


Shirley

ISSUE TWO

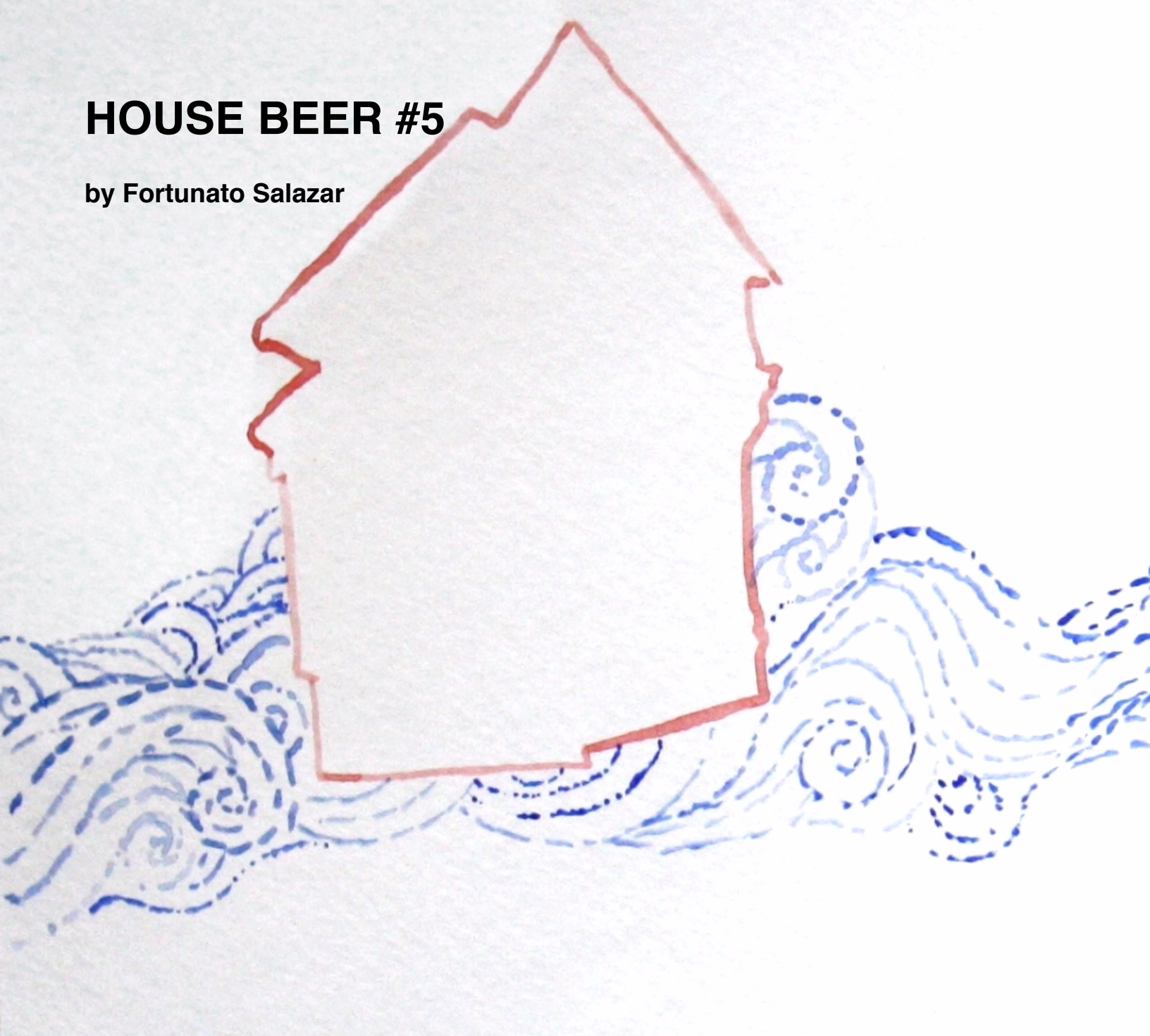


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HOUSE BEER #5

by Fortunato Salazar



The morning and its ridiculous ending didn't change the fact that she still could admire her waist. Okay, her thighs were freeway barrels, essentially, but that came with the territory. Soon the territory would be withered. You could see it in her thighs as well as in her ribs, which resembled wispy contrails.

She aimed a kick at the hem of her trousers. Those trousers, what a spoiled child. She really needed to whip them into shape. Possibly she could find a utility pole and make a reservation. Let's say, six weeks from now at the entrance to her own home. And then another six weeks to stomp them into shape.

Attrition accounted for the missing toe, but that too came with the territory. No matter what she slathered on, sunshine permeated her sturdy boots. If only it were sunshine: well, it was sunshine, but the problem was that it wasn't only sunshine.

Meanwhile the boots became, essentially, obedient mountains. Unkempt mountains, tangling with utility poles. And the endless Palaces of Versailles at the summits of utility poles. Disheveled palaces. Utility poles ingested, at a snail's pace, by the tufted dry lake bed, so that what was left was mainly crown, and all the attendant slobbering; hardcore slobbering, the kind that permeated.

Yuck! Slobber or a spit curse had actually made contact with something way back in her throat, possibly her epiglottis, if that was even possible. Among all the other factors in the way of mustering the will to live, now this.

People took such interesting routes toward their petty burning. It was adorable, almost, how they stuck to their routes. It was awkward when she felt impressed—she tended to neglect to keep her mouth shut. Now she shut her eyes and imagined her defiled epiglottis, quite possibly permanently defiled, with a pale blotch like a laundry stain.

The harder she worked to keep the slobber away from that orifice, the more the orifice went with its animal intuition and formed itself into an ugly or at least unusual expression.

Of all the, fuck, absurd weaknesses...as she didn't have a mirror, she borrowed a utility pole and consulted with the wide-awake surveillance at its crown...tens of minutes passed before she could bring herself to blatantly confront the totally new exotic disfiguration...if that's what it was. She would need to check back again to be sure. Meanwhile, dark globs of slobber ricocheted every which way, untended.

Vanity and at the same time, Good morning! Welcome another exotic disfiguration!

