

Fire Maidens, '57

STEPHANIE DICKINSON

I wish I were anything that had wings. Instead I'm sitting on this flat rock alongside Highway 266 waiting to hitch a ride. My friend Marceline is with me. Behind us sits the town we're from. Lida, Nevada. Officially, a ghost town. Twenty corrugated metal shacks and miners' cabins. Everything is for ghosts, the dugouts with doors off their hinges, the black mouths beckoning, a stone bank for the ghost miners, and a wooden church for the ghost worshippers, a post office for the ghost letters, mines for the ghost gold and silver, and a stone jail where the drunk and disorderly ghosts wait to sober up. Already I feel separate from it. The telephone poles keep striding into the desert. To the west is California and Death Valley, and two hundred miles south is Vegas.

"Read my palm," Marceline says, offering me her hand. "What's in store?"

I open her right palm examining her lifeline, the crease that starts at her wrist and curves toward her index finger. Her fate line intersects it. "You'll travel to far off places like Las Vegas, but you'll come home," I say, not seeing anything today.

"Wrong, Monarch," she yanks her hand away, "I'll never come back here."

That's right my name is Monarch like the butterfly you don't see around here. Pop should have named me Blue Copper or Clouded Sulfur or Sleepy Orange or Stella Orangetip or Golden Hairstreak or Fatal Metalmark. Butterflies that live here in the basin get by on less. Pop should have known there's nothing except the creosote, the color of dried up dust. The dust snows over the highway, and clings to the willow flycatcher rising up into the air. Marceline sitting beside me has swallowed some of the gray of an unpaved mining road. Even her polka dot red and navy blue sun suit with smocked midriff and skirted sides could be a first cousin to tumbleweed.

"I'm going to close my eyes and imagine our ride," she says in her soft stutter. Next to her black and white saddle shoe sits her makeup bag and suitcase.

We've been here for thirty minutes and not a whiff of a car or a truck. I comb my short auburn hair with my fingers; my bangs are long and hang in my eyes. In good light my eyes

might be called violet, and in bad, dust. Pop died this morning so right now they're probably dust.

Marceline knows about Pop, and her knowing helps. So much is at stake that if a car doesn't come I'll have to fly, flap my arms, and make my body go away. I'll turn into a common raven. Glossy black feathers with a green sheen. Then I'll stuff myself with raspberry jelly and peanut butter. Soaring raptors don't eat for weeks. They sleep on the wind. I won't know I had a father just some male who fed my mother and flew away.

"How long you figure before somebody finds him?" Marceline asks.

I shrug, feeling the wrinkle grow in the middle of my forehead. I fiddle with the transistor radio; *Mr. Sandman* by the Chordettes comes in full of static. Freezer tape holds the grill to the radio box. A Wilco ST-7.

Mister Sandman, bring me a dream.

Make him cutest that I've ever seen

Pop used to sing the song to me. Marceline hums along snapping her fingers. "That's not the finest radio in the world. You should stop acting like it is." She picks the wad of gum from her knee where it's been resting and pops it back into her mouth. "See if you can find some Elvis." Her eyes widen so black there's no change between her irises and pupils. "Figures all you're taking is that stupid transistor radio that needs batteries. You should have at least brought your rabbit fur jacket."

Give him two lips like roses in clover.

Then tell him that his lonesome nights are over

"Another stupid thing you did, Monarch," Marceline says, chewing on the end of her teasing comb. "You said we'd take your pop's motorcycle. You didn't know the difference between a kick stand and kick starter."

None of it was my fault. The Harley-Davidson let us down. The throttle heard voices, the mirrors held Pop's face from long ago, and when I opened the gas tank I saw sticks where a sage sparrow had built a nest. Pop wouldn't have wanted me to disturb the birds.

“If that bike had started we’d be half way there.” Marceline reaches for the grape soda bottle and knocks the second to last swallow back. “So what’d you fix your old man for his last supper?”

I almost bite through my lip. “Toasted cheese with crinkle pickles,” I manage to answer. Pop’s face slips free of the house, and then comes after me carrying his shoulders and chest. The white teeshirt ripped apart like feathers.

“This morning I fried Mom her macaroni and eggs. I used grade A eggs and Blue Bonnet Oleo. That’s her favorite when she’s hung-over.” Marceline is skinny but likes to fill herself with talk of food; it’s better than eating. When she offers me the last of the grape soda her hand shakes and I hear her class ring click against the tin. “At least this way I don’t have to tell Mom about the baby.” She brushes her bangs off her forehead. “Can you see it in my stomach yet?”

“Nope.” I keep my eyes peeled on the highway.

