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This to which we've come.

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THIS TO WHICH WE'VE COME

By

Holly Tabor

B.A. Western Kentucky University, 2000

M.A.T. University of Louisville, 2012

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the

College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

in English

Department of English
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2019

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B.A. Western Kentucky University, 2000
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A Thesis Approved on

March 27, 2019

By the following Thesis Committee

Paul Griner

Ian Stansel

John Gibson

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to
my two children, Mea and Jude,
and
my husband, Scott,
without whose support, love and patience
this project could not have been.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge and thank my creative writing professor, mentor and friend, Prof. Paul Griner, who has supported and validated me in too many ways to count, who has shared generously, critiqued honestly, and believed convincingly in my work, and who in the process has made me believe, too. I would also like to thank the other committee members, Ian Stansel and John Gibson, for their feedback and assistance in the development of this project.

Additionally, I thank my parents for their undying support of every dream I ever had, no matter how young or old, and for all the many ways in which they have inspired and empowered me; my sister for never giving up on me; and my brother for quietly tolerating us all. Of course, I thank my husband and children, to whom this thesis is dedicated, for the richness with which they have deepened my life and heart. And lastly, I thank Mick Kennedy for convincing me to follow my pen, come what may.

ABSTRACT

THIS TO WHICH WE'VE COME

Holly Tabor

March 27, 2019

This collection of works explores the linkages between moments, the connective thread that accumulates over time to create for each of us a unique present. The title, “This to Which We’ve Come,” attempts to convey that each moment is a point of arrival colored by the smallest of temporal fibers, our most interior histories that stretch and bend and fold back onto themselves when the present forces us into action, or inaction. Through these characters and their stories, I attempt to examine that moment of arrival. A secondary thread explored in this collection is the idea that humans are still animals, still connected to the natural world, driven by inexplicable undercurrents of obligation, guilt, hunger, survival. But too much else exists within us, too much else that we create, so that even though the connection still exists, our ability to comprehend it is often lost.

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COMES THE CANKEROUS RUSH

Two days ago my hands explode.

Rorschach inkblot on the page.

Spatter on the walls and ceiling fan blades.

Darker than I expect.

I lick my teeth and think this will make a good story.

Then come the leeches.

Wearing ascots and morning coats

and drinking water very responsibly from glass jars.

They slurp up a taste of the darkening mess and smack their lips

and say it tastes the same.

And I say what about the ceiling fan.

And they roll their eyes and say it's been done.

This morning, words wash over me in the shower but never break skin.

Strung together like party lights on someone else's back deck.

Tangled barbed wire at my feet.

At lunch I eat my cats through a straw

-- the fat one takes a while --

and vomit and inspect the contents, looking for what.

There is only cat and bile and an inside-out raisin, remnant from breakfast.

Didn't expect to see you again, it says.

It's the same thing over and over I say.

This is the best I can do.

I have only one stomach.

This afternoon I stare at a goat.

I see only a goat.

For three hours I watch.

It tires of me and walks away.

Tonight I will go to my friend and say I must.

I must shower in your pantry and eat your children through a straw
and stare at the transparent crickets mating in your cellar.

I must.

I must take down that light bulb, that one there,
hanging three to the left and not knowing whether it's up or down.

And I must set it in my window to be nourished by the sun.

I must.

And so I will.

I will climb onto a chair on the deck that isn't mine.

A stomach bloated with children and corn flakes in my hair
and barbed wire around my ankles.

And I will reach up to unscrew a single word from the strand
and I will clunk it with the bloody stump that used to be my hand.

A SPECIFIC GRAVITY

By the fifth step she heard the heavy click-shut of the office door latching behind her. On the sixth she felt the crunch. So infrequent was sound in these sterile halls the first she had come to expect -- the hydraulic-hinge, the slow release. The latter she believed could have been spectral, a ghost-echo left hanging in the empty. Might have believed it to be nothing, but she felt it. Up to the center of her chest, felt it. Specifically, beneath the second toe of her left foot, felt it -- the salient corpse-whisper knuckling up and inside-out from beneath. Half-bent she teetered, reached a hand out to steady, lifted the culprit-foot, revealed the white-blood smear, the muted shards of a black-brown shell. Except for this, the floors here were exceptionally shiny--

Earl. She should have seen him by now, nearing the end of his shift, a blue-gray heap hunched over a dry mop. Would have said to him "Good morning, Earl," and he to her "Good night, Ms. Lou," with ice blue and up-all-night eyes that smiled like chrysanthemums. "It's 'bout yo time, ain't it Miss Lou?" He was always saying things like this and she never knew what he was talking about -- only that he was kind -- so she smiled and said "about time" and "these sure are some shiny floors" to which praise he would tuck in his chin and softly affirm "Mm-hmm" and "gotta keep the place lookin pretty for you, Miss Lou." No Earl today, though; just the roach, half on her shoe, half sinking into the

liquid white. “Sorry Earl,” she half-whispered. “You too, little guy.” She swiped the carnage which clung to her finger and proceeded down the hall to her boss’s office, her left foot feeling slightly heavier than her right.

Mid-lunge over a desktop calendar, matching coffee stains from too hot and too full, her boss reached for the desk phone, strained to dial a number, then clutching the coal-colored handset to his cloud of a face, thrust his full-body weight back into the chair and swiveled. Half a revolution away, she let herself in and waited -- “Bill? Tom. Yep, yep. Doing fine. Listen --” four and a half minutes. Waited while the back of his balding scalp deflected darts of fluorescence through oily black hairs; watched him swivel, chair popping threatening collapse; witnessed him dig a thick pinky into his ear, withdraw it, study the tip of it, flick it toward the trash. Phone suffocating between cheek and shoulder, he turned to Lou still standing. Behind lowered lids he slithered a lazy gaze over her sweater-covered breasts, past the notebook clutched tight to her stomach, down the hemline and up again to the soft unspoken space between her hips. The typical touch-base meeting, she thought, swatted away like a fruit fly. And he returned to rubbing circles beneath his buttoned-down watermelon stomach.

Along the white, familiar walk-back, Lou noted for the first time the smooth roughness, the dull-shine, the contradiction of painted cinder block in the hallway walls. Felt the swish of her skirt. Heard the linoleum click-click of her black Mary Janes. Remembered the remains of the roach still clinging to her finger. Thought she heard the sound of mortar cracking. She’d been reading more

lately. Had read recently that the brain, in times of emergent crisis, those seconds just before it believes it is going to die, can slow time, somehow stretch it out, to capture all the sensory details surrounding the moment, so that a person, for instance, falling off of a roof might see in minutest detail the leaves rustling in the breeze in the nearby tree, smell the cinder seeping from the neighbor's chimney, feel the roughness of the precise shingle that slipped beneath her foot, her jeans shifting against her thigh, the intense pull of gravity, the absolute surrender. Notice the hair strand whipping across her face, lashing her eye. Remember that she hadn't told her mother she'd be climbing on the roof that day. Hear the sound of bone cracking on impact.

At the end of an invisible line in an eye-level crevice, her hand traced its rote passage back to the metal STORAGE plaque situated just beside her office door. On her day of hire two years ago told she was told that of course the plaque would be replaced with a nameplate -- that it was a *large* closet and would make a fine office. It was still a large closet, into which she daily stepped and removed the laptop from her bag, placed it on her desk, clicked it open. Inside it, a folder titled *Something*. Inside *it* everything about anything but the nothing she spent every day doing. Poems. Reflections. Ponderings and perplexities; whatever witness the day beckoned. This day she decided was due an elegy, so thusly it was titled:

Elegy

A Milky-white past-life

unwelcome smear,

have Mercy;
the same black sole
saved a wasp
floating fetal in the baby pool
-- why?
If not
eggs for breakfast
Mercy might have been
a mother

She laughed at the ridiculousness of it. Of her. Of those lines, the last in particular. For a whole host of reasons she would never know the mercy of mothering, the loss of an unfertilized egg, Or maybe it was a fact she understood better than most. Her poems would go nowhere, she knew -- just sit here incubating, wishing they'd been written by someone else. Someone whose life had been lived more interestingly. More bravely. More purposefully. Because her life, as yet, had been none of these things. She dreamed the children she didn't have would someday find her *Something* folder and grow angry at her for having written such things. All but one would vote to delete it, and so that one would save it, store it, hide it away for the grandchildren.

Why did I never hang a mirror like I planned? she wondered.

How would she see herself?

Would she see herself at all?

[Blank] sweater. [Blank] skirt -

[blank ---

The blank bare walls]

blurred lines with shoes

And gray. So much gray.

Pretty sure I'd just blend in, maybe even disappear.

