

PRETTY OWL POETRY







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Standing in the Garden Center on the Day the Water Runs Out

Tiah Lindner Raphael

How absurd the buckets
rain wands when we need
three citronella candles
oh hallelujah
oh days of lemonade
Salvia. Petunia. Cosmos.
next.

We ignored
the salmon-filled river,
as if memories can be

cash register receipts, as if
something makes it true.

When the riots come
under the last fluorescent lights.
Let's give ourselves over to
Adirondack chairs and
ice-less cocktails

You'll be Rasputin swilling gin.
passing appetizers.

When the day is done
We'll pocket seeds

steel sprinkler heads
dowsing rods
for \$9.99, last sale of the season

oh gas-powered lawnmower
and brisket.
I apologize for what comes

this drought
mere figment
as easily wiped as

simply saying

let's sun ourselves
lavender plastic
concrete and AstroTurf.

I'll be Nostradamus passing appetizers.

and when we've practiced
our best vanishing act
like cosmonauts
thieve packets to place
lost dreams in.

Room of Rind and Pith,

Grace Arenas

room of discard, the nothing
things,

half-chewed and spat.

Room of weeks-gone bread
and rainfall, egg shell,
forsaken seedling.

Held in this heat, place
my apple core at the altar.
Shrine to remnant.

Have never
not been building it, devout
in my way
to chicken bone
and straw. To endings
that had ripe, plump beginnings.

Know how they must
have tasted. Memory of it,
soft,
constant here. Room
of echo. Half-moon honeydew.
Sweet offering. I live here to learn
what things
can grow from dead things.
What other things
might at once
dissolve.

That Black Light So Cliché

Laurin DeChae

after Mos Def & Talib Kweli

“Orbiting cycle means a thing turning in a given path. Axis means upon which or around which a body turns. Phenomenon means something beyond ordinary conception and inspires awe and wonder. Multiplicity means a great number. Means a globe.”

—Willie Lynch, *The Making of a Slave*

[silence then the beat drops]: *we feel it is necessary to shine/light into the darkness*

[third eye vision]: i feel ill-equipped to shed, blink, shutter

[to think]: in universal terms and holographics

[five side dimension]: here part parcel for system

[8th light]: i scatter into constellation

[shining like an asterisk]: multiplicity an exercise in punctures

[dig, my people, they acted]: the laws of motion

[back to africa]: fluidity of movement and (o)curren(cy)

[flyer than gravity]: i need to feel lifted

[melanin scientific]: stratosphere be kickin’

[once upon a time a long time ago]: it’s in the blood

[the american dream]: jeremiads tearing down picket fences

[you got that good hair/that light complexion]: against me my own

[lineage]: my grandmother (white) said she just wished
obama had done more for his people

[the get down]: **keep the body, take the mind!**

[diaspora]: i read a poem somewhere that said

[radiation]: *i have no mother tongue*

[knowledge of self]: use me up like withers, brother

[bluest eye]: how coarse the hair, how fine

[black girl poem]: grease and braids and magic

[colonialism in a kiss]: my god, you’re so exotic

[how i understood the absence of sound as light]: tell me i am the animal that i am

[a study in whiteness]: a note on cleanliness and god and how he’ll hold

you, you little brown spot, you smudge, you muddy river

[until the cosmos is whole again]: would imply my discrete parts

[split]: let me show you ten different ways i can spin it

[myth]: the black unicorn exists

[truth]: the black unicorn exists

[black is]: vamp until it’s time to spit

The Sensorium of the Cyborg

Laurin DeChae

power on: i a homegrown miracle,
a lovething made for amber lighting
and divine in all the wrong spaces.
but i feeling galactic, a moon-eyed honey-
soaked blip on a screen in a world egg-like and lilting
i orients herself but without the perception
of time, walks newborn deer-like,
tongues a grape skin, a blueberry flesh,
a pebble, a diamond. i has a mouth
of gold and a voice of static and no one
to understand her when she mutters.
i tastes like midnight when she tests
the wind with her finger. tastes flight
then part of i is grounded and part
floats in the ether with the bodies
who have lost their names. i dares not
call them specters, rather stars
set on fire. i wanted to lose her name, but
i a fool on a journey, a glittermeat dreamboat.
i thinks, *my skin peels back and makes i pretty*
soft, pretty prismatic, pretty little thing.
i throws a temper tantrum
because i gets what i wants.
i just wants to feel magical
without having to be magical.
silver-skinned-eve-come-lightly,
her system fractures dramatic
so i doesn't watch black and white films
because i thinks they lack depth.
instead i makes her own scenes, makes
sense of her own otherworldly,
i, with nothing but a flowersack
to keep her warm. i a burlap dress
come into sensation interrupted.
where there is _____ i sees _____.
now you see her, now, now,
i doesn't want to be here.
i doesn't want to be i
but i was made to machine,
made to sluice her shedding

