

As Though There Were No Tomorrow

(a novel in progress)

"Once upon a time, I could console myself.

Eddie Veder

1.

Quiet, speaking of nothing. Under the first blush of dawn, into the harsh blaze and bake of noonday, the woman sits. Imaginary water ripples flat and far away before her, shimmies in any whisper of breeze. Love had shimmered on her skin in that kiss, in the last touch.

Dusk encroaches, lizard flickers across a rock. The black night is filled with infinite stars.

Her nighttime cold is not different from her daytime thirst. She sits within the rotation of heavenly bodies until a pale rim returns to the east. Her shadow emerges behind her, shrinks to nothing, stretches before her.

Beverly was the auntie who spotted her. They were on their way home and she was watching the power lines dip and rise, pole to pole, wondering if the puff of cloud to the west would bring some rain. Thinking just a little of the pain in her joints. The harder she studied a dark lump on the hillside the less she could make it out. "There—" she pointed with a finger that never got straight, "what's that?"

A little like an eagle, but it didn't take flight. Too dark for most kinds of garbage, the wrong shape for a bloated carcass.

Smyrna backed up to where the ditch flattened and drove straight out.

After some discussion Doris and Vernita trudged over and sat beside the young woman. After a time they made their way back. "She doesn't even know we're here."

"Maybe she wants to stay where she is." Sissie had the whole passenger seat to herself and planned to keep it that way.

Vernita shook her head. "When's the last time you sat out in this kind of sun?"

Smyrna, feet splayed sideways out the driver's door, grabbed the doorframe with both hands and yarded herself up, then walked over to take a look. Doris and Vernita were right behind. Beverly slid across the backseat and scurried to catch up.

"Get her to drink some water, first." Sissie's words followed them.

They stood in a half-circle behind the woman.

"How about you come where it's cooler?" Smyrna used her soft voice.

The woman didn't move.

Beverly took the milk bottle out of Doris' hand, splashed some water into her cupped palm, and tilted it against the woman's lips. A trickle ran down.

Doris rubbed the wet of her hand across the woman's forehead and cheeks. "She's burning up."

Smyrna slipped her hands under the woman's armpits and hoisted. "Take her feet gals." They carried her this way: Smyrna shuffled backward, arms locked around the woman's chest, Vernita and Doris stumbled lugging one foot each, Beverly walked along side, dabbing water.

They gently flopped her into the backseat, knees folded, her head cradled in Beverley's lap. Once Smyrna got the car back on the road she drove smooth as water on slickrock. Sissie pouted, jammed against the front seat window, Doris and Vernita sidesaddle beside her, all their legs further pinched together each time Smyrna shifted gears.
