

EL NIÑO

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NADIA BOZAK



ANANSI

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For my mom

BAEZ

Baez is going to die today. The smell is like expiring sky, or a wrung-neck rabbit left too long in the sun. And also like the smell of Old Blue when, lying there in the yellow desert, palms up and swollen, her breaths had taken longer and longer to come.

That was two springs ago.

When Baez found her, Old Blue was tramping on towards the high blue mountain, arms dangling and eyes down on her shoes. Baez barked just once. Old Blue turned, shading her eyes and squinting. *My girl, my girl*, Old Blue kept saying, as Baez came running up. Baez had licked the dust and salt from Old Blue's face and Old Blue rubbed the sore part of Baez's neck where once her collar had been buckled. Then they went on together, Baez running ahead, circling back, nipping Old Blue's ankle bones. The day got too hot and Old Blue got too slow. At a narrow wash, Old Blue fell to the ground, rolling into the shadow of a skinny old mesquite. Her eyes closed. Her chest was slow to rise. Baez smelled

that Old Blue was dying. Baez started to dig a hole.

She pawed at the hard, tough desert, scattering the top crust back between her legs. The crumble of dirt rained down in a steady spray. Ants circled in, sucking her saliva drips before they dried. Pent-up heat escaped from the dug earth and the ants gave way to termites, a brown, nuttier smell. Behind her, Old Blue called *girl, girl, girl*. And then nothing for a long time.

Now that dying smell comes from inside Baez. She licks it—*ch-ch-ch*—going deep, down in the roots of her grainy coat. She rolls onto her side to get at the ribs, bald and raw, throwing out her tongue and raking it back in. She might lick herself into a puddle of teeth, of bone, of tail, of fur. But at least the smell would be gone and, at last, so would she.

She is all alone in her pen. Except there is a tree. The leaves, brittle, waterless lace, drip with greying shadow. There are no other trees on this rough, rocky hillside—some man or boy must have planted this one, chiding the desert. And yet it lives. There is a cactus too. It is thick and grey and grows on the other side of the high chain-link fencing that squares Baez in. An owl lives inside the cactus trunk. It disappeared into its hole just as the moon was falling slowly away.

Glove and Tattoo have returned from the desert too. Through their trailer's remaining window, bulb light melts into new day. Three brown boys (green hat, white hat, no hat) are tied up under the lean-to. These are the night's bounties. The waxy rope that binds them together is fastened through the heavy ring Tattoo hammered into the ground back when Baez first came here. Bunches of tiny brass bells hang from the rope. Should the bounties try to get away the clattery

noise will bring Glove and Tattoo out from the trailer, walking fast, yelling faster. The angled plywood that shelters the bounties is the same material as the fourth wall of her pen. On the other side of this divider her children rumble and scratch. The tight scars along her ribs and jaws still ache and if her children broke down the plywood now, she would not be able to fight back. Glove and Tattoo would watch through the window. And then wait for the bald birds to come.

Baez licks. Baez remembers. The smell of Old Blue's cigarettes mixed with the hot amber she took from the big bottle under the sink, which itself mixed in with the sharp curdle of Old Blue's paint tubes. Then there was the yellow tinge of unwashed skin, the grey of oiled scalp. Her voice was flat, rarely raised. *Ba-ez, good girl*, she would say. Sometimes at night Old Blue would sleep for an hour or two. Then when the moon had passed across the window she would get up and pull on her jeans, go out to the kitchen and paint. Baez would curl at her salty feet. Old Blue's brush would scrape-scrape-scrape. Out in the night the brown-boy footsteps would pit-pit-pit, and if they ever came in too close Baez would bark, pulling hard, raspy eruptions up from her gut, until Old Blue went *sh-sh-sh*. Night after night it went on like that, seasons ago.

Now, here, beyond this hill, a sky-scraping concrete wall stretches up-and-up towards the night's few stars. The desert ends at that impossible block upon block of flat grey. Like the deer and rabbits that still come this far south, memory and mind stop at the wall's upward thrust. Along the base, the bed of the wide, south-bound river is empty. There are rusty cans, though, and sand-filled bottles, half-buried tarps and bent nails. And then there is that wheelbarrow, helpless,

tipped on its side. The sunburned men who left those things also trampled plants and cactuses, which now struggle to right their arms and hail the sun. Opposite, in the north, a jagged range of mountains runs along the horizon. The mountains are deep blue. The highest peak, a triangle, soars up from the centre. The river flowed from those mountains and that is where the brown boys still go.

