

Track Me With Your Words, Speak Me With Your Feet

Kristen Gipson

There is the girl whose hair gallops like horses when she walks. From the front, she looks a little like Elvis, with a strong jaw and sad eyes but from the back, she is a band of colts. There she is every day, sipping her coffee and reading paperback novels with the cover bent back, so you know that she is a little ashamed of reading it, whatever it is, so you know that she has the sense to be ashamed of things.

When she is here, she is loud and has an unidentifiable accent, like she speaks with a limp; it is beautiful. I like her confidence, in her plain white t-shirts and her muddy boots and her hair of stallions, and her coffee.

Stories are supposed to be about changing, but sometimes they're about things that have already changed, things that can never be changed back, things that you wish weren't but are. Sometimes they're about changes long ago or changes that led to other changes. You get change back from stories; that's the point.

Anyway, the horse girl comes in and she reads stories and drinks coffee and tells people her opinions loudly and without fear and I sit there, quietly jealous, a little hopeless, until she leaves. This is my every day.

Then I wait until it is dark outside and someone asks me to leave, and I pick up my bag and I go to the bathroom, where I wash my face. I avoid my own eyes in the mirror and take a nip out of a bottle without ever pulling it out of my bag. The zipper usually scratches me on my face, familiar and condemning.

Then I leave.

There is an underground place that I go. If you walk across the highway and follow the lights of an oil rig in the distance, you can get to it pretty fast, under an hour. You have to walk through a field, so you should look for snakes. But then there is a gaping hole in the ground and a rope there, where others have gone before.

It's not that I want to go into the hole. The whole time I'm lowering myself down, surprising myself with the strength in my arms, I look at the darkly bluing sky and the stars and I wish that I were the horse hair girl, in her white t-shirt, who is probably sitting at home, eating something stable, like corndogs.

It's not that I want to go into the hole. There isn't anything good about burying yourself this way, and it is uncomfortably like a birth, this soaring downward. In some places, the hole is as wide as a stadium; in others, I have to shove with my feet to make the dirt admit my wide hips. You can see the roots of grass and trees and the deeper down you go, the more surprised you are at how much is still visible, how much the earth seems to want you to see it, even when the light does not.

When I finally let go of the rope, my hands are red and raw. They are red and raw every night and every morning I wake up and no one can see them like this, even though they still sting and burn. Every morning, they are just plain palms, unblemished and capable.

Down here, there are lights. Down here, there are around two hundred of us. Down here, the smell of food is forceful and insistent and I follow it.

Isn't it funny that I've never seen anyone wait for the rope? No one ever comes down here in twos or threes. You come when you are supposed to, one at a time.

They give me food and I eat it too fast, throw up. Then I don't want to eat again, because I've been crying and vomiting makes me tired.

The horse-haired girl is talking to a young man with thinning hair. He is wearing a white, short-sleeved button down shirt and keeps fidgeting with the sleeves as though it makes him uneasy.

She wants him to tell a story. She wants him to help her.

"Take me to them," she says.

The young man pretends not to understand her question. He wants to flirt with her, keeps trying, but her loud voice keeps scaring him, making him skittish. She is insistent upon some information.

“I don’t know what you mean,” he says again.

“Yes, you do. You told me two weeks ago that you could do it, so do it. Take me to them.”

“I can’t,” he says, looking helpless. His hands flutter delicately over his coffee. “I don’t know where to find them.”

The girl puts her head in her hands and stiffens her fingers like she wants to drive them through her temples, dig out the gray inside. Just as suddenly, she sits up and relaxes.

“Tell me again. Tell me what you saw.”

When he speaks, it is not with the gentle nervousness of before. His soft voice becomes musical, like he’s reciting a poem from memory or recalling a face that he loved once.

