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and a Symposium on
Bob Dylan's Nobel Prize**

conviction. *Hiya-hiya-hiya-hiya*. My voice cracked and my ears glowed like taillights. I felt as if there were an expanding porcupine inside my skull as burning quills pushed through bone and skin.

My father entered the circle next. I was relieved not to be alone any longer, but I was still angry about the phone calls and everything they represented. We shuffled our feet in the dirt, circled, changed directions. We were like two electrons, chanting.

Gradually men entered the circle until we were bumping and crowding together. I could feel the damp heat of them. Men put their hands on each other's shoulders and chanted at the ground, then arched their backs and chanted to the sky. Some men seemed to skip in place, one foot pumping up and down. We were a motley, strange horde of maleness. Men I'd never spoken to grabbed my shoulders, looked into my eyes, and hugged me. If this were fiction, this would have been the moment I lost myself to the chanting, to flashbacks of sweat lodges and prayer sticks; the moment I lost myself to the ethos of another time and felt a sudden kinship with these men, all men, men of our collective tribal past, and especially my father.

But that's not what happened. Not for me. I just kept chanting until my voice and my father's were lost in a hundred more.

Erika Krouse

Lotus

—in memory of Cort McMeel, 1971–2013

I was buying my daughter hot cocoa at a convenience store when the three of them walked in, pulling guns from their winter coats. At first it seemed like nothing, like, check out those black almost-men over there with pantyhose on their faces carrying guns, and this part of my brain told me that they were just carrying guns, not that they'd use them on us, although I still couldn't justify the pantyhose. I held two empty cups. Rita pointed, her nine-year-old lips parting to say, "Mira, mamá," but she never made it through "mamá" before the men started shooting the plaster ceiling.

We all dropped as if we'd done this before, except Rita, and I pulled her down hard.

"Wallets, phones, jewelry, now," one of them said.

The cash register pinged above my ear. I threw my purse like a grenade and lay on top of Rita. She tried to wriggle free, to see. I pulled her head down by her braids. "Cierra tus ojos," I whispered. She squeezed her eyes shut, and only then did I see fear wobble through her jaw.

An untied sneaker stopped on the linoleum. It kicked my head, hard enough to hurt but not hard enough to knock me out.

"You," he said. "Up."

I didn't move. He kicked my head harder, and everything turned white for a second. "Up, bitch." His knee popped as he crouched down next to me. The cool circle of his gun pressed against my temple. I smelled his socks inside his wet shoes.

Rita opened her eyes.

"No," I said. At least, I thought I said it, but I was already getting up, palms against the grit of the linoleum, watching my daughter's soft face constrict as she realized I was leaving her behind. The big man panted through the mesh. I tried not to look at his face, blurred by pantyhose so his nose was pushed flat and his lips stretched wide and

his eyes looked sleepier than he could possibly feel. The hand on the gun had a Band-Aid with Spiderman on it. This very young man with the gun and mean friends had a child, a son, or else why Spiderman? So he wouldn't kill me, the obvious mother of my obvious daughter, who was starting to cry.

But that's not what the gun said as the man rammed it into my ear. He said to his friends, "I got someone. Let's move." His friends had already collected all the cashier money and handbags and wallets in a trash bag and were now stealing candy. The gunman wrenched me toward the door by my arm. I thought, stupidly, *I can't die now—I promised Rita that hot cocoa*. Rita started to scramble up, and I snapped, "Down" in a voice that horrified us both. I was seeing her face for the last time, and the terror written across it would turn me into a ghost.

But another person was standing now. It was a black teenage boy who must have been lying near us because he was beside me so fast, the gunman jumped a little at the boy's clear voice: "Take me instead."

All I saw were his eyes, black against white. The boy said, "Not this lady. Me."

The man with the gun said, "Sure, asshole," thrust me back onto the ground and pointed the gun at the kid's hooded temple. "Hands on your head."

