

The background of the entire image is a photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, there is a field of low-lying, scrubby vegetation. In the distance, there are several layers of brown, hazy mountains. The sky is a clear, bright blue, with a large, soft white cloud that drifts across the middle of the frame. Numerous small, white, rectangular pieces of confetti are scattered throughout the sky, appearing to fall from the top of the image.

CLAIRE VAYE

WATKINS

STORIES

BATTLEBORN

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Claire Vaye Watkins

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

for my parents

In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said, "Is it good, friend?"
"It is bitter—bitter," he answered;

"But I like it
Because it is bitter,
And because it is my heart."

STEPHEN CRANE

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Acknowledgments

GHOSTS, COWBOYS

The day my mom checked out, Razor Blade Baby moved in. At the end, I can't stop thinking about beginnings.

The city of Reno, Nevada, was founded in 1859 when Charles Fuller built a log toll bridge across the Truckee River and charged prospectors to haul their Comstock silver across the narrow but swift-moving current. Two years later, Fuller sold the bridge to the ambitious Myron Lake. Lake, swift himself, added a gristmill, kiln and livery stable to his Silver Queen Hotel and Eating House. Not a bashful man, he named the community Lake's Crossing, had the name painted on Fuller's bridge, bright blue as the sky.

The 1860s were boom times in the western Utah Territory: Americans still had the brackish taste of Sutter's soil on their tongues, ten-year-old gold still glinting in their eyes. The curse of the Comstock Lode had not yet leaked from the silver vein, not seeped into the water table. The silver itself had not yet been stripped from the mountains, and steaming water had not yet flooded the mine shafts. Henry T. P. Comstock—most opportune of the opportunists, snatcher of land, greatest claim jumper of all time—had not yet lost his love Adelaide, his first cousin, who drowned in Lake Tahoe. He had not yet traded his share of the lode for a bottle of whiskey and an old, blind mare, not yet blown his brains out with a borrowed revolver near Bozeman, Montana.

Boom times.

Lake's Crossing grew. At statehood in 1864, the district of Lake's Crossing, Washoe County, was consolidated with Roop County. By then, Lake's Crossing was the largest city in either. The curse, excavated from the silver vein and weighted by the heavy ore, settled on the nation's newest free state.

• • •

Or begin the story here:

In 1881 Himmel Green, an architect, came to Reno from San Francisco to quietly divorce Mary Ann Cohen Magnin of the upscale women's clothing store I. Magnin and Company. Himmel took a liking to Reno and decided to stay. He started designing buildings for his friends, newly rich silver families.

Reno's Newlands Heights neighborhood is choked with Green's work. In 1909, 315 Lake Street was erected. A stout building made of brick, it was one of Himmel's first residential buildings, a modest design, small porch off the back, simple awnings, thoroughly mediocre in every way. Some say construction at 315 Lake stirred up the cursed dust of the Comstock Lode. Though it contaminated everyone (and though we Nevadans still breathe it into ourselves today), they say it got to Himmel particularly, stuck to his blueprints, his clothing, formed a microscopic layer of silver dust on his

skin. Glinting silver film or no, after his divorce was finalized Himmel moved in with Leopold Karpeles, editor of the *B'nai B'rith Messenger*. Their relationship was rumored a tumultuous one, mottled with abuse and infidelity. Still, they lived together until 1932, when the two were burned to death in a fire at Karpeles's home, smoke rising from the house smelling like those miners boiled alive up in Virginia City mine shafts.

• • •

O r here. Here is as good a place as any:

In March 1941, George Spahn, a dairyman and amateur beekeeper from Pennsylvania, signed over the deed to his sixty-acre farm to his son, Henry, packed four suitcases, his wife, Helen, and their old, foul-tempered calico cat, Bottles, into the car, and drove west to California, to the ocean.

He was to retire, bow out of the ranching business, bury his tired feet in the warm Western sand. But retirement didn't suit George. After two months he came home to their ticky-tacky rental on the beach and presented Helen with plans to buy a 511-acre ranch at 1200 Santa Susana Pass Road in the Santa Susana Mountains. The ranch was up for sale by its owner, the aging silent-film star William S. Hart.

