

TABITHA SOREN

Laura, 2012
pigment print, 46 x 60 in



credit: Kopeikin Gallery, Los Angeles

in the car at the package store. That sense he seemed to have—temporarily at least—that he'd been denied something clear and pressing. Something powerful—beyond decisions. Denied the answers Willie had gotten, the love that sustained. It's not a way I ever want to feel.

"Baby," Erin says. She's in the living room, looking for me. "Baby," she says again, her voice louder, approaching.

"I'm getting a glass of water," I say. "You want something?"

"No." Her silhouette appears in the kitchen doorway. She hugs herself against the cold.

"Come here," I say. She crosses the linoleum, which is slightly sticky, and leans into me. We stand that way in the dark.

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That's Friday, and this is Wednesday. Mist and cold, the sky filled with dull, gray clouds. During my lunch break, I walk down Market, past shops full of cheap electronics, to Powell. I cross toward the bank, and see out of the corner of my eye Erin emerging from Blondie's Pizza, carrying a Gap bag. She should be in Oakland right now, teaching her teenagers to conjugate *avoir* and *être*. I step out of view, under the dome covering the entrance to the bank. I wait a beat, then peer around the wet marble. I catch her walking away from me, toward Union Square.

I step back down into the crowd. The tourists lined up for the cable car are all wearing yellow plastic ponchos, and I stagger from one to the other as I follow her up the hill. She seems to just be shopping, looking into store windows. She bites her lower lip, weighs the worth of what she sees. She goes into Urban Outfitters and FAO Schwarz and, on a whim, I guess, Cartier. I find something to make myself look busy—pretzel stand, newspaper—until she comes back out.

She returns to Market Street and turns west, toward Civic Center. She listens to some men playing bongos, tosses change into their pan. She shakes her head when a homeless woman approaches her. Then she walks into an office building. Again, I give her a few minutes, then enter the lobby. The glassed-in board between the elevators lists several law offices and an ESL institute. I look over the names carefully, but don't recognize any of them. Anyway, I know she's not there for the lawyers. Yesterday, I

found two library books in her backpack, though she never mentioned going to the library: *Bigsby's Guide to Working in Europe* and *Teaching English in Latin America*. She apparently wants to go. Anywhere.

When she comes back out of the building, she tests for rain, and heads my way. I walk north and watch her descend the steps into the Muni station. I follow her in time to see her pass the turnstile, walk down to the platform. I pay and take the opposite staircase, circling around to observe. She sits on the closest round bench. She's scouring a booklet. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. There's a hardness to her features, an intensity, a hope beyond hope, I guess, that what she's reading will reveal what it is she needs to know.

The truth: I'm sure what her answer will be. She's going to say yes. I'll pop champagne, order flowers, dance her around the room. I'll call my mother—the last survivor of that worn-out world—and tell her the good news. That's how it'll go. But right now, in the damp station, I want to be a stranger, to plop down on the bench, ask Erin what she's reading. I want to see her face the moment she glances up. The set of her eyes, her mouth, the lift of her cheeks. Something in that split-second arrangement could tell us everything.

Scott Hutchins's debut novel *A Working Theory of Love* was a *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Salon.com* Best Book of 2012, a finalist for the California Book Award, and the recipient of the 2013 *Tess d'or* for best first foreign novel published in France. *A Working Theory of Love* has been translated into nine languages, including Hebrew, German, Dutch, Estonian, and Korean. His work has appeared in *StoryQuarterly*, *Five Chapters*, *The Owls*, *The Rumpus*, *The New York Times*, *San Francisco* and *Esquire*. He is the recipient of two major Hopwood awards and the Andrea Beauchamp prize in short fiction. A former Truman Capote fellow in the Stegner Program at Stanford University, Hutchins now teaches fiction, nonfiction, graphic novel, arts writing, and Twitter Fiction/Future Forms in Stanford's Creative Writing program. He lives in San Francisco.