The kid obeyed. Rita and I grabbed each other on the floor. The boy leaned over me. His jacket smelled like dirt and cold. His perfect lips said, "Olivia." He held my gaze to make sure I heard him.

I was about to ask what Olivia meant when the gunman shouted, "Stay down!" to all of us and shoved the boy. The boy stumbled, recovered, and they were all out the door.

Everyone lay still on the ground, like they were asleep.

The men and the boy were visible through the glass double doors, and I blocked Rita's view with my shoulder. The men packed themselves into the back seat of a navy blue car, snow dusting its hood, no license plate.

The boy stood on the sidewalk, staring straight at the men in the car. His fingers were still laced behind his head, elbows wide as if he were lying on a beach, except it was snowing and he was standing up in front of bad men on a bad street in a bad town.

A hand stuck a gun out the window. The boy who said Olivia didn't move.

"No no no no," I said, as if it would change anything.

Snow swirled around the gun, the bare hand. Then that hand shot that gun, shot the boy three times into his collapsing chest before the car drove away. By the time I made it out the door, the boy had already fallen, alone in a vacant street, eyes rolled back; he was already dead.

Aurora means dawn, which is supposed to mean hope, but I'd never seen either thing in this town. A couple times a week I cleaned The G Spot in north Aurora while my daughter was in school. An unlisted place in a frigid basement, they had those peep show booths where a lady danced on the other side of the glass and the men did whatever. I don't know. They don't make rubber gloves thick enough. I had to lay down a layer of hot water and then come back a half hour later when the dried semen loosened into a mud I could scrape up. When the peep door closed, people fumbled their money and nobody picked it up, so I got that, too. I would dump the coins in a jar filled with bleach and empty it out when I had enough for a pizza, but even that was hard to eat.

I also cleaned the plasma donation center after Rita went to bed. They needed me more often because their customers smelled bad and sometimes vomited. I worried about Rita the entire time, from when my key left my doorknob until I slipped under the blanket next to her after I got back, relieved and smelling like bathroom cleaner.

Plasma is your blood with half the good stuff sucked out. The same drunks and drug addicts wandered in every week and said they were clean now, so could they donate, so they could buy more drugs and alcohol? The answer was yes. Payday loan places surrounded the center, and every store wanted to buy my gold. I'd lived in Aurora since I was seventeen but never crossed the city to the Rocky Mountains on the other side. My daughter didn't even notice their outline through the smog and dust, but she knew they were there.

After the shooting, Rita and I didn't leave our monthly rate motel room for over two days. I called in sick. We clutched each other, stared at the TV, and forgot to eat. "Why did he do that?" I asked over

and over. Rita cried with rage into my shoulder. She had nobody but me on this earth, and “What if” ricocheted through my mind. I still felt the gun in my ear.

Between our two memories, we patched together a picture of the boy who said Olivia. Maybe seventeen (“eighteen,” Rita insisted), tallish, a perfectly even Afro, with a hood covering his head. Thin chest, a few pimples. His lips turned upward, drawn in thick, perfect lines. But his black eyes were what made him beautiful, his gaze flashing between Rita and me and the gun.

While Rita pretended to sleep at night, I wandered around our room with a rag in my hand, unable to cry. I tried to make sense of everything that happened—the boy, the killers, the scared silence of the other people in the convenience store, even after the cops came. The police’s professional disinterest in this Olivia. In us, the spared.

By the third morning, I knew I wasn’t returning to work at the sex shop that day or ever, just like I knew Rita wasn’t going back to that elementary school where they called her Mexicoon and WetBlack and Blaxican. The day before the shooting, she asked me what “rape” meant. I asked why, and she said that two boys in her class said they were going to do it to her, so she might as well know.

“Enough,” I said. “We can’t hide in here like rats.”

Rita said, “We should find Olivia and—” but she didn’t know what we were supposed to do, either. Still, we dressed and left. In our motel lobby, we found yesterday’s paper in the bin and flapped it open on the counter.

