the connection was at least plausible enough for the two of them. Outside a bluebird flashed against the dark green.

The first time Aidan saw Star Wars, only a few months earlier, Obi Wan’s death upset him. We explained how much a sacrifice hurt, that it wasn’t a sacrifice if your heart didn’t cry. Still Aidan’s eyes watered as Luke screamed for Obi Wan. When the movie was over, he said he didn’t want to see it again.

*

At the moment we hit the coyote, Jai Uttal had been chanting “He Ma Durga” on the stereo. His deep voice continues long after Michael turns off the engine and the police officer arrives and leaves, filling my head, so that I find myself comforting my son to a mantra as old as the juniper around me. Jai Uttal sings kirtan, a form of Hindu chant that dates back to the thirteenth century. The mantras repeated in kirtan are meant to evoke the divine. Roughly translated, the Sanskrit reassures the Great Mother abides. “He Ma Durga” is a lullaby in our house. We tell Aidan and Kellen it is a song about mothers, a song to keep them safe.

The coyote is not safe. He is dead. Or she. And we have killed it. Michael will say later that he hesitated only a moment before telling Aidan the truth.

“What did we hit?”

“A deer, I mean a skunk, a rabbit.”

“What did we hit?”

“A branch, the side of the road, the limits of innocence.”

“What did we hit?”

“The past, the Great Mother, a toad that was already dead.”

“What did we hit?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Everything”

“What did we hit?”

*

Ten minutes after the police officer leaves us, we are on the road again, heading north to home, the coyote’s body further and further behind. Aidan and Kellen sleep; Michael and I sit in the front, dark still around us, the music off. Aidan sleeps with two coyotes every night, the one Michael gave him and a baby that came along later. He holds one now in the backseat of a silver van with coyote blood and fur on its bumper. I hate a universe that offers us a dead coyote.

Near a tiny town on the border of New Mexico, Aidan wakes and throws up. Then he starts to cry. After we stop on the side of the road to clean his pajamas and booster seat, we turn Jai Uttal back on. In his deep voice, he assures us that the Great Mother still abides, yet I now resist the familiar chant, even as I wonder what other choice exists.

“It’s the worst thing that could have happened,” Michael whispers to me, thinking, I am sure, that it seems impossible we have hit the very animal Aidan has been waiting to see. We are climbing out of the desert into tree-covered mountains. Snow has returned, no scrub jays, no bluebirds. The stars fade with dawn.

“No,” I reassure, “it’s not.” And I think about how Michael didn’t even have a chance to brake, that it happened so fast. A slower animal, more time to respond, and Michael would have swerved, sending us into a ditch, a guardrail, out of control. In the silver speed of his flight, his brilliant beauty, the coyote kept us safe. That’s what I want to believe, anyway, that such grace is possible. I remember a day earlier in the year when Aidan came home from school telling us about a classroom visitor, a Native American, who was saved by a deer. He and his family had been driving on a mountain road when their car hit an icy patch and started off the edge. At that moment a deer jumped out from the woods and threw its body into the path of their car, saving them from plunging off the cliff.

“The coyote chose you,” Michael says to Aidan when we reach the Utah border, and Aidan is crying again. “He picked us.”

Aidan listens hard. Nods his head. I, too, am listening.

Michael tells Aidan that when we get home we will have a ceremony for the coyote and bury a box of our precious treasures that the coyote can take with him on his way to the stars.

*

We sat under the cross, looking up at the hanged form.

“Is that the baby Jesus?” Kellen asked, and I nodded.

As crucifixes go, the one at the Christ in the Desert Monastery is Zen-like in its simplicity, mirroring the chapel itself as well as the surrounding land. Designed by George Nakashima, a Japanese-American wood worker and architect, the sanctuary was praised by Thomas Merton as the most perfect chapel he had ever visited. Tall, rectangular windows framed the clear desert light, so that the canyon walls hung like paintings against the blue sky. We sat on wooden pews, shaped, I imagined, by Nakashima’s lathe. An altar made from a slab of canyon rock stood before us. We were the only ones there.

I could hear the wind and waited for the boys to say something about the blood, the holes in his hands, the thorns that pierced his forehead. They were more interested in lighting candles at the small altars.

“Can we make a wish?” Aidan asked.

Michael stood to dig for change in his pocket to pay for candles to light.

As Aidan lit his candle, I looked back at the crucifix glowing in the sun.

The blood came from wounds I could see, rivers of red as dark as the canyon walls. It ran from his forehead and cheeks, chest and arms. On his head, a crown of thorns spiked out in all directions. In the way he held his body against the cross, he didn’t look dead, even as the blood ran between his toes. He might have stepped from the wall to walk among us. It was clear the artist wanted the viewer to feel both the possibility of life and death in one body.

