

Fragile Things

by Ophelia Hu

I'd hit a pole yesterday and she let it go, so when we bottomed out and the undercarriage came loose and we pulled into a convenience store parking lot, she said it didn't matter, except that we wanted to hit the trails before dark. The plastic dragged on by one bolt, so we got down on all fours and kicked until it came loose, and when a man came and asked if we needed help, we did, but neither of us wanted to admit it. But he did what a Swiss army knife and the trunk tools couldn't, and begrudgingly we said oh thank you, sir, you're a life-saver.

And we threw it in the back and promised we'd remind each other it was back there so I wouldn't return the rental with the undercarriage stinking in the back. It's not a necessary part, I said to her, mostly to convince myself.

She held my hand the rest of the way to Silverton, and I'm still down on myself for hitting that pole, so I take every curve slowly and take my hand back, throw it back on the wheel like I'm not nervous but really I am, just a little, and she occupies herself slicing an eight-dollar cheese we bought back in the city. When we lived together, we were always treating ourselves like that.

In Silverton, I ask at the visitor center how many folks live here and how many just pass through. The place more than doubles in the summer and winter, she says, and we know how that goes, but we're always on the leaving end of things. We have that luxury. At lunch, we pick the window over the stove because some other group has the stove and we'd rather enjoy the view up close than the warmth from a distance. This is an adventure to her, but me, I'm homesick, and I study her face in the light of the tall window and imagine us home. And I recall vernal walks past Emily Dickinson's home to Wheatberry just because I wanted a goat-cheese croissant, and she

always got her coffee black, and I'd always try a sip, although I knew I hated the taste. Like I said, we were always treating ourselves like that.

My phone signal's killing her, she says, but maybe it's for the best. She says our friend's dating the boy she loves now, and she says she's crying, and I say I'm so sorry. She wants to talk about her schizophrenic mother. She asks me what she should do, and I say I don't know because I'm no good at handling fragile things. She says, let's talk about you. I say I can't - phone signal, you know. She calls me anyway, twice, then leaves a message saying that she just wanted to talk.

And I'm on my way out to Fort tonight and she says she went home last weekend and wrote me a letter, and she meant to throw it away, but her grandfather misunderstood and mailed it anyway, so it's coming to me. She says she's sorry for what she said. What'd you say? I ask. She sends me a hundred letters, and she lets me have my silence, I think because she loves me. My coffee's cold, but I finish it anyway. Then the signal fades, I pass between the haystacks, one hand on the wheel, one hand by my side, and the clouds start melting, and I barrel down the road alone.

