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SAVIORS OF LONELINESS

This is a work nonfiction. Some names have been changed in order to protect identity.

My apartment in Baku, Azerbaijan was romantic until the cats arrived. Though small, my room opened up to the balcony with a front-row view of one of the only two Orthodox churches, its silver-plated onion dome topped with a cross and surrounded by a felt green roof, and further in the distance were beige minarets capped in gold of a new mosque. Certain mornings, mesmerized, I stood at the edge of the balcony and watched religious ceremonies performed outside of the church, just yards from my apartment, where women covered in headscarves and men in religious robes prayed and sang. A priest swung a thurible in the air in the metered rhythm of a metronome from which incense flowed, its smoky scent reaching me on typical windy days.

At first, the apartment was a sanctuary, a reprieve from the city's culture shock, the car horns that never stopped but only lessened late at night, the men who dominated the streets after sundown, gathering in teahouses, wearing only black or gray, and the staring eyes of both men and women, not because I was a foreigner. I blended in easily enough, until I opened my mouth. I have dark brown hair, blue eyes, and mild olive skin. Generally, Azerbaijanis have thick black hair, are short in stature, with medium-toned skin. Azerbaijanis stare, both men and women, at everyone. My body language only helped me to stand out. In my twenties I'd been a dancer, and I was not skilled at standing still. When I wanted to fit in, and at times I did, we all want to be anonymous, I restricted my own movement, that desire to

stretch, an exercise in itself to deny the impulses of what would be deemed here as grand gesture.

Those first two months, September and October of 2012, I was constantly stimulated by newness. I took photographs. Walking to my neighborhood metro station Nizami my first time, nothing was ordinary. In front of a dilapidated wall was tendir, oval-shaped Azeri bread strapped to a three-legged chair with rope as advertisement like a passenger buckled up before flight. A middle-aged woman wearing a headscarf sold lemons out of a cart. I bought two lemons, tucked them into my purse, and walked into the metro where people physically pushed in front of the ticket booth. One man tried to cut. I yelled at him: *Pujalusta, budte terpliviy* (Please, be patient). He was frustrated by my slowness, gesturing at me while speaking in Azerbaijani. My irritation burned off easily. These very annoyances were the cultural differences I sought, and newness trumped any negative feelings, usually. The escalator's descent was so long that I couldn't spot the train platform below, and across from me, where the escalator ascended, the heads, torsos, and legs of passengers lifted into view in a habitual cadence that surprised me nonetheless for I didn't know whom to expect. On the platform, I held my camera up to a tile mosaic but before my finger reached the button, a guard yelled at me. Photos, I was told, were prohibited after terrorist attacks in '94. I'd read about the attack but forgot. In that moment, more than other social blunders, I was obviously the tourist, the foreigner, able to forget a traumatic event because it hadn't happened to me on American soil. During rush hour, people pressed and pushed so forcefully to both

enter and exit that I felt as though my feet weren't even on the ground. Weightlessly, I entered the train for the first time.

This stimulation was great distraction from my personal woes. My husband Steven was in America at his new job as assistant professor in northern California. He would have come, he'd said, if he hadn't found work. Though I'd wanted to live overseas, I was anxious about having oceans separating us again. In 2008, he'd lived for six months in Russia while I lived in the States during the first year of my MFA program in creative writing. We were making decisions based on our academic careers, and these very decisions were separating us.

"Who turns down a Fulbright?" he'd asked.

I'd considered it, and for the record, people turned down all sorts of things. But at the time, and I would be absolutely wrong about this, I'd thought that going alone overseas to Azerbaijan was my last long-term trip I would make without Steven, and seeing this confidently and as a smart career move, I accepted the fellowship.

"We'll be fine. We'll talk every few days on Skype," Steven had said. He promised to visit me during Christmas, which meant we'd be apart for almost four months.

