

Visitations

There was a squirrel trapped in the wall behind my stove in October. We could hear it clawing back there, but what to do? “Maybe it will leave of its own accord,” Paul said. We sat at the kitchen table, an old farm table so heavy it took two people to shift it, and listened. Perfect, I thought. One of my friends had come home one night to find her hunter husband had skinned a squirrel and put it in the Crock-Pot. She had lifted the lid expecting rice and beans and had found the pink body curled like a fetus.

One day, I said, “The squirrel’s gone—listen, quiet.”

He said, “Or it’s dead in there.”

The stench started three days later. Paul had gone to Phoenix for a conference on new soil technologies, leaving me with the changing leaves and the dead squirrel. At first it was just a tang in the air, sweet-sour, like menstrual blood, like the hair under his arms where I liked to bury my nose. Then it turned gamey, thickened. It spread through the house, a smell that gnawed at me like an itch I could never reach. Paul said it was the baby, said pregnant women had an enhanced sense of smell. Only four months in, and already he had read several books on the

subject, was after me to start practicing my breathing and do squats to prepare my pelvic floor. He did not understand it was all I could do to shower and do a little work each day. The morning sickness had not let up, despite what his books predicted. It wasn't really nausea, but more like a shaky hunger, a yearning mixed with claustrophobia. The only thing that helped was meat. Roast beef, steak, sliced ham, chicken cutlets. As long as I ate a good helping of meat every few hours, the sickness stayed at bay, a buzz in my throat. I knew it wasn't really the baby's fault, but I felt robbed of my last few months of freedom. Whenever Paul called from sunny Phoenix, bitterness choked me, made him think I was crying. He was perplexed and irritated. He used words like *miracle* and *new life*. I opened the windows, and the spiders came in. They clustered in the corners of the high ceilings and masqueraded as cracks in the plaster.

October, four years ago, I was also pregnant. This was before Paul. I was a dating a lumberjack who actually wore plaid shirts and had arms like tree trunks and a sweet quirk in his cheek and a habit of cleaning the snow off my truck. When I went to the doctor because my period wouldn't end, she said, "Did you know you were expecting?" I misheard this as expectant and smiled gamely, in a way I thought might be hopeful-looking, wanting to please. Then she took me to a small sterile room and sent me home with a stack of thick cottony maxi-pads like the ones my mother kept in her bathroom cupboard even though she was menopausal. And I was neither mournful nor guilty. It was as if nothing had happened. If I had any feeling about the event, it was a feeling of mild gratitude, the surprise of a small blessing. One night soon after I told him about it, the lumberjack wouldn't come in from chopping

firewood. By morning, he had disappeared into the forest, leaving me enough logs stacked against the house to last the winter.

Paul called from Phoenix to tell me about the palm trees. He said they were everywhere, shaggy spires lining the highways and yards. At the conference, they showed pictures of the newest cell phone towers, sculpted to look like everyday objects so that farmers would agree to install them on their land. Everyone liked the one that looked like a windmill. The next time Paul went out, he noticed that some of the palm trees were metal, their split fronds stiff with the business of transmitting and receiving.

When I was alone in the house, something expanded. I slept sprawled across the bed. I left books piled in the living room and plates in the sink. Sometimes it felt like my heart beat so slowly it stuttered and paused, and I could trace the whole path of a leaf falling outside the window before it started again.

The stench kept getting stronger. I could smell it everywhere, even when I was away from the house, walking in the woods, trying to outpace the morning sickness. Even with the cold autumn air stinging my nose, the smell lingered, crouched at the back of my throat, and no amount of swallowing would get rid of it. “We have to do something,” I said, the next time Paul called.

He said, “Let’s wait it out. It won’t last forever.”

I met him in a feed store. I was buying tube sand for the back of my truck, and he was checking prices on phosphate. He was a landscape architect starting his own nursery. It was March, and he leaned against the counter, wearing a denim jacket with a

dirty sheepskin lining and flirting with the woman ringing up my four bags of tube sand. She must have been eighty years old, and as she ponderously searched out each key on the register and stabbed at it, he said to me, “Isn’t a bit late for that?”

He disagreed. He said we met at a wake for a neighbor. I remembered the wake—early spring, the long line of black-clad people strung like beads spilling out of the Victorian house of the mortician—but not him. One of us was forgetting something.

