

Golden State

by Lisa Estus

I know the way to our house so well. It's tattooed in that place where the mind stores ancient reflexes like swallowing, like breathing. In winter the night covers me and I feel sneaking, like a thief, but now it is summer and I'm beckoned by the sun's melting streaks of coral, blush, and blue-to-break-your-heart. By your own admission you would not have noticed this splendor. You used to let me translate beauty to you, when I could still touch your tanned and smooth forearm without you pulling away. Oscar: *divine spear*; descendant of Vikings; your name promised so much. If I could have anything from you now, what would I want that can still be named?

It begins on the coastal highway in San Francisco. It's not the route you would choose. You prefer shortcuts, expressways, but I like the feeling of lazing on the edge of the world, the taste of eucalyptus and salt spray on my tongue. Years ago in Chicago, people who were supposed to have been there told stories about this Highway 1. They claimed you could start at one end of the Golden State and bum rides all the way down to Baja, stopping in beach towns to work the bar or wait tables if you were seriously broke. I listened to every word. I would have done anything to get out of the suburb I grew up in—where the recession was closing a restaurant or car dealership a month; where, in the back seats of Impalas and Volkswagen Bugs I pleaded with boyfriends to for God's sake put down the bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon and put on the condom. I never told you this. Like you, when we exchanged anecdotes, I left out the unflattering parts.

California waved from the distance: a rare warm place where you hardly needed money and it wasn't odd to drift alone. I sacrificed my record collection for the plane fare to San Francisco. I remember receiving two shocks straight off the plane: first, it was not warm and second, I did need cash. I spent four nights in the international terminal until a QANTAS ticket agent took pity on me. She tipped me off about a job interview, found me clean clothes and

a bed in a commuter house of flight attendants. It's weird how a stranger will save your life, but the people who love you are no help at all.

Oh, Oscar, why am I telling you this? You never asked what I was like before we met, as if I sprang from your imagination fully formed, battle-ready. At least half of this is true. I'm at the part of Highway 1 that runs through Pacifica, giving me a last glimpse of the spread of ocean and sky before the road ducks underneath the redwoods. When the sun is low through the trees like now, it is fractured into honeycombs of light. Road signs advise the use of headlights but I can't see how that helps. I make my way by faith alone; if the road wasn't curved I'd close my eyes.

The house we found rests behind a knoll of dun-colored grass that was deeply green when we first saw it. Although your name I suppose is on the title deed, I think of the place as ours. We dreamed of it on the very same night. We had just made love. The air was perfumed with our warm animal smells and I was faint from climaxing. Just as we were drifting into sleep, you spoke of a house. You described its details until I saw it too. The next day you drove and drove until we neared the coast and recognized the turn-off. We rode over packed dirt to a tiny one-bedroom house behind a barn. The shake roof was falling off in places and it needed new paint badly, but there it was. Our house. The place where our individual drives and desires would converge and be contained—hermetic as a spacesuit, snug as a double-yolked egg.

I approach the house stealthily, creeping low and close to the native shrubs. I stand up taller and look in your picture window. I can see all the way through to the back of the house, where you've carelessly left the kitchen window open several inches. Who if not you will close it against the entities of the night? Perhaps you imagine they orbit from a distance, avoiding your domestic sphere like hallowed ground. Or maybe—and I prefer to think this—you've deliberately left it open, knowing I would come. The calico curtains stir. I wish I could say I hand-made them for you, in a fit of anticipatory bliss. As it happens you bought them yourself.

I walk around the back, pressing closely to the outer walls. I hoist myself up on the air conditioning unit and push the window wider. I wedge myself inside, climb down from the sink and drop rather noisily to the tile. The house is going about its business: refrigerator humming, floor creaking as I step across it, even the sofa sighs as I sit and consider what to do next. The moon through the undraped picture window is so bright I have a cat's vision of differentiated light and shadow. A soft gray plane intersects the slice of light to reveal a hallway. I tiptoe toward it. Once the corner is turned, darker shapes suggest entrances to intriguing inner rooms but I know them to be nothing more than a utility closet and bath. And the bedroom. The first door on the right is the bedroom. Even if I try to forget; my body remembers and the strength of its yearning fairly pulls me inside. I noticed you left the door ajar. Really you should be more careful.

I walk toward you. I'm not sure what I came for but I'm not leaving until I get it. I sit at the bedside and watch you sleep. A sliver of moon falls through the window and lights your face. Your eyes are closed. Your lashes tremble and you move your lips soundlessly—as if you were in prayer almost but I know you better than that. I bend closer to try to hear what you murmur in your sleep. Your breath is warm and moist on my cheek; it smells faintly of pinot noir and cloves. The scent is familiar and I want so much to brush my lips against yours. But I am afraid of waking you so I run my thumb lightly from your temple to the curve of your jaw instead. Just below, an artery throbs. Its main branch forks into two delicate tendrils that rise and fall ever so slightly beneath the veil of your skin. I could stop their flow with my thumb. I suppose I want things to stay just as they are, your upturned face angelic, receptive. If it's true you made me there is no-one to blame but yourself.

But I won't do anything to hurt you, Oscar. I'm talking and you're listening, in your way. I'm telling you about the parts of myself that were formed before you. All the things you never asked about and pretended not to know. It isn't too late. I will insinuate myself into your dreams, where every sensation seems tangible and the

symbolic hardens into truth. You will ache; you will wake up with tears of longing in your eyes; you will believe you are making me all over again.

