

Pine Street

I had no expectations of loving anyone other than a roadrunner or, perhaps, a jackrabbit, that year. The jackrabbit with his beautiful long ears and spring thighs and the roadrunner with his tiny feather mohawk and long tail.

I left carrot sticks out on a rock at night for whoever wanted them and, every morning, they were gone. It was a perfect kind of love. Someone, or someones, understood what I had to offer and it was easy to feel good about giving to them.

I believed all living things—plants, animals—were *someones* that year and not *some things*. Everything around me had a pulse and I felt it. If I couldn't feel it, I would get down near it. Even the tarantulas. Even the snakes.

I had not planned to love you, is the point.

**

March and I am alone in my small apartment. April, May; alone.

Being alone that year was not easy. Some parts of it were, but not most. So many of us were alone that year. I was.

But June.

June and I meet you.

**

On our second date you say, "See that sand? I want to move it to smooth out the land over there," and you point to uneven dirt with bits of desert sticking up out of it.

I say, "Sure."

You are beautiful. The most beautiful man I have ever stood in front of with a shovel in my hand and looked at.

Your back is purple with sunburn and I want to put sunscreen on it, but more than that, I want to hook a finger onto your molars and pull you into me.

I go home with two big blisters, knowing how your mouth tastes like cigarettes and warm beer and something else, something sweet.

**

You tell me about your ex-wife and then the other woman and I try to listen, but how do you listen to the end of a marriage? How do you listen to an affair?

I lived—I live—on a street called Pine and a street called Cone is two over. Encontado sits between them. *Charmed. Delighted.*

You live on a street with a name that makes sense for the desert.

When I make the left turn onto my street my brain goes *pine charmed cone* and I think this is what might be happening between us.

You live a mile up the road.

**

I give you two plants I kept alive for two years, thinking you'll give them a bigger, better home. They immediately start to brown and mold and die in your care.

August in the desert and your air conditioning breaks, but still, you refuse to sleep over. I think, *stubborn*. I think, *come on*. Anything to not think about what it is about me that you both want and do not want.

I come to your house and we sweat all the time. When we eat meals, when we sit and talk, when we have sex.

We are tired and comfortable and hot and silent. There are passed mason jars of water and cases of beer we open at 10 a.m. There is laughter and music and trying.

You move on the roof or on your piano stool or on your piano keys and I bend the corner of whatever page I am reading, stretch my body on the pinewood floors you laid by hand, write another sentence.

We are sticky, reaching bodies then. Making what we make next to each other and, sometimes, closer.

I feel safe and soft with you. Safer and softer than I ever have.

**

A bartender once taught me how to walk across a restaurant without spilling a drink, no matter how full.

“Just don't look at it!” she said.

I was still young, young enough to believe anything someone a few years older than me said. Young enough to not care if I spilled the whole drink anyway.

But she had been right. I never spilled anything from a drink again.

I thought you gave me something like that.

**

One time you started to come down from your roof and stopped on the middle rung of your ladder. I had fallen asleep reading nearby with the book closed over my face. The cover said *How to Do Nothing*.

You said, “I love when you know you are making a memory.”

You said, “I know I will remember this one.”

In the month that it ended—months after it started, but not enough months to help anyone understand how sad I was at the end—I found a page in my notebook where I had written *I went on a date yesterday and knew immediately that he was not someone I'd ever have a serious relationship with. Something inside of him is missing and he is trying to find it in women.*

Had I really thought that when I first met you?

**

All around us people are sick or dying from a virus, but we are alive and fine and not alone, together.

I know what each of your junk drawers holds. I drink coffee in my underwear on your front porch and I can find all of your light switches in the dark. I know which side of the bed is yours leftover from marriage and which way your body must lay for you to snore.

I watch you build your roof, build walls, build railings, build walkways, build doorways.

I paint your walls, scrape dried paint off my body with an old toothbrush, stare at the clogged drain in your shower. I crawl in, damp, next to you, wrapped in your red towels. Tug your long hair and wish mine was longer. Want your mouth. Want how much you make me cum.

I read, you sing. I write, you build.

I take long baths in your tub; laugh when you use your power tools in underwear with no goggles on, sparks flying; accept you in everything that you are trying. Hear everything you think you did wrong.

I kiss you, softly, when you pass out from the heat after having sex. I put a wet washcloth on your neck. I hold you by your back, put the fans on higher.

I write your to-do lists. I scrub your counters. We go together to the small stores in town. At the Christian thrift store I make a joke with my nose pressed to your shoulder.

“Did you know Jesus loves you?”

“So much,” you say.

And then I listen, again, to everything about the other women.

**

On Halloween at an outdoor party I wear a pink wig and your fur coat and ask the friend with the fanny pack full of Molly if you and I can split one. I pour half in your beer and half in mine.

You turn to me an hour later and say, “What if we leave without saying goodbye to anyone?”

“Okay, but can we put on velvet pants when we get home?”

You smile and I smile and I would bottle every second of that night into an elixir if I could. I would drink it again when I’m eighty.

