

You Are Here

Here is the couple, the girl in the boy's car, three in the morning with the windows open and the headlights off, coasting the full length of her parents' gravel drive, the trees high and close enough above them to black out the blue and moony sky. When the gravel turns to hard-packed dirt, the boy throws the car into gear, and the girl turns the radio on; when the dirt lane widens at the highway's mouth, they swing a wide turn east to follow the moon that is brighter and rounder than any they've seen. That is already lying. The boy pops the tab from a can of beer, and the girl peels licorice laces from a sticky cherry wrapper, and the pinpoint of road at the horizon is deeper than any galaxy. In two hours they will stop at a Pilot to fill the tank and use the restrooms. They'll buy bags of powdered-sugar donut holes and Fritos, Mountain Dew and strawberry Yoo-Hoo, and Camel Lights with cash the boy amassed, dollar by five and week by month, taken from the greasy paper bag on top of the toolbox where his old man keeps the prescription pills he deals at the VFW.

The girl is fifteen years old. She has an angel's lips and a snake's tongue and a baby who moves like a moth inside her. The boy is seventeen. That is all he is, so far.

Here is the town that is smaller than their desire but big enough for a motel overlooking the exit ramp, U-shaped with a railed walkway outside their second-floor room. To the left is the highway that flows like black water, to the right is the traffic light that marks the line of town, beneath is the rusting roof of their car, above is velvet sky. They are closer to it here.

The motel rents by the week at a reduced rate, rooms with kitchenettes and salvaged café tables in them, linoleum floors that curl at the seams. The bedside tables are gouged and scarred; the carpeting smells of mildew. They prop the door open with a chair and ferry their belongings up from the car: two duffel bags, a backpack, a cardboard box with softening edges, the top flaps tucked secure. This pile in the middle of the floor is a bigger wonder to them than a pyramid, and they fall on the bed, legs twined, breathless, until the girl nudges the boy up to close and bolt the door.

Here are the rough sheets, and the blanket, thin and too narrow for the bed, the pillows they fold and wedge under shoulders and hips; her legs smooth and his covered in soft dark hair, her rounding belly pressed to the slick concavity between his hipbones, their puppy breath. Here is the jut and dip; here is the imperative. They sleep in the starry glow of highway lights and wake to a candy sun that burns lemony through the thin curtains, and the blurry words they whisper back and forth are halfway between plans and promises.

The girl stocks the cabinets with boxes of cereal and cans of soup, crackling packages of noodles, bags of discount candy. The boy walks to the convenience store for soda and beer, and the amputee who works the register does not ask for ID. His left arm is furred and delicate and peters into a slender and fingerless tip below what passes for an elbow. He bags efficiently, and with grace. His own son is a titan, a potentate, a captain of industry, broad of shoulder and smooth of jaw and despairing of ever touching his lips to the beautiful skin of his wife's twenty-five-year-old brother. When he can the amputee slips packages of peanut butter crackers into the boy's bag before handing it over to him.

At night the boy smokes cigarettes on the motel walkway, shirtless, pale as the crescent moon above him, and the girl sits in the open doorway, legs like ribbons stretched across it, and the highway that delivered them to where they are snakes dark and almost silent to the places they still dream of. The traffic light at the intersection flashes yellow, and the spindly pines stab black at the resting sky, and where they are is the beating heart of everything waiting for them.

They believe this. They are too young not to.

Here are the weeks and months, the mornings breaking grayer and the rain falling colder and the clouds sinking thick, and the ground crusting over with rime; here is the screaming baby, her eyes hot slits and her balled fists plums, her mouth wide and wet and livid; here are the baby's grandparents who are no longer looking for their son and daughter, who refuse to speak their names, who are careful not to sit in the same pew at church on Sundays, but who cannot help but jump when they see a car that looks like the one in which their children drove away, unseen, unheard, unimaginably.

