

SOFT SHOULDERED

This part is true.

It is true because it is named and found. People have investigated and made inquiries. And inquiries result in findings and findings can be documented and published and circulated and so people pay attention and they search for solutions.

Dystocia is the name given to any difficult childbirth or abnormal labour. During childbirth, when the anterior shoulders of the infant cannot pass below the mother's pubic symphysis, when a baby's shoulders are wider than the opening in a mother's pelvic bone, it is called Shoulder Dystocia. Imagine an infant gasping for breath, trying to emerge into the world. Imagine watery panic. Contractions. Bone against bone, unyielding.

The quickest solution is to break the baby's clavicle bones. Reach inside, first one side and then the other, thumb on tiny collarbone, hand grasping around the curve of shoulders, fingers on shoulder blades. And snap. Yes. Snap. This must be done with force and conviction. A clear fracture heals with fewer complications. We tell mothers that their babies will not remember that excruciating pain. We tell mothers that their children, their daughters, will cross a threshold into life with limp and broken shoulders. But the bones will bind themselves back together again and the breaks will set and arms will again stretch out strong, poised for running, running, and being alive with breath pulled deep into lungs. It's enough to make a person cry. With relief.

This next part is no less true.

And it hurts no less.

But there is nothing named or found and so nothing is documented or published. The sparseness of findings and inquiries has resulted in almost nothing and so nothing has been circulated and solutions are slippery and invisible.

No name is given to a child born to vanish. There is no diagnostic term for those who slip into this world born to disappear.

There are no solutions or diagrams or carefully recorded scientific data about the daughters who effortlessly take their first breath, who pull air into their lungs for years and years but for whom each breath is a breath closer to the moment when, on the shoulder of a highway, they will go missing.

This too is enough to make a person cry. With anticipation of what is coming.

And it too begins at birth, the edge of life, a life running and rushing, arms outstretched, towards a vanishing.

So begin with me at the edge. That borderland where pavement ends and soft shoulder begins. This is a land bordered by a wall of green so dark it might be black. At highway speeds, this is how Engelmann spruce trees appear. Through

a car's passenger window, branches blur and trunks transform. Things get hazy and things get lost. The details disappear.

Asphalt dissipates into gravel, gravel touches mud that curves into ditches scarred and slashed by the bulldozers and the D-9 Cats sent to scrape the foliage, the never-ending efforts of devil's club, slide alder, Indian paintbrush, and salmonberry bushes. This is a space where everything is feral and weedy, growing and growing, creeping up past the boundaries that separate the regulated and patrolled highway and the wild, wild, western wilderness. Soft shoulder of road, slip of pavement, downward slope from the centre line, a space of refuse and discard.

You are in northern British Columbia. Nowhere most of the world will ever go. A land bordering on the lost. An unseen. A beyond cities, a far outside the imaginings of most.

Still, it is worth looking at. It is worth looking closely at, if only to see what has disappeared, what is missing. Look into the thin shoulder space that borders this highway. Here is what you might find.

Broken beer bottles tossed from cars. Can you hear the hilarity, teenagers partying, driving drunk on unpatrolled roads, sweaty and in love during the few days of heat that summer offers up? Ice-cold beer and the freedom speed of a car, a carburetor-smoking-nearly-used-up-bought-off-a-neighbour-car with the windows rolled down and the wind rolling in. Yes, oh yes, toss those beer bottles, watch them shatter, just because you can. Nobody is patrolling you.

Plastic bags, snagged on brambles and translucent as lungs, filled with wind and the rushing exhaust of cars.

Mufflers rotting into metal rust, patterns like muscled lace in thin seepages of water.

Thick black curls of rubber, the ruins of wheels from transport trucks, skid marks like scabs.

Carcasses of broken deer, necks snapped and smears of blood, legs always, always, bent in that running position, some frozen reminder of a futile attempt at escape.

Fallen rocks and the remnants of blasting caps. What is left after dynamite has done its job and the fireweed has come back to ignite the dips and drops; first there are the bright purple flowers, then during pollination the fluffy cotton white. And as it dies, the fireweed gasps into red, a red so red it looks like fresh meat, road kill.