You once told me you just wanted a connection that made you feel something right away. I nodded, and silently pictured you setting fire to everything you had to feel warm for a while.

Then, you told me this wasn’t how it felt with me.

**

At my house, I see a snake on the doorstep. Then, a quail family is attacked in the middle of the night and I close my window so I don’t have to listen. I wake one morning to find just the ears and hind legs of the rabbit who lives under my shed, the one who had been eating the carrots. I hunt along my fence until I find the hole, and the claw marks of the cougar who dug in to kill her. I fill the hole with stones.

At your house we have sex outside under the stars, loudly. I leave, for once, before you can tell me about the other women. The other woman.

Still, still, you want the other woman. But she has someone.

Have you considered just letting her be happy? I ask. Just leaving her alone?

But you wouldn’t. You knew what you were doing. For months, and she did, too.

I watched and wondered how the two of you could be so committed to telling yourselves that part wasn’t true. Then I thought about a simple line I’d read once.

Inner beauty can fade, too.

**

Just before it is over, just before the cleaning lady picks the other woman's jewelry up off the floor of your bedroom and places it next to something of mine, just before I know I have to ask you, have to stop ignoring the truth of the untruth, I guess how old you were when you lost your virginity.

We are outside, sans masks, eating the best food I've had in seven months. I have on a long, gold dress and you are wearing a blue suit, overdressed because I asked you to be.

I guessed so much about you correctly.

The server asks if we are visiting from out of town. I say *No, we live here*, but I don't mean to say *we*.

It is my birthday. We go to your friend's house so you can play poker.

We go home and have sex. I turn to watch how you hold me in the mirror for once and feel like crying.

I want to know you and you want me to be someone else.

**

When it is over, when it is really over, when I call you and you raise your voice, the first time you have ever raised your voice at me; when you call back and softly tell me, finally; when I show up and you look at me, crying and swollen; when you stand there in front of me; you hold your two palms up and open.

You tell me how you kept them open—your hands—for birds. For birds who might come back.

And—*listen, see, look*—one bird came back, you said. Right back to your left palm and you are going to let it stay there, *see*, right there. You want to let it stay. It's staying there.

I tried to see.

I looked right at your hands.

I thought about animals, who do not despair. Who do not want to be human, who make their sounds freely.

I thought about birds, who have their routines, their small joys; lapis sky come again, new nest, soft ground.

This is not what was in your hand.

**

After, I lie outside on the ground like a coiled snake, like a dying mouse. Like everything that dies in the desert that surrounds me. I am limbs hugging limbs, shallow breathing.

The sun is hot on my body and, I think, *I am something dying*.

I want to be eaten, I want to disappear.

But nothing bites or stings or hurts me for two hours. I lie there unmoving and the desert—the desert, of all things—is kind.

You are not kind.

**

Did you see an animal? Did you see a bird? What did you see when you looked at me?

Here, look:

I crouch over a small piece of earth in gray sweatpants and gently stroke a dying desert mouse. I crouch and bend, not unlike the other woman in my posing but so unlike her, and hover over this creature with a tiny mouth. He stops breathing in my hands. I hold him until the first flea jumps off his soft, warm body. I bury him as best I can in land that does not open. I sing to him.

I would never stay there, in your palm, softly, knowing everything.

I am not bird. I was never bird. Not the kind you mean.

**

I go back to being alone. There is no one to touch and no one to call.

I am so lonely at first; I am so lonely my teeth and fingers ache, hurt. I am so lonely I can't look at belts and ceiling fans without thinking about hanging from them. Can't look at my shed you fixed or the closest mountain.

And then you write to say all you care about is her.

Someone you loved once wrote songs about you.

She sang *lie* and *heart* and *cold* so many times.

I have questions and you took away the possibility of answers.

Do you remember the day you remembered, on the ladder?

Do you think about me at all?

**

I never told you I loved you. There was no point. You wouldn't have liked it and I wouldn't have been sure I meant it and knowing your stories about loving someone else by heart made it impossible.

What was love and kindness to me was just proximity and timing to you.

Knowing this now does not make it any easier.

I think the two of you must look at each other and see magic. Others see an illusion: a saw, a white rabbit.

That house I helped make, she moves into it immediately and calls it her home.

**

I wished you both unwell before I started wishing myself well again.

I can admit that.

I cared about the person who never would have done this. I obsessed about a person who did.

I can admit that, too.

I miss the person I knew, and I feel sorry for the person I don't.

I exhaust myself with all of it.

**

When I am done, when I am done ghost-interrogating you and wondering why her, when I am done hoping you will reach out, when I can wear my belts again, when I am done being angry, when I am done being embarrassed for both of you, I am embarrassed for myself. More than anything.

That year has ended but it has also kept going. It will not stop. No matter how much I want it to.

**

A new rabbit moves into my yard.

I finally hang a bird feeder and a windsail.

I cup creosote and juniper in my hands and talk to it.

I tell the roadrunners, good job.

I tell the rabbit who is left how I love her very much.

I pour coffee. I talk to the mountain again.

I watch the land when it's windy and think, *Ah, everything is waving at me.*

Time moves again, slowly.