

Uncertain Alchemy

1.

Quiet, speaking of nothing. Under the first blush of dawn, into the harsh blaze and bake of noonday, the woman sits. Imaginary water ripples across the steppe, shimmies in a whisper of breeze. Love had shimmered on her skin in that first kiss: I love you. A lizard flickers across a rock, dusk encroaches. Infinite stars glitter in the black night that follows.

Her nighttime cold is not different from her daytime thirst. She sits within the rotation of heavenly bodies until a pale rim returns to the east. Her shadow emerges behind her, shrinks to nothing, then stretches before her.

Beverly was the auntie who spotted her. They were riding in the Packard on their way home and she was watching the power line dip and rise, pole to pole to pole, a puff of cloud to the west making her wonder if it would bring some rain. Thinking just a little of the pain in her hands and knees. The harder she studied a dark lump on the hillside the less she could tell. "There—" she pointed with a finger that never got quite straight "what's that?"

A little like an eagle, but it didn't take flight. Too dark for most kinds of big garbage, not the right shape for a bloated carcass of anything they could name.

Smyrna backed up to where the drainage ditch flattened and drove straight out toward it.

They stopped about twenty feet away. After a little talking, Doris and Vernita went over and sat beside the young woman, facing the same horizon. They offered her water. After a while they made their way back to the car. "She doesn't even know we're here."

"Maybe she wants to stay where she is." Sissie had the whole passenger seat to herself and planned to keep it that way.

Vernita shook her head. "Sis, when's the last time you sat out in this kind of sun?"

Smyrna, feet splayed sideways out the driver's door, grabbed the doorframe with both hands, yarded herself up to standing and walked over to take a look. Doris and Vernita followed. Beverly slid across the backseat and fell in behind.

"You get her to drink some water, first thing." Sissie's words followed them.

They stood in a half-circle behind the woman.

"How about you come to where it's cooler?" Smyrna used her soft voice.

The woman didn't move.

Beverly took the milk bottle out of Doris' hand, splashed some water into her cupped palm and tilted it to the woman's

lips. A trickle ran down her chin. Doris rubbed the wet of her hand across the woman's forehead and cheeks. "She's burning up."

Smyrna slipped her arms under the woman's armpits and hoisted. "Take her feet gals." They carried her this way: Smyrna shuffled backward, arms locked around the woman's chest, Vernita and Doris stumbled with one foot each, Beverly dabbed water on the woman's face from alongside.

They flopped the woman into the backseat, knees folded, her head cradled in Beverley's lap. Once Smyrna got the car back on the road she drove smooth as water on slickrock. Sissie did not say a word, jammed against the front seat window with Doris and Vernita sidesaddle beside her, all their legs pressed together each time Smyrna shifted gears.
