

No Person Mine

By Lisa Levine

I stood in the centerline, staring back at the optical illusion of a widening highway. Where shoulder bled into drainage, mirages of steel strewn about the blacktop and into the culvert, as if my car had rolled, fender over tires. As if it had been swept across the desert in a flash flood. It could have happened. In my head, his voice. *On a straightaway? You're thinking of gullies.* I knew it wasn't him. My only child, my Elliot, ran off to the desert, called me now and then, died in a terrible fall, and then spoke to me with such regularity that I began to think of him as a new person, a hybrid ghost son of my psyche.

A honk. I jumped back from chugging tires and a jacked-up bumper, vanishing on the other side of the road. I had to imagine the driver's angry curse. Now I realized there was no accident debris, the steel a mirage. I did see cloth: a hefty piece of canvas which I dragged out of the ditch and dropped over the dog, also not a mirage. I didn't believe in signs, but Elliot would have said the cloth was one. I'd hit and killed a wild dog. Overhead, two large dark birds – ravens – circled and dipped. *Stupid idea.* My thought, not Elliot's. What purpose did it serve to Do The Right Thing by roadkill? This dog trotted wild, tits to pavement, ribs through hide. Did it



even have a person? A person far from the road, to whom no one would share news of its passing. Maybe the land would. Maybe the wind. Maybe the ravens. I rubbed my temples, hard, against memories of the year I left my furry menagerie in a pet sitter's care and spent Thanksgiving inside Elliot's life. Campfire meals and dizzying ascents. My son

gulping up pretentious adventure tips from some annoying female friend. Not his girlfriend, he felt the need to point out to me. “Oh, so –” I chirped, slicing into cheap, buttery steak. My pro tip formed, silent in my mouth: stay remote. Cross paths with others as you would in a museum, not a petting zoo. The girl friend wanted him to have another kind of mother. Her brown ponytail gleamed under restaurant spotlights. She spoke to him in one-word conversations of which he’d translate a fragment here and there. If I could have that night back. The next night. Any night. Even a day. A second, between day and night, sky bluing and glowing. I would take his hand. I would tousle his hair. I would tell him a joke. I would listen with my whole heart. *Silence*. Okay, maybe I wouldn’t.

Above, one of the ravens pulled up hard, making a long, loose arc through the cerulean sky. Miles it lassoed. I’d been fiddling with the phone map, had seen a shape in the road too late, made a hard, terror-shot slam on the brakes as loose objects flew at me. The car rental paperwork. A plastic pack of hand wipes. An elephantine backpack containing his ashes snuggled inside a sleeping bag and three layers of Ziploc. I’d righted that. I could have driven off, not looking.

My son gone, my conscience soot and claw, I dug.

First with my sneaker toe. Then hands. Finally the plastic spade. Three inches, *not enough*, before I banged against rock. Arms aching, I rested, then scraped around chunks, squatting close to the soil. *Maybe you should* – but I silenced him, as mothers do. Tossed the shovel aside and clawed around a block of caliche. Another, another. Again the shovel. Sweat filmed my armpits and forehead. Three feet deep. Four. I looked at the time. *It’s probably fine*.

Nothing felt fine. I hate being late, have hated being late since my first animal shelter job. I will hate being late until I die. Unlike me, my son never came into the word *late*. He measured

time in songs: *By the last verse, I'll summit this wall.* In races against incompatible things: *By the time you finish the dishes, I'll be on the last question.* Then his questions would come. *Does the Pythagorean Theorem have a square root? Could a slippery slope also be post hoc? When is Dad coming home? Later: What's the difference between step-sisters and half-sisters again?*