Things decay and things are consumed in the ditches and crevices on the edge of Highway 16. There is meat and metal and flowers and there is rot and there is rejuvenation. These shoulders are thin and strong, exposed and jutting. Imagine the shoulders of a very young dancer, clavicle bones jutting through flesh. The ever-present risk of breaking.

Broken shoulders.

Soft shoulders and sharp shoulders and oh, oh, such are the shoulders of a sinewy highway, Highway 16.

Things go missing at 120 km per hour on long desolate stretches of road, straight shots between one place that almost no one has heard of and another

place even fewer know about. Truck stops and Indian reserves, logging camps and precarious towns clinging to the edges of giant gouges, open pit mines exhaling molybdenum. Endako and Gitsegukla. Kitwanga, Kispiox, and New Hazelton. Usk and Rosswood. Smithers and Moricetown.

We have stopped many times on the shoulders of that highway and the time we stopped years ago was not so much different, a detour to the edge.

Pulling off onto the highway's soft shoulder for a soft-shouldered young woman, standing there on the edge of the road on the edge of a town that seems to have no hard and fast boundaries. Smithers simply evaporates. Slowly. From downtown core to mountains, from Main Street to railway track to cabins on lakes to glaciers that trail like tongues up the valleys and into sky.

And the sky is blue the day we stop for her, her in a tight black tank-top and tight jeans and jaunt and confidence on the side of Highway 16, walking backwards on the right shoulder of the road, right hand out, thumb spiked skyward.

By the time we reach Smithers we have already been driving for five hours. We left late but the long summer days make driving all night seem possible. The air is warm. Our car windows are unrolled, our dog is riding in the back seat, head hanging out the window, face streamlined in glee and we have passed rigs and beehive burners with sparks like fireflies in the long light of late August. We have counted seven black bears, fish-fat fed and glossy handsome, lumbering along the highway's edge. Our dog has barked. The evening has remained warm but we know it will grow cool before the girl will make it to where she surely must be going. And that is part of the reason we stop. We do not want her to get cold on the edge of the highway.

And of course there is something else.

Moricetown, she says, slipping into the front seat beside me. I'm going to Moricetown.

We have decided I will drive, you will sit in the back seat with our dog, and the girl from the edge of the highway will sit in the front seat beside me. We do not want our dog to make her uncomfortable. So soon she is settled in, all smiles and teeth and chitter-chatter and stories of summer basketball games in Smithers. Stories about kids from the reserves hitching "into town."

Into town, that descriptor that covers every place that is not the reserve, not her reserve with the Moricetown Canyon at its heart, a canyon through which waters boil, waters that men tether themselves over, strapped onto rock faces, spears in hand, the gut-blood of speared salmon spewing into the fine mist that sprays up from the Bulkley River, narrowed for such a breathtakingly short span, dizzying, fish leaping. Salmon by the hundreds for canning and smoking, fillets of red meat crisscrossed and hatched and slung over ladders made of green sapling alder bound with cord and bendable enough to withstand the winds that careen in. The wind smells of all of this and more.

And it is precisely this, this smoky-sugared scent of drying fish and the slippery sweat of men tethered to canyon walls, which is everything she wants to escape.

Hitchhiking into town. Because in Smithers the smell of reserve smoke disappears.

How old is she? Fourteen. Going into Grade 9 in the fall. The call of new jeans, runners white and unscuffed, crisp pages of notebooks, and moist bright highlighter pens. Geometry sets with not a single missing piece, the protractor's needle perfectly sharp. These are the things she is looking forward to, things she dreams will unfold come the early days of September, come the first whispers of frost.

We curve into Moricetown. Past the roadside hut selling smoked salmon, past the bridge over the canyon, past the Band Office and the community hall and up the hill on the other side of the reserve and onto the shoulder once again. She points out a trail. An almost invisible cleft in the ditch's vegetation, a path through bush and bramble that we would never have seen had she not known just where to look. We let her out, sun-setting light on her swinging arms as she crosses the highway's shoulder, descends the cupped lip of the ditch and then up the other side and back to her home hidden beyond the tree line.

Our hitchhiker crosses a borderland, walks over the highway's soft shoulder and is lost from our sight. Enveloped by all that grows on the sides of roads.

I have picked up other women hitching their way home. Once there was a woman in Gitsegukla, perched on a stack of Coors Light cases, teetering in the dark, hitching back to Kitwanga. I round the curve and my headlights catch her eyes no differently than headlights would catch the eyes of a highway coyote, trotting along the side of the road. Glowing illuminated metallic yellow like asteroids. She is so drunk I take her in my arms and fold her into the seat beside me. I pack all the cases of beer into the trunk of my car and I do not argue about the can she keeps in her hand.

She tells me stories as we drive, warm boozy breath wrapping around descriptions of her daughter, her cousins, tales of picking berries or heading down to Vancouver. She is heading home to her auntie's house and in the morning there will be tea. She calls it angel's tea, tea so milky white, warm and sweet, it is like the clouds we see in pictures of heaven. She is certain of this tea, this tea that awaits her. It will mark her return home. And my headlights shine and the ditches on the edge of the highway fade into blackness beyond the light of high beams and her voice hits the pitch of tires on asphalt and we are hurtling together down a mean, mean, road.

Think of this highway as a cut. A slice through darkness or wilderness or vegetation or the towns from which we all run.

And now think of this.

A slash right down to the bone can be done in less than three seconds. A slice so deep the skin may never bind, the scar will most assuredly never fade.

Now think of that highway once again and hold your breath and contemplate all the soft shoulders you have touched. Close your eyes and feel the softest slope in the world, the slope at the top of a baby's arm, curve up to neck. The landscape of your lover's clavicle bone, rising and falling with the deep breathing of calm sleep, facing you and the early morning sunlight with a familiarity that

knots your stomach and makes you reach out, again and again, just to touch that beautiful skin. Think about every shoulder you have ever touched, ever loved. Think about every person you hold dear.

May you never know what it is to lose your daughter. May you never know a disappearance never explained. A missing without reason or answer or end. May you never dream of your daughter's shoulders buckled and torn in the mud and silt of a ditch. May you never know what mothers know in Moricetown, in Kitwanga, in Burns Lake, Kitwankool, Terrace, Hazelton Kitimat Prince Rupert or in Kispiox. May you never think of your daughter as roadside prey.

May you never be the mother of the daughter gone missing from the shoulder of Highway 16 in July, in July when the days can be so cruel. A month of forest fires, a month thick with mosquitoes and decomposition. Fish rot. Of course there are daughters for almost every month of the year because slaughter has no timeline. Thirty-three murdered and missing daughters, sometimes at a rate of more than one per year.

The missing daughter of July was a treeplanter. Hitchhiking between Smithers and Prince George, backpack and hemp necklace and a shadow cast on the shoulder of Highway 16. When I think of her I think of long moments when nothing is audible but the sound of wind on the leaves of aspen trees. I think of sun on pavement and the rustle of shrubs and blood red fists of elderberry thick with juices that birds will drink come fall. I think of the safe stretch of time that existed for her between cars passing. Yes, there would have been that flicker of disappointment when the minivan with a mother and two children did not stop or when that fully loaded logging truck barreled on past. But as long as she was walking, as long as a killer did not stop, that July daughter was safe.

In Moricetown there is a billboard on the side of the highway. "Girls, don't go hitchhiking. Killer on the loose."

They search for her in waves, ripples of people winding through the ditches. They sift through the foliage and the growth and the rot. Where the roadside slips into fields, they use long sticks and methodically beat back the wheat and alfalfa swaying in the wind. In those roadside tides of green, search crews hope one of them will stumble upon her body. Even a piece of her would be a clue. Please, they think, please let this stick connect with a portion, any broken portion, of the family's daughter.

Let her not have gone missing without a trace, let the soft shoulders of this highway reveal something.

These daughters go missing in the spring and in the winter. They are only occasionally found, frozen and crumpled amongst the roots of alder trees, left torn with pine needles resting on their eyelids, tossed without concern and scratched at by eagles and ravens that draw no distinction between someone's child and the body of a porcupine clipped by a careless driver. Blood on the shoulder of a highway is blood on the shoulder of a highway. So may you never think of your daughter as roadside prey, shoulders soft as dawn, shattered in a ditch overlooked when we travel at highway speeds.

May you never know this truth.