SARAH MCCOUBREY

Fox II, 2012
oil on panel, 45 x 37 ½ in.

COURTESY LOCKS GALLERY

REBECCA CHEKOURAS

Free to Good Home

An April snow unusual even this far north laid a thin veneer of white over acres of pasture. The ground, no longer frozen, couldn't hold it. It would be gone in a day. The smell of mud and shit crowned the wind-batted air and water rippled where it collected in low spots. Jenny stopped at the milking parlor door to scrape her boot soles clean and then made her way past hired hands who readied the line. At her locker, she dipped her shoulder and her backpack slid to the shelf. Behind the concealing protection of the square metal door, she pushed two fingers into the canvas front pocket and tugged free a piece of paper no bigger than her mom's CD liners. It was real. That was her name under the tiny thing so much like a sea horse—a curl of spine and bulging eye spots suspended in dark fluid. She stuffed the image back and washed her hands. "Heads up, here they come," called Wayne. Wayne of jet-black hair and lake-blue eyes, his voice distant and small through the speaker buds in her ears. Her mother had warned her time and again the automated line was dangerous if she didn't remain alert, attuned to it, she'd said, but Jenny was sixteen and nothing could stop her doing what she wanted.

In the pale gray of late afternoon, a tide of black splotches on white hides, their hooves and shins tarred in the field, bawled and rolled their high-boned hips through the pasture gate and into the pen. Frank timed calving to the first grass and already many stomachs hung broad and low. The milkers were vectored off to a chute where Wayne rinsed their teats with iodine and glycerin and primed them with a few quick pulls. "Hey, Jenny," he called, laughing and wanting her to look at him. "Check it out. It's nipple play gets 'em going."

With any other boy she'd fire back at this kind of bullshit. But she'd been dating Wayne for six months. Long enough to know that a little nipple play really did bring the house down. She tied her long hair back and snapped a plastic cap over it, hauled on padded overalls, and settled the straps onto her boney shoulders. The flow and filter systems were in the chilling room where she monitored the pickup tank and scouted for abnormalities. She logged in, cleared the morning yield, and waited in the low-light coldness. In the parlor, the milk line hummed and jolted to a start. Her monitor blipped. The

screen reflected ghostly white off her cheekbones and chin as she watched numbers fall into columns.

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Wayne slapped the haunch of the last milker and boasted he had beer in his trunk. The line boys followed him out the barn door and into the blue-black square of evening. Jenny stayed behind to wait for the processor and sign for pickup. Headlights swept the barn and a flock of shadows flew across the walls and up to the ceiling where they vanished among the huge, bell-shaped lamps hanging from the rafters. In the darkness outside, the ancient hatchback she drove to school rolled into the yellow oblong cast by a yard spot and stopped. The engine rattled off. In the distance, the kitchen door smacked against the side of the house and her mother materialized from the surrounding night, the baby over her shoulder. A string of nesting dolls from toddler to sixth grader trailed after. With just enough effort to be noticeable, her father pried himself from behind the steering wheel, stood, and faced the barn. His cheeks burned a triumphant red. "I gassed 'er up for you," he told Jenny. The youngest children broke rank and ran to their father, who bent to embrace them. He let them all go and put his finger to his lips. They fell silent and followed his pied piper tiptoe to the back of the car.

"You went to town more than two hours ago, Frank," her mom said.

"Yes, Alda, my love," Frank said, all coin-slot eyes and shambly grin. "I went to town." He opened the hatch like a magician wheeling his cape back for the big reveal and stepped aside.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, Frank." Her mother's face mapped a territory of disbelief and fury. She lumped the baby to her hip. "I asked you to pick up diapers and you come back with a goddamn donkey?"

Jenny approached the car; looked where her mother looked. Silhouetted under the dome light was a little nimbus of fuzzy coat, straight-up ears, and huge foal eyes that caught the yard spot in bright circles. Altogether no bigger than their German shepherd. Its timid nostrils tested the air. The children clamored for a name and Frank said it should be Jenny, the oldest, the smartest, who named the baby. The children hushed and turned eager, hopeful eyes to their sister.