Wind ruffled the shroud and shot beneath my shirt, chilling me. A bit of scruff stuck out, and I looked away. As the gust vanished into heat, I leaned back against my taillight, watching movement on the horizon, dot to jellybean to lozenge to car, dot to jellybean to lozenge to car. Dot to jellybean to lozenge to person? Yes, that was a person. I felt furtive. *Bury it quick*, I thought. *Yeah, don't let her see.* But the thought wasn't quick enough to bury the thought beneath that. Elliot, the adult Elliot, who may or may not have had a quick death. A fall – without autopsy, how to know? The girl friend, who he'd gone backpacking with, said many words that meant nothing, like “I don't know, man,” and then “Yes, ma'am, I went with him there, but I felt sleepy, and he said he wanted to stay,” and “No, we weren't angry with each

other.” Forced, I took other words to heart, like *possible alcohol-related accidental* something in the official Park report. I refused to imagine it that way. He’d been preoccupied. A wrong step while transfixed by a mineralized water streak down the Supai. A tumble at the edge of a formation. Elliot, my untamed son, died a violent death, his whole self, mind, body and heart, clear and aware and terrified as he must have been on the day I panted, pushed, and staggered him out into the world. He wasn’t a risk-taker, so much as a kid who needed to see what there was to see. Hyper-alert and hyper-aware. His final seconds would not have flashed by too quickly for him to know what was happening. People know. He loved knowing silly answers, Elliot. Why did the dog cross the road? Why can beer but not wine go through the green glass door? How did the man lying in the alley, surrounded by 53 bicycles, die? Elliot would have had a flash of knowing - something. Something unknown to me. He lived for relevant irrelevancies. He would call me to tell me about esoteric answers he’d found in nature – a twilight shooting star, a herd of coatimundi, a balanced block of sandstone.

If this dog had a person – probably it hadn’t – but if it did, it wasn’t someone who hung around highways, like the elongating jellybean of a human approaching me. I looked at the hole. The dog. Back at her. That person – fuck that person. Approaching me, now. What was a person doing walking down the highway? The only reason for dallying on this highway was having committed a wrong – hitting an animal, like me, or forgetting to fuel up, perhaps losing a license. People who’d done everything right went on to better places than desolate, desert highways. Unlike us, the dog was an innocent. The desert was its home. It might have broken free from a yard. There were yards here. Dirt and rock yards, rather than grass ones. I’d seen them on my last visit. We took back roads. Found ruins. Elliot’s idea. “I’m reading about Mormons,” he told me.

“Are you converting?”

He laughed. “No, it’s not that.”

On that trip, the two of us alone, I’d been surprised and maybe a little unnerved by the signs of (to me) ordinary life in the vacant desert. Mostly, around these dirt byways and tracks, open land met sky, but here and there a home or a cluster of homes would rise from the grit. They sparked unexpected questions. “Do you want a family?” I’d asked him, and he shrugged but didn’t answer. “Before you were born, I didn’t always know if I wanted you, but once you came, I knew I loved being a mom.” His smile. If he did, or didn’t, believe me, he made no sign.

The person walking the highway closed in on me, close enough to be wearing black sweatpants, a loose shirt. My nerves clenched. I hauled the corpse to the side of the road. The fragility of a body strolling along a two-lane highway emboldened me, *don’t, Mom*, but instead of shoving the shroud inside my partial hole, I flicked it off. The dog’s body lay mid-stride, her hip and thigh yanked open to reveal a chaw of meat. Ignoring that, I looked at her rosy-white belly, buttoned by nipples, and at the ruffle of ribs where her short black fur started. Her side sported a tiny white spot that made my skin crawl, and I looked away, to her eyes. Open. Wide open, wanting to see what there was to see. Their deep brown didn’t reproach me. Like my son, Elliot, dead at twenty-seven, this one would never find its way home.

The walking woman, close enough now to have a race that wasn’t mine, brushed back hair and slowed her rocking gait. She looked at me. She saw the dog. I let her see the dog. She moved close enough that we could have touched each other, walking, step, step, step. I wanted to say *hi, hey there, hello, how’s it going*, but her proximity overwhelmed me. Her ordinary nearness. Her eyes moved past me. Her smell might have been my smell, of which I wasn’t aware until she made me realize that smell existed, ancient, pungent, unclean. My sweat. Then she vanished, obliterated by the side panel of my rental vehicle. *Mom, are you okay?* No. Likely,

I was not. Sweet, reedy, eager, Elliot would have spoken to this inexplicable person who walked on down the blurry edge between blacktop and dirt. I knelt by the dog.