As she continued to contemplate the color of things -- the grays and whites, the distant browns -- the fact of her own beigeness occurred to her not once. Not until -- and it happened almost suddenly -- the thought took hold.

She noticed the open door, closed it, removed the shoes first. Then the sweater, the sudden weight of which bore down on her like a lead apron. The gray carpet etched a hot, red itch into the bare skin of her back as she lay there watching the stars in the ceiling tiles, a spray of black dots in an off-white universe pulsing into abstraction, floating back to front, blurred to sharp to blurred again. If she were to name the pattern, she might call it space matter. Aftermath, maybe.

She removed her bra and her breasts fell sloppily sideways, inflating, deflating with each rise and fall of her ribs. Tethered her hands in a weave over the skin of her abdomen which gravity pulled to a tight, smooth sheet over her uterus. She unfastened her skirt, inch-wormed free of it, caught the edge of the smooth, circular scar in the soft of her right thigh with her thumb and winced again at the sudden sting, the burn like a needle forcing its way out from the inside.

Cross-legged in the middle of the back bench seat in her daddy's Scout. Windows open. Head tilted back. Whole body, sweat-drenched, sliming over dry-cracked upholstery patched together like crazy-quilt with duct tape and paisley. Eyes fixed on the perforations in the ivory vinyl overhead. Simon and Garfunkel singing here's to you, Mrs. Robinson and Lou floating above and below and between the dots -- tiny black holes an inch apart that she could fall into-- until the burn brought her back, the blinding pain that blurs all the dark places into one, and the tiny piercing squeal of baby brother pressing hard pressing still the still-red dashboard lighter to the whitest part of her thigh.

No response from her body--- no voice in her scream, no action or protest not even a reflex knee-jerk hand-slap nothing. Every sensation pulsing into the blistering black circle burning about the size of a nickel burning burning into her flesh and her father, who came to find the boy sitting in the front seat with the lighter and said Jesus, Louna -- and he said it without seeing her -- you were supposed to watch the baby and here he is playing with a lighter and Christ -- and so she pulled the leg of her shorts over the burn, tears slinking from her cheeks down down onto the paisley. Tears, sweat, all the same.

It's a lie the scar told her as she lay there listening to the laughter in the walls. The hollow cackle of men's dress shoes -- black and brown and black and brown -- the colors sounded the same, never nearer, never louder, only pounding- - pound and pound against the whiteness of the walls, pound the tempo to which a pulse keeps time and to which Lou with each heartbeat grew nearer nearer naked, nearer till the still could hold her no longer and she lunged herself up. Exposed

and gangly she scurried insect-like across the grit. Cheek to floor she arched her back, pointed hips up toward the aftermath. Her nipples, firm and alive, dusted the gray sky beneath her as she peered beneath the door, watched the long cuffs and scuffed heels of men who held their chins too high and secretly wanted to be taller. *They can have their secret wants.*

She sat up, resting her thighs on the curves of her feet, raising a hand to the metal door knob, which was cool in her palm and smooth. She clutched it a long time and stood. A vertical sliver of light found the back corner first, then spread like a curtain across the floor and walls of her office. When all was white and the laughter in the walls had quieted and only the black of Lou's shadow remained, she waited to see if she might fall-- saw the shards of shell ... listened for the whisper, the cool gloss rippling up. The floors here were exceptionally shiny-- Earl-- she should have seen him by now -- who was plenty tall, who walked softly who said things like "it's 'bout yo time, Miss Lou."

Half-bent she teetered, reached a hand out to steady, lifted the culprit-foot over the threshold.

The night before, she lay in bed, listened to the crashing and yowling of cats in the alley. Her own body motionless, cringing, she tried to comfort herself. Tried to compose a poem, but none would come. Soon it will be over, she whispered. This she repeated until she fell asleep.

STUCK

I thought of you today. Thought of you driving in my car on the way to school. My daughter ear-muffled and gloved, sitting in the front seat though she shouldn't, flipping through music on my phone looking for a song, a good song, some anthem for mornings like these: dark, fingery mornings, streaked wet with headlights and the hum of things electric. It'll freeze soon, most likely. It's that time of year. Up ahead, red lights flashed, fog light blinked, school bus STOP elbowed out across the puddled four-lane road. And so I slowed. And I thought of you.

Thought of how the other kids walked the black-tread strip to the front of the bus that morning, down the toothy stairs and out the jointed doors. Told the driver, wrinkled and pink, goodbye. But you didn't. You hunched a mountain of shoulder over Eugene Brown who tried to hide in his coat sleeves. You yelled at him and looked at me, dared me to look away. "What's the matter, Shit Brown?" you said. "I bet that's what your mommy calls you. Little Shit Brown." And the gap widened.

How you fisted the cushion beside him until he flinched and wailed stop it and you laughed, a crackled spitty laugh, rusty-lipped red-orange circle of a laugh, tinny and broken. And how I hated you and hated that laugh and I leaned a flush cheek to the cool green vinyl seat back, hotter by the second and dry

heaving. How the ones in the back kept their distance. How they always kept their distance, but it was me this time, not you.

Ducks. That's what it was this morning that made the bus stop. And made me stop. Ducks. A whole bunch of them, eight, ten maybe, maybe a family. Walking one after the other across the black highway stretched between industrial parks. The mama first, I presume, and her little ones following. My daughter, her breath fogged up the window while she watched hoping, nearly crying she hoped so hard they would make it across alright. And the kids in the school bus gawked out their windows, hoped maybe as my daughter did for safe passage, though I knew more than a few likely latched on, couldn't turn away -- had maybe even made bets on whether the universe would make good on the promise of tragedy so early in the morning.

I couldn't figure out where those ducks were going. Had no idea why one had already tried and failed along this same route beneath the power lines about ten yards shy of the tracks in the dark. Couldn't have been that long ago. Still sticky and warm, the life steaming out of it. But these ducks, they just walked along. Walked right past without even a sideways glance, except the littlest one, who stuck a foot in it and looked down.

And I thought about the ripped out notebook paper -- crumpled, spit-torn - - convulsing from the open pocket in your backpack as you punched Eugene's seat. How a pencil fell, bounced and rolled over candy wrappers and cigarette butts on the black bus floor and nobody, not a soul dared pick it up. How I couldn't get out that I couldn't hold it in and how I shook and purged and threw

up all down the back of you. And you turned your contorted face and gagged and scrambled in it. Your right foot slipped and your knee banged against the metal when you lost your balance, and you flailed and grasped at fumes until you found your feet and pounded down the aisle, backpack dragging, elbows handcuffed behind your back by your too-small coat.

And I followed, tasting vomit, trying to clean my chin and nose with the back of my hand, pushed along by kids scurrying over and between the backs of seats like upside down beetles screeching and holding their noses.

That stupid duck, it just kept looking down at its foot and shaking it and walking in circles, like its whole world had been thrown off balance, left foot tied to a lead balloon. And I looked at my daughter and her hope and her perfect porcelain world and thought this was why I don't want her riding the bus to school. Kids like me and kids like you too close together for too long to do either of us any good. And I was glad she was there with me, and then the worry set in because the porcelain can't last. It can't.

"Mom, what's he doing?" she asked me.

"I don't know honey," I said. "Doesn't know what to do, I guess. Panicking maybe, all the lights ..."

A car horn bellowed, long and angry, and another chirped and another. And the duck, he kept looking down at his foot and shaking it, and he started flapping his wings and every time a car honked he became more frantic and his circles more erratic and more up and down, his body lifting off the ground and crashing back down, and his foot jerking out to the side and away from him, and

not knowing which way to go he just kept coming back to that same place, the place that stuck. I should open the door, I thought. Just open the door, get out, pick up the duck and walk it to the side of the road. I should do that, I thought. But I didn't. Never even took my foot off the brake.

“Not the duck, Mama. Him.”

It was Joe Hill. He's a walker. People here always notice walkers. Those guys in Army green jackets with giant rucksacks going place to place but never very far. Guys you feel like you know after you've seen them enough times. Guys you think you'd like to stop sometime and buy a cheeseburger or a coffee, but you don't. Instead, you check and make sure you locked your doors. Made sense he'd be here; I'd seen him here before. Walking across the tracks, the cuff of his right sleeve tacked up to his shoulder on account of only having half an arm, rucksack high on his back, the name Joe Hill written big in black marker all over it. It was Joe Hill whose bow legs scissored through the headlights, who chased that duck in circles, right sleeve clutched to his side, left hand reaching into and out of the lights after the bird flopping lopsided now, from exhaustion I supposed. And it occurred to me how often I suppose things I don't really know. How easy that is.

