

## Chunky in Heat

Her thighs spread across the vinyl ropes of the lawn chair. In the heat they seem to melt into the plastic, seeping out from under her shorts, slipping through the vinyl as though eventually she'll begin dripping fat onto the lawn.

"Chunky?" her mother calls through the sliding glass door. The voice is muffled and sounds like a drowning person talking under water. "I'm running errands, are you coming with me?"

Cheryl shakes her head. Her second chin rolls across her chest, gliding on a layer of sweat.

"Why not?"

Her mother seems to be gurgling behind the glass.

Cheryl doesn't answer.

"I'm leaving now," her mother says, and then waits at the glass for several minutes before walking away.

Cheryl lays on the chair in the center of the backyard, her right hand plucking individual blades of grass, her eyes not focused but aimed at a bald spot of lawn, a remnant from another afternoon when she had a similar problem.

They call her Chunky in part after the candy bar, which used to be her favorite. Her mother started it.

Cheryl was eating a bar and refused to give some to her little brother. "Too small to share," she said, popping it all into her mouth, ending the discussion.

He called her Fatty and poked her in the stomach; his finger sank deep into her flesh.

"Your sister is just chunky," her mother said.

"You bet she is," he said.

After that he called her Chunky and then everyone called her Chunky, and then as if being called Chunky actually made her fatter, she truly was Chunky—and she hated that candy bar and switched to Mr. Goodbar but didn't tell anybody.

Cheryl is fat, only she didn't know it until now. Before this she always thought of herself as a big girl, a growing girl, a girl who could do anything. Now, in the heat, in the sun, she lies immobile and swollen. She feels larger and larger as if her breath is actually inflating her. She tries not to breathe as much, as deeply. Her double chin presses down onto her chest, onto her windpipe, and she feels like she is suffocating. Cheryl tilts her head back, establishing an airway.

She tilts her head and thinks of models in *Vogue* who seem like they can tilt anything, like they aren't people but fully articulated dolls like her brother's G.I. Joe—G.I. Joke she calls him. She thinks of thin people on beaches, with a breeze slipping over them. She realizes that because they are thin, they are aerodynamic. She pictures herself on the sand and sees a blob exactly like a jellyfish.

Two incredibly large insects, with wing spans like small airplanes, buzz past Cheryl. They buzz back and forth within a foot of her head, and on their second pass-by they lock together belly to belly like Siamese twins. Their wings beat against each other with a faint clicking sound. They are mating; Cheryl knows that. She knows what they are doing, but she doesn't know how. She doesn't

know what they are doing it with. She can't see anything. The insects' green eyes bulge out of the sockets, their front feelers claw at each other, and Cheryl feels sick. There are too many sensations, too many distractions. She is writhing in her lawn chair, shifting her limbs, her balance. The chair rocks and lifts into the air as if it might tip and dump Cheryl onto the grass. She grips the armrests, thinking that holding tight will make her safe.

"I'm gonna get you, I'm gonna get you." Cheryl hears the voice of her next-door neighbor. "Oooh, I'm gonna get you now." There is a high-pitched scream, a squeal of pleasure. Her next-door neighbor is chasing his daughter around in the backyard. She is six years old. "Bet you can't get me. Bet you can't," she mimics and taunts her father.

"Oooh, I'm gonna."

"Enough," the mother screams and then there is silence.

Cheryl looks around the yard and back at the house. Everything is still and shadowless as if stunned by the heat, the light, and the peak of the day. The house appears flat, as if it's been cut out from a magazine and glued back into another picture. Even with the fence around it and the ivy from the neighbors' yard growing over, wrapping around like guy wires, it is as if at any moment the house might take off and disappear into the wild blue yonder. There are no anchors, no signs of life, no swing set, pool, barbecue, nothing except Cheryl in the backyard.

She looks at the house, but focuses on the sensations of herself in the heat, of her clothing in the heat, against her body. Cheryl wears her clothing like the protective coating on a cold capsule. Clothing divides her body into reasonable sections, arms and legs that need to be kept apart from other arms and legs, safe from the possibility of skin touching skin and rubbing itself raw.