"Hitler," Alda said in the flat tone of practiced anger. The children stared at her, their mouths open though no one spoke. Alda twisted away from the family and walked back to the house. The darkness swallowed her bit by bit as she went, first her head, then her arms, her legs, until only the oval of her back remained and then that, too, was gone. The children's heads whipped back to Jenny. She exchanged a long look with her father.

"Who wants ice cream?" Frank cried. The youngest screamed and ran circles around his legs.

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Alda and Frank had been at it for days about Hitler. "They didn't want her," Frank said.

"And we do?" Alda gave the spoon she held a sharp flick. A tuft of mashed potatoes hit the plate and stiffened in the shape of its falling. "The thing isn't even weaned," she said.

"I'm taking care of her," Jenny said. "It's alright."

"No, it isn't," Alda said. "You have other responsibilities, Jenny. You know that. Plus you have school."

"We've got eight hundred animals on this farm," Jenny said. "What's one more?"

Alda put the bowl down but held onto the wand of spoon. "A dairy farm is a business," she said. "And in a business we make decisions."

"No one gives a shit," Jenny said. Her mother shot her the watch-your-mouth look and glanced to the younger children. "What? They've never seen shit on a dairy farm?"

* * *

Each day the sun rose earlier. The scent of purple lilac ambushed every open window. Cows calved and scores of roundheaded chicks peeped in the nesting box. The school year was drawing to a close. Jenny laid one elbow on the roof of the hatchback and the other on its open door. She rested her chin in the V of her arm and tried to steady her stomach by concentrating on trumpets of blue morning glory braiding the fence wire. A girl ran up, backpack swinging from her shoulder. "We'll be late for homeroom," she said. Then, after a closer inspection, added, "Hangover?"

"The air smells like sandwiches," Jenny said.

Nose up, the girl flexed her nostrils as wide as they would open. "I don't smell it," she said and laughed.

"You go." Jenny tilted her head toward the bank of windows that faced the parking lot. Wayne semaphored the blinds up and down to get her attention. Jenny collected her backpack. When she stood up, Wayne dropped the cord and drove the stiff finger of his left hand into a circle made by the thumb and first finger of his right. After a few quick thrusts, he grinned like an idiot and pointed to the equipment shed. The bell sounded. Wayne held up five fingers. Jenny looked down at her pack and then back to the window but Wayne had taken his seat. Two minutes later, she drove from the lot.

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She crunched to a stop alongside the place on the sidewalk where someone with a can of orange spray paint had written ASSHOLES on the cement and someone else later had tried to scrub it out. She cut the engine and turned her attention to a nondescript building across the street; no windows, a solid white door with a peephole. A strip of thistles and tall grass gone to seed stretched left and right behind the building. Beyond the strip was the parking lot for the mall. Not so long ago Jenny had sold Girl Scout cookies there. She brought a cigarette to her lips and lifted the lighter but hesitated, the flame only an inch from the tight roll of brown tobacco. She shouldn't. The door to the building opened and Jenny slid her thumb from the lever. The flame fell back into the cylinder. A man in scrubs pushed a woman in a wheelchair to the curb. She wore huge, black sunglasses and the lower portion of her face was obscured by a phone the size of a paperback. Within seconds, a car rounded the corner. A man got out and helped the woman from the wheelchair to the passenger seat. They drove away. The man in scrubs, the one who'd pushed the wheelchair, the one Jenny had seen the time before, and the time before that, remained at the curb and stared at Jenny's car, his face alert though neutral. Jenny dropped the cigarette back into its box and started the car.

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Voices from a televised ball game floated from the house to the calf barn where Jenny filled a one-liter Coke bottle with milk and outfitted it with a nipple. Hitler bunted her legs, wanting her to hurry up. Jenny cooed and called her Baby the way she did with her sisters. The sound of footsteps silenced her. She didn't need to look to know who it was. Her father gained her side and rested his shoulder against the wall, arms folded. Hitler sucked the bottle so hard Jenny had to lean back for counterbalance.

"School called. Said you skipped class this morning." He said it casually, like *Your shoe's untied*, as though it were nothing.