Through my tears I found you again in the gravel, clenched-fisted and yelling, boys pointing and laughing and girls hiding whispers behind white-cold fingers. Your hand digging in a wet back pocket for the knife and then swinging. “Fuck all y'all mother fuckers!” you shrieked, tear streaked, spit strings on your chin. Hot puffs of breath traced smoky halos around your head and you, eyes closed and freckles bursting, screamed and stabbed at nothing until Eugene, still

wiping his lashes, who never laughed at you, not once, lost his balance in the fray, fell in and caught the blade in his gut. It's that way for some of us, I suppose.

It took Joe Hill an eternity to catch that damn duck. Car horns blaring the whole time and he and that bird slicing through all that noise and I thought of what I'd say to my daughter if some driver had had enough, grew tired of waiting, came barreling through and took them both out. After a while, it seemed like the duck just gave up, and Joe Hill scooped it into the crook of his elbow, placed his hand under its chest and held it up to his, stroked its feathers with his stump. I swear I felt their hearts beating, saw it in the puffs of breath escaping their mouths.

Once he had it in his arm, Joe Hill never looked away from that duck. Just walked and stroked its feathers until he reached the side of the road and kept going, down into the ditch, where he set it down and gave it a nudge. And it just started walking, turning its head from side to side, periscoping up and down, searching, and every other step hiking its leg out to the side, trying to shake its foot clean.

And Joe Hill just picked up his rucksack and took off walking again. And my daughter leaned her head back against the seat, settled back into her anthem search. I wondered what she was looking for. Wondered where Joe Hill was going. Promised again I'd buy him a cup of coffee sometime, though the promise was empty, I knew. Wondered if that duck would ever catch up to the rest of them, if it'd be missed if it didn't, how long it would take to shake off all that mess stuck to the bottom of its foot. I wondered, and I thought of you.

SUNDAY STREET

Early morning and rusted Buicks sat hot and unwilling on the gravel shoulders of Fells Hill. A rogue breeze tongued at cracked windows in shotgun houses with hopskotch shutters, -- on its breath the taste of sour mash and sweet decay, oak-charred and bourbon-y and thick from the nearby distilleries. "Air's too heavy even for the birds to sing," Lainey thought, so she hummed aloud to still the quiet. Blue shadows of silver maple leaves danced over her legs. Pages in the book she forgot she was reading rustled slightly beside her, then lay still.

Lainey loved to watch the street wake up and wondered if it was like this every day or just on Sunday when she was there to watch. Butt-flat on the front stoop, her grandmother at TV church in the back room, she'd been watching already an hour before Mrs. Daley emerged in pink and green curlers from the brown-yellow bungalow two doors down and across.

Elbows rested on right-angled knees, Lainey leaned in at the woman unloading an armful of dish-dingy rags across a fishing line nailed-high and stretched from one end of the dilapidated front porch to the other. For a minute she focused intently, waited for something to happen though just what she didn't know. Whatever it was, it never did and after it didn't, she went back to tracing invisible hearts and arrows on the gray-painted concrete with a stick she'd found loose in the holly.

Next, she knew it would be Mr. Maggert creeping out his crooked doorway scratching the front of his shorts with one hand, flicking a lighter at the cigarette dangling from cracked lips with the other. If he had been in Ms. Smith's fourth-grade science class, he would know that smoking will turn him to tar on the inside, Lainey thought. She watched him crumple the half-smoked cigarette into a greasy black spot on the door frame, drop it to his feet and reach for another from the pack. Maybe he does know, she decided. Maybe he just doesn't care.

A thick orange extension cord snaked from the front window behind Lainey and across the sun-cracked porch to a box fan her grandmother had placed there the night before so she could dry her bath-wet hair before bed. Lainey rose and clicked it on, and eyes closed, leaned in and hummed into the blades. This must be what a hummingbird hears all the time, she thought, putting herself high above the steaming blacktop, above the withering leaves and screaming insects, the drooping rooftops of Sunday Street, as Lainey had come to call it. She liked making up names for things; calling them what they weren't. This seemed to make them better than what they were.

She sat, eyes closed, a way 10-year-olds do when they're not being paid attention to. Her legs criss-crossed, shorts gaped open. Life on Sunday Street smeared to a blur as she swayed back and forth allowing the fan-breeze to cool her thighs and panties. She had worn the silky ones, a gift from her Aunt Joan. They weren't really silk she knew, but she loved them and told no one. Kept them hidden deep in her drawer, beneath the First Communion socks and pastel tights, beneath the envelope of birthday money. They were pink with pinker ponies that

shimmered when she moved them in the light, like grown-up beautiful. Like the model she had seen in the television commercial that she wasn't supposed to watch. How her hands danced in the air above her perfect face. How her back arched and her ribs shone through a thin layer of porcelain skin. How her hips moved, slow and fluid, from one side of the screen to the other. Like water.

Lainey practiced in the mirror on Saturdays at home when she could close her door and be alone. Slipped them on and placed a hand on a straight waist and turned her body half around to see how they looked in the back. Sucked in her stomach so that her ribs showed. Pushed her hair up to her cheek with her shoulder and narrowed her eyes and pouted her lips in a bow because that's what the model did and she thought it must be what all women did when they wanted to look *that* way. She longed for this secret someday womanhood, felt foolish for it. Mother bought her only cotton panties – the kind that came in multipacks, the cheaper, the more practical. No one's going to be seeing your panties, she said. Aunt Joan saw things differently and somehow knew Lainey wanted to too.

A screen door whip-cracked against vinyl siding three doors down forcing Lainey's back rigid. A raucous tangle of dingy white T-shirts, scraped elbows and gangly legs erupted from the flapping front door of the Miller house, the smallest of them landing on his hands and knees at the bottom of the steps, righting himself quickly and disappearing a few steps behind the others in the tree line beyond Youngers Creek. What was his name? Lainey couldn't remember. Not one of them. Not even how many they were. Eight? Nine? She had stopped counting, stopped caring --. The Miller boys no longer held her interest. Lately,

she had a more singular fascination. Returned to her slump now she crossed her arms and fixed her eyes on the Conder house across the street, taller than her grandmother's, had once been white too. Now it was no color at all, with a pink roof and cinderblock stairs and old-sheet curtains and nothing lurking inside at this hour but darkness. Squinting to block out the morning sun, Lainey waited for the darkness to breathe.

“Cicada.” The girl’s voice was sharp and abrupt, like a pop-- electric wake-up call. She hadn’t noticed her there, bent at the waist, legs straight, bare feet astraddle the large green-black thwump on the sidewalk, hands on hips. Clumped strings of unbrushed hair tickled the crumbling sidewalk as blood filled her cheeks. “Cicada,” the girl said again, righting herself, head tilted. “Dead.” She picked up the bug, nearly the size of her palm and seeming bigger an inch away from her nose, pretended to kiss it, tossed it unapologetically into the shrub and shrugged. “Wanna hang out?”

Lainey sat, her throat tight --. “Finally,” she thought. Friends from school had play dates, played dress-up with American Girl dolls, ate heart-shaped tea sandwiches and yelled “Get *OUT!*” when little brothers picked bedroom locks. That’s what she suspected, anyway. Lainey had never actually been on a play date. Clover, it was clear, hadn’t either. Legs too long for cut-off shorts worn low on liquid hips, Aqua Net hairspray, pastel lip gloss, black-lined eyes, mascara-ed and menacing-- Clover rescued waste-bin magazines with cover stories of makeup tricks and sex tips and studied them. All the education she needed, she’d say. Truth-and-dare reckless, she knew things and would often disclose to Lainey in

curiously descriptive detail on days just like this, days when Lainey could be here or not, could be anywhere or not, could be as old or young as she wanted.

“Well?” Clover persisted. “You comin?”

Lainey sprang up turned to face the screen door and yelled, “I’m goin cross the street.” Her grandmother, pulling laundry from the basement dryer, did not hear her.

The girls tiptoe-danced across the patchwork pavement, squealing when one of them landed on a crack or a piece of gravel stabbed at the pads of their feet. Lainey jumped clumsily over the crumbling front-door threshold into the house then watched Clover glide past her with ease. Her eyes followed and then returned to the tear in the screen door. Clover made sure to leave it unlocked. It wouldn’t be long; it was never long before he showed. But he almost always did, almost always uninvited, Barry, smelling of too-much cologne and seeming always to have just been sweating.