“They wear these clothes, reddish brown like the dirt, like togas made of long pillowcases and they sit in circles and light a fire and tell a story about how the earth was new once and when they speak, you feel that they were there and you can almost see the plants soaring up out of the ground, ten feet tall and lush and green and you can almost smell the humidity of the many seas hot on the air. They tell stories and then they all stand up and hold hands and they cut one another’s throats and then whoever is left jumps into a great hole, a hole in the earth.”

The last part of this makes me shudder-stop, my hand gripping tight on the two-dollar coffee that gives me a place to rest during the hot days. No one where I go wears rust-red robes, but they do jump into a hole in the ground, I suppose. But not all at once like this. No one comes out of the hole in groups. No one cuts throats.

The horse girl has an expression like a great curve of anger, as if she doesn’t believe a word he says. But then she reaches down into a briefcase and pulls out a sheaf of papers in a manila envelope. They are gray and yellow: newspaper clippings.

“And this. And this one. And again here.”

Dead people is what I gather from the squeamish look on the man’s face. A few moments ago, he spoke of cut throats with a sweet tenor. Now he glances around as though he regrets seeing her. His eyes lock with mine for a half a second before they move on around the room, looking to see if someone important heard their conversation.

“Just dead bodies and no one can work out who they are or where they came from or what they were doing there or anything. Dragged bodies. There is no hole nearby. But you’re the only person in the whole county who says he’s seen something. And you’ve told people, you’ve said: I saw something. So why won’t you tell me where to find them?”

“Because I don’t know,” he insists. She glares at him and he stammers silent. I am listening with such an intensity that my ears should bleed from the effort.

There are no words for a few minutes.

“Why won’t you tell me?” she whispers into her coffee cup.

“Because I’m afraid,” he admits just as quietly. They finish their coffee quickly, gulping.

“Will you walk me to my car?” she asks and now she is loud and bold again and her eyes make promises. He says sure and they walk away.

In the bottom of my bag there is a half-dollar that my grandfather gave me. After going to the bathroom and rinsing my face, I fish it out. It is sewn into the bottom of the bag, and I have to jerk hard for the threads to break. I see the barista raise his eyebrows at me, leaving early. Sometimes I ask him for food and he always says no, because he is scared of his boss, a blonde, lined woman who is always frowning over expense reports.

It takes me three hours to walk to the coin shop and I almost regret it when I think about the three hours back and then the nearly one hour more to the hole in the ground.

But maybe that is not my destination. It makes me nervous to think about it, so I focus on the graffiti under the overpass, the unkempt grass growing from the curb, the cracked and cloudy windows in the old presidential library. This has never been a pretty town, but the veneer of blue-collar respectability seems to crack a little more every day and the underneath is dusty and tired.

My destination is bright inside, brighter than the coffee shop, and everything seems like it’s made out of windows. Even the coins, lying on beds of velvet in the counter glisten wetly like painted glass. The silver half-dollar in my pocket is dirty with rust. While I wait, I rub my thumb over the grimy ridges and I stare at my shiny black reflection in a baby grand piano.

A woman with iron-gray hair comes out of a room behind the counter; she is dressed stylishly in high heels and a wool dress and everything about her is manicured and clean. When she sees me, wearing a headscarf and a green nylon coat in the middle of July, she pauses.

“Can I help you?” she asks doubtfully.

I decide not to speak, because I don't trust her yet, and she seems like the kind of person who might not trust me either. So I just put the half-dollar on the counter and wait.

She picks it up and looks at it. Kneels down and digs around under the counter and emerges with a little lens like a spy glass that she presses hard to her eye.

"What do you want to do with this?" she asks me.

"Sell it," I say.

"You could get a little for the silver," she says. "Silver prices are good right now. I'll have Jim do the paperwork."

She disappears into the back with my grandfather's half-dollar and I regret it.

In the hole, people don't have grandparents. They don't have parents or brothers or sisters or pets or boyfriends or anything. In the hole, we like to sit in lines, dozens of straight lines of kneeling strangers, and we eat our food and we wait for something to happen. Most people carry a backpack, but almost no one carries around memories. I had to sew my memories into the bottom of my backpack, and, while I wait, I finger the hole that I ripped to tear it out. I wonder if I want to sell my memories for thirty dollars or so.