snakeskin, she capsule and container.
what i knows as truth or prophecy:
i mirror distortion dsymorphia—
big head, little ankles.
i's insides feel like coral reefs,
i tickled pink, but i's skin
church hymns crows sing
i is dazzled by the bright lights
of big cities but her body is so quiet,
so hush, that is, overlapped.
i always floats and never touches
because to touch means to stay a while.
i has layers: dry wind and damp swells.
the roof of i's mouth is mountains,
her throat a wheezebox, insides chromatic
pulp. she knows nothing of herself so she bites
her tongue and bleeds, compares herself to seashells
and the scent of beige, a freshly fired gun—
skinmetal or fleshflower—that one summer
her trashjewels sang of high heels and hoofprints
and she's been hungry and throbbing ever since.

To Shake Off Today's Dark News, I

Bonnie Bishop

clamber down the dune path
through waist-high goldenrod,
pasture rose, poison ivy gone
to crimson, over sand-scuffed
granite boulders to the beach;

cross the strandline of storm-strewn
wrack, sodden eel grass, kelp
and rockweed two feet deep,
cushy underfoot, beach-hoppers
feasting on the sea salad there;

step onto the damp sand
smooth as a freshly made bed;
find shells of clam, moon snail,
mermaid's purse, carapace of crab,
beach glass, blue, green, and lavender.

Across Broad Sound, white gas tanks stand
among silhouettes of bridges, buildings,
and a giant, three-armed wind turbine,
peace symbol or roulette wheel,
rotating slowly.

Submarine Roots

Alana de Hinojosa

for weeks sand lingers
in the round corners of the bathtub
grainy secrets refusing
to slip through the drain,
square tunnels
beneath the surface
carrying the rest of our waters.

I scrub the pink basin with a blue sponge,
the hot water still running.

(El Paso, Texas)

this rectangle room, a house now empty
the first in the family built with a woman's money,
her big double doors yawning with light
so grey I can barely see her reaching
arms, gold bangles
on the cherry wood vanity
from her mother's quinceñera,
this mirror
her reflection
humming

 Marie, María, Marie
and her dancing bangles clang
against wood, music
reminding me of lineage
and shackles
and once when she told me,
“Marie doesn't go to the river.”

(Port Isabel, Texas)

even now, carving your silhouettes out of the night
my heart is heavy in my mouth,
the decades
between us, you
standing on the fringe, you
deporting,
deported bodies
boarding a ship,
our people's submarine roots

tangled and tangling
beneath the vessel's shadow,
roots barely visible
to their eyes.

(Los Angeles, CA)

the first time I remembered my grandmother's name
I heard the key of a piano

submerged

under the sea,
its slow echo a room
in my mouth, a key
unlatching the gate where I will take a nap
amongst myrtle leaves after rain
before carving her name
into the blae sound
of water,
the piano humming

Esther, Ester, Esther,
and once when she told me,
“the river that brings you does not
leave me behind.”

we come blind, I am learning;
wading through the black water,
our feet
as eyes.

Tell Me About the Rain

Jen Stein

when I can't feel
my shoulders
when I can't walk

the aching smell
dampened pavement
hot made new

mist gathering at my ankles
discarded stockings
next to the bed

rumpled sheets
blanket slung over a desk
lamp chair book

when I am becoming
a passive verb
to be I watch the window

tell me about spring
and the heat nestled
in your collarbone

when you come in
let me run my fingers
from neck to cheek

the beaded moisture
you gathered as you moved
from work to home

will settle in
the whorls and eddies
of my stilled fingerpads.