Standing in the sanctuary, I was struck by how well Nakashima understood paradoxes, those of faith but also those of materials, land, and light. Because of the large windows, the rock and wood, it was hard to tell whether you were inside or outside. Nakashima knew deserts, their reach, their complexity, the way you are both lost and found in such vastness. During World War II he had been

interred in a desert camp not far from our house in Utah. Guarded by his fellow citizens, he learned his craft and dedicated his work each day to the divine. Sitting in the chapel, on pews planed by his hands, such distinctions—inside or out, ordinary or divine, lost or found, living or dead—didn't seem to matter; it all just was.

*

In Moab, Utah, we pull into the parking lot of a grocery store to inspect the van in full daylight. The boys remain in their car seats while Michael and I take a look. The bumper hangs close enough to the ground that Michael heads inside to buy some wire to twine the van's bumper to the undercarriage so it won't drag should it become even looser as we drive. As Michael secures the bumper with wire, I try not to notice the tufts of fur lodged in the cracks of plastic. The worst damage is on the driver's side. The coyote almost made it—twelve more inches and he would have cleared the van. Shaking our heads, Michael and I get back in the car and tell the boys to buckle up. We still have hours to go.

I expect the snow to be deep upon our return, but a spring thaw in northern Utah has temperatures hovering around 50 degrees, even at 5:00 when we pull into the driveway, over 600 miles from where we'd been when we woke up. The van has barely halted before the boys run inside to see their toys they had not taken. When Michael and I begin unloading the car, I make sure not to walk past the bumper.

I have only made two trips into the house when Aidan comes outside holding a folded packing box. He has gotten into the closet under the stairs, a place he is not supposed to go, and pulled out one of our saved moving boxes.

"Aidan," I say, exasperated. "We haven't been home five minutes and you're getting into things you know you aren't supposed to."

Tears gather in his already red eyes, lips quivering. My son stands there on the driveway, folded box in hand, and says, “I got it for the coyote, so we can bury things for his trip back to the stars.”

Later that night, the van in the garage and the boys in their beds, as Michael cries for the first time that day, darkness once again surrounding us, in our bed, the same place he cried for the loss of his father, I will wonder aloud if, through the coyote, we have been given the chance to teach Aidan how to release the balloons. Maybe it was a gift, I will say, not knowing if I fully believe that, no longer knowing what to believe, all these stories seeming like such poor props, flimsy, shoddy, thin. But when I think of Aidan with that empty box in his hands, I can’t help but want to fill it with something.

*

On the last night of our vacation, tucked safely in our cabin, the Rio Chama shushing past, we lay together on the two futons in the loft, the branches outside the window clicking together in the dark. Michael lay with Aidan, while I rubbed Kellen’s legs. We were sad to be going home, back to the snow and cold, away from running water and the first green spears of crocus.

“In the middle of the night,” Michael said, “we will carry you to the car. When you wake up, we’ll be driving.”

“Will it be dark?” Aidan asked.

“Yes. We’ll be driving under the stars.”

It would feel like magic we told them.

Michael began a bedtime story as he always did, “Once upon a time a long time ago, there were two boys named Aidan and Kellen.”

Both boys yawned, as if on cue, and Kellen moved closer to me under the covers.

In this story, Aidan turned into a coyote while Kellen turned into a cat. Together they got into all sorts of trouble, eluding a frantic farmer and saving some baby wolves. It was the kind of story

Michael told every night, a tale of rescue and safety, one to empower them. Toward the end of the tale, Michael asked the boys if, within that world, they wanted to remain a coyote and kitty or if they wanted to be turned back into boys. Kellen wanted to turn back into a boy.

“I want to stay a coyote,” Aidan said, “and never come back.”

*

That night, after Michael had cried for the dead coyote and fallen asleep, I reached for a book that he had given me months before, Jack Kornfield’s *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace*. I had never cracked the book, never even read the back cover. But I took it up now. I was reaching, I knew, for meaning in what I felt was a completely meaningless event, even as I understood the futility of my search. I opened the book anyway, randomly, to the words of Sufi master Pir Vilayat Khan.

You must overcome any bitterness
that may have come because you
were not up to the magnitude of
pain entrusted to you. Like the
mother of the world who carries
the pain of the world in her
heart, you are sharing in a certain
measure of that cosmic pain, and
you are called upon to meet it in
joy instead of self-pity.

I wanted the words to mean something, to build a bridge between the person I was that morning and the one I was as I lay in bed next to my grief-stricken husband, our van in the garage with a coyote-shaped dent, the one without a story that made any sense. I closed the book, got up, and went to check on Aidan. He was asleep,

holding his coyote. I bent to kiss him good night, nesting the stuffed animal deeper into his arms. Michael dug a hole in our backyard the next morning, and we each found something to bury for the coyote. Michael chose a picture of our puppy Krishna, the one killed by the semi-truck; Kellen, a toy; I wrote a note; and Aidan gave the wooden coyote keychain we had bought him in Yellowstone the fall before. He had written the coyote a note as well, a letter really, on the inside of a card where he had drawn a coyote howling to the sky. “Dear Coyote, I’m sorry that you died,” he wrote. “I always loved coyotes.” When I had asked him if he wanted to write anything else, he had added, “You were my favorite.”

