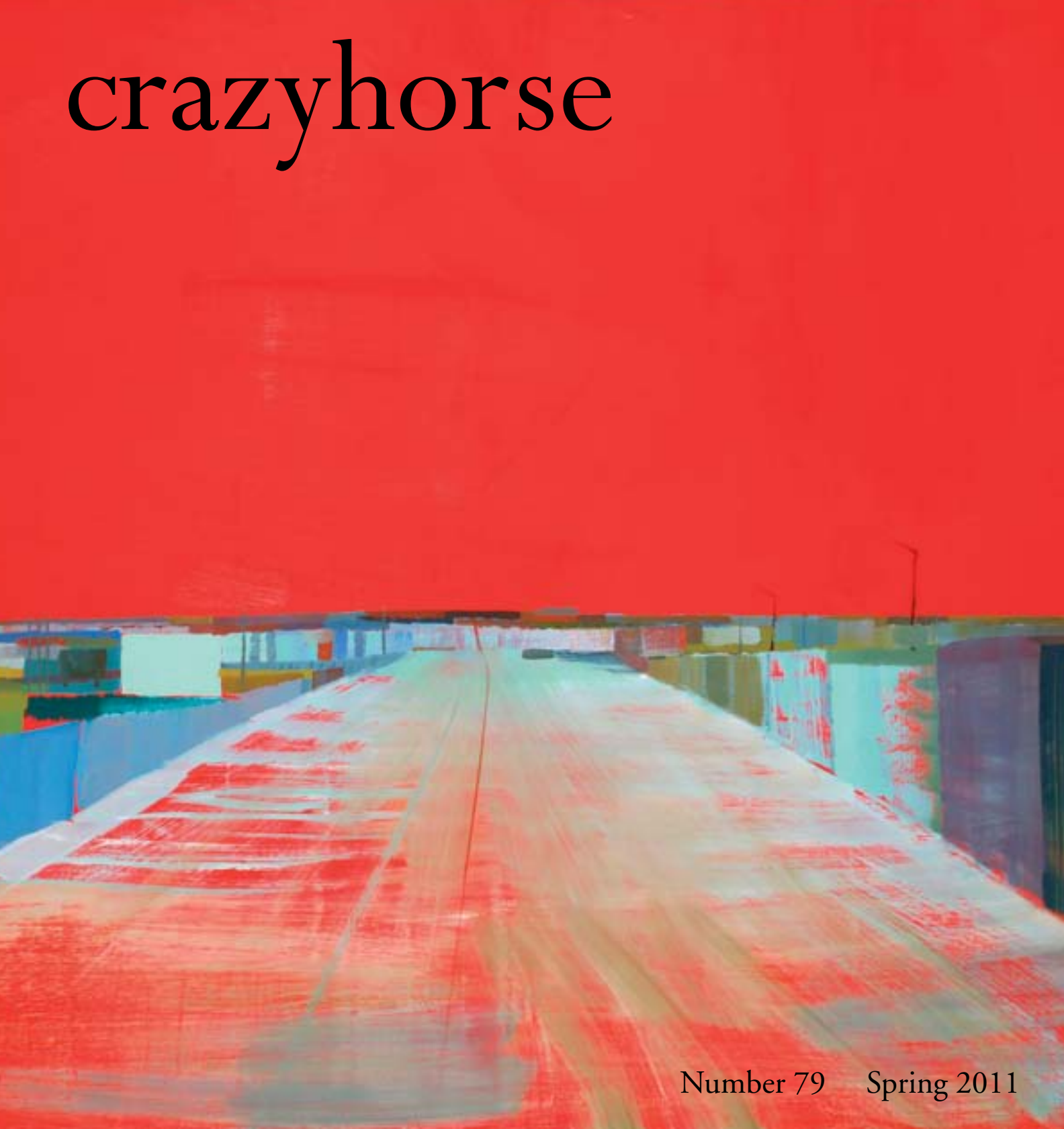


crazyhorse



Number 79 Spring 2011



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Dear Reader,

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ALBERT GOLDBARTH

Near Death Experience

*The main scenario includes a buzzing sound . . . and
a sort of judgment imparted by a being of light.*