Who Built the House Made of Maple Trees

Grace Arenas

Lashes blink against piano lid til walnut

 clunks cathartic. Crocuses are cooked
 from dirt and I

 also unfurl

 at the toolshed. Antonyms always
 keep jousting in colors of birthright,

 always annuals raptured
 away while mums stay mud-sweet. Blister
 begins as swatting. I practice

 collecting echo and oval and spill baskets full
 all over the golf course. Velocity

 and long division.

 Who built the house made

 of maple trees? Voices carry in the hall, wedged

 into fists. I could have swallowed
 an atlas. Like lamb down python-throat,
 square bulging, paper edge rakes

 esophagus. Could be filled
 with those winding red highways.

 Certain stars unchart
 themselves, burn until wickless. But it's mouse

 and mousetrap, happenstance.

 Let drift crinkle leaf. I came back,
 omniscient piano,

 because the truth turned out
 only true.

Mothering

Ellyn Lichvar

On his side, curled. Sick,
asleep in the afternoon.
She wished him a nautilus

growing back down,
smooth crescent chambers
collapsing behind motion.

She places the shell in her lap
to watch. Days like these,
worst nightmare and best

case scenario, he sleeps
and sleeps. *I'd absorb
a fever if I could*, she's

supposed to whisper.
She lifts him in her palm.
Five years unaccompanied

in motherhood—she is
the end, the all and the
nothing. It would be so easy

to put him back, absorb
and start over. Like a wafer,
she places him on her slight

tongue, placid mouth
closing around. Stagnant
womb, patient holster,

its quiet ache for activity.
He slid down her throat
so easily he never woke.

I Don't See What the Big Deal Is About Hemingway

Ron Riekki

I could kill elk
too, all it takes
is a lack of love;

anyone could
drink back beer
until their halved

by guns. The real
God, for me, is
other ways of

being, not hemming
and hawing, sitting
in some arena

watching animal
testing for sport,
and does anyone

remember the racism
in his drunken
expectorations,

the crooked streets
of his everything?
God, people will

forgive the ran-
sacking of mangers
if you can simply

tell a story in sentences
even children can
understand and be

offended by if
they care about
the eyes of others.



Digital Dreams

Anna Saikin

Flooded cornfields, morning traffic, a stuffed dinosaur. My DDT flips through the spreadsheets on her tablet and interprets the letters and numbers that supposedly capture everything my mind conjured during the previous night. The screen behind me shows images of clouds moving across the sky, a video the brochure claims will calm me during my CMA. The acronyms tumble easily off the doctor-not-a-doctor's tongue and are kindly translated at the bottom of the trifold: Digital Dream Technician. Clinical Mind Analysis.

“Let’s throw them on screen to create a visual field.” She means the brain waves.

“What’s my diagnosis?”

“We’ll get to that later.”

The vagueness of her reply doesn’t surprise me. I’ve been going to sleep therapy for years, at Amy’s behest.

The information takes a while to load, but that doesn’t shut her up. I can’t leave because I’m still plugged in. There are two sensors on my head, one on the base of my hairline and the other at the top of my spine. DNA sequencing could map your body, but it couldn’t map your mind. Dream Databases were the new way to protect yourself against the mind-based diseases that could kill you as easily as cancer. The official reason why I enrolled in the CMA is to receive a preventative treatment against pseudo-sleep, but really I want to know why I keep hearing tornado sirens every time I doze off.

The screen resembles an old NOVA special. My entire life story is condensed into a pixilated cube. She rotates it with her mouse, and a glowing red area punctuated the otherwise green and blue spots. If the sleep therapy is everything it claims to be, my DDT will notice. I wait, but she doesn’t say anything.

Make no promises and you’ll get no demands. Amy said something like that the last time we went to the beach. We played Survivor Skill Set: if the grid were to disappear, what transferrable skills did we have to re-build civilization? I cited my experience working on my grandparents’ farm. I could fix a broken tractor even better than he could. I asked Amy if she would be ok eating corn for the rest of our lives, if it came down to that. She turned away and didn’t answer.

Nobody I know invests in the future because even though we all owe our livelihood to technology, all of us fully expect it to disappear, POOF. It’s the reason why I endured the machine as it clicked and clacked all night. It had intermittent lights that flashed on and off like a computer modem. After hooking up a sensor to my finger, every electronic signal in the space between my ears was recorded. The electronics collected my body’s excess signals and generated an embarrassingly large file that I lugged back to the DDT’s office.

