

SUSAN SOLOMON

State of Mind, 2018
Gouache on panel, 8 x 8 in



COURTESY FRAMEWORKS GALLERY IN SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA

ANDREA DONDERI

Rivington

For a while there hadn't been much out the window but skunks and fog. The last audiobook ended this morning as we'd crossed down into California. Now there was nothing on the radio but talk shows for getting riled up or ballads for crying and by this point even those were sputtering out.

Rivington's email had mentioned two roads. They'll both get you there, he said, but the one you want cuts straight across the pass. The wrong one squiggles up into the mountains. I must have mixed them up, because the farmland gave way to forest twenty minutes ago. Now things were getting narrower and steeper and twistier. The first few spatters of rain were steady into a down-pour. It was getting dark fast and there wasn't anywhere to turn around.

I'd hoped we could make it through this last stretch without stopping, but in the seat behind me, Tupper was whimpering and panting a little. He probably had to pee. I did too. The headlights lit up a diamond-shaped sign, warning yellow, with the silhouette of a leaping deer.

It had been a couple of months since my job had evaporated. Our whole company had folded. I hadn't been attached to the work and I wasn't panicking yet about money, but "folded" was the right word for me too. I had no idea where to go next. My parents had owned a garden center near Louisville when I was growing up; sometimes I missed it. I'd posted something about maybe working with plants again.

And then Rivington (for the dozen-odd people who might have heard of him, that's *the* poet Will Rivington) piped up with a comment. His sister's husband's family ran a wholesale nursery out here, he wrote. They were expanding, they needed someone sane to help run the place. Why didn't I come visit and check things out?

Rivington had taken over our porch swing during his fellowship in Bloomington. My sister, Beth, and I adored him, but we hadn't heard much from him after we left town. Right around the time he signed the contract for *Value Propositions*, he'd moved away too: all the way back to California, near his family. His relatives ran gas stations, taught school, staffed vet clinics. They zoomed up and down the coast in convertibles they'd restored themselves, arms resting lazily on the window, music pouring from the radio, past seagrass and lupines, artichokes and cypress trees.

We'd seen an entire textbook of geology. Plains, mountains, strata thrown up sideways, bare snow-swept fortresses of rock, and then suddenly this morning we were in California and there were trees again.

At least that was how I imagined them, based on postcards and music and odd things he'd said. I'd never been west of the Mississippi.

I wasn't sure whether he was serious, so I called him. "Of course," he said. His voice sounded as happy and comfortable as it always had. "At least come out here and see what you think. Seriously, Abby, what's keeping you in Cincinnati? Or in the Midwest at all?"

I didn't have a good answer. Former job, long-gone boyfriend. He knew that.

He went on. "Even if you and the Cruzes don't hit it off, you're within interview range of geek central if you want to do that again. Or hey, you could join the police department like me. We've been known to hire non-poets from time to time."

"What about Tupper?"

"Bring him out. He'll be fine here, and on the way any Motel 6 takes dogs. You've never done the cross-country drive, have you?"

"In the middle of winter?"

"Where's your sense of adventure? Bring chains for the mountains."

Chains? I had no idea what he was talking about.

That was Monday. Amazon had me fully equipped by midday Wednesday. On Thursday morning, Tupper and I headed out. We'd seen an entire textbook of geology. Plains, mountains, strata thrown up sideways, bare snow-swept fortresses of rock, and then suddenly this morning we were in California and there were trees again. Christmas trees, cedar and white pine, all perfectly frosted, and a long, slow sweep down from the Sierra into the valley. The signs told truckers to "Let 'er drift." I laughed out loud.

The afternoon stretched out bumper-to-bumper, past stripey fields and bright water, then along the edge of metropolitan sprawl and thousands of cars moving fast all together, light through rare breaks in the clouds slanting more obliquely as evening closed in. After that, more agriculture, more clouds, and now this mute, overcast landscape. I thought I was done with mountains but now that the light was disappearing, we had one last ridge to cross between here and the ocean.

Every pit and puddle in the road was glistening. Millions of drops on the windshield stretched and re-formed as the wipers sloshed them around. Now and then a car would spiral down a bend in the road, cloaked with spray, headlight beams swinging as it turned. Sometimes they'd zoom up from behind, these people who knew every turn of the road, seething with their lights in my mirror, furious if I missed a chance to pull over, eventually barreling ahead into the void. The way to keep steady was to focus on the white line painted between the road and the ditch. It was glittering too, but solidly, like a ribbon.

