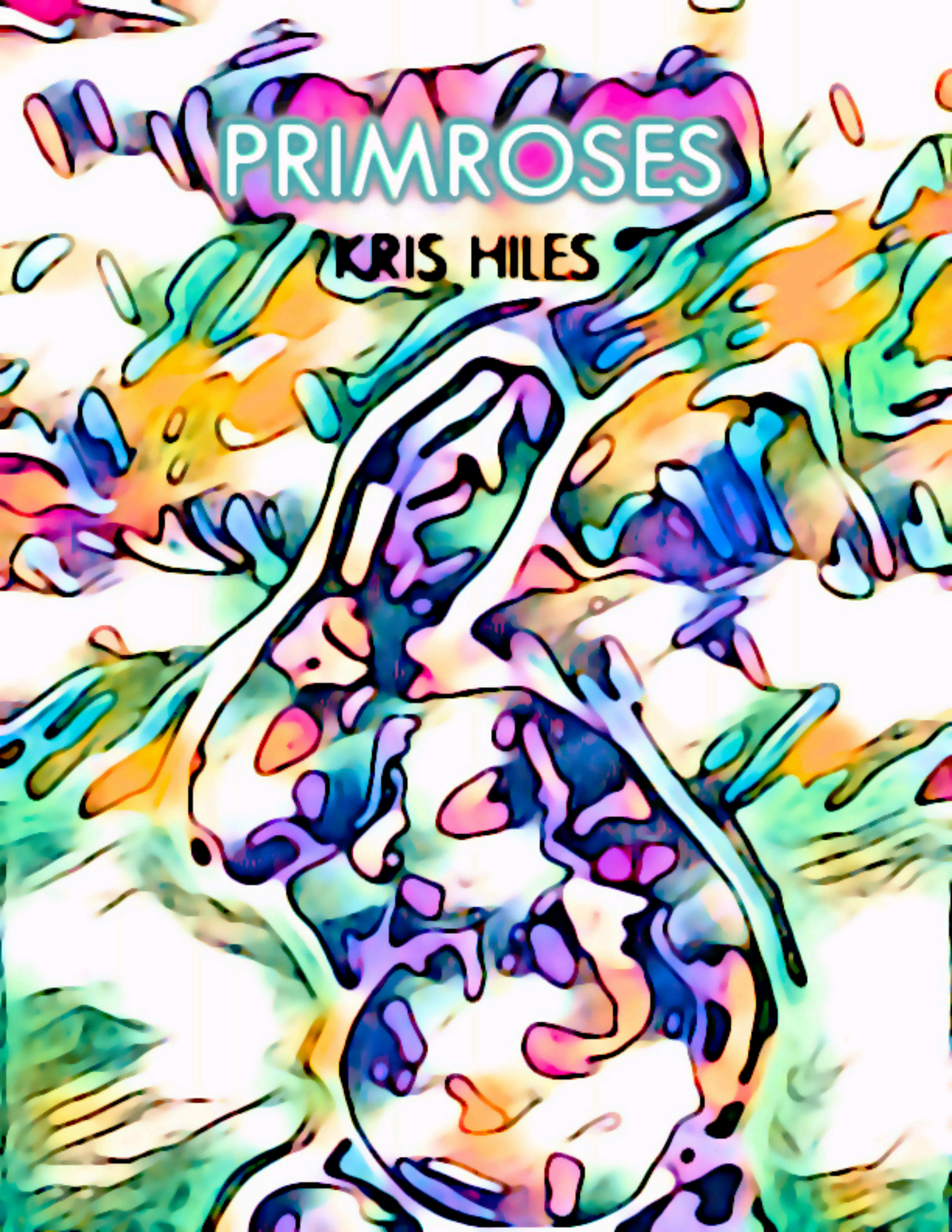


# PRIMROSES

KRIS HILES



# PRIMROSES

KRIS HILES

“Well, there’s another place – another country, isn’t there?  
We go there when we sleep; at other times, too; and when we die.”  
– Richard Adams, *Watership Down*