In Baku, I blamed the Internet that failed us. After our Skype calls dropped the first few weeks, Steven and I resorted to chatting on Skype. When I missed his face, his six-foot body, his barrel chest and milky voice, I would call anyway just to see him. But he'd freeze on the screen and I'd become sad. Another time, and more than once, he ignored my calls and emails because he

was angry with me for various reasons, one being that I had gone to a bar at night. I sympathized with his insecurities. I'd been in his shoes before when he'd been in Russia, imagining the foreign country as an alluring place for an affair, geography itself a seductress. Anywhere, though, I knew, was an easy location for an affair. And it would have been easy. Other foreigners were lonely, and some men who knew I was married hit on me anyway. I was lonely, too, and I missed having sex, but I didn't struggle with monogamy overseas or stateside. Steven tracked my patterns via Skype, seeing when I turned on my computer (which equated to Sandra returning home late), yet other times he begged for me to come back to America in a sad voice like yearning that left me feeling torn as though I now had a choice to make even though I'd already made it, with his blessing, even with him inciting such an opportunity, to live in Azerbaijan for nine months.

I had my roommate Harriet to talk to sometimes. We never became close. She is German and taught German language for four years in Baku. She didn't seem happy there and was easily frustrated, but hers was a love story in the end. She would marry an Azeri man, one of her students, who spoke her language and was headed to Germany on scholarship to study to be a doctor. They now have a child together. But before all of this, she seemed desperate to leave. Sometimes she cried in frustration because students weren't doing assignments. They came to class empty-handed. They talked and texted while she lectured. Worse, they weren't showing up. I experienced similar frustrations my first two months. I taught ESL and academic writing. I collected cell phones from the busy hands of texting fingers. By

the end of a class, I might have thirteen out of thirty-two phones, but by the end of the year, I might have collected zero because they knew I'd take them. My first semester, I had unfair expectations. Some of my students were plagiarizing. As topics for their descriptive essays, some students wrote about Azerbaijani women being the most beautiful and Azerbaijan being the best country. Sometimes I wondered if I was in a version of North Korea. In America, plagiarizing was an ethical issue, also, an issue of laziness. Americans knew better, though they still cheated. To alter lessons for Azerbaijanis, I needed to understand what they'd been taught and how they'd been taught. When I surrendered to certain expectations, teaching became easier, and I taught better. This had been something in my control.

Most foreigners spoke of loneliness, what they missed back home or what issues made them feel like outsiders in Baku. One American missed her dog, another, her husband; many missed clean air and grass to lounge on. An American teacher said she missed working with school officials who were truthful; also, she missed the ability to be anonymous. In Baku, with her glorious height and her comfortable white sneakers, she stood out amid the women petite, despite their stilettos, because of their stilettos. Loneliness might have been one of the reasons Harriet rescued three feral kittens one fall day that were lying in front of our apartment building outside of a shoe store where I would linger—in the shoe store—wishing I could afford some new pair of boots in a Baku boutique on some of my lonelier days. Shopping was its own brief comfort if only for the familiarity of roles.

I was followed around the store by a sales girl during which the exterior foreign world fell away as I held a boot in my hand and considered the leather, rubbed a thumb to feel texture, and imagined myself in the walking vehicle of the socially well off as compared to the manly loafers I wore that two fashionable teenaged girls made fun of me for while riding the bus. I would finally buy boots there in early winter once they went on sale. Everything was cheaper in America.

Strays are everywhere in Baku. Cats curl up on stoops, linger near apartment doors, waiting to slyly slip into the stairwell where they beg for food. Locals prefer them outside where they guard their territory like gangs, controlling their section of the courtyard. Older “aunties” might feed them scraps, but overall, the attitude toward strays is one of mild tolerance.