The boy who said Olivia had his own name: Vance Farris. He was seventeen. He went to the high school near our neighborhood. His next of kin was his aunt, Mona Farris. The story was already on page two, upstaged by a dead politician. Vance’s article didn’t say anything about Olivia or that he took my place. A police officer mentioned gang initiation shootings, but because Vance left with his killers “voluntarily, we won’t rule out possible gang connections between the shooter and the victim.”

I didn’t realize I was shaking until Rita tugged my finger away from the boy’s picture, and the sound of rattling paper stopped. “We’re going to find this boy’s aunt,” I said. “And apologize.”

“For what?” Rita asked.

The phone book listed Mona Farris’s address about fifteen blocks down Colfax, and we walked to save bus fare. We were thoroughly chilled by the time we arrived at the apartment building. Graffiti covered the brick, no artsy tags, just Fuck You Whore in white pissed out from a fire extinguisher.

We knocked on a hollow door until it opened. A middle-aged white lady said, “Yeah?” Her bottle-blond hair stuck up from where she had been lying on it. Her gray eyes were clouded from sleep or something else. She looked nothing like Vance.

“Mrs. Farris?” I asked. Rita shrank from the open door, which burped canned peas and microwave burritos. “Are you Vance Farris’s aunt?”

“Whatever he owes you, I ain’t got,” she said.

“He saved my life,” I said.

Mrs. Farris stepped aside. We pushed past her into the heat.

The room was uncleanable. An ammonia ring scarred the carpet around a litter box, which sat in front of the TV. A cat squatted on the kitchen counter, licking its way down the assembly line of dishes. Rita was already sneezing into her elbow. The bathroom had no door. A sofa sagged against one wall, but I shot Rita a look forbidding her to sit on it.

Mrs. Farris sat. One of her eyes leaked tears while the other stayed dry. She dabbed at the wet eye with a hardened tissue, but never looked at me once. “So what’s this?” she asked her clasped hands.

I told her. Throughout, Mrs. Farris’s one eye kept crying, crying. I wanted to sit next to her and take her hand, but I was afraid of that couch. “I’m just so sorry,” I said.

Mrs. Farris jutted her chin at Rita and said, “No, you’re not.”

I was too surprised to respond. She was right. So I asked, “When is the funeral?”

“I don’t know. I’m not paying for that. Someone else’s problem.” Mrs. Farris flapped a hand in the air. “Vance is my ex-husband’s nephew, not mine. I only let him stay here out of my goodness.”

“Where are his parents?”

“Last I heard, his mother’s somewhere in Denver.” Mrs. Farris said “Denver” like it was another country instead of half a mile west. “Father could be anyone.”

Rita began squirming, so I touched her shoulder. *That's not you*, I told her silently, and she settled down. "Was his mother's name Olivia?"

"No."

"I think I'm supposed to find someone named Olivia."

"Well, I don't know no Olivia."

"Did he have any friends? A girlfriend?"

One negatory grunt inflated Mrs. Farris's middle.

Rita said, "Mamá. Let's go," but I couldn't move from that terrible carpet. "I still don't understand why he did it," I said.

Mrs. Farris shifted her wet-dry gaze to the TV, which was off. "Boy thinks he's a hero, I guess."

I groped in my pocket for a tissue. "Can I see his room?"

Vance's room was half of a bedroom, divided in two by a Mexican blanket hung from the ceiling. Wool covers lay rumpled on the bed with a naked pillow, no sheets. His clothes rested in two wrinkled piles next to a stack of textbooks on a plastic crate. A wire-bound notebook splayed open on the floor.

"This is it," Mrs. Farris said.

We nodded. She led us out.

I almost knocked Rita over, hustling back to his room to grab the notebook from the floor. I shoved it into the back of my pants, under my coat. "Where you at?" Mrs. Farris yelled from the living room, and I hurried out to her.