A patchy mustache had begun to curl over his lip as if it had been combed that way and his hair was black and stuck to his head and at all times in need of a trim. Often he slung his head to the side to swipe the fringe from his eyes. He wore tee shirts with gaping holes cut where the sleeves should have been so that when he raised his still-skinny arms to shoot basketball in the driveway a girl could see more than a little hair growing in the pits beneath them, if she was watching. And Lainey was -- how the others moved and played and how their bodies looked different from hers. Clover was only two years older, but her waist had begun to shrink and her breasts and hips moved in that way, that *way* of knowing, feeling

something Lainey's yet didn't. This was a house where she could learn things. Across the street her grandmother likely was yelling for her to come help wash dishes. Here she stared at the faint rectangular outline in Barry's back pocket where someone before him had kept his wallet, religiously.

He looked at her sometimes, too. Watched her from behind the screen door before she knew he was there. Tugged at her hair and then ran through the house and ducked under the clothesline in the backyard, turning to see if she had followed. Looked at her sometimes like he'd just caught her in the act of something and only he knew what it was. This was what appealed to Lainey, who was leafing through fashion magazines in the floor with Clover when he arrived.

"Where's Joe," he asked, out of breath and in a hurry, slinging his head to the side. "Upstairs. Why?--" But Barry was already lunging and yelling inside the bedroom top-right of the stairs, "Say it again, asshole!" The girls ran after to find Joe pacing, hands cupped beneath his nose, blood dripping from pointy knuckles. Satisfied Barry picked up a basketball and dribbled on yellow wood floor, a dusty heart-hollow thump thump near collapse. "You boys stop that racket up there!" the voice crackled from somewhere deep within the house--. Lainey had seen Clover's mother only twice, her large unruly teeth and dark tightly-curved hair, both times in red shorts and carrying a laundry basket. Usually she only heard her, never knowing where in the house the voice was coming from, but thankful for it, even if a bit afraid.

"Hey, Clover--" Barry turned, pushing the ball hard into Joe's stomach, Joe still wiping the red from his nose, (Lainey wondering if he might cry) "--Let's go

to *your* room.” The muffled clump-lump of worn-out boots bounced off paisley-printed wallpaper, gaping and colorless, peeling up at all corners as if in a desperate chest-clutch. Lainey sat on the corner of Clover’s bed and beside her Barry, saying nothing, sat too, ran a finger through her hair, studied the strand that lay across his palm a minute and rubbed the side of his leg against hers. A warmth rose inside her from her thighs to her stomach.

From across the room Clover watched, kicked a pile of dirty clothes into the closet, remembered the first time a boy looked at her that way. Her cousins laughed at her for being afraid, scared of Jimmy -- *Jimmy?* -- who was only playing, they said --but wasn’t he cute?-- and he likes you, they said, and she’d better jump on that and if she really wanted to get his attention she needed to show more skin. That afternoon, she went straight to her drawer and cut away the midriff of every shirt she had.

She had told it all to Lainey, who remembered this now too, who walked to the mirror, raised the hem of her shirt above her belly button and considered asking for a pair of scissors. She saw Barry watching and held it there, her breath trapped in her throat.

“You like to play with dolls?” he asked her.

“Only sometimes,” Lainey lied. “They’re kind of for babies.”

“I got a doll you can play with, *baby* --”

A passing cloud cast a shadow through the window, the room held its breath -- Lainey’s legs, stiff and stilt-like, paralyzed with confusion or excitement or fear, and Clover brushing blush onto sucked-in cheeks at the vanity. “Lainey’s taking

dance lessons,” she said into the mirror, looking now more to see Barry’s reaction than her own reflection. “No, I’m not,” Lainey protested because she wasn’t and she didn’t understand why Clover would say that-- wouldn’t be caught dead in those pink little tutus and pointy shoes and hair all in a bun and ribbon. “Sure you are, don’t lie,” Clover said, pushing her back toward Barry.

“I bet you’re a good dancer,” he said.

“Ask her about how she dances in the mirror, Barry.”

The sun returned in fiery strips, slashing-fierce and jagged through tattered blinds at the floor and Barry’s boots, a hot lash on the back of Lainey’s neck.

“Show me--.”

She tried--, tried to move her hips like the commercial-model, tried to feel the veil of safe and alone behind her own closed bedroom door. But her hands clenched too tightly the hem of her shirt for reasons she couldn’t explain; her hips stuck like a licked lollipop trying to fit back in its wrapper. Clover rolled her eyes. “She’s wearing special panties today, too.”

“Mmmmmmm. I bet they’re pink,” Barry said, and the way he breathed the word out his nostrils, how it quivered like a tongue over his wet mustache, how his fingers hinted at grabbing something as they hung now between his knees made Lainey hollow, as though she’d just done something wrong, though she didn’t know what. She stepped closer to Clover, who thought it was all very funny and laughed and said come on, it’s no big deal and that yes, they were pink. And

see? Mine are pink, too. She pulled down her own waistline to show them. To show him, but his gaze never left Lainey.

“Lemme see ‘em” he said through a sliver, jaw clenched in a slow-ripple. Nostrils flared, his breath filled the room with vinegar and he said it again, stepping toward her hips first. “Come on now, I just wanna little look, ain't nothin wrong with a little peek. You scared? You a baby? Huh?”

“I ain’t a baby, see?” and Lainey lowered just the hip of her waistband before Barry reached and grabbed at her, pulling them down just long enough for him to see--.

“Them ponies?” he said, confusion squinting his eyes, thrusting his head back into his neck. Then he laughed a saw-tooth laugh that cut straight through her. “You got ponies on your panties? Christ. You *are* a baby,” and as abruptly as he had started laughing he stopped, as if some great and serious purpose had just been revealed to him.

“I -- I need to go,” Lainey said. “I told my grandma I’d be home in time for lunch.”

“No you didn’t,” Clover said, her voice now a high-pitched shrill. “You didn’t say anything like that, I was there. She probably didn’t even hear you. Probably doesn’t even know you’re here.”

Clover looked to Barry; the right corner of her open mouth upturned in a sinister smirk, and nudged the door closed with her foot. Lainey rushed toward the closet, tucked herself between the dirty clothes and a broken dollhouse and

pulled the door closed tight between her and Barry, who laughed and whispered “I’ll get you baby girl,” and whose hand grasped the knob just as it latched. Feeling the pull and fearing it, she situated her back against the wall and propped a foot on each side of the door frame, clutched and prayed it would hold. Dread carried hot tears down her cheeks as bursts of breath exploded from her lungs, almost as if she too might be laughing somewhere deep within. Barry tugged at the door, thrusting harder and more and more rapidly, his breathing heavy, each jolt pressing her back further into the wall, darkening the bruise along the ridge of her spine.

“Bring’m on out here, baby girl.” His voice was low, urgent. “Better out here than in there.”

“Stop ... Please I wanna go back. Clover... Make him stop ... I’m scared-- Clover --?”

“Oh, Lainey, honey,” Clover laughed a pitiful laugh, fondled a loose ribbon of hair on her shoulder, pouted her lips in the mirror, inspected her sucked-in stomach, a side-flung hip, spied the reflection of Barry still holding onto the closet door, but watching her instead.. “You know well as I do there ain’t no goin back.”

She turned to face Barry. “This is gettin old,” her low voice little more than a breathy whisper, a finger still twirling the loose lock held closer to her lips now, its tip aglow in a rogue sunbeam. “She ain’t comin out--, and I’d just as soon you not break my closet door to get to her. Let’s go see what Joe’s doin.”

From inside, Lainey felt Barry's grip loosen and slide away. A kaleidoscope of quiet, of dark and light, danced beneath the door and filled the room with still. She let a long time pass before setting down her right foot and then her left, before loosening her grip, before emerging from the closet into the lingering stench of sweat and makeup. Delicate and slow, she padded across the soulless floor, over the threshold, down the stairs, a single hand outstretched in the descent. Unfeeling fingers slid unsoothed over the textured-paisley wall, and it was this feeling that carried her finally out the front door, screen door slapping, rip-hole flapping metallic and gnashy, where she teetered a moment on a loose cinder block, then made her way across the street, forgetting and not forgetting.

She climbed the front porch stairs to her grandmother's house not noticing the street-gravel etched into her feet, nor the box fan now unplugged, nor the still-dead cicada, nor the earth's mournful dirges pulsing from some invisible vein among the leaf-shadows. She stepped over the orange extension cord not hearing the youngest of the Miller boys standing on his porch, yelling to see what she was doing and did she want to come play.

She wanted to run to her mother and clutch her neck and bite into her shoulder and feel the cradle of her arms and the warmth of her breath that smelled like cotton. But her mother wasn't there. It would not have mattered if she was. Instead she slid quietly into the house and into the bathroom, locked the door and cried without knowing why. She slid out of her clothes, letting them fall into a heap onto the sticky yellowed linoleum.

