

Epitaph

The foal was born crooked, legs folding in on themselves like an origami crane. It took too long to stand up, Papa said, it wasn't going to make it. He went back to the house to get his gun and by the time he got back the little thing was on its feet, legs wobbling as it fought gravity. We'll give it a couple hours, Papa said, spitting into the dirt and walking out of the barn into the cold night.

I watched through the wooden slats as you wrapped a blanket around the still-wet body. You nodded to me and I slid in the stall door, knelt beside you. Careful, you said, mama horses are like mama people. When a body slips out of ya, there's no telling how you'll react. The towel I rubbed down the shivering body grew damp while the mare breathed hard, forcing herself up on the shavings. Come away, child, you breathed, they need to bond. And as the mare ran her tongue down the body that had so recently been inside her, first with trepidation and then with resolution, long strokes that almost knocked the foal off its trembling legs, you stroked my hair the same way, held me close, as if remembering the moment that I came into the world and became yours but also not yours at the same time.

The foal made it, but you died that spring. Papa didn't shoot you but sometimes I wonder if he wished that he had as your screams, long gone, echoed around the empty rooms. Towards the end the doctor came almost daily, giving you pills that dulled your eyes and your song and left you staring at the ceiling, not remembering my name. Papa used to sit with you every day, holding your hand and praying to your god for you to get better, to come back to him. But as you got worse he came less and less, until finally you died and he wasn't there at all.

Papa doesn't say much now. But after you died he went out and shot that colt, six months old now and still at its mama's side. Shot him right in the

head so he didn't feel any pain. His mama did, though. That mare cried and cried for her baby, the same way you had, rolling around in your bed. I remembered how you used to save that colt garden scraps, the little horse that Papa didn't think would live, and how you named him Providence and how Papa put a bullet in his head after you were gone.