Settlers of Unassigned Lands

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I’m behind the old Safeway, the one near the graveyard, where the rigs back in and offload and pull out into the night. I know where to stand so the store clerks can’t see me; I know that you stand in the shadows, just under the light. She’s coming here to meet me. She’s from Oklahoma. I met her at a party, the night before Halloween. Her costume was one of those oversized fingers and she’d worn it sideways and painted out the team’s logo and written on there OK and when I saw it, the first time, the finger looked just like the state I was from.

I took a Greyhound out west, saved up washing dishes, one year of rinsing and scrubbing and lifting, the food I washed off just bloat and hue. Tulsa to Oakland and goodbye tornadoes and here were the Rockies and here the Salt Lake, and there was a man who came into the diner, who drove rig for England and had been saved by the Mormons and knew all their stories, and I said but they thought that that lake was the ocean, and the guy said, but have you seen that lake son, so goodbye to the floodplain, my veins its wrecked roads, the black broken pathways of south Oklahoma, the rare and red earth that soaked up my youth, towns full of gun racks and rig hats and six packs, and Friday night lights, seven to a side because the schools were too small. The train tracks held departure: you could climb in the boxcars, or lie down and wait for the wheels. I knew those who did both, caught out and came back a week after. A day passed, a month passed, then the coroner’s low black Hearse would pass by the diner and park next to the spikes, the body, the rails.

Ten years now in Oakland, selling dope to the cute ones, the boys from the parties and these days I’m skinpopping to try and save money, the high longer this way, when you blast up your skin, when you don’t shoot the vein and the rush is a lot less but the economy sucks now so the boys, on the weekends, don’t come around like they did. My studio’s down by the BART at MacArthur, blocks off the strip and the thugged-out per-hours, their parking lots full though you never see people and it’s a good place to
be, the johns draw the cops’ fire, my room just a futon and scales and a table, the big West of small spaces: a wall for a kitchen, a toilet that stands right next to the fridge. But the boys don’t come around now, and my rent is past due.

She said she could save me. She said if we fucked, I could make it back home. She said that she knew this was something I wanted. She said she knew I was Okie because I wore my eyes low.

The clerk flicks his butt and pulls the door open and goes back inside and the ember’s still smoking and the rigs are all gone and she walks down the alley and she’s dyed her hair from blonde to a brown. She’s tall. She has white on, a white flowing dress and black motorcycle jacket and I think not yet, I need music inside me, the scene needs its music, this scene needs its score. Past the mouth of the alley, cars blur on Broadway. It’s a short walk to the cemetery, where she wants it to happen. At the party she talked of a group of graves there, the bare tiny headstones, the graves without names. They’re under a cluster of scrub trees in some grubby corner. The cemetery here in Oakland is huge.

She isn’t attractive, or is almost attractive. Her nose is too big and her eyes are too narrow. Her lips do something funny that make her look stupid. Her teeth look too small inside of her mouth. Her hair—there’s a term for it—is done up in this wreath; she doesn’t have bangs and the front part is braided and she wears these braids pulled back behind her, like the ends of a visor, the braids holding the rest of her long brown hair back. At the party I asked how she knew she could save me, and she told me my play didn’t have any actors, and too many directors, and the sets were off-color, and how long had it been since I heard the word supper, the word supper in earnest, used as it should. And it made me believe her: no one out here, in the big West of small spaces, answers questions with questions, and supper’s not heard.

She takes my hand and we walk from the alley. The diner I worked at was next to a truck stop, one of those big things that had mainly diesel and the tourists driving through were too scared to stop at, and car washes that only the rig drivers used. I timed my productions to those power washes, the shooting of hoses, the rubbing of shammies against the hard metal truck. I knew how much time I had left by the noises. From the beginning, I did it all with eyes closed. But the boys here were different, there was acceptance, there was commitment on their part to these acts. And some of them loved
me, or said that they loved me, and one of them, once, stole most of my
drugs, and in the backyard of a party nearly half a year later, I stepped on his
kneecap while he stood drinking beer. I shot the bone out and he crumpled
and whimpered, and not once more, not ever, were things taken from me.
I’ve been made a fool of but not here, on the coast.

She and I walk by the Wendy’s, the tree lot. It’s November, and the next
week is Thanksgiving: sweaters and slacks and forks, knives and spoons.
We’re holding hands. She has on black hi-tops. The dope’s moving through
me like a slow, patient brook. The front of the Safeway is part of a center:
there’s a café, a store that sells smoothies, a combination pharmacy/every-
things store (and how did we get here and who let this happen and where is
the person in all of the meetings on zoning and planning and building and
digging who stands up for beauty, who screams in board meetings but what
about art but what about art, but what about beauty the need for aesthetic
the need for the mind to have things it can question, why is this shaped like
this, why is this basic, and where were the dissenters when the men in their
ties said it’s all about money, fuck art? Because it’s graceless. It’s graceless to
walk with the one who will save you past such tawdry neon, such bright
hollow signage, when children are hungry, when graves don’t have names.
Where is that person, who screams it and screams it, who says no you’re
wrong, who screams art art art).

The hills near the graveyard harbor thin eucalyptus, the seeds of these
trees brought over in the bellies of vermin, the bellies of birds. “How far
away is Australia?” I ask her, and she says, I know what you think now, don’t
think that I don’t. “But if we build things and these things that are built—like
computers, like bridges, like tracks laid for trains, if these things are built to
bring us all closer and these things fail to do what they should, then why
aren’t they torn down? Why don’t we start over?”

And she says, what do you think that it is that I’m trying to do?