Isolation. I drank some water. I had no time. No time to greet. No time to smile. No time for death, not even Elliot's. No time for grief. Nothing but time and space around me. Nothing but me. The dog. And the hole, safeguarding her against that pair of ravens in their big sky. Like the dog, those belonged to her, the decreasing slant of a person now a quarter of a mile up the road from where I stood, gulping water. It sloshed out on my face and my shirt, so I stopped drinking, recapped the bottle, and took up the shovel, scraping away at the next level of caliche before the heat started at me again. *It was crazy*, I pictured her saying to a friend. *This old lady standing there with her dead dog*. I had to end this. Elliot would tell me it was *probably fine*. "Thanks, baby," I said out loud. Lighthearted, I rolled its body over itself, into the hole, and clunked the butt of the shovel to snug its legs up inside the cloth. With little space left to backfill, I tried to surround the corpse with some of the caliche, and finished off the burial mound with loose dirt and rocks. I stood, looking at it. Fourteen when I had him – a broken leg, I'd had to stay home from school and my boyfriend came over. I'd still found my dream and followed it. I was still young. Nobody else in my life had died yet, except relatives I'd never known, friends of friends, a coach's son – no other people close to me.

No person mine. *No, you have loads of friends. Those women you.*

They don't understand.

No. Most people don't want to talk about it. You'll learn to not speak.

By the time the ravens peck their way to the carcass, I'll have driven up to the meet spot, late. Everyone will smile neutral, youthful smiles at me. They'll be tightening backpack straps or

readjusting their trekking poles. The nondenominational minister-leader will say, “What took you so long? Were my directions off?” and I’ll stand there, silenced, not sure how to reply. How to answer as me. *Just be*, my grief ghost will assure me. *Be you*. In the time it takes me to hear my child’s encouragement, their curiosity will evaporate, flash flood on banked road. *You*. Or, as I think in my own voice, me: jellybean-lozenge-dot at the meeting of big blue sky and red-brown land. He’d taken me out with that puzzling girl friend, showed me how to steady myself on a rope tied to a tree and climb up a steep wall. *Come on, Mom. You got it. Good. Over there, see that rock? Hold that. Nice, Mom.* For an hour that one day, I accepted it. I basked. He believed in me. In me as him, the extension of a body that made him happy.

Then it was gone again. Fragments. Stardust. Standing over the half-buried dog, ready to drive away, I looked everywhere I could see and tried to imagine what it would be like to grow up here, way out west, in a poor place. To feel you have nothing, and to probably be right to ask for more. What made him love this desert so much? Elliot never felt, as I did, the pull of our shaggy lawn, our robin’s egg and white trim exterior, our four-block walk to the local library. Nothing as powerful as the love he felt for these vile rocks, this barren land, and this sweet, flat, blue sky.

Irrelevant, my Elliot-self corrected me. *We see starlight older than any radio waves we can transmit.* With that he felt gone again, leaving me alone with the anxiety of knowing. Under cramped, incandescent Eastern seaboard skies, I’d loved him age to age: on his father’s shoulders, ducking through the doorway of a single-family home, walked or driven to West Hartford public schools, vacations at the beach, lobster rolls, a closet full of durable cotton, pleasant step-siblings, a math degree, all gone too soon, gone for good, good and gone; none of his traces would wipe clean, and none of them would feel clean out here, surrounded by clay-dirt

mesas and melt-away lives. None of it felt me. The desert seemed preoccupied with itself, like my smart, sweet, difficult and determined son. Out here on the roadway between Cameron and Jacob Lake, alone, I could feel it, the will to step out into space and be lost. Later I would read that burying a body without saying a prayer invites the soul to shadow the burier's life, but that's bullshit: I would forget about the dog by the time our backpacking group, Elliot's friends and I, made it to the Thunder River rapids. *Here*, the girl friend would say, touching a rocky ledge. *No, here*. I would shake a tiny portion of his ashes into her damp, cupped hands. He was no person of mine. No son of my tears, those conventions of grief, unrelenting as the water that cut the canyon that killed him.

My phone rang. "Did you make it?" asked his father.

"Almost," I spoke from within my daydreams. "Almost there."