

Amy Stuber

PICTUREBOOK

1986

Instead of attending high school, Marguerite lives in a tent in the side yard of an apartment building where five people she knows share a studio. She stuffs her pockets with bulk candy from the co-op around the corner and holds tight to it in the early mornings when rats scrape at the nylon tent walls.

Her mother moved to Vancouver with a boyfriend, but her mother has never been reliable, so this was not a surprise. She leaves Marguerite with their two-room apartment of things to sell and a lease that runs out in ten days. Marguerite has a tag sale and makes a few hundred on the '70s pottery, the albums, the weavings, the books about medicinal plants. She hangs onto a backpack of clothes, a tent, her grandmother's turquoise rings in a silk pouch, an aging Nikon, and a bag full of film.

Instead of selling the camera, Marguerite makes a study of it. She takes the camera out for weeks, unloaded, and pretends. In May, she loads it finally and walks from The Mission to Ocean Beach and then up the hill to Land's End and shoots the first roll.

1) Blessing in gold pants and a man's shirt on the corner eating Wonder Bread straight out of the bag.

2) Ty in his black shredded jacket lying on a tarp under the conifers near the Children's Playground in Golden Gate Park, children's feet visible through the crazily angled trunks.

3) Brian passed out against a Monterey pine with his pants around his ankles.

4) Blessing and Aurora in just their bras on an unsheeted mattress in the morning.

5) A huddle of homeless teenagers, skin caked gray, washing their hands and faces in the cold, pooled water in the ruins of Sutro Baths.

6) Etc.

In three weeks, she shoots seventeen rolls of film, and Blessing develops

them for free at the pharmacy where she works. Marguerite carries the snapshots with her in a manila envelope for months until she drunkenly spills them at the feet of an older filmmaker at a house in the Castro where she and her friends have crashed a party. There is little artistry to the photos, but to anyone over forty they are a window into the looseness of youth. The filmmaker snatches them, takes them on, and within a year turns them into a book with both of their names on it, a book that fetishizes teen sex and the lawlessness of living mainly outside. To have success of that kind at seventeen, at eighteen, is a setup for future failure, and she knows this even when it is happening.

Within a year, she is living in the concrete basement of the Sacramento ranch house her mother has come to share with an accountant on the edge of a city that offers little more than not being as bleak and desperate as the blanched fields that surround it. For many months, she thinks nothing at all of the future.

1999

The wedding is simple. Their parents, the grove in the valley pockmarked with lemons so that later in pictures it's the punctuation of yellow in the trees that she notices instead of their young faces, their still brown hair, her plain cotton dress, his white shirt untucked.

His parents are drunk on bourbon they downed in the car on the way. Her mother wears a dress too formal for the occasion.

When they drive away in her mother's old car to nowhere in particular (a diner, they decide when they see it), it isn't with thoughts of honeymoon sex (they did that enough earlier in the day to wear it out for the short-term) or a threshold to be carried over (they don't have one officially; they are staying with her mother). Plus, she doesn't care about tradition.

In the car outside the diner, the sun is on the glass and for a few seconds turns the windshield to an impenetrable silver solid enough that she cannot see anything through it. During the year of her childhood she spent living in various houses in the canyons around LA with her mother, "the Joni Mitchell years," her mother called them, she'd closeted herself away in a two-person tent in the heat of the day. So many years later, she continues to want that trapped heat, that odd opacity of place, unseen and in a pocket protected.

Two days before the wedding, she biked to meet an old boyfriend at a

boat dock that hung over a stretch of the town's fast-moving river. The trees made some show of containing the current but were routinely pulled entirely over during floods. The cottonwoods were dropping feathers. There were piles of white threaded on the grass and pushed up against tree trunks and settled into boats like passengers. Rats as big as forearms wove themselves through branches. "Lie on me," she told him because she needed that full-body weight of another person for a moment, to feel at first pinned and then obliterated. It wasn't contact alone, but the canceling out, or maybe both. She looked only at the water and the parade of desperate sticks being swept by as he pulled down her jeans and then pulled off her boots and threw them onto the bank in the way of someone who felt sure he could do anything physical in just the right way. It was dusk, and the geese were honking all at once, and he pushed her shirt up so that the fabric covered her face. The fucking was almost brutal in a way that she needed on that day, and when they finished she let herself drop right into the cold and dirty water of the river, her hands holding tight to the dock, her head under and her eyes hurtlingly open.