"I just wanted one more look at his room," I said.

For the first time, Mrs. Farris's eyes focused on mine. "It's for rent now," she said. "Let me know."

I was late for work that night because I couldn't stop looking through Vance Farris's notebook. "History," the cover said, but inside I didn't find one date, one fact, one name except for Olivia. It covered every page, in all kinds of handwriting. "Olivia" on the side of a carefully drawn airplane, on the heart of a robot, inside a rose. In one drawing, the O was the back of a girl's head, hair in a ponytail. In another, the O was the wheel of a race car.

One sketch featured the silhouette of a boy with a cape, or maybe just a flapping shirt. He was catching a girl in his arms, both of them

shaded opaque with blue ink. From their postures, I couldn't tell if the two people were flying or falling.

My mind hurt and I turned pages, looking for relief. Finally, on the back of one Olivia-covered page, Vance abandoned her for a moment to draw a blossom with triangular leaves, spiky at the tips, layered inside each other. It looked almost like a machine. The bloom hovered on a thin neck of a stem, growing out of some scribbled liquid. Underneath, Vance had written, "In a pool of shit grows a lotus."

I didn't even like it, but I couldn't stop looking at that page.

I tore it out of the notebook, folded it, and put it in my coat pocket. Even there, it bugged me. I checked on Rita, her eyes blinking in the dark. I kissed her and hurried to the plasma donation center.

The sign by the bank said one degree Fahrenheit. Every night I worked, there were two men loitering by the air vent. I guess it was warmer there. The men always pretended they didn't see me, and I pretended they didn't frighten me, and we all did our jobs—me cleaning an empty building, them staying alive one more night.

But this time after I unlocked the door, I didn't walk through it. That's the funny thing about being alive when you're supposed to be dead. Nothing is a habit anymore. Instead, I felt the ghost of the gun in my ear, alongside this strong thing I couldn't name, pushing through me. It was so powerful, it shook my whole body inside my coat.

"Come on," I said to the men.

They didn't hear me at first, so I said it louder. "Come in."

They looked at each other, and then shuffled over. Ice covered the beard of one of them, around his mouth. I held the door open and they walked in as if they had been waiting all winter for me to come to my senses.

Inside, the men wobbled from the heat. Or maybe they were drunk. But drunk people need to rest, too, especially drunk people. "Stay in the lobby," I said and waved them toward the chairs, but they flopped onto the floor. They were asleep on their sides before I took off my coat.

"Well," I said, and started my cleaning.

It was much nicer to clean a building with people inside it, even if they did smell. Cleaning isn't a bad job. Before I lost my purse in the robbery, I had even begun to come out a little ahead. I had stopped

sending my family money a couple years ago, after they found out Rita's father was black. She never even met him, but that didn't matter to them.

In between scrubbing toilets and mirrors and counters, I stared at the piece of paper Vance had drawn on—the lotus on one side, the Olivias on the other. Who was this Olivia? I had to know so I could sleep at night like these men on the floor around me, snoring even as I vacuumed around them. “Olivia,” I wrote in antiseptic foam on the front desk counter and scrubbed it clean. I put the supplies away and folded Vance's drawing back into my coat pocket.

Then, “Time to go,” I said in a not-scared voice, and the men woke right up. They stood, straightened their dirty coats and walked out the door into the freezing air. I sprayed Lysol behind them and locked up, leaving no trace of the men or myself.

The cops wouldn't tell me anything, so Rita and I walked to Vance's high school the next afternoon. The kids were leaving and the cliques crowded together—Mexicans, blacks, whites, geeks, jocks, gangsters. Hormones thickened the air and gave me a headache. I gripped Rita's arm too hard as the kids bumped past us to get away from the building.

Inside, a security guard slid a gloved hand through my purse and scanned my daughter in a way I didn't like before pointing us to the office. We passed a small white sign that said, “If you need to talk to someone about the shooting, please see the guidance counselor.”