Here are the children and their sleeping baby, the three of them in bed in that

room between the interstate and intersection while the snow feathers the black sky. They share a set of men's flannel pajamas, the bottoms on the boy and the top on the girl, the legs and sleeves almost wide enough for both of them to burrow into at once, plaid like Christmas paper, brand new. The girl waits tables at a chicken-and-rib shack, and the boy loads pallets at a garden supply center; they keep a neat list of expenses in a spiral notebook held closed with rubber bands in the utensil drawer. The girl's handwriting is buoyant, round and looping; the boy's tilts headlong for the paper's edge.

This indicates everything, and nothing.

The door is locked three ways, knob-turn and deadbolt and chain. The girl curls her legs up under the flannel, and the boy flings an arm over the side of the bed, and between them the baby wakes. Her fingers wave like anemones, and her eyes are riptide blue, and in the silence before her cry, the wind readies itself; the snow spins itself up into a silver plume. The world knows she is in it.

Here is the slow thaw and the fox that creeps through the sweet new green, wet teeth, wet fur, sharp ears and snout, so pretty in its stealth, its silence. Here is the lullaby, cicada hum and truck horn, water dripping on cracked tile and the buzz of walkway lights, the fade and crackling swell at the bottom of the radio dial: voice and static and the tin roar of applause from the stands of a dusty arena inside that metal box on the stained and listing dresser.

The girl has had enough of every station, and the boy is quick to turn the volume down when she asks, if she asks. They have traded the notebook for an actual ledger, three-columned green pages bound in stamped faux-leather, two debit cards and a neat stack of cash in a manila envelope tucked inside. They pay the rent on time, or early. They lean together over the classifieds and circle ads for one-bedroom apartments in neighborhoods they have driven through, yards dusty and sidewalks cracked but yards and sidewalks all the same. On Sundays the girl holds the baby in her lap while the boy slows the car to peer at red-and-white For Rent flags staked in scrubby grass.

Shotgun porch-fronts, brick-faced quadruplexes, signs taped to windows or balloons tied to mailboxes or creased poster boards with phone numbers marked at a slant across them. They drive up one street and down the next,

slow and squinting, nothing like that first dizzy streak through the soft and rushing night, like that dark fizzing gallop into everything. Vinyl-sided duplexes; a row of bungalows, porches sagging and paint chipping, set along a fresh-poured drive. Door after door and the rooms behind them sealed and empty; drop ceilings or dusty carpet or transom windows but each room the same in its emptiness, in its waiting for the first boxes to be set down and slit open, the first bowls put on shelves, the first coats in closets. A rusting push mower in a yard, a blue plastic pony tipped sideways and rigid on a walkway, eye and ear open to the quiet sky. A sandwich board by a rental office doorway: If You Lived Here You'd Be Home Already.

The first pizza delivered and eaten by candlelight, the first wax drippings and red-wine stains on the kitchen counter; the first breakfast in bed, the bed an open sleeping bag piled with quilts on the floor and the breakfast burnt coffee from the convenience store down the street and slices of cold pizza.

The baby smacks the flats of her tiny hands on the car window, and the Sunday houses float past in the pale April sun. The boy thinks about what it would be like to have a lawn to water, gutters to clean, and leaves to rake; to come in from shoveling snow and drink hot chocolate with his daughter, her hair in red ribbons, her cheeks sticky with marshmallow. The girl dozes. She dreams of slipping fully dressed from bed and floating to the chipped dish on the table in their rented kitchenette, of hooking the key ring with one ghostly finger and passing like sweet pale smoke through the scuffed and dented door, of aiming the car into everything.

The first drink poured after the first caught lie, tongue and throat on fire and the sun going cold, windows clean and glittering; the first glass thrown, the door slamming and the moon going black above the howl and chain-rattle of the dog across the alley; the first fuck that hurts and the last one that doesn't.

She dreams of tires on smooth asphalt, the dark, cool smell of it under stars and the fog tipping the tall grass silver; of windows open to a silence deep as the velvet sky and every bounce and jerk of the wheel beneath her fingers; of the song she can sing without knowing the words.

