

The General and Josephine

I.

*Baby, baby, naughty baby
Hush, you squalling thing, I say
Peace this moment, peace, or maybe
Bonaparte will pass this way.*

— 19th c. British lullaby

Napoleon is carving a trail of angels across Russia's snows. Josephine hitchhikes to a trucker bar outside Tucson. She enjoys a solo game of pool. Each time she pockets the yellow ball she does a shot with the man from Boston. When she bends, her cleavage reminds him of his sister. He draws a map in hyphens on a cocktail napkin and leaves with his hands in his pockets. Eli, the bartender, tacks the napkin to a bulletin board behind the bar next to a rodeo flyer and an ad for a lost sheepdog. Josephine pushes herself against the jukebox, strokes its lit sides, feeds it quarters as if serving Communion.

II.

*Baby, baby, he's a giant
Tall and black as Rouen steeple
And he breakfasts, dines, rely on't
Every day on naughty people.*

Napoleon has run out of extension cord. He fears a withdrawal. It is difficult to keep up the soldiers' morale without the neon lights. He orders baked chicken that night and gnaws a drumstick with his baby teeth. The bones fall to the snow in the shape of a four-pane window. Again he sees the sheepdog crossing the mountain in his dream. He wakes to find his hand crusted with saliva, salt dissolving his fingernails. He tucks one palm against his warm, oval belly. Lifts the other as if hailing a taxi.

III.

*Baby, baby, if he hears you
 As he gallops past the house
 Limb from limb at once he'll tear you
 Just as pussy tears a mouse.*

In heels and a white halter dress, Josephine stomps the snowy sidewalks of St. Paul, looking for exhaust vent to Marilyn Monroe herself upon. She's already frozen when the man from Boston finds her, except for the billowing skirt lassoed about her hips like a white, floppy hat. It is difficult to maneuver her shape into the backseat of the sedan. He stands her in the corner of his living room next to the Christmas tree. Watches the skirt for hours, mesmerized.

IV.

*And he'll beat you, beat you, beat you
 And he'll beat you all to pap
 And he'll eat you, eat you, eat you
 Every morsel snap snap snap!*

The postcard reads *Dear Eli, we found her.* The return address is Boston. The bartender pins it to the bulletin board above the coupon for "Some Like it Hot" buffalo wings, then postures in the doorframe, italicized, until the last waitress leaves. He unplugs the jukebox and wipes spilled salt from the bar with a white, wet towel. The hour before sunrise is usually his favorite, but the image of a lasso swirls his memory. The little general on the sheepdog, the cardboard cutout of a screen star. He is sure this is not how history will paint them, but the postcard tells a different story.