

TOO HEAVY TO CARRY HOME

That Silver had become a musician was no surprise to anyone. After all, most of her childhood was spent dancing on the coffee table to the sitar music played at all hours by her father's rotating cadre of hippie friends in their limestone house in South Austin until, at sixteen, she'd moved into a crumbling mansion inhabited by members of a hardcore band, the kind of place where electrical plugs were for guitar amps only and rent was collected in a hat.

That she ended up a washboard player, however, people found slightly more puzzling. But after seeing her first zydeco show at the Continental Club, Silver suddenly had eyes for nothing but that strange metal percussion instrument bayou players called the frottoir.

That and men. She'd always had eyes for men, but with the added novelty of being a female professional washboard player, men also had eyes for her. She liked to tell them that in her line of work being flat-chested was a blessing. And she was—was one of those tall, abnormally thin women who, from a distance, are sometimes mistaken for teenage boys. She was not exactly beautiful, but then again, like most women, sometimes, in some lights, she was. There'd been Roger, who kissed her neck in the middle of the night and cooked stuffed bell peppers for lunch; Jon Tre, who raised goats and drove her to the neighborhood bar on his tractor; and also Miguel, who gave her trinkets made from the caps of imported beer bottles.

And then there'd been Cole. Cole—short for Coltrane—whom she'd met in New York City at the end of her tour with The Rickety Sticks. At first, he said she was Silver for the color of her washboard, but when she moved out of his place four years later, he said she was Silver for the color of her icy heart. Silver had stayed in Brooklyn at first, and they even tried to remain friends. But a few months later Cole

knocked up a woman and the two decided to hold a shotgun wedding.

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” he said over the phone.

“I haven’t even properly moved out of the apartment, and you’re already starting a family with someone else.”

“The only shit you have left here is that black gunk,” he said, referring to the electrical tape she used to wrap her hands when she played. “Look, I called to inform you, not to ask your permission.”

“How can this possibly be okay? Don’t you realize I’ve never had something like what we had? Four years.”

“Babe,” he said, lowering his voice. “This isn’t something being done to you. You never wanted a family. At least not with me.”

And so Silver moved back to Texas. She found a short-term position on a project with Denton’s University of North Texas music history department recording traditional Cajun music for their collection. She rented a house from a guy named Andy, who introduced himself over a dozen Pearl longnecks at a place called The Pig Stand. It was his father’s vacant house on the outskirts of town, and he drove her to see it after last call the night they met.

On the way, he told her, “You sure do have a lot of tattoos,” eyeing the swirls of blue and black ink that ran down her arm, faintly in the shape of a woman. And she said, “Your ears sure do stick out,” until she saw his expression, and then she told him she was just kidding.

She cried when she first set foot inside the house: thirty dead animals mounted on the living room walls. Some of them she could identify—the longhorn, the antelope, the boar. Others had queer puckered faces, devil horns, supermodel-like cheekbones. A lion crouched outside the bathroom door. A bear reared up on its hind legs next to the breakfast nook.

“Taxidermy is a dying craft,” Andy told her.

“You wouldn’t know it from this place,” she wanted to say, but the tears were coming too fast, her mind filling with images of slaughtered animals on the forest floor sticky with blood, their limbs jutting at unnatural angles. On a red-eye flight to London once, she’d gotten plastered on complimentary bottles of screw-top wine and sobbed throughout the

entire movie *Pay It Forward*. The point: drinking always made her emotional.

“What is it?” asked Andy, taking off his cowboy hat. “Is it the spectacled bear? Does he frighten you?”

She sat down on the love seat and smeared mascara all over the bottom of her T-shirt. *Shit*, she thought, because it was new. She looked around at the rest of the house. A gas stove, mosaic tile, a freestanding sink basin all gave the place what some people called character.

“Maybe it was a bad idea to bring you here now,” he said, sitting next to her and putting his small hand—tiny, really, for a man, but calloused—on her thigh. “Things ain’t so bad in the morning. When it’s light.” He paused and then added, “So, I guess this means you don’t want the place.” Andy got up from the love seat and looked down at her. From that position, she found him almost attractive, his chin dimpled like a thumbprint in dough.