Were those *eyes* glinting at the side of the road? For someone who grew up with plants, I sure didn't recognize any friends in these woods. Just a throng of giant conifers thrashing their branches around. I'D TURN BACK IF I WERE YOU!

There was a shadowy hulk in front of the car. I don't remember putting on the brakes. I do remember hearing them screech through the rushing in my ears. I also remember a rubbery smell. I remember a distant part of my mind thinking, "This could be very bad," and another part of my mind answering, "Shh, there's work to do." We spun and scudded into a stately, unhurried curve.

Eventually we came to a stop. There was no sound except the rain. We were on the wrong side of the road,

facing the wrong way, but we were still upright, unharmed, a few inches from the guardrail. The abyss was at least a yard away.

After my breath settled, I eased the car back into my side of the center line. I wanted to call someone. I didn't want to call Rivington, or maybe I did want to, but I couldn't because there was nowhere to stop. There wasn't a shoulder, just wet gravel and underbrush, then a wall of forest on one side and a flimsy rail and chasm on the other. Occasionally there'd be a hairpin curve and the wall and chasm would swap sides. I crept along with my flashers on, pulse pounding, and eventually, after two or three switchbacks, there was a turnout. I stopped.

I checked my phone. Nothing. I couldn't call Rivington anyway, or anyone else. We were in a dead spot.

I hopped out into the rain and opened both passenger-side doors. I leaned in, unsnapped Tupper's seat harness, snapped on his leash. Then I tucked myself between the two doors to pee. Tupper did the same. Something cracked underfoot. It sounded like plastic. I looked down to see what I'd broken. I'd crushed and killed the biggest snail I'd ever seen. It was striped, the size of a horse chestnut, writhing horribly.

I'd read about these snails. Their ancestors were French, farmed for eating, brought to California by entrepreneurs. A few had managed to break out—look at that S car go!—and many generations were thriving in the wild. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, snail," I said, as my urine and Tupper's joined the rivulets in the gravel.

Once we'd settled back into the car, I started the engine and reached for the turn signal. Suddenly I had a lurch of doubt: was that really how the turn signal works? It was exactly like hearing yourself use a word—*excessive*, perhaps, or *claw*, or *application*—and then panicking: Is that a real word? Does it mean anything like what I intended? But my hand was right. The signal was clicking and flashing. We pulled back onto the road.

I rolled down the window. Rain was splashing inside but I needed to wake up. Tupper strained at his seat harness so he could lean his huge head on my shoulder. The air was heavy and aromatic: deep resinous evergreens, whiffs of eucalyptus and sage.

We kept going. The road was no less narrow and no less twisty. It was still raining, still dark, but at some point

the switchbacks started taking us down instead of up, and along with the cedar and eucalyptus, there was a tang of salt and kelp. Eventually through the branches, far away and a long way below, there started to be glimpses of tiny lights spread along a curved edge, and finally a blackness that had to be the ocean.

* * *

Heading into town I had to remind myself to slow down. The rain was softening into drizzle. I pulled into a gas station and called Rivington. Half a mile further along, he said, was an open restaurant. He'd meet me there. I spotted the place moments after he'd hung up. Just as I was scratching Tupper between the ears and cracking the window for him, headlight beams swept across the lot. The patrol car rolled up, making crunching sounds on the gravelly surface.

The way Rivington looked was going to take some getting used to. I remembered him swathed in fleece and flannel, shaggy hair, baggy khakis, flopped in an armchair or shambling down a hallway, grinning. Here in his blue uniform, he loomed with angular shoulders and that menacing belt. He'd buzzed his hair short, exposing strange edges to his head. There were bursts of white in his hair. Against them his eyes looked pale, intense, sea green. Behind him was another cop: much smaller, sturdy, with a broad, careful face and smooth dark hair pinned up behind her.

Rivington was still grinning, but his mouth seemed to take up more face than it used to. He held open his arms for a hug.

"Abby! Welcome to California!" His ape arms and my kangaroo arms wrapped around each other. Then, as we let go: "This is Sonia. She's Luis's cousin." I had no idea who Luis was and I hadn't counted on having to be polite to a stranger. I shook her hand and smiled at her inanely.

"Are you hungry?" Rivington asked. Before I had a chance to answer, he said, "Me, I'm about ready to eat my boots."

I looked at his boots. They were black, pebbled leather, unimaginably huge. Sonia's were the same type. On her tiny stubby feet they looked like old-fashioned baby boots, the kind that might get bronzed.

"Ravenous," I said companionably, though I wasn't sure if that was true.