The Santa Susana Mountains are drier than the more picturesque Santa Monica Mountains that line the California coast. Because they are not privy to the moist winds rolling in off the sea, they are susceptible to fires. Twelve hundred Santa Susana Pass Road is tucked up in the Santa Susanas north of Los Angeles, off what is now called the Ronald Reagan Freeway. Back in 1941, when George was persuading Helen to move again, taking her knobby hand in his, begging her to uproot the tendrils she'd so far managed to anchor into the loose beige sand of Manhattan Beach—*Just a bit east this time, sweet pea*—the city of Chatsworth was little more than a Baptist church, a dirt-clogged filling station, and the Palomino Horse Association's main stables, birthplace of Mr. Ed. Years later, in 1961, my father, still a boy, would start a wildfire in the hills above the PHA stables. He would be eleven, crouched in the dry brush, sneaking a cigarette. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

At the heart of the ranch was a movie set, a thoroughfare of a Western boomtown: bank, saloon, blacksmith, wood-planked boardwalk, side streets and alleys, a jail. Perhaps the set dazzled Helen. Perhaps she—a prematurely arthritic woman—recalled the aching cold of Pennsylvania winters. Perhaps she spoiled her husband, as her children claim. Whatever the reason, Helen laid her hand on her husband's brow and said, "All right, George." And though by all accounts Helen came to like the ranch, on the day George took her out to view the property for the first time her journal reads:

The property is quite expansive, surrounded by mountains. G. giddy as a boy. Not such a view as the beach, though. The road out is windy and narrow, sheer canyon walls on either side. Seems I am to be once again separated from the sea. And what a brief affair it was! Looking west I felt a twinge like something had been taken from me, something a part of me but never truly mine.

Within a week of the Spahns' move up to 1200 Santa Susana Pass Road, Bottles the cat ran away.

But George was more adaptable than Bottles, and luckier. In 1941, Westerns were still Hollywood's bread and butter. George ran his movie set like he'd run his dairy ranch, building strong relationships with decision makers, underpricing the competition. It certainly didn't hurt business when Malibu Bluff State Recreation Area annexed Trancas Canyon and sold off its many sets, making Spahn's Ranch the only privately owned—and therefore zero-permit—outdoor set for seventy-five miles. The Spahns enjoyed a steady stream of business from the major studios, charging them a pretty penny to rent horses and shoot films at the ranch, among them *High Noon*, *The Comstock Boys*, and David O. Selznick's 1946 classic *Duel in the Sun*, starring Gregory Peck. TV shows were also shot at the ranch, including most episodes of *The Lone Ranger* and—before Warner Brothers, coaxed by Nevada's tax incentives and the habits of its big-name directors, moved production to the Ponderosa Ranch at Lake Tahoe—*Bonanza*.

• • •

We might start at my mother's first memory:

It's 1962. She is three. She sits on her stepfather's lap on a plastic lawn chair on the roof of their trailer. Her older brother and sister sit cross-legged on a bath towel they've laid atop the chintzy two-tab roof, the terry cloth dimpling their skin. They each wear a pair of their mother's—my grandmother's—oversize Jackie O. sunglasses. It is dusk; in the eastern sky stars are coming into view—yes, back then you could still see stars over Las Vegas—but the family faces northwest, as do their neighbors and the teenage boys hired to cut and water the grass at the new golf courses and the city bus drivers who have pulled over to the side of the roads and the tourists up in their hotel rooms with their faces pressed to the windows. As does the whole city.

Their stepfather points to the desert. "There," he says. A flash of light across the basin. An orange mushroom cloud erupts, rolling and boiling. Seconds later, she hears the *boom* of it, like a firework, and the trailer begins to sway. Impossibly, the heat warms my mother's face. "Makes you think," her stepfather says softly in her ear. "Maybe there's something godly out there after all."

The blast is a 104-kiloton nuclear explosion. It blows a hole into the desert rock, creating the deepest crater of all the Nevada Test Site's 1,021 detonations: 320 feet deep. The crater displaces seven hundred tons of dirt and rock, including two tons of sediment from a vein of H. T. P. Comstock's cursed soil, a finger reaching all the way down the state, now blown sky-high in the blast. The July breeze is gentle, indecisive. It blows the radiation northeast, as it always does, to future cancer clusters in Fallon and Cedar City, Utah, to the mitosing cells of small-town downwinders. But today it also blows the curse southeast, toward Las Vegas, to my mother's small chest, her lungs and her heart. And it blows southwest, across the state line, all the way to the dry yellow mountains above Los Angeles. These particles settle, finally, at 1200 Santa Susana Pass Road.