—I. P. Couliano

At which I thought of Dickinson's famous opening line
"I heard a fly buzz when I died"—it "interposed
. . . Between the light and me"—so: perfect, yes,
she'd had an "NDE": get *on* that, Dickinson scholars!
And I was, I admit it, self-consciously proud of this
quick-minded acuity of connection-making, although
a moment later my recollection of the title of a Whitman poem
had exceeded its expiration date . . . it turns out life,

by definition, *is* "ND": I'm 63, and I wish they'd hurry up,
those exuberant genius medico-menschies
I'm always hearing about, with nano-scans of our direst,
deepest cellular insurgencies, and techno-this
and laser-that and vitamins sprung from some near-future square
of a radiant biomaneuvered periodic table . . . "the average life span
is liable to be extended by [your choice of amazingness] years"
. . . I'm 63, do you hear me, *rush it along*, because I remember

my aunt Regina—I was eight, impressionable, aghast—
as the tumor increasingly leached her brain, and words
would batter against the inside of her skull like birds
attempting escape from a shuttered attic, and ever since,
a word that won't sleek readily forth when called upon
is worrying to me, I've had those moments—haven't
you?—when my head on the pillow is filled with crash after crash
until a neural window opens up and the word I want flies out . . . that's

it, “The Sleepers,” Whitman’s space-time vision of the cycle of birth and death and then (he’s certain of this) regeneration: if life is “ND,” death is correspondingly, to coin a term, “NL”—though that’s a slippery wish to hold to with my brain at rest on its brainpan like a suspect piece of supermarket produce (thump it and keep on moving), great gray fruit with its mystery shelf life. Aunt Regina was just in her thirties. No one was prepared

when she was ambushed by mortality. Dickinson, I’d like to think, had pre-imagined an intimacy with death: “he kindly stopped for me,” she says, and they ride to “Eternity” . . . she’s been “ND,” she’s found a kind of peace with this already, she whose poems are so provisioned with life and its music-makers! The lark in one, the starling, the linnet. . . . Great gray loft and its thousands of birds.

WAYNE HARRISON

Storm Damage

The weather forecaster said after midnight, but by two a.m. it still hasn't come. Tiffany has been waiting; she's watched all the sitcoms. Now the TV is muted on a shopping channel as she wanders around the apartment, looking at the rooms, not quite missing them but feeling a nostalgia that moves her to find her diary. She sits in the recliner and skims a dozen entries that span the last nine years. They're mostly about her breakups with boyfriends. The cursive leans and spikes across the page from when she was twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-five, but what Tiffany writes tonight is loose and uncertain. In four months she'll be thirty.

The deadbolt clacks like a shot and she jolts around. Danny nearly falls into the room before heaving shut the door with his shoulder. The rain-smelling gust he lets in sends mail across the dinette table. "You're up," he says, his hair all over the place, thick black Tom Cruise hair, the first thing she ever noticed about him. He tosses his leather case full of expensive darts onto the futon, where he's been sleeping for more than a week.

She sets down the diary, turns off the woman modeling Tanzanite rings. "Did the rain start?"

"Just about," he says. Hands down in his front pockets, he's pacing now. "What are they saying, category three? Bullshit. It's going to be a four.

I can tell a four." He stops under the ceiling fixture, cranes back with his hands behind his head and staggers. It takes a lot to get him drunk, and she wonders how much money he spent at The Overtime. She takes up her diary and puts the pen back in the end table drawer. "I'm going to bed."

"Tiff, I got mugged," Danny says, and turning suddenly she sees not the Danny of now, the Danny she's trying to leave, but the boy his mother sometimes speaks of, who was ignored by his father and picked on at school. His eyes blink uncontrollably, his shoulders slump, and finally he tightens his lips and sighs. "Just like twenty minutes ago, you believe it?"

The door—he didn't turn the bolt again, and she stares at it as though the crime has followed him home. "Danny. My God."

"I'm unlocking my car and this grease ball kid comes over with a Glock. A freaking Glock." Danny closes his eyes for a moment and touches his temples. "Your mind does these things. Instead of pissing my pants, I'm wondering where this punk Guinea kid gets a nine hundred dollar gun. I go back in the bar and Frank Nespoli runs out looking for the guy, waving *his* piece around. I mean, everybody has a piece, right? Fuck."