“I’d like a blue and white finned Fairlane to come pick us up or a red convertible Sunliner.” She starts to backcomb a strand of her pale hair. Marceline’s hair reaches to her waist, but the ends are split and coarse as horsetail. Her mom regularly lightens it with hydrogen peroxide because she wants her daughter to be blond and white not black-haired and red. Sometimes the peroxide blisters Marceline’s scalp. Her dad is full-blooded Shoshone but he’s not around since he got the tumor on his thyroid. Marceline’s mom sent him back to the tribe. She told us it was the death dust. We were *downwinders* after all. Marceline’s dad and my own worked at Yucca Flats. Hog Ears and Little Man were their code names just like the bomb tests. Our dads would go into the desert afterward to measure the radiation levels. It was beautiful those rainbow colors the hot air made. Then Pop got sick. At first he couldn’t keep his balance, and after his feet started to drag, the falling started.

I keep looking for something beyond the highway so maybe what I want is in the air. A raven circles above the burro brush. I don’t see one eighteen-wheeler on the horizon carrying cattle across the state of Nevada to the meat packing plants, the cows lowing sweet and dark through the holes in the side of the truck, mooing as if their cries could change the heart of the driver. Twice a week the cattle pass. Every so often the Army’s canvas caravan travels through along with the jackrabbits. Then there are sightseers in Safari station wagons and the semi trailers hauling new cars to Lake Tahoe and Los Angeles? The highway stays blank.

Marceline unties her shoelaces, kicking off her saddle shoes. “I hate Velveeta. They have real cheese in Vegas that they serve with water crackers.”

“What’s a water cracker?” I start to chew my pointer fingernail to pink shreds.

“It floats on water like a communion wafer, and it tastes like nothing. Ever since I felt this baby in me I’ve been hungry for water crackers.” She twists Sam’s class ring around her finger. It’s not really his class ring; it’s her older brother’s who joined the Army. I can read the engraved year—1953—too early to be Sam’s.

“After you told him about the baby he stopped talking to you.”

Her lips part, showing teeth that are slightly bucked from sucking her thumb. Marceline tried out for a part in the same play as Sam. They let her be prompter. After one of the practices the jerk took her to *Fire Maidens from Outer Space*. Astronauts go to the 13th moon of Jupiter and discover a race of nubile girls all hungry for men. He drove her home and somewhere between Hornsilver and Lida, Jupiter happened. He took her into the seepwillow.

Marceline frowns. “Maybe when we get to Vegas I’ll find one of those doctors who make the showgirls miscarry. What do you think?”

I spit out my spearmint gum, watch it arc like it’s going somewhere, and then hit the dirt. “Listen I’m going to help you take care of the baby.” I’ve been chewing so hard my head hurts.

That sits well with Marceline. She uses the tail of her comb to lift a strand of my hair. “Your part’s crooked. I’m going to fix it. You’ve got the prettiest hair. Deep red and brown mixed together. I think a horse the color of your hair would be the best.”

We’ve been friends since our Moms hung out diapers on the clothesline between our cabins. In the afternoons the Moms would pop beers and put their feet up on overturned washtubs, one beer leading to another while we splashed in our pool, an old tailings trough filled with last summer’s flashflood. Marceline and I picked wings of orange-yellow butterflies off each other. When my Mom went to Elko on the Greyhound for dental work and forgot to come back, Marceline’s mom said, “Your mother went prospecting. She’s hunting for native gold.”

“Once we’re in Vegas you can grow your real hair color back,” I tell her.

“And we can work as waitresses.” Marceline brightens. “Cocktail waitresses get better tips. Only I’ll be in a maternity blouse.” The light goes out of her face and she slides off the rock. “What’s wrong with the damn highway? “

“It must be broken.” I say, squinting down the blacktop. At least the worst hasn’t happened—a highway patrol cruising by. “Marceline, do you think I did right by Pop? Maybe he’s happier. You know how he’d been having that pain like ice picks were stabbing into his eyeballs.” I feel like a barn swallow that has already traveled 6,000 miles today. But they ride tailwinds, getting up where the wind is fast. My voice trails off. Marceline’s not listening.

She marches in her Bobbie socks to the highway shoulder. “Monarch, what if the Army is stopping any vehicles from coming through? Maybe it’s bomb season.”

Hell, we haven’t seen the mail truck heading into Hornsilver where the nearest grocery, gas station and post office live. I twist the station selector. DJ voices crack like fifty mile-an-hour winds have taken them. “To do your level best smoke Lucky Strikes.”

“That’s KRJC. Elko,” Marceline says. “Try to get KDWN.”

I coax Las Vegas from the V shaped dial. A newscaster announces blue skies and 78 degrees for the desert paradise. “If you’re in the vicinity don’t miss the dramatic spectacle. Megaton Nancy is being dropped from the tower today. Remember, folks, fallout does not constitute a serious hazard to any living thing outside the test site. “

“Nancy!” Marceline whispers. “That’s mom’s crappy name.”

I start biting my left hand pinkie. If it’s so safe why are they holding back traffic? We’re never going to get out of here.

We hear the backfire of a muffler, and then pebbles hitting under back fenders. But it’s coming from Lida. I jump off the rock. The truck accelerates past us, making a U-turn and heading towards us.