The first snow came while he was still in Phoenix and the dead squirrel was tight in my wall. The small flakes sifted in through the open windows and powdered the hardwood floors. As the snow fell, I felt the baby moving inside me. I hadn’t been expecting it for weeks still. Paul had told me that first-time moms often didn’t recognize the baby’s movements, mistook them for indigestion. It felt like someone tickling me from the inside. I felt bones slipping where there should have been no bones. I went to the stack of pregnancy books on the coffee table and flipped through the pages of the fattest one as if divining from a Bible. My finger stabbed a line drawing of a closed-eyed fetus, its nose tipped up, sniffing, the cord foregrounded, knotted like a sailor’s rope. That night, the stars shrank and hardened and the screens in the windows shuddered, punctuating my sleep with aluminum whispers.

My refrigerator was a bloody mess, all that meat rotting imperceptibly. For breakfast, I had half a chicken and I fried a pork chop for a midmorning snack. The baby was hungry for flesh. At the grocery store, I was a werewolf, flinging lamb shanks and ham

hocks and rump roasts into the cart. The village ladies giggled and stared at my stomach. The cashier double-bagged everything.

When Paul moved into my house, it was because I refused to spend the night at his. It was a principle of mine to never stay the night at a man's house. And I never had. In all the years of lovers and flings, they always came to me.

I was spending more time in the basement, where the smell was nagging but not unbearable, like a tooth going rotten. The basement was where I had set up my workshop, a grand name for a couple of banquet tables and old file cabinets filled with paints. The knives I kept in a rack on the wall. The handles were black with touch, but the blades shone, oily and flexible. I used linoleum blocks for my woodcuts, and in the cold weather I wrapped them in a heating pad to rid them of their stiffness. Magazines bought these illustrations more often than one might think—duck hunting at dawn, lost in the woods, the persistent mayfly, bear attack.

One morning, soon after the first snow, a bird tried to get into the house. I was coming upstairs from the basement, and the full stench of the squirrel hit me before I heard the thumps. For a moment, my heart jumped—I thought the squirrel had come alive and was trying to escape. Then I went into the kitchen where the smell was most dense and I saw the bird, a small brownish-gray one, maybe a sparrow or a wren, hurling itself at the window. Finally, it stopped, and I went outside to look for its body, but nothing was there, just a few feathers on the ground and a tear in the screen.

The story of the bird didn't seem to upset Paul. He said it was the change of seasons and he'd seen it happen before. He said Phoenix was still hot and fragrant with bougainvillea and chives. He said the woman who ran the bed-and-breakfast had a wonderful yard filled with stones and cacti and tropical blossoms. I asked when he was coming home. The conference was over, but he was learning about conifers and water conservation from a soil engineer he had met there. I reminded him winter was coming.

Paul had moved in during the summer, and the first thing he did was plant a ribbon of hyssop that smelled of licorice and drew the bees. Next, he planted a vegetable garden in the backyard, at the edge of the forest. He said it was too late to plant anything but kale and radishes—bitter, earthy things. When he found out I was pregnant, he was angry I wouldn't marry him. He was angry it took me three weeks to tell him and that when I did, I said I was considering my options. From the garden at his own house, which was only two miles away straight through the woods, he brought tomatoes and yellow squash and peas, which he shelled on the porch while I worked downstairs. All things I couldn't bear to eat. I gnawed at bones while he made summer soups and pastas. I could see his feet moving past the high windows at the top of the basement as he dug dozens of holes around the house—"Surprises," he said, when I asked him about it, things that wouldn't come up until spring.

Wasps came in through the torn kitchen screen. They made their way to the basement and buzzed me as I worked. They were building a nest in the corner of the room, above the water

heater, and I didn't bother them because I hoped it might be one of those large paper nests so prized by artists and naturalists that one sometimes found for sale in junk stores. I would have liked to see how such an elaborate home evolved, but it quickly became clear they were just regular wasps building a mud nest. I ventured into the kitchen for the fruit that was rotting on the counter and piled it on my worktable. The two plums and a soft, late-season tomato lured the wasps, and they posed for me, busy and unhurried, as I cut them into the linoleum blocks. I sent those prints to a women's magazine for a story about love betrayed.