Tiffany fights the impulse to hug him. When

he said what kind of gun it was, she thought he might be making the story up just to get even, but now that Frank's been mentioned it's verifiable, and she feels a pang of guilt. She does hug him, asks if he's hurt, he's not, and after enough time she pulls back. He holds onto her hand. His eyes glass over before he turns them away, and a second passes when she wishes she still loved him.

Danny goes in the kitchenette and takes down a coffee mug. He comes back with the Absolut from the freezer.

"You've got work tomorrow," she says, suddenly feeling exhausted. She can postpone until the morning knowing if they got his wallet—his Sears card and license and any cash.

He pours a shot and drinks it without a sound.

"Stay up if you want," she says, and this time she makes it all the way into the bedroom.

The crash she can feel under her feet. When she comes out to the living room again the front door is wide open, the knob punched through the sheet rock. Like a sidewalk witness to a car wreck she squints into the salty electric wind.

Danny appears outside in the stairwell light holding two Beefeaters boxes she'd seen in the dumpster. "Let's do this right now," he says. "Let's get it over with," and he heaves the boxes in and slams the door.

"You just ruined the wall," she says. "Good luck getting your deposit back."

"Let's pack your shit," he says. At the bookshelf he pulls down her books—on photography, on being your own boss, on European castles—in

twos and threes. He fills the first box. "You want to hear something hilarious?" he says. "When I almost got shot tonight I thought about you. I was worried how you'd get by."

He picks up the framed picture of her and her daughter Marcy at Chuck E. Cheese. She rushes him. "Not in there with the books. What's wrong with you?" Whose fault it is isn't clear, but suddenly the picture falls, its glass shattering on the hardwood floor. "You asshole," she says and pounds him with the bottom of her hand.

It happens too fast to see, more of a sound than a feeling, a cymbal crash. Then tingling, heat. She raises her hand again, but suddenly her legs give out and she's on the ground. Danny's hand is still flexing. "Get off me," he shouts as though in self-defense.

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RICHARD JACKSON

My Many Disguises

I'll be there in no time, you said, which would make waiting a thing of the past except that time wouldn't exist. Sometimes we just want to be those ancient insects trapped forever in amber. We want to know about that tree growing down into the seabed off Norfolk England, about the next life the ancient Beaker people planted it to grow towards. We want to know where the Door to Eternity with its concentric carved frames unearthed in Luxor, Egypt, leads to. Even the evening comes on as if it didn't understand what it is doing. Maybe that's why we say the evening is so melancholy, for it reminds us that we are the only species that knows there's a last breath waiting for us, and because the dead, sadly, have no need of us. Look, even cockroaches can live 9 days without their heads. Euripides thought every god lives inside us as an unspoken word. That's why we become the stories we imagine, the way hover flies disguise themselves as wasps or bees so nothing will attack them. Everything wants to live forever but even the sun is slowly dying out. Everything wants to be something else. Same difference, as the saying goes, but in fact everyone's watch shows a different time. Fireflies signal their mates with a unique Morse code of flashes. I wish I could tell you everything, but each memory is an aftershock sending the old truths scurrying over rotting thresholds of belief, and into dimly lit side streets. Maybe no one hears our cries simply because we speak a language of extinct hearts. The call of a humpback whale can be heard for 500 miles. The heart of a blue whale is as big as a small car. The old