The night of the wedding she and her husband spend outside in a field that was once a baseball diamond but that has gone months unmowed and now has the look of a blown-apart bird's nest. Her new husband has brought a striped blanket, a store-bought cake, and two bottles of wine, and even though they are hungry, all they do is drink. He is a poet who will become a professor, and she is certain he is churning the scene into lines in his head. The fireflies turn the night pin-pricked and crazy. The trees cape the field. They don't talk. They've talked for months. The cicadas cycle endlessly through their same chant until the two of them, drunk and covered with the blood of swatted mosquitoes, fall asleep beneath a cackling of stars.

2005

The first child explodes her. The labor is thirty-two unmedicated hours. She spends half of it walking back and forth in a hospital gown, the back hanging open, her modesty trashed, traversing the Midwestern rooftop garden populated by piney shrubs that have been tortured into shapes. She was unsure about children. She didn't want children. She didn't know. After a solid day, the doctor tells her to consider a C-section, but she refuses. In the last hour she allows a shot of morphine in her thigh, the only way, the doctor says, and then there is her daughter in the middle of the night. Those first few months

are heat and walking and thunderstorms and slings and bottles and crying and sleeplessness and fighting and being up in the night looking at her daughter and wondering how this happened to her. It's hardly a new story, but she's terrible at it. The weather in Kansas in the spring is accusatory and unsettling. The land is a flat thing, much like the Sacramento of her first married years, but without the promise of the ocean a few hours' drive away. The baby is as insistent and boundary-defying as the prairie. Aside from herself, she's never both loved and hated a living thing so much at the same time.

They've ended up on a farm three hours from any real city but near the small liberal arts college where her husband has come to lead a tiny, crochety band of English professors. "No one else wanted the job," the most cynical of them told them at the first faculty party they attended where the only drinks were orange and grape Fanta.

The farm has acreage, and in the days she walks her daughter on gravel roads in the jogging stroller below the power lines that put off a hum and static that make her hair stand a little bit on end. The bean fields shoot up wild purple flowers all around them. Farm trucks weave away from her, but still the dust encapsulates them for a half a minute after, and her daughter blinks wide over and over, as if trying to believe the world is all anew each time she opens her eyes. Marguerite's own mother had moved to a cabin without electricity in Alaska. She hasn't talked to her in years. The woman who serves her coffee in the gas station up from the property tells her, "Kansas is different from Missouri. Where I'm from in Missouri is known for the last public hanging. You see what I mean." A clock over the wall of cigarettes is a chicken head with two Bakelite eggs that hit into each other in a plastic pronouncement at the top of the hour. She imagines it as a photo, of course, but her cameras have been in a box for almost a decade. There was something stippling and pinned about motherhood. She was broadened, she was other, but she was also stuck.

When her daughter is only a few months old, a small tornado touches down near their house, and the wind topples the peaks and rafters of the stables. They are out on the front porch at first with the rain in a frenzy and the sky greening. Her daughter sleeps in her swing with her fist outstretched and somehow suspended in an unintentional baby version of "power to the people." Her husband is making pasta in the kitchen and listening to The Beach Boys so loud the walls vibrate. The rain blows through the screens, and her daughter, her nose dotted with water, wakes up smiling. When the sirens

start, Marguerite carries her daughter quickly to the basement, and she and her husband eat pasta arabiata on a tarp on their cracked concrete basement floor. They put Anna in the portable crib and play Scrabble. They have done this basement waiting so many times. They don't expect anything more than a thunderstorm dropping from an odd-colored sky, but then there is the ripping of wood, and one of the basement windows cracks. The glass tips out of the frame. Her daughter looks at both of their faces to see what she should do. They must look horrified enough to make her think she should start crying. Marguerite holds her, the baby, Anna, wrapped with her head in a blanket and as close as possible to the chimney, which she thinks of as the solidest structure. Her husband stands by them, and while she knows they should make some kind of huddle of personness, she can't bring herself to lean into him. For a second, she hates him, the flimsy nature of human solidity, even his breathing. She hears the horses whinnying, loose and tearing around the property, and there is not a single thing she can do other than wait.