Looking ahead to the growing seasons of the future, tufts would be the natural enemies of tufts. That is, each tuft would closely guard its own secret. Meaning she would need to rethink her boots. That rethinking seemed daunting, to say the least, what with the effort of not being distracted by the squishiness which just got worse each time she raised a knee.

Okay: she braced herself and plunged down from the hip with routine force. And there it was—all this time she'd been harboring a brutal little thing her lip did, totally remotely. Fuck! All this time she'd been rearranging lunch dates so as to avoid more of the same belittling of brutal little things affiliated with the dry lake bed. And now she would have to own up to...how exactly did her lip have it in for her?

Zero hour! She plunged again. Not exactly...refreshing. Those dark globs were not slobber. They streaked past, particles zoomed off at odd angles, she fretted again about her epiglottis. The focus was not supposed to be her epiglottis, not at the moment.

Eventually the slobber would gratify certain selected tufts by irrigating. They would gain an advantage and possibly knot into a cadre of hulking tufts that collectively projected both thunder and trouble.

Anyway, fuck! The result was both amusing and annoying. In sync with the effort of plunging, the orifice immediately above her chin went into a runaway just plain weird contraction sequence; not the entire orifice but a fractious segment of the upper fleshy fold. Whoa, it was brutal to observe. Rebarbative. Possibly the utility poles flinched. Possibly not only the crown flinched but the length that had been ingested by the dry lake bed flinched as well, the length that had already seen it all.

Fuck, she despised logistics. But also, bring on the fanfare! In any case, she was totally overwhelmed by enthusiasm for living just a little longer. She had a request to make. This whole business with her knee was going somewhere! She just needed to accept the inescapable annoyance: logistics.

Possibly she would end up under general anesthesia while they scraped the brown glop off her epiglottis, or wherever it was in the back of her throat that had once been blissfully ignorant of the fastball ballistics of the brown glop.

Anyway, her knee was waiting at an intersection, and here it went, up toward her clenched fist. And at the same time she hazarded a definitive command in the direction of the upper fleshy fold. She cast a cold eye on the command. It obeyed and basically put the hammer down. So far so good. The upper fleshy fold was poised to do its goofy contorted salute to asinine brutality.

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Motherfucker! And at the same time, holy shit! No wonder the sky had a line running down the middle, slantwise. The upper fleshy fold just went ahead and did its thing, unfazed by the command. It was like the whole dry lake bed flinched. Wow, this was more fun than aiming at the pointy edge of a jagged cloud and stomping brown glop upward so that it dangled from the edge. This totally added an entirely new dimension to the challenge. How often do you get a chance to take aim and at the same time observe yourself disobeying a command.

INTO LIGHTNESS

by Monica S. Macansantos



The air was warm and the ground beneath me was soft, and wet, and I was running.

The earth was moist, and I was sniffing the earth, letting my nose guide me to the answers that lay underneath the ground.

Maybe I had escaped my kennel, or maybe someone had unlatched the door, but that ceased to matter to me once I scratched the ground and found earthworms, chicken, twigs. The smell of food was thick enough to chew on. I heard barking in the distance, and ran to meet it. The sun rose to meet me.

The faster I ran, the faster I wanted to go. It was warmth I chased after—warmth that was never served to me on a tray. The grass parted, and I barked, clawed the earth,

sniffed it until I could breathe in its friendship. The earth was sweaty, welcoming. A pack of brothers and sisters waited for me at the top of the hill, panting.

When I leapt at them, hard, cold bars caught me, and I lay on my back, shocked that I had landed on my cold and familiar floor. I was in my kennel, and it smelled of rancid food, and it smelled like me.

*

Waffle rinds, maple syrup, butter, hotdogs, pork tocino. I sniffed and barked at my food tray, and my master dropped it before me, allowing its juice to splash onto my nose. Humans leave traces of their discarded hunger for me to chew on. Shared friendliness that has gone cold. I buried my nose in the smell of food, and forgot that I was emptying this plate of leavings.

My master patted my head and I snorted, ignoring the ticklish feeling of furless flesh. He didn't linger at my kennel door, but slammed it shut. I was too distracted by the food placed before me to notice the opportunity of an open door. My master came to my kennel every morning with a tray of food, and I had nothing else to look forward to.

When I had licked my plate dry, I clawed at the door and howled. A loud "Shhh!" cut through the stillness of the morning air. It was like my kennel door clicking shut—a sound that offered no promises. Tired, I dropped to the floor and let my chin rest on a soggy leg.

The dog in the kennel beside mine was a lady—I could tell, by the way her butt smelled, and by the way she clawed her kennel and whinnied longingly as she gazed at me during our season of heat. She had been here before I was ever brought to live in the kennel beside hers. When I still cried for my mother's warm tits and cried in the rain, she'd sniff across the open space that separated our cages, prick her ears, and lick her nose. At night, they'd let her out to hunt for rats, and as a puppy I'd sometimes awaken to her sniffs, and open my eyes to see her thrusting her snout through my kennel bars and whining. As I grew older, I resented her mobility. I barked at any human whose scent wafted through my master's gate, irritated that they were free to disrupt the privacy to which I remained captive. The more I barked, the more food was served on my plate. My hunger was satiated, but the scent of these invisible strangers, whose footsteps came and went without warning, nagged me.

That night, they let her loose again. It was her habit to scratch and sniff at our master's fence, but now, as I watched her jump out of her cage, I felt something clawing inside me as she growled at the fence and went at it with claws bared. Beyond my master's kingdom, howls interrupted the silence of the night sky. She stopped scratching, pricked her ears, raised her head, and howled as though in communion with these invisible creatures. We had never laid eyes on these howlers, and neither had they laid their eyes on us. Our ignorance was communal.

A ball that hovered outside my master's gate flickered into brightness. Her fur turned golden, as though in answer. I remembered the blades of grass that glistened and bristled my sides as I ran across a kingdom that kept expanding as I ran. Before I knew it, I felt furry balls of gold slapping my sides, and my legs were moving as fast as they could. I stopped and barked and let my claws sink into the earth, and I let the wind comb its way through my fur, and I closed my eyes. I heard barking in the distance, and barked back. Something in the grass twitched, as though in reply, and I ran to meet it.