My DDT continues manipulating the data: “Let’s see what happens when we shift the tables around.”

“Where are the tornado sirens?” I finally ask.

“What?” My question seems to catch her off guard.

I point to the screen. “There. Is that it?”

“Oh, that’s just noise,” says the DDT. “Everyone has it.”

I press her for more information. “The noise, though. It sounds like a siren?”

“Not really.” She sips her coffee. “Not like the ones we had in North Texas, at least. When they went off, we tried to duck and cover, but what were we supposed to do if we saw one? We didn’t have basements.”

If only Amy had had a warning. After I heard the news, I returned to the beach, but of course the boardwalk was no longer there. It had been blown away, taken in planks. Nothing remained, not even the roads. The only thing I had to remind me of her was a Velociraptor—a cheap promo toy—stuffed in my glove compartment.

My appointment is almost over. “Did you know some of our most deadly viruses are held in a building on an island made of sand?” I’m not sure why I say this, only that the fact that the medical university survived the storm made me sick to my stomach.

“Good thing your mind is bug-free.” She hands me a flash drive with my results on it. “See you in six months.”

Foodie

Bijoyeta Das

I don't like being semi-naked in rooms with women. There is perversion in their judgment. The way women's eyes nibble over my skin, my non-edgy contours and the stuff in between arms and legs. When they touch my skin, there is that overly familiar, knowing touch.

Cringing is not an option. Not now. It will hurt more. This nameless woman is crouching, cold hands on my warm, uneasy skin. I am on the bed, on a rubber sheet, like the ones we use for children who pee on beds.

I want to shut my eyes. But even through shut eyes, I can see the room. Pink. Cubicle like. The only purpose of the room is to hide a single, hospital type metal bed and the activities on the bed. The walls are plastered with posters of pretty, thin, made-up women. Women with shiny hair and perfect skin. Women with half-smiles. Some posters are glued, with ends curling, glue drying. Some stuck with translucent cello-tape. The moment I entered the room, some five minutes ago, she asked me to take off my dress. *Your semi-nakedness is none of my business* look on her face. I hung my snake printed sheath dress on the sole nail on the door.

She rubs her leathery hands with hot pink nail polish on my legs, fluffing the haphazardly growing hair. "Chocolate," she says with a tone of finality. Non-negotiable, even though it will cost me more.

I picked this beauty parlor randomly, uncaring for its name or fanciness. All have similar names, *UNISEX this* and *UNISEX that* and glass doors.

She pulls out a side table with wheels. She plugs in the heater and scoops some white chocolate wax into the heater and it melts, smelling of wax but looking like mouth-watering fondue. Ignores the other wax, the honey-looking cheap one.

Mostly I want to plug my nose. I don't like the smell of burnt hair. This place reeks of burnt hair. Curled, straightened, blow-dried, ironed hair. All beauty parlors inside housing colonies reek of burnt hair of average looking housewives. Even the woman's blonde streaks over jet-black brittle hair looks burnt. Streaks that are fading. Streaks with split ends. Streaks painted with leftover dye. Streaks that belonged to the 90s and should have left but overstayed. Imported fashion of local women.

"You should apply cream on your feet. They are cracked," she says, at the same time she pulls the waxing strip, plucking the hair off my leg.

My fingers curl in a ball. Not out of pain, because of the indecency of her common sense and the honesty of her advice.

I look at the used strip before she bins it. I find satisfaction in seeing plucked hair sticking helplessly to gooey wax. Like mosquitoes smacked to the wall.

"Party-sharty?" she asks with a smile, so wide, lips so cracked, as she massages my upper lip, first with astringent and when I request, she uses a blob of rose-smelling cream. Her fingers smell of *Sambhar masala*. Her

idli lunch is my *sniffing, iffing* snack now. Like I need any more reason not to tip her.

“Maybe. But you should apply balm on your lips, they are cracked,” I reply. Ah, feels so good to wipe that smile from the *mistress of beauty secret*’s face.

The cashier is also the owner and she has a *please-come-again-smile*. There is a golden statue of a Laughing Buddha on her glass desk. They should name it UNISEX *smiling* Parlor.