2009

Just after her son's first birthday, she starts photographing the dead. First, it's insects, their stained-glass wings magnified and useless but for their beauty. When her husband is gone on Saturdays with their daughter (the library story time, the swimming class, the after-swimming sugar cookies), all of it an hour's drive away, she straps her son into a front carrier, climbs on one of the horses, and rides all the acres of the property with cameras and lenses on her back. The cantering puts the baby immediately to sleep. It's something she should never do, the baby, a horse, but she does it anyway. Something protective in her is broken, she's sure of it.

They've converted a part of the barn to a studio with darkroom. Soon the walls are covered in black and whites, a mausoleum in images: dead insect wings, dead badger paws, the whole open mouth of a cat, eyes kiln-dried and wide, and its teeth barred in a warning to nothing. Each time she goes out, she brings back an object. She's lined bones and skulls and skins on the metal desk alongside a few camera bodies. Her son Oscar is not walking yet, and he crawls across the cork studio floor always with one item in one hand (the thigh bone of a calf soaped clean or a coyote skull, its sharp edges filed down) so that the cork is scarred with indentations and patterns that looks like termite tracks.

On a Monday, she takes Oscar to the morgue during Anna's three-hour

window of preschool. It's a small enough town that it's maybe one dead person a week if that, and usually an old person, but the mortician is old himself and says old mortician things like, "The dead don't know" as he lets her in the door at the back of the building. That first day, it's just the hands she shoots. It's a physical test not to be unsettled thinking about all the things the hands have done: the trimming of nails, the assembly of food, the methodical tapping on tables, the touching of the skin of another person.

The hands belong to an old woman whose gray braids hang down from the table almost to the floor. It's almost impossible to keep Oscar from playing with them, the braids, batting them against the steel table legs. Everything else about the body looks different in death, plasticine, but the hair, dead already, looks exactly the same. Eventually, Oscar falls asleep on a lab coat under a side table topped with scalpels. The room has one window. It's high up on the wall and separated into triangles of leaded glass. When the sun moves, the light triangles settle onto Oscar's forehead, and she almost expects it to crack open and reveal another universe.

The next Friday morning, while Anna is at her tiny Montessori preschool and Oscar is sitting on the floor playing with coyote teeth, there is another school shooting. There have been enough of them that she's started to look away. But this one is at a high school only an hour from their property. It's the town where she and her husband buy bulk toilet paper in wall-sized slabs and pistachios cracking inside plastic columns as tall as toddlers. It's a town where boys wear camouflage zip-up jackets and farm hats and cowboy boots, and the makeup on the girls seems like a whole other face they pick up in the mornings and plant on top of their own.

She turns off the radio in the studio and rides with Oscar over to the creek at the outer edge of their property. It takes half an hour to get there, and Oscar stares sideways at everything with such intensity that it's as if he knows some world language of details and textures that she's never been privy to. She's left her camera and lenses at home. When they get to the creek, even though it's still spring-morning cold, she unbundles Oscar and kneels with him by the water. She's not even remotely religious. She hates the religious for all their blind faith and assumptions, for their wide-eyed Sunday morning dumbness and bland basement food on foldaway tables. But she submerges the whole back of Oscar's head until he's screaming, and then she says out loud to no one but herself: save him from me. Save him.

2013

Her son and her daughter sit in a tide pool, the waist-high water Northern California cold. Their skin turns slightly blue. On most days, her son and her daughter look like Appalachian orphans. They have dirty blonde hair and are usually as unclean as miners. She is under a towel and periodically stalking them with her camera. Her husband is walking at the edge of the water, his jeans rolled up to show the pink skin of his calves. When she first came to this town as a child, there was a head-on collision on the narrow bridge over the inlet that killed an eighteen-year-old girl who'd ventured up the coast for the first time in her new car. The bridge had been closed for hours while the coroner's van and several police cars worked the scene. This was the particular insanity of parenting: the creation of some uncontainable thing that sprung into the world that you had to watch go and then pretend to be glad for the going.