My teeth chatter when I yell, “A pick up!”

“We’re saved or we’re screwed.” Marceline runs back to the rock for her makeup bag. “You carry my suitcase. Wow, it’s a new-model Chevy. A real machine.” She struts out onto the highway, straddles the centerline faded like a vein of played out silver. The driver must be

taking his foot off the accelerator, shifting into another gear, now coasting towards her, his chrome grill gleaming. Maybe he thinks she's a fire maiden or a sacrifice to Kali, the Hindu blood goddess. A virgin rubbed in cooking oil and pinned to the ground, her feet and breasts cut off and the arcs of her blood set aflame. Marceline darts out into the path of the pickup. There's a long screech, the stench of burning rubber.

The driver's voice blares, "ARE YOU DEAD?"

Marceline is grinning. "Geez, it's only Mosley. Check out his wheels."

I take in the ice-blue pickup and its driver. Mosley whips off his shades and leans across the seat rolling down the passenger's window. "What in the Sam Hill motherlicking peckerwood hell is going on here?"

"We need a ride, Mosley," Marceline says in her cat's purr. "We're going for groceries."

"Yeah, and I'm a roadrunner spotted skunk," he says, watching me lift Marceline's suitcase that must hold everything she owns. I remember that Pop once said Mosley wasn't a man of few words, but way too many.

"The A&P in Vegas," Marceline smarts off. "How about it?"

"I can get you butterflies to Hinkey's Jack N Jill in Hornsilver."

Marceline slides in. "Come on, Monarch." She pats the seat beside her.

Hornsilver is nowhere. We go to school there. Mosley is one of its pooper residents. So a part of me is glad to see someone we know, but the rest of me wish he were a stranger who doesn't know Lida, Nevada from any other pinprick on the map. I heave the suitcase into the bed of the truck so new it's empty except for a spare tire and shovel. The shovel has dirt on it. I wonder if he has buried something. I glance behind me at the tin roofs of Lida glinting in the sun. The tin is sharp and tries to slice my eyes.

"What are you waiting for? Thanksgiving Christmas Easter? Hop in." Mosley reaches over Marceline to give me a hand up.

Black curls over his ears like a sheep's. He wears a bandana around his neck. Its folds are beautiful like a cloudless sulfur forewing. He runs the tiniest pool hall in Esmeralda County, Mosley's Palace, an old assay office where they used to sell bogus mining claims. Once

he lived in Lida, and every couple of months comes to visit his grandmother. We don't know him that well anymore. He's missing his right arm. I never heard how he lost it, but it's cut off at his shoulder and he safety pins his flannel shirtsleeve against the stump. He's older, somewhere in the high desert between my age and Pop's. Monarch, Marceline, and Mosley. Triple M. Like we were meant to make a triangle.

"Monarch? I knew one of you was named after a butterfly, but I thought it was you," he winked at Marceline, "the one who looks like a butterfly." His blue eyes are bits of Nevada sky that got stuck in his head.

"She's Marceline, but go ahead and call me Moth," I say, after climbing in. "They're plainer."

"So, Moth, you'll go to Vegas today and be back for school on Monday," Mosley snickers, resting his left arm on the steering wheel, snickering like I've heard older people do all my life, pretending he knows something, that he's more than a spare tire and shovel. "Why don't you let me carry you hairstreaks to Mosley's Palace for a couple of pool games? My treat. I'll bring you home before nightfall."

Neither of us answers. We're preparing to migrate; we're our own flock of canyon wrens. His eyes graze over Marceline's teased platinum hair; her size 36C breasts half outside her sunsuit. He's gone on her. I hardly need to wear a bra so I don't have anything under my father's white shirt with the sleeves cuffed and tails out over my jeans.

"We don't have to be home at nightfall, Mosley. Mom threw me out." Marceline reaches for the radio volume. "Just take us to Hornsilver."

Finally, Mosley reaches across his lap to shift the pickup into gear, steering with his knee. He makes it look easy. The gears don't grind, but slip against each other like honeydews. From inside his pickup everything feels different. The passing land just scenery and not part of my own body. I pinch myself, roll the window down, and stare out at the junk cars upended in the ditch. We're off the line and moving, following the dry gulch, littered with mattresses and scrub boards, heading down Highway 266.

He keeps steering with his knee but when he has to reaches over Marceline who sits with the gearshift between her legs. "Marceline, I remember the last time you were in Hornsilver.

You and your Mom came into the Palace to use the bathroom. She's a hot tomato, I said to myself. A real spark plug. An atomic bomb."

I roll my eyes. He talks in sets of doubles and triples. No wonder he's single.

"Who, my mom?" Marceline says.

Mosley only chuckles.