Outside, as she sweats, her clothing separates itself

from her body and begins to slip slightly, working against her, moving independently. When she breathes in, her bra creeps up and sticks, like a rubber band around her ribs, biting her and then creeping up again, higher, when she exhales.

In a moment of extreme consciousness, she sits straight up, reaches her hand up the back of her shirt, and releases the bra, sending it snapping across her chest like a sling-shot. She pulls it off under her shirt and drops it, lifeless, onto the grass.

In the hot air the surface of her skin becomes tacky and the tops of her thighs touch and stick together, gripping each other in a vaguely masturbatory manner. She moves her legs to separate them. This touching and pulling apart causes a soft lip-smacking sound. Her thighs rub together even in her thoughts.

There is the distant sound of a doorbell, a sound like the tone in a hearing test. When you hear the beep, raise your finger. She hears the doorbell and then a muffled voice.

"Chunky, Chunky, are you here?"

She hears the boy who lives next door, the boy who is three years younger than her, the boy she plays games with that they tell no one about. She does it because he wants to and she wants to and she can't find anyone her own age to do it with and besides she feels better doing it with him because she's bigger than him, and he does what she tells him to. He doesn't care that she's fat because he's getting to and he doesn't know anyone else who is getting to, and he likes that she is older because even though he can't talk about it anywhere, it gives him a new kind of credibility even if it's only in his mind. She doesn't let him see her actually naked; that's one of her rules and part of what makes it all right. He just sees bits and pieces but it's never too much, never overwhelming. He doesn't try to kiss her and she likes that.

"Chunky, are you here?" His voice is higher than it should be. She doesn't like it when he talks. "Chunky, I think you're home."

She hears him calling but doesn't answer. It doesn't mean she doesn't want him, but she can't bring herself to speak. She lies on the lawn chair and thinks of him coming around the house, into the backyard and finding her. She thinks of him topless, his shoulders looking new and too big for the rest of him. She sees him unzipping his shorts and pulling them down, his erection jutting forward like an extra limb, a birth defect. She spreads her legs and he comes towards her. She has to spread her legs very wide in order to make a space between her thighs. He kneels on the grass and pushes in.

He grabs her breasts and squeezes them again and again like they are the black rubber bulbs on bicycle horns. He pushes into her hard and quick and she can feel it everywhere. He slams in and the newest part of her, the freshest fat, the softest flesh, jiggles. Her hips, thighs, and butt jiggle. Her breasts jiggle each time and she loves it; she loves the jiggling.

This is the thing about being fat that no one mentions. Everything feels good, every square inch has incredible sensations, as if skin when stretched becomes hypersensitive, as if by stretching the skin to cover the fat the nerves become exposed or sharpened: it is not just her flesh rubbing against itself but the very sensation of its existence, hanging from her body, apart from her body, swaying, jiggling, touching things.

"Chunky, are you in there? If you don't answer I'm leaving."

She imagines him not on top of her, but apart from her except in that one place and every time he goes in she slides up on the sweaty vinyl so that when they finish her head is hanging off the end and he can barely reach her.

She imagines him and as she imagines him she slips her hand into her shorts. She imagines him and she pulls her shorts down to her knees. She digs her heels into the bottom of the chair and pushes up, raising her butt up off the chair. Her flesh pulls up and off the chair like adhesive tape being removed and it hurts a little and she likes the sting and repeats the thrusting until her skin is raw and sweat coats the chair like butter and she doesn't stick anymore. She pulls her shirt up to her neck so her nipples can get the air.

When she finishes and realizes she is half-naked, her pants caught at her knees, her shirt at her throat, the sensation of being outside, in the middle of the day where someone might see her—and suddenly she feels like someone, at least one person, is seeing her with her clothes all pushed up and pulled down—is too much and she has to do it again, this time more slowly, this time for an audience. This time, she pulls all her clothing off. She does it lying on her back, imagining someone seeing her doing it. All she's thinking about is people watching and she's not fat or thin, she's sex, pure sex, and as they're watching her she thinks they're probably doing it too and she likes that.

