

Dance Party

The babe is on a bender, on her second bottle of milk without a nap. Power hungry, she goes on a tirade in a language I do not remember. A text from her mother assures me she will *'wear herself out eventually.'* Surrender is my only option but I know, even that, will be lost in translation.

I make a sound like rain, as if the world is crying with her. *Shhhhhhhhhh.* All 16lbs of her bounce on my forearms as I pace the footpaths of her home.

Sixteen pounds.

Two gallons of milk.

Against my three decades of life experience.

The numbers inspire laughter. The babe jolts away from my tear-soaked shirt, with questions she can't formulate.

"You think I have answers. Ha! I wish I had answers." My laughter comes as a surprise, at first intriguing and then terrifying to the babe. Her wails are criminal against my ears and the tears that form on her enfant eyelashes are powerful enough to cut stone.

Sssssshhhhh.

The ceiling fan spins above us, drying our tears, yet going nowhere fast.

Sssssshhhhh.

If it were really raining, there would be flood warnings by now.

When exhaustion sets in her puffy eyes twitch with dreams of being understood. I am afraid to let her go. It is in my best interest to keep my heartbeat and body heat a constant foundation of her dreamworld. I descend into a nursery rocker like a stone tower falling in slow motion on the distant horizon. I let the upholstery become my new skin and concede that my bones are just a knotted and knitted afghan for the babe.

She's not mine. I am only hired hands—hired spit-towel.

She is my age—the mother—from my graduating class. We used to listen to Blink-182 in her parent's hot tub and smoke stolen cigarettes. We'd use pizza parties and youth group conventions to get away from our bible-ridden homes. In our black eye-liner and Tripp pants we'd draw future tattoos and tithe our virginites on the offering plates.

Somehow we ended up here: her career affording to hire me, me unable to afford to say no. Like life is a game of 52-card pickup. Fortunes and fates rain down. Forecasts predicted in percentages with plausible deniability. Science made as clumsy as myth—or myth as complex as science. A dog chasing its tail.

The babe's eyelids and cheeks are back to their happy hue. Her chest rises and falls and I am jealous of her quick recovery. I know from experience she will wake up from her nap with smiling, ocean-blue eyes. Her dreams will have already come true and she will not yet anticipate our miscommunication tomorrow.

When I am home I slink upstairs like an intruder in my own home. A question from my wife doesn't quite make it to the delicate skin of my inner ear.

Words are caged up like wild beasts. How did Noah do it? Sail with all those animals and evade their appetites? How did he keep himself from tilting overboard and sinking to the bottom just to be back home?

My face meets my pillow and I am not asleep so much as waiting for a dove with an olive branch. Dusk filters in, gilding our secondhand furniture and it would be so easy to let it cast me in bronze. Then the bedroom door creaks and a shift of the mattress tells me I am not alone.

“Rough day?” My wife asks, caressing the dead nerves of my elbow.

I am silent like a pillar of salt.

“Want me to leave you alone?” Her fingers move to the crease of my arm where a warm nest of nerves awakes and scamper through my shoulders, crown, and sternum.

“No.”

“I have a surprise for you.”

My ears perk like a puppy and I roll over, exposing my belly.

“But you have to come downstairs.”

“What kind of surprise?”

“Nothing big. It’s silly, really.”

“Silly?”

“Come see.”

I get up.

The living room windows are blacked out with trash bags. A smoke machine purrs in the corner. A disco ball scatters light. The ceiling and walls have been plucked away like weeds and we are immersed in the night sky. The earth is formless and only a spirit hovers over the surface of the deep. When I close my eyes, I can feel the undulation of everything—endings and beginnings.

They are the same.

I approach the records on the shelf and pick out something we can dance to.