They pull into the motel lot, and the boy takes the baby; the girl blinks and stands and stretches. It is just past noon, but already the sun is giving up, going

white behind the blowing clouds, a bright, diffuse circle in a graying sky. The trees are bare and indifferent. They climb the metal stairs, the boy in front with the baby wrapped inside his jacket, and the girl a few steps behind, one hand trailing along the rail and the other deep in an empty pocket, eyes half-closed as she drifts up after them. The boy unlocks the door and shoulders it open for the girl, and the three of them close themselves inside.

Here is a Sunday afternoon that will disappear like the rest of them, that will dissolve like sugar in water, like salt. They will not remember the black-and-white movie muted on the television, the condensation on the window and the hiss of the heat pump below it, the sleeve of saltines and sticky jar of grape jelly, the peanut butter and apple slices on a plate by the bed. It is possible they will not even remember the bed.

The girl clicks the television remote until she finds a football game for the boy to watch, but he turns to kiss her instead: even now he cannot concentrate on anything but her when she is this close, when he can smell her sweat mixed with the pink perfume she sprays inside her shirt every morning. The baby is sleeping just next to them, and still he cannot think of anything but sinking himself into the tight soft heat of her until the room goes white and the blood roars tidal in his ears.

She shimmies out of her pants and underwear, because on this Sunday that will be forgotten, she still believes she loves him—he is, after all, the one who brought her here, and if *here* is not enough—not yet, not quite, not ever—she does not yet doubt that he will bring her to another *here*, a different and better one, one she will never want to leave.

The bed squeaks as he moves on top of her. She closes her eyes and tries to conjure the glimmer and sigh of midnight in June, Libra balanced above her and new grass pressed below and everywhere else his skin warm and wet and salty on hers.

She tries but she is no magician. She opens her eyes to thin brown curtains, flattened shag carpet, and walls scuffed at the floorboards. She looks at the baby struggling to free her arms from the blanket as the heater clanks and whooshes and understands for the first time the end in every beginning, hidden like a seed in fruit. It is still tiny, but it is dense as iridium; it is already too heavy to bear,

and love will never be enough to lift it.

She would split the sky if she had the breath.

Here is this Sunday in this room before the years of Sundays pile white and light and hollow, before they crumble like chalk and blow into talc-white clouds. Here are the baby's petal-pink hands, tiny flags waving semaphore to the sky she does not know yet. Here is the girl's wet cheek under the boy's warm hand, and when he asks, "Why are you crying?" and she says, "I'm not," he does not argue because to argue is to admit and to admit is to accept: responsibility, defeat, the cold-and-waiting silence.

They will disappear from this room like everyone before and after them has done; they will leave less than some and more than others and none of it will matter. They will think now and then of the baseball cap with a tear in the brim or the stuffed green giraffe until they don't, and when the room itself disappears in an explosion of brick and glass and molding plaster, they will have no idea of its obliteration, the girl by then in a small office strewn with schedules and order forms and mailers and the boy in the waiting room of a free clinic with a pain in his chest that he has been ignoring for days and the baby in lemon-yellow corduroy pants and a paint-smearred smock at a low, sturdy table strewn with crayons and watercolors and clay in the preschool she hates to leave.

When the motel is razed, they will be miles away from it and one another. The baby will attend the preschool from eight until two. The girl will be responsible for scheduling sixty employees among four warehouses. The boy's blood pressure will be two hundred over one hundred and fifteen.

Here are the numbers they will not remember: of the highway, the exit, the room, the street address of the garden center or chicken shack or bank, the three times that Sunday the girl wrapped herself around the boy while the television droned, the five inches of April snow that fell that day, or the seven hours it took to melt.

Interstate, intersection, interlude.

The boy leaves because he can, and the girl is left because she is. He leaves while she sleeps, and she sleeps while he drives. The baby watches: the dark and the lights sliding through it, the rise and fall of her mother's bare shoulder, the

cooling expanse of her father's pillow, the breath and tick of this night. She bats her wrapped feet and her hands, pink as empty conch shells, come to rest on the blanket.

Interstice, interval, interdiction.

The stars burn toward extinction above all of the idiot flesh below them.

Here is the on-ramp and mile marker and exit sign; here is the fork in the road and the fork in the tongue. The regret the boy feels is bright and buoyant; he rides it like a salt swell over crests of hills he anticipates before the tires meet them.