The woman precedes Jim out of the back room. He is a short man with curly, close-cropped hair and he is full of frenetic energy.

"Did you steal this?" is the first thing he says to me. He slaps the coin on the counter.

"No, sir," I say.

"Are you lying to me?" he asks me, looking at me hard.

"No, sir," I repeat.

"Well, okay." He pulls out some paperwork and hands it to me, pointing where to sign. In the receipt column, I see that they are going to give me nearly one hundred and seventy dollars for my grandfather's coin. That is much more than I expected; more than I thought this was worth.

When I hand back the papers, Jim seems proud of himself and he kisses the gray-haired woman on the lips. Then I understand that my coin was probably rare, probably worth a lot, more than one hundred seventy dollars anyway. I always thought the edges were a little funny. This is capitalism, a funny little statement of it, and I don't mind. I am always trading my memories for something lesser.

I go to a thrift store and buy a clean pair of jeans, a white t-shirt, and a new pair of shoes for less than twenty dollars. Then I go to a fast-food hamburger chain and order one of everything off of the value menu. This costs almost six dollars. Then I check into the worst motel room in town, run by a friend of my mother's. She gives me a discount, gives me the room for the whole week for all the rest of my money, although I owe her eight dollars. I tell her I don't know if I want to stay for the whole week, and she asks me where else I would go.

I shrug.

I do not want to go back to the hole tonight.

It's too hot for me to lay under the blankets and they feel scratchy-soft to me, unused to them, so I pull them all off the bed and sit on the mattress, listening to the cartoons playing in the room next door. I tried to turn on the TV, but I couldn't figure out the remote. When I press the power button, the TV tells me no señal.

While I lay there, I think about the top of the hole under the sky. It is my favorite part of there, the weeds ankle-high, some of them blooming, and you can always see them just right under star-light. I like the bluebonnets, like to pick them and place them in my bag before I make the descent.

In my mind, I imagine blank and empty bodies, with bluebonnets tickling their pale eyes, the rust-red dirt redder than usual.

I do not want to go back to the hole tonight.

When I sleep, I dream about a girl with blonde hair, standing at the side of a swimming pool, lined up next to nine other kids. They are laughing and shouting, waiting to jump in but she is standing bone-still. The left half of her body is burnt and bloody and when she turns to look at me, she makes shrill chirping noises, like a cricket trying to sing over a vacuum cleaner.

I don't remember what happens next.

The horse-girl does not show up at the coffee shop today, so when it is time to leave, I grab my bag and walk thirty minutes up the highway to the hotel. From the road, I can see the rig lights that I would normally follow to home. I wonder if anyone down there has noticed that I am gone. They do not know my name.

I strip the bed and sleep. This night, I do not dream.

When I see the horse-girl again, she is reading a paperback novel with the cover bent over. Her boots are muddy and she seems in better spirits. I wonder what her interest in the hole was, whether she is a reporter or a social worker. I knew a social worker once, who wanted to find me a home. She had a voice like a leech that burrowed down into your ears and laid eggs. It made her good at her job, but she was fired a couple of weeks after I met her, for testing positive for marijuana, I heard. I was disappointed when I heard that she had lost her job. She wasn't nice, but I wanted to hear her voice again, tell me that I deserved better.

When she finishes her coffee, horse girl looks around the room and sees me staring at her. I have not let her see me before; today, I am wearing my new clothes, washed in the sink last night. We are dressed the same, in white t-shirts and jeans, although I wear old, once-white sneakers.

She surprises me by blushing; she seems awkward when she gets up to leave. I wait a moment, savoring the last of my coffee, although I do not really enjoy the taste, just the warmth, and then follow her out.

Halfway across the parking lot, she waits, facing away from me, so that I can see her hair canter and gallop. In the middle of the parking lot, she waits.

So, I take her by the hand and we begin walking.