Once Old Blue went that way too. And maybe it was from looking at those mountains, sharp-toothed as they are, that the sunburned men thought to lay the razor coil along the top of the concrete. It took a swarm of paddle-foot helicopters to do it. That's fine: the brown boys burrow underneath the wall, their narrow hole obscured by scattered rocks and the soda cans Glove and Tattoo crush in their fists and toss, tumbling, to the ground. When the ball caps pop up from the hole, Baez and her children are not supposed to bark at them. Let them get a good head start. Let them believe they are free for a time.

Before, when her children were babies, still too young to hunt, it was she that Tattoo would each night muzzle and lead into the back of the desert buggy—open top, treaded wheels, its body coated in the same gold as the land. Then Glove would come. The shiny helmets they still wear blinded her. The desert night teemed with the fresh tracks of those brown boys who'd just gone running into the hot bliss of a starry night, towards the rolling blue mountains piercing the faraway sky.

Now her children have outgrown her. Now they run the bounties down. Her children's tails are hacked to stumps, their ears honed to points; coats of blue-orange mottle shimmer and muscles pop, nourished as they are on bowls and

bowls of mincemeat and the rabbits and reptiles Tattoo and Glove watch them hunt. Let them go. Let her shiny, flat-eyed children run down the brown boys, the hole-in-the-wall boys, the boys that Old Blue once fed and watered and watched and maybe even lived for just as Baez had lived for her, Old Blue.

HONEY

Her ponytail still smells of chlorine. And her skin is tight, like a mask too small, while her shoulders ache with that delicious kind of tired.

“Ninety-five degrees out there,” the radio crackles, “and it’s only ten a.m.”

The land pulling past her windows at sixty-five miles per hour is a daze of blond sand, khaki brush, a sky of china blue. She keeps forgetting that she lives in a desert. Every month or so she and Keith will pack their bathing suits—plus a cooler of beer, tortillas, and Dinorah’s famous *refritos*—and drive five hours west, to the coast. Each time they crest the Entrada mountain range that separates Buzzard City from the Oro Desert, Keith will shake his head at the land sprawling out beneath them. How can a city like theirs exist in the midst of such hard, parched geography? “Just look—nothing but empty.”

Some two hours back, she had low-g geared down the southern side of the Entradas, the roofs of brown-and-tan suburbs sinking down behind those soaring blue mountains. One of the Entradas’ many peaks dominated the rest, rising up like a sloping pyramid. Then Highway 19’s bright blacktop T’d at the cracked asphalt of 55 South, where she turned west. The two lanes are narrow and there’s barely a

shoulder to speak of, but she's really in the Oro now, squinting through her clip-ons into the pungent gold of the dirt and sand that this desert was named for. Or is the Oro so-called on account of what men used to come here to prospect and mine? To the east, low humps of chocolate mountains glow lavender, while everywhere else puffs of creosote and fizzes of blond cholla give depth to land, land, land, land, and more dry land that stretches on into forever.

A dusty black Pinto, headlights cracked and muffler dragging, rips north. She hasn't seen one of those in years. The only vehicles going south are her Ventura and the low-riding white vans with orange chevrons and "Control Corp" peeling on the sides. She slows as one signals to pass. The two agents in front stare straight ahead. Their faded green jumpsuits meld perfectly with the cactus and brush dotting the landscape. The German shepherd panting between them can barely contain its meaty bubblegum tongue. A caged window—fifteen inches, maybe, like the RCA she and Keith watch Sunday mysteries on—dominates the rear door. She counts the silhouetted ball caps of six illegals, three per side. The agents will dump them on the other side of the border, less than ten miles from Marianne's.

The AC's maxed. Keith keeps warning her about overdoing it. Does she want to blow the rad again? But the sunlight beating in heats up the black interior: dash and wheel and all that leather. Cheese in a microwave, her black pants cling, as does her matching top—a light crust of silver stars sprinkled from shoulder to chest. When she left the condo after her morning swim—suitcase in the trunk, Keith's old briefcase bursting with the "Society and Pedagogy" term papers she's going to have no excuse but to grade in

bum-fuck Matchstick County—she had thought she could get down to Marianne’s by afternoon. But Matchstick isn’t on the road signs yet. It didn’t seem so far two years ago.