“We have discount on mani-pedi.”

“No, thank you.”

“We also have packages on facial, I think an anti-tan facial will suit your skin. It is so sunny outside.”

“Of course. But no, thank you,” without looking at her.

“We also have deals on L’Oreal products, salon ones.”

“How much is the bill?” now staring at her.

I don’t have the exact change. I don’t want the owner to suggest I give the change as tip. I fish out my crocodile leather wallet from my ostrich leather tote bag. Last season’s sale at Leather World. I swipe my debit card, exact amount.

Sneha calls. Two rings. That is a missed call. That means she is waiting outside in her new four-seater, two door-nano car.

On the street I feel naked without all that unsolicited hair. The hair from the arms, underarms, legs, upper lips and eyebrows, all plucked, pulled, threaded, screwed.

“Looking cute,” she says.

“You too.” I always say she looks cute or hot even though I think she mostly looks like an over dressed smurf. Narrow arms, short bony legs, noodle thin lips and a belly full of stubborn fat, like a hard-boiled egg. She walks like a penguin, slowly dragging her feet, throwing her weight left and then right.

She convinced me to attend this event. It will be just 2000 rupees for appetizers and wine. She belongs to a foodie group that is always scouting for causes to support or people to toast, while chewing foreign food and sipping Indian wine in new restaurants.

“Foodie is someone bored of Indian food and looking for new cuisine,” she explains. It sounded like “looking for a new cousin,” the way she drools over her words. I want to ask “You mean a fat, gluttonous hobbyist?” but decide to instead focus on the FM radio where the jingle is repeating “*Mirchi sunnewale always khush.*” Happy are the ones who listen to Mirchi.

“Wow. 2000 for appetizers only?” I ask, not that happy.

“Unlimited.”

“Women in 30s need to meet new people,” she continues. Of course by people she means strictly men. I nod be-

cause arguing with her is an option I have long relinquished. She will vanquish me. Then she will remind me in front of our common friends or newly made male friends how successfully she ambushed my opinions.

The restaurant is called *Zhuppy by Bai*.

“What is Zhuppy? Who is Bai?” I ask Sneha as she slowly *waddles and paddles* behind me. I don’t want to lose her so soon, so I wait for her to catch up and together we *waddle-paddle*.

I am unpleasantly surprised when the captain of the foodie group hugs Sneha and blows two kisses in the air around her cheeks and immediately pull us towards the cashier. In case we back-pedal. But I plant two kisses on her cheeks with the clear intent of leaving red lipstick stains.

The building is old, heritage old, the *stained-cheeked* woman explains. “Britishers time. Now it serves Sushi and Indo-Chinese food.”

“It is British not Britishers. Like Indians and not Indianers,” I say.

For the rest of the evening, the *fallen captain* circumvents around me like I am her ex-boyfriend’s new girlfriend.

The restaurant has an open courtyard, a dining room, and a bar. Lanterns with tea-lights and empty wine bottles with money plants are hanging everywhere, like forgotten, dusty family photos. People are standing around high round tables. There are no chairs.

Only tittle-tattle.

Sneha and I float away. I am drifting towards a possible empty table. She is looking for the star couple that gave up posh jobs in London to travel. Five years later they are still traveling. There will be a slide show of their travel photos and they will share the secret of funding such trips. A part of today’s profits will be donated to them.

I choose a table near the Sushi bar by a windowsill with potted plants. It is next to the restaurant kitchen. My back is towards the screen.

“Only two types of Sushi, buddy?” I hear a man, wearing a moss green crisp cotton shirt and jeans, disappointedly ask the sushi-chef.

“Hello,” he says, turning towards me now. “Are you here for the food? Or you know the couple?” he asks, as he starts filling his plate with four tuna and four cucumber sushi.

“Do I look like someone interested in somebody else’s five-year-never-ending-honeymoon?” I ask. He laughs and disappears. He returns with two glasses of chilled white wine. Wine served in narrow champagne glasses.

His name is Tapan, corporate lawyer, smartish, 40ish. I think he will make a good match for Sneha, both stout, both with bellies, both lawyer-liar-word slayers. When he laughs at his own jokes, I stare at his belly to see if it jiggles. It does, like a half-boiled egg.