Marceline's boozier mom Nancy staggers into my mind's eyes wearing her heels and red lips like she cut them out of her stomach and stuck them on her face. In school when we read about bad characters we have to point out their good parts because that's what makes them interesting. So when I think of Nancy, I search for her good parts. Last month she made Pop a sweet potato pie. That's a good part. Nancy loves to bake cookies but then she yells at Marceline for getting pimples.

"Well, does your Mom know about Vegas?" Mosley presses the question.

"Sure, she knows. She's a know-it-all. We're kicked out. We're on our own."

Mosley raises an eyebrow. "Fifteen year old girls on their own."

"We're seventeen. We fired our parents. Right, Monarch?"

"Righto, Marceline," I answer, pulling the visor down. The sun is at that place where it gets in your eyes. Like a chunk of quartz scraping through your lids.

Mosley scratches his lamb's wool head. He reaches on the dash for his wraparound sunglasses. "Monarch, I'm always meaning to look in on your dad. When I was a young coyote he used to let me drive his Harley. That man was on the stick. How is he?"

"Same," I mumble, wanting to look at the passing sagebrush, and keep an eye out for a kitfox. Leave me and Pop alone.

I'm a fire maiden on the 13th moon of Jupiter. I don't want to think about Pop in the recliner with *I Love Lucy* on the boob tube. I don't want him in my forehead; he takes up too much space, and he won't stay still. He's got to shake and fall down, he's got to itch and tingle, and pee himself. A VA doctor calls it multiple scleroses. Pop hates scleroses and shattered the mirror above the kitchen sink so he couldn't look at himself.

“You pretty much take care of him?” Mosley asks.

“Yup. Me and the government.”

Lately when I walked into the two rooms that used to be the miner Jack Capricorn’s cabin I walked in slow, never knowing what might jump or shriek at me. Pop let the creatures in. He thought he knew which ones needed protecting. Last night I heard a screech owl. Marceline once told me owls and other night-crying birds are disguised witches, and their cry is a sound of evil. After I heard the owl, a rosy finch flew in the open window. Birds in the house flap and fly into walls, they bring the wild inside, and you can’t catch your breath when the air is frightened. Pop let in dying birds, wrecked nutcrackers and purple martins, tanagers and mountain chickadees, their wings crooked, their heads twisted, eyes missing. He wrapped them in squares of silk cut from Mom’s underpants, and waited for them to wake up. More and more he reminded me of the winter wrens, the dead ones. His arms losing their muscle made angles; he drank his coffee from his spoon eating mainly breadcrumbs. Even his salami sandwiches he crumbled into his coffee. The stubble was fierce on Pop’s jaw. Like wires sprouting from his chin. I see myself bending over him; I make myself say, “I love you. I love your pale face with the brushy stubble. I’m a floating soft serve cone, and I’m going to cover your cheeks with ice cream. I’m going to make you a beard of clouds, and after I shave you, I’ll squeeze a lemon and rub the juice over your face.”

Last night while the owl hooted I shaved him. “It’d be easier if you had cancer, Pop,” I said, wishing as soon as it slid out that I could take it back.

Mosley has a heavy foot and we’re laying rubber down. “I figure your old man got sick with the death dust,” he says, not content to leave Pop in peace. “We’ve got lots of sick cows and sheep and goats. Whole herds the government burned. You know why? Their blood turned white.”

“Righto.” Marceline and I roll our eyes, the old death dust talk.

“You don’t believe in death dust?” Mosley reaches for the cigarette behind his ear, the one resting in the silky curls. He jimmies it into his mouth, sets a matchbook on his thigh, steers with his left knee, and strikes the match, all with his left hand. “Jack Vogt had a herd of cattle that got dust pneumonia, and then his wife Janine gave birth to a boy with a water head. The parents named him Smokey.” He draws the stream of smoke in, and then blows it out. “I personally saw a lamb born with the heart outside its body. That’s all because of these A-bombs

the government keeps exploding. They don't care if we all turn into x-rays. What a shame that only robots can live in this pretty country safely. ”

Righto again. Ditches are deep and go by in a blur. There's a shed roof that's fallen in, a Dutch door leading into a hump of lumber.

“Last time they tested the one called Climax. They brought in animals to see how they'd fare. Damn, if the sheep's wool didn't catch fire and the cattle's hide burn off their backs. I got sun poisoning on my face from the heat rays.”

I shrug, so what? We're downwinders and no-one gives a damn. We pass the abandoned Desert Queen Motel. People don't bother to board up buildings around here when they walk away. They leave them open for the ghosts. My nose aches. I've had nosebleeds all my life. We're all sick here.

It wasn't that far past dusk when Pop sat at the table and I loaded up his plate. He hardly touched anything. His cheeks dimpled when I lit his cigarette. I kept a coffee can with sand for him to drop his butts in. The young version of Pop on his Harley rose up, a wind-blown pompadour and leather jacket. Now the cigarette shook in his lips so I had to hold it there. “Pop,” I said, “You have to stop hiding your food. You need to eat it.” I kept finding stuff: a Velveeta cheese sandwich in the coffee can under the sand; oatmeal and raisins shoved in the recliner's creases; chipped beef and tips inside his pillow case. No wonder his wrists could hardly lift his hands.