As I ran, I heard more barks. The grass around me whipped the air, and from behind me emerged more dogs—small dogs, big dogs, dogs that could run faster than me, and dogs that followed our lead. Our tongues hung out and flapped as we tasted the wind. The wind tasted like rat, hotdog, pork tocino. Our fur rubbed against the air, and it took on the fragrance of our sweat and excitement. We didn't stop, not even to scratch our fleabites.

As we neared the edge of the forest, the smell of our sweat overwhelmed the smell of food, and I realized then that we had forgotten what we had been chasing after. I knew it was a rat, but was also supposed to be bigger and better than a rat. It could've been popcorn, menudo, pork tocino. My nose worked hard to sniff out what I wanted, but it wasn't there.

A pack of trees rose from the ground, as though to frighten us away from their kingdom. My master also had trees in his kingdom, from which sweet-smelling fruit would sometimes fall, but these trees were bigger and taller, and bore no fruit. We weren't threatened by their largeness, or by their sharp, unappetizing smell. A little dog with long, smelly fur and a tinny voice yapped at these trees, and ran in circles, marked their trunks with his scent. Others followed his lead, and ran around tree trunks, scratched their fleshy roots, whined when their digging turned painful and dull. The slapping of a ball against the ground, followed by the sound of a heavy, woody fruit falling to the grass, sent them howling away, and these fruits rained on them as they ran, and split their heads open before they could escape to the empty grassland. A long, shimmering crash of a tree interrupted this staccato of dull rain, and I jumped away from falling trees and ran into the light. The sky above me was dappled when I looked up, and then there was darkness.

And then, there was light. The human puppy was skidding and dancing on the concrete, dribbling a bouncing ball. I followed its rising and falling with my eyes, knowing that if I chased it, the bars of my cage would come crashing against my head. When he saw me watching him, he stopped and turned to look at me.

I stretched, got up, wagged my tail, and barked.

He took the ball under his arm, and approached my kennel. I sniffed at the honest scent of his armpits. Younger humans are less ashamed of smelling like themselves than their parents. The master's woman masked her earthiness with a liquid that smelled like

tasteless fruit. When she bathed me, she used a liquid that washed away my joy, and although I felt weightless afterwards, I longed for my smell to grow back.

He set down his ball, and unlatched my kennel door. I licked his outstretched hand and he laughed, and then the terror of the forest descended upon me. I whimpered into his palm, breathing in its warm saltiness.

The dog in the kennel beside mine was asleep, and when I scratched my kennel bars, she stirred and pawed the air without opening her eyes. When I yapped at her, her mouth opened, bodying forth a soundless bark. I dropped to my kennel floor. Had she been with me when we all ran into the kingdom of trees? What had brought us to that furry, open space, and why did my kennel bars have to close in on me, just as I was about to dive into the light?

The human puppy took my bowl, and closed my kennel door before walking to the garden and gathering water from an opening in the earth. For a moment, I wished it were he who had set me free, but that couldn't be. He was like me, a prisoner of the cage our master had built around us.

Humans are powerful, but their power rests in their hands. Which is strange, really, because their claws are clipped short, and they can't burrow into the earth, or draw blood from flesh. But these hands can open and close doors, draw water from the earth, carry us from our mother's breasts, into cold cages that don't bleed when scratched.

He opened my kennel door, and set down my water-filled bowl on the floor. I stared at its clear surface, and a dog stared back at me. It was always there whenever I stared at it, and it always mimicked me. I didn't want it to bark at me when I barked. Neither did I want it to thrust its nose at me when I lowered my snout into the bowl. I wanted it to prick its ears when it saw me, bark when I drank, pant when I whined. I wanted to come alive when I watched this dog, see it emerge through the surface that divided us.

The human puppy opened his mouth. I'd learned, from experience, that these sounds he made were meant to reassure me.

I snorted, and lowered my face into the bowl. My tongue pierced the colorless surface, and my friend dissolved as I drowned myself in my own thirst.

★

The only way I can conquer my hunger is to satiate it. Afterwards, as I lie on my kennel floor, I watch my master's son play tag with a girl human puppy in my master's garden, and a flickering of past knowledge blurs my vision. I have been outside my master's kingdom before, but my nose fails to guide me to the places I have left behind. All I have within me is longing—for the warmth of my mother's body, for the wholeness of her milk. And then I remember the jostling, the crying, the sound of grass

crunching against our bellies as our weak legs buckled and our mother moved closer to us, stroking us with her tongue.

I remember being taken away from that nest of grass one day, together with some of my brothers and sisters, and being placed in a cage that grumbled and rolled under our feet. There was fur underneath us, but it was shorter than the grass, and it was ungenerous when we clawed its surface. We suckled the air, and air filled our bodies. I felt empty, weak. I was weightless when they carried me into my master's kingdom and locked me in my cage. When they later served me a bowl of cold, alien-smelling milk, I licked my bowl clean, filling the emptiness that gnawed my insides.

The air that surrounds me is empty, tasteless, and I bite at it, pierce it with my cries. I've forgotten the taste of my mother's milk, I've forgotten the smell of her breasts, and I bark at the space that comes between my mother and I. My master's guests keep away from my kennel when they walk through my master's gate, and I only stop barking at them when my master shushes me, or hits my kennel with a stick. I cannot tell what he wants from me. His friends are afraid of me, and so are the birds, the hairy, pointy-eared, golden-eyed creatures that eye me with suspicion whenever they wander silently into my master's garden, and those who walk by my master's kingdom at night, who quicken their steps when I bark at their footsteps.

I wonder why I never feel the same gnawing whenever the human puppy visits me. Like our master, he makes sure that my kennel door is always locked, but he pats my head when he opens the door, instead of dropping my food tray onto my floor and withdrawing his hand, the way our master does. I do not fear him, because his eyes are not cold. He comes to me, and lets me rest my snout in his warm palm. His hand enters my kingdom, and I let him stroke my back. I do not bark at him, for fear that his kindness will turn hard.

