

X

by Michelle Elvy

I.

Do you remember when we were kids, how I wrote letters to Bill when he went to military school, sealed the envelopes with a kiss and hoped that would make everything OK? Do you remember how you laughed at me then, brother, how you said kissing the envelope (x, I wrote) was stupid, how you mocked me for adding S.W.A.K. across the glue, said it was a show of weakness (well, what you really said was “that makes you look like a dumb girl,” but I knew what you meant, even then).

II.

My crush on Bill lasted through high school, but I hated it when he sent me a picture of him and his college roommate, arms slung around each other, fingers casually clutching Coronas, with that huge Rebel Flag on the brick wall behind them. You said, *Don't hold it against him*, but I did.

III.

I was always too political, you said, with my Malcolm X posters and my DC rallies. I laugh at that now, cause who's fighting the fight? Who said it was his duty, his calling, his right? Who turned patriot overnight?

IV.

That last day together, we sat on your porch and felt the weight of the sky, turned up Exene and John and sang *The Fourth of July*. You passed me a Camel and I grinned, recalling how I started. It was your fault. Do you remember? I begged a cigarette off you at that party I wasn't supposed to go to; I gagged and you made me smoke the whole thing, said *Smoking's not pretty*. It made me sick, but I was determined to be as cool as you.

-Do you have to go?

-No.

-But you're gonna go?

-Yeah.

V.

And then you were gone, just like that. I signed my letters with x's and o's, didn't care if you called me a dumb girl. I tried to understand, but I think you always knew how much I hated that war.

VI.

I looked up your camp, marked an x on the map but my pen was too thick, made a smudge over the whole region. It's OK, though, 'cause I didn't want to say the name or remember it, I just wanted to see it on my globe, halfway round the world from here.

VII.

I wrote short stories when you left. Desert stories, some on this continent, some over there. I wrote one called "Homecoming" but it was no good, so the other day I cut it right out of my system, *control-x*.

VIII

It's December now. You've been gone six months. I got the call from Mom two days ago, merry fucking x-mas. The screams spilled over the linoleum and took my voice. I've not spoken since.

IX

A letter came today, from you. It's sitting on the kitchen counter, I haven't touched it.

-Promise you'll write.

-I promise.

-Liar.

-Cross my heart and hope to die.

You always kept your promises.

I sense you across the universe; love is all you need, they say, but my heart's bursting with love for you, brother, and I don't know where to put it any more.

I stare at the letter, mouth dry with sand and sorrow.

X.

I drive to your place, climb the stairs to your porch. There's a cat here, black as night, sitting on the step you never did fix. Your letter burns my pocket. If I open it, your voice will fill my ears, my head, my heart, and then it will drift out into the forever night.

I pull the envelope out of my pocket and marvel at your tiny neat print, the black x written after your name.

I sit on the stairs, smoke a cigarette alone.

