

## A SORRY SCHEME OF THINGS

Between nothing and nothing, there is this—me, at seventeen, tunnel-vision drunk, swerving my father's station wagon home at 3:00 a.m. Two-lane road, all curves and dips—dark woods, a stream, a patchy acre of jewelweed and grass.

I don't see the deer until it turns its head—road full of eyeballs, small moons glowing. I crank the wheel, stamp both feet on the brake, skid and jolt into the ditch.

Glitter and crunch of broken glass in my lap, deer hair drifting like dust. My chin and shirt are soaked—one eye half-obscured by the cocked bridge of broken glasses on my nose.

With the car still running, its lights angle up at the trees as I get out. The doe lies on its side.

I want to fix the beautiful body, color of wet straw, color of oak leaves in winter, but here's what I do: pick the deer up like a bride, wrestle it into the back of the car, the seat folded down.

Somehow, I steer the station wagon out of the ditch and head home, night rushing in through the broken window, headlight dangling, side-mirror gone.

My head throbs, something stabs my side. The deer breathes behind me, shallow and fast.

A stoplight and I'm almost home when the doe scrambles, its long head like a ghost in the rearview mirror. It bites me, teeth clamping down on my shoulder. I scream, struggle and flail until the deer, exhausted, lets go and lies down.

A wonder how my own body, empty, clean of secrets, knows how to drag the deer out of the car, onto the driveway. Shaking, leaf-weak, I pat it down, frisk it, like a fish slipped out of its net.

The deer shudders, bleats, its tail a fused filament. By now the doe's eyes are hot tar and my shirt's ditch-litter, smelly as dirt.

This is when I know I'll never get to see it: bright future, stuck like a bum star, never coming close, never dazzling. Clutching the doe, I slap it, scream, *Say, it doesn't matter. Say, this is enough. Say you want this.*

Around the driveway the trees wave, like mute women trying to alert me to an emergency. Roots like lanyards. Grass cut like a cancer.

When my father comes out, he yells, “What the hell?”

The odor has changed, enormous as a storm, as he walks to the toolshed, comes back lugging a concrete block.

Time freezes. The night hemorrhages snow. When he drops the block on the deer’s head, I’m a river diverted from its path. And when God doesn't strike, and the sea doesn't overflow, my voice is a kettle of hawks, circling. My head, lowered, sees how death accepts a special kind of silence. I exhale.

Some things stay with me, like dumping the doe deep in the woods, as though I were a gangster.

All my life, the deer. A mouth growing more exposed without air. The spine, a column of clouds. The remains, a brutal cave.

What did I dread? Right then? My father, a dead doornail, coming into my room, his red robe, opening.

Or was it myself, who had danced in a bar full of misfits that night, squash flowers rotting in my hair?

Drunk, weaving, I danced an obscene dance in a stained red dress under the lowered eyes of men. Shuffling into place, the floor boards browned, wilted.

Vulgar as an anonymous language, a man twirled, dipped me, as if into a vat of hot wax. I wanted to drink from his sorry scheme of things, touch the spot that bites back and so I did.

Like him, I had a wide, friendly face, yet I smelled his dishpan breath as I swung my ponytail like a filthy tassel.

Next thing I knew, blood on the sullen ground, blood on the stones, blood on the slope and blood on the fist going into me without any pain. Blood on the green torso of the slaverling flies.

Blood in thick amber strokes, blood from my right ear, from his ochre nose. Whose blood was this? On the fender, in my shoe, in his breath?

*There's blood,* he said.

*Blood here, too, down here,* I said.

Only blood, blood on his watch, would it dry? On his whitish wedding band. Would it dry?

Blood on his knee, blood on the faithful knee, the one readied for erotic negation. Blood at the age of seventeen. Blood that was mute and autistic and cauterized and smelled of smelted tar.

Was this mine? Blood on the wheel—bronzed, dead, gold and diamond deep. Blood as fast as the car when I hit the deer. The thud was log-thick.

When I got out, her hide was frayed mohair, her wooden feet, petite sculptures, small as the ace of clubs.

Dragging her into the woods with my father, then standing in front of her body listening to her bones hiss, like pumice stones, this made me want to drown my hands.

The deer entered me in the dream of a white dawn, breathed mist into the pine trees, her fawn, a hot package of breath rising up, like a rocket and falling again, like a rocket.

Death is a lack, I suppose, and love even more so. Years later, when I drive home alone, I go back into the woods where a collapsed star bankrupts the moon.

Dark galaxy of faults where the deer was left, like an underwater statue, the woodsy rooms, abstract.

What I make of the earth is inferred and the undersides of the leaves on the forest floor are a rundown palace, the color, eel-black.

Who I am and was before the deer and the man and my father, when only the stars and only the sea and only the light gushed from its unknown source, this can be charted as precisely as a fever, even though it's absolutely colorless and missing a thingness.

My hands, the ones I wanted to drown, these smell like smelt, as I stand, a condemned building while the hour, forever it seems, half-steps its crippled way elsewhere.