She didn't take her eyes from Hitler. "Just homeroom and first period." She rested the bottle against her leg. "Biology."

"Ah, well, biology," her father laughed. "Farm kids don't need a lesson in biology now do they?" He took the bottle from Jenny and squatted down to scratch the little donkey's head. In the faraway house, a reliever came in from the bull pen and the game cut to a commercial.

"I'm thinking of taking Hitler to the mall," Jenny said. "While she's still small enough to ride in the back of the car."

Nothing. She could announce she'd taken a shotgun to school and he would not lift his head. "To give little kids rides and take their pictures. For extra money." She imagined swinging a shovel hard to the back of his skull. "I need things," she said. Across the gravel yard thick with gnats, in the house jumping with blue television shadows, the plate umpire screamed, "Steee-rike!"

"I guess that would be all right," her father said over his shoulder. He put his arm around the donkey, patted its round belly.

* * *

Jenny had to fold down the backseats now to make room for Hitler and the basket of props—ribbons, straw hats, clown-sized sunglasses, a skirt too tight to wear anymore. Hitler stood in the shade blinking at the early June morning and chewing straw. Jenny pulled a roll of bills from the spare wheel compartment and counted it again. They were not making money fast enough. She put the roll back and tied a bow around Hitler's forehead. Small boys would stop and throw some shit. These sons of fathers called the donkey stupid or lame or queer. Older boys always worked in an "ass" comment. She told herself her rage and tears were just hormone buildup. Hitler was her dad's rescue, not hers.

Toddlers and girls were her moneymakers. Little girls especially could not get enough of a wee donkey in a straw hat and pleated skirt. One in particular had a crush on

Hitler. On first seeing the long-legged colt, the girl had screamed and run up to throw her arms around Hitler's neck. She asked its name and Jenny had answered Baby. The girl's father laid out thirty dollars that day for a dozen pictures and a ride to please his daughter. Jenny had seen them at the mall several times since. Always the father. Never a mom or girlfriend. Maybe the father rode some kind of sales circuit and his wife had died, of an excruciating, lingering cancer, and his daughter's day care was now the front seat of a Ford 150. People did weirder shit.

Jenny trotted Hitler into the parking lot and set up her homemade sandwich sign. Inside her head the constant radio of her mother's voice announced: Market Saturation—those inclined to buy already have. Jenny was still more than a hundred dollars short. She switched out the bow for sunglasses and a straw hat. Hitler gave her a head bump and Jenny poured water into a bucket. She had only a few more weeks before it would be everybody's business. While Hitler drank, she scanned the mall for children.

The girl pressed through a knot of people, pulling her father by the hand. "Hi, Baby!" she said and gave Hitler a kiss on her dripping muzzle.

"She just loves that little thing," the father said, his grin as wide as an open gate.

* * *

Jenny brought the car up near the house instead of the barn and twisted the key out of the ignition. When she stepped from the car, her mother turned away from the kitchen window. Jenny slammed the car door, dug a cigarette from her purse, and put it in her mouth. Lit it. Walked into the house.

"Put that out," Alda said from where she stood at the stove browning hamburger.

Jenny walked past her, squinting against the smoke stinging her eyes. She said nothing. Her eyes filled. She wiped her nose with the back of a fist and still it ran.

"Wait," Alda said to her daughter's back. "Where's Hitler?"

"Tell Frank the oil light came on," Jenny said and kept walking.

Rebecca Chekouras has appeared in the *Open Bar* (Tin House), *Narrative Magazine*, the *East Bay Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, and *Longridge Review*, among other publications. She is a fellow of the Tin House Writers' Workshop and the Lambda Literary Emerging Writers Retreat. In 2014, Chekouras helped inaugurate the Basement Series with writers from *McSweeney's* and the San Francisco Writers' Grotto. She lives in an old ironworks factory near the Port of Oakland where boom cranes meet the storied Southern Pacific Railroad.

STUART PRESLEY

The Abandoned Donkey, 2016
archival print, 16 x 24 in.

COURTESY THE ARTIST