Ten days after the squirrel died in my wall, the smell moved into the bedroom, and I gathered up the down comforter and the Mexican blankets and started sleeping in my pickup truck. The mornings were cold enough that when I woke, the windows were misted with frost and the rough fiberglass ceiling of the camper dripped condensation.

One night, while sitting in the back of the truck, bundled in covers that held the faint scent of the squirrel, I argued with Paul and heard my voice echo back through the cell phone, dummy windmills and palm trees working overtime in the expanse of country between us. As I hung up, a large, dark shape moved past the truck toward the house. There were three deer there, sniffing at the kitchen door. One of them butted its head against the wood. The smell of the squirrel rose up around me like the scent of one's own scalp or the hidden folds of one's skin. The deer made odd sounds, muted moans and snuffles, and tapped their noses against the door as if demanding to be let in.

Every now and again, I tested my limits. I went for hours without eating until the sickness was so bad that I could hardly move for the shaking. Then there would be that scrabbling feeling, that little bony body twisting inside me. On the ultrasound, its spine had been a line of seeds, its fingers twigs finer than anything I could have cut.

The radio in the truck ran reports of home invasions, terrorist alerts, deadly viruses—all stories of hospitality abused. The wasps continued to seep into the basement, and the deer showed up each night to scrape at the door. It began to seem there was something gone wrong in the house. I had spent several winters there, and the animals never had acted like this. I couldn't help but wonder if Paul had brought something with him, a ghost or a curse or an unhappy soul. I went through the two cardboard boxes of clothes he was still living out of and found nothing unusual except for a sock of mine. It was from my favorite pair—a fuzzy lurid pink sock with a cartoonish Virgin Mary stitched in blue. I couldn't tell if the sock had dropped into his box by accident or if he had taken it for some reason, maybe to stop me from wearing them around the house all the time, maybe for love. I left it there, tucked into the sleeve of one of his shirts.

The walls in my house were poorly plastered, the joints in the sheets of drywall rising up like veins in the back of a hand. I considered knocking a hole in the kitchen wall myself and entered the kitchen with an old silk scarf tied around my face. The scarf had been my mother's and smelled like one of her drawers of clothing, dust and lemons. In the kitchen, all I could smell was the squirrel. I leaned against the heavy, old, cast-iron stove but couldn't

budge it. The woman I bought the house from had told me the stove used to sit away from the wall to leave space for a box where she slept as a child through the northern winters. A dangerous practice, I had thought at the time.

At night, the baby was particularly active, twisting and squirming inside me. If I spoke or sang, it stilled. I liked it for its caution. I always piled the blankets highest around my middle, even if it meant my feet grew chilled. I sang colors to counteract the onset of gray winter. Cadmium yellow, brown madder, cerulean blue, I whispered, invoking pause.

It snowed again, and I shut the windows to prevent water damage to the wood floors. There was nothing to do but to call the contractor in town. He said he'd send his cousin who had come down from Canada to work through the winter. His cousin was an artist, he said, a master of restoration, and I explained I just needed a hole, an extraction, and a patch, nothing fancy. Really, I just needed someone to help me move the heavy parts of my house, but I didn't want to admit that Paul was still in Phoenix, under the spell of succulents and irrigation systems.

The cousin was older than I had expected, in his late thirties, and I wondered what kind of life he had in Canada that he could leave behind for months at a time. He went unerringly to the wall in the kitchen and stood looking at it, still in his coat and leather work gloves. I apologized for the heat being off and gestured at the wall, the smell, in explanation. Together, we moved the heavy stove and he took off his gloves, placed them carefully in the pockets of his coat, and kneeled to put his bare hand on the

plaster. He said he'd have to leave the wall open for a while to air it out, but that he would come back and patch it so perfectly that no one would guess it had ever been touched. I looked at the snowflakes melting in his hair and without knowing why, placed my own hand at the back of his neck, just at the point where his hair met the corduroy collar.

The kitchen table was just as hard and uneven as I had thought it would be, and I worried about splinters, even while enjoying the warmth of him against my ribcage and thighs. He was slow and silent and didn't seem to notice the solid bulge of my belly. *A minor restoration*, I thought as I breathed against his stubbly throat. My fingers measured the ridges of his collar as he moved over me. From that angle, I could see how the aged glass of the windows was much thicker at the bottom than the top, and it seemed for a moment that I could see it slide downward, cloudy, viscous, sinking under its own weight.