wrecks in the abandoned lot have turned into dead stars.
Maybe those scientists who created artificial bacterium can help.
The wind leaves a puzzle in the dust from demolished buildings.
It doesn't matter that the moment is always splintered wood.
What comes next appears like a number at the deli counter.
We never know where the paths of the wind begin or end.
It doesn't matter how many rocks we throw against the hour.
Sometimes we hold each other as if we were the thinnest clouds.
If the alley is deep enough you can see whole constellations.
Maybe people have the same kind of attraction as binary stars
that eventually collide and destroy each other. Sometimes
they just go whirling into other galaxies. Isn't that why
we are made of stardust and interstellar light? Doesn't
every love set off the security lights in the heart?
You just have to know the difference between true and
magnetic north. Every word here stands for a star I have
kidnapped. The latest theory is that the universe is made up
of bits of information so that we are just chips in some
giant computer. To someone light years away we are
just a tiny blue dot made up of the wrong chemicals.
I don't know whether this is the beginning or the middle.
There's a bit of leftover sun blowing around on the corner.
There's the quivering branch the robin has just left.
Nothing is complete until we can see it. Even the trees
hold their breath. It may seem forever until you arrive.
There's the prison of my shadow, these words which are
roadblocks, their elliptical emotions, the night's refusals.
It may mean the dead need us, after all, to say the unsayable,
to hold in our hands a simple rose, to cup the wind, to feel
the endless longing the heart brings back from that inverted
world, that world whose destiny encases your every breath.

NANCY McCABE

Before and After

“Meet intelligent, sensitive singles just like you!” the classified ad coaxed. I don’t know if it was those words that first caught my eye, or the advertisement below it, the diet pill one that coupled Before and After photos. In the Before picture, a large, fuzzy woman avoided the camera. In the After version, a slim, focused woman smiled straight into the lens. The photos were supposed to be of the same person, but I couldn’t find any resemblance between the two faces.

I was eighteen, and I’d imagined myself like the Before photo ever since my high school sweetheart had abruptly dumped me. He’d been the love of my life, the boy I’d planned to marry someday and whose four children I’d meant to bear. Now I drove my 1976 Hornet around singing songs about rain, “Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head,” “Kathy’s Song,” and “Just When I Needed You Most,” which played constantly on the radio that spring of 1981: “You left in the rain without closing the door . . .”

I sang in my car, but in public, it was as if I’d taken a vow of silence. Talking was dangerous. I felt one word away from spilling over, losing it, falling apart. I was the Before photo, blurred, sloppy, my boundaries slipping. I wanted to be the direct, confident, cleanly contained person in the After photo.

As if the pairing of the classified and the diet ads were deliberate and had something to do with each other, I sent in my ten dollars to meet other intelligent, sensitive singles. And that’s how I, the girl who could barely speak, met a mute man.

He was a 25-year-old accountant from Detroit whose vocal chords had been paralyzed by childhood encephalitis. I had once, in junior high, accepted the challenge of a teacher to remain silent for two hours. I communicated only by gestures, notes, sign language, and lip movements. I was disappointed that silence did not make me mysterious and intriguing. It annoyed my friends. They started ignoring me. Giving up speech, I saw, meant sacrificing presence and power.

But now my boyfriend, struggling, I would learn much later, with admitting to himself that he was gay, had broken up with me for seemingly no reason. I didn’t get it, didn’t know how I would ever find anyone else who made me as nervous and breathless and giddy as the boy I’d loved since I was fourteen. My confusion and grief were like a key turning, locking me into my silence. Who better to understand that, I thought, than a man who couldn’t speak?

Getting to know someone through letters

seemed perfect. I could usually say what I meant in writing, so much so that as a child I'd amassed sixteen pen pals in the U.S. and one from Trinidad. The ones who lasted included Helen from Minnesota, a good-hearted Norwegian girl whose father inseminated cows, and Jennifer from Pittsburgh, a lovely, well-bred girl who went to a private school and had a coming-out party. The pen pals who didn't last included those inquiring about the status of cowboy-Indian relations in Kansas as well as one who envisioned my native state as a beautiful, colorful place with roads made of pure gold. I had to gently explain that she was confusing us with Oz, that we were the black and white parts, and no, Kansas was not actually a black and white state, but was in fact in full color.

"Sometimes I feel very far away from other people, as if separated by a huge barrier," George wrote to me.

"Sometimes I feel like that, too, even though I can speak," I wrote back.

I didn't know what to make of the heavy cologne that scented his letters or the cards that arrived weekly. At first, cartoon characters smiled on the covers, which opened up to humorous rhyming lines or jokes about friendship. The cards progressed to silhouetted figures strolling hand in hand down beaches and Susan Polis Schulz poems, then a field airbrushed with the pinpoint glimmers of fireflies. "You light up my life," the card said.