We all clumped inside. I picked a booth next to the window so I could keep an eye on Tupper in the car. I spotted his silky ears, silhouetted behind all the reflections. Those beautiful, alert ears. I felt a gust of what might have been oxytocin.

The place was lit with milky, translucent fixtures like drippy noses. I tilted my menu to keep the glare off the laminate. What did I want? A panini? A spinach-and-crab salad? Beer? I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, my contact lenses were haloing and there was a twitch in my left eyelid. The sound of forks scraping on plates across the room hurt my ears.

Rivington and Sonia were talking about some guy who'd drilled right through his car's fuse box trying to mount a red plastic ooga horn on the side panel. I'd forgotten Rivington's "I'm thinking" expression: he'd squint and open his mouth at the same time, like a kid making a monster face. Beth used to call it his piggy look. I wondered if I should tell him.

It occurred to me that though the rest of me liked traveling, my gut hated it. In the morning, I promised myself, I'd score some kale at one of those famous farm stands and eat all of it. Rivington and Sonia burst out laughing. Apparently I was talking out loud.

"You know," I said, "I nearly plunged off the road just up there in the mountains. It was wet and windy and I thought I saw a deer. Maybe I did, I don't know. I braked and skidded out. I'm fine, we didn't hit anything, but I guess I was kind of thrown by the storm."

"Storm." Rivington scratched his nose, unimpressed. "You're a midwesterner. Since when was that a storm?"

We'd had an evening back in Bloomington, right after Rivington arrived there, when the sky turned greenish and the wind came up.

In those days, my sister, Beth, and I shared a place. I'd graduated a couple of years earlier and was writing code for a biology lab on a grant; Beth was staying on for a master's, practicing like a demon and not only getting more gorgeous by the minute but also playing really, really well. We lived in a ramshackle house on a leafy corner south and west of campus, divided into three apartments. Each place had its own entrance. She and I got the limestone porch in front, covered with honeysuckle. There was a basement apartment, too; someone called

Delphine lived there, an amiable folklorist from Seattle with heavy eyeliner and black ringlets who belly danced at Casablanca every other Friday. A little stoop around the side, with an address on the other street, led right into Rivington's kitchen.

As soon as the sirens started, Delphine banged on Rivington's door, then on ours. "Come on down to my place," she said. "We can all wait it out. I've made a huge pot of chai."

And we did, the four of us sprawled on her futon and papasan, admiring Norton the cat's camo stripes and yellow eyes. We listened to cars whooshing along the street outside and sirens on top of the school a few blocks away. Delphine poured us tea from a brown glazed pot. This was fantastic. No one else in our generation made tea in pots. Rivington was laughing uproariously at everything we said. I'd heard tornado sirens every year of my life, and it didn't occur to me till years later—actually, not till that moment, right there in the restaurant—that Rivington, being new to these things, had probably been terrified. He'd kept making jokes about Oz.

I remember looking up over Delphine's head at a huge op art piece on the wall: black, neons, pastels, all pulsating in zigzags and asymmetrical stripes. Delphine followed my gaze.

"Look closely. It's a quilt. From around 1960. My mom found it at a yard sale somewhere in the middle of Alabama. Unbelievable, isn't it?"

A floor lamp angled toward the schefflera in the corner. Beth reached elegantly over to tilt it up at the quilt, but spotted something on the schefflera. "Check this out, Abby," she said. "It's covered with scale."

We'd grown up in a plant nursery. Bad news. We sprang into action.

Do you know what scale looks like? If you didn't know better, you'd think you were looking at bumps on the plant. Beth and I requisitioned Delphine's cotton swabs and some dish soap and spent the next half hour obliterating the evil little knobs. While we did it, Rivington got out a piece of paper. He and Delphine listed different things the word *scale* can mean. Among other things, there was music, of course; any graduated series; climbing a rock face, which my boyfriend was off in West Virginia doing; indices such as the Beaufort scale, which is how you measure weather

such as the storm outside, or Bloomington's own Kinsey scale, which Delphine said she was right in the middle of; the device that tells you you're too fat, a constant concern for Delphine; the flakes on a fish; the illusions that fall from your eyes. (Rivington spent the rest of the summer writing poems about these things and put them in a collection called *Scale*.)

* * *

When the power went out we gasped. Not because it was suddenly dark, but because it wasn't. There were tiny halos of light trembling everywhere. Around the room, Delphine had set up half a dozen tea lights in salt-crystal holders, a couple of tapers in filigree lanterns, and most impressively, emerald green and enclosed in glass on the bookcase, a botanica candle: The Seven African Powers.