We waited at the counter for the secretary to notice us. I've always been habitually invisible, but I was suddenly tired of waiting. “Hello,” I said. “I need to talk to a girl who goes here. I don't know where she is.”

“Is she expecting you?” the secretary asked her piece of paper.

“No. Her name is Olivia. I don't know her last name. But I think she takes history class.”

“All the kids take history.” The lady finally looked at me over her thin glasses. “And there are 2300 kids here. And school is out for the day.”

“She was in Vance Farris's class.”

“Oh. The boy—” the secretary squinted. “Are you a relative?” she asked Rita, for some reason. We shook our heads, and she said, “Then I can't give out confidential student information.”

I struggled for a way to explain, but Rita said, “Where's the bathroom here? I have to go bad.” Once we were out of the office with a visitor's pass, Rita grabbed my hand and pulled me in the opposite direction from the restroom sign.

“Where are we going?”

“The school library will have yearbooks.”

I stared at my nine-year-old. “¿Qué lista! How did you figure that out?” Rita pressed down a smile, but her shoulders rose a half inch.

We passed miles of lockers until we hit one decorated with wilting carnations and paper crosses. “Vance Farris” was printed in uncertain block letters next to “R.I.P.” Rita stared, but I hustled her past it into the library. Nobody was in there, not even a librarian.

It took Rita two minutes to find the yearbooks. She grabbed the one from last year and said, “Ta-da!” I slipped it under my coat. I was getting good at this.

“Mamá, that's stealing,” Rita said.

“Not if I bring it back.” I couldn't help it. This school made me nervous with the rent-a-cops and empty halls. I was a top student in Pueblo—spelling bee, science fair, all that. Then at the end of my junior year, my entire family got deported back to Mexico while I was in gym class. I had no money or green card, so I followed Rita's father north to Aurora, where he knocked me up and then went to hell or wherever. I didn't hear from my family until I was five months pregnant, cleaning buildings, and living in a homeless shelter. They told me to stay in Colorado, make a pile of money and send it all home, while also finishing high school and going to college and then medical school and becoming a doctor so I could make even more money and send it all home to them. That's how stupid my family was.

Back in the hallway, a teacher rounded a corner and headed for us. That big book was under my coat, so I pulled Rita through the first open door into a little room.

“Hello?” A young man with a silver earring was in there, seated at a messy desk. He asked in passable Spanish, “Are you here to sign up for GED classes?”

I read the paper sign taped to the door. “Yes,” I said. “GED.” The teacher in the hallway passed by, glancing once and away.

The young man gave me a sheaf of papers, and I had to pinch the

yearbook against my ribs with my elbow to take them and shake his hand. "We offer child care on Monday and Thursday nights." He tapped a brochure. "That one's in Spanish."

"She speaks perfect English," Rita said. "Better than your stupid Spanish."

"Rita. OK. Thank you, sir." I pushed Rita out the door and toward the building's exit. The security guard at the door didn't glance at us. They don't care about you if you're on your way out.

We ate at a taqueria near our motel to celebrate our cleverness. Rita and I sat side by side in a booth. She sipped her horchata and asked, "What's GED?"

"Like a diploma. If you didn't graduate high school, you can get a job with it. Or go to college."

"Am I going back to my school?"

"Do you want to?"

"I want to be a lawyer," Rita said.

"Why a lawyer? You want to send those men to jail?"

She shrugged. "I just don't want to clean buildings."

This stung so hard, I had to look away for a second to organize my face. I said, "You won't." But she didn't look convinced, and I realized maybe a GED wasn't the worst idea.

We thumbed through the pages of the high school yearbook together, Rita's foot on mine under the table. We scrutinized every page. The girls looked older than high schoolers, wearing more makeup than hookers. *Don't grow up*, I prayed silently to Rita. I pressed my nose into her clean hair. She wiped me off casually but gave me a smile, a secret one between us, before glancing around to make sure nobody noticed.