Harriet didn’t ask me to live with cats. Instead, she scooped up the motherless kittens and contained them in our bathroom. “Look how cute they are,” she said, gingerly opening the door even though they were sequestered to the well of a bucket, their three bodies nearly inanimate except for their protruding ribs displaying life in shallow breaths. They weren’t cute, exactly. They were fuzzy with dirty patches of new fur, the eyes of one glued shut by its own secretions—some infection. They were, all three of them, dying.

Harriet said she would take them to the vet. I assumed the vet would put them to sleep, that euthanizing the ill kittens might be the kindest option. She returned, though, with the kittens, medication, and a diagnosis that the kitten with the pierc-

ing cry was blind. The following day, our landlord was scheduled to visit. He would kick us out if he knew we had pets, so minutes before the landlord arrived, Harriet placed the kittens in a cardboard box with punctured holes and taped the lid. The box o' cats was stored in a cabinet on our fourth floor balcony while the landlord visited for thirty minutes. With such anxiety about their condition, I could barely focus on what the landlord was saying. He knew I spoke some Russian, so he talked to me in a fast conversational speed, at times beyond my understanding. My brain was split between translating his words and simultaneously worrying if the cats were breathing. To appease him and get him out the door, I responded a lot with, "Da, da, da." After the landlord left, Harriet and I ran through my bedroom to the balcony. Like a magician, the blind one had escaped its confines, both the box and the balcony. Harriet discovered its body splayed on our paved yard behind the apartment. She carried the kitten to the vet who put it to sleep.

The same time the cats arrived, an American friend told me about a women's shelter. An Azeri woman had recently fled her village and her husband. She had brought her son with her but had no other family locally. I asked if I could meet her, and the American gave me directions. I had no social work experience. The desire to go there was a woman's impulse and a writer's impulse, too. I accepted every invitation given to me and even invited myself to students' homes. I wanted to see Azerbaijan in both its overt glory, like the flagpole, the second tallest in the world (Damn the Tajiks for first place!), and its covert ignominy,

in other words, what the presidential family preferred foreigners not see—the poverty, the forced evictions of home owners and demolitions of privately owned homes on prime real estate that the government wants for its own end.

The shelter was in a secret location, and the directions to get there by foot were like this: At the guard station turn left. Keep the flag on your right. Pass a fruit stand, etc. Those directions were housed within the fortress walls of Baku's twelfth-Century city called the Old City at the western edge of the Caspian Sea. The oil in the air was palpable—the wind wafting the scent of the country's most valuable and incendiary commodity from water to land. I walked narrow, twisting alleyways and pale cobblestone streets as I looked for the various landmarks. Just before I turned a corner to the shelter, I saw one of my students, a gregarious young woman who was walking with a man hand in hand.

“Teacher,” she said, and her red-painted lips that matched her stilettos opened in surprise, “Don't tell anyone you saw me, please!”

I promised her that I wouldn't, and wondered if they walked these streets protected by the fortress only to hold hands, to be invisible to everyone but each other.

In these streets, I was reminded of the book *Ali and Nino*, a novel about an aristocratic Azerbaijani man and a Georgian princess who fall in love (*Azerbaijan's Romeo and Juliet*) set during a turbulent milieu, the early 1900s, the eve of the Bolsheviks. In the book, Ali says, “Our old town is full of secrets and mysteries, hidden nooks and little alleys.”

The shelter was dilapidated with a crumbling brick exterior and narrow wooden doors so skewed that they didn't align. The neighboring building was new, its brick smooth and whole. In the background were the Flame Towers, pointed glass buildings in construction that, surrounded by so many stone buildings centuries old and a few stories tall, appeared like an exaggerated harbinger of future architecture—a glass city. This, in essence, was Baku, the old and the new rubbing up against each other in a visual story of fast wealth, historic irrelevance, and a country's effort to get notice. I couldn't imagine this neglected building as a place where women lived, a place specifically for women to feel safe, to be comforted. I knocked, no answer. I turned the knob with the assumption I'd find it locked, but it wasn't, and I entered.

