

SOMEWHERE THERE IS A FIELD WHERE THE BIRDS WILL DIE FOR YOU

I once saw a picture. It was twilight and the grasses in the fields combed themselves towards the gnarled pear trees. The sky did not exist, but the birds did. Their blue wings filled the air. Feathers rocked from the sky and covered the fields in a blanket of indigo. There was no way to know if it was day or night. In the middle of the field stood a man. He stared down at the feathers. He looked tired. I thought of my tiny bedroom in my yellow house. My warm bed. My walls are blue like the feathers. The man in the picture is familiar.

The man comes to visit me at night. He is tired and asks to sleep in my bed. His body is cold as he curls up next to me. He whispers, *the journey is very long to the end of the road*. Outside my little window the birds begin to murmur.

I wake up in the field of feathers. They float up and then down every time I breathe. Standing over me are two young boys. They hold their hats in their hands. Their faces are smeared like drying paint and I cannot make out their features. One boy holds a gun. *We shot the birds from the sky*, the boy says. He points the gun above him, and I see the sun. It ripples its way over the black branches of the trees in waves of orange and yellow. The feathers around me begin to burn. The boys do not move. It is quiet and I hear the sound of footsteps on the road. I hear the sound of the bones in the feathers crunching as they come closer. I know the man is coming for me. He was cold when I left him in my bed.

A SMALL INFESTATION FOLLOWING A BIG STROKE OF LUCK

Mom won a year's supply of Dr. Pepper. She earned it. After drinking hundreds of liters, she managed to save every cap, turned them into the address on the label, and won. I came home from school and she was sitting at the kitchen table, blinking at a creased letter in her hands, her mouth a tiny bow of surprise. *I've never won a damn thing in my life, Petey.* She only called me *Petey* if she was happy. Petey was my name between the ages of two and twelve, back when I still ate her thumb-printed PB&J sandwiches. We watched Bugs Bunny together and snorted out our laughs.

Two weeks later the kitchen was filled with empty soda bottles. They consumed the kitchen table, the countertops, and the dog's water bowl. It had been a week since I had seen Dinty, our dotted terrier. The refrigerator door wouldn't shut. The bottles had taken over and Mom and I couldn't keep up with disposing them. The recycling truck only came once a week. They put a warning note on the big purple bin telling us that we were over our allotted amount. Mom wasn't sure what the allotted amount was. She didn't know what allotted meant either.

I was already sick of the taste of soda, but Mom refused to stop drinking Dr. Pepper. She told me if she stopped, they would just send more to make up for the fact that she wasn't drinking enough. I imagined her on an assembly line in a soda factory, grabbing each bottle's neck as it sped by, gulping the fizzing brown liquid. The conveyor belt picks up

speed. Soda bottles smear past her as she grabs for each one, her hands squeezing air like lemons. Lucille Ball is standing in the background imitating Mom as a laugh track cuts through the air and Lucille's mouth collapses into a pouty vermeil frown.

The delivery man kept coming, like clockwork, every Friday at two pm. There was never enough time to answer the door, so he started piling up the boxes of soda like ancient man-made statues. One day I saw a British Columbian totem pole peeking in, leering at me through the hallway window. I heard Mom call out from somewhere in the back study, but I couldn't be sure. I think she was asking for her monkey slippers.

The bottles reproduced their way into the living room. Their young came in the form of one-liter bottles, flopping and bouncing on the carpet. They formed small piles and helped each other climb onto the couch. One got savvy and learned how to operate the TV remote. Their favorite show was *Bonanza*. They would bump against each other like they were clapping whenever Hoss made a joke.

The bottles and their offspring and their offspring's offspring had filled the entire house. They were like overpopulated bird life on a minikin island: herding together in patchy groups and making guttural plastic noises with their capless tops. They had popped their caps off two weeks prior like a rite of passage, puffing out their hollowed bodies in a show of bravado.

One month after winning, Mom disappeared. I could barely make it out of my room by then. The house started to smell like the time I left Sugar Daddies in the back seat of Mom's Chevy. By the time we noticed, they had melted together like

abstract art—decaying caramel weeping in the sun’s slanted grin. There was a dispute between Diet and Regular. They didn’t like how their labels were different colors. The bottles started to collapse on each other, swaying and twitching as they squared off, the unchoreographed plastic version of *West Side Story*. I managed to escape out the bathroom window, imagining I was a jet because “When you’re a Jet you’re a Jet all the way” just as the bottles began their uprising. I crash landed on my knees and palms, dog paddled in the dirt until I managed to stand and run. I heard Mom scream as the sound of plastic kabooms ruptured the air, like ducks shattering in the sky.

HUCKLEBERRY

You are walking through a forest. It is dusk and you see a field full of wildflowers in the distance. You want to smell the flowers, but a river is blocking your way. The river is not swollen so you decide to cross. When your feet enter the water, you realize the water is hot. You look down and see the river is hot chocolate. Marshmallows bob and mounds of whipped cream become stuck on the sides of your legs. You look up and see a man standing on the other side of the river. He is beckoning to you. He is wearing a black cowboy hat, a black suit, and has a dark swirly mustache. You realize it is Val Kilmer from the movie *Tombstone*. You hear him shouting something, but the river drowns his words. You walk faster and as you do you reach down to scoop up the marshmallows and eat them. Your mouth is full when you reach Val Kilmer. He looks at you and says, *I'm your Huckleberry*. He starts coughing up blood into his hands. He looks down at the blood and then looks at you. You take a closer look at him and realize he is not Val Kilmer at all but your friend who died years ago. You open your mouth to say what you never had the chance to say but all that comes out is a tiny white cloud.