“I’ll take it,” she whispered, reaching up and hooking two fingers through his belt loop, pulling him back down beside her.

Among all the animals in her new living room, the pronghorn was her favorite. So demure with its long lashes and its horns the color of black walnut, lyre-shaped, extending overhead like a fancy hat rack. She got in the habit of standing on the back of the itchy seventies-era sofa, face-to-face with the pronghorn, and asking his advice, like a Magic 8-Ball, although Silver would say, no, like a sphinx. *Fruit Loops or Raisin Bran? The dress with the beads or the one with the open back? Do you feel like listening to Robert Johnson or 7 Year Bitch? Should I call him? Yes, you’re right, much too expensive to call New York City from here.*

After a few weeks, the taxidermied animals no longer made Silver feel gutted by the pathos of their deaths but rather fascinated her with the mystery of their lives. She learned from the Internet that the pronghorn was neither an antelope nor a goat, although it was sometimes referred to as one or the other. It was the only animal in the world with branched horns (like antlers) and the only animal to shed its horns (like antlers). The pronghorn, with its obtrusive yet strangely soulful eyes, was the fastest animal in the western

hemisphere and extremely skittish, sleeping only bits here and there, like a criminal on the lam. They tended to live alone in the summer, foraging about the desert, but formed large herds in the wintertime.

Sitting at the computer, a mug of Darjeeling warming her hands, Silver especially liked this last part and decided she too would attempt to live by such an abstemious cycle. It was summertime, and she enjoyed being alone in the big house—though with the presence of so many eyes she didn't feel entirely alone—but come fall, when the job here was done, she might decide it was time to shack up with someone new for a little while.

Silver poured herself more tea and spent the rest of the morning lolling about in the hammock she'd strung up on the porch, smoking a loosely rolled joint. The house was more or less in the country, a few miles from Denton, which, despite its quirky college-town feel, was slowly becoming another suburb of Dallas/Fort Worth. When she looked to the left, across a field of weeds and ratty sunflowers, she could see three other houses in the distance, wooden A-frames not too different from the one she rented.

But on the right, across the gravel road, construction crews were working to steadily expand the Robinson Ranch retirement community, which consisted of small identical brick houses situated around a blinding green golf course, expertly landscaped to reflect the exact antithesis of the surrounding countryside. "Ranch" was a typical real estate misnomer.

Silver was not someone bothered by change of this kind, by gentrification or chain stores or tourists; she let these things wash over her like dipping her head beneath the surface of the bathwater. After living in Brooklyn for four years, she found Texas a bit like going back in time—bars with cheap drinks and people smoking indoors; throngs of suits and flowery dresses spilling out of church on Sunday—and this afforded her the rare luxury of nostalgia in the actual presence of that which had seemed lost.

Denton was the best of both worlds: it felt like home in a way but it wasn't Austin. She didn't know anybody here. The music part, however, was tough. She hadn't played professionally since meeting Cole—it was as if she could only throw herself into one thing or the other. She chose Cole and

then later unchose him. Now the music seemed to be wary of taking her back; she went through the motions meticulously, but it did not fill her like before. She went to work, did her job, and came home. The other musicians who had been hired as part of the project were dedicated, talented types—and together they were developing a certain rapport as they learned and practiced old zydeco songs each day—but she didn't go out with them after work or call them or even offer personal chitchat over lunch. There was only Andy, and he visited late on the nights she bothered to pick up the phone. Silver didn't really know much about him, just that he worked the rigs, that he was about thirty but already divorced, that he preferred shirts with snaps to those with buttons. These were not things he'd told her directly—Silver didn't like asking questions because she felt they made her responsible somehow.

They made love on the living room sofa or sometimes in the kitchen on the coral-colored Formica countertop—she liked how his arm muscles knotted in support of his body as it moved over her—but never in the bedroom because Silver preferred to be in front of the animals. It made her feel less alone. Andy was gentle and sweet, if a little unimaginative. He puckered his lips tight when he kissed her, like a fish or maybe like a baby bird straining to receive worms from his mother, as if he were too lazy to move his head closer and hoped his lips might cross the distance on their own.