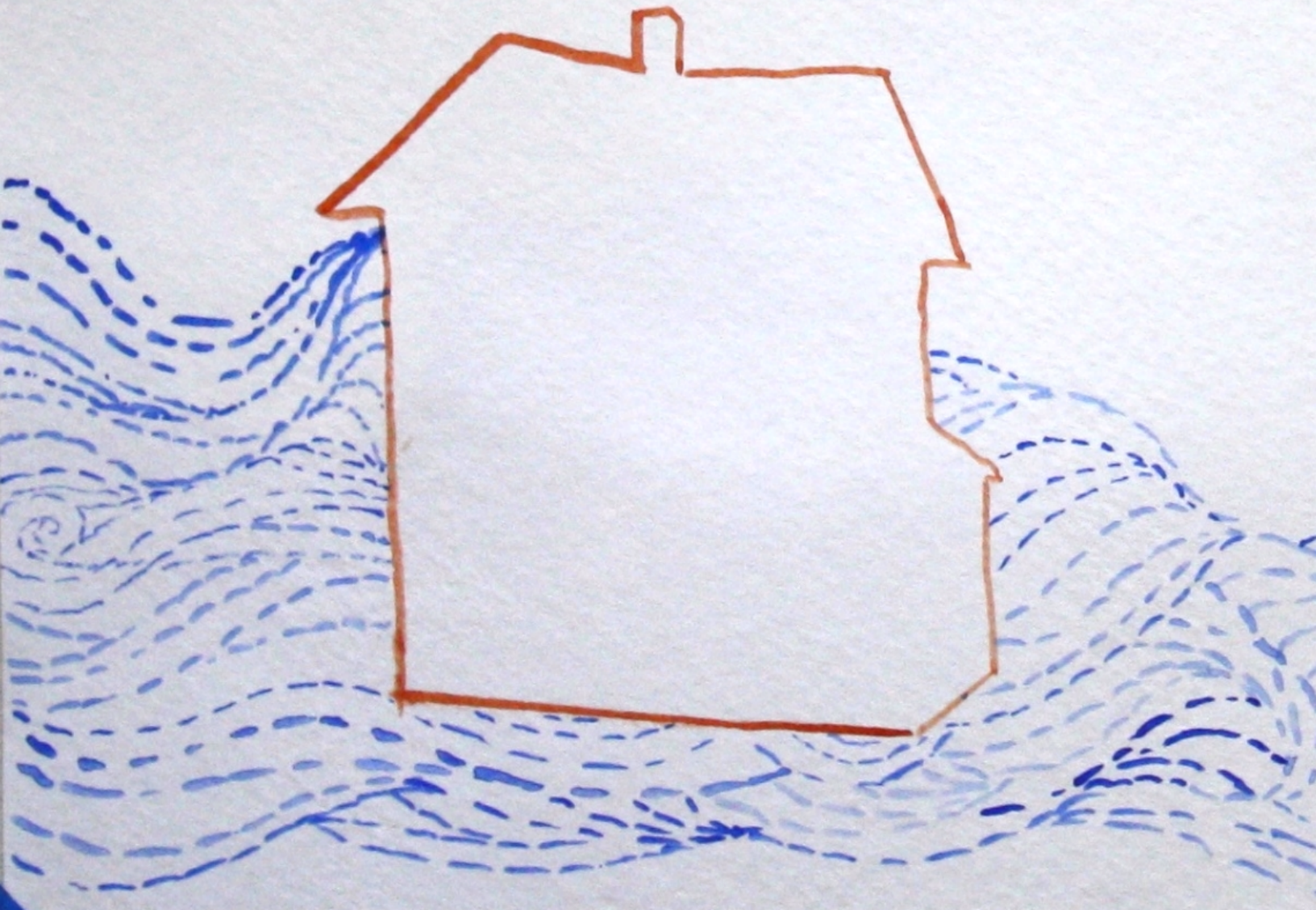
I know I could hurt him easily—his nails are short, his skin is uncovered—and yet he closes my kennel door just when we have both allowed ourselves to cross the space that comes between us. I howl, and he laughs, takes his ball, pushes it to the ground, and hops away as it bounces back to meet his palm. I claw at my kennel, and I feel the dog in the kennel beside mine staring at me through her hard, steel window. We know how powerful humans are, more than humans do. They build cages around us, and then withdraw behind a wall of stone with openings that frost over as night descends. They cannot see, or feel, the cold that slips unnoticed through the slats of our walls, that are like their soft fingers that slam our doors closed.

But someone, or something, has taken pity on me these past few days. I do not know whether it is human, since humans are the only creatures who are capable of opening my kennel door, but I see no hand unlatching my gate, and I do not feel my paws teetering from the edge of my kennel floor. It descends upon me after I have eaten, or when the coldness of night envelops and overpowers me. Maybe I'm the one who nudges my own cage open with my snout, but I do not feel my cage bars pressing

against my nose when I enter this kingdom of grass and open sky. All I feel is my body becoming as light as air as I fly to the sunlight that burns into my body. The wind claws at my fur and I close my eyes, forgetting the smallness of my master's cold kingdom. The grass spreads out before me, as far as the eye can see, and I can smell my brothers and sisters waiting for my return.

GOOD SIGNS

by GJ Hart



Denis was running along the path skirting the scrap yard when his stomach twisted hard. He doubled over, pulling at his belt. He squatted down, moaning as the heat poured out of him. When he brought up his hand he brought up blood. This is how I bleed, he thought.

He was pulling up his jeans when he noticed a hole in the fence. Something to trade before morning, he thought. He would buy insect springs and bloodfish and he would have to forgive him.

He laid his coat across the chain mail and slid inside.

He stayed down, waiting. He heard nothing, saw nothing and crept inside. He relaxed, too much. He moved from car to car like he was browsing the buffet cart. He didn't notice the camera fix him with its one red eye. A second later something opened its mouth and screamed.

Lazmus found Denis bunched in the bed of a Toyota Hilux, his pockets stuffed with stolen bulbs. Lazmus beat him till his breath flickered then dragged him to a derelict caravan at the edge of the yard.

"You live here now," he'd said.

Lazmus came early the next day,

"We are all good," he said.

"Why?" asked Denis.

"Because pain hurts," he replied.

Lazmus said he had an opening, in advertising. He drove Denis to the corner of Golgaffa Street and handed him a sign.

"Sale. Everything must go. 60ft this way."

Now Denis spends his days clinging to a length of cedar.

