

ÖSEL JESSICA PLANTE

When the Mississippi Speaks with its Wet, Pretty Mouth

A string of vowels comes out, silty tongue
curling under and around the dark outside

the Highlife Bar that backs up to this brackish
curl of coast. You need a passport to come

this far south, where men with flashlights
wade knee-deep with spears, flicker them into

dark so their small beacons appear to nod
like drunken heads. I watch for silhouettes,

men gigging for flounder that lie flat in mud
they've burrowed under with one eye facing

up to stars. Out beyond the naked bay, Biloxi
in the grip of old-growth pines once felled

for floors in the turn-of-century houses full
of double-hung windows the Preservation

Society adores. I'm with my husband, who's
ordered another Michelob Ultra as I finger

a fried pickle out of the plastic basket lined
with waxed paper now translucent with grease.

He asks if I want another, if I want to dance
upstairs, then stares at the lights of a distant

gulf shrimp boat where the hearts of a few
men bob, they're trawling for someone else's

dinner, throwing back rusted cans and gar
fish, while upstairs the bartender calls me

little lady and I am still when my husband grabs
and flings the ring-toss game on its string, I am
remembering the antique fan I'd brought from
Boston, which he carried to the attic because it
was too rustic, the bicycle I rode through Nova
Scotia he put out with the trash when I went
home to visit my mother. Just a ring on a dingy
string, we watch its elliptical flight, how it seeks
the clink of collision. I think about how my
name is no longer my name and how I am full
of the same old dumb luck that sent me up
the aisle at twenty-eight, and he did not know
how I was afraid to be alone. Another quarter
dropped into the jukebox slot, the air along
the Gulf is stagnant, hot, my hair pinned up
off my nape and he's not touched me in several
nights, not a wrist or hip but I am all right
with how we shift in bed after the lights go out,
listen as a distant train approaches the trestle
over the bay & soon we'll walk out to our car,
I'll take the keys but only after we've chugged
another each, listen as records shift and drop,
Etta James begins to sing, her voice moving east
then south like a knife through me, like I'm some
small town with the word pearl in it, then Slidell,
over denim-colored Lake Pontchartrain, its palms
open, how it rises each time it rains, and there,
once, how a woman flashed a gun at me on
I-10 after I'd merged, speeding into her lane.

The Navy Wife Tries on Her Body

Fragile, hollow — I make a new woman
from these animal bones, a ghost that will

disregard roof and walls. Cardinals come
to collect her marginalia, drift in and out

of her ribs. If these birds had names, she
would call them *Daughter I Do Not Have*,

Mother of Pearl, Herring Bone. They button
their past tense into her body as they swoop

in cursive. She's not held together by muscle
or tendon, but brittle memory; the sinew & gut

used to sew flesh to animal hide. My fingers
grow stiff around my needle. This is not

a contract, these stitches, yet here I am
trapping myself inside her. She'll never

know that I talk to a piece of red linen
as if it were her soul. Leave your dead

by the roadside, leave your wells covered,
there are so many ways to die yet every day

she'll live as if by habit. Breathe in, breathe
out. But it's I who might blow out the lights,

release her hands, extinguish an entire town
with the waves gathering beneath her gown.

Pistol of Bones

I lived in a green house on First Street
like a figment passing through rooms,

almost less than plaster and lathe, horse
-hair smoothed into walls, pine trees felled

a hundred years before I drank the sun
and rain, rooted deep in silence and sleep

and married a man who flooded our
bedroom each night, never sat at the table

to eat, or took his pleasure in me. Listen
to the way *ob* is the surprise we know

with our mouths — my moon, my cottage,
my storms that blew acorns onto the tin

roof. I measured and sewed my days
together — floral and nothing I would

buy again or hang myself in a new life,
the one without a man, the one where I

understand the marrow of words tastes
nothing like the marrow of bones.

She & Wolf

Outside our house there are men heating up
the newly paved road with a blowtorch. Their fire

sounds like an airplane engine. In orange
and yellow vests they make me think of what needs

protection, not the fruit of the fig tree from
wasps that will burrow deep inside, not the tadpoles

birthed into the brackish shallows that will
nibble an outstretched palm, but the piece of me still

circling into my husband's ear, his mouth,
measuring herself against his bones as I sit aching

at my desk, bent and white as a swan, hollow
as honeysuckle wrists. The wind blowing outside ruffles

the men's hair. They parade back and forth
to their truck like peacocks, their words dissolve before

I can hear. My husband's words have found
the shady edges like snow in early spring, they glint

from the sunless rims like amber holds a frozen
sun. Look and there's the curve of a beetle's wing, a tiny

continent of stillness, dust. Any warmth now
and my scars flare. The life below the one that shows,

wriggling to come, to know itself black as tar
and indistinguishable after the men are done. I get up,

head for the kitchen to dive into lunch. The coral
mouth of a torch goes out, there are small fires sutured

to me tight as a blush. I wish for a dozen birds,
for sunlight to strike my throat ruby, bare—a woman,
a bell, a magnolia bloom, the same uninvited
wolf sitting in my dining room chair.



Paul Batteiger, pen and ink