• • •

We might start with George's longest year:

For nearly twenty years, George's letters to his son, Henry, back home in Pennsylvania were characteristically dry, questions about herd count, tips for working the swarm at honey harvest; he hardly mentioned his own ranch, which to his son would not have seemed a ranch at all.

But by the early 1960s the demand for Westerns began to wane and George Spahn blamed, among others, Alfred Hitchcock. He increasingly ended his notes about farm business with aggravated rants about "cut-'em-ups," and "sex-crazed" moviegoers' fixation on horror films, probably meaning Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the second-highest-grossing film of 1960, after *Swiss Family Robinson*. On the first day of February 1966, George Spahn filed for bankruptcy. By then, unbeknownst to George, his wife's kidneys were marbled with tumors. Six weeks later, at UCLA Medical Center, Helen died from renal failure on the same floor where my father would die thirty-four years later. The coroner's report noted that her tumors were visible, and in the glaring light of the microscope seemed "like hundreds of hairlike silver ribbons."

After Helen's death, George neglected the few already tenuous ties he had at the big studios. He wrote Henry often, spoke of the ranch deteriorating, of weeds pushing up through the soil in the corrals.

"I'm tired," he wrote to his son on July 23, 1966. "Let most everyone [three part-time ranch hands] go. It is hot here. So hot I have to wait for dusk to feed the horses. They get impatient down in the stalls and kick the empty troughs over. Boy, you wouldn't believe the noise of their hoofs against the metal . . ."

In the end it was the horses, thirsty or not, that kept Spahn's Ranch afloat. Spahn rented the horses to tourists for self-guided rides through the hills. Occasionally, a few of George's old studio friends would throw business his way, sending for six or eight paints when a scene couldn't have needed more than two. And so the horses became George's main source of income, meager as it was. The Los Angeles County tax records show Spahn's annual income in 1967 to be \$13,120, less than a quarter of what it was in 1956.

In previous letters, George rarely wrote of Helen. When he did his lines were terse, referring to her only along with other ranch business: "Storm coming in. Your mother's knuckles would have swelled. Lord knows we need the rain."

That year, George continued to write even as his eyesight failed, his lines sometimes piling atop one another. He began to write of Helen more frequently, sometimes devoting an entire page to her blackberry cobbler or the fragrance of her bath talcum. These are the only letters in which George, otherwise a deliberate and correct writer, slips into the present tense.

In September, George reported discovering a tiny bleached skull in the hills above his cabin. "Bottles," he wrote, "picked clean by coyotes."

• • •

Or here. Begin here:

When a group of about ten young people—most of them teenagers, one of them

my father—arrived at the ranch in January of 1968, having hitchhiked from San Francisco, George was nearly blind. Surely he smelled them, though, as they approached his porch—sweat, gasoline, the thick semisweet guff of marijuana. The group offered to help George with chores and maintenance in exchange for permission to camp out in the empty façaded set buildings. Though he'd broken down and hired a hand a couple weeks earlier—a nice kid, a bit macho, went by “Shorty,” wanted to be, what else?, an actor—George agreed, perhaps because he wouldn't have to pay them. Or perhaps because the group's leader—a man named Charlie—offered to leave a young girl or two with George twenty-four-seven, to cook his meals, tidy the house, keep up with the laundry, and bed him whenever he wanted.

My father didn't kill anyone. And he's not a hero. It isn't that kind of story.

Nearly everyone who spent time at Spahn's that summer wrote a book after it was over, Bugliosi's only the most lucrative. We know, from the books of those who noticed, that a baby was born at Spahn's Ranch, likely April ninth, though accounts vary. In her version, Olivia Hall, who'd been a senior at Pacific Palisades High School and an occasional participant in group sex at the ranch, wrote of the birth: “The mother, splayed out on the wood floor of the jail, struggled in labor for nearly fourteen hours, through the night and into the early morning, then gave up.” In *The Manson Murders: One Woman's Escape*, Carla Shapiro, now a mother of four boys, says the struggling girl “let her head roll back onto a sleeping bag and would not push. Then Manson took over.” My father's book reads, “Charlie held a cigarette lighter under a razor blade until the blade was hot and sliced the girl from vagina to anus.” The baby girl slipped out, wailing, into Charlie's arms. My father: “The place was a mess. Blood and clothes everywhere. I don't know where he found the razor blade.”

