

The Geranium

KEVIN McLELLAN

I look out the window, wait
for you, envy all
the outdoors' moving parts.
The geranium on the

kitchen table, red next to
the window, also waits.
This blooming is privy
to my secrets. Its language

isn't translatable; scent,
a gesture. The last time
you were here you said,
I am like a fish. I can go

anywhere and I knew that
this was a warning.



Safe

LIBBY FLORES

Our anger kept us safe for a while that summer. The lizards were skittering around the willow trees in the backyard and Bub the dog would draw our hands to him, and we'd forget the burning in our chests. A piece of toast and a hot cup of coffee left by the front door, sheets tugged back to cover feet, a vacuumed house after a long day of work, scrambled eggs made and served when one was still blinking from insomnia—we were never terrible to each other. If she didn't call the house, the small kindnesses could continue. You were angry at this new restraint: me at the lie. Our limbs ached; for weeks we had not embraced. Arms, even legs, frail from under-use.

In that dead summer heat the boy who cut our lawn came a day early. On his break he leaned against our old fence and I forced my gaze to him, understanding maybe for the first time the word *brawny* after decades of relying on a man built like a post.

Later that July one of Bub's eyeteeth rotted. When we reached down to him his panting smile revealed a festering smell. How odd this betrayal, so late in our lives—the fetish of it after many nice years. It reminded me of when we saw those bodies of chickens on the side of the road in El Paso. I rolled the window down for a better look. Four donkeys making a meal of them: the openness of the carnage, the upturned animal kingdom, the atrocity, blatant, and plain.



Toast

LIBBY FLORES

The embarrassment, of both families, was how large the wedding had been. A big white tent in the rain. The guests contemplated using the table linen for cover. It was New Orleans in summer; no one had predicted a storm.

The tea lights, prematurely lit, flickered at the thunder. Guests who had brought small dogs or babies were on their knees, desperate to retrieve them from under the rented tables. The big white tent was next to a house that was now a restaurant. The father of the bride had rented both. On every table large magnolia blooms floated in antique silver saucers.

The husband-to-be sat in a small mahogany-paneled room alone, drawing on a bar napkin. It had started with his initials. The T now curled into a black crow that was diving into a bowl much too small for him.

The bridesmaids wore blue in all shades. In a row they resembled cornflowers at the moment of wilt. The heaviest of them was pregnant, and she stood behind the rented cocktail tables most of the night. She knew the dress neither concealed nor revealed her secret. The little bubble that protruded out of the indigo silk was one she wished to pop.

The bride wore bright-red lipstick. Not having a moment to herself, she was sweaty. She had already fainted once, after she saw that the tissue-paper stars that were to be hung in the oaks were wet as toilet paper. Her mother comforted her with lies about the rain. "It'll let up any minute now. These tropical storms blow right through. Oh, dear, you look beautiful." The bride's corset, made from

the finest whalebone and satin, was an uncomfortable reminder that her waist, even on her wedding day, was not small enough. It was fine to be beautiful, but to be thin was something else. In a mirrored dressing room, seven women plucked, sprayed perfume in clouds of saccharine mist, talked while looking at their own reflections, checked their armpits, applied mascara, but mostly crowded the bride.

The chef was elbow-deep in crawfish and squinting from the onions as he yelled to his staff. "Five more minutes on the hush puppies! And watch the okra." He was a New Orleans chef, born and raised. His apron was never clean. His palms sweated garlic. He had seen many weddings go down. He had fed this many anxiety-ridden stomachs. He looked at the tiny black eyes of the crawfish smothered in cayenne. The poor fellas were soon to be beheaded by all those French-manicured hands.

A second cousin was sent to buy umbrellas. He was a blond young man with a driver's permit. Happy to be free of the chaos, and in the seat of his uncle's new BMW, he opened the top button of his dress shirt and ruffled his damp hair. The keys were handed to him in a hasty fashion. The bride's mother, his aunt, had just discovered that the florist had delivered the wrong flowers. A polo match had been swapped for the wedding. Horseshoes of carnations and long droopy irises were at her nude, stocking feet.

All the while the groom's father was opening every closet in the sprawling house. A puzzle on his face. The groom's tux was lost. He kept yelling, *Misplaced, not gone. Misplaced!*

The wedding planner was sneaking a Virginia Slim under a dripping awning by the dumpsters, a clipboard in her free hand; she had lost again. Her own fiancé had asked for his ring back just the day before. Matrimony being her business, she had requested a few more days. So there it was still on her finger. She twirled it nervously with her thumb—a flat tire on a slow-moving car.

In the end, only the tent survived.