We'd finished the tea. "Ooh, here's what we should have," Delphine said. She shimmied over to the kitchen, ringlets bouncing, and came back with four tiny glasses on a tray and a bottle marked TAYLOR FLADGATE. "You know why?"

We all said it at once: "Any port in a storm!"

We couldn't put on any music, but there was wind roaring through sycamore branches outside. Beth and I told our string of Jewish-at-a-Catholic-girls'-school stories. Norton the cat padded from lap to lap making everyone massage the base of his tail. Rivington leaned on his beautiful forearms and talked up the summer poetry course he was about to teach: there were still a few slots left, we could audit if we didn't want grades, we should all register. (We did, all three of us. It turned out to be great.) Eventually the sirens stopped. We kept on talking. In the candlelight everyone's faces flittered; Delphine's sweater, bunched around her backpack on a peg near the door, looked like a warrior bird from Teotihuacán. Nobody wanted to leave. How could we possibly divide ourselves up?

But here in the restaurant, all that seemed even longer ago and farther away than it really was. Rivington himself seemed only to have a shadowy resemblance to the guy I remembered. I couldn't believe I'd just driven all the way out here. I looked back up at the gloppy ceiling.

The waitress brought me a Coke; it perked me up a little. Rivington and I swapped stories about people we knew. I remember thinking I should be explaining more,

Rivington leaned on his beautiful forearms and talked up the summer poetry course he was about to teach: there were still a few slots left, we could audit if we didn't want grades, we should all register.

or doing something to include Sonia, but all that seemed too difficult. Rivington asked about my parents.

"Who knows. After they sold up they moved of all places to Savannah. My dad's teaching a couple of adult ed classes, they've got this dog I don't even know." I took an agitated gulp of Coke. "It's like they got divorced and married strangers, only the strangers are each other. We didn't even get together for the holidays. We talked about going to see Beth in Sweden this year, but the money didn't work out for any of us."

"Beth's in Sweden?"

"She didn't tell you? She's playing with the symphony in Malmö."

He grinned. "That's great. I'm glad she didn't get sidetracked. I loved hearing her play," he said.

Everyone loved hearing Beth play. About getting sidetracked, I wasn't sure what to say. Rivington had joined the police after a stint teaching at some local college. I'd loved reading his stuff too. Instead I told him that even now when I drifted off to sleep, I still sometimes hallucinated Beth's arpeggios. I wondered if she and I would ever live in the same city again.

The beach is the color of the loose material it's made up of: sand, pebbles, shells, crushed-up bits of coral. But a stretch of sand by itself isn't a beach. You need water.

I looked out the window. Tupper must have curled up to snooze on the back seat, because I couldn't see him.

"Playa Azul," I read on the taqueria sign across the street. "Blue beach?"

"Yeah," Rivington said. He cocked his head. "But that doesn't make a whole lot of sense, does it? The *beach* isn't blue. It's the *water* that's blue."

He and I riffed on that for a while, just like the old days. The beach is the color of the loose material it's made up of: sand, pebbles, shells, crushed-up bits of coral. But a stretch of sand by itself isn't a beach. You need water. The shore of a body of water isn't necessarily a beach either, unless there's a relatively flat stretch of loose material along it. You need both. Do the prepositions tell us anything? You lie *on* the beach, but you swim *at* the beach. You don't do anything *in* the beach. Even if you bury someone in sand, you bury him or her *in* the sand *at* the beach. What role does the water play? Is it part of the beach, or does its proximity allow the loose material along the shore to constitute a beach?

"In my line of work," I said, "we'd call the water a zero-length look-ahead assertion." I thought that was pretty funny but all I got from the two of them was a tolerant smile. Sonia got up to go to the bathroom. She walked the same way I'd seen other cops walk, each leg swinging like a pendulum.

"Beth could hardly believe you joined the police," I said.

"Well, after a few rounds of adjuncting, I begged them to take me," he said. "And I love this community. But Beth . . . how's Sweden working out?"

Back to Beth as always. I was about to tell him, and to ask Rivington if he knew where Delphine was now, but Sonia reappeared, followed by the food.

"I just scared the bejesus out of some poor Guatemalan woman in the john," she said. She unclipped her hair. It spilled straight down her back, darker than Beth's but equally long and silky. Then she twisted it up, reattached it, and sat down. "She was shaking all over."

"What happened?"

"The stall door wasn't locked. I walked in on her. She screamed, I backed out and apologized. I still have to pee but I didn't want to wait back there. She's probably still afraid I'm going to turn her in."

