

Prodigy

I USED TO BE ABLE to do multi-digit multiplication in my head. When I was seven, my dad woke me up in the middle of the night and drove me three hours to Sioux City to show this guy what I could do. The guy came out onto his lawn, stood with one hand on his hip, kinda womanly. My dad said, “I want you to see this.” The guy spit something into the grass. We stood on that guy’s dead grass, my dad firing multi-digit multiplication problems at me and me answering until my teeth were chattering and I had to pee. Finally my dad said, “Okay? Okay?” The guy turned and walked back to his house. “Okay,” he said.

The Day Before Thanksgiving

SHE TOLD ME TO LIST OFF each thing I could do in less than three minutes. The list itself could take as long as needed. I could only think of complicated, unbeautiful things. Roll a cigarette, play chopsticks on the piano, crash a car.

She was the one driving, pulling past the white Ls of failing farmhouses. The radio was almost all static. On average, a pop song lasts three minutes. We were still two-hundred pop songs from her parents' house and we didn't have much to say to each other, which is the reason we were playing stupid car games. Before word games and static she had said, "My mother doesn't distrust you. It's just that she remembers everything."

Her father would want me to go hunting. Her mother would ask me to take off my shoes at the door.

I was wearing a winter jacket and four days worth of stubble. I had a coffee mug wedged between my legs, full up half with coffee and the rest of the way with vodka. I can't drink whisky because it makes me violent. I am aware of my limitations.

I asked her to list the make and model of every car she could remember ever riding in, in reverse chronological order. She said it wasn't the same. She said she asked me first.

I told her, "Hold on. Hold on." I was thinking. Say the Hail Mary, hold my breath until I pass out, make a decision.

Solving the Problem of Monogamy, Part I

IT WAS WHILE SCRAPING the last bits of residue from the bowl and watching *Helter Skelter* at three o'clock in the morning that she had the idea for the commune. She began immediately to make a list. After ten minutes she had three names. An hour later she still had only the original three, though two more had been added and crossed out. The list-making tired her. She fell asleep in her clothes atop the bed. In the morning she awoke excited to share her idea with her husband. She went into the living room to retrieve her list. Her husband was already there, watching TV and smoking the bowl. The list was on the coffee table. A name had been added in red pen. She read it carefully as one reads a death threat or ransom note. She looked at her husband, shredding the list into pieces and fitting them one at a time into her mouth. She wondered where he kept his red pen.

The Sky Is a Well

IT IS THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS. My brother has his stocking on his head. He thinks that is what a stocking cap is. I show him the picture from our Little Golden Book. A stocking cap, I tell him, is what old men wore in the days of yore. They also wore nightgowns. Our own father sleeps in the nude. Friends' fathers wear pajamas, or boxers. Only ladies wear nightgowns, my brother says. But he knows that if I tell him something, it is probably true.

There are pudding pops in the freezer. We each take one, then tiptoe outside in our bare feet. Or, as my brother calls it, berry feet. It's too warm for Christmas. Too cold, really, for bare feet. The pudding pop sends icicles through my teeth and pierces the top of my skull. Brain freeze, my brother says.

Every Christmas I pray for snow, but I'm beginning to think that is unrealistic. God probably doesn't bring snow to the desert unless you are, say, a prophet spreading His Word. Or at least a saint. Or a beautiful, innocent child. I am not innocent, and I'm cute, at best.

Under a gnarled mesquite tree is our sin. I've buried our sins for us in little scraps of paper. There is also a small puppy there, one we found on the side of the road after a hard cold night. He'd probably frozen to death, I explained. My brother is too little to write his sins for himself so I wrote them for him. But he is too good, he's never done anything really bad. Here is what I write for him: I used a popgun in the house. I passed some gas at the table and said it was my sister. Sometimes I get so mad and I want to hit someone. I had a frog and I didn't feed him, and then he ran away.

My sins are folded into doves and stars. I won't tell him what they are. I hope, buried beneath the earth, they tangle up with the roots of the tree. I want them to stay down there, get strangled by the roots and eaten by worms. One night, I dreamt the doves came alive, tried to chirp, then suffocated. Evil, dark, dank thoughts.

I'm cold, my brother tells me.

Wave to the moon, I tell him. And make a wish.

We look up at the moon. She's shivering in between branches of our little tree.