Opposite the entrance was an office. At a desk were two women. The older one introduced herself in Russian as the director and the younger woman looked at me but said nothing. I told them my name and that I was the American's friend. She had told them I was coming to visit. I was about to elaborate but the director walked me ten paces to the main room and pointed to a woman named Gusel sitting on a couch who had just arrived a few days ago. For some reason, the director left us alone, and I didn't know if she trusted me because I was a woman or, perhaps, if I had a certain privilege as an American.

Gusel wore the mix-matched clothing of village women, pale blue terrycloth jogging pants with a lateral white stripe and a thick pink turtleneck sweater with gold-threaded design that covered all but the bottom of an oversized red shirt underneath.

Her face was stunning, wide brown eyes common among the men and women here, a soft jawline, a perfectly balanced face with youthful skin and a fading green bruise around her right eye. She smiled softly at me with downcast eyes. She didn't know Russian, so beyond a basic introduction in Azeri, we had to rely on gestures and a dictionary when none of the staff was around to translate. She sat in a chair while her son, a two-year-old boy with hair shaved at the sides in two-inch arcs above his ears, moved like a tornado, his hands grabbing at electrical cords, his fingers investigating a heating vent, his legs leaping onto the couch. I couldn't tell if he was showing off for me, a newcomer, or if this was routine, a little boy expending his little boy energy. Postcard-sized advertisements from a clothing store were stacked on a coffee table. I grabbed a pile of them, and the boy and I built little houses together on the floor.

At the apartment, I had little sympathy for the cats. They'd gained strength. Out of the bucket they were normal kittens, though still a bit ragged, a bit wild, with indefatigable energy. When Harriet opened her bedroom door, they ran out and attacked my feet with their claws. She allowed them to run up her body, and when she wasn't wearing pants, they left a trail of scratches and sometimes blood on her skin. Harriet didn't care. She was in love with them. I wasn't. In my animal rights concerns of my youth, I'd worked at a shelter in Clark's Summit, Pennsylvania, tangled in four dog leashes walking along State Street, and at the end of the day, I cleaned up cat and dog excrement. Some weekends, I handed out brochures with grainy black

and white photographs that revealed how factory chickens were abused—stuffed into cages and force-fed drugs—all in the setting of the Viewmont Mall where my peers, who thought I was a hippie, roamed with the weight of sheer boredom with Orange Julius cups in hand. My older sister's solicitude was different and, likely to her, opposite of mine—abused children. She didn't approve of my sympathy for animals. People were further up the chain of importance; therefore, my sympathies were mistaken. Tolstoy wrote about wealthy Russian women who cried at the theater yet who were oblivious to their coachmen waiting outside for them in freezing temperatures. I was the Russian aristocrat who couldn't care for what was right in front of my face, the rescued kittens.

I walked to the shelter every other day some weeks and felt the charge of the unknown coupled with the anxiety of Gusel's fate. All I knew to do was to talk with her and to give her son attention. I didn't assume that I could solve her problems or save her. Sometimes a volunteer who spoke English and later became my friend was working at the shelter. She told me that Gusel had escaped her abusive husband and absconded with enough money only for bus fare. The husband not only physically abused her regularly, but he also had pushed her down a staircase when she was pregnant. She lost her second baby. Whenever the volunteer and I spoke, Gusel sat in a metal chair whose back cushion was held together with tape. The room was wallpapered in a lime green flower pattern. There were two couches, and both were covered with red polyester blankets. Opposite the entrance was

a doorless doorway. From the threshold hung a plastic leaf room divider behind which was a set of bunk beds, the room itself small and triangular that fit nothing else. Every time I visited her she and her son were in the same clothes and she only sat in that one chair.

During the third week of the cats' stay, I came home from work and sat with my computer on my lap in bed researching and writing lesson plans. As I typed, a black bug jumped out of my keypad, then another. I reconsidered the small pink bumps that I'd noticed accumulating from the past few nights around my ankles in a linear pattern. Fleas, the kittens brought fleas, I realized. For a week, I'd been inadvertently volunteering my skin as their lifeline.

