

Carol Guess

Girl of Yes, and an End to Highways

The air in this town smells like cantaloupe and the high school looks like a prison. Bellingham's resident white supremacist, a balding man in a 70s track suit, jogs across town every morning carrying his breakfast in a paper bag. Railroad Avenue is downtown Bellingham, Washington's main drag, a once elegant strip of turn-of-the-century buildings. There's an herbal remedy shop run by a woman who grows her own herbs; she'll diagnose all your ills from one strand of your hair. Guns and guitars fill a pawn shop and AA meetings are held in the Hotel Helena. The sex offender's playground looks down from the top of the hill, over a city built on gold digging and gambling, prostitution and Empire. Native American names hover over the town on truck stops and casino marquees.

This is the City of Subdued Excitement, a city of one-way streets that unfold into highways and again into alleyways without even a hello. This is a city you can know and un-know on the same day, a city no one owns, although more and more people are buying its views. This is a city where vets cluster in yurts, inching closer and closer to Canada. Sunlight happens three months a year. This is a city of beached whales, rock slides, and ghosts; of serial killers and guard dogs, Minutemen and meth labs, borders and bodies among the ubiquitous greenery. This is a city where art and violence have the same velocity, where someone's knitting sweaters for the skinniest trees: black and white stripes, pink buttons crawling up the bark.

This is a city of liars and I am in love.

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Elizabeth and I met in this mill town, this sweaters-for-trees town. We fell in love walking the ledge to the logjam, eyeing the teeth of the cold, clear stream. We tucked up our pant legs and took off our shoes, draped our socks among the trees. We tucked our sleeves into our sleeves, turned cartwheels in the warm, wet sand.

For many years I feared I wasn't made for love, just a fierce and reckless solitude marked on my body: the cruel pink scar that flowers, a strange dahlia, on my left shoulder.

"Your scar," Elizabeth began, that day at the logjam. "You've got one on your back, too. An identical flower."

Two marks, not just one as I'd always believed. Might I—maybe—please—pretty—be marked for a lover's gaze?

First kiss came to shut me up.

My cherry print scarf dipped into the bay.

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Years after that day, we dance in our kitchen. Elizabeth swings her right hand in a windmill. I shake my hips and move my arms side-to-side.

She calls my geeky dance move "Shaking the Baby."

"I look ridiculous."

"Yes, you do."

We dance to Snoop Dogg and Sleater-Kinney. "They go together," she says, and I'm not sure which unlikely pair she means: Snoop and S-K, my blind dog and her twenty-two pound cat, her windmill and my awkward gestures.

Our mismatched family, our commingling.

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This is a city of farmers and farmland, outdoor markets and companion llamas. On one of our visits to the farmer's market we're stopped in our tracks.

"Would you like to buy a bridge?"

I spent my twenties in New York. I know this trick.

Elizabeth spent her twenties in Georgia. She says yes and buys a brick.

The bridge seller is a farmer; the salvaged bridge and reused bricks are soon to be part of a building housing the farmer's market all year round. So it's legitimate, this brick. And the bridge, too—an actual bridge saved from destruction by Bellingham's garbage company. The indoor farmer's market will bridge the community, connecting consumers to farmers, a cornerstone of slow food.

Elizabeth purchases a tiny part of this building, a single brick with our names etched in. Our brick takes its place on the floor of the new farmer's market. When the bricks are planted, we spend half an hour searching until we discover we're standing on top of our names.

*I would dye, I say, these things blue for you:
my ex-lover's shirt
my city's gray sky*

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Sometimes we walk to Boulevard Park, a grassy promenade bordering Bellingham Bay. We look for our history here, reading between the lines on the wooden sign suspended above the view: Bellingham Bay was claimed by Captain George Vancouver in 1792, and named for a Naval Officer, Sir William Bellingham. This coastal Washington city appears to have been colonized by British fags. Our history, the history of colonialism disguised as discovery. Our history, the history of lovers disguised as friends.

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This is the city where we wish to marry. But in July 2006, after months of debating, the Washington State Supreme Court rules 5-4 against same-sex marriage, upholding the state's Defense of Marriage Act. For weeks in the press we read about "the sanctity of marriage," and listen as our fellow citizens compare same-sex affection to bestiality and necrophilia.

In defiance, I venture to the jewelry store downtown to stare at displays of "His and Hers" rings. Finally I work up the nerve to make a purchase.

"Two plain silver bands, both size six, thank you."

"Your husband," she says, "must have very small hands."

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In the end we cross the border, small hands and all, in search of a country that will allow us to marry. Canada is just thirty minutes away; we skim the highway from Bellingham to B.C. On our first trip, we procure the license; the notary crosses out "groom" and writes "Bride #2." Some weeks later we return for our wedding, accompanied by friends to witness our vows. Traffic lights love us. Red turns glitter-green. We drive the bustling streets of Vancouver in search of the stranger who will deliver our vows.

We found her on the internet, this stranger who will marry us in her apartment. She's beautiful, red hair turning silver, and her vows make us weep. It's as easy as stealing plastic forks from a coffee shop down the street, easy as paper plates the red-haired woman won't let us use, insisting we use her elegant china. We can barely cut the cake, it's such thick chocolate. We can't believe we've said it, "love," in the presence of strangers. Our witnesses watch us, as if to know how.

After the ceremony we stumble into a convenience store to pick up toothpaste. We're married, two of us, all of us in love. We're women, tall and small, dark and light, black hair and blonde. Leigh Ann and Amy hold

hands and read magazines. I scan for toothpaste, Elizabeth searches for gum. So we're separated for the first time all day when a woman with meth sores on her face stumbles into the store and the manager blocks her.

"Get out," he says. "I told you not to come in."

"I have money this time. I just want to eat."

"Get out," and he's on her, tackling her, and she fights back, and someone shouts, someone else gasps. She's on the floor. He's dragging her by her coat. More shouts, and a man runs into the store, grabs the manager's uniform, and slugs him. They brawl, the woman runs, grabbing sandwiches and soda. The man who punched the manager pulls a knife. Someone screams, and all I can do is watch Elizabeth across the room. We're waiting for the gun that must be next, for "lesbian romance ends in death." Leigh Ann and Amy stand flat to the walls. Sandwich girl is out the door, and knife man with her, the manager shouting after, and then we're all four through the doorway, shaking as we run for Amy's car. What does it mean, anyway? One minute you're one, the next minute you're two, the next minute a gunshot subtracts you again.

Dead tired, Elizabeth and I honeymoon in a high-rise hotel, dizzying ourselves with the drop from the window, taking photos of each other's shoulders. We go to sleep married and we wake from dreams married and we drink coffee married and then we drive home.

Our car looks small in the hubcap of the semi beside us. Wheels pirouette, oblivious, toward the Peace Arch, where traffic stalls on the Canadian side. Our car inches forward. The obelisk approaches: the international boundary line between B.C. and WA.

Just before we cross into the U.S., Elizabeth takes a photograph of the two of us, our faces touching. Then, as the wheels roll over and the U.S. reclaims us, annulling our marriage, she takes another photo of the two of us together. Later we won't be able to tell the difference between the two shots.

Carol Guess is the author of numerous books, mostly recently the poetry collections *Femme's Dictionary* (Calyx Books) and *Love Is A Map I Must Not Set On Fire* (VRZHU Press, forthcoming). Find her on the web at www.carolguess.blogspot.com

The front porches of Carol Guess's childhood were rickety breezeways attached to houses damp with Carolina heat.