A dusty brown roadrunner skids out across the hot asphalt, dragging its slender tail like a dress train. It bounces over the bumpy fur rug that might once have been a coyote or someone’s dog—and which, *zip*, disappears under the Ventura and then falls away from the rear-view mirror. Orange-flavoured Tic Tacs zing between her molars—crunched three, four at a time. She’s been craving nicotine since Keith left for his conference, and even dreamed of her old silver Zippo the night before—that gorgeous, satisfying sound it made each time she flicked the lid. Why didn’t she just give in and treat herself to a small pack of Pilots when she filled up with gas and thin coffee? When she gets to Matchstick she’ll mooch Marianne’s tobacco: one delicious smoke for every six dreary term papers she grades, or something like that.

Sign says, FUEL 5 MILES. And after that it’s just her and cactus and creosote, one deep-cut mountain wash after another: *arroyos*, as Marianne calls them. And it is good to be gone from the empty condo, the windowless office at the university, and for a minute she doesn’t even miss Keith. But then her mind flashes to his long jaw and greying Saturday stubble, and she wants her husband’s steady shadow to be there, in the corner of her eye.

A gassy burn rises. With the AC switched off, the needle on the temperature gauge drops from the red zone to the orange. She throws back one more tumble of Tic Tacs, crunches. Billows of steam rise from the Ventura’s shallow hood. Her foot falls heavy on the gas pedal, catching

air over an aluminum bridge under which another wide, scrub-lined wash fans out.

“Shit, shit, shit! You piece-of-shit car.”

A red pickup flashes past, going north. Then she swerves to avoid the massive grey saguaro that’s toppled from ditch to road, its exposed ribs splitting through the trunk. The Ventura’s steaming is worse now. And then, through engine smoke, a sign in the shape of a teardrop appears. FUEL. SNACKS. SERVICE.

The attendant’s skin is violet with sun, his cheekbones sharpened into triangles. “Yo! Yo! Kill that engine!” He waves a rag.

She rolls down her window. The blistering air smacks her in the face.

“Yo! Lady! The hood!”

The lever is under the seat, between her legs. The attendant pulls his greasy T-shirt up over his mouth and turns away from the steam. Like Dinorah, who is only thirty-five but looks about fifty, the attendant is probably quite young. Dinorah’s eyes had popped when Honey dug out her driver’s license to prove she was forty-three.

“You are blessed to look so young, Missus,” Dinorah had said, pressing the collar on one of Keith’s tennis shirts. “I work too hard for that. And then there’s my kids. Kill your body, don’t they?”

Honey had nodded, warm with pride, but then came that angry flush she got whenever someone just figured, hey, she’s a woman, so she must also be a mom or at least want to be.

Grabbing her purse, she steps into staggering heat. The attendant’s eyes linger over the tightness of her exercise

pants. Before standing to full height, she pulls her T-shirt down as far as it will stretch. And then she does stand, and even with her shoulders caved inward and her chin tucked up she towers over this stocky man who steps away from her—lips parted, eyes up—like they always do. And then, if her height's not mind-blowing enough, what about her glasses? Or the thick gold wedding band—*This chick's married?*

The engine's steam thins into the hot air and disappears. Her skin shrivels and bakes. Behind the attendant, now bent over the sizzling engine, a soda machine glows in the station office.

The attendant looks up with a grin. "You must be rich."

"Why?" Her purse, of smoothest leather and many buckles, dangles from the crook of her arm. It is hot to the touch.

"Cause you're killing this real nice car, lady. You should play nicer."

She frees her glasses of the clip-ons. A quick laugh catches in her throat.

"Well, anyway," the attendant says, hitching up his jeans, "she's not getting you back to Buzzard City anytime soon."

Her glasses, held to the sun, are spotted. "I'm going down to Matchstick County."

"Not there, neither, lady. You fried this sonnabitch."

"Oh, come on," she says, applying the hem of her shirt to a lens. "Last time it just needed new radiator hoses."

"Nope."

If the attendant's eyes flick away, he is lying. But it is her eyes that drop. "Do you have a phone?"