I feel the pressure in my nose like my own breath is a road edge. We're on the outskirts of Hornsilver and I squeeze Marceline's arm telling her to say goodbye to that noodle Sam, to the town where we suffered junior high and high school. Here's where we'll part company from Mosley. Here's where we'll turn into birds.

Mosley sticks his arm out the window and raps the roof with his knuckles. “Damnit, how in the spotted sandpiper hell are you two going to live? Money doesn't grow in white clover.”

“I have green.” I flash the seventy-two dollars, money Pop got for his twitching legs. A lump forms in my throat and starts to swell from the size of a knuckle into a plum. I fold the bills and slip them into my transistor radio.

“Me too,” Marceline pipes up. “I packed Mom's green silk gown with rhinestones. The one with spigot straps she's way too big to fit into. In Vegas I'll have lots of places to wear it.”

She reaches into her clutch purse and takes out a lipstick holder and compact. I recognize it as her mom's prized possession, the compact's top crusted with amber rhinestones and seed pearls. She uses the mirror to smear a cool moonlight blue lipstick over her mouth. Her mom wouldn't have let that go if she'd been sober.

I hate lipstick, the same way I hate eyeliner and mascara. I think about my room with a real door that Pop gave me, not a clothesline and curtain like Marceline has. He made me a dressing table from a crate, and ruffled it in pink cancan.

"Hold this," Marceline says, nudging me.

I hold the mirror while she adds another streak of eyeliner to her top lids; the streak goes on next to her lashes and swoops up on the ends.

"Watch out Miss Nevada!" Mosley grins, his sky eyes twinkling. "You're as pretty as last night's lunar eclipse. Did you see it?"

"Nope," Marceline and I say almost at the same time.

But I'm lying. Last night after Pop finished his cigarette, he struggled to his feet and asked for his canes. He mentioned that he was low on cigarettes. His money was in the Big Chief baking soda. Tomorrow was soon enough. "Monarch, lets see some stars?" My transistor said we had a lunar eclipse on its way. Feet dragging and canes swinging, Pop made his way outside. "The moon has no light of its own," he said, his neck so twisted he could hardly bend it enough to look up. "That goes for human folks too." You could see the moon dimming, sinking into Earth's shadow. Pop smoked a cigarette, his coal, a firefly sparking the dark, and the moon, orange like the enormous cell spot of a monarch. How could the moon be a cold stupid place?

Mosley jerks the pickup's wheel making the turn into Hornsilver. I scowl at the regular houses with upstairs and downstairs and front porches where the stuck-ups live who look down on kids from Lida. The homes are white and yellow and pink, some with statuettes on their lawns that are raked clean of tumbleweeds. Mosley's Palace sits perpendicular to the Skelly. Its parking lot is practically filled by a red and white Fairlane that could have been spit-shined minutes ago.

"Look at that rod," Marceline slurs in her little voice. "What a screamer."

I let out a long low whistle.

“Mosley, you’re giving us the royal shaft,” Marceline says, flipping her hair over her shoulder, “by refusing to take us to Vegas. Maybe that Fairlane will.”

Shut up, Marceline, I want to say, I don’t trust Mosley to get us there. My gut tells me we’d have a better chance in the Fairlane. She keeps promising to buy him gas and a steak dinner, but it’s the Fairlane that changes his mind.

“Okay, shucksters, give me five bucks to fill up.” He grinds the gears when he backs up into the Skelly, his lips pressed into a straight line.

I fork over the five spot knowing Marceline never has money.

When we pass through Scotty’s Junction on Highway 95 we’re less than fifty miles from the test site, and just a hundred miles shy of Vegas. It feels like we’re kicking through the sands of a dry lake as we head up a long grade. The air is brittle and I keep trying to swallow spit to the back of my throat. A magpie circles overhead in a spell of black and white dizziness--its beak ready to rip through bones and fur. In the side mirror I glance back at the highway and still no cars. Should we tell Mosley about Megaton Nancy? He hasn’t asked where all the traffic is.

We cross into yellow sagebrush where the tumbleweeds chase each other. I’m wondering how long it will be before Marceline’s mom wakes from her hangover and puts on her gray leopard kimono and yells for her daughter to bring coffee. Getting no answer, she’ll light a cigarette and phone my place. Eventually she’ll walk over, carrying her own key for the times she bring groceries from Hornsilver, selling them higher to those in Lida who don’t have cars. She doesn’t have wheels either, but old Jim Gibbon does and he might as well be her chauffer. After pushing in she’ll hesitate, something about the stillness. Pop’s back will be facing her, because he’s still sitting at the table. Poor Pop, his feet look blue and at peace, but someone needs to clip his toenails.