At first she was silent, but soon she has many questions. Where are we going? Do you know about the people? How are we getting there? I keep telling her, you will see. I tell her, the walk is long. You should pay attention. To myself, I think that I might not be able to make the trip twice.

She keeps her own company after I say this, noting what she thinks are landmarks: an oil rig just so far away from the road, identical to a dozen other oil rigs just so far away from the road in these parts. She may never find it again. I want to point her eyes to the grooves in the dirt where others have passed before, not on our path, but wagon wheeling all around us toward a central locus. But I stay quiet, trying to keep my resolve. I am afraid of the story that was told by the man with the thinning hair, of what we will find.

Sometimes she asks me to stop and she looks hard at the dirt, at the way we came, and I can tell that she is regretting the decision to come with me. Then, she starts walking again, and I try not to regret it myself.

"I had a sister," she says after awhile. "Her name was Emily, and she had a tattoo of a bird, a robin, under her ear. Her hair color changed all the time, but the last time we saw her it was red

with streaks of blonde and black.” She frowns. “Or maybe it was blonde with streaks of red and black. It’s hard to remember sometimes. She was always changing it.

“Anyway, one night she was reading upstairs in our room and I got mad about something, like, I think my car was out of gas. She had driven it all night, joy riding with her high school friends, and didn’t fill up the tank. Yeah, that was it. It seems like a stupid thing to be mad about now. I yelled at her and she yelled at me. Normal sister stuff.

“Our parents weren’t around a lot, you know. I didn’t think that was weird until much later, when I got to college, really. I thought that everyone’s parents would disappear sometimes. Especially once I got into high school, I thought it was totally normal that my mother came home drunk and my dad would sleep off his hangover all Sunday morning. They didn’t fight much, but they didn’t really talk to each other either.

“I thought it was normal, but Emily hated it. I guess maybe they all hated it, maybe she got it from them. That house, those walls, maybe it was stifling. Emily took up their traits, would decide to crash at a friend’s house, and I would be alone for a week and a half, waiting for one of them to stumble through the door, so I could get a field trip permission form signed.

“So, when I yelled at Emily, she grabbed the keys to my car and zoomed off. I thought she was just going to her friend’s house. I was mad, because she took my car to get there, and I knew I wouldn’t see it or her for ages. At that time, I was working at the pizza place downtown, and I was going to lose that job if I didn’t have the car.

“But then the car was found a couple of days later, abandoned in the parking lot of a real estate agency, locked up tight.”

The horse hair girl stops again and looks back at where we came. We are close to the end now.

“It wasn’t the last time I saw her. She was found a few months ago, her throat and face cut ragged with a blunt object, covered in dirt, bruised post-mortem from being dragged. I saw her at the funeral. It really sucked. I really wanted to know what happened to her.” She swallows. “Do you know what happened to her?”

I don’t say anything for a minute.

“You’ll see. People don’t really have names down there,” is what I tell her, finally.

“Down where?” she says, suddenly eager, and I point at the hole.

She refuses to go down the rope at first. She keeps saying that I should go down, bring them out. I explain that it doesn’t work that way. We come when we are called. One at a time, it is solitary, it is lonesome. She does not understand, the girl with the loud voice who reads

paperback novels, with the missing sister. She is defined by the things in her lives. Down here, you are what you are missing.

Eventually, I grip the rope and tell her to wait and then follow. I tell her to hold her grip firm. If she gets tired, she can rest on the rocks; there are many ledges built down here for that, close to the top there are roots growing thick and old that you can perch on for a minute. Deeper down, where trees don't grow, there are old trashcan lids jammed into crevices.

What I don't tell her, while I am trembling on the edge of the hole, is that I do not want to go down myself. I am afraid. I remember the girl with the red bird flying on her neck, drawn anatomically incorrect by a cheap artist. I remember her a little, like I heard a story about her once, like a dream I once had. I am afraid. Down in the hole, there will be food smells and lines of us, waiting. Down there, I will be safe and protected, but I do not know why and I have never bothered to question the safety I have been given. At some point, when you are given comfort, you must take it. I am afraid.