But there is no answer at the pay phone from which her

mom, her Marianne, makes their weekly calls — every Sunday at five p.m.

“It’s not safe, Honey,” Keith had said the last time Honey suggested they were long overdue for a trip.

“We ought to go,” she told her husband.

Leaning back in his office chair, dimpled leather creaking, Keith had lowered his bifocals. His misty eyes had once been as green as spearmint.

“Let her be, Honey,” he said.

A box fan whips hot air around the small office, paper rustles and flaps. A fifty-cent cola freezes as it slides down Honey’s esophagus, pooling in her empty stomach. The phone’s dial is caked with black grease, and now so is her finger. The ringing on the other end sounds more hollow than from the condo. She hangs up.

Her purse is as soft as a child and the smell is clean, like fresh meat. She holds it tight, fiddling with the familiar loops and buckles, the fan blowing at her back. Outside, the attendant untwists caps in the engine, pouring in icy green coolant. Thick vines of tattoo coil up his arms. When she was still teaching high school, a kid had tattooed “Now, gods, stand up for bastards!” across his bicep, so moved was he by her *King Lear* unit. She had photographed his arm and filed it in her teaching dossier under “Student Testimonials.” Her own tattoo — the Sanskrit sign for healthy or, more literally, “freedom from disease” — is etched on her outer right ankle. There’s a box of bandages in her desk at school for the rare days she wears a skirt with her low heels instead of long black pants.

The engine fails to turn over. The attendant is still wiping his hands when he comes into the office. “Something’s sure

gone wrong in there.” His T-shirt ripples in the fan’s breeze.

Honey crosses her arms over her chest. “Like what?”

“My boss’ll fix it, but not till Tuesday.” He lights a Pilot and rests a butt cheek on the edge of the desk. *Fury* is disguised within the design on his right forearm; *Wisdom* on the left.

“Shit.”

Each time she speaks, her dry face sprouts another crack. She packed her Nivea this morning, must have.

“Got a cigarette?”

She pushes up her glasses and slides a cool, white Pilot from the attendant’s pack. A luxurious inhale sluices her brain. She’ll phone Dinorah and Dinorah will phone someone—a nephew or a cousin’s cousin—to come pick her up and bring her back for her car again. So, okay, Tuesday she’ll drive down to Matchstick. Except then she’ll only have a few real days with Marianne if she wants to be back in Buzzard for a quick swim before Keith flies in on Friday.

“Could take the bus.”

“Huh?”

“Bus.” His eyes pop. “B-u-s. You know, big metal thing drives from town to town.”

She feels her face heat up.

“Should be here in an hour,” he says with a crooked smile. Then he promises her the car will be ready and waiting when the bus brings her back again.

He helps lift her luggage out of the trunk. But the canned goods she’s packed for Marianne, the bag of no-name dog food, and the rolls of raw canvas and jars of gesso will have to stay until the next trip. There’s a form to sign, agreeing to pay for parts and labour up to an estimated value.

Anything major, the boss will hold. Worst case? Tow it back to Buzzard.

While the attendant crouches in the narrow shadow of the office's eave waiting for another customer, she stays in front of the fan until the Greyhound arrives, clouded in a storm of dust. She rolls her suitcase towards the driver, who leans against the bus and lights a cigarette. The sun reflects off the mirror of his shiny pink head.

"You go as far south as Matchstick?"

"All the way to the border, lady." He looks up-up-up at her, making change for her five-dollar ticket and reaching out for her suitcase.

"I'd rather keep it with me."

"Nope." The driver clenches his cigarette between his leather lips and, straining, opens the underbelly storage bin. "It's Control. Just a rule they got." Her purse is okay. And the briefcase—once she shows him it's only full of papers.

"Let's go," the driver calls, slamming shut the luggage hold. He throws away his cigarette and squeezes past, his hand grazing her hip. The bus pulls out onto the highway, going south.

CHÁVEZ

This being Friday, they quit the fields by four. It's town day. Maclean gives them their pay envelopes and lowers the tailgate for them to hop, two at a time, into the back of the idling pickup. They're a crew of ten. Chávez gets in last. As Maclean eases the truck down the ridged-up road Chávez hunches over, counting his dollars, weighing how broken is his back against how little he's got to spend. The kids who've

been picking a while will have a few bills to send home. Some send grubby letters too, though none believe they will ever get there.

