

January Gill O'Neil

Brave

A thin layer of ash,
 fine debris, probably bone
 coated the windshield

as we passed exit after exit
 for the Garden State Parkway.
 We took detours and back roads

while police blocked every onramp.
 Blue lights pulsing.
 Officers in yellow hazard vests

stood next to their squad cars
 as we drove past midnight:
 my soon-to-be husband, mother-in-law,

brother-in-law, and me
 in a 1992 Grand Marquis
 on our way to Virginia.

On the radio,
 nothing but news and static.
 All of us silent, sleepy, edgy,

uncertain, both absent and present
 on an empty highway
 driving past New York City.

∞

I would never tell my daughter
 that some nights I lie awake
 listening for the raccoon I know is in the attic

but pretend isn't there.

The scratching, the heavy scampering—
she hears it, too.

If he were here,
daddy would check things out.
If he were here,

mommy would not feel lonely.
We pretend to be brave,
bang on the walls,

play loud music to scare it away,
pray it does not have cubs.
Marriages fail.

There is no one else
to go up there
and get the little fucker.

☪

On our day in court
my lawyer was late,
so the judge moved our case

to the afternoon docket.
We sat for hours
you on the left side,

me on the right
listening to failure after failure,
the quick dissolve of marriages into oblivion.

I remember thinking
Hallmark doesn't make
a card for this:

the moment when the judge calls your name
and uses words such as
irreconcilable, broken, and final

and a swell, no a surge of tears
breaks as the judge
uncouples us.

You cried, too.
Neither of us looked at the other
or spoke.

When I turned around
You were gone.
You had left the building.

∞

Before we arrived at the hotel
we took engagement photos
in our wrinkled clothes.

And before that
we watched the sun rise as we crossed
the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel.

And before that
we listened to Howard Stern around 5 A.M.
broadcast live, trying to find the right words. Any words.

And before that
you took the wheel from your brother
so he could get some sleep.

And before that,
silence.

And before that
you held my hand
as we rode in the back seat.

And before that
we were not allowed
on the Garden State Parkway.

And before that
we stopped for gas, sandwiches,
checked the check engine light somewhere in Connecticut.

And before that
there was a toll
on the Tobin Bridge.

And before that
I was on the phone
with the maid of honor

who would ride the bus
from Texas to Virginia to arrive by Saturday.
I thought she was crazy.

And before that
I was on the phone with my father
who said, *be careful* and *I love you*.

And before that
no flights were allowed
out of Logan Airport or anywhere.

And before that
I said *yes*.

And before that
you said *yes*.

And before that
I asked, *Should we go through
with the wedding?*

∞

I would never tell my daughter
male raccoons have no part
in raising their young.