Once, lying there afterward face up on the floor, he told her that the night they met at The Pig Stand he'd found her disappointingly plain. "Now don't get mad, 'cause you know you're beautiful. I mean, the second time I couldn't take my eyes off you." And she thought: what is the point of that kind of beauty? If it failed to spark attention right away, if it only served to inspire a clutching, pawing, almost undignified attachment after the fact, then, really, what was the point?

But Andy was okay because he didn't like to ask questions either. The only thing he'd ever wanted to know was why she'd left New York. He was drinking a beer on the steps of her porch and said, "Never been up there myself, but I'm still curious why you came back down here."

Silver thought about it for a minute. "Pumpkins," she said. "In the end, it came down to the pumpkins." And Andy nod-

ded his head as if he'd figured that all along. As if pumpkins were something he could understand needing to get away from.

Silver had gone for a jog in Prospect Park the morning Cole decided they should carve pumpkins. The foliage was beginning to peak, and patches of leaves were brilliant, the color of lime sherbet and papaya, swatches where the pigments mixed just right, where yellow and green and red flushed up against one another, their amorous rubbings blending into the hue of pink lemonade.

They'd decided on a place to meet after her jog, and she cut up a hill, off the path to get there more quickly because she was tired of running. Silver sprinted up behind Cole, who was arranging newspaper under a maple not yet all red, and jumped on his back, tackling him, but because she was so lithe and tall she only threw herself off balance and landed on her back in the grass looking up at the distant mid-rises of Dumbo. Cole turned toward her; he was wearing a long-sleeve shirt that said *Follow Your Dreams* beneath the faded image of a rainbow. Most of his T-shirts looked as if he'd gotten them free when signing up for a credit card. She looked at him and thought, *His secret is dressing just hip enough so it looks accidental, like it comes to him naturally without trying*. He smiled, pleased by her awkward position sprawled out on the grass, and he lit a cigarette, ducking his head part way into the neck hole of his T-shirt because of the wind, a trick he'd learned by being from a family of boat racers.

Cole had brought three pumpkins—"in case we fuck one up"—and carving knives and Sharpies for drawing. He did things like this occasionally. Out of the blue, he would decide their lives were too haphazard, too unstable. In these bursts of energy, he might invest a hundred dollars in an ice cream company or stock up on candles in case of a power outage or sign them up for a wine-tasting class or salsa lessons or drag her to pretentious galleries.

Sometimes Silver wondered if the failure of these initiatives was really her fault. She went along passively enough, but somewhere deep down was resistance, maybe because, unlike Cole, she hadn't grown up in a home with Christmas

trees and dinnertime and chore lists, and therefore felt disdain for his sporadic bursts of suburban nostalgia—she couldn't stop herself from telling the wine connoisseur, when it was her turn to describe the flavor of the Mendoza merlot, that she tasted a woodiness mixed with a hint of something vinegary, like the taste of cum from a smoker. One of the activities she'd loved: they'd started going to the radical bookstore in Alphabet City that showed radical movies on Wednesday nights; the films were granular, filled with images of women smoking cigarettes alone, women swimming laps in indoor pools, men walking with their hands in mo-hair coat pockets, people in the street looking up at people in windows, behind curtains, looking down. The bookstore eventually folded.

Sometimes Silver even felt uncomfortable jogging—it seemed like the ultimate bourgeois pastime. But she jogged only in the autumn, out of an anxiety that it would pass by without her noticing, an anxiety that she would miss truly absorbing the season before it was gone. This might be because she came from Austin, where autumn was a few leaves and a brisk snap in the air. Or maybe it was because she'd always been the type of person who, above all else in the world, hated to be left out of anything.

“I forgot paper, so we'll just have to create the faces straight from mind to pumpkin,” Cole said, running a palm through his kinky black hair, which stuck up and out in waxy clumps.

“Don't we have to scoop out the gooey intestines first?” she asked. “Maybe if we leave the seeds on the ground, a pumpkin patch will sprout up right here next fall.”