I am struggling to use chopsticks, drink the wine and hold my large, unfastened bag, while standing in toe-pinching high heels. “Come on leave your bag here and make sure you drink and eat the hell out of the 2000 we paid.” He plants my bag next to the aloe vera plant, by his side on the windowsill.

The room is packed. The hustle and bustle increases like rush hour traffic that is not going away anywhere.

We keep filling our plates, gobbling sushi after sushi. Harried waiters are bringing small trays of starters. Deep-fried crabmeat wontons. Chicken nuggets with mince sauce. Crispy veg spring rolls. Greasy chicken wings with sweet-sour sauce. Fish fingers with tartar sauce. Chili crackers with ketchup. Tender cheese dumplings. We pick a few with wooden toothpicks and eat out of napkins.

We face competition. Three over-perfumed ladies in high heels at the neighboring table are emptying the trays before the waiters reach us. “Foodies are so besharam.” Shameless. Tapan says, a tad too loud. The ladies look at us with lipsticked, gummy smiles and say *sorry-sorry* and offer us the plate. Tapan and I also say *sorry-sorry*. In a synchronized effort to shame us, the three ladies keep offering us plates of food. We say *no-no-thank-you-thank-you*. They say *no-no-please-please*.

Tapan suggests I refill the wine. “In India, ladies can cut the line.” Four times, I wade my way with *excuse mes* and take advantage of *ladies first*. Like flotsam, I find my way to the bar and back. No sign of Sneha.

Tapan talks about his divorce, and I half-listen. He jokes about India’s elites, their branded clothes and farmhouses, destination weddings and their adopted Hollywood accents. I half-laugh. He tells me about his twin brother who is also divorced. His retired father. His still pretty mother. The latest movie he watched at PVR. The best seller he is reading. His spondylitis. His pet fish. I ask questions such as “Do you snore?” He sincerely replies. I ask a question before he finishes answering the last one. I give him no chance to ask me any questions.

Lights dim and remain dim for the rest of the evening. The slide show begins and ends. People clap and cheer. But all the foodies in the room concentrate on the food.

Chit. Chat. Gobble. Gobble.

“We are strategically placed next to the kitchen. We can hijack the food,” he laughs with the enthusiasm of a teenager. At this point we are no longer picking food with toothpicks, we are confiscating trays from the flustered waiters.

In the dim light, I am sure I am dipping chicken wings in soy sauce, cheese dumplings in mint sauce and sushi in ketchup. And, indeed we are parking the food. There are empty trays on trays on trays. I am surprised I am eating so much.

I realize I half-like Tapan. He is helping unleash my inner hog or he is converting me into a foodie with his infectious gluttony. Tonight, we are *food buddies*.

“Where were you all night?” Sneha asks as we hop into her car.

“I was doing what you dragged me to do here.”

“Whatever. I am hungry. By the time the food reached us at the courtyard the trays were almost empty.”

“*Accha?*” Really.

So we go to her favorite *Conti* restaurant. Sunday night family crowd. We wait for ten minutes in line to be seated at a table in the middle of the room. Cheery, merry families and big plates of food surround us.

I am nibbling at my Banoffee pie. Sneha is gorging on a cold platter of salami and minestrone soup. I am drifting into a food coma. Thankfully, she asks for a Belgian chocolate shake and the bill. I want to go dutch after all she

will drop me home.

I look for my wallet in my bag. I pause. Disbelieving what I am seeing. My stomach begins curling in a knot.

“Oh my God. No. No. Shit. Shit.” How to unsee this?

My ears are hot. My hysterical yelling drowns the euphonic crescendo of munching-crunching-leg-pulling of happy families. People stop eating and start staring at me. Waiters come running.

“What happened? You lost your wallet?” Sneha asks. “Chill.”

I make space on the table. I stand up and turn my big mouthed, chain-less ostrich leather tote upside down. That’s when the tumbling starts.

My wallet. The sushi. Some still rolled. Some unrolled. Tuna sushi, cucumber sushi and tender cheese dumplings come flying out. My phone. Keys. Deep-fried crabmeat wontons. Double-effect mascara. Greasy chicken wings. Veg spring rolls. Wide-bristle wooden hairbrush. Chili crackers. The receipt from Unisex *smiling* parlor. The fish fingers. Sanitary pad. Chicken nuggets. Red matte lipstick. More sushi. Notebook. Pen. Safety pin. More wontons. Hair clip. Sample size perfume. More veg spring rolls. More and more.