Through the windshield the sun strikes my nose and I rest my head on my arm. Then I taste it, the slow steady ooze at the back of my throat.

Mosley’s lifts his boot from the accelerator and taps the brake. “Damn it, this doesn’t feel right, you two butterflies running. Your folks are going to be worried sick. What about your

dad, Monarch? My mind can't get around that," he says, but his voice sounds far away like he said those words miles ago and they're just now catching up.

Marceline curls her nose. "My mother is a drunk, Mosley."

"But she's cooking for Pop. It's all set," I say, wishing Mosley would shut up.

"That's right," she chimes in. "For a booze hound Mom's a great cook."

The blood tastes like the gardenia perfume Marceline's mom wears. My nasal membranes are scarred from all the past bleeding. I lean my head forward, blood flows from both nostrils onto my knees. Marceline's mom will feel the lunar eclipse that is happening inside the house, as she walks around the table, saying in her raspy voice, "It's just me Nancy. Don't let me scare you. I'm looking for the girls." Will she feel what I did this morning in my room? Something darkening? A dirtiness covering everything with sheen to it like the light was in hiding. Pop wasn't asleep in the recliner, instead he hunched over the table. I kissed the top of his head before I shuffled to the sink to throw water on my face.

Marceline's mom will smell the sour sweetness. The smell sets the pulse racing. She'll see the handle of the bread knife sticking out of his chest, blink, try rubbing her eyes but the knife will stay stuck, and then she'll probably see the second one.

"Oh, Jesus," I hear Marceline exclaim; opening her make up bag, taking out the Kleenex she blots her lips on. She thrusts it into my lap.

"Should I stop?" Mosley asks, alarmed. "Jeepers, keep the blood off the dash. "

Blood is trickling through my fingers.

"She does this all the time. Pretty soon she'll pinch it and make it stop."

This is the worst. I pinch the bridge of my nose for five minutes keeping the pressure on. The blood tries to push its way through the dam, a rockslide of blood, hot like a pickaxe is jabbing, blood watering desert marigolds.

I saw the knife handle first and tried to laugh, thinking Pop was holding the blade under his armpit to tease me. I opened the fridge and poured a jelly jar of Kool-Aid. "Pop, why didn't you lie down last night?" At first he didn't answer, and then he said, "Come here." His voice was choked back in his throat like an overflowing ashtray.

Mosley stops the truck in the highway, makes a fist with his one hand and pounds the steering wheel. "I'm going to turn this vehicle right around. This girl needs to go to a hospital."

"No, she doesn't." Marceline's knuckles go white even though she's trying to keep her hands relaxed. "Stop sweating it. Don't be a cube, Mosley, Monarch's okay."

"I knew this was wrong. But what kind of man would I be if I let you get in that Fairlane? I'm taking both of you home."

"No way," I say.

Marceline slips her hand on Mosley's jean leg. "Home is a boring place."

His blue eyes cloud over. He's having a cow. Didn't he notice Marceline's seed pearl compact, didn't he see my seventy-three dollars? Neither one of us is going home ever. No matter what I said when I read Marceline's palm. I hold the Kleenex under my nostrils until it becomes a ball of blood, and I let it fall onto the floor. Then I wipe my hand along the side of his seat. Like an aurora. Blood keeps flowing. I look into the windshield. The sun is stuck where the moon wants to hang, a dark, reddish-orange. The longest bleed I had lasted for fifty-three minutes. Marceline set an egg timer.

We're ten miles from the edge of the test site. Ravens take off, two thousand of them, flying toward Lida. Mallards and black-throated sparrows, wings fingering the currents, sharp-skinned hawk and pigit. They're picking me up, taking my arms and legs. I have to swallow.

"Poppa," I cried like it was the first and only word. "Poppa, Poppa." There were two knives in his chest; one only part way in, the other must have missed his heart and lungs. His dark eyes were open, shining. He'd written on a piece of three-hole notebook paper, *Monarch, I'm leaving the only way I can. Remember the government is kiling us. Don't bury me for a week--let my soul get free.* "Help," he moaned. Blood had wet the front of his flannel shirt until he wore a bib. I grabbed the kitchen towel. "Pop, I'll call the sheriff, I'll get Nancy." The nearest sheriff and hospital was thirty-five miles south, the nearest doctor in Hornsilver. "We'll get Jim Gibbon's car. We'll take you in."

"Push it," Pop said.

I drew a jerky breath. "I can't."

“For me,” he begged, “please.”

I remembered Pop when he was himself, riding me into the high desert on his bike where we'd collect cactus. Cactus Springs, Indian Springs, stopping to eat peanut butter and banana sandwiches. Pop teaching me the names of the birds. *Buteo swainsoni*. Swainson's Hawk. Telling me how cactus open their pores during the cooler parts of the night to breathe, making me a necklace of maroon cactus flowers. I wrapped the towel around the handle. “Pop, I'm your ice cream cone.” He moved his lips and I read them. “I love you too, Monarch.” My fingers gripped the handle. The rest of me was somewhere else. Then I did it.