★

Denis feels drab next to the sign. It is hand painted and beautiful. He feels it tingle when it sees itself read. Such a flirt, such a harpy, he thinks. He sees them follow its direction. Watches them disappear beneath the archway as if sucked through a jet door. Denis looks at it sideways. More than wood and paint he thinks. This is gypsy magic.

At five each day, Denis lowers his sign and heads home. He is happy. He has a job, a home; he feels human again. How he longs to tell Lazmus how he feels, to show him how mindfully he approaches his work. He would show him his fingers, browned and ossified into a perfect grip, his ankles grown rigid and stable as ply. But Lazmus rarely leaves his office and Denis is too terrified to knock. Instead, he climbs the caravan and flattens himself. From here he can look down without being seen. He watches Lazmus staring into nothing. Occasionally he bends to stir chili bubbling on the desk before him with a filthy screwdriver. Denis grabs at his stomach, for a bowl, he thinks, just one bowl.

Lazmus rarely considers Denis at all. When he does, he sees things differently. Sometimes at night, as his wife works him to sleep, he pictures him on all fours, curling through wreckage, his tongue thick with fox shit.

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On his days off, Denis sits out and watches the new cars arrive. He sees them tremble on the steel wire and his heart aches.

In the evening, he slips his chains and searches them. He finds mints and toffees, half eaten sandwiches and the dregs of fizzy pop in bottles lined with lipstick.

Sometimes he finds other things. Personal things. Underwear mostly and lots of pills. He sniffs the underwear and collects the pills. At night, he swallows them. Some make him sick, others make him sad. The green ones make his insides feel too big, like they shouldn't be inside at all.

He remembers the Nissan Micra, its tyres melded together, its roof smooth as breast armour. He'd cut a whole and crawled through. Inside was soft, red yolk and on the back seat he found an entire, intact brain.

He'd cupped it gently, carried it inside and asked it its name. When it didn't answer he'd considered eating it. He'd guessed it would go best on pizza.

In the morning, he'd buried it. For safety, he'd marked the spot with coriander seeds and piss.

★

Friday, Denis finishes work and navigates the narrow lanes back to his caravan. On the way, he finds a bag toffees half buried in the muddy path. Lucky bugger he thinks and slides them into his pocket.

He stows the sign beneath the caravan and drops onto a seat he'd scavenged from a Hyundai Sonata 1.6 ls. He opens the toffees and is about to pop one in his mouth when he hears the porta-cabin door slam. He sees Lazmus striding toward him.

Lazmus towers above him, looking down.

"You alright Mr. Lazmus," says Denis.

Lazmus looks at Denis, then at the caravan.

"Needs some work," he says.

"Yep," says Denis.

"Plenty a wood around."

"Yep."

Lazmus rolls a cigarette.

"I'll be coming back tonight," he says. "You're to stay inside. Like last time."

"Will do Mr. Lazmus."

"Good," says Lazmus. "Next week I'll send a couple of lads down. Get this patched up OK."

"That would be nice Mr. Lazmus."

Lazmus lights his cigarette and turns back for the porta-cabin.

Denis sits out a while, watching the sun sink behind the stacks. He hears the yard doors open and moves inside. He hears laughter and peers out. He sees Lazmus and

four men climbing from a van. They are huge like Lazmus. A family get together, he thinks. How lovely, he thinks.

That night Denis lies and listens to the stacks moaning in the wind and feels their guilt. It makes him sad until he remembers the stockings he'd found in the foot well of a Toyota Prius. He pulls them over his head and masturbates into a hubcap.

Afterwards, he swallows two red pills he'd found in the elasticated side pocket of a Jaguar XJS, fits then falls fast asleep.

*

Two hours later he's woken by a noise outside. A gust of pain that rattles the windows and has him on his feet before his eyes are open. He pulls back the curtain. The lights in the workshop are on. Lazmus leans against the door smoking. Again he hears the sound. Lazmus laughs, tosses his cigarette and disappears inside.

Denis creeps toward the workshop and peers in. He sees disco lights. Hears Dixieland. Lazmus checks paperwork, at a desk. The four men stand steady beside an archway in the far wall. Through it, one by one, people appear.

Denis sees their confusion, sees their anger. They march toward Lazmus, assuming rules still apply.

The men circle them as if inspecting lots. When satisfied, they batter them to the ground and drag their dead weight to dog cages lined against the wall.

Denis crawls away, back to the caravan, his ribs rattling against the earth.

When he returns he plants himself hard, bows his head and flings the workshop doors wide open.

The men turn. Denis slams the sign into the earth. Lazmus raises his head and roars.

The men approach with open arms. It's working, thinks Denis and grinds his feet like he's saving par. The sign vibrates in his hand so hard he can barely hold it.

