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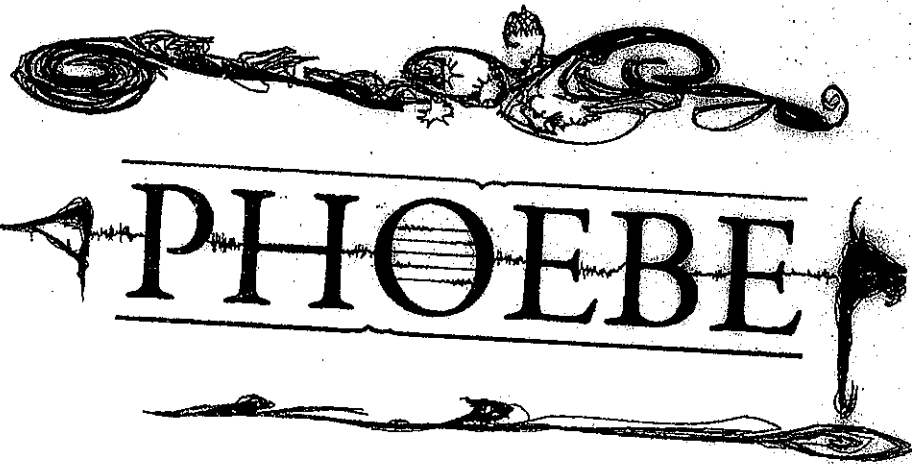
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ASKING FOR IT

We wake to the dust. Eight hours ago, we ran a wet cloth over the bookshelves, shook out the blankets, and beat the couch cushions until they no longer pillowed dirty air. We swept the floor into piles of dirt and hair and lint and threw it into the trash bin outside. It doesn't matter. In the morning, dust sticks to our eyelashes and we try, unsuccessfully, to blink it away.

Beamer gets out of bed first. He thinks I'm still asleep because he stands at the bookshelf and stares at the layer that formed overnight. He runs a long, thin finger over the surface and dust clumps on his fingertip as if we haven't cleaned for months. His body is mostly square, with sharp-edged shoulders and nonexistent hips. Except for those hands and their feminine length and curve, he successfully passes for a man.

"Hey," I say. He looks down at me, his thick-skinned face grooved and worn the way his leather jacket by the door is. Too much sun and too much time, he says if I look at him for too long. But even though we've never talked about it, I've seen him inject himself with testosterone every couple of weeks, and I know it's more than time that sharpened his face and hardened the feminine out of his skin. Around him, dust particles float like pollen glittering in the sun. He breathes it in.

"God damn dust," he says. His body is stiff, classic Beamer. I get out of bed.

"Beam," I say. "Look." When his board of a body rotates towards me like an old door, I run my tongue along the trail his finger left behind. The dust coats the edges of my tongue and tastes of tired.

"Alma," Beam says, "you're a crazy fuck." He smiles for the first time in days and fills the coffee pot from the tap. The dust sticks to the roof of my mouth and in my teeth.

Beam chatters the way he did when I first moved in. He's spouting off facts about dust, pointing at the ceiling and telling me that, believe it or not, it was thickest up there. "They say dust is made of skin cells," he says. But this dust builds faster than we could ever shed it and I wonder who I've just consumed. Beam opens the refrigerator and digs around until he finds the jar of cheap jam, lid crusted shut with dried berry. As we wait for the bread to

toast, Albuquerque opens up outside our window, the wind rolling over our yard, kicking dirt against the sides of our house. Beam's feminine hands clench and unclench until I wrap my bear-like arms around his waist. He stares out the window.

When it comes time for work, Beam straps neon bands over the arms of his leather jacket before hopping onto his bicycle. His backpack weighs him down as he pedals away and through his baggy jeans I see the strain in his thick thighs. The dirt kicks up behind him.

My own pack is light, filled only with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a flute I found at a garage sale nearly a decade before. Not one of those cheap kid kinds, but the real deal, a shiny piece of polished silver on my coarse skin. My fingers are not feminine like Beam's. They are fat and hairy, link sausages that keep the metal greased.

I make my way down Central Avenue towards Old Town. For weeks, the weather has been nice but Old Town and my pockets have sat empty. The sky is as grit brown as the adobe walls, and although the shops have been empty for weeks, today the tourists are out in droves, snapping pictures of hanging vines of red chili despite the murky weather.

There's nothing in Old Town that shocks them more than the sight of me, a woman with thick hairy fingers, bear of a body, brown cheeks drooping like sagging breasts. And the flute as delicate as a small bird. I loom over them as my notes catch in the wind, swirling around and then drifting away, leaving behind the memory of sound. Their manicured hands dig through clutch purses to toss loose change into the old tin can at my feet.