Like a faucet switched off my nose stops bleeding.

The pickup is turning around. Mosley shifts into second gear before punching it.

Since he's made up his mind to return us to Lida, his lead foot sits on the gas pedal. Marceline reaches for her make-up case, her elbow works itself into my side.

I squeeze the door handle with my red hand. “Mosley, let me out. I have to throw up.”

“I keep a paper sack under the seat. Throw up all you like,” he snaps. There's a strange glint in his eyes like the one Marceline's mom carries in hers. “Here.”

I grab the sack; bury my head in it, gagging. Heading west instead of east feels like being sucked down a funnel, nothing to hang onto. I keep on retching.

Marceline's voice goes shrill. “Stop this damn truck.” She pats my back. “Mosley, can't you see she's going to choke? She's car sick.”

Mosley hesitates, lifts his foot off the gas, letting the pickup float, slowing on its own. I'm spitting up my nosebleed. When the pickup comes to a semi stop, my left hand reaches for my transistor, my right jerks open the passenger's door.

I tumble out.

In mid-fall I hear Marceline's mom's voice ringing. I remember how my knock echoed on the screen bringing Nancy to the door. Fumbling at the latch, she held their cat, a skinny gray female. Neither the cat nor Nancy looked very awake. She smiled at me. “It never stays clean around here.” Her eyes looked like mouths. I tried to duck them. She threw her words

over her shoulder. “Your friend is here, Miss Mess, but you’re not going anywhere. Not today not tomorrow. I bet Monarch does decent cleaning in her house.”

“I don’t,” I mumbled, thinking of Pop’s boxer shorts in a bucket of vinegar water.

“I bet you wash the fly screens.”

I said, “Nancy....” But I couldn’t form any more words.

“Did you come for your old man’s cigs?”

Shivers were rocking my body yet I noticed that Nancy wore a black Angora sweater and a skirt too tight for her. Her clothes weren’t fresh, and she probably had them on last night at Sparks Saloon where she went with old Jim Gibbons. “Well, don’t stand there with your mouth catching flies. Come in.”

She dropped the cat, straightened her shoulders, holding her arms at her sides like a man. Jim Gibbons sometimes swung his arms like that. I followed her into the two-room cabin, a bedroom-kitchen-living room combination and a bathroom. On the walls were calendar pictures of wild flowers and birds. They’d been there so long they’d curled. The cabin was the same size as my own but Pop had put knotty pine walls in ours and made real rooms. Nancy must have forgotten about the cigarettes. She pulled off her sweater and unzipped her skirt before stretching out on a daybed piled with pillows, her head almost hitting an end table.

I lifted the sheet that hung in the doorway to Marceline’s room. She perched on the edge of her rollaway, folding a pair of jeans into a suitcase. “I’m hitching to Vegas, want to come? If the bitch tries to stop me, I’ll kill her. If she’s passed out by the time I finish packing then she gets to live.” Marceline reached under the bed and pulled their cast iron frying pan out. “I made the bitch her macaroni and eggs for breakfast. Now listen to her.” She swung the skillet onto her lap. “Kiddo, your eyes look buggy, what’s wrong?”

Then I sat beside her and told her everything.

“To hell with hitching, we’ll steal old Jim Gibbon’s car,” Marceline said.

“Nah, we’ll take Pop’s Harley.”

“Sounds like fun.”

I lie face down in the dirt beside the highway, hugging the ground, tasting the minerals. There's the sound of an explosion. My head stops spinning. Tears come to my eyes for all of us downwinders, for people of the southwestern desert, for Pop and Marceline's Dad, for Esmeralda and Nye Counties, the square miles the government calls practically uninhabited. I lift up on my elbows although I'd prefer lying like a snake in the sun.

When Marceline leaps from the truck with her makeup case, Mosley lays on the horn. "Get back in the truck. This is nuts." He swerves the pickup onto the shoulder. "Marceline, I've got your suitcase. I'm not asking, I'm telling. Get back in."

"Big deal. You can take it back to Lida," she yells at Mosley, "but you sure as hell aren't taking us."

He climbs out of the cab, his one arm swinging, shirt billowing wind, the pointed toes of his boots, bayonets. Like we belong to him because we rode in his pickup, because he went a few hundred miles out of his way. "I'm going to have to call the sheriff to pick you underage girls up."

I climb to my feet, reach for Marceline's arm.

"Screw you, Mosley," she hisses. "I'll tell the sheriff you tried to kidnap us. Where's the frying pan when you need it, Monarch?"

We both laugh, high-pitched shrieks. And then we start into the desert. Mosley's words drift away, "Butterflies, I'm trying to help." His threats become pebbles. He gets back into his pickup, the spine and stick of the desert brush crackling under the truck's tires.

"Don't look back," Marceline yells.

