archer avenue

poems by Kristy Bowen
prologue: the haunting of archer avenue

For the most part it’s all true: the white dress and fade. Radio static and the street slicked black as cats. Ask her where the light goes and she’ll say dancehalls, their music dwindling to a note that silks along the inner ear. But here, she’s an understudy of dark, the slip in the shadow that speaks like a girl, but isn't. Kiss her and she tastes like broken light bulbs. Batteries draining in parking lots.

Doubt inhabits the space between cars, the drag of headlights over grass just thickening in the cold. Imagine, if you will, the pitch between stoplights. Kiss her and the landscape swerves left.
invocation

the way it happens

He meets her in a bar or along the road. It’s raining. Snowing. He has a blue coat. A yearning. A father with the silence and all. A friend of a friend. It happened. He didn’t see her come in. Asked for a dance. Asked for directions. It’s always like this. The distance and the tiny purse. The jazz and the dizzy light. Earlier, the gin fizz. The giggle. He tells a lie. His mother is dead. Or his wife won’t listen. She places a hand on his wrist. Against his cheek. The road is always slick. The snow comes early or it doesn’t. He drives with one hand on the wheel. One hand on the mirror. On her thigh or her throat. She’s distracted. Lives nearby or close enough. When he kisses her. When he leaves her at the gate. When they approach the cemetery, she disappears. She cries. She sets the car on fire. Sets off on her own. Walks right through the gate. It was late and he doesn’t remember. It was dark and her dress was stained. Things like this happen all the time. Her mother is a thin woman with a Polish face. Her mother is dark-eyed and heavy. When he knocks on the door. When he hesitates at the gate. When he returns the sweater left in the backseat. He’s shown a lock of yellow hair. A photo. A girl in a prom dress. She’s smiling or she isn’t. Been gone for years. Just a month. It happened in December. It happened in June. She liked dancing, or smoking, or cussing. She was a flirt. Or fast. Or too shy for her own good. It happened here, or somewhere else downtown. Outside the cemetery or in the parking lot dark. There was a fight and a swerve and the wind knocked out of her. There was a wreck. A tree or a truck. Her name was Anna. Her name was Maria. Her friends called her Mary. No one remembers. She was buried in an unmarked grave. In her ball gown. Or something orchid, tea length. It was all over the papers. I read it myself. Her parents moved away and never spoke of it. Her date swore he went looking for her. Swore he was never on that road. Swore he never saw it coming.
the luxury of borrowed dresses

She’d gone near dizzy in the dressing room. All capelet sleeves and velvet piping. Shoes akimbo and gathered tulle fuzzing the chandeliers. Much too cold for organza anyway. The crème chiffon. The bias silk. And this fringe, so last year. Her friends glittered and glossed as pearl pocketbooks. And her, slipping into each gown like some other life. This one with enough flounce to forget her mother sewing buttons, French ones, for 5 cents a bit. To forget the shop girls. Their sad, tidy lunches.
burn

The tail light put the dark
in her mouth, this rubied gleam.

Black lake beneath her nightgown
littered with sparklers and roman
candles. At home, the stockyard filth
in her mother's kitchen sullies
the mended bedspreads. The bleached
bones of peaches. She breathes
a little sometimes. Swallows a silver
locket lifted from the thrift store.

Not the real girl with the dress
rehearsal and the geometry of sixes.

But the one gone musty in the throat.
Gone deep in the milk white.
the vanishing hitchhiker: a study

You see, the limbs are accidental. Riddled by vagueness and blue-checked aprons. Her back arcs against the seat and the sweet black mouth of the soprano opens and opens again. The myth delineates her leavings and arrivings. The dirty books hidden beneath her bed, her lips red-dark and unruly. When you inquire after her address, she offers a taxonomy of saints. Spreads her thighs and shows you her phobias. The creeper vine at her throat won’t let her sing anymore, but she’ll gesture erratically. Offer assorted sundries, hotel soap and chewing gum. Her eyes like lemon cake behind the glass. Sugared and untouched.
the graveyards of chicago

