Arc and the Sediment

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She wakes up to Lance pulling off on an exit and into a small town. She thinks he’s going to stop for fast food, but he passes McDonald’s, KFC, Four Corners Burgers and Shakes. He keeps driving—turning off in the wrong direction: south.

“Where are we going?” she asks Lance.

“Get some sleep.”

They drive along barren roads until curiosity turns to anxiety and then to panic. But (questions, questions) she is afraid to ask why they have come this way. Finally he pulls onto a dirt road and parks next to a wood-shingled white house.

He looks at her for some time. “I’m going to ask you this once,” he says. The tone is not good. Her heart knows it and beats indiscriminately. He looks as afraid as she feels. He waits. For what, she doesn’t understand. Then: “Did you fuck him?”

“What do you mean, who? My brother.”

Oh, him. Thank you. Because she can honestly say no.

“Of course not.”

“No? Or not that you can remember?”

“No. Absolutely not.” That, she would remember.

He breathes in the manner of Olympic divers just before jetting off to the end of the high dive. He stares at the porch a moment. He grabs the two white sacks. “Wait here.”

He slings the sacks over his shoulder and knocks. A woman answers the door. She’s slender and pretty. Her black hair turns in just below
the shoulders. Lance disappears inside the house. She is no relative of Lance; she must be the one, the girlfriend. Gretta’s skin burns cold, hot, cold, hot.

You could go in—

She reaches up, up from the tarry pit, but she can only find two radio stations—country and evangelical babble.

She pushes her swollen feet into sandals and gets out. An Australian shepherd mix runs up to her, barking, baring his teeth. She jumps back into the cab. “Lance!” The dog is noisy and snotty but not particularly foamy. Lance appears on the porch with the woman, who calls the dog off. The dog runs behind the house.

“Fucking lush! Stupid drunk!” she yells at Gretta. And at Lance: “You deserve her!” She pushes him—“Asshole!”—and slams the door.

Lance stands near the porch a minute, staring at the shut door.

He knocks. “I need my tape recorder!” The door opens. The tape recorder flies halfway to the truck and busts into black pieces and a tape.

Give him the whistle. The whistle—why is it still in two pieces? Erikson said he’d fix it, he’d drill holes on both ends, then Lance would have two. He gave him a smaller female whistle for the meantime, the meantime turning into years, when he gave the two pieces back—with no new holes drilled on both ends. The new whistle, it still had meat on it, like a wishbone the week after Thanksgiving. Lance never used the female. He said the children’s plumes were enough to protect them. Protect them—are they protected? Your mother is protecting your children. Good god.

Lance waits on the little white porch. She wants to call him to her. She wants to beat him with a sharp stick. Just give him the whistle.

The woman comes out of the house crying. She sits on the porch, her head tucked under her arms. Lance sits by her, puts an arm around her. He pets her back. She lifts her head up. Her puffy face is blackened by makeup. He wipes her face with his hand and presses her head against his shoulder. “Shh,” he says. “It’s all right.” For a second
Gretta feels as though it could be her he’s consoling, but the comfort comes as a drop of water on the dry, dry earth.

The dog pokes its head from behind the house and barks. A baby cries. Gretta wants to see for herself but waits, hoping her face is not as red as it feels. She tosses around the clothes and dirty napkins and fast-food bags that are strewn all over the cab. It occurs to her she can check out the dates accessed on her files to figure out what Lance has seen and what he has not. Then she concurs with herself that, at this point, it doesn’t matter anyway.

The yard has no grass. There is a cactus at the side of the house. It sends up hot pink. She hears her pulse and takes notice of her breath—short, sharp, shocked. She breathes in deeply and exhales slowly. Pneumatic.

“Aren’t you afraid—what if something happens to your whistle?” she asked Lance when they left it with Erikson at his trailer house so long ago.

“Like what?” he asked.

“What if he forgets it’s yours? What if someone takes it from him?”

“Why would anyone take it? It hasn’t been given to them.” Vacuous.

An old Pinto is pulled half apart thirty yards back. It was brown then green…or green then brown. Now it’s rusted, just like her own truck. She scoots to the driver’s side of the cab. She forgets the starter is fixed, so when the ignition turns over smooth as wet soap, it is as a gift rather than the consequence of a mechanic.

“What kind of Indian am I?” Tulip asked her one day.

“You’re two kinds—Cheyenne on Grandma’s side and Navajo on Grandpa’s,” she answered.

“What kind are you?” she asked again.

“I’m English, Dutch…Welsh?—and maybe a lot of other stuff.”

“So what kind am I?” she asked.

Lance calls after her, but the truck is in motion. He yells louder. The situation is beyond her. There’s nothing she can do except go forward,
anywhere. \textit{Isn't it what you wanted? What you wanted all along?}

\textit{His skin was soft and spongy}. She thought she could never do without it. Maybe she can.

She wants to curse his mother, his aunt, his lover. But it’s not about them. It’s about her—and also about him, and there’s no undoing any of it. She reaches under the seat for her bottle, stuffs it between her legs, and uncaps. She drinks long, with gratitude, because with any luck, with any waft of transpiration, tonight will be the night before she’ll show back up at her caseworker’s door, asking for help. “It was an Occident,” she’ll tell her. “It was purely Occidental.” And whatever the woman tells her to do, short of giving up her children, she’ll do.

She wonders about the crying baby. What does she look like? Does she look like Lance? They almost took in a little girl a couple of years ago—her teenaged cousin’s baby. Lance didn’t think it was a good idea. It wasn’t good for the children, he said. She figured Lance didn’t want any more kids. By the looks of things, he doesn’t. But maybe he wants her—the woman on the porch. \textit{Maybe you want a woman}. Maybe she wants a lot of things.

She thinks about the baby and insurance and government housing and those Twelve fucking Steps, the ones she gets stuck on, and together they make a black hole. The baby isn’t aware of any of this, of life in general, even. It’s all mom, milk, my diaper’s wet. One day she might have to introduce Tulip and Braden to a sister. They might be photographed together, and the photograph could very well be suspended on her fridge with an I ♥ Arizona magnet. The future—it could be anything. She tries to imagine that, but instead she sees just a shell of a baby, because for now, she isn’t prepared to see anything else. There are some places she will have to go alone, but there is one place she’d far rather be: with her kids. All she wants now, at this moment, is to look at them, to sleep between them, listen to them breathe; she wants to make sure that they haven’t become a part of the emptiness. She wants to feel the fullness of their company, because that is as close to God as she is willing and able to get. It is her red road, her white road, her only road.
Lance will surely show up someday. Maybe she will be dry, and he will ask to stay. Maybe she’ll say no. Maybe she and the kids will run off with James—or Bincy, for that matter, or just with themselves—somewhere far away. Or maybe she’ll say, “Of course” and “I love you,” and everything will be different, as it was for Renee and Clyde when they gave up drinking for singing. But she can’t bring him or anyone else home this way. Not like this—not couched in a living, breathing, drunken apology. And not in the face of a brown-eyed, beautiful emissary to a world that would have her drown from a mountaintop—not with this woman, who will be, in Gretta’s mind, forever waiting in her driveway, holding a baby that is or is not Lance’s. Not like this.

The future, it could be anything. She moves, the whole of her: forward, home.