Charlie had a rule against couples. The group had nightly orgies at the ranch and before it in Topanga, Santa Barbara, Big Sur, Santa Cruz, Monterey, Oakland, San Francisco, the list goes on. You know this part, I'm sure. The drugs, the sex. People came and went. Tracing the child's paternity was impossible, even if the group had been interested in that sort of thing. “There was a birth, I know that,” Tex Watson wrote to me from prison. “Hell, might've been mine. But we were all pretty gone, you know?”

Of the mother, the accounts mention only how young she was. No name, no explanation of how she came to the ranch. One calls her “dew-faced.” In his account my father admits to having sex with her on several occasions. He says, “She was a good kid.”

After police raided Spahn's on August sixteenth, California Child Protective Services placed the baby with foster parents, Al and Vaye Orlando of Orlando's Furniture Warehouse in Thousand Oaks. Vaye constantly fussed over the baby, worried at her calmness, what she called “a blankness in her face.” During the child's first five years, Vaye had her examined for autism seven times, never trusting the results. She even hired a special nanny to play games with the child, encourage her cognitive development. Al thought this a waste of money.

Now the baby is a grown woman, forty. She is slender but not slight, and moves like liquid does. She has dark hair and the small brown eyes of a deer mouse. Not the eyes of those teenage girls my father met at Pali, the ones he invited to Spahn's and introduced to Charlie, the ones, later, with crosses cut into their foreheads, arms

linked, singing down hallways, smiling into the camera in archived footage. I've looked. These are my father's brown eyes. Mine.

. . .

Ten years ago, Lake Street—the last surviving vanity landmark of poor Myron Lake, site of Reno's original iconic arch (you know it, *Biggest Little City in the World*)—was lined with slums: dumpy neglected mansions with fire escapes grafted to their sides, bedsheets covering the windows, most of them halfway houses. But soon people were calling Lake Street and the surrounding neighborhood Newlands Heights. Op-ed columns parleyed on the topic of redevelopment. Three Fifteen Lake was converted from the single-family mansion envisioned by Himmel Green to six one- and two-bedroom apartments in 2001, one of the last to go. By then, Newlands Heights (named, of course, for Francis G. Newlands, Nevada senator, prudent annexer of Hawaii, irrigator of the American West, and great civilizer of savages) was lined with post-Comstock Lode Colonials and Victorians, their lavish parlors and sunrooms partitioned into open studio apartments and condos with hardwood floors. They've even torn down the original arch—it attracted vagrants and teenagers, they said. I was assured, back when things like this meant anything to me, that the city was erecting a replica, in neon, across Virginia Street, closer to the big casinos.

These days, they say Newlands Heights is worth quite a bit, and for all my bitching about gentrification, I don't mind this. A person feels just as guilty living among the poor as she does living among the rich, but at least you can be angry at the rich. I can afford to live at 315 Lake only because the landlords, Ben and Gloria (nice people, Burners turned bourgeois, role models to us all) hired my boyfriend—ex-boyfriend—J to do the cabinetwork on the building. J ended up, as he does with so many of his business associates, smoking a bunch of pot with Ben. J considers marijuana the universal ambassador of goodwill, and himself its humble steward. Gloria was pregnant and Ben was desperate, pouring money into a building with no tenants. One afternoon, J and Ben sat on a pallet of bathroom tiles passing a joint between them, and J persuaded Ben to give me a deal on the only unit they'd finished, a studio on the first floor, number two. It was probably the last nice thing I let him do before he left.

I lived through nine months of construction noise and paint smells, the rest of the building a hollow skeleton. Once, I heard someone working in the unit right above me and went up there to see who it was. I was thinking if it was Ben I'd give him my rent check, see if he had any weed I could buy off him, or that he'd just give me. But it was Gloria, standing in a room painted a crisp robin's-egg blue, splotches of the paint on her hands and overalls, speckles in her blond hair. Clear plastic drop cloths billowed in the breeze from the open windows. She rested her hands on her globe of a belly and turned to me. I saw then that the room wasn't entirely painted. In front of her was a patch of wall the size of a playing card, dingy beige.