You can see our lawns are lovely.
Their fences precise. No shoddy stones
or wilting gardenias. See how well
the steel mill provides. The highway.
The misstep and tidy sickness.
Our angels line up row by row.
Almost god. Or close to it.
And ghosts? No ghosts.
Only nightshift gin and kids
fucking in the bushes.
See how our marble shines.
Even the pigeons love the dead.
The vernacular of plots and greening.
st. andrews day

Once the house has emptied of its birds, the water holds the shape of her. Buckets, bathtubs. A landscape of rusted locks and falling brooms. She counts fourteen fence posts and finds a knothole big enough for her wrist. Melts the Sunday candles in her mother’s best kettle and still nothing.

Last night Ava and Anna must have hidden the red scarf beneath the breakfront. The husband game, and each of them a ribbon, a rosary.

Nothing under her plate but its shadow.
roadside inventory

The ribs are a lovely museum, you know. All spooks and idling Chevrolets. Amazing the glow that finds its way into open spaces. This mouth like a broken reflector, a length of silver chain. I’ve carved a heart in the tar that lines the shoulder and assembled my name in bottlecaps. In ditches, the discarded tires resemble murders. Slender pickets of crosses lingering at their margins. There’s a racket in the things left behind. Each name a handbag or a hairpin. The forked heat of backseats. My limbs are riddled with sisters lurching along interstates. Their pink shoes abandoned at the turn. How they all lie down like this. Lie down like this. Lie down like this.
last call

In the parking lot, all
the dancers are lovely
and drunk. Symmetrical.

Kissing in the blue dark.
A girl pins a tiger lily
to her shoulder, itches

beneath silk. Comes
closest with the boy
who still smells of his mother's

laundry soap. Still opens
his mouth to her like a door.
When the yellow of her dress

singes against the spotlight;
when she heaves into the
hydrangeas, he still loves her.

Everything glittered
and moving through violet.
justice, IL

Maybe the landscape holds them, water on three sides and the dead too many to count. A profusion of clotheslines and baseball diamonds. How the streetlights dim as the third shift kicks in.

The waitress at the diner has no tongue but says enough with her eyes, her beautiful limbs. Maybe her dreams are treeless. Every car wreck a broken cassette tape rattling in her trunk. Every ghost expected.

Her husband keeps a roadkill deer in the freezer, hits her only when he needs to. Calls his mother little bird. The telephone poles have her name all over them, the foxglove grown over in the ditch.
the imagined lives of ghosts

Perhaps they are, after all, godless. Licking the finials and mothering strange black dogs. The boxwoods alone accumulate thousands, precarious as jukebox lovesongs. All of them enamored with objects. In love with birthday cake and the backs of stamps. See how they rhyme in couplets, how their shoes don’t match their skirts. And velvet. Yes, velvet. As if any of us have enough. As if the low-watt gleam of silver guardrails doesn’t charm us. How even the road bends to meet them.
swerve

I am bending toward the headlights
when the sound goes out. One minute
the wind in my throat, my hair,
and the next nothing. I had three sisters,
I tell you, and each of them a china figurine.
A man, he took my sweater and gave me drink.
Took my keys. Took my name down in a book
and offered to drive me home. I can’t stop
these headaches. The jagged glass beneath my
tongue. I wear my quiet like a charm bracelet
 tinkling at my wrist. This body practically
a crime scene by now, all dusted and closed.
My sisters cry and make wreaths. You wouldn’t
believe how hot my hands are right now.
How tiny my fingers.
midnight at chet’s melody lounge

Again, I dream I’ve killed you.
The back of your dress taking on
rain and the windows fogging over.
I dream a radio and a bedroom.
I dream a button and a bead.
Someone who looks like you
but more like me, moaning
into the backseat.

We both smell like sugar and wax.
Both trace our names against the glass.
Like sisters. Only better.
Bless us for our mothers.
For the yellow hair dyed black.
For the rum in our cokes
that makes us lovelier.
This thing that burns behind us
grown fierce and clumsy as our fingers.