I had very stern literary standards, firmly es-

chewing what my high school creative writing teacher referred to as pimplly weepy puppy-love poetry, sentimentality, and anything by Rod McKuen, a poet pictured on his book covers musing as he thoughtfully combed beaches or gazed out into the ocean. But if I was a snob, how would I ever meet anyone? I resolved to be touched by the effort behind George's regular cards.

"Why are you writing to someone so far away, and why did you choose me?" George wrote. "When I read your letters, I sense that you are a beautiful, vivacious girl that can have any guy you want. What are you looking for in life? A husband? A family of your own in the near future?"

What did I want? I wanted my former boyfriend back. I ran into him sometimes at the bookstore where he worked and we'd inadvertently enrolled in the same freshman biology section. When he showed up, which was rarely, he seemed sad. I wanted him.

But I dutifully wrote back to George, enclosing my senior pictures, assuring him that I was quite shy and far from beautiful, offering him, it turned out, the upper hand. After my admission of self-doubt, George's letters took on a lecturing tone and he frequently addressed me as "sweets."

My former boyfriend knew that I was allergic to cologne, that I was obsessed with the quirkiness of Emily Dickinson, and that I regarded myself as kind and compassionate but not sweet, a term I found diminishing. Sweet things were pleasant but had no nutritional value. I took my-

self more seriously than that. “She was old—so old—she had lived a hundred centuries and a thousand lives. She had loved beyond love, died beyond death,” I’d written after my boyfriend had abruptly exited from my daily life. “Every worthwhile experience had escaped her or been hers—and all in the space of eighteen years.” I was briefly swept away by the drama of it all. I was discovering literary distance. I could become a character, I could distract myself with language, and grief became less dire and overwhelming.

So it was, at first, with my letters to George, in which I could be beautiful and vivacious before I blew it with honesty and George turned condescending. Or maybe, I thought, I was just too quick to find fault. I had to give him a chance.

George sent a thick Polaroid photo of himself. The sleeves of his gray suit were too long, covering half his hands. His face was turned toward the camera, his body away from it, as if casting a glance back in the midst of retreat. But his legs appeared rigid, not really in motion, simply posing that way on purpose to obscure himself.

But the real problem wasn’t his seeming deception or his businessman blandness. It was that he looked nothing like my former boyfriend, who had long arms and staticky flyaway hair. My former boyfriend wore blue workshirts and heavy dark jeans and his grandfather’s gold pocket watch and sometimes cowboy boots that made him even taller. But I had to stop making these comparisons, or I would never find anyone else.

Besides, George had an artistic side. He was an amateur photographer who took beautiful, color-

ful pictures of chrysanthemums and sunflowers, of tulips opening in the sun, of roses climbing trellises. He sent me 8x10s packaged in large envelopes with pieces of cardboard. I framed them and hung them on my bedroom wall. I sent him some of my stories. “Your talent clearly ranges far and wide,” he wrote back.

Speechless, we both spoke through our art, I thought. Wasn’t that enough to have in common?

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MARY RUEFLE

Rumours of Earth

All things written feel a little terrified at first
as though come to destroy us
and with a loud voice
and all amazed
and immediately
but making anything you have explored time,
and exploring time you have created the world,
even if it is only a little cairn of broken bricks
at the end of a rainbow.
Earthly splendor must have appeared long ago
and suffering established forever.
The tower said to the sun
See anyone coming?
The sun said Yes,
the past again coming tomorrow
issued with a clean gun
and the raw appearance of an oyster.
Rumours of earth!
Still, my little injury,
we cannot do more at this point
than indicate a few minor principles
of maps in sand.
So long as morning is the chief authority,
at the sound of voices
the stars say nothing.

LAURA VAN ETTEN

To the Holidays

It was a mistake. Just a bad misunderstanding from the start. The lawyer bought her the first drink. The pilot bought her the second. And there were two corporate types with generous tabs. And rather quickly, it seemed, there were four upside-down shot glasses in front of Kira's new furry-fringed holiday purse.