We found Vance's picture first. It startled us to see him in there among all those other kids. It was the same photo they used in the newspaper. His eyes were soft, black, and flashing, like they were that day, like Rita's eyes. Her finger traced his head, as small as a nickel.

We turned almost every page of the book before Rita pointed at a face and said, "Here. Olivia Zarate."

Even then, I kept looking for a different girl. "Maybe there's another one," I said. But this was the last page before the ads, and there was only one Olivia.

She was as dull as a brown paper towel. Olivia had a square face, an uneven haircut, plastic glasses, blotchy skin. She wasn't someone to die over. Hers was any face you'd see on the other side of a fast food window. She smiled like she was happy to have her picture taken, flattered at the common courtesy given to her, too. It was the smile of someone who would be forever praised as a great worker before she was replaced with someone younger. Who would smile when people shortchanged her and thank them.

"Mira, mamá," Rita said. "She looks like you."

Where there had been two homeless men, the next time there were five, then nine, and that night, seventeen men waited for me to unlock the door at the plasma donation center. They staggered in as I took off my coat and draped it over the counter. The last one smelled like aftershave and looked just like the man who hired me for this job a year ago, which it turns out he was. He announced, "Everyone out of the pool."

The way the men shuffled back out told me that they had been expecting this development far more than I had. The air was so cold it felt aggressive, and the men didn't look at me before disappearing into the night.

"What the hell?" my boss asked once they were gone, his eyelid twitching. "You had half of Aurora waiting outside like we're the fucking Rescue Mission."

"It's cold out." I could see him thinking, bleeding heart. But I wasn't bleeding. I didn't even feel bad.

"You're fired, of course," he said.

And I couldn't help it, I was laughing.

For a moment, my boss laughed with me. His was a bewildered, barking laugh, which made me laugh even harder. The sounds swirled for a moment in the gray space between us.

Then he frowned and shoved me out the door.

The next afternoon, I finally found out where "the disposal of the remains" would take place, after calling almost every cemetery and mortuary in town. The cemeteries in town take turns burying unclaimed remains, the voice at the other end explained. "Does his school know?" I asked. "Did you tell people?"

"I don't know," he said. "I just work here part time."

Rita and I walked to the high school again to watch the kids leave. I stood at the foot of the stairs. Rita ran to the top, right at the edge of the doors, so she could see faces better.

The kids erupted from the building as before. We scanned the crowd for anyone recognizable, but there were too many kids rushing by me. They smelled like aftershave and perfume and baby powder and sex and pot and meth, and I couldn't find Olivia. Soon, there was only a slow dribble of students left. Another day lost. I let my arms collapse to my sides and called up to Rita, "We'll try again tomorrow."

Then Rita slipped next to a half-asleep girl in a light brown coat, dragging down the steps. If Rita hadn't noticed this girl, I wouldn't have. Rita plugged her mitten into the girl's glove, and the fact that the girl didn't jerk her hand away told me that she had little siblings of her own. Rita pointed at me, and I waved.

As they drew nearer, I couldn't look away. Rita and Olivia could have been sisters. Half-sisters because Olivia was all Mexican and Rita is just half, but it was all there—the same full lips, the square face, the wide eyebrows. In Olivia, the features had begun to fall from what looked like exhaustion, but they were still fresh in Rita, who I can't see as anything but beautiful. She was my baby, mine. But if Vance Farris and Olivia Zarate had a child, it would be Rita.

Olivia stood in front of me now, dressed entirely in brown. I spoke in Spanish out of nervousness. "You're Olivia?"

She nodded. She looked like a lump.

"Is there another one at your school?" I asked. "Some other Olivia?"

"I don't think so. Maybe." She answered me in English. It was cold, and she clenched her teeth to halt a chatter. "I'm sorry. What is this about?"

"Vance Farris," Rita said. "We're friends of his."