“You ‘bout done in there?” her grandmother beckoned trying the knob, leaning in. She patted a batter-damp wood spoon against the door. “I’ve been lookin’ for you-- thought you might like to make some sweetbread.”

A car cuglugged past the front of the house. A mower coughed to life in the distance. Lainey wiped her moist cheeks with the backs of her hands, eyes down tracing rust stains to the sink drain, grime in the porcelain, refusing to face herself in the mirror. “I’ll be out in a minute,” she said in a forced high-pitch, and placed a soft, tiny wad of fabric into the trash beneath a cluster of toilet paper rolls, no longer noticing the pink nor the ponies, only the feint light-shimmer of silk that wasn’t silk.

ANT BAIT

If you feel murderous, I tell my husband--
Let them think they've hit the Mother lode behind the toilet.

Crouch on your hands and knees and watch closely.
Press a cheek to the damp filth -- the hair and toenail clippings.
Open your mouth.
Invite them in.
Tongue their black-bodied daisy chains against your pointed teeth.
Let them wander in the wrinkles of your brain.
Tell them this is the way to the Promised Land.

Solomon said go the ant; consider her ways and be wise.
But you and Bud the bug guy know better:

Survival is a fatal vice,
An ancient tug in the hollow chin--
 Follow follow the pheromone;
 Follow the fool to the fallow--
The sallow seduction, the surrogate crop,
Slow and sweet to swell the bellies.
--too easy

Laugh and poke elbows in each other's ribs.

Smack Bud on the back.

Say it was Darwin had it right, not Solomon,

Thinking it was you he meant all this time.

If you feel murderous,

Wipe the floor-crusted urine off your face with scented tissue.

Genuflect with your handheld broom,

Thank the maternal urge

that brought them here.

Sweep up the corpses,

The mangled tangled legs --

Sprinkle them onto our daughters' tongues;

shut their mouths tight.

Not in *my* house! tell them and feel strong,

And know this is the least of the damage you have done.

MILES TO GO

The force of the gasoline pulsed through her as she clutched the handle, squeezed the oversized trigger of the pump. What a splash it must make when it first bursts in, Marie thought and studied the hardened hand, still steady at 74, steadier even, grittier. She inhaled. The fumes on this cool April morning shot straight to her knees and elbows. She inhaled again, squeezed harder. A wisp of white hair tickled above her brow in sync with the sycamore buds that danced above. With it, the breeze carried calm, tasted of hot brown and grits from Mae's Kitchen.

A sudden kick slowed the pulse to a trickle. The still, cold metal reminded Marie of the last time she touched her husband's hand. His then, like hers now, had changed. There was a time when nothing could fit her hand the way his did. A time when hers were soft and delicate, accustomed to mothering and diapering and washing dishes and his warm, strong, protective. That was before, of course.

What would he think of these hands, stained with soil and the scent of motor oil?

Maybe the gas nozzle is a better fit these days.

A utilities truck raised a jacketed hard hat and tool belt to the junction box at Second and Providence. Silhouetted savior on a cross backlit by the tangerine glow of a low and rising sun. Barbra would be calling today to invite her again to Easter Sunday service. Come visit with the kids. A big dinner afterward. Ham, the

whole bit. A sigh escaped her lungs, through her parted lips. Puffed a white ghost chrysanthemum into the air. “*Oh, Cheeks.*”

Old people, thought the young woman at the adjacent pump, shaking her head, believing she’d just overheard an oddly intimate conversation with the gas nozzle named Cheeks. She jammed a credit card into the reader, yanked it out and tossed it bouncing on its end into the driver’s seat of her Honda Civic hatchback. She squeezed the trigger three times, then groaned. Forgot to press the button again. This had become routine.

Stop with the goddamn beeping, already. I get it.

The gas finally pumping itself she crossed her arms, tapped an index finger on her sleeve, her cuticles pink and chewed. A spot of dried blood rested in the corner of her thumb nail. Her knuckles, swollen from constant cracking her grandmother had told her would cause arthritis if she didn’t stop. An old wives’ tale, the girl would say back.

Marie might never have noticed the young woman had it not been for the violent banging, the beeping of the machine, the intermittent ding of the cell phone, the urgent click of the trigger, the *come on, come on!* It all seemed too much, too fast. A spinning wheel with no traction; a whole bunch of movement going nowhere.

Not quite 30. Marie estimated. *Older than 20.* *With the patience of a toddler.*

“Honey, your card-- ,” she attempted, leaning in, hand still on the nozzle.

“No! No--Nononononono!” the girl sputtered, thumbs now clicking frenzied at her phone. “Oh my *God!* Why did I *marry* you?” She placed a hand on the back windshield and peered inside where sat a red plastic jug her husband had placed there intending for her to fill. *I’ll fill the tank, but I am not mowing the grass.*

“I’m sorry,” she puffed. Cocked her head in Marie’s direction. “What did you say?”

“I was going to remind you to get your card,” Marie pointed, the girl struggled to remove the cap from the gas can.

“Before that,” she grunted. “You said a name or something. Who were you talking to?”

“Cheeks,” Marie said. “That was my husband’s name. Well, it was what we all called him, anyway. I’m not sure why. Such a silly sounding name. But not the way he wore it --.

“He wore it like only he could, strong and sure, with good humor. Somehow it fit. But on him, anything would. He had been a strong man, a family man. A working man. Could shimmy up a utility pole quick as lightning, repair a blown transformer and shimmy back down again before you knew he was gone. He was stocky -- not too tall -- with curly black hair, a neck and face the color of honey, and arms as dark as hide. But beneath his clothes he was gray white,” she laughed. “It was as if the skin on his chest and legs had never known a day without a work shirt and blue jeans --.”

Marie alone saw that part of him, the gray underneath. Watched it grow grayer toward the end. In the mornings, when she changed his clothes, and in the night, when she woke to walk him to the bathroom, when his white tee-shirt stuck to his gaunt, sweaty shoulders and the exposed flesh of his lower back grabbed at her arm. There is no comfort with a fever.

She alone watched as the tan faded and the soft black curls turned to kinked strands of electrical wire. And the legs bowed, and the walking slowed, the back went and the coughing fits came more and more.

She alone rocked and prayed the rosary at his bedside, tucking and tending, with her soft, mothering hands until he slipped away.

The young woman half-listened to Marie, but fully regretted having asked the question before. She would be late again, had been texting her boss, who had threatened her job the last time: *Running late. Cat got out again. Had to crawl under the house. Out now. Be there soon.* The pump beeped at her again asking if she wanted a receipt.

“Well, he sounds like a nice man,” she said. She had heard enough of what Marie said to know this much and thought this an appropriate response, perhaps even a polite exit from the conversation. She hadn’t, however, intended to speak in that tone - the one young people use when they talk to old people as if they are doing them a favor, as if speaking to a child in need of praise. Marie forgave her this; it was a familiar tone, generally unintended. *She’ll know soon enough*, she thought, then continued.

“Oh, everybody loved Cheeks. And he couldn’t help but love everybody. He had a heart of gold --.”

Of course that was just the kind of thing you said to people. But it was more than that, Marie knew. Cheeks has a heart of tears. Happy tears, sad tears, tears of all kinds. It was what she loved most about him. How he could be moved to crying at times of tenderness, or of joy or of grief. Sometimes he cried because he never believed he could be this happy. Never believed he could find a wife like Marie, and she knew him better than anyone.

Knew the soft spot he had for children and Hallmark commercials. How he had worried when he wrapped his blunt, calloused fingers around their infant children as if each was made of glass. How he read the Sunday paper back to front so he’d know how it ended before nodding off. How he brushed his teeth longer in the morning than he did at night, and how delicately he held the false ones, cleaning every porcelain piece until it glinted after the real ones had gone. How he’d wipe the spoon dry and tuck it back in the drawer so she wouldn’t know he’d been sampling the pot roast again. (Of course, she knew. She always knew.) How he’d lean to listen for the katydids through the window screen when he could no longer sit on the porch. Longed for the sudden ghost-breeze to slip in like a secret in the night, forcing him to pull the covers up to his chin, but not before touching her shoulder softly, feeling the warmth of her sleeping body, making sure she was alright.

“He was always making sure I was alright--,” Marie said.

Making sure she didn't have to worry about money, or to mow the grass, or to work a job or to pump the gas into their first new car -- a mint green 1963 Buick Riviera -- or any Buick that came after it. It had never occurred to either of them that it wouldn't always be that way, not until it wasn't. Perhaps too late, he had tried to tell her--

To pump the choke on the mower like crazy before tugging on the cord to start her up. (*You can't pull it easy, now, Marie. You gotta yank that sucker like you mean it!*)

Where to pay the electric bill and on what day.

