

I don't know what the truth is

Katherine McCord

It's a relief to get her text. I pick her up at the bottom of a hill in her boyfriend's neighborhood. She apologizes and says the friend who was supposed to get her fell asleep. We drive, the glow of her cell phone in her lap. The whisper of her texting someone else here and there. She says her left eye is swollen because of her boyfriend's overly friendly cat. More like a dog she says, the way it wants attention. I laugh and carefully take this up. I remember how both eyes would swell when she was little. One time she could hardly breathe. When I teach I take my students outside. Once or twice, midway through class, a helicopter cuts the sky in half. Some of us give up speaking. Lean back. Listen. Some of us shield our eyes. Watch it turn. Glint. Roar away. Plath, a frame of reference, the explosion of Ariel. How it came after years of study. And then the falling off. Flat-out joy. Maybe we are experiencing The Great Death, I tell my husband, enlightenment to follow. Like an arrow arcing. It's just that it's been hard for years. A student says, What about her kids? She means Plath. But I think of mine. It's just not worth it to me anymore. Explaining. Trying to ignore the hurts. Those kids who have to live with it. For one of them, had. How to discuss it without discussing pain. How it spreads outward from the source. But we move on. And I digress. Try to trade. In other words, I don't know what the truth is. Walnuts in the road. Their green husks, their stains, their memories, their crippled tree. Beauty is the moon between the branches. (It would make anyone cry out.) Once, at fifteen, I broke up with a boyfriend. Moments after. Hives. Because you were upset, they said. But it wasn't. I was just so relieved. After it was over, I read a book on whistleblowers, Anita Hill's autobiography. About the price. We, as a family, paid. And teach my students about cliché. That there's a cost. No even trade. What you did to save the world, your child. And how there is no such thing as art beyond the grave.