They decided to find a better location, grassier or with a more striking view, to do their carving. As they walked along the path, Cole kept pointing out lovely spots, benches surrounded by long-armed cork trees or gentle hills under a line of smoke trees, with their billowing white tufts of fur-like fiber in place of leaves, but when they actually arrived at each site, he always decided it wasn't quite right. As soon as they went to sit down, Cole was disappointed their view was not what he expected; their view was of twigs and mounds of dirt and the path along which women in slimmingly cut peacoats walked with strollers covered in plastic to protect

their babies from the wind. Silver realized Cole didn't really want to be in the scenes he pointed out, but what he wanted, really, was to be somewhere he could see those places.

Silver played only zydeco-style washboard, which meant that instead of sitting astride it or holding it like they often do in the blues, she wore the corrugated metal instrument along her torso like a vest and played with her hands wrapped in gauze and electrical tape, tipped with thimbles, drawing them up and down the washboard as if her body itself were some kind of living harp. The traditional sheet music gave them all a lot of leeway, but Silver felt like she had the most—it was the washboarder's job to keep the tempo, sure, but anything after that was up to her. Sitting in the soundproofed recording studio with the three other musicians, she tried unsuccessfully to lose herself in the cadence. She would keep the base rhythm with her left hand and let her right hand pulse more playfully—*up up down up up up down down up*—the instrument making a slightly different reverberation depending on which direction she stroked. *Just like a man*, she thought.

One afternoon they got off early from rehearsal, and so Silver decided to make the thirty-minute drive to Fort Worth and buy notions. None of the craft shops in Denton carried the specific type of thimble she insisted upon.

Notions included all the tools used in sewing and knitting—needles, eyelets, seam-rippers. Silver liked the whimsical sound of it, the way you didn't have to keep any silly notion that came to you, but rather were able to look carefully through all the offerings and choose the exact one you'd always wanted. She'd even tried to write a song about it once—something along the lines of *I had the notion that you'd left me, so I bought some embroidery floss instead*.

She drove by the Fort Worth Stockyards, no longer real stockyards but a commercial complex filled with overpriced western-wear stores, kitschy saloons, and the Ernest Tubb Record Shop, where one of Andy's buddies supposedly worked as manager. Recently Andy had been fighting to get Silver to go out drinking with him and his friends or to watch the game at somebody or other's or to just "try being ordinary social. You depress the shit out of me sometimes."

“Does it look as if I’m begging for your company here? Do you really have a right to complain?” she’d asked, hanging her weekly cluster of bananas from the curving horns of the flared-nostril Cape buffalo in the hallway. This way the bananas ripened evenly, and she thought it gave the beast a more festive, Bacchus-like appearance.

“All I’m saying is if we’re going to be dating, we have to make a public appearance sooner or later. How is it you always make me feel as if I’m the one out of line?” He bit his lip the way he did when trying to think of what to say. “Do you think I’m too stupid for you?”

“Dating?” Silver thought dating was like walking around covered in a slightly sticky residue; occasionally it felt pleasant only in that it made you aware of your body again, but mostly, it felt disgusting.

“So, I guess I should tell my folks not to expect you at Thanksgiving. Or ever.”

“Can we talk about this another time? Can we not talk?” She stroked his head and back as she said this, to soften the blow of her indifference.

The first Thanksgiving Silver had ever celebrated was her first one in New York. In their apartment in a ghetto called Bushwick, where the subway ran above ground and screeched and shook and blocked out the sky, she and Cole had watched WWII documentaries on television and listened to the squawking of live turkeys from the storefront across the street. They ate peanut butter crackers and pumpkin pie and drank Coors Light tallboys from the bodega on the corner. The pumpkin pie was some kind of holiday bonus from Cole’s boss. Back then, Cole worked at a North Carolina-style barbeque joint in Greenpoint—once an ardent vegetarian, he swore by the special sauce on their pork sandwich—where the walls were lined with frontier cooking equipment and any employee answering the phone said, “Biscuit.” What made this an official Thanksgiving, compared with all the ones before, was the fact they’d decided so. The fact they were together.

Driving through Fort Worth, Silver recalled the e-mail she’d received from Cole that morning—his reply to an ill-advised drunken e-mail of hers the night before. All it said was: *Sil: I miss you like the desert misses Rommel*. Ironic, she thought. She’d never felt like a WWII tank rolling across

the sand or an aggressor army on the attack; she'd always felt as if she were the one being run over.