I asked, "Can I buy you a hot chocolate or something? Coffee?"

Olivia regarded my face and shoes, a film of distrust on her face. "I have to get home to watch my sisters. You mean that kid who got shot, Vance?" We nodded, and she said, "I'm sorry, I didn't really know him. Maybe someone else—" She glanced backward at the school, already deserted. "I might've sat in front of him in one of my classes."

"History class," I said. "He wrote about you in his notebook." I

pulled the picture of the lotus from my pocket and showed her the doodles on the back—Olivia the rose, Olivia the car.

Her eyes widened at her own name in his handwriting. "No." She tried to hand the paper back, but I wouldn't take it. "He never talked to me. Except he borrowed a pen once."

I told her, "Your name was the last thing he ever said."

So much steam escaped Olivia's lips, it looked like her mouth was on fire.

I talked about the robbery, about "Take me" and "Olivia." I don't know what I expected from her, but it wasn't stillness. My feet grew numb in my sneakers.

When Olivia finally spoke, she stammered. "There must be another—"

"That—" I flicked the piece of paper in her hand "—is from his History notebook. He sat behind you in his History class, stared at the back of *your* head. It's you."

"I'm not important like that." She wasn't looking for a compliment; she was stating a fact. She said in rapid Spanish, her eyes reddening, "I'm sorry. I didn't know him, he borrowed a pen, I just, I'm sorry—"

"Stop saying you're sorry," I snapped, and Olivia started crying. Her mascara washed down behind the plastic frames of her glasses. I didn't care, stupid girl. I grabbed the brown sleeves of her coat and shook them hard. "Why did he say your name? What are we supposed to do? *Think, chica.*"

Olivia twisted herself from my grasp. "I have to go. I'm sor—I have to go." She scooted down the sidewalk, moving fast.

"The funeral is tomorrow morning at ten o'clock," I yelled after her. The wind had picked up, and it was hard to tell if she heard me as I shouted the cemetery's name and address at her back. She was making time in her brown polyester coat, chin tucked, hands weighing down her pockets like stones.

"She wasn't even his girlfriend. I don't get it." I turned to Rita. "What did Vance want us to do?"

Rita frowned after the girl. "Did he love her?"

I remembered the sketch of the boy catching the girl in his arms. "He must have."

Rita stared into the distance. "Maybe . . . he wanted her to know who he was. Why he took your place and did that for us."

"That's just it," I said. "Why did he?"

"Mamá." There was pity in Rita's eyes, and I realized I was already eating her dust. "Because he was a hero."

The cemetery was a sunken square not far from Olivia's high school. We waited next to the Jesus like I had been instructed over the phone, our feet numb. The old Jesus statue was part of some rich person's large monument near the entrance. The statue stretched out his concrete arms, and I don't believe in that stuff anymore, but it was hard not to cross myself anyway.

The outline of mountains was faint through the smog that morning, like a torn piece of pale blue paper. Traffic noises bounced off the gravestones. With no buildings on that whole block, the sky was enormous. Rita stared at a pinwheel stuck in a grave. Pink plastic flowers rested in an empty whiskey bottle.

At ten past ten, a young Mexican-American man in a narrow tie and overcoat approached us, cradling an urn. He wore a badge with the name of the funeral home on it. "You're here for Vance Farris?" He looked around but we were the only ones there.

"Maybe we should wait for his aunt," I said. The young man opened his mouth to speak and then just shook his head no.

He led us across the grounds and abruptly halted at a small hole in the ground about a foot wide, with upturned dirt beside it. He pulled the lid off the urn and tugged on a plastic bag full of cremated Vance, grayish white and powdery. The young man asked in Spanish, "Would you care to inter the cremated remains?"

I shook my head, then nodded. I reached for the urn, but he pulled out the plastic bag and handed it to me instead. It was heavier than I had expected.

I placed the plastic bag in the hole.

