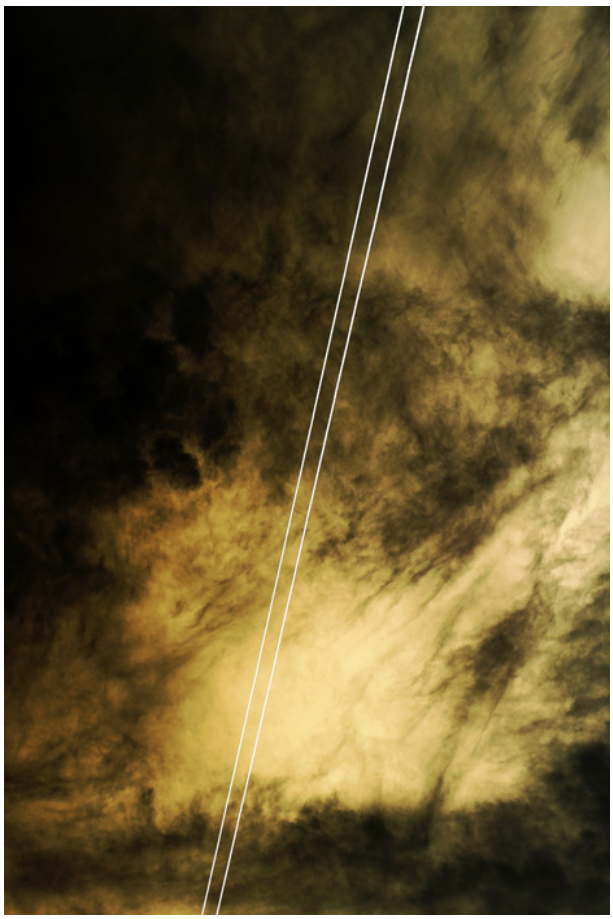
FLASH FICTION

Alouette

by Jael Montellano



Untitled by Adriano Marinazzo

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The fetid Midwestern heat is trapped in this house with you. The kitchen windows are open, but without a draft, the heat goes nowhere. Outside, the sky is a lurid yellow, and in the west, storm clouds approach. There is no wind as there is no air conditioner as there is no dog. Your dog died but your mother didn't tell you until two weeks after the fact. She is mad at you for going to college out of state, somewhere beyond the Venus flytrap of her clutches. You returned at semester's end to smell Camila's blankets, but the only evidence of your fourteen-year best friend, your mooring in this country that isn't yours, is the urn in the curio cabinet. Your mother washed her things and gave them to the neighbor with the Bichon Frisé.

She hums a tune, serves you the cobbler she's made on her favorite English china. Blue-and-white, Qinghua style. Stolen from its place of origin, bastardized into something else. Like you.

"You used to sing that to me as a kid," you say. "Alouette, gentille alouette. I never knew what it said until recently."

She grins, cheeks glistening with a layer of sebum. "It's about a lark."

"I know." You spoon the dessert toward your mouth. "It's the rest I didn't know."

"Je te plumerai la tête, je te plumerai le bec, et la tête, et le bec, alouette —"

The overripe sweetness pervades your tongue and you spit the cobbler back onto the plate, wiping your mouth with your hand. "I hate apple."

"Do you?" she furrows her forehead as if this is a new development. "I wanted you to feel better about Camila."

"You *know* I hate apple."

A gale pounds suddenly and rattles the windows in their gummed up tracks. Overhead, the clouds have gathered black as pitch, rolling thickly as if the atmosphere has been cracked open and the cataclysm of space bled in.

"I spent all morning making that." Her voice has soured like buttermilk. "You're so ungrateful. Eat it or you can't get up from the table."

You snigger. "What, are you going to tie me to the chair? I'm not little anymore."

The tornado siren breaks. It seems to take ages as though it swims through a riptide, but then there's a continuous crashing of sound around the house.

She turns on the television and bathes in its tungsten light. "Tornado watch in Fulton County." She looks up at you and you can see the struggle of her mouth where it warps with

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satisfaction. “Guess you can’t go anywhere now.”

“Do you even understand the difference? Between a watch and a warning?”

Her mouth twists into a sneer. You think she’s always loathed the quickness with which you’ve disarmed her.

“When you finish you can join me in the basement.” She leaves the television on and takes the stairs down.

Branches jettison across the yard. The low trees flatten and water sprays through the screen like warm spit, speckles landing on your forearm.

“I will pluck your eyes, O Lark,” you mutter. In the garbage, you spy the pre-mixed Betty Crocker crumble box peeking from the plastic. “I will pluck your neck, O Lark.”

In a decade, you will have the courage to cut off contact, to choose distance over the whirlpool of war, but for now, you are the eye of the storm. You throw your remaining cobbler in the garbage and then the contents of the baking dish.

“And the eyes, and the eyes, and the neck, and the neck.” You shatter the dish and then open the cabinets for the matching china. “Alouette, gentle alouette.” You shatter the entire collection on the linoleum. Dish by dish. “Alouette —”

There is a wail from the doorframe. Your mother stumbles to her knees on the top stair, surveying the damage. The artifacts from her life before you lie in pieces. She looks at you as though she sees your mestiza skin for the first time and her lips tremble.

“Je te plumerai,” you sing.

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