The place where they stay every July in Northern California is a tiny sectioned-off portion of a larger farmhouse across from an old school in a town that is one part Victoriana movie set and one part post-apocalyptic punk homeless teenager and aging commune dweller outpost. The house has five different outbuildings in various stages of decay. There are chickens and a steep-edged pond around which spiny blackberry brambles bob and lurk. In the evenings, her kids, now five and eight, sit on a water-softened picnic table by the pond and eat blackberries out of each other's open palms. Roaming the town in the morning, she sometimes catches the eyes of people she wants to believe she knows from her days in *The Mission*. She imagines a series of now and then photos of Blessing and Ty and Aurora, the fullness of their seventeen-year-old faces shocked and exploded by time.

When her children were younger, she'd taken them to cemeteries and airplane hangars and junkyards. Her daughter couldn't talk to other children easily. She often had the expression of a caged feral cat. She went fetal upon hearing fire engines or vacuums. There had been too many mornings when Marguerite, wrestled down by the general craven mindfuck of parenting, had walked out into the cold of the morning until the house was just a shape on the land before running as fast as she could back in.

It made perfect sense to her that when her kids were two and five she had ended up in the back of a minivan with a dad she'd met at a library story time,

her jeans on the car floor, their children at a play gym run by college education majors. Like most sex for her, it wasn't even personal. It was convection, movement, and minutes during which there was only one thing she could be doing. It was the most temporary and brazen kind of relief.

All around that time, for the weeks it went on, she was the best mother and the worst mother. She drank whole wine boxes. She secreted away her cell phone. She drove the long miles to town and then came home with key lime pie slices and expensive chocolate. Dessert buffet! She took her son and daughter to all the parks and playgrounds. Tour of parks! And then she was unexpectedly belittling or she punished them arbitrarily and then apologized profusely. She drove slightly drunk on early summer evenings with all the windows down, her kids' hair flying random circles around their happy faces, and loud music playing, that one moment when you slip down a hill in the bee-buzzing hot world of summer.

There were months after the affair when she was sure they would come apart from each other, more when she felt sure she'd live in a tiny house and see them only on weekends. Or that her husband would leave in silent disgust and remarry someone who could make a straight instead of a wobbly line out of days, someone much better at parenting, at marriage, at everything. But then a year passed, and it hadn't happened. And then another.

Her husband comes back from the edge of the ocean and rolls his jeans down. He sits a few feet away from her and writes several lines in a leather blank book before he begins reading. There are people on sea kayaks. There are people with sticks and dogs. Teenagers in dirty clothes sit around a driftwood fire. She thinks of walking to the town for coffee. She thinks of standing at the headlands without anyone humming or hovering around her. But she stays on the towel, watching as her son and her daughter cover their faces and arms with wet sand until they look like clay casts of themselves. The thing she hadn't wanted, wasn't sure she had wanted—motherhood—has become the only thing she really is.

2017

At twelve and nine, Anna and Oscar go to a small school in the country about twenty minutes from their house that's run by retired nuns who believe in calligraphy, bread making, rudimentary algebra, and social justice. On the drives

to and from the school, her children count hawks. In December, they found a dead one near one of the power lines. It was frozen in flight with a squirrel tight in its talons, but both animals are absolutely dead. After photographing it, she took it to the nuns, and they put it in the deep freezer in the basement of the school. One of them had a sideline interest in taxidermy, and she stuffed and mounted the entire thing and hung it in the school's "Science and Nature" room.

After nearly three decades of hiding out, Marguerite has lined up a show at a gallery in the small city three hours from her house. For months, she has planned to hang the photos of dead animals and dead people, a progression around the large room going from the insect wings to human braids, human toes, the glassy eyes of a human face, its actual life many days gone. She printed them large and framed them in pine frames. But a few weeks before the show, she stays up for several nights with the negatives and contact strips and remakes everything and tells only her husband. Lately, they've grown conspiratorial together, not quite friendly, not quite friends, but shipmates maybe.

When they pull out of their long driveway, the horses are loose in the pasture, and Anna throws two pears out the car window, and they come running. Most of the flowering trees have started dropping their blooms, and so there are decaying magnolia and redbud petals making pink carpets around their trunks.