As we buried the box of treasures and scooped cold dirt into the hole, the thin light of early spring shone through the mountain ash overhead. A few clouds gathered on the Bear Mountains behind us. Aidan made a cross out of two small sticks. “To remind us to love.” Kirtan played from the speakers, the repetition of the sacred winding through the branches and joining the clouds.

“What were your favorite parts of our vacation?” I asked Aidan later that day while we ate lunch. I expected him to name building fires, eating marshmallow treats, or sleeping in the loft.

“The coyote and the hot tub,” he replied. Both experiences—witnessing the death of a coyote and splashing with his brother in our own private pool—were the same, opposites bound into a story that didn’t deny suffering but rather held it alongside joy, a story of his own making.

*

The van has grown cold, even though the heat is cranked to high. I pull my legs to my body for warmth and consider searching the backseat for a coat or blanket. We are driving too fast, though, to make any movement.

The road must curve sharply—though I can’t see out the window at all—because my shoulders pitch toward the door, and I knock my head against the glass.

For a while, we drive in silence.

“Where are we?” I ask. “Are you still following 84 across the border?”

Coyote nods, or maybe he is just moving in time to the kirtan. He won’t meet my eyes.

I notice blood along his jowls and down the side of his neck, but the wound appears painted, fixed. Every now and then, he adjusts the lap belt so that it hits below the gash on his leg, similarly painted. Then we are climbing a hill, a steep incline. In fact, we seem to be going straight up.

“Are we leaving the desert?” I ask.

Coyote shakes his head and hunches closer to the steering wheel. The accelerator must be to the floor. He begins to pant, as though it is in part by breath that he urges the van forward, carrying it up the hill. We climb, my head thrown back against the seat, gravity pulling my organs, my flesh, pressing me flat. The speedometer needle has snapped, the pace furious. The window glass near my cheek hums, and the floor mats vibrate the soles of my feet.

Outside, nothing, just blackness.

“I think we should pull over,” I say. “Now.”

“Just wait,” he says, his nose reaching almost to the windshield.

The wheels don’t seem to be touching the ground anymore. I can’t hear the rhythmic contact of rubber and pavement. In fact, I can’t hear anything, no wind, no trees, only the sense of flying through the darkness under a power not my own. “We’re getting close,” Coyote yells. The exertion has opened his wounds, and blood now runs down his forelegs onto his paws. Up, up, we go.

With one final hurtling movement, we reach the top of the incline and the van spins out across a plain of rock. Far below, the sea of juniper and cactus rolls toward the horizon. We are stopped, and sound returns, taking the place of speed. Thousands of coyotes surround us, all with their heads cocked back, howling at the moon, high atop Georgia O’Keeffe’s Pedernal.

I step from the car under a ceiling of stars; noise vibrates against my skin. The sky is close overhead. A pause, silence, then the flock of coyotes rushes down the side of the mesa. I run with them. If I could stop I would howl at the madness of it all, but I can't stop, won't, just keep running faster and faster. Coyote takes the lead. I can see the silver of his fur flash under the moon as we run for the horizon, delirious with speed, lungs and heart open and laughing. The moon is setting, slipping beneath the desert's edge, white and shining. We run toward it, one body moving, flying through the air. When we leap for the light, we cleave the sky in two. f

CAITLIN SCARANO

DEAD DOG DONE

When that old dog drug itself
across our autumn path.
Felt it like a man's
breath coating my face.
We've been looking for a dog, but not
a damaged dog, not a near dead dog.
You can't fix the broken with a broken.

I'm running
down the ditch. Draping night
across my shoulders. I'm naked
except for the clothes and the cry.
Begging dog to look me in the eye. You
shameful, you bowlegged, matted surly.

When that dog dug itself out of our bed,
barked at the ghost of ourselves we could
not see. What did you expect? Busy
turning keys between your teeth, purled
with burrow and maple and gleam.
Naw. I got real things to do, real shoes
to sew to real feet.

When that dog didn't drip or bowl,
why didn't you just leave me
on the nightroad crawl and howl home?

CAITLIN SCARANO

PILLOW

My kid sister is not nailed to a mattress.
Her boyfriend, not crushing the softness of her
freckled face with a pillow. In this one, we're children
locked in our grandparents' house. She is not
three months pregnant, choking on the pillow
that tastes of unwashed hair. Nor will she ever be,
in this dream. I have something urgent
to say to her. But we are bisque doll versions
of ourselves. Mouths and limbs fixed. Full of glue
and sawdust, I cannot articulate the need.

The end of the story is not undone, hollow
braided rope. It just hasn't happened. She's sleeping.

Her face milky and unmarked. No pillow,
no unborn baby, no addled boyfriend

jostling the sawdust from where the threads
have come undone in her. In this dream,

I close the door to the room she is in. I curl up
on the hardwood hallway floor and guard her

from what approaches stealthily—our grandfather,
ghosts circling the high-vaulted ceiling, wolves licking

the edges of the backdoor. In this one,
I let her lie.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION THAT MAY BE IMPORTANT

I moved into a room in an apartment I found online and helped the pop star move out, though I didn't know she was a pop star at the time. She wasn't anybody to me except a girl with expensive furniture and multicolored rain boots, though it wasn't raining. Her mother was there, too; she was very Jewish. The whole interaction took maybe two hours. We talked on the elevator between their car and the eleventh floor, where she told me about bus lines and the place nearby famous for specialty pizzas.

I almost forgot this, the pop star said when it was time for her to go, leaning over the empty mattress to take down a Follow Your Dreams plaque hung there.

Don't want to forget that, said her mother. Still following them, aren't you?

Then the pop star transferred over her keys and her security badge, the latter of which she apologized for—having to look at that picture everyday! I tried to shake her hand but she was still looking at the badge and touching her hair and dramatically shuddering, so I waved and then locked the door behind them.

Later, my new roommate told me about the pop star being a pop star. Or an almost pop star.

She's got pretty legit management, my roommate said. Or, I mean, she's almost got, she's trying to get. Legit management.

She played some of the pop star's songs from a website where they were for sale.

Not really my thing, sneered my roommate, who was an aspiring actress.

I assured her the songs weren't really my thing either, and they weren't. The songs had the explosive quality of a water gun, all neon colors and a drenching pulse. The lyrics were about boys and girls; about girls like her and boys like him and how it seemed like a bad idea but, the upbeat tempo protested, might not be so bad after all? The pop star's voice was nasally and unrecognizable. The same girl who told me to try the artichoke pizza was synthesized and reminded me, inexplicably, of salt-water taffy.

It's like stuff you'd hear on the radio, said my roommate after a few songs. She's going to LA.

I could tell expressing this resentment and jealousy was good for my roommate. I felt relieved that I had such an easy act to follow, that I'd be a default good roommate compared to an almost pop star who thoughtlessly left behind a bag of dried mango, some bobby pins, and a box of blondish hair color. I thought it was a good sign.

*

It's important to know that I moved to New York City. It's even more important to know that I moved because I was waiting for my boyfriend to propose. He was living there to go to med school, and we'd dated through college and long distance the past year. It seemed like the sort of thing he should be doing—we should be doing—though I know this is not the sort of thing a girl my age, my generation, and my education can say she is doing. As in:

What are you doing? My mother yelled at me over the open suitcases spread out on my bed, vomiting clothes and other clothes.

I yelled back about needing to give the relationship a chance, needing to get out of her house and away from my nowhere temp job, needing to support him and myself. All my bluster was a hard wooden music box of reason to hide where inside, secretly, there was a spinning ballerina of, I don't know, I don't know. I think I just wanted something important to happen to me.

Finally I yelled, What are you doing?

Which I didn't think meant anything but apparently hurt her.

She cried and left the room.

I cried and kept packing.

Some things I should have realized then: It was a bad sign my boyfriend couldn't pick me up from the airport. It was a bad sign he didn't want me to move in with him because of his lease and three roommates. It was a bad sign that, when I explained to the pop star why I was moving into her room, she said, Oh, like trying on a life? which was probably something she made up, but I nodded like I knew what it meant.

*

I spent the evenings with my boyfriend after his classes and listened to him talk. He had a lot of plans, mostly about Where We Should Go. The city was an endless place of places to go—for people to ricochet from one place to another like silver balls in a pinball machine, complete with flashing lights and frequent collisions. We went to a café that specialized in meatballs. We went to a bakery that specialized in fruit tarts. We went to see an experimental performance/poetry reading, where a man yelled poetry over the dwops and twangs of his bass.

After the performance, we had to talk about it, but not about “liking” it. My boyfriend wanted to talk about how he had actually felt the bass. How he really understood the drums. How jazz was somehow connected with the city, with being here, because it was a presence that reverberated in bone and flesh and fat, altering people on a cellular level as it thrummed through the body.

We went to my apartment because my roommate had her creative movement class that night. We had sex in the pop star's bed. He held me after as I cried, at first flattered, then annoyed when he realized it wasn't because of him.

Is this what it's going to be like? he said, pulling on his boxers. You're still going to be like this here? You're just going to, what? Be obsessed with Cheerios?

He went to sleep by the wall, I lay facing the window. Across the courtyard I could see three other apartment buildings identical to mine, only distinguishable by the patterns of light and dark, the empty squares around the occasional flickering window.

*

I should add that my boyfriend was saying nice things, too—about me, about love. He wasn't cruel, my boyfriend. He wasn't even particularly overly self-centered, not any more than any one else. It was me, really; it was my fault. It was that, in waiting for a proposal, I could only notice the things he didn't say, count the absences, instead of listen to what was said.

And—this isn't important, but still—I wasn't obsessed with Cheerios. He had said that because I had said I didn't want to go to a brunch with his friends unless I could order Cheerios. Through a series of misunderstandings, I had not eaten Cheerios for several years. If, after having rediscovered them recently, I was slightly hyperbolic about their qualities, and if, because of such a long abstinence, I wanted to eat Cheerios and only Cheerios for breakfast everyday, it in no way reflected on his friends or wanting to meet them and seemed totally justifiable.

*

Not knowing anyone got lonely, so I called the only other person I knew who had lived in New York, a friend of mine from high school. He was the artsy type, as was his girlfriend I had never met. They had both gone to one of the art colleges here, where he had painted still lifes of dumpsters and she had sold her hand drawn pornographic comics outside subway stations.

Though they seemed made for New York, they weren't in the city any longer. They had moved to one of the pointy-shaped states at the edge of Canada. It had something to do with her mother and money, and she was pregnant, and maybe there was a house there, but it didn't really matter because the important thing was that they were suddenly living up in the wilderness.

When I called him, he told me that, after they put their baby to sleep, he and his girlfriend would dress up in gorilla suits and go out into the woods.

It started as a prank thing, he said. Like, we'd go around looking for people to freak out, just for a laugh. But now, I don't know. It's intense out there, all dark and shit, and just your sounds, when you step on a twig or whatever. You're totally removed.

I pictured the two of them – the moon reflecting on the rippled brows of their gorilla masks, the matted fake fur collecting snow flakes, their floating breath appearing through the plastic nickel-sized nostrils.

She thought we could get on film as Bigfoot. Or Big Feet, he laughed. But the thing is, anytime we actually get close to some property, some house or whatever, it's like, I don't want to. Like my instincts have changed. Like I'm an animal now—I mean then, in the woods—and I see people and think, uh-oh. It's funny, because she keeps saying, Bigfoot doesn't exist, Bigfoot isn't real. But she doesn't get that it is real when I'm it, right? Like, Big Foot doesn't exist, OK, but I exist, and I'm Big Foot, right, so, it does exist. Then. Because I exist.

Anyway, he said. I'm glad we're talking again, he said.

And then there was nothing else to say except, Yeah, so I said it and we hung up.

*

I called this friend after my boyfriend went to sleep one night, after I had cried some more, cradling my phone and sitting on the toilet.

I had used the box of the pop star's hair dye in an attempt to kill time, trying not to call, but then ended up calling anyway. When he talked about the gorilla mask and being something else, I felt the damp and slimy noodles of my hair, patiently lightening under the thick coat of goop, and I felt like I was beginning to understand something.

Something important I know now: I didn't actually want to marry my boyfriend. I wasn't even sure I loved him. I just wanted him to ask. Actually—if I'm being very, very honest—I just wanted the opportunity to say no. I wanted to be the one who said no.

*

I got a job as a part-time nanny because I didn't want to do temp work in an office. It felt very young and very New York, deciding I didn't want to work in an office, and a nanny job was easy to find. The mother was practically vibrating during my interview, sparking with the electricity of her life changing.

I just need to work again, she said, her hands buzzing around her coffee cup. I've just been out of it too long.

I started the next day so she could go on interviews.

Her kid was a girl. We started watching a movie but ended up rolling around on the floor. She had very definitive opinions about favorites and demanded to know mine.

As in, Her: What's your favorite animal?

Me: I don't know. What's yours?

She sat up, her hair full of static, a sea anemone lit by the changing colors from the TV. Dolphins! she said.

Dolphins are suicidal, I said. They throw themselves against rocks if they're in pain.

Her eyes got wide.

I added, But only if they're in pain.

She considered this, then repeated, Dolphins are my favorite.

She flopped back down, commenced rolling.

We established that she loved waterslides, she loved gummy bears, she hated all vegetables but if she had to pick a favorite she kind of liked broccoli. Then we told jokes that would be funny to someone else.

Hers: What did the ghost say to the bee?

What?

Boo-bee!

We laughed.

Mine: What do you call the hair of a half black, half Irish man?

What?

An iFro.

We were not offended.

Her favorite color was pink. Her favorite nail polish was glitter. She wished she had blonde hair and I said, Me, too, because mine was only blondish, even dyed. We both liked making friendship bracelets, so we set to work with embroidering thread.

Her mom came home, looking sweaty.

I scheduled a few things, she said in answer to the question I didn't ask. But then I just went to the gym.

She asked how our day was; we agreed on Good.

*

He's black, the friend I called.

Is that important?

I didn't think so, but I am not black, which might be important if my friend's being black is important. I don't usually think about being not black, or being black, but then I started thinking about what it would be like to be black and live in a rural, northern town. I've heard horror stories, and not just violent ones, but stories about getting stared at on the street, at a stoplight, a novelty.