To lift the top and pull up the float bulb when the toilet just keeps running. To turn off the water *here* if it starts acting like it wants to overflow, and which plumber to call and which one not to.

To tell the gas attendant at the station how much before putting in the nozzle. To turn on the pump and watch *there* to make sure not to pump too much. (*And if you pump too much, to just go back in and pay what you owe. And if you don't have it, just tell them. If it's Mick, he'll let it slide. If it's Johnny, he'll make you kick if off a little early next time.*) This always made Marie laugh.

Perhaps too late, he had tried to tell her everything. Strained to lift his head from the pillow, his neck a circus-canopy of sagging, spotted skin over pulled-tight tendons. The color of yellowed linen. Tried with uncooperative arms to show her how--, to point to where--, to measure how much--. And she, hearing none of it, only seeing and feeling and patting him gently, *I'll be alright. I'll be alright. I'll be alright.*

“The day he died,” Marie continued, “all I could think about was what that palm reader told me so many years ago, so many years before I even met Cheeks-
-.”

Her hands, like rose petals, silken, delicate in her lap, draped with opal beads and a crucifix, folded open and slowly the perfectly manicured nail of her right thumb traced back and forth the semicircular crease from beneath her left index finger, through the middle of her palm, and down to her wrist. *That’s your lifeline*, the palmist told her. *Unusually long*. She hadn’t believed it then, didn’t want to believe it now. Fearing it to be true, she clasped her hands over Cheeks’, leaned her body over his and wept.

“So, before that, you had never pumped gas or paid the bills or mowed the grass?” the young woman asked. She had been doing those things since she was 12. All except paying the bills. That, she started doing at 18. Online. While she was away at college. Finally, even if out of surprise, she looked, really looked at Marie, finally really seeing the woman who had shared so much with her at this run-down relic of a gas station. How comfortable she seemed, even if a little slow, at managing the gas pump. Her pastel colored short-sleeve shirt -- buttoned to the neck, untucked. Faded blue jeans. Slip-on canvas shoes. She reminded the girl of her grandmother, or maybe she only wanted her to. She’d been gone a long time.

“Never had to,” Marie said. “Times were different. Women stayed in the home. We took care of the children. Cleaned them, fed them. Kept house. Nobody questioned whether that was important. In the car, we rode in the passenger seat, waited for the door to be opened. Let our boys be gentlemen.”

Both women had allowed the nozzles to rest in place though the gasoline flow had long stopped. It was a slow day at the station; not a single car other than their two had pulled in. Barely any movement at all inside the store.

“You must have hated it,” she said. “You seem so ... independent.”

Marie laughed. “Oh honey, I never hated it. I never knew any other way. And I loved Cheeks. And he loved me. We had a good marriage. A loving home. I never felt trapped. Didn’t even know a woman could. Cheeks took care of me the way a gentleman would back then. Maybe I didn’t know how to do any of these things when he was alive, but I never would have believed I could, if it weren’t for him.”

A moment of silence passed before the young woman thanked her.

“For what?” Marie asked.

“I don’t know exactly” she said. “It just seems like the right thing to say, So, thank you, I guess, for telling me your story.”

“Well, alright then. Thank you for listening,” Marie responded.

The girl had already ducked into her car, inserted the key into the ignition.

“Oh, don’t forget your card,” Marie shouted over the engine.

“My what?”

“It’s on the ground there, your credit card. It fell out of your car when you dropped it in before.”

When she opened the door to grab the card, an ink pen fell out and rolled beneath the car. Too far for her to reach, she left it rolling back and forth before it

stopped, as if it had forgotten how to move. As the little blue hatchback drove off, Marie felt almost sorry for the pen.

“You ’bout done?” a familiar voice brought her back. “Thought maybe you broke it or something.”

Bobby laughed as he strode back to the truck with a Mountain Dew Big Gulp in one hand, a roll of powdered doughnuts in the other. It’d been a steady diet of sugar for breakfast and fried you-name-it for dinner and -- to hell with what the doctor said -- 70-odd years of working on the farm and it hadn’t slowed him yet. And Marie loved that smile. Saw it in his eyes he meant it. Had seen it the first day she met him. But, it took several more meetings and two and a half years before he would convince her that it was truly genuine. Bobby was a man who loved his family, and had loved his wife deeply before she died. Still did.

“You ok?” He could tell her mind was on something else.

“Oh, I’m OK,” she said slowly. “Just had a nice talk that took me back, that’s all.”

“Who with?”

“Just a young woman in a hurry. In the little blue car there.”

She nodded her head in the direction of the car sputtering away, recalling how moments earlier Bobby had stopped and waited while she sped in front of him.

“She was running late,” Marie added. “Sweet girl.”

Bobby opened the doughnuts and offered her one. Marie declined.

“Well, what did you talk about?”

“Oh, you know,” she shrugged. “Men.”

A smile spread wide across Bobby’s face.

“Well, what’d you say?”

“Not much, really. Just how they can shape us, change us, love us. Maybe even teach us a thing or two.” She winked, gesturing at the gas nozzle, which had finally overstayed its welcome.”

“That a bad thing?”

The couple laughed. Marie wasn’t sure how to respond. For her, no, not a bad thing at all. But, she wondered for the young woman.

“I guess it all depends.”

Plucking the heavy metal handle from the side of the truck, Marie confessed to Bobby what he already knew. “You know I never pumped gas before I met you?”

“You hadn’t?” he played along. “Well, you seem to be pretty good at it now. Reckon with a little more practice, you might get good as me. Next, I’ll teach you how to skin a deer.”

There was that smile again. Bobby had a gift for understanding without belaboring. He touched her hand, kissed her cheek. Marie placed the nozzle back into its holster at the pump, waved politely to Johnny inside the store who nodded in return.

“I suppose so,” she said to herself, clicking the gas cap into place, closing the lid, believing that she could. Skin a deer. If she wanted. And she slid her

fingers over the side panel of the blue and white Ford F150, tucked a knuckle under the handle of the driver's side door and climbed in.

SOMETHING LIKE REGRET

I get my calories from Weetabix

And wine.

Not at the same time.

That would be

Inappropriate.

Weetabix in the morning.

Then wine and wine and wine.

Then, mama, mama I want some and

Can I have some, please.

And no, baby, this is not for you.

Then, sure, baby, just a taste.

A body tires of all these Ws.

Needs to lie down.

Needs the baby to lie down.

Needs it all to just lie down.

Until tomorrow,

When some more,

And some more.

A NEED FOR A MAN

I've killed him hundreds of times, I say. Crushed him in a head-on collision on I-95 on the way home from his mother's. Pummeled him to the concrete by a two-ton pallet dropped by a forklift that shouldn't have passed safety inspection. Strangled him in a mishap at the mall involving an escalator and the unusually long scarf I gave him for Christmas that year. Imagined all types of dormant, deadly conditions: Aneurysm. Seizure. Blood clot. Heart failure. Sometimes I feel bad about it, I say, because you're supposed to apologize when you wish somebody dead, even if you mean it. But mostly, especially lately, I just let myself imagine.

It's not that I don't love him. Andy – that's his name; I marry him, anyway. Willfully, mostly. He convinces me we'll be happy together. That eventually I'll warm to the idea of having a husband, a man around the house. "Nobody is totally independent," he says. "Nobody wants to be alone all the time." Only I know he's just trying to make me feel small and helpless, like the girls back home who always have boyfriends. Engaged before they graduate, married six months later and pregnant six months after that if they aren't already. Girls who smell like soap and nail polish, who never go to the bathroom alone.

Boys are a distraction, mom says first when I'm 6 and learning to tie my shoes. "They're trouble. Trouble," she repeats, jerking the frayed laces of my shoe too hard, yanking my foot up off the floor, flopping it back down like a tea bag, fumbling to tie them, untie them and tie them again. "You're better off without them." She smiles too big and pats the tops of my feet tied tight like balloon animals about to pop. "There now, see?"

I never really understand what she means until a couple years later when Tommy Jenkins tries to kiss me on the mouth on the monkey bars. After I push him off and give him a concussion he tells all his friends I'm really a boy dressed up like a girl, which doesn't matter all that much except that kids start to believe him. And me wearing my cousin Jake's old jeans and T-shirts to school every day only confuses the matter, I suppose.

"Don't you worry about him," she tells me, cigarette dangling from her lips, dish towel over the shoulder, eyes brimming hot and bloodshot from too little sleep. "You don't need him or anybody. You've got me and I've got you. And that's about all we need, I think. Fact, we don't need anything at all, long as we've got us." She looks at the sink when she talks, pink hands hidden by the suds of too much dish soap and too-hot water.

It doesn't come easy, not needing. If a faucet drips, a toilet clogs, a room needs painting or tire needs changing, you can't just will it gets done and it does. And you can't ask someone else to do it for you. You have to study, to figure, to plan. You have to decide resolutely that you can take care of it, and then you do. So I'm sure he's wrong when he tells me everybody needs somebody. When he

swears he'll wait, wait for me to come around to needing, no matter how long it takes. "This guy isn't going anywhere," he says. Wait, I say. Just wait. And he does. Waits a full year and a half before I even go to bed with him. But it's not because I need to, not even because I want to. I feel sorry for him is all. Here he is bringing me pizza on lunch breaks and showing up uninvited with a bottle of wine and a picnic basket as if he has nothing more important to do than to make sure I know he's thinking about me. After that, what else can I do but lie in bed each night and let him spread my thighs and grunt till exhaustion and wonder how can he be satisfied with this.

One morning he says, "Do you love me?"

I blink heavy and sigh. "Sure."

It's not even a lie, I tell myself; love can mean lots of things.

"But are you *in love* with me?" he says.

"What does that even mean," I say.

People in movies fall in love and it's all roses and soft music and lovemaking for hours but that doesn't really happen. In love is a fantasy, just a high school boy with unromantic fingers drunk in a field party truck bed. I look around at the mess of food and dishes from last night's dinner and wonder if this is what in love means to him.

He crosses his arms and props his six-foot frame against the countertop.

"We're roommates," he says.

"Great roommates," I say.

"But do you want me? Do you need me?"

“I want you to help me wash the dishes,” I try to joke, “or else I’ll need you to get out of the kitchen.”

I’m 11 when I start my period. Mom and I are sitting on the piano bench. I unfold the tissue, show her the faint brown-red stain shaped like an arrowhead. I don’t say a word. She sees the tissue in my hand, feels me looking at her, must know I need her to say something like it’s OK or isn’t this great you’re becoming a woman or how about we go get some ice cream and celebrate. Instead she just slides her fingers from the tops of the black keys into the valleys of white, like she’s stroking the head of a cat, slow, smooth, and it’s not even a song she’s playing, just a bunch of notes and chords, sharps and flats. A streak of mascara runs down her cheek. I don’t even know why she’s wearing mascara. Then the doorbell rings and she tells me to go to my room and I hear a man’s voice before the door shuts.

“Seriously, I feel like I could just leave, like you wish I wasn’t here so you could go find somebody else,” he says.

“I never wish you weren’t here,” I say. “I don’t want anyone else.”

The second part is true, anyway.

One night I come home and his car’s not in the driveway and I wonder where he’s gone and think it looks like I’m bringing in the trash bins again. In the rearview mirror, my son’s face glows blue from the cell phone. I watch for a moment the ghost of his reflection, the still attentiveness. “We’re home,” I say.

“Time to get out.” I pat his knee, hold out my palm, wiggle my fingers. “Come on, Bennie. Give Mommy the phone. I need to call Daddy and let him know we’re home.” I resent it, try to hide it in my voice.

I don’t notice the man walking toward the car, his arms bare, his face glowing red in the tail lights, his breath billowing behind his head like pink cotton. I don’t see him until he nears the side of the car. I lock the door and wonder how much protection a latch and a pane of glass can really give. I grab the gear shift to put it in park, only it’s already in park so I try to put it in drive, in case I need to get away quickly, but I put it in reverse instead. Then neutral. I press my foot hard on the brake. Tell myself to get it together. Tell myself this is stupid. I’m being stupid. Bennie’s sleeping now. His face still blue from the phone. I hear the tap on my window and so I roll it down inches, maybe three, probably too much, I roll it back up slightly.

“Can I help you?” I say, like I’m the attendant at a drive-through window. He mutters something about a son, a friend’s son, a son’s friend maybe, played together -- basketball? -- just got back-- from Iraq, something-first-class-something- something--.

“Wait,” I say. “I don’t-- I can’t understand you.”

He leans in, his breath fogs the top of my window.

“[Something]-first-class ... played with your son ... new [something] shoes ...” he keeps on muttering and I tell him I think he must be looking for someone else. Then he reaches for the door handle like he’s going to try to open it but he doesn’t, and I can’t remember if I locked it, but instead, he rubs a finger

against the glass like he's never felt anything so smooth, or maybe like it reminds him of something, and he leans in and looks hard at my hand and then the steering wheel and I clutch the gear shift tighter and press on the brake and wonder what he is doing out here in the cold with no coat and where has he been and what has he done that's got him acting this way. And I wonder what is that in his eyes, like a flashlight flickering at the bottom of a well, what is that? A cry catches in my throat and I hate myself for being so weak.

The headlights don't faze him. He just stands there, his finger on the glass and eyes peering in, only now they just look sad, lost, like he's forgotten something, or like he wants to forget. Andy walks up beside him and says "Can I help you?" and I want to laugh and I wonder what is it that makes us say things like that when we know the answer is no and we're not really interested in helping anyway, just in being left alone.

I just sit there in the driver's seat while the two men talk -- one incomprehensible, his voice unsteady, the other coherent, in control. Sit there like I'm waiting to be told what to do. Sit there just looking until Andy points to the back seat and then to the house and I know he's telling me to take Ben inside and so I do.

I go inside and deadbolt the door behind me. Unbolt it. Bolt it back. Take Ben upstairs. Catch a glimpse of myself putting him down in his bed and think I don't look like me. Pull the covers up and over his tiny shoulders, catch the faintest scent of milk in his breath, remember Andy outside. Imagine him bludgeoned to death with a tire iron by a man he stopped to help on the street.

Turn off the light. Recall a coworker who keeps a pistol in the left-hand corner of her glove compartment.

THIS TO WHICH WE'VE COME

The man's shadow stretched long and easy over the sand to a length ten times his stature. Half a sun hung hard to the left, low and quivering, its tangerine tongue licked the watery horizon to wake his side of the world. For as long as Gus had been here, he'd been the first. First to feel the warm yellow-orange spill along the length of his calves, his knees, his thighs, penetrate the thicket of gray-red hair curled to a thousand tiny slip knots on cracked-leather skin. First to glimpse the white foam lapping against the purple sea. To taste the salt in the air. To feel the crunch of shell, black and gray and colorless, beneath bare feet on the last first step of the boardwalk. First to feel the cling of the not-yet.

He patted for the lure in his shirt pocket then wiped his brow beneath his ball cap with a cotton cloth, dingy and gray. And thus began the walk he'd made at just this hour in just this way to just this stretch of shore so many times now that his gait would have tilted slightly to the right even without the weight of the bucket. A sure step with the left foot, a slight drag of the right. A sure step left, slight drag right. Sure left, slight right. Sure and slight. From above, a series of dots and dashes in the sand. A pattern. Code maybe. Or story. Anymore, not even Gus would have known which.

Still and silent, the first hours passed lulled by the thousand white whispers shooshing against the sand and Gus's arthritic toes. The fishing line, cast in little hope of a catch, lolled limply with the tide, bait sometimes there

sometimes not when Gus reeled it in. And he, perched on the bait bucket in quiet contemplation, standing only when necessary to replace the bait and recast, occasionally looking to his right. Not yet.

From about a hundred yards east came the clanging of mallet to post, a familiar sound, a sound of hope at first, and then anger, sometimes desperation, eventual submission. A young wife unpacked an overloaded beach cart and baby wriggled to free himself from the clutch of the stroller harness, while the young husband, the source of the clanging, pounded the base of a beach umbrella. Clang. Clang. Never moving. Clang.

“It’ll never hold,” Gus muttered, chuckled, shook his head. Still looking at the ocean. Talking to no one but the waves. “You gotta drill down deep--. Down deep to get the teeth in. Got to catch it in the deep and dark. Can’t just go hittin’ at it. It’ll never hold.”

He considered putting down his rod and walking over to the young family. Could save them a lot of trouble. Lot of frustration, he thought. He watched the woman point here and there and up at the sun and down to the sand. Gus couldn’t hear her, but he knew what she was saying. *Hurry up! And The baby’s getting fussy. And Don’t you know what you’re doing? And Oh my God! Let me do it.* And the man, who kept pounding at the pole, who was sweating and cursing, who threw down the mallet and looked to her and raised his hands and shrugged his shoulders and thrust his palms to the baby, who sweated and squealed, and to the mother, who said *We shouldn’t have come. I knew this wouldn’t work. So stupid,*

and to the pole and to the endless, cloudless sky as if some answer was there that he and she and they were all looking for.

