

DOUGLAS SILVER

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*HOME AND OTHER PLACES WE LEFT*

Some people called it the Devil's house. I heard it on the news a few days after we left. We were far gone, just off our second Greyhound when I carried you into the diner and I saw the house on TV. Police and EMTs milled about the wraparound porch. There was an ambulance with its lights off. The front door had been pitched into the chaparral, its screen torn, strips of aluminum sprinkled alongside black body bags that I thought were garbage. I ordered you applesauce because our mother had warned me not to feed you solids until you had teeth. The waitress promised me dessert if I let her hold you. She rubbed her nose against yours. A reporter interviewed a neighbor who I had never seen before (there wasn't another house within a mile). "Some sorta pact," he called it, and I didn't know what that meant. He said he always knew that the Devil lived in that house. Now I think he meant the people, our parents and their friends.

You wouldn't remember that house. You'll say you do, but you don't. I'm not talking about that cabin we lived in by the creek, where I'd steal the neighbor's dog so we'd have something to play with. I'm not talking about the trailer I found behind the drive-in theater, where the manager used to give me hot dogs and I rocked you to sleep while learning how to kiss by watching teenagers at the late show. This isn't the house where you first walked and talked and realized I was no one to raise you. Those were shelters, not homes. They were the best I could do when I didn't know what I was doing.

The Devil's house is where you were born; on the back deck, our father cut your cord. Two men held down our mother and an old woman snatched you from her sopping legs, a glob of cherry mucus that she foretold would grow into a strong man. This is where we lived before you knew you were alive. You slept in a crib our father had sanded by hand and stained a light brown that looked red at sunrise. This was the house where I made you dinner all those nights our parents disappeared to bask in the divine. Everything from a can or box because I couldn't reach the stove. This was the house where if I had been a little taller, I'd have discovered that the gas wasn't on. Just like the lights and phone.

This is the house from which I took you, from which you were given to me and we were run off. Our father handed me his wallet and our mother hit me when I tried to give you back. This is the house I was sprinting from the first time you cried in my arms and, young as I was, I realized I'd fail you often.

This is the house where police carried out bodies from the basement, along with stacks of Bibles and linens caked with wax and dried blood, and this is the story I could never tell you until you left me, until you became my ghost. This is the house we left the day you became mine. The day I saved you, is how I choose to remember it, the day I set you free.