"I found it when we scraped the wallpaper," she said, her eyes teared up with sadness or paint fumes or both. She had a paintbrush in her right hand. "I've been avoiding this spot for a week." I bent to examine the patch of bare wall and saw there, scrawled in charcoal or heavy carpenter's pencil,

H. loves Leo, 1909.

“How can I do this?” said Gloria. And she said it again as she slopped a stripe of blue over the writing.

This was just before my mom died. Before Razor Blade Baby moved in. I didn’t know what to say. Now I know better. I see Gloria in the yard, and I’d like to give her an answer. She’s had her baby and puts a playpen under the willow tree and sings over to the girl while she gardens. She named her Marigold. I’d like to say: You do it because you have to. We all do.

And here we are.

The day my mom checked out, Razor Blade Baby moved in. Upstairs. Number four. Right above me. We are neighbors at 315 Lake Street, Newlands Heights, Reno, Nevada. That first day I heard the floorboards above my bed creak, then the hall stairs. When I opened the door, Razor Blade Baby invited me to see a three-dollar matinee at the old Hilton Theatre. Though I like their popcorn (stale and fluorescent yellow, salty enough to erode a gully in the roof of your mouth) and their hot dogs (all beef), I said what I would say every Sunday: No. No, thank you. I closed the door, and she sat on the stairs as she would every Sunday. She stayed there all day.

My father, Paul Watkins, met Charles Manson at a house party in San Francisco eleven months before Razor Blade Baby was born. He and Charlie wrote songs together and camped around the bay until December, when they set out for L.A., bored with the city, sick of the rain. Paul was eighteen and handsome. Or so my mother would tell me later.

At Spahn’s, Paul moved his things into the old jail set: a sleeping bag, candles, his guitar and flute. He looked younger than his age, young enough to enroll himself in Pacific Palisades High School, though he’d already graduated the previous spring, a year early. He would become fond of pointing this out in interviews. (To Maureen Reagan on *Larry King Live*, August 23, 1987: “We were bright kids, Maureen. Not delinquents. I was the class president.” Larry was out sick.) Paul went to Pali, home of the Dolphins, for two months to meet girls and bring them back to the ranch. He was good at it.

Years later, well after he was finally swallowed up by Hodgkin’s disease, my mother, after one of her attempts to join him, wherever he was, called my father “Charlie’s number one procurer of young girls.” I couldn’t tell whether she was ashamed or proud of him.

She also said, lying on her bed at University Medical Center, bandages on her wrists where she’d taken a steak knife to them, “When you go, all that matters is who’s there with you. Believe me. I’ve been close enough enough times to know.”

About once a year someone tracks me down. Occasionally it’s one of Charlie’s fans wanting to stand next to Paul Watkins’s daughter, to rub up against all that’s left, to put a picture up on his red-text-on-black-background website. Far more often, though, it’s someone with a script. Producers, usually legit ones—I Google them: *True Lies*, *The Deer Hunter*. They offer to drive down from Lake Tahoe, take me out to dinner. They never want my permission to make their movie or input on who should play me (Winona Ryder); they just want to know how am I.

“How are you?” they say.

“I’m a receptionist,” I say.

“Good,” they say, long and slow, nodding as though my being a receptionist has given them everything they came for.

The day after Razor Blade Baby moved in, I rode my bike across the Truckee River to work. Razor Blade Baby followed, wearing a blazer, trailing behind me on a violet beach cruiser with a wicker basket, her long hair flapping behind her as though tugged by a hundred tiny kites. She followed me up the courthouse steps and sat in the lobby in front of my desk. She stayed there until lunch, when we sat on a bench beside the river, me eating a burrito from the cart, her dipping celery sticks into a Tupperware dish of tuna salad made with plain yogurt instead of mayonnaise. After lunch I went back to work, she back to the lobby. At five we rode home.

Some days she brings a roll of quarters and plugs the parking meters in front of the building. Others she crosses the street and browses the souvenir shops. I watch her from my office window, through the shop’s glass front, running her fingers along the carousels of T-shirts. When the sun is very hot she simply sits on the courthouse’s marble steps, drinking a cherry Slurpee, her palm pressed to the warm rock.

Some weekends I go out, and Razor Blade Baby comes along. One night, about three months after she moved in, I went to a dinner party to celebrate a friend’s new condo, built high up in the hollowed-out bones of the renovated Flamingo. A row of one-legged bird silhouettes was still left on the building’s façade.