By the time I finish for the day, my lips are dry and fingers tired. I wipe down the flute, empty it of my spit, and feel exposed. I throw the flute into my bag and head back to Beamer and the dust. I drop the coins into the cherry red piggy bank by the door and kiss the back of his neck hello.

As I sweep the floors, Beamer boils down chunks of beef with salt and potatoes and carrots, even though he grew up here with green chili and flavor. He thinks he might have been Irish, so he boils things down, slaps it on a plate so it can sit colorless. By the time he's done cooking, the floors are mopped and shiny. We usually eat quickly, not asking about each other's days because there isn't much to say that hasn't been said before, and Beam likes to eat in the quiet, his thick jaw chewing the meat in concentration. Yet tonight, Beam is in a good mood.

"It's my brother's birthday," he says. He stabs a chunk of beef with a fork.

"Oh?" I say. I hadn't known he had a brother. For how often he

talked of his parents, he might've washed ashore on a seashell for all I knew. I assumed he covered over his past until it was only the residue of a bad dream the same way I had. But his stories were mostly amicable, his mother teaching him to cross a street, his father smoking her Virginia Slims on the back porch. They were the kinds of stories not meant for an audience, told simply to resurrect a memory.

"He hated his birthday," Beamer says. "He didn't like the attention." I chew carrot after carrot, waiting for him to say more.

There are things Beamer always talks about. The way he sold drugs in South Valley alleyways until he had enough money for top surgery, that in the end, after he cut that part of himself away, he could pretend the encounters were cut away with it. He'd talk for hours about his bicycle, the way he found one part or another on the edges of town or about the people who donated their junk at the Salvation Army where he worked. Recently, he'd spoken of the dust, facts he learned from his boss or plans for how we could beat it. He talked about many things, but never about a brother.

"Are you going to call him?" I ask.

"No," he says.

After dinner, I clean the dishes and Beam, with a stained brown rag and a yellow can of Pledge, tackles the bedposts and bookshelves, table surfaces and stereo. He wipes the TV, the windowsills, the jars of mayonnaise and peanut butter and canned corn sitting in the pantry. Together, we beat the rugs and couch cushions; we shake off the bedspread, and I don't ask about his brother.

When we're done, I step into the shower. Beam arrives as I'm about to step out, his breath smelling of whiskey. The mention of his brother has opened up questions and I want to ask them. Like where does his brother live and are his parents still alive. And when was the last time he saw them. And did they know. But instead I take the soap and lather it into his shoulders, scrub it as if to rid his muscles of the dust, too. I run my hands over the place where his breasts once were wondering what it must be like to have my own suddenly gone. My thumbs trace the thin scars, and Beam sighs.

It is only in the shower that Beamer ever says, "I love you." But even then, his face is sad, like loving me is worrisome or maybe my loving him is worrisome. Or maybe it's worrisome that I never say it back. Because before Beamer, love was the slow turning of a doorknob in the middle of the night, my mother's thick hand over my mouth, and the way she averted her eyes in the morning as I got ready for school. Love, she said, made her do it in the first

place. Love was what happened because I'd asked for it. There was another word for these days with Beamer. Words like safety. Words like home. And so when he tells me he loves me, I do what I always do. I run my hands through his hair and push the wet strands behind his ears. I tell him that if he likes, I'll cut his hair.

Beam's the first to leave. I rinse my body of his soap, pick at my fingernails, dig the dirt out with my front teeth. When I get out, he's already in bed. We've lived together for six months now, and on most nights, he'll rest his arm across my own. Sometimes he'll trace his thin finger up and down my forearm and in the dark, I'll answer his wants with my own. But on this night, he's facing the wall, his thick back curved inward. I leave him be.

I awake to the sound of his coughing, a hacking so thick and rough, I find I'm holding my own breath and have to force myself to breathe. I wrap my arms around him until the coughing stops. But even then, each breath is an ungreased hinge. It squeaks as he pushes air in and out, in and out, and I imagine the dust clogging the passageways.

"Beamer," I say. Its dark, but I can see his eyes are open wide. "Beam, we're going to the hospital."

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When I met Beam, I was living out of cheap motels on Central Avenue and, on warmer nights and when I didn't have much of a choice, I slept between the cardboard boxes in the bed of my truck.

Two months before, I was working in Northern Arizona, fixing potholes and laying concrete, playing my flute alongside empty highways, holding signs and telling drivers when to stop, go, or simply slow down. One afternoon, an accident backed traffic up for miles. Car after car piled one on top of another, each one filled with people leaving somewhere and going somewhere else while I stood stagnant. That afternoon, I filled my truck with the few belongings I had worth saving and headed east because there was more land east than west. I'd spent over a decade working those highways, but the land felt like memories of memories, unidentifiable cravings on my tongue, and as I left the asphalt behind, it lingered.