Here is the cold bed in the dark room, the silver windows and turned milk. Here is the wet body waking, tears and sweat, cheeks and legs, pupils wide and black and searching. Here is the mother, her acid panic and radiant fury, her howl. Here is her impulse: to throw the damp sheet off and run barefoot out into the late snow, hair snaking behind, catching nothing and leaving everything, Medusa, empty and ravenous and pure.

Here is the unburied daughter, the dead star, the white dwarf.

The years unfold, bear up, become: a box, a house, open to the sky. The walls fall open and flat, roads snaking across them. A red arrow: *you are here*. But not for long. Longitude, latitude, the curve of rivers, of breathing paths. Fold it again; smooth it to fit into a pocket. Shake it open and watch the rooms as they scatter and fall, the moons in them.

Here is the woman who was the girl and the girl who was the baby; here is the breathing ghost. They live in a one-bedroom apartment in a complex with an overgrown courtyard and an in-ground pool that is filled with dead leaves in the winter and mossy green water in the summer. They have wall-to-wall carpeting and a ceiling fan in the narrow kitchen and a Trimline phone mounted on the wall of the pass-through. They have a pass-through. They eat dinner sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the television set, English muffin pizzas and Tang, popcorn hot from the handled foil pan, sleeves of chocolate-covered graham crackers and tart green apples slivered.

The girl wears her father's face without knowing it. She doesn't remember him; she has no idea that she squints against sunshine with his eyes, that her forehead

knots itself into the same crabbed furrow as his did. At night, in the mint-green bathtub, with the tiny window near the ceiling open to let the summer in, her mother scrubs that furrow smooth with a kitten-shaped sponge soaked in shampoo the color of marigolds. *Lather, rinse, repeat*, say the instructions on the bottle, but the furrow won't stay gone.

She lifts her daughter from the water and sets her dripping on the bath mat, a slick and wriggling seal, then wraps her in a towel, rubs at her shoulders and legs in the sweet close air, the freckled forearms and scabbed knees, the rose petal heels she cups in her palms in sleep. She will never be rid of him.

From the open window, crickets, a shout and chlorinated splash, keening guitar swallowed by the spin of a radio dial. She leans to whisper into her daughter's warm ear, lifts and carries her out to the sliver of balcony that overlooks the pool and the fence and the woods beyond.

Here is the broken earth and gutted tree; here is the gypsy moth. Here is the black leaf, the soil that remembers nothing and the skin that remembers everything, the spit and mud and waking dream. Here is the cool ground, tooth and root and bones exposed, scraped clean and waiting.

She is twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, five feet four inches and one hundred pounds. Her hair is strawberry-gold, her hair is copper, her hair is banged and blunt as a Dutch boy's, her hair falls in skeins to her waist. Her hands are seashells, and her eyes are winter surf, and her untouched skin is cool and smooth as limestone. She dissolves Benadryl into her tea at night and NoDoz in her coffee in the mornings, and in between she stretches wide across her empty bed, in between she prowls the dusty floors with a cigarette in one hand and a tumbler of wine in the other, in between she dreams that when he finds her he doesn't recognize her, when he touches her he can't feel her, when he fucks her he tears her in two.

He is twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four, he is sleeping sunburned in a hayloft, he is kneeling at Easter Mass, he is huddled in a thrift-store parka in the doorway of a truck stop. The air is frozen, crackling black, full of gasoline and burnt coffee and the perfume of a girl whose name is Shelly or Shelby or Beth, whose nails are purple, whose lips are silver, whose hair glows blue beneath the

diesel sky as she leads him across the cracked and rumbling lot.

In the back seat of her car, Shelly or Shelby or Beth pulls an unzipped sleeping bag around them and a blanket over that, tugs her mittens from her hands with her teeth and his shirt from his pants with her cold fingers. He feels something hard and smooth beneath his hip, and she kicks a textbook to the foot well. "I'm studying to be an agronomist," she tells him and pulls a neat leather case from between the seat and the door, opens it to clean works shining on fawn-colored felt. "I made dean's list last semester," she says, then ties him off and lowers her heart-shaped face to his arm, sucks at a vein until it throbs fat and green, and slides the sunshine home.