I slammed my computer shut, leaped off of the bed, stripped it, and aired my bedding on the balcony, a process I would perform numerous times, washing and air drying every piece of clothing and bedding in my room.

That night, Harriet came home from work and I ran to her.

"Look, flea bites," I said.

Harriet was very calm about the situation. She showed me her pale arms.

"They like you," she said.

My sympathy for Harriet and the cats was fading fast, a feeling untethered. Sympathy has been labeled as both misguided and misplaced. Philosopher David Hume believed that passions were irrational either when they are "founded on the supposition of the existence of objects which really do not exist

or when exerting any passion in action we choose means insufficient for the designed end and deceive ourselves in our judgment of cause and effects.” Harriet’s passion for the kittens wasn’t questionable, but I didn’t believe she deliberated about which actions would be best for the cats’ sake. Instead, she acted spontaneously. We want to feel like saviors, in any small way possible. We want to feel good.

The fleas had bitten up my feet, calves, hands, and the skin behind my knees, taking residence in my closet and bed. Some nights, I slept on my friend’s couch, which made my husband more suspicious. In the city light of night, I believed every dark pinhead-sized ball of fuzz on the couch and blanket to be a bug. I kept slapping myself. Steven questioned where I was sleeping despite my telling him. I called him one of those nights, partly to prove where I was as well as to discuss Christmas break. He’d yet to buy his ticket. Steven had news for me.

“It’s too stressful to think of coming to Baku for Christmas. I just can’t do it,” he said. I was surprised and I wasn’t.

Already, in late fall, I was acclimating to Azerbaijani culture and had a mild fear about breaking my new rhythm here by going back home. It hadn’t been our plan. I knew, though, that we needed to see each other. We fought. I told him my concerns for myself and for us, and he said he just couldn’t make the trip but needed to see me. I would never know how he felt after turning off Skype that night. Perhaps satisfied or relieved. I felt defeated. I knew I was the more compromising of the two, and I also knew he wouldn’t come. He’d already made up his mind.

The next morning, I returned to my apartment to get

dressed for teaching. As I lifted a glass of water from my shelf, a flea jumped into my mouth. Or did it? I screamed. I told Harriet that we had to talk. “The cats must go,” I said. “I didn’t ask to live with them.” Her eyes teared. “I know,” she said. “Give me a day,” she said. The following day, she placed the kittens outside, but unlike the neighborhood cats that lived without shelter, Harriet’s kittens resided in a cardboard mansion. She’d cut and shaped boxes for them against the back of the building and accessorized with our hand towels for rugs, bowls from our cabinets for drinking water, the landlord’s bowls. I aired out my belongings again. Her lugubrious mood returned. The cats were gone. She made hot chocolate from one of the care packages that her mother had sent her from Germany and closed her door to the world.

The last time I saw Gusel, I was sitting with her and her son in the living room. This was my tenth visit. The boy was now comfortable enough to sit on my lap. I held his warm body and stroked his bangs across his forehead to kiss him before he jumped down to run through the room again. A male voice from the hallway filled the room like a storm cloud. Gusel stood up and sat beside me on the couch for the first time. The director entered, followed by an older woman wearing all black, her clothes magnifying the sudden change of mood. She wore a skirt to her feet, a too large leather coat that hung past her knees, and her gray hair, long and unkempt, reached her mid-back. Gusel took my hand, a gesture she’d never made before, and squeezed. She knew the woman.

“Your mother?” I whispered to her in Russian.

She understood, nodding her head. Later I would learn that the elder was her mother-in-law. The room comfortably held four people. We were nine. Women I never met before filled the room. Chairs were brought in. I wasn’t told to leave, but the director wanted to sit beside Gusel, so I moved to one of the chairs across from her.