It was a fine party, good food. I wore a poufy emerald green cocktail dress with pink flats, a pink ribbon in my hair. My friends, trying their very best for normalcy, sometimes pointed across the room and asked, “Claire, sweetheart, did you bring your auntie? You look just like her.”

“Oh, no,” I would say, swallowing the last bit of prosciutto or salmon dip or whatever it was. “That’s Razor Blade Baby. She goes everywhere with me.”

That night Razor Blade Baby and I left the party and started our walk back to 315 Lake. It had been raining heavily up in the Sierras for two days straight, and the Truckee was raging—the highest I’d ever seen it. The water was milky and opaque, and in it tumbled massive logs that had probably lain on the river’s bed unmoved for years. Across the bridge two concrete stumps with rebar worming out the tops stood on either side of the street like sentinels, all that was left of the original arch. We stood there for a long while, Razor Blade Baby and I, sort of hypnotized with the high water thrashing by, not sure whether it was safe to cross or what we’d do when we reached the other side. I imagined taking very small steps down the wet, slippery bank and wading into the current, my pockets weighed down with silver.

At home I got stoned and thought—as I often do after tracing my fingers over the frosted glass of my cabinets, my butcher-block countertops, sanded and varnished by his hands, all that’s left of him, in my life anyway—of calling J. But I was no more capable of giving him what he needed than I was the day he left.

I didn’t call. Instead I smoked myself deeper into oblivion and watched my hot breath billow at the ceiling, Razor Blade Baby no doubt on the other side, and fell asleep.

• • •

believe I fell in love with one of them, these producers. He e-mailed me, said his name was Andrew, that he wanted to have dinner and talk about a film he wanted to make about my father, about how he was Charlie's number two in charge (true), how he came to live in an abandoned shack in the desert (true), how he got sober and testified against Charlie, then fell off the wagon again, blacked out, and woke up in a van, on fire (mostly true). I agreed to let him buy me dinner, as it is almost always my principle to do.

I met Andrew at Louis' Basque Corner on Fourth Street. Razor Blade Baby came along. I take all the movie guys to Louis', or I used to before Andrew. Now I take them to Miguel's off Mount Rose, also very tasty.

"What's good here?" he said. He had an easy, loose smile.

"Picon Punch," I said. "If you come here and don't order the Picon Punch, you didn't really come here." This was my bit. My Picon Punch bit.

Picon Punch is the deep brown of leather oil. Only the Basques know what's in it, but we all have a theory—rum, licorice root and gin; top-shelf rye with club soda and three drops of vanilla extract; well vodka, gin and a splash of apple juice; Seagram's, scotch and a ground-up Ricola cough drop—all theories equally plausible, none of them the truth. One Picon Punch will make you buy another. Two is too many. That night we had three each.

For dinner we ordered the sweetbreads and two Winne-mucca coffees and ate at the bar playing video poker, Deuces Wild. Razor Blade Baby played Ms. Pac-Man in the back.

We talked quietly, closely. Every once in a while Razor Blade Baby floated over and stood at my elbow. I did my best to shoo her away. I gave her another roll of quarters and found myself leaning into Andrew. He smelled of strong stinging cinnamon, like a smoker who tried hard to hide it.

A casino can make an average man lovely. The lights are dim, the ceiling low and mirrored. The machines light his face from below in a soft sweet blue. As they turn to reveal themselves on the screen, the electric playing cards reflect in his eyes as quick glints of light. The dense curtain of cigarette smoke filters the place fuzzy, as if what the two of you do there isn't actually happening. As if it were already in the past. As if your life wasn't a life but an old nostalgic movie. *Duel in the Sun*, perhaps. You don't want to know what a casino can do to a man already lovely.

It wasn't long before we were turned facing each other, and my right leg, dangling off my stool, found its way between his legs, nestled into his groin. We finished off the sweetbreads with our hands, sopping the small sinewy pieces of young lamb glands in onion sauce.

He asked about my father. I wanted to tell him what I told you, but that's nothing that can't be found in a book, a diary, a newspaper, a coroner's report. And there is still so much I'll never know, no matter how much history I weigh upon myself. I can tell you the shape of the stain left by H. T. P. Comstock's brain matter on the wooden walls of his cabin, but not whether he tasted the sour of the curse in his mouth just before he pulled the trigger. I can tell you the backward slant of Himmel Green's left-handed cursive, but not whether Leo loved him back. I can tell you of the silver gleam of Helen Spahn's tumors, but not whether she felt them growing inside her. I can tell you of the view from George's front porch, of the wide yellow valley below, but not what

he saw after he went blind. I can tell you the things my father said to lure the Manson girls back to Spahn's Ranch, but I can't say whether he believed them. I can tell you the length and width and number of the cuts on my mother's wrists, and the colors her skin turned as they healed, but I couldn't say whether she would do it again, or when. Everything I can say about what it means to lose, what it means to do without, the inadequate weight of the past, you already know.