I give the bag one last vigorous shake. My pink *Baby Lips* balm falls out along with a soggy, yellow fish finger.

Last Days (*from Found Memories*)

Danny Powell



It glows and it fades. The mind is funny like that sometimes. First to float in is how my body ached, the long hours spent sitting, watching. Watching anything at all, right? It didn't matter. You and me and the world.

Yes, it's the feelings I remember. Not emotions; those leave without a trace save for a hidden scar. I remember the way the rain felt against my skin that August day a storm swept over from behind and we stayed, smiling as we awaited its arrival.

It's funny, too, the silence of those days. We didn't say much. Maybe we didn't need to. We sat and watched the world, our world, a place so moored and yet adrift, like the house at our backs and that other world inside its walls.

It's funny, too, how from day to day now so little of it remains, and then one morning it's all right there. The dove outside my bedroom reincarnates the sound of the one we loved so much, and I'm there with you again, my muscles stiffening, a heart full of words, the honeysuckle too far away to reach us.

Theft

Jessica Barksdale

When she broke into cars, Gabrielle was polite. It was the least she could do. After all, she was sneaking around the neighborhood at night, rifling through other people's belongings, sitting in their driver's seats, opening their glove compartments, an act she thought of as kin to going through an underwear drawer. Personal. Forbidden.

And then, worse, taking the very thing the car's owner wouldn't want her to have: the computer left in the back seat, the tablet, the cell phone. Once, a Snicker's bar, cool and firm in its wrapper on the console by the GPS. And then, of course, the GPS.

So when Gabrielle spotted the Honda, Toyota, Acura, or GM car for her nightly target (she read online they were the easiest to break into), she put on her black gloves and brushed off her clothing. Sometimes, she was covered in leaves, grass, and dirt from flinging herself into the bushes when a car roared by. She scraped her shoes on the asphalt. She took a deep breath. She went in.

The most important rule of theft. Be quick and inconspicuous. Easy in her neighborhood, a swath of respectable houses on a hill, winding streets, well-spaced-out streetlights.

And tonight, here she was again during the prime time for stealing, two to four am. This car? The right model and a hide-a-key where someone middle-aged and clueless would leave it: back right tire well. Gabrielle reached around the tire, found and then clutched the tin box. Rattle, rattle, rattle. And now, according to Gabrielle's calculations, it was 2:13 am, and she was sitting in an Accord, carefully flipping through CDs. Nothing she wanted. Bach, Beethoven, Mozart. She had enough classical music on her iPod, the one her husband Mark gave her three years ago. The front was cracked from the time she dropped it on the locker room floor at the gym. He'd had the back inscribed: So Your Daily Sounds May Be as Beautiful as You Are.

Beautiful. Ha. Ragged hair, ragged skin. Beautiful? The day or her? Never mind the yelling children, barking dog, and cell phone tweets and blips and rings. The "Mommy! Mommy!"

The Accord's owner—and Gabrielle knew it was Sue Thompson because that's what the registration declared—had her own taste, but she was much more organized than Gabrielle could be. Sue's car was as buttoned-down as a naval ship. Spotless, floor mats without tell-tale dirt prints, dash dust-free. No fruity fist or handprints on the windows, at least as much as she could tell in the darkened cab.

Gabrielle's own Outback was like a war zone, the battle between nations of smelly, drippy children: jelly, baby poop, orange juice.

Sue Thompson was the person Gabrielle would never be, even when she went back to work.

"They will only be young once," said her mother, Joan, calling from Florida. Gabrielle hadn't seen her in a year. If she wasn't in Naples, Joan was off on a bus tour in Provence or Scotland with her boyfriend Ned, a sailor and fisherman and well-endowed in apparently more ways than one. Off they went, touring Iceland, Nova Scotia, the Hawaiian island chain.

“But,” Gabrielle started. She couldn’t finish, her argument selfish.

“You can do your consulting,” her mother said.