At the Unbutton, ostrich-feather boas were on sale for \$69.99. The back wall was draped with every color of yarn imaginable; there was even a variety called Touch, and she did. They had samples of scarves hanging from the ceiling, magical scarves, sparkly and plumed. Silver walked beneath them, her arm stretched overhead, tapping each one as she went past, causing the material to whoosh and swing through the air.

There were glass beads, seed beads, and leopard-print felt. There were tassels and cotton balls called pompoms and ribbons and very long strands of fake pearls. There were instructional books on a rack in the corner, one of which was called *Stitch-n-Bitch*.

The wall labeled "Notions" was filled with circular knitting needles, bobbins, and plastic crochet hooks that reminded Silver of those penis straws she'd seen at bachelorette parties. And thimbles, lots and lots of thimbles. She picked up two packages of tortoise thimbles, which were the most expensive but the best because of how they fit, how they gripped longer down the finger than the rest. They had originally been used by seamstresses for the Japanese emperors.

The clerk must have had something big going on after work. She was wearing a tiny velvet slip dress and boots that swallowed her skinny calves so much so that Silver thought, *Those boots are wearing her*. The woman held a cell phone up to her ear while she punched slowly on the cash register, but she wasn't saying anything into it, just holding it there and looking straight in front of her. As Silver shook her head no to a bag, tossing the ostrich boa over her shoulder and the thimbles into her satchel, the woman pressed one palm down onto the counter and said loudly with vitriol and conviction, "Whatever you do, don't beg. He'll take you back eventually, but he'll spit on you good if you even get close to begging. Believe me."

She and Cole had finally settled with their pumpkins in a spot not far from the water, where geese were stirring up

fallen leaves, twisting their long, slick necks to rub up and down their backs. The hood of her sweatshirt up over her head, she carved the top off the pumpkin silently, methodically, with one hand firmly gripping the stem. After an eternity of scraping and hollowing out the insides, their hands were sticky and caked with orange slime, which they rubbed on each other's clothes, shoving and picking at each other. Silver made her pumpkin nearly all mouth, jagged teeth thick and long as fingers, and Cole's was practically all eyes, oblong and droopy like Japanese anime.

Cole had a thing about eyes. When they met for the first time, he'd been drawing charcoal faces in a notebook, strangely shaped eyes that flashed and dominated as if he secretly thought the ones possessed by normal humans grossly inadequate. Silver had just gotten off the train—her first time in New York and the last stop on the tour with The Rickety Sticks—and she stopped into a cafe in the East Village for an iced tea. A woman in a black cardigan was eating a frosted blueberry muffin and reading *The Art of War*. Two men at the table next to her were discussing which breed of dog was the most rabid. So, *I guess this is New York*, Silver had thought to herself. And then, *This is really no place for a washboard player*.

She heard him before she saw him.

"How much for the cowboy boots?" asked the man, Cole, of course, in the corner with his notebook of eyes. His dreadlocks, which he later cut off to play Othello in an underground theater production in Battery Park, were pulled back in a bandana.

"I have a hunch they'll be too small," she replied.

She'd planned on staying with him only for a few days or weeks maybe; why not see some of what they referred to as *The City* before going back, especially now that the tour was over?

One night she woke up crying in his bed, still a little drunk from the bar, the streetlight shining even through the blanket he'd taped over the window to keep out the artificial glow. Cole put on the kettle for tea. He asked over and over what was wrong, but she didn't know how to answer. She felt the weight of an enormous stone crushing her chest. It

was the weight of something tethering her to his bed, the weight of something that, by its outline, told her how impossible it would be to move it. It was the weight of finally, after so many nights in other cities attempting to disentangle herself from other bodies, not wanting to. It was the weight of wanting to stay. Like when she saw her first zydeco show at the Continental and felt an immediate but inexplicable sense of ownership. *This thing is mine.*

He lay down next to her in bed; he asked what he could do, what she wanted.

“I can’t say it. It’s too cliché,” she said.

“Then how am I supposed to know?”

“Just think of the most cliché thing a woman can say.”

“I don’t want to make any assumptions.”

“The *most* cliché thing.” She didn’t look at him but at the ceiling.

