

The Beginning of the World is a Gas Station - Eleanor, Year 10, VIC

That summer was a hot, Texan summer. The kind of summer that melted the words off your tongue. Where spiders fled their dust ridden webs on the streetlights and migrated to dark corners of antique shops brimming with chipped china plates. The kind of summer where the sky was a constant vast and lonely blue, but incomparable to the vastness of my loneliness.

Everywhere, the air was thick with heat. It hummed to life at dawn, then simmered at twilight with the fireflies, and in the wheatfields that were dry and cracked. I felt that summer in the restless mornings when my body ached for the roads past the gun ranges.

The first week of summer, I spent travelling to Houston. Just to drink sickly sweet coffee and stare at Apollo Mission Control and dream of a world beyond space and time, a world beyond scorching sun and barbed wire fences. Apollo, Icarus, melting wax wings and the promise of greatness; someday. But no, my town intended to keep my greatness as a trapped moth in the streetlights that fueled the perpetual glow in the uneven tarmac streets.

The paint on my bike looked like my nail polish, chipped. The baby blue exterior was flaking off, revealing its steely grey body - a blunt and lifeless colour. I pedalled along the melting road, on a dusty path fettered with rotting roadkill, the sun mercilessly glaring down at me as I moved through the eternally empty streets of my town.

My 'glorious' town of smashed whiskey bottles and wasted potential . The words plastered on the lopsided sign that stood alone in the arid earth, about one kilometre out from town, read something like: "*Welcome to Constance, your dream destination!*" The sign was quite misleading, since Constance was probably the number one place in Texas where dreams went to die. They didn't just die, they burned in the constant sun, becoming bleached and haggard and broken. Dreams that could never rest, dreams that had become wisps of what they once were, but still remained clinging to your every thought like ivy. Snaking wildly over every crevice in your brain.

I couldn't ever fathom the idea of wanting to stay here.

The brakes on my bike squeaked as it shuddered to a stop in front of a faded pale pink house. I slipped off, grabbing my overstuffed sparkly pink gym bag from the basket in the front.

The front porch steps creaked menacingly as I quickly skipped up them, they sank and groaned under my steps, the rotten wood threatening to give way at any second. I pushed open the flyscreen, closing it behind me, then knocked softly on the door.

I heard some muffled footsteps from inside, and then the door flew open. The girl I had known since I started school, currently sporting choppy, faded turquoise hair, a tank top with rhinestone angel wings - that appeared to be missing a few rhinestones - and frayed denim shorts, stood, smiling widely in the doorway.

“Mary!” She engulfed me quickly, she smelt like cherry body spray and cigarettes. I hugged her back. “I missed you, girl.”

She pulled away, giving me a quick once over before tugging me inside her house, “Come on, the car’s waiting.”

And so it began, the escape from this town. The escape from the constant cycle of the same roads and houses and people. The desperation to be free burned like white-hot flames inside me. Inside both of us. Willow had been drinking herself into a stupor all winter and spring, and told me she wouldn’t survive another Christmas here. I didn’t blame her.

Willow was asleep in the seat next to me, the coyotes were howling. I flicked my eyes from her to the road. Willow once told me that she didn’t remember the sound of her brother’s voice anymore, just the shape of it; curling smoke from a joint lit up on her roof. Her brother left when he was eighteen. She only talked about him once, but every time someone mentioned him, she would curl her hands up tightly. When she uncurled them, they would be covered in half-moon indentations. She kept his denim jacket that smelt like gasoline and burnt rubber, she wore it like she hoped one day it would grow wings and carry her out of town too.

When we were fourteen, she broke into our half-rotted away church and stole the communion wine. We got drunk amongst the moth-eaten velvet pews. The priest found us in the morning. Willow told me she wanted to “taste forgiveness”. I think she just liked the thrill of being caught and the way the priest told her that she was unholy.

A week later she asked me if God forgave people like her. I told her I didn’t believe in God. I faintly remember her softly saying “me neither.” She never brought it up again. But when we were fifteen, she was still going to church every sunday. If it was guilt or the craving for faith that brought her back, I don’t know.

Night had fallen, a thick velvet blanket thrown across the endless sky, a blanket flecked with brilliant silver stars. The scratched up Chevrolet in dire need of a paint job rolled along the seemingly limitless flat dirt road, a cloud of dust swirling behind us. Soft static seeped from the radio.

I wondered about home, if my parents would care if I left. They wouldn’t. My mother hasn’t looked me in the eye since March. Last year, my dad called me Marian for a week before my mom corrected him. I can’t remember what he looks like anymore, just a blurry face and a hand clutching a lukewarm beer.

The weeks after we left were incomparable to anything I had ever experienced. I had become something new, my whole mind shifted to encompass the gloriousness of this sudden new world.

I was a whisper on the breeze, a lazy cat, lounging on the hot, red hood of the car at the gas station, drinking flat coke and shading my eyes from the sun.

Willow and I would take turns driving the red chevy. Once, she announced loudly, “We’re never going back,” as she tossed a ginger beer can out the window. But there was longing in her voice, and I watched her crane her head to stare at the line of dust following behind the car, as if she hoped it might reach out and drag her back home.

“I love these dirt roads, I love being nowhere, no one,” she had laughed as she threw her arms out into the rushing wind. But I watched her flinch every time we passed a diner with a payphone; maybe her fingers ached to dial familiar numbers.

We crossed state lines, clambered over fences, stumbled into diners with yellowing menus and cracked red leather seats. Willow would dance on top of beer-covered countertops, spilling secrets out of her lip gloss mouth and demanding kisses and candy like a real gas station queen.

But at night, in the motel, she would curl up by the window to watch the moon, her arms tight around herself like she was trying to heal something broken inside.

The world had become tinted at the edges, it smelt like stolen perfume and smoke, mistakes covered up with more mistakes. I became “Clementine” in one state, “Betsy” to the girls in the Illinois seven eleven, “Ella Jane” to the man I kissed in a leather jacket full of cigarette burns in Nebraska. Shedding identities like snakeskins, I became no one and someone between two golden cornfields and a flickering neon motel sign. My old self was a mere echo in the past, lost at the start of the world, while I had gone to the end of it. The Texan sun set in the west. All that I was, was the line of the horizon as the sun dipped low.

A car with Texas plates passed us on the heat-soaked highway. I think both of our stomachs dropped, and our breaths were stolen for a second. Neither of us mentioned it, but the silence was enough. Enough to remember how very far these Texan girls were from home - yet not at all far.

As I spun across the sticky floors of a dive bar in South Carolina, I became no one. We were finally free. And when we stumbled outside, my hand clutched in the hand of the same turquoise-haired girl I left Texas with, I was filled with a sudden reverence for life. I was drunk and dizzy, worshipping the kaleidoscope of malfunctioning LED signs around me.

In that moment, eleutheromania filled me like the coyote howls in the moonless midnight sky; savage and breathtaking. The sky cracked open above us as we spun, the infinite universe swallowed us whole, and suddenly my loneliness recoiled in comparison to the boundless cosmos I had come to know.