“The answer ain’t there,” Gus muttered, stared still at the waves, and reckoned it best to stay where he was. “It ain’t here neither.”

The heron ruffled its wing slightly at the sound of Gus’s voice. Ruffled it just enough Gus caught the movement out of the corner of his right eye. Its other wing clutched tight to its side as if held there by a sling, never moved.

“Well hello there, Blue,” Gus acknowledged. “I was wondering when you’d show up.”

Standing in his usual manner, the heron cast no shadow he could call his own. Statued there on a stick leg, only one, spindly stretched-out claw covered and uncovered by the tide, the heron nodded to him, turned back to the waves. To the line. To what might bite onto the end of it. Gus turned to look at the bird, haggard, dagger-like beak slightly parted -- hungry or tired, Gus could never tell which -- neck a loose S, knobby, lopsided S, like a snake falling from a tree. Like a knotty shoelace. Gray-white-brown colored, shades of defeat.

“Never occurred to me how much you look like Fuller,” Gus said. “Skinny, lanky fella. Long neck. Hair slicked back in front, all regal-like, greased like he was some kind of gangster in one a them movies, only it wouldn’t lay flat in the back. Always a black tuft sticking out from the back of his head, the rest of it gray.”

The heron scanned the horizon. He’d grown used to the man’s voice by now. Used to his movements, the grunts and curses, the zips of the line being cast,

the clicks of the reel that brought it back in again and again. And again. The stills and silences that always won out, eventually.

“One-legged, too. Lost it in a card game. What he always said. Lyin’ bastard.”

Truth was, Gus hadn’t seen Fuller in a decade. Not Fuller or Sipes or Newt or any of the guys. Not since he’d left.

“*Squawk! Squawk!*” A heavy-set woman, arms flapping, voice cackling, beer lapping over the white rim of a red Solo cup, came running-stumbling over the dunes at the man and the heron, trying to run it off he supposed. Gus cursed her under his breath.

“*Shoo! Shoo!*” she shrieked, squawking at the bird trying to get it to move. Man and bird craned necks to the left just enough to see her lose her balance, to see the red cup fly, to hear the dusting of displaced sand thud against their feet and the bottom of the bucket. To hear the shriek, the laughter.

“Boozin’ already, Brenda?” Gus said flatly, not sure whether she could hear him and not caring.

“Why not?” she asked, grunting to right herself. Time and leisure had not been kind. “Not a whole lot better to do. It’s why we’re here, ain’t it? Why we been here all this time? Relax? Unwind? Get away from it all?”

Brenda hadn’t adjusted to their new life. To the beach, sure. To the heat, a bit. The shiny winters were a far cry from the gauzy wet-gray she’d known before in Kentucky. But to the nothing to do and no one to do it with, she’d grown resentful. He took her and she came thinking they’d escape together. She eyed the

bird. “*Squook! Shwawk!*” a last flap of the arms, attempt at running in place to scare it off, before collapsing to a seated position in the sand.

“You had breakfast?” she asked.

“Had breakfast,” Gus said. He hadn’t, but it didn’t make any difference.

“When are you comin’ in?” she kept on. “I’d like to go shopping later, you know I don’t like to drive. Can’t anyway ... not right now. Did you put on sunscreen? Gus...?”

Gus had stopped listening, stopped long before now. Only studied the white-foam caps lapping in the distance, the turbulence beneath, and beneath that the deep deep still. A fish could be totally free down there, all that space, bigger than any freedom he would know. He listened again for the whisper. Looked for the sun, now white-yellow, high and hot. Felt the sweat drip from his nose. Wiped his brow again. Watched the line dance and slice through the waves. Felt the pull.

The heron straightened its neck, watched intently as the tip of the pole bowed down and up and down again. Gus’s grip tightened, the muscles of his forearms, long unused, found their purpose, pulled and tightened and reeled, and Gus stood and jerked the pole back, knocked the cap off his head and unsettled the heron and finally, pulled the fish up out of the water, hook buried deep in its yellow throat.

“Dammit,” the man said. “Gut hooked. Musta been hungry, huh fella?” he said, thinking he was talking to the fish. Until he felt the heron, its eyes fierce and dark, watching. “Now, hold on--.”

He grasped it near the head, caressed down the silvery-blue dorsal fin. “Swallowed the whole damn thing. Hooked deep. Have to go in through the gill.” His thick fingers fumbled a second or two before the hook caught his thumb and the sight of blood set him off. The blood. The barbed hook. The delusion of rescue. And the more he fumbled, the more the fish wriggled to free itself, the deeper the hook went. “Just gotta pop it,” Gus said to himself, to the fish, to the heron, to the hot still air. “Just ... gotta ... pop it ... loose. Hold on, now hold on -- .”

“-- *Hold on, Mike, while I cut the barbed wire from his neck ...*”

Newt’s boy, Mike, he was only 13 when it happened. Could hardly talk at the sight of it, much less hold him up, but he tried. Tried to do what Gus told him, tried to help him save Tom, who was 15 and strong and as far as anyone was concerned, was fit to live forever as long as luck was on his side. He’d been driving the farm truck to his Papaw’s. The buck came rushing out of nowhere, caught its haunches on the front fender, sent the truck reeling and Tom through the windshield and into the fence. Barbed wire wrapped around his neck. Gus and Mike were first to find him there.

Gus stared at the blood leaking from the fish, flushing over his knuckles in waves --

Gotta get it out, Gus thought. Gotta get the barb out--,

Get it out from around his neck --, *Might still be time to save him--*. Even though there wasn’t, and -- *watch out boy, don’t let him fall, lemme just cut this wire here, and you hold onto him, now Mike--*, *don’t let him fall*. But he doesn’t

hold on and Tommy falls rubber-legged, face first into the muddy ditch and Gus hears himself yelling *Goddammit boy I told you to hold him steady and not to let him fall. Git em up. Git em up now dammit, fore his daddy gets here.* And he wiped the mud from Tom's face, only the mud kept getting replaced by blood and the more he wiped, the bloodier it got and it occurred to Gus there's no cleaning up a mess like this.

And the heron watched. Not yet. Not yet.

And the fish's eyes, black, bulging pearls, screaming, pleading, reminded Gus of the black-eyed girl at the IGA counter -- mascaraed eyes bulging, waiting on him and his deli sandwich and he stood there stupid, her shining black eyes waiting, and he forgot about the sandwich and about the work he had to do that day and all he could think about was blood and mud and barbed wire and he caught a glimpse out of the corner of his eye -- special deal -- Magic Bait -- and he took it.

"Give me a pack a Marlboro Red and this here bait," Gus said, digging for the \$20 in his shirt pocket, and it shined in her big wet-black pearl eyes and he began to walk away and she waved his plastic-wrapped sandwich at him saying *Sir, Sir, don't you want your sandwich? Are you going to take your sandwich?* and she wagged it at him back and forth and the sandwich started looking to him like it was kind of silvery in the fluorescent light and kind of wiggling like a fish -
-

-- a fish, now in his hand on the beach, with its black bulging eyes and bloody mouth mouthing *Take the sandwich, take your sandwich! Take it with you. Take it--.*

“I don’t want the goddamn sandwich!”

His voice stabbed at the still salt-air, and he remembered his fingers, calloused and bloody, holding firm the body no longer struggling, just waiting, perhaps even wondering whether it would ever again feel the ocean, taste it, breathe it. A fish can be a glorious optimist. And finally, hook and fish and finger now loose, red spatter on the sand, Gus stroked it like a baby’s head and cried and wondered where the fight had gone.

The heron raised its wing as if about to take flight, or maybe, after remembering it couldn’t, to make itself appear bigger than it was. It lowered its neck, tilted and lunged and hopped flapping its wing, a sorry lopsided sight in flight toward the old man still holding the fish who puffed out his chest and raised his head and stood stolid.

“You don’t want this fish,” the man said. “You don’t want it, and it ain’t yours. Ain’t mine either. But only one of us here gets to decide, and by God this time it’s gonna be me. I’ll decide.”

As quickly as the charge had begun it stopped. The heron, less than three feet away studied the man with the fish in his hand. The three of them, still now, breathed short and shallow breaths, none knowing what the others would do next. Gus was the first and only to move. Sure and slight. Sure and slight into the water. Crouched low to the water’s surface, smoother now, he slipped the fish through

the sheen and held it there wishing, willing it to move again. Until at last a flutter so faint, a fragile lunge, the slow surrender of the shimmer into the yellow, the green, the black. And the heron watched and the fisherman watched, both and neither the same.

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