She sat down. She picked up a forkful of fries but a call came in so she put them back down. As she talked, Rivington took a second to draw me a map on a napkin. Then he handed me his house keys and some cash for the bill. "I'll call in a while," he said. They zoomed off. I watched the car leave the lot: lights, no sirens, moving fast.

I finished and paid up. The streets were still wet but no rain was falling. I climbed into the car; a dog barked in the distance. Tupper woofed back, then settled down.

Rivington's place was a townhouse in a wooded complex. I didn't unload; I just took Tupper and my backpack and stumbled up to the door. In the pooled lamplight, the walls were bile colored. The sofa was dark like chocolate or dried blood, segmented, glistening like an intestine. But I was glad to recognize the Turkish flatweave rug from his old place, rich zigzaggy reds and olive and gold and blue. It softened the greenish walls. And the hall toward the kitchen was lined with plain white bookcases, brimming with old friends.

I scanned the bookshelf, then stopped when I realized I was looking for clues. What was I hoping for? *Criminal and Poetic Justice: Prosody and Image in Law Enforcement?* I giggled.

Beth once told me she thought I was potentially a competent musician. I was no math whiz but I did have a knack for computation as a kid, the way some people pick up languages. If you're a girl who's comfortable with quantitative

stuff, there will be scholarships. Then one thing follows another. Beth would have managed fine in a STEM field too. But if she'd done that, I bet she'd still be playing scales most nights. Me, I just did my job and nothing else. So who was I to judge?

I poured Tupper a bowl of water. Then I spread his blanket on the intestinal sofa. He hopped up and settled with a snort. I kicked off my shoes and joined him. I closed my eyes and started to drift: my brain fired up images of roadsides rushing past as it suspended consciousness.

Maybe forty minutes later, I woke up from a confusing dream. It involved Sonia, I think: there were forearms, long black hair, and, oddly, the scent of crushed basil leaves, or at least the *idea* of the scent of crushed basil leaves.

A few texts had come in while I was dozing. It was Rivington. My room was at the end of the hall to the left, he said. He'd forgotten to set it up so I could read and plug in my phone; I should look under the bed for an outlet and extension cord. The light-blue towels in the bathroom were for me.

It occurred to me that I'd better get my stuff out of the car.

It also occurred to me that I'd better find it in my heart to forgive Rivington for being a good friend, for trying to help me figure out what to do next, and then failing to be Jesus Christ Almighty and the communion of the saints. Also for having a staggeringly ugly couch. I had to admit, however grudgingly, that it was comfortable. And any furniture looked all right with Tupper sitting on it.

There was a rustling noise outside. Tupper sat straight up, ears angled out the window. He barked once sharply, then a couple of throatier woofs, then nothing.

I waited a while, then tapped 911 into my phone in case there was a problem.

Moonlight beamed between and bounced off clouds overhead, illuminating trees I didn't know: one with dark berries and lilac-shaped leaves, another with weeping fronds. The breeze brought a gust of night flowers. It wasn't honeysuckle. I didn't think it was jasmine either. Citrus. I wanted to grab Rivington's arm and say, Hey, isn't it nutty and wonderful that the monoterpenoids that they exude to mimic hawk moths' sex and congregation pheromones should smell so lovely to us? I'd also tell him that I'd never imagined the combination of citrus flowers with cedar and

eucalyptus after rain. I was almost prepared to say it was the best thing I'd ever smelled.

There was the rustling again, by the visitors' carport where I'd parked. It looked like a big, leggy dog poking around the underbrush and dumpsters. Only it was much too spindly and skittish to be a dog. It was a deer, a young male one, with little antlers! I put my phone away.

Sirens sounded in the distance. It occurred to me that these weren't ordinary night sounds like freight trains. Sirens meant that somewhere there was trouble. People, Rivington and Sonia maybe, were rushing out to deal with it.

I don't know how they calculate "points" out of branching antlers. The little guy had one Y per antler, so maybe that's two, or maybe four points total? He stood stock still and looked straight at me. I stayed there for a while, looking back.

It wasn't till he danced off, trampling the ivy, that I opened the trunk. I hauled out my duffel bag and slung it over my shoulder. It was time to bring everything inside.

Andrea Donderi grew up in Montreal and arrived in California via Toronto, Chicago, and Bloomington, Indiana. She lives in a ramshackle backyard cottage on the San Francisco peninsula and writes manuals for the guts of the Internet as well as essays and fiction. This is her first published story.