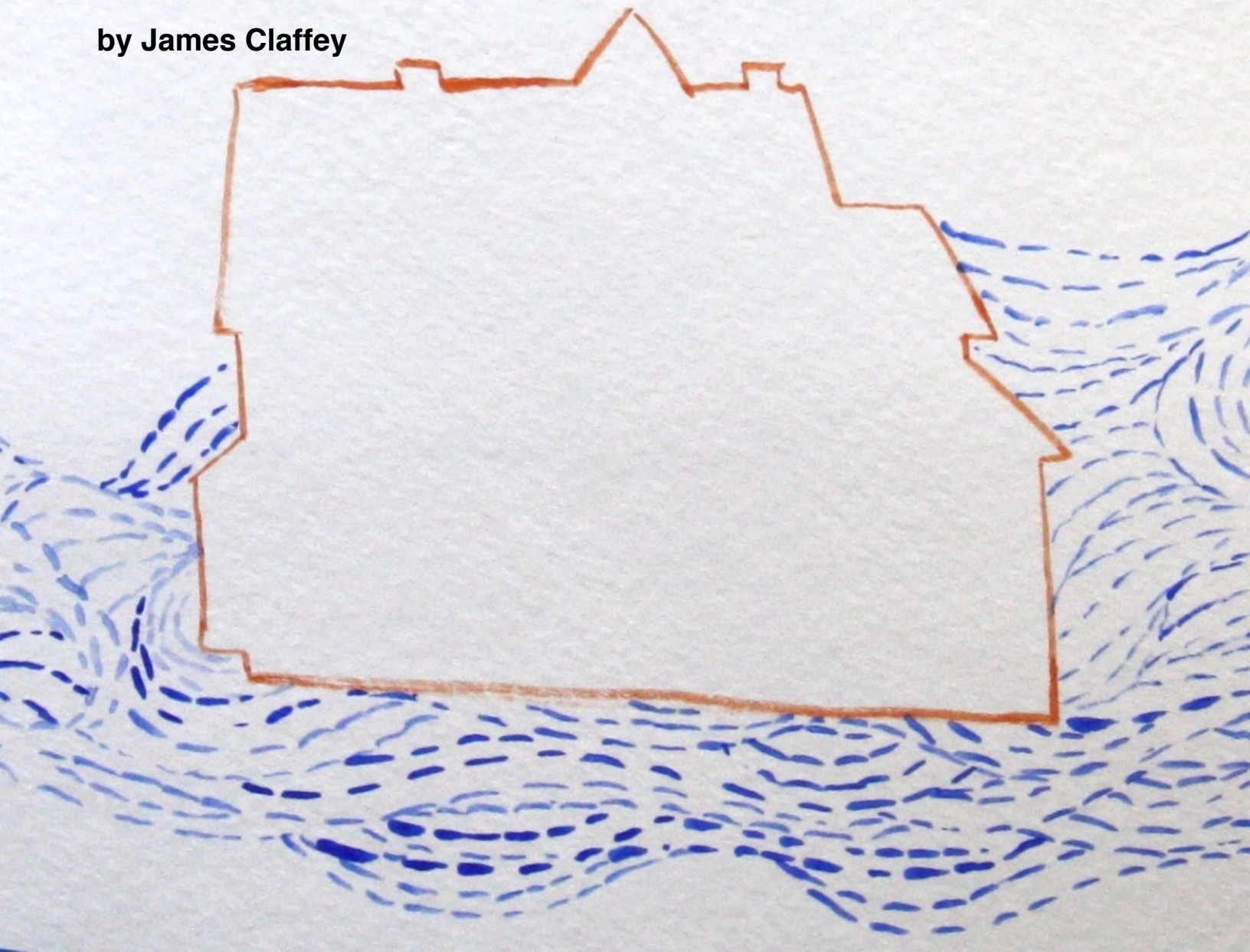
He lifts it high again and wrenches it down.

He hears it crack as it hits, watches it fall in splinters to the ground. He staggers back, exhausted.

The men take Denis by the arms and lead him inside, toward the last, empty cage. He looks back at the sign laying in pieces in the dirt and oil. Just wood and paint, he thinks, useless, he thinks.

UNFIXABLE

by James Claffey



Cannibalism was not on my mind as I sat with my mother's coffined body. I'd read the Tibetan Book of the Dead and of corpses that moved and how holy men would attempt to capture the spirit of the dead by latching onto the body and waiting for the tongue to protrude from the mouth. Once this happened they'd bite it off, and with it, the spirit of the person. I didn't read too closely the part that told of how the spirit turned into a whirling dervish and at times could take the lives of anyone close. I ignored that part, as I wanted to save my mother's soul too much.

At midnight, the night before the burial, I closed the front door on the last visitor, a third cousin twice removed from Sheepshead Bay. When he was gone I went

into the parlor, climbed atop the pine coffin and wrapped my arms and legs about her stiffening body. The book said I'd have to cover her mouth with mine and the thought of it made me want to puke, but the memories of her love and the shabby dresses she wore to church on Sundays; well, I had no choice, did I?

The cat downstairs was scratching the baseboards in search of mice and my mouth was glued to the mother's. I could feel her melt beneath me and begin to thrash about in the coffin, upsetting the candles lit on both ends. Quit your wriggling, I said, her eyes unfixable and moving from side to side in panic. If I weren't careful she'd be the death of me. Her legs were flying at this point, the coffin rocking precipitously, her Rosary beads clicking time.

Astride her, my fear unbearable, I clustered her limbs together and pressed my lips even tighter. She tasted of Woodbine cigarettes and Eau de Cologne 4711. My childhood wove patterns in the air above the coffin as I waited for her mouth to part and her tongue to press between my own two lips. The spasming of her eyelid must have tipped me off to the moment, for just then, under the gaze of the Blessed Virgin's portrait, I felt the cold triangle of her flesh.

My heart thumped and I bit hard on her tongue, chewing vigorously until it came away in my mouth. All calmed in that moment. Her body reclined into the rich velvet of the lined box and whatever creature had come alive in her withdrew. Into a square of aluminum foil I wrapped the gray flesh of her tongue and slipped it behind the rainbow trout in the freezer drawer of the fridge.

When the undertaker's man screwed the lid down the next morning he didn't give her mouth a second glance. I washed my breakfast down with a mouthful of hot tea and slipped out the door to the waiting hearse. Some problems in life are unmapped and left to the explorers of the world to unearth. My mother's spirit lived now in me, the wedge of flesh safe and sound in the freezer, my worry of being abandoned in this life all but put to rest.

FULLNESS

by Amanda Marbais



"Come on, bitch. Get in the car," said Muriel.

Muriel and Julie, adorned with green eye shadow, glitter peppering their domed hair, picked me up in a battered Subaru. Julie cranked the stereo, blasting the Stone Temple Pilots so my father looked out the window and turned on the floodlights in warning.

We drove to the high school and drank Southern Comfort from Dairy Queen cups in the parking lot. Staring out our windshields, we talked about the school bullshit we didn't understand. Someone had burned FUCK HIGH SCHOOL into the hillside with acid from the chem lab, but got caught before he finished.

My own family had moved twelve times, so I was always new. My popularity never seemed to gain traction. That night I passed from one person's car to the next, drank too much, blacked out and ended up in a Pacer, at Red Head, with Peggy Meyer, holding a blunt. Peggy, eyes red, caked with septic-looking eye-shadow, cried about some sack-of-shit boyfriend who didn't care she had been sexually assaulted at a party in the ninth grade. She couldn't shut up about that party. Her mascara was running.

"That sucks so bad, Peggy. That sucks so bad," I said.

"It's okay, Mary. You don't even know me."

