

## CORE

### MOLLY FAERBER

Late autumn, the antique cider press in the barn shudders to life with a violence that no longer entertains me and a noise I've ceased to hear, or almost. I can only watch so much coring and slicing, so much pooling of liquid crushed from fruit flesh. *It does the same as a person*, Dad says to visitors and slaps the machine like a faithful, dust-grimed beast, *only more*. My mother's hands flex over the chopping block, fanned wedges falling into ranks for a pie. She would sometimes peel a whole apple in one long ribbon of glossy, marbled vermilion—not a job for a machine, that. The fields where our horses graze have turned like the ends of old celery, and though I haven't marked it on the calendar in the kitchen, I know you will be home today.

I thought you were a boy the first time I saw you. It was something in the line of your jaw, the tilt of your chin, or how you seemed always to be hungry. I was often mistaken as a child; I thought I was a horse and ran on all fours until the heels of my hands were as calloused as my feet. I refused to speak for days at a time, and I did not look at mirrors or the backs of spoons, or directly into anybody's eyes. I'm still a beast of burden of a sort, hauling produce to the farmers' market and learning how to keep it going after my parents can't. It isn't difficult to follow old tracks in the road, paths the body

learns like the mind does.

Twilight, the tired whir of your old bicycle on the drive, a sound that sings in my skin as in the groove of a record. You've always been good with my parents. They're older than most people's, and have less guile. Or rather, they don't anticipate deception, untruths. They love you almost as much as they love me, for your manners and your willingness to climb into the hayloft and heave down bales, which you do much better than I can. And for being bright, which they say will take you places—it already has; I don't need to remind you. I think the horses can smell city on you like meat or gasoline. My mother says it's a shame I'm not more like you—I don't mind; she's only a little sad. She says that short hair is unbecoming on a girl, and anyway that men always like it long. Her own is uncut, bound and silvered like something shot and stuffed. After dinner I stand by the sink and wind a discarded peel around and around my arm, which is not the right shape at all.

Since we were children you've been allowed to sleep in my room, but it doesn't work there. I've painted the walls a dark green and cleared away much of my childhood, packed it off to the Salvation Army. My model horses are neatly stacked in yellow boxes beneath a skylight in the attic, laid by for the grandchildren my mother hopes to see before she dies. Even in the altered space we jar like crinkled film on the reels. Sitting on the bed I consider where I want you to touch me first, but my eyes catch in the corners of the room, on the woven rug, and my hands feel weak. I am twenty-one and should perhaps have done this with other people in your absence. You lead me outside with practiced ease.

You say it is darker here than anywhere else, that the valley fills up with nighttime to the brim. Everything smells of your cigarettes I've never smoked, and of winter starting, a humming cold just loud enough to thicken the air. I lie back in leaves outside the paddock rail and watch, almost shivering, as you sit straddling the fence. Something in the set of your hips,

the way you watch, hesitate, exhale. You climb down and stub out your cigarette, and with the same hand you slip me from my skin, my body a halved apple, star of wet seeds glistening at the axis.

I don't think of exactly what it is you do. Twisted so that one ear is pressed to the ground, my eyes tight shut, I hear the minute movements of a thousand small things. I want to be and then I am, or almost, a surge of muscle, a resonance of beating hooves on the cusp of a hill.