But Gabrielle couldn’t really count the work she did on the side, even though her last gig was enough to pay for the fancy preschool program Mallory went to MWF mornings from 9-12. Gabrielle had thought that her eldest being occupied would give her a break, but so much of the morning seemed to involve getting Mallory, 4, Dylan, 3, and Macy, almost 1, into the car, out of the car, into the car, out of the car, into the car, out of the car. There were the booster and car seats, the gabbing away with other parents, the delivering of morning snacks, which needed to be organic, natural, healthy, and preferably tasty (crunchy, sweetish, though not throat choking-sized), a true impossibility. Once she had the younger two back in the car, Gabrielle knew she might as well do what she must, so there was the getting of gas, going to the vet, the dry cleaners, the locksmith. All the places that were impossible to go to online, though she wished for them. She could see her dog Remy sailing through the ether, into the vet’s office, getting his shots, and being texted back.

Sue Thompson didn’t have these problems. Gabrielle dug through the glove compartment again, admiring the organization pattern. A thing of beauty. Car manuals in a neat faux leather folder, flashlight, Kleenex, reading glasses all in their places.

No organic animal crackers or used baby wipes, things Gabrielle found everywhere.

She closed the compartment, sat back against Sue Thompson’s smooth leather seat. Bottom line: She needed a babysitter to take her oldest child to preschool. Maybe when all was said and done, there were two hours three times a week when Gabrielle was at home, Macy napping, Dylan somnolent in front of the television watching an educational video, and then what? Sometimes all she did was stare out the office window, when, in fact, she should be sending emails to prospective clients or current clients. She could solve their client database issues. Contact her immediately!

Something other than nothing.

In what seemed like two seconds later, back in the car they went, down the hill, across the freeway, where she picked up Mallory, talked to the teacher about her daughter’s anxiety levels, and then home, where she had to make three sandwiches (all while nursing Macy), different kinds, and try three different ways to get them to rest or play quietly or flip through picture books.

At that point, Remy would start barking.

One early morning at 2 when she couldn’t sleep, Gabrielle, exhausted but wide-eyed, decided to take a walk. Slipping out of bed so as not to wake Mark, tip-toeing down the hall past the children’s bedrooms and Remy’s crate, she landed outside on a starry night, a rare thing so close to the city and light pollution. The cool air whisked around her. The silence held her still and calm. In her dark sweatshirt, flannel pajama bottoms, and black Uggs, she was almost invisible. She slipped between cars, stopping to listen to an owl hoot-hooting. And then the call of his or her mate or pal or friend.

Hoot-hoot.

At the corner of her own street, she found her first car, this one easy. The door was actually open. Pulling her sweatshirt down over her hands and fingers (she watched enough *Vera* on Netflix to know better) she opened the door. And right there? An iPad. How easy it had been to reach in and take it, just like that. Qui-

etly, without disturbing anything else, Gabrielle closed the door with an invisible click.

The next day after wiping the iPad (she was in IT, after all), she donated it to the public school down the street. For an instant, she thought she saw suspicion in the secretary's eye. But then, nothing but gratitude.

"I work with computers," she told the woman. "I sometimes come into extra hardware. I'll make sure to donate everything here."

"Wonderful!" The whole office beamed. And every other week, when Gabrielle brought in a laptop or tablet, more beaming. More nice words.

But this car? The one she'd been in ten minutes too long already? Nothing. Sue Thompson was not going to give up anything. Her car was clean and clear and pristine. Sue Thompson was organized, efficient, and thorough. Sue Thompson would know how to get three kids into a car without a major production. Sue Thompson would tell Mallory's teacher to shove it. Sue Thompson would tell Mark that Gabrielle needed to go back to work.

"Bonding has been established," Sue Thompson would say. "The kids are just fine. It's having an unhappy mother that can cause problems, Mark. Really. Use some sense."

Sue Thompson would read to the kids and lull them all into a nice long nap. Sue Thompson would clean the house, make the right kind of sandwich, and solve every single one of Gabrielle's first-world problems that were killing her.

There was a pounding on the window. Gabrielle jumped, dropped the CDs in her hand.

"Who the hell are you?" a voice asked. "What are you doing in my car?"

Sue Thompson, Gabrielle thought, her entire body relaxing. She turned up into the beam of the flashlight, smiling.

At last.

CONTRIBUTORS

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