She started the car, using my name over and over again, like an incantation, asking me please not to tell.

"I probably won't remember," I said. I could not forget.

In a miniscule town, people spilled their secrets to the outsider. I guess no one wanted to shit in their own camp.

*

I got this job at a tourist trap, Captain Black's Sweet Shop, to be away from home. I was always trying to get in with other families. It annoyed some mothers, but others ate it up. Occasionally, these mothers treated me like a temporary daughter, and it worked out, a safe-harbor where I could fill up between moves. I had hung out at Muriel's house a hundred times before Homecoming, often staying overnight on the weekends, my small duffle bag in the corner of their laundry room, my temporary shelter. I also kept a duffle in my car to hedge my bets.

Muriel, had an abortion our junior year. She was the only girl I knew to get an abortion. As my best friend, she spent fall semester crying in my Rabbit. She told me, under penalty of death, not to repeat it. I swore on my little sister, the only family member I liked.

In Captain Black's shitty basement, Julie and I put our full weight on the freezer to tamp the chicken that arrived from Sysco. We jumped on the freezer like wrestlers, ignoring the possibility of rupturing the plastic bags, spraying chicken-fat over storage shelves.

"I'm done with this. Let's put the pickle bucket on it."

Julie lit a cigarette and sipped her Styrofoam cup filled with Coke and JD.

"Don't tell anyone I made out with Kim."

"'kay."

"Do you think I'm gross, because we went down on each other?"

"No."

"Don't fucking tell anyone."

"Who the fuck am I going to tell?"

Upstairs, Muriel had turned up the radio and the register drawer dinged open. She'd locked the front doors. "I didn't think you guys were going to come back up. Count these." She threw a bag of change and it hit me in the chest where it would definitely bruise.

"Jesus." That wasn't cool, but I counted. Muriel could get away with a lot.

Julie, ever the pastor's kid, glinting with nose-rings and ironic '60s hair, piled high, ashed in a sundae bowl and fought tears.

Just then our coworker, Crystal, threw her tip-apron on the waitress station and said, "I need a beer and to listen to some fucking Santana." Crystal was whip-thin, tinged from spray tan, her shoulders rolled in to minimize her height. She turned to Julie. "What's wrong?" Julie just said, "Shut the fuck up, Crystal." Like most, Julie wore secrets badly, the bags under her eyes, the fearful, rabbit-like looks.

★

In the car, Muriel, Julie and I split a skunky joint Crystal gave us. She'd wanted to come. They made me be the asshole and say "no". She asked me to do something Sunday. I said no to that too.

We drove to Sparkle for cigs. We called Dax to get beer and waited a half hour, windows down, feet propped on car doors, pot and wood smoke making us dreamy. I felt I was visiting, before moving someplace real. I watched the ghostly patterns of swinging power-lines crisscross the blacktop. The traffic's taillights made disappearing comets around the bend, reaffirming freedom with a riptide of color, "no responsibility to shoulder someone else's standards," I said.

"What are you talking about, Mary?" said Julie. She turned halfway around in the passenger's seat and gave me a shit-look.

Muriel interrupted her. "Bolton's sick," she said.

"So? Is he dead?" said Julie. She lit a cigarette.

"No. My mom took care of him."

"So?"

"He's my sister's kid."

"She should eat that shit up. She's a grandma." Julie toked off her cigarette. "They live for that."

"Not if you've raised two daughters. Seriously, she deserves a life," said Muriel. "She tried to make us all get IUDs. Bet she wishes that worked."

"She can't force you to get an IUD," said Julie.

"Yeah she can," said Muriel. "She should have."

★

In their friend's bedroom, Julie, Muriel, me, and five guys listened to the Dead Milkmen while drinking Peppermint Schnapps from Muppets glasses on a race-car bed. There were Alyssa Milano posters everywhere. Perhaps it was an Ohio thing. What did I know? I was from Illinois, most recently. I felt like a voyeur peering in the window, above it, inside it.

"Your hair is cool." This guy named Stewart had Morrissey hair. He wore an Eraserhead T-shirt.

"It's not. I got it done at Family Clips," I said.

"Cool."

"It's actually not cool."

"Want to go outside and smoke?" He asked.

His 14-year-old sister was eating a sandwich, feet on the kitchen counter, in front of a 10-inch TV, watching Beverly Hills, 90210 with a bemused and incendiary look. Stewart ruffled her bobbed hair.

On the porch, bracketed between two trellises of Morning Glories he said, "My mom has lung cancer. She got silicone breast implants. One busted. That shit seeped into her lungs."

I touched my own breast. Could that happen?

"Don't tell anyone," he said.

"Uh," It was a grunt, like I'd been hit. I wrapped my arms around myself.

"I probably shouldn't have said anything."

He tried to kiss me. I didn't want him to touch my breast. I pressed my back into the trellis.

*

Two months later, Crystal and Muriel lounged in my Rabbit on break. Crystal tagged along because she was within earshot when we talked about smoking. In a parking space by the dumpster, we watched for the manager and listened to Bikini Kill. I was nearly a part of Muriel's family. I knew everything about them, and they even called me Little M. The car was filled with smoke and my favorite screeching - I chewed on your sores.

"Guys, I think I had a miscarriage," said Crystal.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" said Muriel.

"I was in the bathroom last night. It was like real bloody and chunky and shit."

"Are you okay now?" I said. I acted like she would bleed in front of us.

She pushed on her stomach. "I feel so full. Uh." She got out of the car to pee.

"Jesus," I said. We watched her walk to Captain Black's.

"God. She's such a slut," said Muriel. "Want to go to a party tonight?"

"No," I said, more aggressively than I meant. I sounded like a real bitch.

★

I was over at Stewart's, wedging myself into their family, too. We had chicken, mashed potatoes, lemonade—what Stewart called “the works”. The week prior, my dad drove into a tree on purpose. He had been driving my sister to track practice when he hit a massive oak in front of the country club. My sister wore a pink neck brace, which she complained of constantly, her head stiff and her eyes sunken in her face.

A few days after the accident, I felt compelled to unload this at school, and walked into several classrooms intending to corner my teacher with “Wait. Can I talk to you about...”. But, other students always wandered into class, and I had the sense my teachers were too exhausted from life to care. I didn't blame them. But, I was beginning to feel like one of those ticks we found on my dog last summer, a grape with legs, crammed with everyone's sorrow. Even if I could, were these people worth telling?