# CONTENTS

ASHLEY

THE GODS DRINK BEER

*CW: alcohol*

NICE, BUT LIMITED

MUD

*CW: menstruation, ableism*

CHAPERONE

*CW: body image*

DOORWAYS

MOM'S COPY OF WATERSHIP DOWN

*CW: suicidal ideation, cancer, death*

WITH YOU, DAD

GOOD MORNING, MORTALITY

*CW: blood, animal death*

STONE HOLDS YOUR LIFE IN NUMBERS

*CW: death*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

# ASHLEY

I have terrible allergies,  
and I will sacrifice my body for plants,  
not animals. Except, maybe, rabbits, I remember  
turning four, and my dad  
handing me a stuffed rabbit. I smiled,  
and I rarely smile. It was a gift for him,  
but gifts are forgotten. I named the rabbit  
after my best friend, Ashley,  
the neighbor girl who babysat. I remember  
when the toy went missing, months later,  
and my dad told me it was going to be fine,  
rabbits usually don't live  
longer than a year. I asked  
how long people live,  
and he told me they can be eighty  
ninety, one hundred, then said  
people also don't stay together  
that long. Come and go. Usually. I forgot  
about rabbits. The next fall  
Ashley went to college,  
and I was sad, all over, with a new kind of loss,  
until Dad bought me a new stuffed rabbit,  
but this time I didn't smile, didn't name her,  
just stopped crying.



# THE GODS DRINK BEER

Everyone I knew loved juice,  
loved apple or grape or Sunny Delight,  
and our fridge was stocked  
with tomato. For me. I loved the silk  
and the bite. A nectar. I noticed  
more of my little cans disappeared  
into thin air than into my stomach.

When I asked about thieves, I learned  
Dad liked to drink  
tomato beer, a little juice, a lot of beer -  
he told me, since I knew the secret  
I should try a sip. I tried a sip,  
and the silk was gone, the bite was there,  
and bubbles that grew  
flowers in my mind, bubbles like the ones  
that ran up my spine in the bath.

The world of the kitchen was fun  
and he let me drink the secret  
until I sobbed, until the silk threatened  
to return from my throat, the flowers  
to spring from my forehead, like Athena.  
He told me everything would be alright,  
we should do this more often,  
and his laughter was thunder, his hands,  
soft clouds wrapping me like a blanket.

# **NICE, BUT LIMITED**

The drive to the lake was always too long,  
too loud. Every year. The rattle.  
I remember though,  
one summer the car swallowed Dad's CD  
of Duke Ellington songs,  
how with a big band in its throat,  
the car drowned out  
the droning hum of the road.

The "A" Train  
spun on through the hottest days,  
ones where he would take me for ice cream  
before a work meeting  
outside the office,  
and the vanilla would melt  
if I didn't eat fast enough,  
so I always had time  
to make dresses from napkins  
until he came out, covered in sweat,  
round bruises with soft edges flashing beneath  
A shirt not tucked in quite as tightly.

He sold that car -  
a hell of a deal, Mom called it -  
while "Crosstown" faded  
into "Pretty Woman", unwanted melodies  
stuck inside it, just like the question I had built  
while folding napkins  
lodged itself firmly behind my teeth.

# MUD

I was running  
through the sprinkler  
when the end of the world came,  
just a small mess in my swimsuit.

My dad sat  
outside the bathroom door  
while I bathed and cried,  
and he called my mom  
with the good news.

As I dried off and dressed,  
I heard his voice through the door,  
about grandchildren and God  
birth control and autism.

I opened the door,  
threw my one-piece at him, told him  
I never want kids, told him the truth, told him  
to do the laundry, told him  
he would never be a grandparent, told him  
not to worry, told him I was going to my room,  
and I did. From my window  
I could see the yard, growing spots of mud,  
as the sprinkler went about its business,  
like me.



# CHAPERONE

My mom was the most beautiful woman  
I've ever seen. I mean, she was never going to be in a movie,  
but she had grace, an ethereal effortlessness  
in her bones. She told me  
I should get a dress for prom. I should at least think  
about going. About experience  
and memories. She said it with a smile  
that curved up into the soft edges of her cheeks,  
a sincere smile that wrinkled her eyes,  
a smile I never possessed,  
and I told her I didn't believe her. I had heard too much  
talk about my walk, my body, my face, I told her  
I wasn't a fool. I told her lies about friends  
and their plans and their dates and dinners. Dad knew  
everyone. Knew the truth. He told me we were going  
shopping, we were going to walk into the gym together  
if I needed a strong arm. He told me it wasn't an option,  
and I hated him. For supporting Mom. For pushing me  
out of my comfort zone. There are days I still hate them both  
for not taking more time to understand  
how my knots were tied, how my muscles worked  
like sails. I thought of how to sail away  
when I was naked, in the fitting room. I screamed  
I was putting my clothes back on. I screamed  
the ugliest scream I could. And dad stayed calm,  
speaking in the soft tones of a late night public radio host,  
and when I walked out, the skin of his face changed  
from a normal color, salted and peppered,  
to a soft pink. Like my dress. And he told me,  
"You look so much like your mom." And my knots came undone.  
And he bought the dress. And I smiled.