Dear Granny, Please buy some Nescafé with this money.

Dear Mom, If only you could see how many tomatoes this month I picked. I bet it's more than a million.

A few have dads back in the villages, but they're crazy or old or, like Pedro, got injured up here in the north. Pedro is Abuelita's, his granny's, kind-of boyfriend. Through his pants you can see the outline of the brace that holds his leg together and on bad days he gets around with a cane that's too short so he has to hunch over. It's from Pedro that Chávez knows how to drive a car and turn a Bic into a tattoo gun.

Along with the dads lots of moms disappeared up here too. He remembers his mom had pink high heels but Abuelita says no. Because of weak ankles his mom wore sturdy sneakers that laced right up. The high heels must have been from a dream or one of those glossy magazines sold at the market. On the cement wall above Abuelita's virgin candles and hibiscus flowers there was a square photo of a girl with the same orange-coloured eyes as his and a high puff of black hair.

"She left here with only enough for a cola," Abuelita told him.

And whenever he tried to get her to speak of the factories in Zopilote where his mom might still be working, the walls of Abuelita's cement cottage closed in around them and the air got cold.

"Where? Zopilote?" Abuelita always said. "I don't know that place."

"It's over the border, Abuelita," he sometimes pushed

her. “Pedro says it’s called ‘Buzzard City’ in English. But he told me to call it Zopilote.”

But Abuelita didn’t want to know about that city that swallowed her daughter and would get him someday too.

To make room in the truck he and the other boys hug their knees tight to their chests. The drive out to the main highway is muddy with yesterday’s hard rain. The musty smell of tomatoes rises thick and so do the worms. Each Friday it’s the same. While Maclean does his banking and shops for cases of spaghetti sauce, the other boys rush the ice cream stand and the store selling soda and chips to spend their pay. But Chávez just walks around and pretends he lives in the town he doesn’t even know the name of. The way people won’t look at him—or look too hard—it’s a tough game. Then a couple of the littler kids get sick on the ride back to the farm, ice cream puke spraying up milky with the mud.

Their bunkhouse is just a cramped and crummy shed. It has no heat or light bulbs. Chávez is the only one awake, even being so tired. Behind his eyes bright green hunks of field tomatoes pop from the dry, grey earth, and like the ghost of an amputated limb he can still feel the motion as he stoops and picks, twists and plucks the unripe fruit, then tosses each taut handful into that cracked garbage bucket, which the biggest boy hauls and—with a heave and a curse, *fucking shit*—pours into the waiting truck. Maclean notes each bucket in his coil book; Chávez imagines stealing it so he can add a hundred ticks after his name.

Awake and dreaming, it is all the same but at least at night he is horizontal and there is no sun to burn. He hates tomatoes even if the boy with the grey front tooth and a cross on his neck says, “No way, bee-keeping’s the hell of it.”

Another says, no, the very, very worse is chasing chickens. Or, no, it's cleaning crabs. "Twelve hours of that slime and stink, you jam the knife in your palm just to stay awake."

There's ten boys and five mattresses. As they sleep the boys call for things like sandwiches, moms. Some boys say Maclean and his wife, in their high, wide house across the fields, sleep alone in their very own rooms. The bed he and Abuelita slept in bowed in the middle so it might as well have been a hammock, but it didn't matter because Abuelita didn't sleep much. It was always still night when, with a groan, she pushed her body away from the mattress. And when she shook him awake a few hours later she'd have baked a blanketful of soft bread. At the market plaza behind the crumbly white church, they sold the bread along with sweet corn stew, which would be brimming in the iron pot when Abuelita coaxed him off of the mattress. Chávez would pack the stew and bread into Abuelita's cart—an old bicycle Pedro had converted, with deep sidesaddle baskets and low handlebars that Chávez pushed. If he had gasoline, Pedro drove them in his two-door with the holes in the floor so you could see the road. Though it was so nice and easy when Pedro pulled up in the dark, they never counted on it.

The village was getting navy when they set out. Cats and dogs, bellies pinned up to their pelvises, followed them, going crazy for the food smells in the cart. Abuelita stopped to breathe a lot, shooing away the dogs and cats. Reaching deep into her lungs, she would point up at the remains of the starry sky. The bright one is the North Star. And that one is called Venus. It's the brightest after the moon. She said he could go anywhere in the whole world if only he knew the stars. Heaven is the only thing that never changes, she said.

