

HERE

Elizabeth Gonzalez

At seven every night two bats come down the street, circling one another as they fly between the trees. They travel twenty feet above the asphalt, hunting mosquitoes and moths. They look like rags operated by an inexperienced puppeteer. Sometimes in summer the children toss up stones to watch them dive. They don't seem to know stone from food.

A woman wearing a camouflage coat and black pants walks a black dog every night. She comes out at the same time as the bats and follows the same route, head down, oblivious to traffic. The children call her suicide lady.

A man who lived on the end of the street committed suicide four years ago. He went on vacation and dove off a lighthouse. His wife was bewildered for a while, then moved away. He used to rinse his driveway every morning and nudge acorns out of the cracks with the toes of his slippers.

She turns the tap. Steam swirls under her chin. She has the window open for a breeze but there is no breeze.

The children work at the table. They are learning to do bubble tests. If none of the given answers fit, instead of NA for None of the Above, they are told to mark NH for Not Here. As if to say, there must be an answer somewhere but it's gone missing.

Moths bat at the screen, drawn to the light over the sink. When she turns off the water she can hear them hit, a splanging sound quiet as clothes dropping on carpet. They hold onto the screen with hooks fine as hair. They have mistaken a 60-watt bulb for the moon.

The moon is out, only it's 200,000 miles from here. Today it came out in midday, a bland blue picture hanging over the grocery store parking lot like a prop laid out in a hallway before a show.

The neighbor's porch light goes on. His wife died in the spring. They are from another era and still loved each other. Sometimes at night when she is out on her porch she hears him cry. His dogs are keeping him alive. They need feeding.

This afternoon she passed a farm where a sheep was cuddling up to a cinder block wall. Its chin was pressed tight against the block, eyes closed in sleep. She wishes she hadn't seen it, that black chin pressed against the block.

Her son has a question. She takes the paper from him and reads. A ring of suds radiates from her thumb into the paper. It will dry crinkly but clean.

She dries her hands and moves to the table. She makes the lightest circles around their mistakes, erasable circles, and they make corrections. The answers are here after all. The moths hit the picture window, louder against the glass but still a sound one has to listen for. She read an article that said they're disappearing, fruitlessly courting billboards, soaring headlong into headlights, filling bug zapper trays. Fortune favors the bright.

One by one the children pack away their papers. One by one they return from the shower, hastily dried, and she tucks them in. Tell me what I did when I was little, her daughter says, her hair wetting the pillow, tell me about your childhood. What her daughter means to ask is, who were you, who am I?

You used to say hambubber, she tells her. Twice in first grade you rode the wrong bus home. Once you were jumping on the bed and knocked your teeth through your lip and had to get stitches. Finally her daughter smiles, satisfied. She remembers, she always says, even things that happened when she was too small to remember.

She reads stories to the baby. The old stories are brutal and she edits them, takes out the squirrel's heart in the box, the stones sewn into the belly of the wolf.

Her husband is asleep. The moths are at the windows, tracking the last light. Up close, they are unique. Some have shaggy legs and rust-colored manes like lions. Some have iridescent wings like the insides of shells. They are the colors of old pearls and bark and dried out cornstalks at sunset. They all have great black eyes and cannot help themselves; they see in every glimmer something shining, something beautiful, something they cannot live without.

She turns off the light, and one by one the moths drop away, making the tiniest sound of all when they let go. Down in the back of the yard, milkweed leaves wave like white hands under the moon. Her husband stirs, reaches an arm across the bed. Where are you? he says, and she says Here, I'm right here. If the children come in the middle of the night and say I'm scared she says, Here, and pulls them into bed.

How do you know, she wonders, when you've found what you were looking for? She has been a stranger on this road forever, hunting after things that shine; she still can't tell from the cast and fall of a thing whether it is food, whether it is stone.