“Is it something like this?” he asked, wrapping his naked arms, the color of hot cocoa, all the way around her. And it was.

Later he would accuse her of only ever saying she loved him when she’d been drinking. Silver guessed he meant that was a bad thing, but maybe those were the only times it was true.

The morning Silver threw up after breakfast, she knew. She and Andy had played the cocktail game the night before—the one where you guess the ingredients of each drink for points—and so, even though she hadn’t vomited from alcohol in years, Silver still might have blamed the nausea on the fact that she’d mixed too many liquors. She might have attributed it to that if she weren’t already two weeks late.

“How could you do this to me?” she said, choking, when Andy knocked on the door to the bathroom.

“What, baby?”

“How could you forget the cilantro in the Pico de Gallo? It wasn’t as if I didn’t have any because I did, right next to the garlic in the cheese drawer.” Andy had cooked breakfast that morning—a sausage omelet with Pico.

“I’m allergic to cilantro,” he said, trying the doorknob, but she’d locked it. “Are you saying you’re sick because of a *lack* of cilantro in the Pico de Gallo?”

“I’m saying, get the fuck out of my house and don’t come back.”

“What is wrong with you? Silver, let me in.”

“Look. You’re allergic to cilantro. You don’t like cumin in your guacamole. You can’t stand hot showers,” she yelled, pounding her fist on the door. “You are flavorless. You are lukewarm. It just isn’t going to work out.”

And so he left.

Silver ordered in pizza and spent the rest of the day watching the History Channel: a thing on Holocaust photographers, an exploration on the spread of disease in the Red Army, and then a show documenting the presence of mysterious crop circles in the late twentieth century. The circles had been found throughout the world but were concentrated in southern Britain “disturbingly close to Stonehenge.” The affected crops supposedly showed signs of microwave energy, and people talked about strange white lights, about extra-terrestrials, about other dimensions and untapped powers of the mind. She strapped on her washboard and halfheartedly riffed tinny background sound effects to the dramatic camera dives. Eventually, she turned it off—the old television making that sucking sound as the picture collapsed—deciding people who believed in something like that were measurably sadder than those who didn’t believe in anything at all.

After nightfall, she went for a walk through the half-finished Robinson Ranch retirement community, perched on the hill like a ghost town—no teenagers making out on the golf course, no infants crying, no cocktails on porches. Everyone was inside. Everything was still. Splinters of light from the windows of a few houses cut the darkness around her, like portals to other worlds. One couple played cards at the kitchen table below a metal-framed mirror bookended by spider plants. A woman in a rocker knitted and dozed and knitted. Shadows from television screens. Bottles of colored glass filled with powders and beads and milky liquids. Curtains made from faded floral sheets. A house with two orange candles in each window, but not real candles, plastic and plugged in somewhere and yet beautiful nonetheless. And Silver thought if the world were always nighttime, if the world were always walking in the dark past people’s win-

dows draped in turquoise-colored scarves, she would consider having it, she would have considered having it before. But it wasn't.

She walked home. She stood in the middle of the living room, looking at the pronghorn with his watery eyes and then at the gemsbok, with his spear-like horns and black and white face, symmetrical, like a Stella painting. They looked back. They gave nothing away.

Instead of carving the third pumpkin, they'd made out and watched the geese in pursuit of scraps along the water, telling each other stories. She told him how her father never raked their yard growing up because he said leaves were nature's blanket. Cole held four fingers up in the air, an indication of how many times he'd already heard that story. He told her about something he'd read in the paper, something about a man backing his car out of the garage, swerving lightheartedly into a pile of leaves in the driveway and killing his daughter who was hiding underneath it. "Can you imagine? My God, how that must feel."

"We could take them by the daycare around the corner from us, give them to the kids," he said, as they lay on their backs, her head on his stomach. "They were asking for that, I think. Something about wanting to fill up the yard with them. Pumpkins, I mean."

"I'm not going to play with the kids, Cole. I don't feel like it."

"I wasn't asking you to play with the damn kids," he said, shifting his body so her face lay on the rolling bones of his ribs. "Just, never mind."

"I kind of like our pumpkins. They're a pair," she said, sitting up, beginning to clean the mess they'd made. "I want them to sit on our stoop, together, with tea light candles inside them burning all night long. Just the two of them, glowing."

They rode back to Bushwick on the subway, holding their pumpkins, jack-o'-lanterns now, between gloved hands as they leaned up against each other, weary from the day, as silent as everyone else on the car who must also have felt diminished by the early darkness that sets in after daylight

saving time. A few passengers stared at them, a white woman and a black man, arms and legs caked in pumpkin guts. A girl of about ten held a plastic container of water on her lap with a blue fish inside, dark and oily; a sticker on the container read “Hi, My Name Is Pablo.”

That night they invited some friends over and sat on their stoop smoking joints and drinking beer until early in the morning, Cole eventually falling on the bed in a heap as those too fucked up to make it home passed out on the couch and floor. The last one left awake, Silver stood for a long time at the window and watched their jack-o'-lanterns flick light back and forth in an intimate conversation only they would know. The light that made them so brilliant now would eventually hasten their decay, rotting them out from the inside. Rather than let this happen, she opened the door, wrapping her arms around her chest in response to the cold. And she blew them out.

Silver and the other musicians she played with on the North Texas project decided to accept a live gig on Denton's Fry Street for fun and extra cash. She wore the ostrich boa wrapped tightly around her neck.

“Sil, honey, this is Bombay Sapphire with pineapple juice,” said Bluebird, the accordion player and lead singer, when she asked for a drink of his screwdriver.

“Can you see with those things on?” she asked, pointing at his gold-framed wrap-around sunglasses.

“I can't see without them,” he said.

That night Bluebird looked like a cross between a lounge singer and someone recently released from prison. His pitch-black shoulders and arm muscles, covered with sharp-edged tattoos, bulged from his T-shirt like beasts, but his slacks shimmered when the light hit just right. He had gold teeth, gold earrings, and ivory attached to the end of his plaits beneath a newsboy cap worn backward. His squeezebox was the most beautiful Silver had ever seen—mother-of-pearl keys and red velvet flaps.

When it was their turn for the stage, they began by playing “Louisiana Saturday Night,” a song they would each be content to never play ever again. But people like what they

already know. They played Beau Jocque's "Give Him Cornbread" and some Buckwheat Zydeco and some of the originals they'd worked up in the studio.

The mostly older crowd went crazy all night, dancing violently, running into chairs, swinging their bodies up and down from the hips, grabbing onto each other in a cathartic fury. There were a lot of aging hippies in Nature Conservancy T-shirts and billowing skirts, congratulating themselves on being hip enough to love zydeco, on having come to watch the black man squeeze and sing. On the slower songs, Bluebird sang in Creole, stretching his accordion like taffy, wailing and weaving it with his voice. About halfway through the night, Silver noticed Andy at the back of the crowd, leaning against the bar. His arms were crossed, his drink in one hand. He was brooding. She didn't look at him again.

Silver's washboard had a spiral crimp, which gave it more of a ringing sound, made it great for thimbles. Some players attack the washboard with whisks or openers or spoons, but she would play only with her fingers, feeling the electricity of the hum run through the web of tendons, earrings brushing a shoulder when she leaned her head to one side or the other. It wasn't performing exactly—it was the discovery that what you did the rest of the day was performing and this was living.

For the first time since being back, Silver felt the music penetrate her body.

She stroked *down, down*, deliberately and with force, *down, down, down*.

Like half a heartbeat, like going down stairs with only one leg.

Down, down, down, letting her thumbs follow at a whisper. Like the eyelid blinking, falling.

Down, down, down.

Silver thought of that day in the park with the pumpkins. She thought of how the carving knife had been jagged like a key and how you had to saw slowly up and down or it would jerk out of control and cut beyond your intention. Like how love did not always give enough to make up for the things it took. She thought of how they'd left the third pumpkin, the extra, the "in case we fuck one up," in the park, blank and uncarved, for whoever might come along. Their third—

maybe the child or their life together or maybe just all the other little things—that, by the end of the day, had become too heavy to carry home. Silver looked down at her body, rocking back and forth on the stage. She felt the metal washboard lying flat against her stomach as if the two shared one skin, as if it were holding her in place. And, at that moment, she understood. It was.