

I could tell you the moon was full that night. It may have been. Some of the details are lost to me now, but the air was still and heavy, a wool blanket on a too warm night. I knew it would rain soon and when it rained in that desert it would bring you to your knees, strong as you might pretend to be. I'd be there long enough to know that much. It would flood your room and keep coming until you gave up trying to hold it back and laid down in the middle of the river, let it carry you off or under.

But I was past the point of taking the weather personally. At least that's what I told myself, the sky growing darker outside my only window as I searched for dry towels to stuff under the door. Leaving graduate school, leaving New Mexico again, scraping moldy lettuce off the bottom of grocery store boxes. I packed my photos, my torn jeans, my rocks, three aluminum pans with matching lids that used to be my mother's.

A wedding gift, she'd told me, so that every time I unpacked those pots or cooked a can of soup and stuck it in the tiny fridge, uneaten, I thought of the two of them, happy at some point then miserable together for so many years. And my father in his ankle high moccasins and boxers; his red and white pyramid of Budweiser cans against the bathroom wall in front of the toilet like some sort of private carnival game; a stack of playboys under the sink.

I left the Jesus candle on the fold out table by the stove. Because it would never stay lit. It would light up at first, promising, Jesus smiling placidly, his brown hair combed and parted down the middle like a schoolgirl's. But every time I turned around to pack another box or stuff the towels tighter, the flame would go out.

Even the small losses were something dangerous then. I was starting to scare myself. It wasn't enough to know that Jesus was anything but a man of clarity. He'd done his time in the desert too. Weeping, I guess. All of the unanswered questions.

In the end I had to leave the candle behind. Maybe just to prove I could let go of something.

Two months earlier we'd left Portland in the endless late spring rain-- my lover, her son and me. I called her that: my lover. As if it were something real. I still believed I could change reality with words. Her son was five that year. He had a beautiful Italian name; we called him the boy.

We were both in love with his mother. And neither of us spoke a word of her language.

All of my things piled into the red truck, packed for my new home in a graduate school in New Mexico. A pillow size bag of popcorn for the boy in the jump seat, a sleeping bag, a Gameboy. We pointed the truck south and just kept going until we hit the sun.

Road signs in Nevada urged us to drive carefully.

Nuclear warheads travel this road.

Missile Range.

Do not leave the roadway.

We pull over, put the boy's boots on, remind him about snakes. I give him some juice, wipe the popcorn salt from his face, look into his droopy brown green eyes. I love him like icy lake water. Pure and clean and breathtaking. I kiss his forehead; smell his sweaty hair, curling itself around his neck and ears. Letting go of him, I know, will spin me off the world. So I don't think about it.

I don't know how to explain the words warhead and nuclear to him. And anyway he wants to take a picture. I give him the camera and he accidentally drops it in the dirt. He won't put his own shoes on and I've given up pleading. He wants to go to McDonald's. He's tired of popcorn from Portland. And he doesn't know my heart is breaking open like an empty piñata in this crazy desert.

We gather moon rocks in the blazing sun on the missile range; build a peace sign on the edge of the road. I take his hand, step into the middle. He shades his eyes and she takes our picture, the two of us, standing for peace on this dangerous road.

Driving day after day, the crack in the windshield like a low rising mountain range, never receding, never getting closer. We avoid the interstates, stick to the empty back roads. Route 50, Nevada, we wander the bleached dirt fields along highway 50. She walks around in her bikini top, her cut off Levis. She's going through a stage where she collects the bones of dead animals so she's digging through the hard packed dirt with the toes of her pointy cowboy boots, a cigarette in one hand. I find a blue glass bottle half buried in the brittle sage, and a woman's shoe, stiletto heel. Ancient history or last weekend's blurry Saturday night.

We get tired of camping, stop at a Motel 6 in Silver City. We are all irritable, out of sync. When he wants to be close, she needs some space or a cigarette. She snaps at him and he drops to the ground crying. Then she wants to hold him later and he's whiney, then wild. We have spent too much time in the car together and we all feel the end of our time together coming. She is relieved. I can feel it coming off of her in waves. She plays Tom Petty's Free Falling so many times it's like a soundtrack to the entire trip and I can't get it out of my head.

We go for dinner in the restaurant attached to the motel. It has no name, it's just called Restaurant. The woman who runs the place has teased grey hair, a polyester shirt with a wide collar, flared jeans and white footies with little balls on the heels sticking out of the back of her service shoes.. The skin of her face is taut and close to the bone like she's spent her life in the sun.