But the whiskey in our coffees was doing its job. I was feeling loose. So I told him what I could. I told him of the heavy earth scent after a desert rain, three or four times a year. That it smelled like the breathing of every thankful desert plant, every plot of soil, every unfound scrap of silver. That it had a way of softening you, of making you vulnerable. That it could redeem.

After dinner we watched Razor Blade Baby until she killed off her last life. Andrew walked us out to our bikes and helped us unchain them. He kissed me then, or rather we kissed each other, right in front of Razor Blade Baby. It was an inevitable kiss. A kiss like I had caught the hem of my skirt on the seat of my bike while trying to mount it, and toppled. A kiss like we had fallen into each other, which I suppose we had.

Afterward, Razor Blade Baby and I rode home to 315 Lake, headlights lighting us from behind. When I closed my front door, my cell phone rang.

"Come outside." It was Andrew, his voice breathy, sweetly slurred.

"What?"

My doorbell buzzed. I pulled the curtain of my living room window aside, saw him swaying slightly on the porch, glowing phone pressed to his ear.

"Or come and live with me," he said.

"You're drunk," I said.

"So are you. Let me in. We'll move to L.A., down by the ocean. You can ride your bike up and down the coast. Or forget L.A., we can live here, in the mountains. In the desert. Whatever this is. That thing you said about the rain. You and me, Claire. Just let me in."

And I wanted to let him in. It wasn't that I didn't want to. I was swaying now and reached for the wall to steady myself, trying to stop the swirl of Picon in my head, my chest. Tried not to think of the words written there under the paint. *When you go, all that matters is who's there with you. Believe me.* I rested my head against the front door and wanted badly to open it. But the story was too much, wherever I began: the borrowed revolver on the floor of a cabin near Bozeman, Montana. The sweet sizzle of Himmel Green's skin as it melted into Leopold's. Helen Spahn's withering uprooted tendrils. Bottles's dry bleached bones. My parents' own toxic and silver-gilded love. Razor Blade Baby, the simple fact of her.

"Good night, Andy," I said. "Please don't call me again."

When I hung up, I heard the sound I had already come to know: a quick creak in the floorboards above me. Razor Blade Baby's body shifting. The unpressing of her ear from the floor.

. . .

hen Razor Blade Baby came to my door the next morning—this morning—I did not

say, No. No, thank you. We rode our bicycles to the old Hilton Theatre, down Lake Street. Her hair flapped behind her as though lifted by George Spahn's Pennsylvanian swarm.

I bought a hot dog before the matinee from the concession stand. I covered it with mustard, onions, kraut, jalapeños. Razor Blade Baby nervously fingered a Ziploc bag of peeled carrot sticks hidden in her purse.

Here in the theater I know I ought to try, ought to carry that weight, ought to paint over the past. But I can only do my best. I hold my hot dog near her face. "Want a bite, Razor Blade Baby?"

"Claire," she says. "I could be your sister."

And though we have known this since she moved in—well before—this is the first time either of us has said it aloud. And I admit now, it sounds softer than it felt. There is something thankful in the saying.

I nod. "Half sister."

The lights in the theater dim. Technicolor figures—ghosts, cowboys, Gregory Peck—move across the screen. In *Duel in the Sun* Pearl Chavez asks, "Oh, Vashti, why are you so slow?"

"I don't rightly know, Miss Pearl, except I always have so much to remember."

