

—| **MARY WHARFF** | In the Absence of Wings

AS SHE SAILS OVER THE BARBED WIRE FENCE, a hot dry wind behind her, the cow thinks of birds. How useful wings might be at a time like this. Her spindly legs crumple and pink udders squash as the round of her girth meets the hard of the ground. Parched weeds prickle and lightning bugs flash. The cow unwinds her legs, pushes up to her hooves, lumbers her way out of the ditch, swings her spotted brown head to the west, and sniffs. The air smells much the same as it did on the other side of the fence. But there's not much grass or water—and no company. The cow swats her tail through the beams of a white harvest moon. Her dark eyes peer to the north. It looks to be a long road. She lows sharp and loud, like a trumpet.

Behind old limestone farmhouses, bed sheets snap—solids, florals, a set of stripes here and there. The way they billow, they might be sails but for the clothespins clipped to wires fastened to the poles moored with cement to the baked hard clay. The sheets wave to all who pass by.

The children are first to discover the escape. The boys bellow while the girls yoo-hoo into the wind. They gather evidence: furrowed earth in a path headed straight to the fence; flattened weeds on the other side of the fence, in the ditch beside the road. The children look back to the furrows then forth to the weeds. Back and forth.

"She must have jumped," pipes one tike. Some kids guffaw and others gape. The littlest ones bubble,

"Over the moon, over the moon!"

Word spreads with the wind. It whistles its way from this white-shuttered farm to the next, up creekways and down highways, through the grocery and diner and feed store and bar. "No shit. Well, I'll be. Not around here. Not as far as I can remember. Not in a million years."

The men search the fence. They find no open gates. No upended poles. No rips between the barbs. They search the fence again.

The women stir sugar into tall iced teas. "Silly cow."

The women sip the sweet tea. "She had it made! Naps by the pond. Dinner at her hoof-tips. Daycare for the babies. A good romp with the bull now and then."

The women smile into their tea. "Wouldn't that be heaven?" Teaspoons clack round and round in the glasses. "That fence would have been a hard jump for a horse, much less a cow!"

Teaspoons clack a bit more. "She must have really wanted to go."

In a pasture, the children huddle. A test is proposed and even the skeptics agree to take part. The children line up old apple crates between themselves and the herd. "Here cows, here cows," they caw. The children unfold fistfuls of dried corn. "Come and get it!"

The cows work over the glue of their cuds. Together, they step towards the fresh snack, but at the makeshift fence, they stop. Puzzled, they look to the right and to the left. The fence shows no gap. The cows gaze at the treats on the outstretched hands, but the corn moves no closer. One cow moos and another noisily exhales. In accord, they bend to the grass right in front of their hooves.

Fresh-baked peach pie draws the men into town. They think it out while they chew. "Say it's true." Sun-browned faces look hard at each other.

"If one can do it, what's to stop the others?" The cook tops up their coffee. The men swig it black.

"Crap. Fuckin' A. Geezus." Trouble forges lines across their foreheads.

"Electric wires won't stop jumpers." They stare past the mugs to the crumbs on their plates.

"Higher fences then." They swig more coffee.

"How high is enough?" Their mugs clap hollow against the hard counter. The men throw down spare quarters and leave.

From kitchens and clotheslines and gardens out behind the barns, the women keep an eye on the hilly road. They watch for the cow. Not for the frizzy-haired hitchhiker with a red-lettered sign: GOING THERE; or the coyote cubs crossing from one ditch to the other; or the snake that shed its skin right there in the middle of everything; or the eagle that soared on the August breeze; or the teenagers holding hands on their way to the bridge; or the moon so faint in the searing-white day.

At first, the women want to spot the cow. But then, it seems they don't.

The children pat the cows on their shoulders and rumps. They stroke behind the beasts' ears and scratch the length of their noses. They place alfalfa beside the corn, and later, sliced apples. They drip honey over the crates to the mounds of grain and fruit. "Good cows," they plead. "Sweet cows. Please. Just this once. We'll never bother you again. Promise."

The moon begins to wane and the wind turns, cooler now, but with the same restless whine.

The women sip root beer floats through clear plastic straws. "The cow will never come home." Quiet rounds the checkered cloth. One woman looks into the eyes of another, then another and another. Their gazes web. Coyotes and cougars dash from mind to mind. The women lean over their floats and draw in deep gulps.

"You got to feel for her," somebody says.

"Out there alone," another agrees.

"Not everyone could do it," chimes someone else.

"Hardly anybody," the whole group nods. The glasses rise and meet over the table with a clink, clink, clink, clink, clink.

"Here's to the cow." The women suck hard to get all the good drops.

In the gravel lot by the feed store, the men calculate the cost of new wire and taller posts. They take off their hats and scratch through matted hair.

"Sure is a lot of trouble over one cow." The men shuffle their feet.

"It's not like it happens every day." They push their fingers into the pockets of soil-tinted jeans.

"Probably once in a lifetime." They shift and grind their boots into the rocks.

"Two lifetimes." Their laughter blats brassy. "What do you suppose got into her?" Hands come out of pockets.

"Some kind of big itch." More hollow laughter. "Your guess." The men shake their heads and swipe the heat from their eyes with the backs of their hands.

"Hell of a thing." Tarnished doors slam and pickups hurry off, leaving dust clouds behind them.

Gathered by the pond, the children think things over. The experiment has failed. The ones who were right try not to gloat. The ones who believed try not to cry.

The cows stand still near the crates. They wait for goodies and massages and tickles in places they hadn't known tickled. The sound of tears pokes them like barbs. One cow snorts, and then another.

"Look," shouts a child through the blubbers and sighs. The cows have begun to bump the crates with their heads and kick them with clumsy hooves. Here and there, crates collapse into splinters. One cow crouches into her hocks and lifts her front legs high as she possibly can. With a thud she comes down, two hooves in front of the fence, two hooves behind and her belly settled square on the top.

The children wa-hoo! It's close enough! They shower the cows with kernels and dried bits of apple. They hug their necks and coo cheerful praise. "Good girl. Atta girl. We knew you could do it."

The cows raise their heads into the embrace, and in the midst of the merry, moo from the deep of their multiple hearts.

Inside the painted front doors, up the oak stairs, under the covers, the men lay beside the women, the women beside the men. The men won't build higher fences. There's really no point.

The women console. "It would have ruined the countryside. It's good to see a ways."

The men grumble. The women roll to them. Oh the cow, the fence, the damn coyotes! The women kiss the men's mouths. Fingers sneak above, below and in between.

Frustration mutters.

"Shhhh."

Failure dispirits.

"Shhhh."

The moon slips through curtains on air soft as hushes. The wives lean in, the husbands hold on. Moon rays swallow the space between bodies while shadows rock the ceilings and the papered old walls.

Not too far away, the cow sleeps beneath cottonwood and cedar. When she wakes, she'll drink from a gurgling creek and graze on purple clover, yellow blossoms, and tall golden grass. She'll spend the day with rabbits, a fawn, and some watchful owls. The rabbits may huddle beside her should the breeze have a chill. It is not what she expected, but then, she didn't really know. She twitches with a dream as moonlight brushes her sleeping and wispy over her body, across the fields and beyond the hills.