

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

Sweet Mary of the ballroom, the rum punch and sly grin. Mary of open car doors, cold spots. Fox trot, slow dance. Mary of the table knock. Mary of pick-ups, blue lights, and power lines. Threadbare Mary. Truck-stop Mary. Mary of the culverts. Dance hall, car crash, borrowed dress. Blue eyed Mary. Bloody Mary at the end of the bar and gasoline Mary. Tavern chill and black sedan Mary. Mary of the gearshift, Mary of the burn. Abandoned Skylark and parking lot Mary. Mary of the argument, the dark stumble. Trailer park, cakewalk, charmschool Mary. Mary of hair ribbons and the unhinged. Cartwheel and kolatchke Mary. Mary of the big bands, tire ruts, screen doors. Lipstick and jitterbug. Mended hem and ankle turn. Apostrophe Mary. Catastrophe Mary. Mary at the edges.

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
loket 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.