Something else I haven't mentioned: that one time, before he moved to New York, this friend told me I'd marry a white boy. That it wouldn't be my fault, that he wouldn't blame me at all,

but that, when it came down to it, that's what I would want. I had promised, over and over, that it wasn't true. But the more I denied it, the more he won. He had just laughed smugly, retreating deeper into absolutes, and I wondered how he could know something so certainly about me.

Also important: the iFro thing was his joke. And I still feel a little bad about it.

*

I walked to my subway stop in the rain, walked home in the rain. The pop star's apartment had already become Home, though I didn't have any plaques about dreams on the wall. Actually, I kind of resented she had remembered to take hers. What a luxury, having something to follow.

My roommate was auditioning for a part on a soap opera. She wanted me to film her and read the other part.

But you won't have to be on camera or anything, she said. It doesn't matter how you look.

She wasn't staring at my hair, but I felt the need to flatten it.

We couldn't use the first few takes. In the first one, she started laughing. In the second one, she yelled, I fucking hate this! and banged her head on the table. In the third, though, she got serious:

Eduardo, she said. I can't keep pretending. I have to say goodbye.

I felt something catch in me, some recognition. Eduardo's line came out a little croaky and she turned away – in shame, maybe, or mutual recognition, or just so the camera caught the lone tear she had squeezed out on one side.

We tried a few more after that, but we were both laughing and saying, Fuck! or just groaning.

Oh God, she groaned as she put away the camera and got out some beers. Can you imagine if I *actually* get this part? Like, what will I do if I actually get this part? No one actually wants to work on a soap opera, you just do it because. You know.

She didn't say, Money. She didn't say, Fame. She just waved her hands in a way that somehow suggested both; her gesture, wanting and not wanting.

*

If this were the story of my roommate's life, it might be important to add that she told me the pop star used to read the parts for her auditions before I showed up. It might be important that I caught my roommate looking at the pop star's picture on Facebook and listening to the pop star's music when she thought I wasn't around, that she discussed LA as a possibility even when I was. It would definitely be important to say that they were not really roommates, my roommate and the pop star, but, as she drunkenly confessed to me later that night, they had had a thing.

But it was not important to either of us that my drunken, grieving roommate tried to kiss me. That we ignored it and went on the next morning, no hard feelings, the same way I ignored what it might mean that my boyfriend was white.

*

My boyfriend and I lounged on the pop star's bed, watching TV on the Internet. He talked about working on a cadaver that afternoon and rolled over to demonstrate, drawing lines on my belly with his finger. Here, where they would slice and snap open my rib cage. Here, where my stomach would be snipped from its pipes. My bowels would be unspooled and dragged out, their contents searched. They would find our rice pilaf and chicken: the cauliflower would be dingy white petals, half digested; the spinach in clumps or strands of dead green; beneath that, the Cheerios.

Do you still have your appendix?

I said I thought I did.

You'd know if you didn't, he said. I wish I could have mine taken out. It's just sitting there, but trust me, you don't want to

know what it's like when it decides to do more. When it explodes. Seriously. You don't want to know.

He told me anyway.

Then he talked about the other students and weighing the organs. One of the girls had held the liver like it was a rare book or a baby, precious and fragile.

She was amazing, really, he said. I thought she was going to cry when she put it on the scale. I thought I might cry. The waste, families putting them in the ground. You'd think doctors, at least, would get it, you know. Would donate themselves. I'm going to make sure I get donated. I'm definitely going to donate.

I didn't say anything, especially not that I would get donated, too. We started watching a medical drama and he was happy to talk about unrealistic CPR.

*

It is important to add that my current boyfriend might have been trying to propose. That staying in and watching TV was my idea, not his. That I suggested it after he tried to take me out to a nice restaurant. That, when his face got serious and he wanted to talk about us, I said I had to go to the bathroom. That he was either trying to propose or break up, and I didn't want to know which.

*

There are 1,700 some parks in Manhattan. The girl and I decided to go to all of them, because she did not know which one was her favorite. We went to Central Park first because why wouldn't we start with Central Park?

We ran around awhile, fed some ducks, screamed when the swans charged us. We sat in the grass, eating the rest of the crackers from their plastic sleeve and listening to songs she liked about boys and girls.

I walked to a garbage can, threw away the wrapper, turned around, she was gone.

My mind went white—blinding white, blinding white.

And then she was there, there oh god oh thank god, in a crowd of children. She laughed after they laughed. She followed when they moved a few feet away. She kept trying to move into their circle. She looked relieved when I called her back.

OK, she said as I picked her up and squashed her to my chest. I imagined getting my rib cage levered open, pushing some organs around, nestling her in.

Yeah, it's OK, she agreed as I kept repeating it.

One park down, I said on the way back to her apartment.

One park down! she said, and it sounded so much better when she said it.