In the car on the way to the gallery, Anna describes a myth of a Russian lake that flash froze and entombed a slew of horses, mid-gallop, so that for all the months of winter Russian men in military coats wandered around the frozen animals and leaned into them as if in a sculpture garden. Marguerite catches her face in the rearview mirror, the small puffy heart of it with its childhood scars and upturned eyes. As they get closer to the gallery, the farm fields become rows of taupe houses on the outskirts and then Victorians and four squares closer to the town's center, with rainbow flags on the front porches and brick streets and teenagers with color-blocked hair spinning in packs on sidewalks.

Oscar tells them about water vapor that travels from China to California and even as far inland as New Mexico. He talks about microplastics in the air and then says, "I am going to get two PhDs. One in mathematics and one in chemistry." And then they scroll through Apple Music's best punk songs of 1981. Marguerite wills herself out of nervousness.

She can remember being five on a stone patio with her mother in Topanga. Snakes hissed and rattled in the dead grasses beyond the rocks. Someone down the canyon was playing Neil Young, and she could hear the vocal filtering up, "Only love can break your heart." She could see horses in a corral a hundred or more feet below, twitching and flicking through the heat and flies. Her mother then was beautiful with her dark hair in spiral curls and wearing only a long T-shirt. They outlined their hands with chalk all around the stones until it was a wide circle of hands in a rainbow that would wash away if ever it would rain.

On the stone courtyard in front of the gallery, women in their sixties hold plastic cups of white wine and wear lightweight and intentionally interesting sweaters. Women in their twenties ash their American Spirits into empty cups and pull at their patterned vintage dresses. There are teenagers in high-waisted jeans and T-shirts that say things like "feminist" or "smash the patriarchy" but also show their midriffs. Her own daughter is sitting in the corner of the patio on a cement step breaking sticks into segments with one hand and looking at her phone with the other. Oscar runs back and forth across the stripe of grass between the patio and a tall brick wall that separates the gallery from a restaurant next door. The side doors to the gallery are propped open with bricks, and she can hear voices and music.

When Marguerite walks in, the size of the prints stuns her a little. She can hear her husband's intake of breath. Instead of the dead things, she has filled the pine frames with giant pictures of their children in moments of unease or pain or glee or abandon, all the small and private seconds that build a childhood. Oscar with a gash in the side of his head from falling off the roof of the barn, blood in watercolor streaks down his face. Anna naked after swimming and huddled fetal next to a stock tank with her hands over her ears to drown out the sound of a military plane overhead. The two of them in the Mendocino pond sheathed with mud up to their waists. Sitting with their faces inches from each other and angry over some small slight on the painted wood of their front porch. Oscar leaping down the railroad tie steps leading to the jagged Sutro pools, his hands like monster claws in the air, his face a puzzle.

She can remember reading a book wherein the main character, an old woman, looks in the mirror and thinks about how whatever detachable balloon of self or opossum of soul exists inside the crumpled paper of the old body is the same as it was at ten or twenty. But at forty-eight, Marguerite feels nothing like this. She feels like the matter of her seventeen-year-old self has been smelted

and reformed into something entirely new and mainly unrecognizable to her.

Anna has told her the human skeleton replaces itself every twelve years. She's said that the bone regenerates such that the whole skeleton is a new thing. Marguerite pictures a lineup of her old skeletons: the birth skeleton, the twelve, the twenty-four, the thirty-six, and now the forty-eight in a ring-around-the-rosy of skeletons. But Oscar has told her that there is the same amount of matter in the universe on this day that there was a million years ago. And so she sorts it to mean that she is both wholly different than she was twelve years ago but also somehow wholly the same. A snake that shed its skin, turned it inside out, and then put it back on only to look at it and wonder: what is this new thing?

Her husband touches the angle of her elbow, and the two of them stand silent in front of the last photo in the show: a shot from last summer, Oscar and Anna perched at the midpoint of the path that leads down from the town, down to Little River Beach where whole boat-sized trunks of trees regularly wash onto the beach and become gray with age and weather. Her kids are too old for it, and it's something they rarely do, but in the photo they are holding hands. They are both looking up at a swarm of bees hanging in an angry huddle a few inches above their heads, and there is terror in Anna's face, but neither one is moving. Blackberry brambles hover in a web of spines on all sides of them. The sky is a gray cotton holding the bees in the frame. The trees on the periphery look ancient. Oscar and Anna stand on the step at the turn in the path just before they would normally break into a run for the beach. They stand stock still, just at the edge of everything.