In an hour or a year, he staggers back across the oil stains through the lines of idling trucks, through the pop and fizz of cold sparks. He shoulders the glass door open, steps slow and careful past the displays of cassette tapes and magazines, the metal racks of sunglasses and fringed neon T-shirts and shelves of insulated plastic cups, the bright and throbbing abundance, the screaming promise of diversion of fulfillment of the God-given right to stupor.

He collapses in a bathroom stall, works his hands into the pockets of his jeans, and pinches out torn bus schedules, water-stained receipts, a bent prayer card from a congregation in Missouri. Green hills and a pulled-sugar sky, a steeple rising into it. *Beloved, now we are children of God.*

The metal door to the stall rattles, and he shrinks back against the wet tile, works another slip of paper that is not cash from his pocket. 100% cotton. Made in the USA. He can see heavy work boots and jeans soaked at the hems on the other side of the door. He watches, fascinated, waiting to see if they decide to stay or leave. Nubs of ice cling to the laces, to the frayed tongues. In this bright metal box, he could wait forever.

Shake well before using, toxic if swallowed, fragile.

May cause drowsiness.

Heavy object, lift with care.

The daughter who was the baby is a comet, is an eclipse, is a tidal wind. She drags the sky behind her. She is one thousand days old, she is ten years old, she is one

hundred and fifty months old, and still the sky snaps and billows at her bare brown shoulders.

She trails eggshell and feathers, thistle and gingersnap, tooth and bone and petals. She dives into ash and swims through lava and climbs out ice-blue and shining. She has her father's brow and her mother's chin, but in between, her face is some new planet's moon.

Except she isn't and she doesn't because she is nothing but a twelve-year-old girl, knots in her hair and scrapes on her knees, pierced ears and bitten nails and a stutter when she's nervous. She is not perfect, and she is not magic, and she will never belong to more of the world than she did before she entered it; she will never travel farther than she already has. She will be lucky if she is precious to someone, if hers is the face that appears in someone else's wakeful darkness, if she is someone's only prize. She drags nothing but the years behind her.

Here is the world before her: the car on the dark road and the boy and girl who will be her parents inside it, arms stretched long out the open windows and fingers spread to catch the dusk, hands bouncing and skimming the warm rush of it. Here is the cracked leather hot beneath their thighs, and the tires' bump and lurch as they turn onto dirt, the kick of dust behind them and the high grass flattening. She is older now than her mother was then, and she is colder than her father. She carries his picture in her backpack, his stranger's face creased and faded, tucked into a deck of cards she lifted from a gas station. Her fingers are quick and her step is fast; her eyes are needle sharp.

The deck of cards from a greasy shelf in an Amoco; agate earrings and knitted mittens and crystal beaded key chains from drugstores and arcades; a turquoise bracelet, rusted Hot Wheels Camaro, and a torn and penciled map from her mother's chest of drawers. She takes only what won't be missed, which she already understands is most of everything. She keeps what she takes in a shoebox on her closet shelf. She keeps her own counsel. She keeps her guard up.

Here is the only end to every story: everything disappears, and everyone. She knows this. She sleeps peaceful next to it; she breathes its regardless chill and does not dream of warmth, does not dream of where her father might be or what her mother might do if she found him.

She is the well they meant and the harm they didn't, that boy and girl, immortal for as long as it took to make her and no longer than that. She is what is left, and the world after her will be no different for her presence in it.

Supplication, expiation, absolution.

A water-stained address book from a table in a sub shop, a birthday card from a purse left open on a bowling alley snack bar. A waiting heart, an empty house, a dark and silvered mirror. She takes only what's already been forgotten. She takes all the time in the world.

Here is the ghostless machine and the hatless magician; here is the snake that does not rattle, its pretty slither and flick. Here is the fallen apple and the poisoned tree. Here is the long box and the turned earth, cooling. It is all, and it is enough.