Her mom was waiting for us when we got back. She was upset, but not at us, she said. I put on a video for the girl and sat with her mom at the table, holding hands. They weren't electric anymore, just clammy.

You don't—understand—what it's—like, she gave up and sobbed.

What it was like was that she didn't have a life there anymore. Not working. She wasn't sure she wanted her life here, as a mom, to be her only life, but she now knew she didn't have any other life to go back to.

I cried with her, my tears pent up from the park, my body instantaneously empathetic. I cried with her, because she had no idea how close I came to losing her kid, how close she came to losing her kid, how close she came to losing this life, too.

I left my job no longer feeling very young or New York. I felt a little guilty, starting with Central Park; the kid could only be disappointed from there.

*

My friend—the one in the Gorilla suit—he wasn't really just my friend. He was my boyfriend, once. Ex-boyfriend. Maybe that's the

most important thing of all. Or maybe the most important thing was that I had been sure—absolutely certain—that I had loved him. Or maybe that I might have still loved him. Or maybe all that was obvious.

*

Because they were medical students, my boyfriend's friends ordered French toast and eggs Benedict. They both ordered coffee drinks, the fancy kind with chocolate. My boyfriend ordered an omelet, and there was a tense moment before I ordered the same. Then the friends stepped outside to smoke—Everything we're not supposed to do! they said. So we can tell our patients not to *with authority!*—and my boyfriend asked me if I thought they were a couple.

I can't tell, he said, slumping in the booth. I thought you might be able to.

You want me to ask? I said.

No, he said. Maybe.

When they came back inside, I asked. They laughed.

Did you tell her to do that? the girl squealed at my boyfriend. She elbowed the other guy, then rested her head on his shoulder, then pulled back and laughed like it was all a joke. She sat with her hands between her knees while we waited, but nabbed a bit of egg off his plate when the food came.

You eat eggs now? my boyfriend said, and they all laughed.

Why, does it make you woozy? she said, and everyone except my boyfriend laughed. She turned to me but nodded at my boyfriend. Twinkle Toes got sick over the cadaver the other day, she explained. Thought he was going to pass out and turn into a vegetarian, didn't we? she and the other boy laughed again.

Hitler was a vegetarian, I said.

He only had one testicle, I said, trying to make the first thing I said sound more normal.

They laughed, finally, and said, Well!, and my boyfriend's arm found its way around my shoulders. He gave me a squeeze, the meaning of which I didn't understand.

I was quiet the rest of the time. I couldn't find the tempo of their conversation, their inside jokes and med school gossip. But I knew my being quiet was bothering them, so I leaned as far forward as I could, trying to make them believe I was interested. The tips of my hair grazed my ketchup and left leaf-shaped stains on my breast.

You didn't have to ask, my boyfriend said on the walk home. I wasn't asking you to ask.

I asked what the girl's name was again.

He told me, but I forgot, and later when I asked again, he got angry.

You don't have to be passive aggressive, he said.

Then he told me he had not extended his lease.

Because you're happy here, right? he said, and when I didn't say anything, he added: We can be happy here?

He stared at me and I stared back. Then he kind of laughed and tugged on his ear and made his mouth into a shape that meant, So? I knew that this was as close to a proposal as I was going to get. I waited for the answer to magically fill my mouth. I waited to feel certain of something.

*

Some unimportant things about my life then and there:

I was buying paper towels at a drug store and everyone in the checkout line was singing along with the muzak, It's My Party and I'll Cry If I Want To, under their breath.

I sat in the same subway car as two schizophrenics. They sat across from each other and muttered to themselves, and it looked like they were almost having a conversation.

I started drawing up lists of my favorite things, but I wasn't any good at it. One day, I would think my favorite color was green,

but the next, I saw orange everywhere, orange was a nice color, an overlooked color, and I would think, OK, maybe orange, maybe orange could be my favorite, maybe I could be someone whose favorite color is orange.

*

My soon-to-be-ex-roommate was auditioning for a television movie on a kid's channel. She was to play the part of a geeky girl who becomes popular after she adopts a psychic dog.

God, can you imagine me actually getting this part? she said as she set up the camera. Can you imagine me actually being on this kid's channel, when I'm like, hey kids, what's up, I also do Shakespeare?

We started filming. The script was the part of the movie when the girl is popular and takes the psychic dog for granted, so the psychic dog runs away. The script said, Cleo HOWLS mournfully. I howled. Her face fell.

No, she said. Stop just a second.

I stopped recording.

It's not a big deal, she said. I mean, they're not really going to be paying attention to you, you're just reading off camera. But I need you to actually do it so that I can actually do it, you know? Like, the howl makes everything I do better. You know?

I nodded like I did.

OK, right, so—howl like you just did.

I howled. She nodded and waved her hands; the wave meant, More.

I howled again, louder.

OK, but like this—she howled an example howl. I howled and it wasn't as good. She howled again; I howled back; she howled, and I answered.

Yeah! she said, excited; her hands waving, More! More!

