

Kelly Michels

**AMERICAN
ANTHEM**



Gallery Books

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American Anthem

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PART ONE

The Quickening

Groceries

Do it or do not do it — you will regret both.

— Kierkegaard

They tell me to stay away from her.
Therapists, psychiatrists say: She'll be
in and out of the system forever,
no regret, no remorse. And yet
I find myself at her door reading
the eviction notices stapled
to the rotting wood, a bag of groceries
in my hand: a pound of coffee, quart
of milk, all the things she can't get
at the local food bank. She has emptied
my savings account, forged cheques,
stolen Christmas presents, taken medicine
from cancer patients — no regret, no remorse —
and yet I find myself lingering in the milk
aisle on a Sunday morning, trying to decide
between 1% or 2%, which one is better
for a bad heart, reminding myself
in the checkout line to break a twenty,
knowing she'll ask for money: five,
ten, loose change, anything I might have
on me. I've done many things I'm not
proud of: lied to cops, detectives, social
services, or worse — that summer long ago,
headless Barbies and burnt hair, the year
of ruining my sneakers knee-deep in marshes,
the same year I forgot to drink enough water,
the year she slammed me against the bathroom
wall, shoved a thermos between my thighs,
held my neck in her hands, and threatened
to kill me if I didn't find some other kid
to pass her drug test. I have done many things
I'm not proud of like running next door

to my friend, the girl with long blonde hair
that glimmered like rain, hair her mother
would pin up in a bow like a Christmas present.
I told her to come, told her I had a secret,
to tell no one. I've done many things
I'm not proud of and yet I find myself
at her door, a bag of groceries in my hand:
broccoli, bottles of Ensure, sweetener
for her coffee, the weight of plastic pinching
my fingers numb as I prepare
for what is on the other side, the stench
of foil and ash slinking into the stained
carpet, the gaunt smallness of her frame,
her bad heart thumping against the thin strip
of her ribs and I wonder whether or not
I should knock, whether or not I should
bring my knuckles to the cold, hard
surface of the door, say the word, *Mother* . . .
say the words, *I am here*.

American Anthem as Here, After

Among the whir, the whirl, the hum,
the bones say, *stay*. But there's still flesh. Still time.
I drive down Independence Blvd. Everything
is smaller, the nail salon I worked at, the pawn shop
where my mother once dragged a broken vacuum.
Everything is the same, but I no longer recognize
what it has become, like stumbling over a coffee table
that has always been there. Foxes pace
the suburbs. Possums play dead in the streets.
I had a friend whose veins vanished; doctors couldn't
find them. I had a friend who drove an SUV through
a 7-11. But in either story there's still flesh; the flesh
says, *go*; the flesh says, *run*, knows what the future,
its gleaming marble bones and high ceilings, will
never say, *never say*.

Portrait of a Recluse

1

She is the scream scratched out
by the earth, the broken teeth,
the muffled cover up of darkness.
She is the swabbed underbrush,
the shattered shaking of muscles
failing, the fractured bridge
between the eyes. She is the ripped skin
splintered with dirt, the barrelled fist
on bone, the cracked rib of night.
Her blood is graffiti on a brick wall.
Her voice a guttural stranglehold.
She is the torn hair knotted in a ditch
behind a church, dragged for thirty yards.
She is a dead language.

2

She lives in the apartment next door.
She lives in the basement beneath you,
belongs to the silence between past lives,
to the dumpster on Adelphi Avenue,
to the gaudy fluorescent bulbs on Route One.
Her scent belongs to the dogs.
Her inadmissible ears to the Attorney General.
Her fingernails to forensics.
Her face to detectives.
Her blood to needles and nurses.
For the next two years:
she is a recluse.