The young man opened a small Bible with a ribbon marking a page. He began reading, "Return unto the ground, for out of it wast thou taken, for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." He asked me, "Is there anything you want to add?"

My throat was full of tears. Rita stepped forward. She shouted

down the hole, as if the plastic bag was very far away, "Thank you for saving my mother!"

With a collapsible spade, the young man nudged the dirt back into the hole, and then he stepped on a metal plug to fasten it onto the grave. There were similar metal plugs everywhere, dotting the flat lot, shining their dull faces to the sky. Vance's said 947 on it, no name. "What's that?" Rita asked.

"It's his marker. So we know where he is. May he rest in peace," the young man added. He bid us goodbye and walked out of the cemetery, cradling the empty urn.

We were alone in this place. Rita studied her cheap shoes. She didn't question my judgment, didn't complain about the cold or ask to leave. So I just told her: "I lost my job."

"Which one?"

"Both."

She squinted up at me. "That's OK, mamá," she said.

It wasn't, though. We had the cheapest room in town because a lady got murdered there right before we moved in. And I still wouldn't have enough to cover their weekly rate.

"Do we have to go to the shelter again?" she asked. "Or can you get a new cleaning job?"

"I don't know." The paying world would always need cleaning. I just wasn't sure I was the one to do it anymore.

I reached into my pocket for the picture of Vance I had cut from the newspaper and gotten laminated the day before. I had planned to prop it against his gravestone, but he had none. "Dust thou art," I murmured, and I wanted to believe it. But I couldn't, because it wasn't true, and that strong thing rose up in me again, past my frozen feet and cold legs to my heart, which was wild with beating.

Someone panted behind us, and we turned around.

It was Olivia. She had run here, it looked like. She was almost pretty in stockings and a black skirt under a black coat and high heels that wobbled on the bumpy ground. She caught her breath, hand pressed at her chest, and stared at the vast cemetery.

"Nobody's here," she said.

"We didn't know who to call," I said.

"I really didn't know him," Olivia said. "I swear to you."

"It's OK," I said.

"He never talked to me, except that once." Her voice shook.

"I believe you." I added, "It's not your fault."

She pulled something from her coat pocket, a pen. "It's the one Vance borrowed," Olivia said. "It has his toothmarks on it." She gave it to me. I traced the ridges and dents his teeth had made on the white pen. I handed her the photograph of Vance. Traffic noise surrounded us.

Olivia closed her eyes and pressed her lips to Vance's picture, kissing it hard.

When she looked up, her face was a mess of tears. Rita was already reaching for her, but Olivia flailed her arms, choking, "What do I do now?"

I wanted to tell her that she'd go back to her crappy life. That she'd forget this dead boy, the way she'd forget live boys who would forget her after they were done. But no. We were all crying now because Vance Farris had blocked every direction but up, daring us to find a way to rise, too. Here.

Megan Gannon

Dispatch from a Viral Video

The midwife is holding the babies' faces above water.
They don't know that they've been born, they are clenched

in a Gordian knot, arms entwined around necks,
legs bunched as tangled cord, their two heads pressed

cheek to cheek like tango dancers. Their bodies are deep
in the sink, the faucet pours over their eyes, and just their noses

and mouths breach the water, little dry islands
where the tide slowly recedes as the midwife lifts them.

I watch the YouTube video without any of the usual guilt.
I stood, fully clothed, at the foot of the bed in another bright room

as the doctor twisted my son's head like a doorknob
to wrest his shoulders from the body where he was emerging.

He was my son, and not yet my son, and all I could do
was watch. He is my son and every Christmas he visits

his half-brother and wrestles on the carpet with the only person
he looks like in all the world. Then he goes back to crashing

Hot Wheels and building Legos in my house or the apartment
his father moved into shortly before I called his birthmother

and listened as she said, *This isn't what I wanted for him.*
I almost picked another couple.

The midwife's wrists surface, the babies begin to twist, they are
waking without crying, which is what some people do every morning.