On Saturdays the boys at Maclean's will make a fire and cook up food like they would eat at home. Some have been away so long they can't remember how things should taste, so Chávez cooks for them. As he stirs the chili and cinnamon into the stew—peppers and beans and a little meat—he tells them Abuelita's food was always sold out well before noon. Other grannies sold food at the market too, like salt pork, rice pudding, spicy soup, but the old men and sick men and wounded men who practically lived in the church plaza said Abuelita's food was the best. Maybe because she charged them only enough so she could buy more flour, dried corn, sugar, or Nescafé if they were out. Behind Abuelita's little house the garden was full of peppers and onions, hibiscus blossoms bigger than his head. In the shade of the high, wide palo verde they would eat the food Abuelita had set aside that morning. Then Abuelita slept: crumpled in the wooden chair, her thick grey toes to the sky, a mug of Nescafé tilted on a rock.

That's when Chávez would pack the milking bucket with a half-full bottle of spirits, Abuelita's thickest darning needle wrapped in tissue, and a clutch of ballpoint pens—blue and black and a couple of reds—then walk back to the church plaza. The market would mostly be over by then, the food-sellers, like Abuelita, gone home to nap. Some of the village men might still be there selling rugs, cigarettes, or plastic toys from their carts or car trunks. And there were always kids around. Ball-capped and sandalled, scabby knees and big teeth just growing in, they'd be sharing sodas and scrounging butts. Chávez charged ten cents for a tattoo. Always one of the kids would have saved up, and would choose from the designs in his lined notebook:

stars, skulls, and roses, jet planes too. For ten cents more he'd customize, mostly names of lost moms, gone dads. On the over-turned bucket with tongue between his teeth, he'd poke the darning needle into and out of and into and out of harassed bloodying flesh. He did wrists and necks, but that was extra too. He'd pause to clean the wound with a spirit-soaked rag and if a kid got faint, he made him sip from the bottle. Once a girl said she wanted a lightning bolt on her knee. But he said no. Abuelita wouldn't like it if he marked a girl that way. She said, fuck you, Chávez, she'd do it herself. And she did do it, along with the knees of some other girls. He still did okay. He washed ink and blood from his fingers before Abuelita awoke and when she did she never asked where he got the money for the lemon-lime sodas he brought home every day.

And then Chávez is back in the bunkhouse again. The boy sleeping beside him has moved, struggling against the tight twist of his blanket. Roberto, this boy, sits up, looks around, not understanding the room or the shadows. When Chávez whispers, "Hey, it's okay," Roberto lies down again, his wet eyes catching in the moonlight.

Roberto says he was dreaming of home. "My mom was hanging the washing." The line went on for a million miles, squeaking all the way to the border. But it must just have been the swing set outside their window. "Right?" Roberto says his mom told him in the north there'd be grapes and peaches, "All you can eat. You seen them, Chávez? Or is it all just fucking tomatoes?"

Chávez hasn't heard about any all-you-can-eat fruit. But what about the lakes? He's heard about those, and rivers, clean ones, without rainbows of factory poison, cow shit, or

dead chickens from upstream—or dead boys like he and Juan had seen in Río Loco’s north-south flow and wondered how the fuck you’d drown in knee-deep water. While all he and Roberto know are the Loco’s drained banks, Chávez imagines that there’s a glassy paradise lake further up in the north where all the moms and dads are living, just waiting for them boys to get there. In the north there really is enough water that people can go swimming. Indoors in pools too. A white woman told him so.

And of all those moms and dads Roberto wants to know why none of them ever write home. “Huh, Chávez?”

“There’s a great big hole somewhere where the letters are buried. Control takes the money out first—not that dumb—and then the fuckers buy whiskey and dog food with it.”

Roberto yawns. His cousin got to an apple farm—that’s really north. “They preached to them, though, made you pray before they paid.”

“Fucking white jerks.”

“And there’s Africans.”

“Blacks?”

“They come from a desert, too. They get flown over in special planes because they pick so damn fast.” Roberto says watch out. “Farmers’ll take an African over you.”