But I drop and my hands bleed and burn. After several minutes of the familiar descent, I feel something unfamiliar that tells me she has followed: a jerk and pull on the rope. Then I hear her voice carry in the chasm: cursing and surprise. I wait for her at the bottom for what seems like forever, but since her body has not dropped and I can still hear her voice, scared and whispering now, I know that she is still coming. She drops beside me with raw hands that she holds trembling in front of her.

"Do not speak," I tell her. "Just watch. Just listen. That is our way."

The people are waves around us, licking and lapping at us with their fingers, though they never seem to touch. They do not speak, we have never spoken, but we are herded just the same to the large room with the food and they put food in our hands, and I force myself to eat handfuls of sticky white rice, even though I have not felt hunger since I heard the story of the cut throats and the dead bodies.

The horse girl wants to talk; it is in her posture, like there's a bit in her mouth, and I know that it is not my warning that silenced her. She is unnerved by the silent cooperation of these many dozens of people who swarm us and the many dozens more who sit in placid lines on the ground of the cavern, waiting to fall asleep. She holds her rice in her bare hands, but does not eat it. This bothers everyone nearby; I see them stealing hungry glances at her food. Eventually, she wipes the sticky rice into the dirt. She is unnerved.

For the first time, I am unnerved, too.

After we eat, we go to sit in our lines, and horse girl whispers, "Who is your leader?" I shrug, because I do not know, the question has never occurred to me, and I'm not sure why. I'm

sleepy, and I want to sit and stare into the darkness until I dream. I think about the blonde girl from my nightmare at the hotel, and I wonder if she is someone I met down here.

I fall asleep, while the horse girl fidgets.

When I wake up, I know it is the middle of the night because of the quality of quiet in the room. Everyone sits still and calm with their eyes closed, waiting for the night to be over as they sleep. The horse girl is gone, although her boots lie tidily next to one another. I pick them up and stand.

The girl is not in the feeding room or anywhere that I can see in the sleeping room. She is not in the entry or in the inner caves. So, I tie the girl's boots to my backpack and start the long climb up the rope. My burning, bleeding hands have not yet healed from the night before and it takes me longer than usual to reach the top.

They are telling stories when I step out. There is no fire, like the young man said, but I can see all of them under the light of the moon, none I recognize straight away. The horse girl must have just finished her story, because her cheeks are wet and her eyes are accusatory. The circle numbers ten and she stands closest to the hole. They look back at her calmly, all draped haphazardly in the same rough brown cloth. One of them, a young man, picks at the sleeves uncomfortably, and I place him as the boy from the coffee shop.

How strange, I think, still sleepy from my rice and sleepy from my dreams.

Then they begin their story.

"In other days," begins the man to horse girl's left, "there was a little boy. He carried with him a red blanket. The blanket was warm and it would wrap around him twice, if that's what he wanted. He carried the blanket everywhere with him. He grew old and still carried the blanket, but it had travelled through parking lots and roller coasters and through the dirt and under dirty sheets and now that he was grown, it was black with dirt and ripped and stained and it was barely large enough to cover his feet.

"So, he burned the blanket and in the smoke, he saw himself, and that is the end of my story." Quiet now, the man looked around the circle, waiting for someone to speak.

"In other days," says the woman standing there, "there was a smart woman, large with child. She opened her arms to the world and laughed and nothing scared her. One day, she woke and there were grasshoppers in her sink, hundreds of grasshoppers, crawling from the deep drain, scrambling around the sides of the porcelain sink. She couldn't understand why they wouldn't jump out of the sink or how they had gotten there in the first place.

“Her husband came home from work, and she showed him the grasshoppers. He promised to murder the bugs cleanly, return things to the way they had been. Later, she found him there, holding the grasshoppers and plucking their tiny wings. He did this for hours, collecting the wings in an iridescent pile, then watching them as they scrambled up around, trying to free themselves from the sink, and this is the end of my story.”

