**NO BLOOD**

Annie ignores the exit sign for Chapman Boulevard and drives out to the canyon instead, past where the hot springs used to be, past the motorcycles in front of Cook’s Corner, past the scrub oaks and dry creek bed, hoping to hike up Black Star trail.

Some people claim Black Star is haunted by ghosts of massacred Shoshone Indians, that you can hear their screams when the wind blows. Douglas says that’s bullshit, that the howling noise comes from the way the canyons face the ocean. Haunted or not, Annie needs to hike today, to burn off the lethargy stuck to her skin, like sap from an old tree but when she reaches the trailhead, a heavy chain blocks the entrance and it takes her two miles to find a place to turn around. Another mistake, wasting a day off work. She should have gone to the clinic, braved her way through the protesters and their “Choose Life” signs. Now she’ll have to reschedule.

Her eyes cut across the road as she passes the trailhead again and she almost doesn’t see the flash of grey fur. She slams on the brakes but the tires bump over what feels like a firm foam pillow with a stiff spine. Racoon maybe, or possum, a solid thump, thump, thump under her tires.

Her eyes are wild in the rear-view mirror but the road behind her is empty. After a few heartbeats she finds a place to pull over. She gets out and smells brake fluid and burned rubber as she walks the few yards back to the skid marks. Silence, except for the accusatory crows. A murder of crows, she remembers, from helping her mom solve crossword puzzles.

She returns to her pickup and inspects the tires and bumpers. She’d washed and waxed the truck last Saturday, blasting Tom Petty on the radio, trying to decide what to tell Douglas. The tires are still clean, both bumpers gleam and she hasn’t figured out what he needs to know.

A sleek sedan whizzes past, horn blaring, the driver’s face twisted in an angry knot. She steps out of the road, crossing her arms against her pounding heart, feeling the rough spots on each elbow. She looks in the brush for some evidence of flight--crushed branches, trampled grass, pieces of grey fur. She finds nothing.

A sudden gust of wind shrieks through the trees. Her mouth is dry. She could drive back to Cook’s Corner, drink a few beers, make some new friends, start a different life. She could call 911 but she doubts there’s reception and what would she say?

Annie cups her palms over her belly, waiting for the screaming to stop, waiting for the silence to return.