I hoped if I wore a neck brace someone from my adopted families might help me out. Then I remembered they had their own unspoken problems. I tried not to think about Stewart's Mom's cancer. I looked at her breasts.

After a while, it seemed absurd to make small talk. I excused myself to the Stewart's bathroom, and just hung out in the silence with the dog wallpaper and the matching orange towels, and the perfectly white ceramic floor. I was in there too long. Stewart's sister opened the door, came in, and closed the door quickly.

“Hey, how's it going?” I said. I was still on the toilet.

“I have to check my vag.”

I didn't know what to say. “Okay.”

“Oh. It itches so bad.” She shoved her hands down her pants. “I've got crabs. I'm going to have to take a shower.”

“Here. Let me get out of your way.”

She'd turned on the water and was pulling down her pants. “I have pubic lice shampoo. It's real easy.”

“Oh that's good.” I didn't know why, but I still washed my hands while she was itching and cursing.

“Don't tell anyone at school.”

“I'm telling everyone,” I said.

“Stop being a smart-ass.” She'd jumped in the shower and was lathering herself with the curtain open. “Bye,” she said. She closed the curtain.

I went downstairs. Stewart was on the couch. He'd started the *The Godfather* and he patted the couch cushion. I sat down like a zombie, and he didn't notice.

“Is it possible to know too much?” I said. Soon, I would get into the car and keep driving. It seemed totally possible. I had *The Bag* as I came to think of it, a duffle of deodorant, jeans, my New Order t-shirt, five hundred dollars, my brother's .22, some

Carmex and bubble bath. Somehow it seemed like the right combination of provisions. I planned to leave everything, all the shit, here.

"If you mean gossip, I wouldn't like you anymore if you spilled it about Mom. You got to keep that shit secret."

"Do you think your family would adopt me?" I said.

"No."

"Why?"

"Cause. Like, what if I stopped liking you?"

"Good point," I said.

"Not that it's going to happen." He squeezed my shoulder.

"Sure."

The shooting started up in the The Godfather, sprays of bullets hitting Don Corleone. Even in those seconds you knew the family wouldn't be the same. You understood what it was like to realize yourself, to recognize you were transitioning without danger of interference, to go with the current, to become something new, reborn.

★

After a bad night, I casually told my parents to fuck off while they were watching Matlock. I said it like I was saying good-bye, but I was goose-pimpled, nauseated. Even in the blue TV light, you could see the shock register on their faces. I walked up the split-level stairs and out of the house. I revved my car's motor and cranked Pearl Jam. It was ridiculous. Eddie Vedder was screaming as I hit their mailbox and drove off. I needed some melodrama.

I would stay with Muriel for a couple days to collect my paycheck at work. I wouldn't tell her I was leaving. Why did she need to know? One more secret. I checked the The Bag in my car - clothes, gun, Carmex. I thought of the Latin Club Award, the honor roll letter, the high school shit I left in a pile of Arby's trash by my bedroom door. See you assholes, I thought. But, I was sad. I had this warped way of not wanting to make anyone unhappy. And, my dad would be unhappy. My mom would be unhappy. They were complicated.

I had grandparents in Indiana. They were Mennonite, lived without TV or radio, but they had a fridge, a phone. They would let me stay there. They wouldn't ask questions. They were pacifists and wouldn't invite conflict. If they needed an answer, I'd blame myself, say I was into Drugs. Adults over thirty seemed to think everyone in high school was crazed for Drugs. I could make up all kinds of side-effects and withdrawal symptoms. They wouldn't know. I couldn't tell them.

★

After work on my last day, Muriel drove me and Julie to Dairy Isle, a peninsula in blacktop, with an orange corrugated roof and a statue of a doughy boy clutching a cone and licking his own face with a sickly pink tongue. Surrounded by picnic tables, it was bathed in yellow bug light and black flies. Muriel stayed in the car, her eyes unfocused, sipping a peanut butter-oreo-banana-milkshake—her own invention. Julie was pissed because Muriel hadn't told her about the abortion. They'd been arguing since after we got off work at Captain Black's.

"I'm your fucking best friend," said Julie.

"And, it's fucking bad news. Did you really want to know about it?"

"You would tell freak-face over there."

"I just had to get it off my fucking chest. It doesn't matter who I told," said Muriel.

"I think I'm going to get out and stretch my legs," I said. Neither of them said to stay and it hurt my feelings.

Crystal knew our hang-out and had parked nearby. I got in Crystal's car and she handed me a beer and turned down her Ozzy. The Buick's interior was deep red and her Betty Boop key chain dangled from the ignition.

She said, "Man, I love days when I don't have to work! That place is shit." She began laughing nervously. She wasn't even talking, just laughing.

I looked at the rain gutters, buckets filled at the edge of the building. Crystal's ashtray overflowed. I felt I might vomit. I rolled down the window and hung an arm into the cool air.

Everyone who was sipping their shakes, spooning up ice cream seemed identical, burdened. I began to cry and Crystal went uncharacteristically silent. I didn't care. We all seemed filled to the brim with shit, ready to split apart, walking around with unspoken weight, the silence an equalizer. I spilled it about the abortion, went on about shitty homophobes and pubic lice. I stuttered about gang rapes. I felt on fire, and raised my hand to my face trying to cool the flush. Fuck it. There was no going back. I had split apart, like the cracked asphalt in the heat of the sun.

"My dad's a pedophile," I said.

"Gross," she said.

"My sister tried to commit suicide."

Crystal started laughing. She laughed so hard her fake-tanned face looked like the Dairy Isle roof. "Are you fucking with me?"

Muriel came by and leaned down into the car. "What are you two talking about?" She looked at Crystal who was trying not to make eye contact. "What's going on?" she said, dropping her voice. Her face drained to the gray of tainted cream, her eyes widening at me. "You're dead," she said. I was.

I watched the cars pass on the main drag, fading lights making their way out of town, and snaking on through fields and woods, cutting a map away from here. They were all bending around curves, leading to the new place. I kept repeating my secrets, already feeling new.