When the contractor's cousin finished cutting the hole in the wall, he called to me to come see what he had found. Instead of one squirrel, there were twenty or so, twined around each other, decaying into one mass. They had obviously followed each other down into the space and had not been able to find their way back out.

While he cleared away the bodies in the kitchen, I stayed in the basement. Though I hadn't eaten yet that day, my stomach was calm. I remembered the leaking mass of squirrel upstairs. Nothing. I thought of zucchinis and tomatoes. Nothing. I imagined eating eggplant, asparagus, endive with sliced radishes. The baby

squirmed a little but that was all. The sickness seemed to have disappeared, just as the books said, with no warning. My whole body, even my skin, relaxed, no longer braced against the nausea. The contractor's cousin's boots tapped on the floor above me, making trips from wall to door. I made a woodcut of a charmed house, surrounded by birds and deer and squirrels and wasps. I was working on a buck rearing upright when he called down to me that he was finished, and the knife slipped, gouging away one of the deer's legs before sliding into the thumb of my left hand. When I went upstairs to pay him, he looked at my hand wrapped in the scrap of an old t-shirt starting to seep blood, but he didn't say anything until I handed him the money, and then he said, "Thank you"—twice he said it, shyly, not meeting my eyes.

Paul called to say he was coming home. I was in the basement working on a print for a nature magazine of a man in a forest holding up an old-style lantern—lost in the snow. I struggled with the flakes falling through the tree branches—a tricky thing, determining how much to pare away. My cut thumb stung, reminded me to go slowly.

When Paul walked into the kitchen, he gasped at the hole in the wall and the smell that lingered. It was clear we were not going to be able to stay in the house. He stood in the center of the room, looking around, and I saw him touch the table, noticing it was shifted from its usual space.

There was no use in taking anything with us because the smell had permeated everything. His house was only a few miles through the woods, and we decided to celebrate the first real

snowfall by snowshoeing there. It was already night. The air was so cold the trees cracked. Above us, the gibbous moon, deflating. Between us, this understanding, a tether, the thing we wouldn't talk about. I wanted to tell him about the kitchen windows, the thickness of glass, the cost of a wall filled with squirrels, the spiders claiming their corners. I wanted to tell him I loved him and I couldn't remember how we met. He had things he wanted to tell me too; I knew by the way his breath hung in the air before us. There were so many things inside us, and it comforted me to think of them there, curled up, content, for the time being, to be hidden.

Erratum:
Insert "R" in "Transgressors"

Fragments from the 1899 and 1900 *Transactions*
of the *American Microscopical Society*

A murder had been committed, the instrument used being an ax.

The victim was a sailor of Swedish extraction and had sailed the lakes for seven or eight years, making his home in Buffalo.

The defendant was a dancer, a singer, a woman once beautiful who, because of her tortuous course, became roughened and changed.

The victim was a sailor of Swedish extraction. He was in the habit of spending his nights when on shore at a notorious dance hall in the infected district.

I was engaged as a medical expert in an investigation under peculiar circumstances. With your kind permission, I will briefly narrate.

The poetic statement that drops of different bloods drying on a glass plate would give different figures needs only to be mentioned to show that science is not always divorced from fancy.

The victim was a sailor of Swedish extraction. He was in the habit of spending his nights in the infected district. One night he met a singer, whose husband was “the strong man” doing certain tricks such as stone-breaking, tearing chains asunder, and the like. One night the sailor met a singer, a woman, once beautiful, whose very appearance struck him a blow.

A murder had been committed, the instrument used being an ax. After the murder, the house, a wooden one, containing the body, was set on fire, burning to the ground.

I was engaged as a trained and thorough observer, called into action to help solve the seeming mystery. I was engaged for the testimony of a microscopist—one who sees, then feels—not with his fingers but with his intellectual grasp. With your kind permission, I will briefly narrate.

A murder had been committed, the instrument used being an ax. After the murder, the house, a wooden one, containing the body, was set on fire, burning to the ground. The ax had been thrown down about eight feet from the house, thus being subjected to a high heat.

I was engaged to determine the presence or absence of blood.