THE LAST THING WE NEED

July 28

Duane Moser
4077 Pincay Drive
Henderson, Nevada 89015

Dear Mr. Moser,

On the afternoon of June 25, while on my last outing to Rhyolite, I was driving down Cane Springs Road some ten miles outside Beatty and happened upon what looked to be the debris left over from an auto accident. I got out of my truck and took a look around. The valley was bone dry. A hot west wind took the puffs of dust from where I stepped and curled them away like ash. Near the wash I found broken glass, deep gouges in the dirt running off the side of the road and an array of freshly bought groceries tumbled among the creosote. Coke cans (some full, some open and empty, some with the tab intact but dented and half-full and leaking). Bud Light cans in the same shape as the Coke. Fritos. Meat. Et cetera. Of particular interest to me were the two almost-full prescriptions that had been filled at the pharmacy in Tonopah only three days before, and a sealed Ziploc bag full of letters signed *M*. I also took notice of a bundle of photos of an old car, part primer, part rust, that I presume was or is going to be restored. The car was a Chevy Chevelle, a '66, I believe. I once knew a man who drove a Chevelle. Both medications had bright yellow stickers on their sides warning against drinking alcohol while taking them. Enter the Bud Light, and the gouges in the dirt, possibly. I copied your address off the prescription bottles. What happened out there? Where is your car? Why were the medications, food and other supplies left behind? Who are you, Duane Moser? What were you looking for out at Rhyolite?

I hope this letter finds you, and finds you well. Please write back.

Truly,

Thomas Grey
P.O. Box 1230
Verdi, Nevada 89439

P.S. I left most of the debris in the desert, save for the medications, pictures and letters from M. I also took the plastic grocery bags, which I untangled from the bushes and recycled on my way through Reno. It didn't feel right to just leave them out there.

—

August 16

Duane Moser
4077 Pincay Drive
Henderson, Nevada 89015

Dear Mr. Moser,

This morning as I fed the horses, clouds were just beginning to slide down the slope of the Sierras, and I was reminded once again of Rhyolite. When I came inside I borrowed my father's old copy of the *Physician's Desk Reference* from his room. From that book I have gathered that before driving out to Rhyolite you may have been feeling out of control, alone or hopeless. You were possibly in a state of extreme depression; perhaps you were even considering hurting yourself. Judging by the date the prescriptions were filled and the number of pills left in the bottles—which I have counted, sitting out in the fields atop a tractor that I let sputter and die, eating the sandwich my wife fixed me for lunch—you had not been taking the medications long enough for them to counteract your possible feelings of despair. “Despair,” “depression,” “hopeless,” “alone.” These are the words of the *PDR*, forty-first edition, which I returned to my father promptly, as per his request. My father can be difficult. He spends his days shut up in his room, reading old crime novels populated by dames and Negroes, or watching the TV we bought him with the volume up too high. Some days he refuses to eat. Duane Moser, my father never thought he would live this long.

I think there will be lightning tonight; the air has that feel. Please, write back.

Truly,
Thomas Grey
P.O. Box 1230
Verdi, Nevada 89439

September 1

Duane Moser
4077 Pincay Drive
Henderson, Nevada 89015

Dear Mr. Moser,

I slept terribly last night, dreamed dreams not easily identified as such. Had I told my wife about them, she might have given me a small quartz crystal or amethyst and insisted I carry it around in my pocket all day, to cleanse my mind and spirit. She comes from California. Here is a story she likes to tell. On one of our first dates, we walked arm in arm around downtown Reno, where she was a clerk at a grocery store and I was a student of agriculture and business. There she tried to pull me down a little flight of steps to the red-lit underground residence of a palm reader and psychic. I declined. Damn near an hour she pulled on me, saying what was I afraid of, asking what was the big deal. I am not a religious man but, as I told her then, there are some things I'd rather not fuck with. Now she likes to say it's a good thing I wouldn't go in, because if that psychic had told her she'd be stuck with me for going on fourteen years now, she would have turned and headed for the hills. Ha! And I say, Honey, not as fast as I would've, ha, ha! This is our old joke. Like all our memories, we like to take it out once in a while and lay it flat on the kitchen table, the way my wife does with her sewing patterns, where we line up the shape of our life against that which we thought it would be by now.

I'll tell you what I don't tell her, that there is something shameful in this, the buoying of our sinking spirits with old stories.

I imagine you a man alone, Duane Moser, with no one asking after your dreams in the morning, no one slipping healing rocks into your pockets. A bachelor. It was the Fritos, finally, which reminded me of the gas station in Beatty where I worked when I was in high school and where I knew a man who owned a Chevelle like yours, a '66. But it occurs to me that perhaps this assumption is foolish; surely there are wives out there who have not banned trans fats and processed sugar, as mine has. I haven't had a Frito in eleven years. Regardless, I write to inquire about your family, should you reply.