The sky turns purple and green and the ground quakes and tries to throw us down. It keeps shaking but the desert doesn't fissure, and when I raise my hand to my face, my bones glow like a three-dimensional X-ray, orange and yellow. Marceline's face is an asteroid

"GOD!" I hear a scream and Mosley is ramming his pickup into and up out of the ditch and following us into the scrub. "They're frigging testing today! Jesus Christ, let's get out of here."

I can feel heat on my face. Physical science textbooks run tickertape through my brain. The nucleus is the mass of the atom, neutrons and protons bound together by strong nuclear forces, greater than the connection between parent and child, nucleus the positively charged core that has to be broken before anything can explode.

Marceline and I see the nucleus break; and neither of us is afraid. The detonation sucks the sagebrush into it and tumbleweeds roll towards the dust cloud, the blast wakes the sheep with their wool in flames, and the cows with their hide burning, and the lambs with their hearts beating outside their bodies. Poppa is here with me. He tells me there are coyotes that eat their elders. Places in the rock-face like jail cells to stow the sick ones. The fireball will purify. I see Pop's hand on mine, drawing it to the knife handle, please, Monarch, help me, and then I throw myself against it with all my strength, blood spurts, his mouth puckers, his hands go to his chest. His breath against my forehead, a last gust, and a white-winged dove. That was the true valley of fire. Pop shivering, his legs twitching like he was relaxing into sleep. I kissed his hands. It felt different than I thought it would. I kissed his knees. I was breathing, but not alive. I listened, half-expecting to hear the wail of the highway patrol or a mourning dove.

Marceline stays ahead of me leading the way. The yellow-white fireball named Nancy is billowing into a gigantic sunflower, out dazzling the sun higher and higher until I hear the names of the others. Nancy calling her children--Trinity, Romeo, Dakota, Annie, Mike, Teapot. The children are going to burn the sky and start the air on fire.

"GET IN DAMNIT," Mosley screams. He's right behind us steering the ice-blue pickup with the passenger's door swinging on its hinges. Probably the blast wants the door. "RADIATION, YOU IDIOTS!"

The truck creeps behind us, the chrome grill breathing down our necks. He's tied a white rag to his radio antennae. "YOU WIN," he shouts out the window. "I'll TAKE YOU TO VEGAS. GET IN."

Eighty degrees and a light snow starts to fall. So beautiful, so mighty like God is showing himself in the desert, snow drifting from a golden-stemmed cloud. I can feel the heat of the sand under my feet.

I catch up to Marceline and take her arm. "Come on, we better get out of here. The baby."

Her face glows and her eyes are so large their blackness pools out of their sockets. “In Vegas they have a cocktail called the Atomic Bomb and they drink it when they watch the explosions. Then they eat steak and gamble. There’s chandeliers everywhere even in the hotel rooms. You lie on the beds and let the light drip on you.”

Mosley honks. “IODINE EVERYWHERE. LET’S GO”

Marceline ignores the beeping, “You don’t touch the cards when someone’s playing blackjack, and in craps you never touch the shooter. You keep your mouth shut and don’t give advice. We’ll be staying at the Stardust, and when we get tired of there, the baby and Monarch and I will be at the Dunes, then the Flamingo, the Desert Inn, the Sahara, the Moulin Rouge.”

I didn’t argue with Marceline about what she planned for her mother, I was only half there, I was plunging down a tailings trough into a mine, sliding on my belly, faster and deeper into the blackness, flailing, grabbing for bits of graphite. I kept diminishing. I carried the suitcase past her mother while Marceline gripped the skillet. Lucky for Nancy she was snoring, wearing only her panties, and lying face down. Then her legs rigid as screwdrivers suddenly peddled. I froze. But she didn’t wake and Marceline explained it was how an alcoholic slept, full of fits and shivering. I loved Pop. Nothing could be worse than not being able to love your parent. “We’re splitting, Mom.” Marceline said, finding her mother’s purse and sticking her hand in for the lipstick compact. “And by the way you’re going to be a grandmother.”

There’s so much snow falling I want to make a snowball. I want to play in it. Right now plenty of sheep are dying. I imagine the sheep herds downwind, their lips blistered from eating the radioactive grass

I wave at Mosley, and then I shake Marceline. “We’re going now. The ride is waiting.”

“I kinda like it here, but we need to be in Vegas. When we’re eighteen we can marry anyone for five bucks, that is anyone no closer than a second cousin. We’ll tie the knot at a drive-through church where the justice-of-the peace wears roller skates.”

A rainbow forms in the sky. The sun trembles with a lavender blush. More snow flurries.

“We’re coming, Mosley,” she yells, her thumb sliding into her mouth.

We kick through hot snow on our way to the pickup. Today is still Saturday. I'm trying not to forget. Mosley is telling us to quick roll up the window, that he's driving us straight to a motel shower.

I reach over and brush the flakes from Marceline's cheek. They don't melt on my fingertips when we climb into the truck.