The defendant was a woman, a singer in a resort, whose husband was “the strong man” doing certain tricks. Her very appearance struck the sailor a blow. The sailor’s was a stable body not readily affected. He was of Swedish extraction. He had sailed the lakes for seven or eight years.

The victim may have been the husband, “the strong man” noted for his strength, which in fact consisted only in stage tricks. One man was missing, one dead.

A trauma, be it ever so slight, is only safe as long as the pressure is low. A glance from her struck the sailor a blow. The action of the heart alone is almost never responsible. She was a singer in the infected district, which caused her to become roughened and changed.

I was engaged as a medical expert, a trained and thorough observer, called into action to help solve a seeming mystery.

One man was missing, one dead. They offer a point of least resistance, and upon the degree of resistance do their own lives and safety depend.

To determine the presence or absence of blood, one must perform the most delicate test. The action of the heart alone is almost never responsible.

A glance from her struck him a blow. One man was missing, one dead. Her husband was “the strong man” doing certain tricks, such as stone breaking, tearing chains asunder, and the like.

A chain is no stronger than its weakest link, or a bridge stronger than its weakest span, or a man stronger than his weakest artery.

He was a sailor of Swedish extraction who was in the habit of spending his nights in the infected district. There he met women

who were usually functional and temporary. She was a singer, once beautiful. They proceeded upstairs to a private room. A glance from her struck him a blow.

A bridge is no stronger than its weakest span. There can be no question about the delicacy of this reaction. The main force of the heart is spent in distending the arteries. A man is no stronger than his weakest artery. They offer a point of least resistance, and upon the degree of resistance does their own life and safety depend.

Leaving the room and descending the stairs, they met the husband who struck the sailor on the jaw, felling him. One man was missing, one dead. The house, a wooden one, was set on fire, burning to the ground. A murder had been committed, the instrument used being an ax. On the ax were charred and brittle hairs and some brownish-black spots, which, if blood, were too much altered to respond to any but the most delicate test.

I was engaged as a trained observer—one who sees, then feels—not with his fingers but with his intellectual grasp. As a stable body not readily affected. As a microscopist and a medical expert. With your kind permission, I will briefly narrate.

Practically everything can be accomplished with the small direct vision.

One man was missing, one dead. The woman was a singer, once beautiful, capable of striking a blow with a glance. The instrument used being an ax. Her husband was “the strong man,” noted for

his strength, which in fact consisted only in stage tricks. He struck the sailor on the jaw, felling him. On the ax were brownish-black spots. The test is certain and quite delicate. The sailor was of Swedish extraction and had sailed the lakes. A bridge is no stronger than its weakest span.

Only the use of the most exact and accurate appliances could lead to successful or trustworthy conclusions. They proceeded upstairs to a private room. The main force of the heart is spent. A murder had been committed. To withstand the force of the heart's action one becomes roughened and changed. Matters of the most vital concern may be at stake, with a single small fragment at hand for examination.

There is yet no accord. How to withstand the force of the heart's action? The test is certain and quite delicate. A bridge is no stronger than its weakest span. How to withstand the force of the heart's action? I was engaged as a trained and thorough observer. The main force of the heart is spent. The vessel walls will yield to the strain. The instrument used being an ax. How to withstand the force of the heart's action? Only the use of the most exact and accurate appliances. Practically everything can be accomplished with the small direct vision. How to withstand the force of the heart's action? A murder, an ax, drops of different bloods, a blow, stage tricks, the tearing asunder of chains, the house, a wooden one, burned to the ground, the heart, the infected district.

Skinny Girls' Constitution and Bylaws

We will know each other by the way our watches slip from our wrists, the bruises on our knees, our winged shoulder blades tenting silk dresses.

We eat; we eat. We eat like wild boars, like wolves, like cyclists in training. We love the bloody shreds that cling to the T. We suck the gob of marrow that floats to the top of the soup. We gnaw the chicken down to splinters.

Everything is bone, bone, bone.

Her brother holds Polly to the candle to read her, the way one would a stolen envelope. Numbers float like seaweed under her skin. She is a mathematical genius. She has teeth like the keys of an adding machine. She tells her brother that his birth date plus his wedding date plus the date of his death add up to 243. He drops her so quickly the flame is blown out.

They call us witches. They look away from us in the bright light. The lavender crisps in the fields. The rain will not come.