

Afraid

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SHANAN BALLAM

The baby pig

for Dave Lee

floated in a jar
of formaldehyde
in the fifth grade
science classroom.

Her face was so lonely,
eyes like elegant
brushstrokes on china,
mouth a fine gray line
curved into a sorrowful smile,
wrinkled snout no bigger
than a dime.
Her umbilical cord twisted
like a honeysuckle vine,
belly stippled with two rows
of nipples, and through
her nearly transparent skin
Stubbs saw her heart,
a ripe cherry,
pulse and shine.

He stuffed the jar inside
his coat. It stuck out
like a pregnant belly.

He crafted a nest
of quilts and sticks,
blue heating pad in the center,
and hunkered over the jar
as if it were an egg,
folding his arms along
his sides like wings,
scowling into the sunset,
concentrating hard
to sprout feathers
and a beak.
He would fly
them both away
and they'd be free.

When she was born,
he would name her Beauty.

MARIA NAZOS

Afraid

We were afraid of everything: tornadoes, love, skateboards,
Shelly Cooper and the brass-knuckled earrings she wore.
We were petrified of the human papillomavirus, how
it was Latin for butterfly. We were afraid of butterflies,
their migration. Pot smoke when blown into our mouths

by a boy. We were afraid of Mike Rex, the older man who spat
rap and lived in a mobile home and had long, dark curly
hair, a sweaty forehead, and sold whole sheets of LSD.
We were afraid of being tied to fences, being handcuffed
together, of parties, red-and-blue-lights. Afraid

of the Wisconsin border where people crossed to drink.
Afraid of drinking, cigarette butts imprinted with lipstick stains.
We were especially afraid of the older girls who had babies
and boyfriends, whose clothes, it was rumored, they'd sliced
to ribbons. When they laughed you could see their fillings.

When they lifted their arms to chug a beer-bong, we saw
their spiny tattoos. We were afraid of tattoos, parties
in cornfields, tiny white pills, the dead and the living. Shards
of glass, mirrors, and the fallen salt we tossed over our left
shoulder where our grandmothers told us the devil lurked,

waiting to enter our bodies. Bodies were frightening:
Couldn't banish the memory of the man who emerged
from Hamell Woods, stark nude for us to see. The way
he held himself in unashamed offering. The world
opened and offered itself, and that was terrifying, too.

There were so many things we didn't see but believed.
Black ice, slick sidewalks, falling in love, or just falling and being
laughed at. Being the center of attention, eye contact, suburbs
named after cut-down trees: Timber Estates, Maple Falls—
We were afraid of leaving them. Becoming lost and adult.

Nail salons cropping up like corn. Nipple-hair, Dutch Elm
disease, and yellow tape circling a tree. The smell of cow
manure when you drove out too far. Pigeons and how they'd stare
with inbred-red eyes. Afraid of standing, alone, in the middle
of America's heart: its beat that called us to a place that burned.