

The Prairie Light Review

Volume 46
Number 2 *Spring 2024*

Article 31

Spring 5-1-2024

December

Mina Pattanaik
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.cod.edu/plr>

Recommended Citation

Pattanaik, Mina (2024) "December," *The Prairie Light Review*. Vol. 46: No. 2, Article 31.
Available at: <https://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol46/iss2/31>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Prairie Light Review by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact orenick@cod.edu.

DECEMBER

Mina Pattanaik

After the funeral, you took me to a dingy Wendy's in the middle of nowhere, five miles out from the grave and ten miles out from the school. It wasn't much, but the half-hour drive felt endless enough that you could mistake the fading of the identical suburban houses into scraggly uneven bushes for something profound, for an escape. I had as a kid when I came here with Jessica. Now it just felt like a Wendy's.

You'd never talked much about things that mattered. You didn't talk much about them now, either. You just ordered two fries and two milkshakes because you knew I wouldn't be able to keep anything more down, and where I should've felt grateful for this quiet, easy knowledge you had about me, I mostly just felt hollow. I missed her. I wanted her here instead. You knew this and you were rambling around it, spilling lamentations about going back to work Monday and how so many more people had ended up coming back to live here after high school than you'd thought.

The last time I was here had been the day Jessica died. She'd looked at me with the same face she had all winter—with a careful blankness, like she couldn't decide what she wanted to feel. "I want to leave," she'd said, and she'd held my hands within hers and smiled, brilliant. "Let's run away together. We could go to Indianapolis. Or Los Angeles."

I laughed. I shouldn't have. "You love it here," I said, and I stole a fry. "You'd be miserable after a week."

Her face had shuttered then. I'd thought she was just in a mood; she fell into them often these days, with long hours at work and the Chicago frost biting at her ears. "Maybe," she conceded, and she batted my hand away as I reached for another. "But maybe not."

Foley Beach, SC Evening

M Candace Thomas — Oil on Canvas



That night she went home and overdosed on pills I didn't know she took. The week between then and the funeral, I'd wondered if she would've lived if I'd said yes, if we'd have been watching TV together in a shitty motel in Indiana, or if she'd have just done it there instead. Everyone said that wasn't the sort of thought I was supposed to have, but it kept crawling unhappily in the corners of my mind anyway: she was so close to making it out. I closed her last door.

"I'm sorry," you said finally, after the second bag of fries was nearly empty. "I know—" You reached for my hand and then pulled back, tapping your fingers restlessly against the table. "You loved her a lot. It must be hard."

I swallowed. I wasn't close to crying—hadn't cried since the night I'd found out—but I blinked back phantom tears regardless. "Yeah," I said. I wished I hadn't been so fast to finish my milkshake, just so I'd have something to do other than look at your open wide face, the way your eyes were fixed upon me. "I guess it is."

You always got awkward when things were serious. I remembered the way you'd looked in the tenth grade after I broke up with Adam from English class—when I'd said, my hands clenched into tight fists, that I wasn't really that bothered about it because I was probably in love with Jessica. You were wearing the same expression now: like you wanted to look away but couldn't let yourself. Like I was feeling too much and you wanted to undo it, somehow.

You didn't try to, though, because we weren't fifteen anymore. Instead you said: "It wasn't your fault."

"Yeah," I said again. It was, but if I said so out loud I'd sound insane, and anyway, it was easier to pretend it wasn't. That it was the bitter winter, the sun sinking out of view in the mid-afternoon, the moon slicing through the sky like a gash. That she got so cold one day she decided she couldn't do it anymore. That her mouth didn't slip into a frown and stay there forever when I said *you love it here*.

You reached for me properly, then, your hand warm and solid over my own. Your thumb ran circles over my knuckles. I wanted it to be reassuring, so I pretended it was. You were so reticent about it that for a minute I saw your fifteen-year-old self superimposed over you, knobby-kneed with braces, your hands warm and solid even then, and Jessica on your right, her hair falling behind her in a long black curtain like it always had before she cut it short.

We drove to an open field two hours out. The last time we were here was back in high school. The frost bit at us then, too, and we'd stubbornly worn

shorts and t-shirts just to show we could brave it. I'd been miserable, but so had everyone. I'd tried to convince myself and everyone else that I hated it here, that one day I'd pack up and move to California for college and never come back.

Jessica had said, "Don't, I'll miss you," so I didn't. You had. I thought maybe it was because you'd been in love with her, too, and I was winning a competition only we knew about, but you just wanted warmer weather.

I didn't hate it here back then, and I didn't now. The sky was open and starry and glazed over with cool blue clouds, and the cold felt like a comfort, like it was pouring itself into me and replacing the sticky inertia of grief, pleading: *you have to live*. I wanted to feel horrible. I wanted the winter to make me worse, but it didn't. It just kept me awake and wide-eyed and searching for something else that could be so beautiful and blameless.

One of your hands was on the steering wheel; the other was on my wrist. "We used to come out here and scream," you said. With the cool light of the sky and the warm lights of the car, you were cast in peculiar shades of orange and blue, like a painting half-done. "Do you remember? It never made me feel better, really, but I thought—at least there was an end to everything, even my voice, and then I could go on living."

My tongue felt warm and too thick to speak. I stepped out of the car and took in a lungful of freezing air, and then I screamed until I was raw with it. When I turned back you weren't smiling, but your eyes were bright, and you screamed, too, until our voices gave out and I could pretend I heard Jessica screaming with us, and we went back home.

Last Ride



Quinn Joy — Photograph