The boy will not put his damn shoes on. He throws a fit, drops to the ground saying he is starving. She tries begging, sweet- talking, demanding and when nothing works she walks away and lights a cigarette. I find his socks, put them on. He's whining because I can't get the heels lined up right. I skip the shoes and we go to dinner.

“I don’t think that was chicken,” she says, when we ask for the bill. So I ask the sun-baked woman.

“Was that chicken? Cause it seemed like it wasn’t?”

“It could’ve been chicken fried steak,” she says. “They’re right next to each other in the freezer. I could’ve grabbed the wrong one.”

Then she stops talking and rings up the bill. She doesn’t offer to comp it or anything so we pay thirty bucks for a dinner none of us really liked and the boy is dragging his feet all the way back to the room because he wanted ice cream but didn’t eat any dinner even though he was starving.

She meets a man at the Coke machine and brings him back to the room. His name is Richard and he’s a Hopi Indian. Richard hangs around and has a beer, fixes the Gameboy, notices her silver earrings, which are little silver feathers. He tells me I am a master observer. Then the three of them walk across the highway for ice cream. I am not surprised to meet a man in the desert who knows me. I’m starting to believe that strange things just happen here.

The boy and I watch a movie about a Chinese woman who is sold into slavery at the turn of the century. It’s subtitled and I read the words to him until he falls asleep. All night we do our crazy sleeping dance between the two double beds. I start the night with him then I move into her bed. He moves in with both of us and she moves to her own. I woke with him snoring and grinding his teeth against my back. I got back into bed with her and early morning she leaves and I wake up alone.

When you die on the highway in New Mexico, they plant a white cross in the dirt, your name in black letters. To mark the spot where you stepped out of this world and into the next. All along these desolate roads they appear-- tiny wooden monuments. Death signs in the lunar

landscape. Heading south nine days, they kept reminding me of endings. Sudden turns in the road, unseen. Black ice, maybe, or just weariness.

We find a white cross on the roadside near a huge mound of gravel and a milepost marker. Her name was Susan. A porcelain doll in a yellow silk dress is tacked to a cross with a letter from her parents saying:

We miss you so much. Always.

I drive them to the airport in El Paso. He is excited about his first plane ride. She is quiet. I say goodbye to them and return to my fake adobe student housing building. I do not register for classes. I do not buy books. I feel I might be dying. I wake up one morning realizing I am not dying but probably just losing my mind. I think the desert may not be the best place to do this. The way the landscape mirrors the inside of my head is undoing me.

So I go back. I don't go back for her. I know she's done with me. But I go back anyway, retracing our route like rewinding a movie.

On my own, I could only drive as far as the canyon. I had to rest then, leaned up against the warm steel railing, trembling from no sleep and the mile of silence below me. In the parking lot, in the crowd of tourists, I searched for them. The way you search for things you know you will not find--desperately.

I listened for them in a half dozen languages. I felt around those crumbling stone ledges for what must be left of them after weeks in the sun.

I think I was looking for bones again.

I think I was looking for proof. That we took that trip together. That they walked through my life, however briefly; that I stood on a missile range in the desert and held the boy's hand; that we were struggling for sleep together in a cheap motel, in a tent, or on a mountain in rainy green Oregon.

And not just in my head.

I needed to touch something solid.

They'd been gone a month, a year, a lifetime. A planet spinning retrograde--that unexplainable reversal of motion. I needed to put my hands in the dirt, to unearth something substantial. A leg bone, maybe, a piece of silver jewelry; some young boy's winter coat button. Anything that I could hold in my hand and know as real.

But the midday sun was blinding. The red rocks glow like fire. They blur my vision. I'll never see color the same and if we meet again, I will tell her: this is a place that changes everything—this nowhere desert. Where life and death walk hand in hand down every stone corridor. And nothing is ever finished.

The tourists throw coins into the canyon, tied to wishes. I listen to a man tell his lover he wished on the Lotto, smiling, his arm around her waist. She looks disgusted, tells him she wished for something much simpler. And I wonder if she wished him out of her life. If that was her spare change wish for him, to be gone like a random coin in the wind.

For her and for the boy, a handful of coins flying out into the dry death quiet.

And too many wishes to count. I release them like I let go of his hand, so many times.

I walk back to the truck, past the pinyon trees with their ancient, jagged arms stretched skyward, wondering what it's like to stand in one place your whole life never questioning whether you're getting closer to home or further away.