

# For the Woman Who Hugged Me in the Self-Checkout Line at the Smith's on Sahara and Maryland

Emily Hoover

She had her own damn cart,  
wheeled it into the aisle.  
But she didn't have enough money,  
so she sandwiched her body

in between the conveyer belt & the cart  
as I imagine she'd done at home,  
countless times, trying to close  
the door in front of her as he wedged

his hand (or fist) in the crack,  
a boundary he didn't believe  
existed between his body & hers.  
He scoffed at the cart's load,

waving his credit card in the air  
like some kind of petite flag  
you'd find at a parade for heroes—  
his voice smashed dishes, her face

a punched hole in the wall.  
She stopped loading her Wonder  
Bread, her cans of French-style  
green beans (or creamed corn),

feeling the eyes on her: the pity  
resting between our brows,  
the anger stuck between our shoulder  
blades. She gazed at the snaking

line around her, & joined  
us, the ones who prefer to key  
in our own produce codes, bag  
our own groceries, curse

at the kiosks that gaslight us,  
insisting we place items  
in the bagging area though we've  
already placed those items

in the bagging area. Every one  
of us in line took a step back

to invite her to go ahead of us  
even though her cart carried

more than fifteen items. She  
and I ended up next to each other,  
our kiosks chiming. Her  
crow's feet, tear-stained eyes,

crinkled dollars, collapsed chest,  
& shaking hands an echo  
of me just months before.  
I watched her put what she

couldn't afford back into the cart,  
the grocery store employee hovering.  
*You know, it's none of my business,*  
I said, *but I left a man who yelled*

*at me like that, & sometimes it's hard,*  
*but most of the time, it's the best*  
*decision I've ever made.* The exchange  
of words stood among us, protracted.

Soundlessly, her small body  
softened into mine, & she sighed,  
like sliding into a hot bath after  
a long day of labor. We held

each other, & I imagined her  
remembering this moment, days  
from now, weeks from now, years  
from now—the memory perhaps

giving her the muscle to close  
the door for good. A woman  
I met in a bar bathroom once told  
me, while reapplying her lipstick,

to stay away from men who hate  
their mothers. Even though it was none  
of her business. She eyed the dried tears  
on my face. I wish I had listened then.