

CLOSE TO BEING EVERYTHING

I.

My friend Anne had sex with an old stripper in the gravel lot of the Cotton Eye Joe. She and the man curled their way through the press of bodies, tables, cigarette smoke. Her step light in the neon of the Budweiser signs. His thick hand rested on the curve of her hip and the small exposed line of flesh between the tank top and the beginning of her blue jeans. Outside, the night crawled. Interstate 40 pumped cars along its white piping. Drunks stumbled to their trucks on gravel feet.

II.

Anne used to drive a real beater. It streaked oil down the highway, used a whole quart on trips to Chattanooga. She stuck chewing gum over the check engine lights on the dashboard, said she didn't need another accusatory look. Now she drives a Subaru. On weekends, she'll take it to South Carolina and park it right on the beach, drinking Coors and tanning her legs in the rolled-down window as the sun spreads purple and yellow over the horizon.

III.

On a Monday before Thanksgiving, we swung that Subaru up a mountainside in Sevier County and along a gravel road to look at a forty thousand dollar house. Anne thumbed through penny savers and Thrifty Nickels, skimming those greasy pages for the scariest listings in

three counties. Any place better than where we were. We grew up made for running that interstate out of town.

The Subaru dumped us on a dead end road with Rebel flag mobile homes. The kind of place where they pop the hood on the cinderblock Buick if a new pill shipment's come in. A holler with a long bottle neck.

IV.

Before the Subaru and the stripper and the house in the holler, Anne had a boyfriend that drank too much. He wore shots in layers. He wore them like boxing gloves or football padding. He piled them on the way that stripper peeled them off. One day, she had a thick bangle of a bruise on her wrist. The next, the bruise spread. It tattooed a switchback curve along her ribs.

V.

A man with no sleeves walked onto his porch. The railings leaned to one side. He watched us slide the car to the two-story farmhouse. There was a plastic toilet in the middle of the driveway, a tall oak growing out of the cracked boards of the deck, a set-up for gamecocks behind the house. We pushed against a steep rock cliff to climb onto the backporch and shimmy open a window.

The inside was foul. The drop ceiling lay on the floor. Black mold spidered across its tiles. Upstairs, the sheetrock came out of the wall in fistfuls, punched apart after the foreclosure. The copper wiring long ago sold to the scrap man.

I wanted to leave. She wanted to stay.

"Think of the space," Anne said. "Look at the way the mountains form up around it. It's so close to being everything."