The pilot was the first to talk to her. He slapped down a five-dollar bill and said, "Keep up the good music." Kira had already fed three dollars to the jukebox. She'd played the same song four times; it was important to create ambience for when Louis walked in. She'd be humming the song in her purple dress because, after their in-love-stage, song lyrics became like the conversations they couldn't have: about their love, their tragedy, their grief, or at least somehow apologies for the people they both kept accidentally fucking. This song was about a woman who went out West and made a big mistake. Kira had driven her Mazda to Arizona, and for five and half months their love was *the real thing*.

The pilot reached over and took Kira's hand; he turned it over, palm side up and this time he put the five-dollar bill *in* her hand. He said, "Thought you were getting us some music?"

"It's too much pressure," Kira said. She pushed the bill back on the bar. He didn't have anything

witty or quick to say. But neither did she.

"Hey, there's the smart guy," one of the businessmen yelled across the bar and winked. Something like that. Either way, it was to flatter her. She understood the smart guy was the guy who'd scored a conversation with the only female patron in the Radisson bar. Kira smiled at them. She liked to make people feel okay for saying stupid things.

That was when the rest of them came over to sit next to her, or around her, like a conversation group. The bartender rolled her eyes to show her female camaraderie. Kira had already told the bartender about her early flight in the morning, home for Christmas, about how her boyfriend, or ex-boyfriend, would be meeting her at the bar. Kira laughed when she said, "Boyfriend, ex-boyfriend, who knows?" They'd bonded a bit with that line. They'd both been around. They were fine. The bartender said she didn't mind the job at the Radisson, but she didn't like the smoke—that'd made Kira feel a little bad for chain-smoking. The bartender didn't really count as female, as competition, because the bartender had old skin and wore a bad belt cinched too high and a nametag with ivy Christmas vines. The bartender hadn't gone up to her room and put on the purple dress with the lacy wired purple bra, the

bra that not that long ago Louis said was “lovely, very lovely,” and submitted to her blowjob that night. The blowjob was something he’d feel bad about. He always felt bad when he gave Kira “mixed signals” about their platonic relationship. He’d felt bad a lot this last year.

Louis was meeting Kira at the Radisson, but he wasn’t actually coming to be *with* her. Since they were both flying early out of Phoenix—Kira to New York, Louis to Philadelphia—it was just *sensible* to platonically share a room like they platonically shared a bed every night, and Louis was sensible. Plus, Kira begged him.

The pilot had scooted over for one of the businessmen to sit on Kira’s right, the lawyer on her left. Another drink for Kira. The men fought about gun control, with bobbing heads and excited shouts they finally agreed, despite their disagreement on the NRA’s politics, *who the hell can tell me I can’t have a gun to defend my personal property?* Something about America and protecting women and children followed. They all sat a little bit taller after that. They had important contributions to the world.

The pilot leaned in front of the businessman and asked Kira about her “line of work.” Kira figured that’s what you start with at Radisson bars—career moves and future advancement opportunities. She’d managed to collect a little stack of Christmas napkins, ripping away at the images, reconfiguring until Santa’s arms twisted to corrupt Rudolph with Mistletoe bondage. She told them she was a student. Or maybe she told

them she was a teacher. Probably, she told them she was a teacher because the businessman started asking her the roots of Greek words, or Latin words, or one of those kinds of things where she didn’t even know the words in the questions.

Her ignorance excited the businessman. He speckled the front of her purple dress with spittle: “Ah ha! Hear that? She doesn’t know! And that’s who’s teaching the youth of tomorrow.” She smiled and apologized. She felt a little bad that she didn’t know the root words, she felt bad that she was so tired, she felt bad she wasn’t making it all a big funny show for everyone.

A couple weeks ago, when Louis was holding his head in his hands and rubbing his temples, she’d said: “You know, people think I’m funny.” He said, “I guess people would think that until they realize you’re serious.” He was probably talking about her jokes starring men who came home to gasoline-arsoned homes, or *just-kidding* jokes about swallowing three bottles of Tylenol or *ha-ha* funnies about hypothetical car-cliff-speed-velocity considerations. Kira had called her friend to ask if maybe Louis was about to fall in love with her again; her friend said what she *could* assure Kira about was her sense of humor—Kira was great! She was really funny! Her friend said, “Plus, all great comedy is based on tragedy.” When Louis got to the bar, Kira would remember to tell him that: she was pretty much a modern day Shakespeare.

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