# DOORWAYS

A door is a strange place,  
half in, half out. The wind blows in,  
people smile, people leave,  
and the door becomes an excuse  
for talking, for not talking,  
for writing a letter  
that is also a horror story, that is also  
a confession. The door becomes  
a place where your mom will hug you  
until she dies, your mom will warn you,  
“Dad doesn’t want to talk about, well,  
just talk to him about the game.” So you talk  
about the speed of a curveball,  
how much energy it takes to run  
in circles, recall  
begging to play softball in the summer,  
and you aren’t sure  
if he’s opening the door or closing it  
when he says “Cute girls in softball.”  
But later, when you’re standing  
with the door ajar, leaking heat  
into clear holiday skies,  
he hugs you, as warm as a fireplace,  
tighter than your chest was  
coming home..

# **MOM'S COPY OF WATERSHIP DOWN**

Mom was the one  
who gave me a weathered paperback  
with a rabbit on the front. In the picture  
the sky is yellow, and I still can't tell  
if the sun is rising or the sun is setting,  
but it doesn't matter. I was sitting with her  
in the hospital. She asked to die -  
she asked me, the doctor, the nurse,  
and when everybody told her no,  
she asked  
if I would read to her  
from her book. Across the room  
Dad said nothing, shrugged. I drove home  
and brought the book back. Worried  
the cancer told her yes, or Dad told her  
goodbye without me. It started  
with a line I'd read a dozen times,  
about dead flowers,  
and Dad said, "I don't think I've read this one."  
Mom was too tired to roll her eyes, too tired  
to sigh, just to softly speak  
some simple last instructions  
for a complicated man. She whispered,  
"You should read it sometime."

# WITH YOU, DAD

It always comes back to rabbits -  
soft, violent beasts  
full of dreams.

They will feast in the fields,  
green and gold, roll over in the grass  
and fuck anything,  
declare their might, go for the throat,  
and they leave  
their mess everywhere.

Before you disappeared underground  
you said, "The thing about rabbits  
is that they're a nuisance,  
they're assholes." You said, "But they're sweet,  
you know they've got a family,  
and so you love them, anyway."

# GOOD MORNING, MORTALITY

Today was a crisp morning, and I hope  
when death comes it will be warm,  
slipping a knit sweater  
over goosebumps.

I remember hunting rabbits,  
my father -  
quiet as I held the gun, a BB gun - whispers  
if you do it right, it just takes one shot.

I remember pulling the trigger,  
the explosion of air, and the crater it left  
in the rabbit's skull,  
a bleeding moon.

I remember the fallen leaves,  
naturally brave,  
didn't even move  
to acknowledge a soul shifting planes.

Today I am afraid -  
under the trees  
the leaves in the grass are flying  
and I am afraid.

# **STONE HOLDS YOUR LIFE IN NUMBERS**

There are days  
when I don't think of you at all. There are days  
I still pick up the phone to call you  
before I remember,  
you're not going anywhere, but you're not available.

I moved out  
again, I moved  
into a new place. I think you'd like it,  
I can be at the edge of the ocean  
in a few minutes,  
like when you and I rode the Wonder Wheel,  
a view of the city, a view of the sea. Right now,  
I'd meet you anywhere  
other than a hospital. Other than a graveyard.  
I'm sorry I haven't visited. I've been busy  
finding words,  
exploring, being loved.

In quiet moments, in the woods,  
I hear the brush move,  
and I think of you, big ears, soft hair,  
eyes full of love and anger and secrets. Maybe,  
if the Eucharist is worth its salt,  
you're taking a walk with Mom.

Anyway, I think you'd be proud,  
Dad. I miss you.



# **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Cover:  
Nel L.

Fonts:  
Roboto  
Geosans

“GOOD MORNING, MORTALITY” first appeared in *Anser Journal*, 2020