

Michaella A. Thornton

*finalist***DONNA**

Donna of the black-feathered hair, Pacific blue eyes, and heart-shaped face. Who bought me Twinkies, drove a gray Camaro, sunbathed topless in the suburbs, and worked as a stripper when my father first met her. Donna, who smoked a lot of pot, threw a glass paperweight at my father, and smacked her lips loudly at the dinner table.

There are a few photographs of me at my father's second wedding, the one he and Donna had outdoors before she joined the dinner table. Their wedding was held at a park shelter in the summer; the kind of place where children ate hot dogs and birthday cake, then chased each other around picnic tables.

If one were to flip through the wedding album, one would see a scowling figure on the edge of the frame. A girl with oversized red plastic glasses, who folded up her lanky body while simultaneously calling attention to meringue-stiff, pie-high bangs. A judgmental ghost-child: part cockatoo, part disapproving clown.

Poor Donna: she married into an instant family the day she married Dad, me, and a dog named Pancake. Unlike the dog, Donna refused to be stepped on. She wore a puffy white confection and a blue garter belt in retaliation. Her dress was new. She had bought it on sale at a Kansas City department store. I forgot what was old—certainly not Donna. My father was thirty-two to her nineteen, a girl of blue-black iridescence who wore a shortening-white bodice—a purple martin among the sparrows.

After the wedding, Donna and I sat in Dad's gray Impala and listened to Madonna. We sang and laughed the entire length of the cassette. She showed me how to strike a pose. When we were done, I let her borrow my tape. I felt a little closer to this woman, this stranger, this stepmother who was not old enough to claim the latter should the step be removed. When I asked for the tape back after the honeymoon, Donna apologized: "I left it in the car at the airport," she said. "It melted."

Years later, after Donna divorced my dad and Pancake lost her sight, my grandmother confided her suspicions. "She was all coked up," Grandma said. "I saw it—the white powder running from her nose. I know what dope looks like." I nodded, letting Grandma stretch the truth like the train of Donna's bargain wedding dress.

Twenty years after the wedding, it makes sense, seems almost necessary, to be high on something—white powder or blind hope—to get through vows most knew were doomed before they were promised. To heft one's mistakes, burdens, and differences into plain view and down the aisle so the one you loved could see the baggage. So those sitting in pews or on park benches would know their place, and would, perhaps, sit still and be silent, so the purple martin, who never builds her nests in occupied houses, wouldn't startle and take her songs elsewhere.