

*nonfiction*

RACHEL HOWARD

*Frank Black*

1.

DIRT CROSSROADS IN the orchard. Green Datsun station wagon. Plum trees in bloom, but the blossoms are hidden because Scott has cut the headlights. The windows are down and the hatchback up to let in the treble-buzz of unseen insects, no hope of breeze but the heat feels like permission. The smell of manure drifts to us from the dairy down the road, dust in our nostrils and in our eyes and on our tongues—always in the Central Valley, dust. The back of the station wagon is prepared with blankets.

Eight rows of flowering plum trees between me and the back fence, but the house might as well be the moon. I can see my mother's bedroom light shining from the second story. She is in bed alone, I know, since she worked too damn hard on kicking out her second husband to let another man under our roof.

Sometimes I try to imagine that my father can still see me.  
Scott nudges a mix-tape into the deck.

2.

HE PILED CASSETTES with The Cure and Pink Floyd and Jane's Addiction on a mission to shape my tastes, but I was pitifully—endearingly, he thought—conventional. He was 18 and I was 14, and I still wore ribbons in my hair, and I listened to just one song on Scott's mix-tape over and over, one song that gave Scott hope about my true inclinations. *Hey!* Frank Black shouted as a serpentine bass line crept into my ear and down my spine, to snake around my hips. Frank Black had been

trying to meet me, *mmm mmm mmm mmm mmm*. And he shouted about whores singing *unh!* like a choir, and he screamed about the sound a mother makes when her baby breaks, and listening alone in my bedroom with my hands still outside the bedspread, I made come-hither eyes into the dark.

3.

ALL THROUGH HIGH school, I had a daybed made of brass and an eyelet bed-skirt that matched the curtains covering the window I learned to climb through at two in the morning, until I discovered my mother slept hard, I could just walk out the front door. Even as I stopped wearing the hair ribbons, I still had the wallpaper dotted with pink hearts, pink bedspread, pink cotton pajamas, pink plastic phone pressed to my ear, all hushed to shades of grey in the dark as Scott whispered through the line. This was three years after our nights in the orchard—I was now a senior—and Scott had long since graduated but he still lived in town, worked at Fresno’s single moldy “fine arts” movie theater. I could still picture him in the shadows of his station wagon, skeletally thin, sickly really, but the only one I had loved among all the boys—no, men—I had since put my mouth on in the orchard, at the canal, in the parking lot behind Pic N’ Save. Scott’s body pale and muscle-less. Soft goatee. Soft lips.

He was whispering that we could be alone, in the projector room, after midnight. I was twirling the phone cord. The plastic sheath was dented with teeth cuts, nearly to the wires. Scott was listing all the places he would put his mouth on me. That he would put his mouth on me *there*.

I had never imagined *there*.

I sucked the cord.

I walked out the front door.

4.

SCOTT SENT A telegram. It said things about the taste of *there*. My mother thought a telegram must be urgent, so she

read it. Then she called me downstairs and said I had received a telegram and said it was a good thing I was leaving soon.

I was heading to college. Where I didn't need to worry about walking out the door at two in the morning, and the men became too many to count, one long, continual flight.

Thin lips. Hard mouths.

I stopped trying to imagine that my father could see me.

Scott became a beekeeper. Lives in South Dakota with a wide-hipped woman who bore him four sons.

I've read that a queen bee mates with as many as twenty males during one flight. A blur of anonymous airborne fumbblings. Hard work, exhausting.

I wonder if it matters, whether she feels well cared-for by the first.