She remembers when she was a little girl, maybe five, her mother walked into her room and Cheryl was on her bed with her pants pulled down and her butt poked up in the air. Even then she liked to get the air inside her, on her.

"What are you doing?" her mother asked.

Even then Cheryl didn't answer.

She remembers feeling something more than embarrassed but she can't think of the word. Cheryl is getting too old for this. She is so old that it is embarrassing.

Cheryl is naked on her lounge chair. Her mother comes home. Cheryl hears the car in the driveway on the other

side of the house. She hears the fan running, the a/c still on, and then she hears the car turn off and the fan is still going. The car door opens and does not close, and suddenly everything is all wrong.

Her mother slides the screen door open and calls "Chunky" without looking at her daughter. "Chunky, Chunky, I'm calling you," her mother says, without noticing Cheryl white and naked, lying like a beached whale. "Chunky."

Cheryl is trapped in her head. She is aware of herself naked in the yard, naked in the day. She is aware of her name being called.

She imagines her mother will go back in the house and dial 911. She will dial 911 and report that her sixteen-year-old fat daughter is lying naked in the family backyard on a chair from K-mart and fails to respond when her name is called.

"Sweetie," her mother says, and Cheryl wonders how many calories are in the word *sweetie* and then she realizes that it's just a word and it's fat-free.

"I went to the grocery store, do you want to help me unpack?"

Her mother says, do you want to help me, and she means it. She is perfectly willing to do it alone, but she wants Cheryl to know that if she wants too, if she'd like to do something other than sit naked in the yard, she can come in and help, but she is under no obligation. It is simply an option.

Cheryl likes unpacking. She likes opening things and, before putting them away, tasting just a little bit.

She stands up, peeling herself off the lawn chair with a long sucking sound, and walks towards the house. As she walks, her legs slip past each other with the same whooshing sound that corduroy makes. Her breasts and belly and butt bounce as she walks; they bounce with different beats

but all in some strange syncopation, like a strung-out rhythm section.

She steps over the threshold. The contrast between light outside and the darkness inside makes the dark somehow darker and causes temporary blindness. For the first minute all she can see is the front door, straight ahead across the living room. It is open. She can see out into the light. She thinks of walking through the house and out the other side. The darkness seems to take her over, to swallow her. She stands still. There are mirrors on both sides of the living room walls. She sees herself as a large mass of unbelievable whiteness. She sees her shape, the scope of herself and her size. She feels deformed.

In the air conditioning she can feel herself shrinking, somehow getting smaller all over. She looks away from the mirrors and focuses ahead on the open door. Her mother is just outside bringing in bags from the car. The boy from next door passes by on his skateboard and looks in the door. He sees her and calls out her name, "Chunky." Cheryl stands there, sees him see her, hears her name, and still stands there. Without realizing it she drops her hand to her crotch, covering herself. Her mother comes in carrying three bags, looks at her, and says, "Get dressed, dear."

## Jim Train

It is Jim's idea to walk every day to and from the station. He thinks of leaving his new home, walking down the sidewalks, past the neighbors' homes, over the small bridge to the train station as a pleasant thing to do, the kind of thing he imagines would keep a man alive.

"It gives me time to think," he tells anyone who asks why he doesn't just have his wife drop him off at the station like all the other men.

"I enjoy large thoughts," he says to his wife one evening. "I need them now. My thoughts are my food," he says. "I have to eat."

Jim pops a section of a Ho-Ho into his mouth; cream filling squirts out onto his lips.

"I understand," his wife says, refusing to look at him. The sight of food in a person's mouth makes her ill. "Good night." She turns off the lamp on her side of the bed.

In the morning as he walks, Jim passes unoccupied cars, motors running, warming up, spilling thick exhaust out onto the sidewalks, into the air. He steers around them fully realizing that avoiding the smoke means nothing, toxicity surrounds him.

He weaves down the sidewalk, briefcase in hand,