

Circumspective Limbs

BY ERICA MCKEEN

The rat.

I was laughing hysterically. There was a twist somewhere in my stomach, my bladder. A sound and sensation close to a burp burst at the back of my mouth. I had never watched anything die, remember, I didn't know what to do. So I brought the rat, which was dying in my hands, downstairs to my dad who was doing work in the basement office. The rat's mouth was opening and closing tiredly. When I first saw her in the cage, doing that awful, slow yawning, I had thought she was hungry, so I crumpled a cracker between my fingers and placed some of the crumbs in her mouth. But she wasn't hungry, she was dying. I still don't know, looking back, what the yawning was about, the opening and closing of her mouth. I brought the rat downstairs to my dad and I think by then I was crying, and my dad looked at me, harassed, looked at the rat and said, Okay, and—? What do you want me to do? By the time he stopped speaking the rat had stopped moving and I realized I had missed it—that interminable shift—the moment of dying.

The dog.

I was sixteen and working a shift at McDonald's. It was snowing and earlier that day my mom and I had taken the dog for a walk. All I remember is the smell of grilled meat, the feel of sweat on my forehead, clamped beneath my uniform visor.

The uncle.

There was a feeling of stillness and claustrophobia, a feeling of walls shrinking, the outside light, draining in from the front lobby, buckling in on itself as my cousin came screaming into the funeral home to see her dead father in the coffin, dressed up in a suit and smoothed over with makeup. I don't remember ever seeing the uncle in a suit before this moment. Apparently (this is how the story goes), when my cousin found him on the couch there was a plate of finished chicken wings beside him on the floor, you know, picked through, just the bones.

The friend.

The friend killed herself in a dramatic way, as was her custom, by throwing herself off a cliff. I wish I was kidding. There was no open casket, quite obviously. It was maybe a bigger deal than it should've been, because the friend wasn't really a friend anymore. But she had been, when we were children.

The grandma.

In the hospital room she was having a makeshift tea party with my aunt, post-surgery. On the drive down, during which my uncle called (a different uncle, the other side of the family, don't worry, this isn't a ghost story) to say—She's dying!—and then to call again—Maybe not! They've found a heartbeat, a pulse. As I say, on the drive down to the hospital, my dad tried not to speed, not to run any lights, and my mom waited carefully breathing in the passenger seat. By the time they arrived the grandma was dead, and my mom said, Should we close her eyes or something? (Her mouth and eyes were hanging open, this is how the story goes.) My aunt reached over and fumbled to pull the lids closed.

The cat.

It was only a month later, the cat stopped peeing in her litter box. My mom called the vet to the house to put her down. By this time we were all very tired and didn't like the thought of a clinical space for the poor thing to die in. The cat had been with us a long time, but not so long that we couldn't remember what she looked like on her first day off the farm, frightened, hiding in my parents' walk-in closet, unable to eat her food, not knowing yet that she was home, that she wasn't vulnerable, that she wasn't (this is how the story goes) alone.