We walk past a steakhouse, a care ward, apartments. The air is thick with
the scent of the trees’ leaves, and I wonder if Okie has one eucalyptus, if
there’s even one of these trees in the state that I’m from. I don’t know the
answer. Perhaps some arboretum. Perhaps some fancy zoo made for flora.
Our palms have grown damp from the clasping. I want to let go.

The street tees and down one way, the way all the cars go, is another
small district of this big, lonely city, another quaint sector to forget and go
shopping and perhaps see a movie and then go get a sundae, and buy for
your dog a nice leash made of hemp. To the left is a bar and past it a head-
quarters for Oakland’s Hells Angels and beyond that the vaults and white-
walled mausoleum, across the street from which stands a small flower shop.
We walk past the bar and its door is open and the din flares like rash or a
bite from a spider, and I want to tell her there’s no way I can do this, let’s
just forget it, I’m not going out there, to the place where they bury those
who have no one, and she tells me if all of those people had no one then there
wouldn’t be graves there and I want so badly the boys who all love me, the
ones who come over past midnight and skinpop, the best high for fucking,
the high building with sweating, with lips that I kiss with a sad sort of panic,
as the truckers did not want to be kissed at all, and my small apartment with
glass-topped coffee table and futon and bed sheets and sometimes a post-
card from Brother in Tulsa, where he works as a banker and has now three
children, and remains a Baptist, and calls me deserter, but does not know
enough of the truth to say faggot, the word he would use if he had to use
one, and I don’t want to go there, to the graves with no names.
The columbarium’s dark. It’s well past business hours. Behind its walls
are rows of gold boxes, and each of these boxes hold peoples’ ashes, and
these boxes of ashes are all kept in columns, and the rooms all have fountains
and the rooms all have names. I dress nice when I come here: I own two
sweaters; I own two pairs of gray pinstriped pants. I watch them sometimes,
the victims, the living: they read the dead poems, they leave bouquets in
holders. They are scared to forget because the dead can’t remember. They
are scared because all of the boxes aren’t full.
She and I climb the gate; I hoist her over spires, over wrought iron points
like a row of short pikes. She drops down and her white dress parachutes
upward, a broken umbrella, taken by wind. She told me her name at the
party we met at. She has the same name as my mother, my bright, dying
mother, who must surely know. We look at each other through the black
iron bars and the nighttime. There’s a street light behind me, in front of
the small flower shop. She looks like a child; her cheeks are too pudgy. She
looks like she can’t be a person at all. Climb over, climb over, she says, do you
want me to help you.
But I don’t need her help now. I can do it myself.
The roads in the graveyard go on for miles. Past the gate is a six-foot
porcelain urn. Behind it the road breaks into four curving fingers. At the
top of the graveyard are more eucalyptus, new marble headstones, fresh
even sod. There’s a view of The City, a place I’ve not been to. I don’t
own a car and am scared of the subway; it goes underwater, it’s like Okla-
homa, the asphalt on floodplain, the water above. The sink at the diner had
a spray washer that hung down like the head of a shower, and I remember
its weight, its spring-loaded tug. If you pulled then let go, it was like a man
hanging: it would bounce and then bounce and then sway and then stop.
Tonight there are stars and not much pollution and long smears of white on
the black vacant cosmos. Her dress looks like a ghost as she moves up the
road. The cemetery here is three-hundred acres. There’s Millionaires’ Row,
its piedmont of tombs, names above doors forever and ever, and buried here
is the man who founded Folgers’ Coffee, and buried here is Kaiser, the man
who built ships, and buried here are sculptors and sheriffs and judges, and
painters and mayors, and the man known as the father of hydraulic mining,
as patriarch of employing water to dislodge solid rock, and how did he think
that water could do this, was he from Oklahoma, did he see the floodplain,
did he work in a diner, washing off ketchup from dishes, and she’s walking
faster than I am and stops, and says that we have to go all the way to the top,
that the graves without names and the small grove of scrub trees are on the
backside of the cemetery lot, and she takes off her jacket and leaves it in the
gutter, and her skin looks so pink against the dress’s white fabric that I think
for a moment that she’s made out of gum.

When I was young and okay and the world still cost nothing, my family,
in summer, went north to Nebraska, to a town not that far from the South
Dakota line. There was a lake there, a college, a church with round sky-
light. An uncle had a cabin, a jet ski, a pier. We swam until sunburned. An
elm grew from the shoreline, and from one of its limbs, and by rope, hung a
tire, and I broke my leg the last summer I went there, by not letting go, by
watching the water and shore moving backward, the dirt rushing upward,
the string of poor choices. My brother was with me. I lay there panting. Do
you want me to get mom or should I stay here with you. My brother moved
toward me and lifted me up and put me on his shoulder and half-carried,
half-dragged me back to the cabin, where my family’s faces fell down like
horses, their shock meaning love.

I remember the dice on one trucker’s mirror. I remember my father ask-
ing of girls. I remember the boys, the long nights and candles, the dope on the table, the smooth plastic lust. I am to have a small place in some history, but this place exists without any tradition, and history absent of any tradition is a coat without buttons, a bird without call. A dry dying floodplain I can’t not remember. She leaves the roadside and angles her body and walks sideways, in white dress, down the leaf-covered hill. By the back of the fence, in the moonlight, I see them, the grave without names, like small silver huts. Most of my life has been filled with these items, myself as a settler of unassigned lands. I function as permanent, illegal homesteader. I have built houses but these houses aren’t mine now. I miss Oklahoma. The nights don’t get hot here. I miss the dim wetness, the minor insistence of moisture in air. The warm smell of crop dirt when the storm’s lifted. The blank stare of cattle. The rare and red earth.