

Love, Mortar

by Amelia Gray

My love for you is like a brick. It sits silent in me when you bring out my food at the Dine and Dart, red tray aloft, your skin gleaming like grilled onions. My love is rough around the edges but solid through the center, fresh from the kiln. My love for you is heavy and dark, Jenny, it builds and breaks down, Jenny, it cracks the windows between you and me—you, mixing milkshakes for little league winners, and me, miserly with sandwich wrappers in my car. You, smiling down at the register like a woman with secrets, and me, in agony over the golden arch of your eyebrow.

A brick, inert and dangerous. This love can be worn down but there is always substance to it, always heft, as when you struggle to lift the box of flash-frozen patties, that iced meat against your bare arms, the cold thickness of your flesh a barrier against the protected warmth of your lungs, your heart, your bones. When your manager helps you with that box, the brick grinds in my chest. Your manager, Bill of the blue eyes, Bill of the "no parking" policy, Bill of the fast-food tie. He tucks it in his shirt as he walks to the bathroom. You might be kind and claim that Bill is a good man but what you'll soon learn is that there are no good men, Jenny, none left at all. Not even me, though I'm good deep down, almost to the center.

Almost to the center. But the center of me is that brick. It's there when you bring my cheeseburger no lettuce on a steaming red tray. It's there when you reach into your flat front pouch for my straw. It's there when you pull your hair up behind your visor when you go in for your shift and when you lean over the grease trap with your scraper and bucket. It's there when you stand at the register, Jenny, your unpainted fingernails hovering over the keys as you think of those old dollar bills, the tens and rolls of quarters, wondering if you

shouldn't just no-sale the register and open it, one of those times when blue-eyed striped tie Bill is smoking a cigarette in the bathroom and looking at the Sears catalog he has hidden behind the toilet. You could just open that register and reach in with two hands and pull out fistfuls of cash and put it into your front pocket, stuffing it all down there, paper-wrapped straws scattering across the greasy floor. You'd walk out and throw your visor into the garbage and you would never come back.

But where would you go, with your great treasure? I see you on the beach at Galveston, peeling off that thick dirty uniform and walking slow into the water, trading the salt of french fries and tater tots for the healing salt of the ocean. I see you saving souls in that warm water, Jenny, I see you taking men in that water and making bricks of them all. You sink them there and build a wall with them, and create purpose to their roughness and use to their weight. You build a sea wall and stand on the other side with your feet planted wide on the hot sand, your golden hair streaming behind you like a flag of independence.

You have a power, and there is no reason this power should frighten you. Surely you see how Bill looks at you, and the men paving the road and even me over my cheeseburger no lettuce sucking chocolate milk through a straw. We are all drawn to you, but I am the only one who understands that draw, knowing how I started the kiln's fire myself, long ago. Now, my guts are full of clay and you can dig it out yourself. Open me up and hold the dangerous brick in your hands, feel that awful weight.