I headed to New Mexico because I liked its tagline, "The Land of Enchantment" and it called to me. Later, I learned that it called to many people. People who were driving through and decided to stop and stay. People who'd once stopped and then drove on through again. I came to understand that just because something called you didn't mean it was saying anything worth-

while.

When I first saw Albuquerque, the entire length of the city stretched before me as I drove toward it. A single mountain stopped its path in the east, but it spanned west across what had to be the Rio Grande, and kept going, and spanned north into the horizon, and kept going, enveloping the land. And though it was bright and brilliant, sun glinting off more windows than I thought was possible in a single town, I couldn't understand why I didn't feel relief. I'd thought, for whatever reason, that the city would provide an answer to the monotony of my past. For days, I searched for that relief in the adobe, in the turquoise painted on the freeways, in the murals on the sides of buildings and within the dark corners of the city's bars. I searched through chain-link fenced alleyways and sunrises more beautiful than any sunrise I'd ever seen, along Route 66 and in dilapidated neighborhoods downtown.

I sought but found nothing until I met Beamer on the Central Bus at a time when his previous bicycle had been stolen and he was gathering parts for another one. He turned to me, droopy gray eyes looking into my big, brown face and told me he was on his way to the Salvation Army where he sifted through the donation pile and stuck prices on things in the arbitrary manner of pricing junk. His voice was strange, gruff but lilting.

"How do you know what things should cost?" I asked. I usually shirked off small talk with strangers, but I wanted to hear more of his voice, to search its undertones for its strange source. He shrugged, stared around the cavern of our bus and settled on my shoes. They were a worn pair, the soles so thin rocks pressed into my calluses.

"How much for the shoes?" he asked.

I moved them underneath me.

"Come on," he said. "Gimme a price." The bus pulled into a stop and more people crowded in, the strange mix of college kids and morning drunks pushing against each other. A man with missing teeth laughed as people walked past.

"Five dollars," I said.

"Too much," he replied.

I pursed my lips, and he grinned, a crooked-toothed ghost of a grin. "See?" he said. "Anyone can do it."

"I'm Alma," I said. I stretched out my thick hand to introduce myself.

His hands were tucked into the pockets of his leather jacket, and he looked at my palm as if unsure what it was. At first, I thought he was deciding whether or not to touch me. I'd spent most of my life on the outskirts.

I was a freak on the playground, a freak alongside the highway, a freak even on this bus alongside people who were already drunk. I was about to put my hand into my own pocket, but he grasped it firmly. Too firm. If he hadn't, I might not have noticed. If he hadn't, I might never have stayed in this town.

Despite the calluses, his hand was surprisingly small and delicate. I couldn't help but think I could have crushed it. Maybe that's why he ditched work that day and he took me home: to show me that I couldn't. Regardless, neither of us was surprised when I ran my tongue over the scars that marked where his breasts had been.

Afterwards, when he learned I was living in the bed of my truck, he invited me to stay with him. "Until you get your feet on the ground," he said.

On the day I moved in, the house next to his caught fire and burned, blaring more heat than the desert sun, taking with it the brittle grass that trailed off in front of Beam's house. Beam wasn't there. He was walking up and down the rows of the flea market, trying to find a new seat for his bike. Afterwards, the flakes of ash formed a gray film on the window.

When I awoke the next morning, the house stank of damp cardboard and burn, and Beam was already up and about. He'd swept the floors and was tackling the windows. He stared at me through his streaky circles, the rag moving over the glass. My mound of a body took up most of the double bed, and he smiled at me through the glass.

We heard a rumor that the owners of the burnt building were planning to rebuild something bigger and more modern, something that would take up twice as much sky. But either the construction fell through or the people used the insurance money to buy a pre-made home elsewhere. The house was never rebuilt, the lot next to us sat empty, and without it to keep the earth on the ground, the dust continued to grow.

At first, the dust was conquerable. Beam and I saved and bought wood chips; we zero-scaped with rocks and bricks, but we couldn't afford enough to make much of a difference. The dirt from the other house drifted through the fencing and settled on top of everything we put down. We bought humidifiers, hung tarps on the fence, kept dust sheets on the couch and over the bed, got rid of every dust collecting knick-knack save the cherry colored piggy bank that was filled with our stray coins. We even tried asking the neighbors what they were doing to beat the dust, but they only looked at us blankly and asked, "What dust?"

Our life took on the same simple routine: eat, sleep, dust, repeat.

There is little room for anything else.

When we return from the hospital, the sterile smell of the emergency room clings to our clothing. We were there long enough for the sun to rise before we were able to see a doctor who could barely look Beam in the eye. In the end, we spent a thousand dollars for a prescription for an inhaler and the advice to "stay home and rest." We didn't tell the doctor that resting in the dust wouldn't do any good.

