

NEBRASKA

ASHLEY RICE

Rebecca Morgan's wings appeared on the same crisp day her mother left on a Greyhound for Las Vegas to the land of salvation, quick change and slot machines, where (her mother wrote in her goodbye letter) everything was or where everything was that mattered, and where anything that seemed to matter even halfway could easily be put into a slogan.

When Rebecca woke up in her four-square plywood room aware of an empty feel to the house she had grown up in, there they were, and the huge, ridiculous wings would follow her through physical education and health classes in the Hawthorne-like sawmill town she lived in. The woods her step-father roamed as a child still echoed with shotgun blasts, freezing winters, vacancy, or death, and under coal-blackened, cold skies she somehow dreamed of being a starlet.

In a red school nestled in trees beneath billboards and in an abandoned glass factory's bottle-neck shaped shadow, she hid these new wings under clothes.

"Like we can't see them—ho *ha*," from Kenny Blackburn, a boy she'd had a hard, slow crush on since forever. He leaned against his locker, laughed, glanced back at Rebecca as she walked away, and leaned back again, red-faced.

The wings were bird-useless (could not fly), but as far as Rebecca was concerned, they never gave her any trouble until her senior year of high school. When she won the chocolate-selling contest and saw a counselor about community college she did not yet know that her own life and her step-father's small house would soon turn into a vacant lot. Hoping to match

their lives fashion-wise to snazzy billboards and magazine ads, no one at school would talk to her. Fashion was impossible. Jean jackets were cut too small through the back, so Rebecca Morgan would pull sweatshirts on over her wings. During finals, the chore of hiding the large white feathers took *so* long, though, so she simply cut awkward holes in the back of navy sweaters and forgot about them.

Then Kenny was killed in a mill accident.

A semi-truck carrying dark chocolate and oranges hit black ice, slipped over the ridge and crashed through, destroying tree-tops, then plummeted.

The two events weren't related or in any way portentous, but for many people felt like an omen, the same way her father's house being cut down like a tree for a shopping center felt like one. The trees were changing and the world was rearranging itself, maybe—somewhat, somehow—or perhaps not really. The kids in town made Rebecca into a winged mascot then. They didn't say anything when they put gold glitter on her thin arms, and she didn't say anything or push away when they wanted to dance in a circle around her, or unfold her wings like origami at parties.

There was a one-sentence story engraved on a local bar's wall that said "Crows in the snow, and the moon doesn't know." It had been crossed out years ago with a sharp welding tool, and people remembered it as meaning "Do whatever you want," but Rebecca Morgan interpreted this as "Do whatever you can." She liked the saying and she felt very powerful thinking about it.

One night she saw her silhouette across the faded grass and thought she also saw her mother, years before: tall and white-winged and all ready to go—dancing yet somehow static—like the doctored sign at the end of the oak-colored road, which said: *You are now leaving Nebraska*. Though they did not live in Nebraska.