The man, Gusel’s husband, entered like a celebrity, confident, and a woman gestured a place for him to sit near me. He appeared to be in his early forties. He had a handsome face, chiseled, a sprinkling of gray amid a head of thick black hair he’d gelled into a slick wave, and he called to his son, opening a bag of treats. The father lifted his boy, but the boy wiggled from his grasp, his shirt bunching up to his chest as he escaped. He grabbed the bag of candy and spread it on the floor like treasure, dividing it into dreamy categories I couldn’t understand. The entire conversation was in Azerbaijani. Without looking in my purse, I felt for my camera. I brought it everywhere. I pushed the video record button, my fingers moving by memory, praying I had touched the right button as though concrete evidence had the power to change something as large as abuse. The recording would work, a colleague would translate it, and the following is an excerpt of the conversation:

Husband: “I am intelligent, but you are not smart.”

Employee: “All right, Gusel. Let’s assume you get divorced. What are you going to do?”

Gusel: “You can’t take our son.”

Husband: “Yes, I can.”

Director: “The husband has the right to take the son. The government will come and see that your son is living in a shelter and will take him!”

The husband turned to me. “Who are you?” I assumed he asked something like this and I answered in Russian, saying that I was Gusel’s friend.

He spoke to the director in Azeri and she told me that I had to leave.

“Gusel doesn’t want me to leave,” I said, but the director grabbed my arm and escorted me to the door.

The next day, I returned to the shelter with my camera, eager to have Gusel listen to the recording, but she wasn’t there. When I inquired with the staff, they reported, with indifferent expressions, that she’d left. The words had barely exited their mouths before they turned their backs to me and stopped answering my questions. Though my friend no longer volunteered at the shelter, I asked her to investigate. The director told her that they didn’t know where Gusel was, but she did find out that the husband had bribed the police to reveal the shelter’s location. I wondered how much he had paid, how much the police believed jeopardizing a woman’s safety was worth.

I checked hospitals. I returned to the shelter. Finally, after many requests and phone calls, a women’s rights organization met with me. They told me the shelter had a good reputation and said they could do no more than suggest what I’d already done, look for Gusel locally. I was not permitted to have her address, assuming that she might be back home, forced to live with her abusive husband. I went to the shelter less frequently, and then,

I stopped going altogether. I don't know how to measure time spent with another. I believe Gusel felt my care for her and her son, but would my time have better served her situation if I instead worked with a women's organization versus these private visits to the shelter? My own sympathy was spontaneous and misguided. The issue was too immense, my gesture too miniscule, not capable of affecting change. I am, ultimately, attempting to measure failure.

Regardless of the fleas still hiding and jumping in my bedroom, I slept there that first week the kittens lived in their cardboard home. In the morning, I awoke to more bites and distressed messages from Harriet via text: The cats are dead! Please clean up their bodies because I can't bear to see them again after work! Calmly, I changed out of my pajamas and grabbed a handful of garbage bags, two I would use as gloves, the others for the bodies, not yet awake to the idea of handling dead animals. Harriet said the kittens were in the courtyard, but when I stood in the back of the building, I didn't see anything until I walked to the center where, barely noticeable, fresh blood puddled on the pavement, but no cats. Someone else must have picked up the corpses. I stomped on the cardboard houses and threw them away in the dumpster. Winter had arrived last week with wind gusts that howled in the narrow city streets like a lamenting voice. The sound was human, ardent. Today, the sun shone, the day seemed without wind at all, and leaning beside a wire fence was an auntie wearing a fur coat, dull and flat, likely a few decades old, her palm filled with bread crumbs from which a

large gray cat, one of the bullies, ate. She spoke sweet words to him: *krasivaya koshka* (beautiful cat), *milaya koshka* (sweet cat). In Russian, I asked her if she knew anything about the kittens. She said that a lot of people in the building hate the cats. “They are dirty,” she said. One man in particular complained about the new kittens and early this morning, he slit their throats and exhibited them in the center of the courtyard. The auntie, though saddened by retelling the story, for she obviously was dedicated to caring for these communal animals, also understood why the neighbor killed them. She had an acceptable role at the apartment building that other women held as well, feeding the cats outside, in their territory.