Chávez would like to see an African. And he’s never tasted a real apple. He wishes he knew where he was. Outside the old swing set creaks in the breeze. Night, now, is charcoal. Finally, Chávez dreams. He has seen this one before. The old-lady-*vieja* in the shitty blue car. Her face looks like his feels: tight from being so scared. Then, just as he lifts up the handle of the passenger door her long skinny arm with the popping veins and the blond down reaches over. It’s like

she's wind-milling through water, taking a broad, powerful stroke, scooping a lungful of breath. Her hand, the left, has a gold ring and is so big it could palm his whole head, and he remembers that when she held onto him it felt safe for a minute, like things would be all right. So why does she push down the door's button, locking him out? He rattles the handle. His screaming swells and swells until what comes from his mouth is a full-on siren.

He wakes then. Maclean's truck horn is blaring. And then all around him the boys jump up and untangle themselves from their sheets and grab their runners and ball caps, and after spooning porridge at the picnic table beneath the clothesline hung with Maclean's stained shirts, they climb into the waiting pickup and are in the fields while it's still dark.

BAEZ

She was born in a pen behind a gas station. There were pumps, a phone booth, a flat-roofed store. If she pulled herself up the fencing with her front paws she could see inside the store's back window. Food and jugged water were stacked to higher than the crooked doorjamb. The man who raised her was covered in brown speckles, especially his face and hands, the back of his neck. If he stayed too long in the sun the speckles leaked right into each other, like water drops into dry earth. Speckled Man had two little sons, less speckled but with the same bright orange hair and, after a time, the same shifting eyes.

When she lived with Speckled Man she shared her pen with brothers and sisters, cousins. She was left alone with

her babies, when she had some, until Speckled Man came with gloves on and took them away. Like here at Glove and Tattoo's, she'd had an overhanging tree. Without it she might have boiled and cooked up along with the earth. But at night it cooled. She could breathe, smell. And at night, she could finally see: long, lean rabbits bounded past; woolly spiders tiptoed rock to rock; snakes crunched by. Coyotes came too, golden in the moon, their yowls vaulting.

What she remembers most about the gas station are the brown men. They came out with the stars. They were dusty, in ball caps. Water jugs in hand, humped with packs, the brown men ran up from the highway ditches, skidded through the gravel of the station lot and cut back into the desert, towards the jagged blue mountains in the north. They sweated a ripe white adrenaline, not unlike the smell of rabbits chased or of the orange-haired sons when Speckled Man caught them firing his gun.

When the brown men came Baez did what she was supposed to: she found her feet and bared her teeth, her eyes straining to track their low, quick figures. If they paused, winded, she caught their dry whispers, which sounded like breeze compared to the choppy stuff Speckled Man and his sons spoke, called, shouted. Sometimes mixed in with the brown men were brown boys as young as those belonging to Speckled Man and some so sun-quenched they glistened purple beneath the moon and their eyes were round like the bottoms of tin cans. The few women who appeared straggled behind, feet swelling in strappy shoes, the punch of their blood brightening the air. Then, after a time, there were no more brown men. But brown boys still came, in twos and threes or, if in a pack, a big one would lead. What was sure

were the ball caps on their heads, the crunchy plastic of their bags, the water-jug slosh, and the *ka-chung-ka-chung* of their rabbit hearts.

She remembers that brown men and then just brown boys came to the station in the daytime too, but then they'd be crowded in the backs of bleached pickups driven by overalled farmers. One of her long-gone children—black of face or yellow of body—would ride in the back watching the men or boys who smelled of earth, of gasoline, the deep, oily sweat of no sleep. They sat there while the farmer bought drinks and bright bars of candy and the bigger of the orange-haired sons filled the truck, though he hardly reached the pump. And then the truck would go wobbling down the road, the men in the back clutching a candy bar and a can of drink. And not long after that another pickup would drive up, also filled with brown men, brown boys. They came and went and came and went, and all around them the desert went on living and dying and living again. Baez licks her smell. She wants to die and dissolve into the earth and just stay there, mixing up with time and dirt, nothing left. How close to death now, how very soon.

HONEY

The Greyhound leaves her and her luggage in the gravel lot of the McGarrigle gas station. Hot wind bites her cheeks while, despite her glasses, dust burns her eyes. Two boys—thirteen and fifteen, maybe—loll at the pumps, passing a Fanta. Soft orange hair peeks out from their caps, which protect their freckled faces from becoming more so. Their