When we were done, I called my ex-boyfriend. The girlfriend picked up. I was too excited to be upset about it.

Listen, I said. Just tell him I get it, OK? Just say that. That I get it.

Wait, she said. What?

And so I told her about reading the part of the psychic dog and feeling, really feeling, like I was a psychic dog, really feeling like I *had* to run away, and my roommate was better reading the popular girl when I howled better, and the movie maybe taking her to LA, and finally getting what he meant about being Bigfoot, finally getting it—Just tell him I get it!

It was quiet when I finished.

Then the girlfriend said, If you tell him that, I will fuck you up.

I laughed—not a real laugh, but more of a question mark laugh.

No seriously, she said. This fucking Bigfoot shit. Fucking Gorilla suit. In the fucking woods all the fucking time. He's losing it.

He says it's art, I said.

Yeah, well, it's not art if you hide from everyone. I tell him, take a camera at least. Make it like a film piece. He says no. He says it'll be cheap. He says people will think he's trying to fool them into thinking he's bigfoot, like a scam, when really he's trying to be Bigfoot. That Bigfoot is too evolved a creature to let itself be seen by humans and—are you hearing this shit? *Be* Bigfoot? He has a kid now. We have this life. But he's running away to the woods. You want to tell him that you get it? You want to tell him—he's not *here* for you to fucking tell him!

She was panting, her breath pock-marking the silence with static. Then she was crying. I could see her on the other side of the line, an artsy girl from New York trying to be a rural mother. I saw, somewhere deeper in the dark and the cold, my ex-boyfriend trying to be something else entirely. I saw the pop star in LA singing about boys, and my roommate as the popular girl, and my boyfriend wearing his white coat, and the girl I nannied less certain about her favorites.

And would you believe that this is the most important part of my life then and there? Not the answer I gave my boyfriend. Not whether I spent a few more years in New York or left the next day. Those were not important, those decisions, those eventualities, but this moment—this moment right here—was when I understood what it was to try on a life. What it was to try on a life, and be certain it wouldn't ever fit. **f**

PHILIP BELCHER

DONNIE WITH BABY AND COWS 1999

After the photograph by Shelby Lee Adams

With a pat on the side of the plastic bin,
Donnie called from the hill two cows
and a yearling bull. The calf wandered
off by the boy beneath the oak, but the cows

crowded Donnie under the bowl of the satellite
dish he'd nailed to the mountain with three
steel poles. After a minute under the lamp
on my desk, the Guernsey begins to glow,

and her eyes, like the eyes of all penned beasts,
succeed in their wet plea for attention.

I imagine Adams taking down the reflectors,
sliding the tripod's legs into their sleeve,

and loading his pickup for the next shot
at a shack where chickens are kicking up
dirt by a Malibu raised on blocks. I think
of Donnie, the baby, the boy and the bull,

all walking toward the barn's dark yawn, the dull
ping of bells as the cows climb the hill, plastic tags
punched in their ears. I almost miss that Donnie's
tucked his blue jean cuffs behind the tongues

of his *Faded Glory* boots and wonder whether Adams staged that touch, aimed more light at Donnie's feet, or even loaned the shoes, whether poverty and pride can be seen together anymore without a subtle prop.

JOHN WESTBROOK

WHERE I'LL BE

*I will leave earth
with my shoes tied...*

-Robert Lowell

I'll be self-centered
and naked in the middle
of the nowhere of myself,
building a glass house

where I won't worry about
wearing out my welcome
or the knees of my jeans.

I'll climb back in the bed
from which I've forgotten
I'd risen, and smile
like a girl who has bitten

the pit of a peach plucked
the moment that gravity
asked it to fall. (Her cares
are rarer than reveries

or clarinets after the rain.)
Don't look for me. I'll be
hiding like an absence,

but not before tossing
my pair of laced-together
sneakers over a phone line
and walking there barefoot.

MARK ANTHONY CAYANAN

AS RAPPACCINI'S DAUGHTER

Shall tether to a name. At the motel
the name of which is a flower's
shall stand outside the fence of uncertain

halogen and pretend there is
no reason. Your presence unaccidental
shall coax from the setting

a cause. Hence shall be crimson
throated, cousined to the belladonna
and dama de noche. These cruelties

have to be unmanned: therefore a garden
in me, everywhere insects: in the air
variegations of the unslaked. And how quietly

it turns violent. Shall retire into
this garden, as night in its fearful sympathy
reclines, limbs prized open, garment

encompassing. And the person shall dissolve
and the refusal remain. Someone, as someone
is always appealed to, must say it:

Shall we be kind and suffer
each other. Or must I not be healed.
Shall, like God, ask not to be

touched. Shall come to pass.
What manner of mortal might I
and I be. Bouquet of virtues, garland of avowals.

Like love, its own risky palliative.
As guileless as a garden, shall bear the simplest
question. I have a name; I will not give.

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