Everything felt far away. I thought the story was about the woman, but it was about the man. Or maybe the grasshoppers.

They were looking at me now, expectantly. I am afraid. It is time for my story.

“Once,” I said thickly, “I mean, in other days.” I paused, thinking hard. “There was a... an old woman, who read large books that were always cold when you touched them, even when they had been sitting in the sun, and they always seemed to be never-read, that is, the spines had never been broken on them, they were always black or brown or blue, never fun colors, I never understood that. The old woman would read and read until her eyes were tired and then she would go to bed. Her whole life was made of books, she lived in a printed paper house.

“Then one day, the old woman became pregnant, and it was a miracle, because she had never been with a man, not for twenty years, at least. She was too busy with her stories. But she knew from her reading that she was a medical marvel and probably a religious one, too. She liked that. She had never been a protagonist herself.

“When she started to show through her nightgown, she put on her robe and walked to the doctor and she told the doctor what a miracle she was. The doctor examined her wrinkled belly and while she did, she began asking little questions, sneaking questions about whether or not there were things that the old woman didn’t remember, about whether the old woman had seen any strange men around her house lately, and the old woman realized that the doctor did not believe in her miracle.

“We need to run tests, said the doctor. We’ll need to take your blood. Elder abuse is very common.

“And the old woman looked at the nurse and saw how they didn’t believe and she walked into the waiting room and saw the people staring at her, laughing a little. So, she went home and she took a knife and she tried to carve the baby out herself, to prove it to them.” I pause again.

“They did find a tumor, in her stomach, where a baby might have been. The shape a baby might have been. The size a baby might have been. She died, of course. And her daughter, from earlier days, had no one to turn to when she became pregnant. Her baby grew up and one day that baby was walking to a hole in the ground, because the baby had nowhere else to go, nowhere to stay, no one to depend on, the baby’s mother was dead and the baby’s father was gone and the baby’s family was lost to her, and so she went to a hole in the ground every night,

where she was fed and where she slept and where she was surrounded by the warm bodies of hundreds of strangers, and what are they waiting for down there, no one knows, not even them, maybe, but yes, maybe they are worshipping something, maybe they are worshipping a deep, dark thing, a keeper of secrets, a liar's relics, and she walks there every night, and one night the baby was on her way when she saw a young girl with a red tattoo on her neck, that girl, that girl, she came up to me, asking for money, for help, and I didn't know what to do, because I am not even sure I know what help is, and I thought, maybe I should take her to my hole, that is where people go when they have nothing, and then we were walking along that path, following the lights, trying hard to get lost so that we can find the point of entry, and then she grabbed me from behind, tried to take my backpack, and I thought she can't she can't oh that is where my only memories are, the only things I have, and I never knew my grandfather, but I had his coin, and that is all, and it doesn't really matter, I would trade it now to take back what I did, but I was scared, and it hurt, and then I was fighting and I felt alive, really alive, and scared, and I grabbed a rock and I hurled it around, and I hit her in the head with it and she fell down and then I hit her again and then again and then again." I stop. "Now I try to make amends by telling my story and... and... and that is the end of my story," I say.

They stare at me. The horse girl stares at me.

"That was a good story," says a man in the group and, one by one, they start toward the hole and the rope and a safe place to worship.

I look at the horse girl, who is holding herself like she is afraid that she will fly apart, and I know that soon she will turn to vomit in the high grass. She surprises me, though, by speaking.

"I found you," she says.

It feels nice, to be found.

Kristen Gipson studied writing at the University of Louisiana in Lafayette, from which she received her M.A. in Creative Writing and where she was awarded the Graduate Fiction Award for Best Thesis, the Timothy W. Adams award. She has published her fiction such places as *Sandstorm*, *The Gateway Review*, and *Sleet Magazine*. Her first chapbook, "A Narrow Line of Light" is available for purchase from Boneset Books. She now lives in the desert, where she teaches English.