At the house, Beam stops in the doorway and stares at the dust motes that dance in the early dawn as if to taunt us.

"Come on," I say. I gesture to the bed and Beam gets in. I shake out the comforter before I lay it on top of him. He stays in bed all day while I clean the house. In the evening, he clips the hospital bracelet from his wrist and boils down beef.

"You feeling better?" I ask.

Beam shrugs. He clears his throat. "I guess," he says. He stirs the pot with a slotted spoon, watching the meat bob back up to the surface. I can tell he is thinking something, and I wait for him to tell me what it is. I'm not expecting him to ask me a question.

"Alma," he says. His voice is choked. "What are we gonna do?"

I know he means about the dust. About the hospital bill and the cost of the medication. About the rent that will be due next week, and the dwindling food in our refrigerator. I tell him we're going to shower. "And then," I say, "we're gonna go to bed." I tell him we'll worry about the dust in the morning. That we'll make the money. I tell him these things but both of us know that I'm talking just for talking's sake. That we're both worrying. That we barely made enough money as it was, and I know he's remembering the way it used to come easy in alleyways.

We stay in the shower until the water turns cold. We get out together, and I wrap him in a towel and help him change. He's capable of doing it himself, but I need to feel useful. By the time we turn in for bed, he's telling me he's feeling better, that he just needed a day to recharge.

"It's gonna be okay," he says. "Things will look up."

I trace a finger up and down his forearm and say, "It's gonna be okay."

But the next morning, we wake to a brown sky and Beamer doesn't get out of bed. He will miss work again, and I know I should at least head

to Old Town and bring home enough change to buy dinner but no one will be there in this dust storm. Instead, I sit on the bed and hold my flute in my hands. I need my brain to shut down the way it does when I play and so I assemble its pieces slowly, put the brass to my lips, and breathe into it.

I play for abandoned highways and twisting doorknobs, for the dust and for the bus and for the man who stole Beamer's bicycle so we could meet. I play until I have nothing left in me to play, and the song becomes a series of notes without melody. Melody without song. Beam rises from the bed and stands by the window. When I'm done, he says nothing. He pulls a cigarette from his back pocket, strikes a match, and breathes in the smoke.

I align my fingers onto the clasps, press and release the holes. Without air, the flute is metallic and hollow. Beam lets the smoke slide out the sides of his mouth as if he no longer has the effort to blow it away. He looks at the burning orange, the paper crackling at his fingertips, and presses the lit end into the outside of his hand.

"What are you doing?" I ask. I move towards him, but he turns away. I can't help but think of the first time we met, the way that hand shook mine as if he had something to prove.

He sucks the burn on his skin, and I'm overcome with how much I don't know about him. Between bits of boiled beef, he's spat out morsels of his past, but I don't know where the morsels have come from. I don't know what his life was like as a child—as a girl. It is unsettling to know that somewhere in that square-bodied man sits another body.

I long for the familiar monotony of the highway, the regularity of patching roads, of having a task and finishing it. There is nothing in this house to finish. You can't beat this dust. Already, the bookshelf is covered, and I run a finger through it. Beam said dust is made of skin cells but what happens when skin is made of dust, too?

"I'm going out," I say and without waiting for him to respond, I get in my truck. The wipers need to be changed, and one of the rubber blades is flapping sadly over the windshield as it pushes the dust storm out of my view. I head west on I-40 until I'm ten miles out of the city, sitting amidst tourists who exited at the same viewing point. From up high, I can see the way the storm is a furious brown cloud.

Beamer told me this place used to be covered in water. That fish fossils can be found deep in the ground and from up high, I can see that we do, in fact, live within a basin. But where did all the water go? We are surrounded by desert, and I wonder if the dust is a way for the land to reclaim the land or if the city is growing upwards as if it were always meant to be there.

I stay all day because the air is clear, because to go back to Beamer is to go back to the dust. I stay until the sun falls from the sky and the sweat on my skin is cooled by a crisp breeze. I stay until I can feel the chill settle deep into my pores, until I feel the way my body is a part of this land, a part of this air, a part of this slowly clearing sky. It is only when the night can blink through again that I go back to Beamer.

When I return, he turns toward me, old door opening. His face looks strange and wild. His hair is disheveled, his spine curved like the lip of a lower case "r." I move across the room to where he stands. There are more burns on his hands and he's chewed the cuticles off his thumbs. I think again of the first time I drove into the city, the way it opened up before me in all its glittering, sprawling glory. I take his small hands in my big ones and before he can ask me where I've been, I say to him,

"Look, Beamer, look. At least we have this."

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