

Jeanne Bubu Rogow
SIGNALS

He drives the same narrow two-lane route to and from town each day. Road crews are grading, sloping and repaving. Traffic is slow. Jack hammer pistons reverberate, asphalt dust churns in the air. Still somehow, butterflies alight in the chicory growing in the road stubble.

The same grizzled faces appear again and again. They hold two-sided signs, *Stop* and *Slow*, and communicate through walkie-talkies. Every day one man, younger than the rest, with chocolate milk skin and almond-shaped eyes searches for her pickup truck among the passing cars.

One day she notices him sitting alone, eating lunch from his Playmate cooler, and later, they lock eyes while she is stopped. Another day she sees him holding his sign in one hand and restraining a panting shaggy dog with his other. Did it walk haplessly into the road, or does it belong to him? The next day her skin tingles when he turns to *Stop* just as she is approaching. He leans in, ignoring the signer up ahead who is shouting something. He smiles and the corners of his mouth kiss his dimpled cheeks. Her stomach flutters. His walkie-talkie hisses. She wants to inquire about that dog but admonishments crackle over the radio waves. He straightens, takes two steps back and turns to *Slow*.

Later, he sees her on her phone while stopped toward the front of the line. She slumps, and her face contorts as she bites her lower lip. When she puts her phone down, he saunters over. He has something he wants to tell her but her worn and weeping face stops him. She peers up and sees his skin, patchy with dust and perspiration. She imagines licking it and that it would taste salty like her tears. His walkie-talkie barks. He sprints ahead, turns to *Slow*, and she passes by. For the rest of the day, and the day after, he searches for her in vain.

On his day off he waits on the side of the road with his Playmate and his sign hanging upside down. When finally he sees her inching toward him, he waves *Stop* and gestures with an urgent sweep of his arms for her to pull over onto the gravelly shoulder. She looks uncertain but obliges anyway, pulling in just ahead of him. He opens the Playmate, lifts out a newspaper-wrapped bundle and sprints to the passenger side of her truck. Her face is blotchy and her eyes are swollen. Have her tears never stopped? He signals that he'd like to get in and she signals, 'fine by me.' He opens the door and climbs up, pulling the door shut. He unwraps the newspaper to reveal a pomegranate. His large hands split it open into sections. Rosy juice bleeds onto the newsprint. He lifts the paper tray up between them. They each take a portion, biting and sucking the bursting seeds away from the white pithy parts. Red juice dribbles down their chins and they taste, as if for the first time.