I wasn't sleeping well and felt, at times, crazy with fleabites.

“I should move out,” I told my husband one night, typing the words on Skype chat.

He didn't like the idea because by moving out I would live alone, which meant I'd be spending more of my fellowship money and, in retrospect, I realized, he preferred the idea of me living with another woman. There was security for him in that. Maybe the nights my husband was most jealous of me were directly after his nights of infidelity. I can only make assumptions in hindsight. Upon returning to America, I would discover he'd been cheating, but for how long, and with how many women, I'll never know. I now imagine his disloyalty like cause and effect, like a lesson in logic or a lesson in psychology. He didn't trust me because a) he couldn't be trusted; b) he didn't know how to trust anyone; or c) he didn't trust himself. My husband held his

tall stature erectly with his shoulder blades pinched together, eyes narrow in his staid expression. All the life behind someone's eyes. Or, as Ali said in the novel, "But you will never know what is hiding behind those eyes, even when you think you know her well."

A month after the cats died and Gusel and her son disappeared was Christmas. I left Baku to visit Steven, thinking I was strengthening my marriage. We binge-watched *Friday Night Lights*. We cried at times watching it, perhaps too much, too easily. He imagined, I knew, himself as the coach in the show, a local hero, a savior who swoops in to a new town and inspires undergrads to be better than they think they can be. And he did accomplish that. It was one of his strengths. He wanted to see himself as good. We made love under the Christmas tree, in the bed, on the couch, all without protection in the hopes of making a baby. We walked around our town in a snowless December and we looked at houses for sale. We walked in overgrown grass and I climbed on top of his shoulders so I could look in the windows at the empty rooms, and we named the rooms: our bedroom, his office, my office, the baby's room.

Love dies and does not. I will never have that very specific love I'd had with Steven again. Our coupling created a trajectory unfit for anyone but us. Steven was at first sweet when I returned home from Azerbaijan in July of 2012, but a thread unraveled. He started keeping his cell phone in his office. He started sleeping in the living room, getting mad at me for no reason, making

it more awkward in the house considering we had a roommate, another professor. He stopped answering my calls, but more than all of the physical evidence, the truth was in his eyes. After four months home, I confronted him about the affairs, but he denied everything. He couldn't look me in the eyes, but I looked into his, and they were empty. *All the lifelessness in someone's eyes.* I packed up a few boxes. Steven remained away from the house until I left. My girlfriend picked me up the following afternoon. She drove six hours alone to fetch me. I could have taken the plane, but I didn't want to if I could help it. Packing alone that night, I'd only thought to put a few belongings in boxes. I'd forgotten I owned luggage. I hadn't thought to bring a towel or a toothbrush. I couldn't imagine sitting on a plane with strangers, sitting in that small airport with its cancellations due to fog, the lonely wait of it.

Sometimes all that you have are things, books, a coffee mug, tchotchkes, souvenirs, and the like. When I moved into a new apartment alone, I had some of my belongings in boxes that remained stacked in the center of the apartment. A stranger wouldn't have known if I was moving in or out. For months, I invited no one over. For months I barely unpacked. Loneliness is like negative space—the absence of my husband's hand on my low back or the absence of his voice, enough absence to overwhelm a person, the absence of a future together, the absence of a child. On my most desperate days, it was like waiting for a dead person to walk through the door.

I dream of Gusel. Sometimes she appears in a nightmare

where she sits in that metal chair with its taped cushion, its legs stuck in dirt as though held by cement. Other times, she is with her child in a living room like mine. She has second and third chances, but those are just dreams and I am lucky.