

“We did.” Everything had changed. He knew he couldn’t really consider attending UK but he wanted it to be a real consideration. He wanted her, for once, to look at him for who he was and what she meant to him. He was young but he knew what he felt and what he wanted. He also knew her mind was made up. He had to reconcile that.

He pulled the mason jar out from under the seat. “One more for posterity?” he asked, holding the jar up to her.

“Not for me,” she said, “and only a small one for you.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do,” he said but he did listen to her and took only a quick sip and closed up the jar.

“I am going to miss you, Wren,” she said. “I’ll miss you more than anyone else.”

Why had she wasted these last four years with other boys when they were so clearly good together? He wanted to remain angry with her but he could not bring the heat of anger when it came to her. He forgave her as he always had, writing it off as an unknowable trait of the heart. He did not reply to her remark but instead gave her a nod and opened the car door.

They stepped out and rejoined the party, noticeably thinner now with folks having paired off and moved to their own cars. The fire was dimmer but still burning. The music had been turned lower and Wren thought if he looked hard enough to the east he might see light on the horizon. They sat on a couple of wood stumps and Lucinda curled next to him again.

“Are you scared to go away?” she said.

“Some,” he said. “But when I told my mom I was scared she looked at me crosswise and said, ‘Boy, I moved five thousand miles away from my family and to a different country, I think you can move to Cambridge for four years.’”

They laughed. “Your mother is awesome. So tough.”

“She’s the toughest,” he said and he tried to imagine her at his age leaving Korea and heading off into some great unknown. As he got older he would wonder more and more how she had done it, how she had worked up the courage and fought through her loneliness and isolation, but right then he only marveled in it with Lucinda. He took up a stick and poked at the fire, watching its tip blacken.

“I don’t want this to be the last night I ever see you,” she said with a suddenness that surprised him.

“It doesn’t have to be,” he said. “I can come back to visit. You can fly to Boston.”

She didn’t respond. She took up her own stick and poked at his. “You are arrogant but that doesn’t mean I don’t admire that from time to time. I won’t ever leave this place,” she said. “I know I’ll end up right back here.”

“I don’t understand,” he said, “how can you know that about your future? You sound so defeated by it, too.”

“I know it the same way you know you won’t ever come back. The same way you knew you could get into Harvard.”

“But I didn’t know that and I don’t know the future.”

She turned to him. “You tried. You had the guts to try. Think about that. Look around us,” she said. “No one else here lets themselves dream past a year. You’ve got a whole life planned down to the final detail, don’t you?”

He didn’t. But ever since his father had talked to him, when he imagined life, he did not think of Friday night football in Fordyce or taking his children to Cable Hill for sledding in the winter anymore. He had some ideas about a city—any city—tall buildings, cabs, public transportation. But in every version of the dream there was a woman like Lucinda, tall and athletic, hair that shimmered under the light, hands that reached for him in the night as hers did now and held him close. She had been both the only clear and murky thing in his life until now.

Within minutes she was asleep and he was left watching the fire alone. The people were gone. The radios had silenced. It was only Wren and the yellow light and its dying heat suffocated by dew. He picked Lucinda up, cradled in his arms, and carried her back to his car and set her in the passenger seat. He grabbed his graduation gown from the back seat and placed it gently over her and then kissed the top of her head. He went to the back of his car and sat on the trunk and turned east. The stars began to fade, the sky lightened, birds began to call, then the earth was filled with light and behind him the fire was in smolders.

**Michael Croley** was born in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in Corbin, Kentucky. He won a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship in 2016 as well as an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award. Croley’s work has appeared in *Literary Hub*, *Narrative*, *Kenyon Review Online*, *The Paris Review Daily*, *Blackbird*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *the Southern Review*, *Fourth Genre*, and the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. He teaches creative writing at Denison University.

## URSULA O’FARRELL

*Carried with Queen, 2012*

Oil on canvas, 54 x 54 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST