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# FOURTH WALL AN EXPLORATION OF LYRIC POSSIBILITY

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AN EXPLORATION OF LYRIC POSSIBILITY

by

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"Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth…"

William Wordsworth, Tintern Abbey, lines 103-107.

the Everglades became a secret language I could learn, my home, my work, my love—and God, for with my mother dead, she was now everywhere—grass highlighted in late afternoon, dark gray storms with brilliant edges, silver cypress—tenacious from their watery roots, jagged and mystical—and at dusk, rookeries of great white egrets against swirling clouds of crimson and coral

Shangri-La

I came to Glacier as a tourist, the NPS solidly in my rearview. I had passed through the park briefly a few times, but an afternoon's exploration (or two) could not possibly cover it. Two years into my Missoula residency, I decided to visit right before Memorial Day. Things had been hard in the way they get before getting better. Stress from home renovations (such a good problem!) had worn me down; family and friends were at times contributing to my difficulties. Underneath, I was finally grappling with how my mother's death had been one exceptional link in a chain of banal psychic pain. Never the best at handling academic anxiety, I nearly let it level me. When I spent a weekend in a beautiful place visiting an old friend, we had trouble agreeing on what we wanted. I left feeling more worn out. Returning to Missoula, I thought it might help me feel at home in the world to explore Glacier. I arrived there to a sense of order and harmony that had been so far removed from my life. Even more, the Swiss chalets and glacial lakes unearthed joyful memories of my parents' travels when I was small, along for the ride. One sun dappled afternoon, I walked through rainforest and up a boulder scramble along a river and hiked for longer than my body wanted, arriving at the bright spring green vegetation around Avalanche Lake, where, with some work, I could attempt to imagine myself in solitude. I was pleasantly surprised at how little trammeling I found, charmed by the clean old wooden outhouse. Back at the Lake McDonald Lodge, the paintings of local Indians became insistent, unsettling—depicting as they did a conquered people who seemed very righteously rageful and sad. That night, chatting with an older black lady who worked evenings at the front desk, I mentioned that the paintings and Native-inspired lighting contributed to a strong feeling of appropriation. Her response suggested that this was something she thought about but wasn't going to say. I bought <u>God is Red</u>, the angriest book about colonialism I found at the nonprofit bookstore, and began devouring it, savoring the lack of cell service. I spent another afternoon entirely in the Apgar Village, people watching a couple fight over their kayaks as motorboat generated waves fiercely lapped on the shore,

writing in my journal, eating an ice cream cone. I meditated. It was becoming clear to me that the park was about to be hit with its first truly awful visitation year and that no one working there was ready. I kept thinking of the phrase Shangri-La. I couldn't fully place its origins, but my recollection suggested that it was a place of beautiful mountain valleys and waterfalls that didn't quite exist.

Split Rail

I grew up on a road half potholes, a country lane that had been filmed as such for a movie of New York the place. I did not think it the green world yet, then, but in my memories it is—saturated and teeming, every pool teeming. The memories are influenced by routes more rural as much as recollection, by my parents' slides of the property before it was reclaimed, all magical realism vines and surging dark hemlocks, enchanted wood of a north country fairy tale. My parents met our first cat on a walk to pick up fence posts, when she—lithe, dark, intelligent, vocal—literally followed them home from the barn cat colony. She caught a mouse and so they kept her. The fences I grew up seeing were made of hewn wood such that the bars interlocked mechanically into the vertical supports. Labor intensive. Three long lines—such a horizontal fence has a way of framing its landscape. A fence for people for whom the land makes their living, though they don't live off the land. I can't see the country lane again, though I go home twice a year. It's been paved properly, covered with houses that feel like cruel parodies of the American Dream. My whole life we've owned ten percent of one of the last vistas, and the two older widows who own the balance may well let their heirs profit. I wonder if sometime when I visit if my father will have replaced the split rail with something requiring less maintenance—he DIY's, he's eighty, who could fault him. Would that be my fault for leaving? I used to think I was uniquely raised on an island, the two of them in the woods and I the only child around. Now I think we all come from islands, and some learn to swim.

From a clear sky, two planes

That day regular people went into the office and did not come back. Every pundit in America, sometimes seemingly everyone from elsewhere, wants a piece of that day. I do not expect, when I think about that day, to ever become objective. Tell me about your alienation, and I will tell you about all the other disconnects we take for granted until we fall through them. About newspaper flags throwing open questions of nationalism. Comparing notes on your city as a war zone, gingerly, with other people who also know of a score of deaths, over a hundred near miss stories. How proud I was to be an American when the city I love told everyone who didn't think there should be a Muslim religious center near Ground Zero that they could all go fuck themselves. John Bocchi, the other person to receive my town's Citizen of the Year award posthumously, besides my mom—who left behind five children, for whom I hold vigil when I'm staring at the void of the memorial. I will tell you I didn't know exactly what had happened that day until two pm eastern, to allow for anyone whose parents died to be notified directly. I will tell you of my mother picking me up, the only time (I could swear) she was ever already at my high school as it let out, and as emotionally wrecked as I ever saw her. She told me that earlier that day she drove to a high point, to Summit Overlook, to my physical place of birth, saw the smoke from the still standing towers, left again. That night our only remaining TV channel played a strange loop. Two nights later, still at no fly, I heard fighter jets. But that afternoon, we canoed on the lake and the perfect blue sky was.

Sequence of Events

I was born in 1984. I lived in the same house in Morris County until I left for Bryn Mawr College in 2003. In December 2005, I was asked to take some time away from the school to work on my mental health. I worked retail, went to therapy, and lived at home in 2006. In 2007, I studied German in Freiburg, a university town in the Black Forest. Upon returning, I filed an application and was accepted to transfer to St. John's College in Santa Fe, from which I graduated in 2011. I spent my first year back in New Jersey, this time in New Brunswick, in the workforce doing AmeriCorps VISTA with a nonprofit specializing in afterschool education. After a prolonged period of depression brought about by looking closely at structural inequality (which was, and continues to be, in my favor), I decided to move to Brooklyn in January 2013. I worked my first seasonal assignment with the NPS at Gateway's Jamaica Bay Unit from May to September. My mother died at the end of October. In November, I arrived to the Shark Valley area of the Everglades, only a few days behind schedule. I worked a full season until April 2014, and returned to New York. After visiting my best friend in Montana, I took up a second season at Gateway, where I had many more responsibilities. That concluded in November 2014. I visited the Everglades and Dry Tortugas in December, and spent the winter applying for jobs. In March 2015, I had just landed in Hawaii for a visit when I found out I was being offered the chance to work Yellowstone. Drove from Brooklyn to Wyoming upon returning to the mainland. Worked at Norris Geyser Basin from May to October, 2015. Visited Missoula for a campus visit before returning to the east coast, where I filed my application for grad school. Traveled to New Zealand and Australia in March 2016. Deferred my admission to grad school to work another season, this time at the Statue of Liberty, from May to November, 2016. Squeezed in trips to Cuba and the Galapagos while getting ready to move. Arrived in Missoula in January, 2017.

Fourth Wall

In the photograph, my look plays with a femininity I have never embraced, my plain jeans and brick red shirt adorned with an Anthropologie clearance rack decorative scarf and a simple leather handbag. My outfit offers a pleasing contrast to the wall of green behind. At my hip I hold my reading from the long subway ride up to help a friend move. It's probably Chinese poetry, reflecting an affect for enrichment, a desire to impress a crush. I stand where Inwood, the northern tip of Manhattan, faces into the brilliant wild green of Spuyten Duyvil. The shot is framed by the Henry Hudson Bridge, which I erroneously assumed for years to be the Tappan Zee, my geographic memory introducing errors that the map upends. Literal: I face my home state's palisades.

But all I ever see is

that I looked towards a different future than existed, an Everglades experience where my mother visited me for Christmas, exactly as she promised. Where my parents lived happily together for decades, or at least longer than the week my mom had left. Where when I returned to Brooklyn the following spring, it was not an uncanny facsimile, but my home. I look at that picture and see myself as the camera saw me. But I am incapable of conjuring up that person as if she and I are unified in a single narrative,

as if we are not both fragments of some larger force, unseen.

Glimpse

My mother and I are at Sloan Kettering waiting for the results of my father's follow up scan. I'm going on 29 and taller than her. This is my day off from my first summer commuting all the way to Jamaica Bay, and I just rode the subway more than an hour. I complain about being tired. "Here, put your head on my lap." I curl up on the neutral brown bench that runs the length of the waiting room's windows, cityscape of the Upper East Side. She runs her fingers through my hair, which is the shortest it's been since we last did this, when I was a toddler. My wavy hair from his side of the family. I don't sleep. I feel. Her touch as it soothed me when I was little, her stomach rising and falling in measured breaths, her legs warm against my shoulder. Even as this memory unfolds I want to crawl inside of it forever.

Who We Were

My parents married in 1964 and had me in 1984. In the two decades between, they lived a contented childfree life of two careers, in their free time rafting the Grand Canyon, rescuing a decrepit mansion, buying Persian rugs near Persepolis, mountaineering the Swiss Alps. Closer to home, they ice climbed waterfalls in the Catskills and Gunks when it was too cold for hiking and rock climbing. When I was very little, they told me that they'd given up the most intense parts of mountaineering so that I would be more likely to grow up with two parents. My father told me that they had hoped I would be bright. My mother liked to pluck out her chin hairs and tell me that I was very serious and very sensitive, not as a criticism, but a thing that was. I spent years wondering if that were a bad thing, anyway. As I grew older, it was quite difficult for me to separate myself from the image of me that they had, as an extension of themselves, in their image. Now in my own middle age, I pluck my chin hairs and wonder if this is nature or nurture or if that matters. When I was very little and my mother still worked at Merck, she wore her long hair pinned in a bun, and I remember thinking that she must be beautiful. When my father came home from work, I'd shriek "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" while pounding his sky blue slacks at the knees until he had no choice but to pick me up. In one of my first existing memories, he told me that he did not know everything, and I looked at him in disbelief. When, at 21, I had to take leave from my first college, my mother said that I just missed them, and that I needed to start helping her out around the house. I left for the west for my second attempt at college, and returned as soon as I'd graduated. At that point, she started joking that they needed to beat me with a stick so that I'd want to leave again. Sometimes, now that I live far away and they're receding in my memory, I catch a fragment of them in myself—my father in me as I laugh when I feel ill at ease in a crowd, my mother in the way I smile and deflect back to the other person's situation when I'm at a loss. Sometimes I think of them in contrast with all the other adults I knew growing up. The other mother who sent handwritten love notes along with school lunch, while my mom put a piece of cheese

between two slices of bread, with a half can of cold spaghetti o's. The other father who was quiet and nurturing, while mine yelled at me for listening to music while I studied. It doesn't matter, I don't think. In a crowd of faces somewhere, I'd still pick them, every time.

Winner Winner

Two days before my mother died, the three of us sat down to a roast chicken with a neighbor of theirs who had just lost her husband. (This was in Longview, their Princeton house.) Her grief was so acute, yet so abstract to my parents and me. And then how many times, the summer after I returned from the Everglades, did I take the Q to the commuter rail out from Brooklyn via Penn Station, just to cook for my father. I'd borrow his car to Trader Joe's for precut mirepoix before getting the chicken itself at McCaffrey's. Put it together in the Danish dutch oven that had been left by the heirs of the house's former owner. I also got the chocolate ice cream that she and I used to share. I hated Princeton, where I felt too feral and unkempt for my father, hated its perfectly symmetrical flower garden behind the university president's old house, even as I kept walking toward it. I liked the backdrop of driving through a place where no one knew our tragedy, unlike the much smaller town up north where I'd grown up. Her absence waited for me most at the backyard pool I'd always told her I wanted, when I was little, when they were my entire world.

Caya Huesco

When she was still alive, my mother told me to make sure I got down to Key West before high season hit. After she died, I threw myself into my responsibilities in the Everglades. I started answering questions at the visitor information desk less than two weeks after the accident, even though I'd never lived in Florida before. It was as good a thing to do as any, in the cadence of Hemingway. I swapped lieu days for a three day getaway, and took the Camry she'd bought for me to drive, south on U.S. Highway 1—a continuation of the road we'd taken on endless suburban circuits after my father took the Princeton job and stranded us further from New York City. The way down the Keys was eerie. I'd never driven this stretch before, yet as it veered out into open water in inky twilight, I did not hesitate. Instead the sea, wine dark up the rims of a great calyx, reminded me of that primal first water we all swim in before we reach the land. The next night I watched gulls swoop out towards Havana from the Southernmost Point buoy, and called my dad because it was the next best thing. "I'm about to do something that might ruin your life," he told me, by way of introducing me to my fiscal inheritance. She had only been dead for six weeks.

Park Ranger Voice

"Hey folks, now that our tram tour is underway, oh look, it's our first alligator sighting! I don't want to promise anyone anything, but we'll probably see more of them here in the Everglades! Now that we're back underway, I want to welcome everyone to – oh look, another alligator! Looks like this one's eating a turtle! Awesome! Right folks, so as I was saying, welcome to Everglades National Park at Shark Valley. People often ask me, why is it called Shark Valley? Well, I mean, did you see any sharks? No? Do you see a valley? Well, you can't see it, but it turns out we ARE in a valley! All right! That's right, as you look around you, you'll see how incredibly flat everything is. And because it's so flat here, slight changes in elevation make a huge difference. Miami, which many of you are probably staying in, is on the Atlantic coastal ridge. It's 26 feet above sea level – that's the mountains, on the scale of South Florida! Oh hey, we're approaching a mama alligator and her babies. This is a pretty special sighting for us here, we've been seeing them a lot at this spot. Let's try to be quiet. Anyway, so folks as I was saying, Miami is in the mountains, and so is Naples – 22 feet above sea level. So we are in a valley, the Shark River Slough. What do you think we'd find at the mouth of the Shark River? That's right, you'd find sharks! Here, we sure do have a lot of alligators, though. Look over there, that one's swimming!"

EVER

I worked at a section of the park that offered a scenic bike loop, with a tram tour for those who couldn't or didn't want to ride. It was called Shark Valley, and I liked to point out to our visitors that in such a flat landscape, both Miami and Naples were the mountains of our geologic scale, at over twenty feet above sea level, each. The water of the wide, slow moving river drained gradually out to a section of Florida Bay that was a nursery for baby sharks. At the dedication ceremony, Harry Truman made note that the Everglades was not a geologic wonder the way that Yellowstone or the other famous parks had been. But the longer I lived out past the edge of human civilization on the most desolate stretch of US Highway 41, the more certain I grew that Truman missed something. Here we were, at a place connected by land to the continent of North America, but geographically already in the Caribbean. Just a few feet of elevation meant that shrubs could sprout, and you could tell how far above the water level a tree island was by whether it supported gumbo limbo and mahogany. The predominating sawgrass reflected any stray bits of golden light against the dark dramatic afternoon sky. Florida itself was named for its abundance of life, where early reports from conquistadors mention such a wealth of fresh water that it extended out onto the Atlantic itself. Even in the 1920's, reports of the sheer number of frogs defy either logic or reason. Even in 2014, there were plants growing from the sides of other plants. Once a caller asked me about the birds. I kept listing them—woodstork, white ibis, black crown night heron, snail kite, roseate spoonbill, little blue heron, great egret, anhinga, purple gallinule—until he told me to stop.

Everglades in a Jar

When I was reading historic accounts of the creation of Everglades National Park, I ran across the reported anecdote that a noted conservationist walked out of the room when the park boundary was announced. He thought it was not nearly enough land area. Frame of reference: Disney World (and the rest of Orlando) is part of the Everglades' natural landform, though it's hundreds of miles from where I worked. Yet while my readers may not be among them, there are those for whom any amount of federal protection of land is too much. As someone with intimate, intergenerational ties to private land on both sides of my family, I grew up inclined to offer far more sympathy to the broad contours of this perspective than you might assume. However. The ecological viability of the Everglades has been imperiled for decades now by federally subsidized sugar plantations upstream, around Lake Okeechobee. Herbicide and insecticide might be obvious, but fertilizer can also imperil the characteristic sawgrass prairie, allowing cattails and other plants that require more nutrients to overpower the native sedge. South Florida housing development relies on drainage systems built by the Army Corps of Engineers that siphon water away from the natural landscape. Florida panthers are one striking example of wildlife that are hurt or killed by their habitat's proximity to roads. Surveyors for Everglades National Park thought that they could set aside one quarter of the estimated total land area of the ecosystem. In the same way, I continued along after my mother died with the assumption that a tragedy in one frame would not impact every other moment.

Blunt Force Trauma

Here is the aspect of the accident that killed my mother that I have become the most reluctant to say out loud in the years since: I witnessed it. When people ask me how my mother died, I know that they mean well. But every question leads me closer and closer to a moment when they'll clutch at me and tell me how sorry they are, when I wish they'd just admit they're at a loss. I have to say that it's okay, that I'm okay, and that's true only sometimes. I was already given to philosophizing as if that were wisdom. Now I'll go to any length to avoid making someone else uncomfortable with this story about my mother and I stopping for the night when she was helping me drive to the Everglades. Now I don't necessarily mind the memory of the two of us crossing an unfamiliar street, at dusk, with the car coming fast. But I hesitate to let someone else see me in terms of this moment. Meanwhile my father wrote that I was feet away in his updates to people in the months afterwards, as if it were a clinical news bulletin. Aging myself, I've noticed that his scientific approach to everything does not mean he does not feel strong emotions. I've come to see value in the detached way that he approaches things, and his idiosyncrasies are inseparably part of why he's mine. A symmetry: the part of the story that I find the saddest is that my parents were preparing to celebrate fifty years of marriage.

What the Crows Know

My coworker Shaun tells my father and me a story about corvid intelligence. This is his second season working in the Everglades, and last year he watched the crows while the visitors climbed the observation tower during the middle of the tram tour. Crows can pull apart zippers, open ziploc bags. One day Shaun watched a crow try to steal a lunch left on a bike, and the man whose lunch it was ran back and yelled at the crow. The man left again, this time taking his lunch along. The crow flew straight above the unguarded bicycle and pooped right on the seat. They are like us: before the end of the season, I'll tell a female caller that it's likely her lost cubic zirconia earring won't turn up because a crow took it. A day or two after I get there, before my dad flew home to deal with my mother's death from New Jersey, the two of us bike around the scenic loop. More from emotional exhaustion than physical exertion, we rest at the foot of the tower, a swoosh of sixties modern elegance that can be seen from miles away on this flat landscape. Crows watch us from the trees. "Do you think the crows are sad when a crow they love dies?" I ask. "I'm sure that's true," he says. That feels like enough for a while.

Ex Stasis

I traveled. New York to LAX, to New Zealand. From New Zealand, to a dear friend's side in Melbourne. From there with them out to Uluru, a mystical rock, apparition in one of the world's most remote and barren deserts. I had a conference in LA on the other side. My last flight in that sequence left California late at night. Los Angeles glittered next to the Pacific. I recognized the military precision of Twentynine Palms, near Joshua Tree. Then low clouds blanketed the Earth. The moon was on the far side. All I could see were stars. The perspective was otherworldly. I looked out for the whole six hours back east. I didn't think I'd ever find a place to settle for long enough to find a person I loved as much as I loved that moment, that night, looking.

Gettysburg

We lived far away from all our kin when I was growing up, scattered as they were between Pennsylvania, Texas, and dad's hometown in Wisconsin. Maybe that's why it didn't seem odd that we learned our family history partly from an interview a child I never met conducted of one of my long dead grandfather's sisters. To me, the old ladies were boring and nearly indistinguishable in our periodic visits, with their houses brimming with random stuff that just smelled old. But I remember vividly that I was 9 when I learned that I had a great something grandmother who had been 9 herself during the Civil War, had apparently fed the Union troops around the same time as Gettysburg. My mother told me this in a light way, hoping to pique my interest in history, which continued to lay dormant. The Civil War was a layered abstraction of sepia tones and the Ashoken Farewell. Years later, far from my place of origin and dealing with existential malaise about America, I reconsidered it. I was making bean soup of scraps, like her father apparently had. And I thought of this nine-year-old civilian in a valley not far from this site of indescribable carnage. I recalled my mother taking me to see her father's younger sister, Aunt Elizabeth, at the assisted living home in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. After a tour of Gettysburg Battlefield, she sent us home with some of her fresh fruit, though we protested. "I wasn't raised to let people leave hungry."

48 Star

The big flag hung from the second story of our front hall on Memorial Day and the Fourth of July, and when I was young, my mother told me it belonged to an uncle of hers, my great-uncle, who fought in World War II. This was peacetime, just after the fall of the Berlin Wall; war seemed awfully abstract to me. And I'd never met the man whose casket this flag had consecrated. Apparently his name was Earl Harlan, and he met and married my mom's adventurous Aunt Philly (Philomena) in Butte, while she was on a road trip with her friend Kit Henry in 1922. I wasn't even entirely sure what death was, though I had seen my mother's face when my grandmother lay in state. I know it seemed odd to me that the flag had been meant to comfort the man's widow. My mother's split heritage—half Pennsylvanian Scotch-Irish back to 1730, half Lebanese trader—fascinated me. In elementary school, it struck me as the American experience, made literal. The mid-Atlantic is the Revolutionary War's crossroads, and I bragged to my friends about my DAR eligibility, mentioning my Lebanese lineage in the same breath. Her Scotch-Irish family kept in touch through a round robin letter by post, and she would tell us about their doings in Oklahoma and Oregon (of the Oregon Trail, apparently), both of which seemed faraway and abstract. Meanwhile my grandfather had grown up on the same land our ancestors had settled and cleared, 300 acres. Philly's sister, my grandmother, used to tell him that she'd done a great service to his family by adding some new blood to the line. Which sounds brutal, but which my mom never disputed. But my mother spent her childhood summers out in Mercersburg, and though she hardly remembered most everyday things, she would tell me about exploring nature as we looked for frogs and snakes in our yard.

Love Letter Red

Rural America was not what I thought this project was about. Time and memory, I knew—but for me, those details are intertwined with land and landscape. My whole childhood and adolescence, my father had a voluntary second career in local bureaucracy, helping select farms to protect by buying their development rights. Land was at a premium in our part of New Jersey, and this could be expensive. Because the farmer retained the right to live there, to farm it, and to sell those rights, this was a competitive process; because my mother was interested, these conversations went on in exhausting detail. One October day when I knew I was moving west for graduate school, possibly indefinitely, I walked our estate's grounds trying to make sense of the beauty that I had once regarded as given. I tried to notice each detail—the long-abandoned fountain area behind which we once kept our vegetable garden, where in high school I'd retreat to read, the falling down haywagons and the apple orchard, ornamental grasses next to the stone bridge, the flickering crick that had been my world, the sweetgum grove we called Birnam wood, the lake and the stone boathouse that my father had once taken the windows out of for a project he never completed. I planted myself in a section of lawn that is in my first memories and looked straight up at the warm gray night sky. Wind shook the hickory trees whose shapes I was willing myself to remember, even as they'd already changed.

Exile

I wanted to honor my mother's spirit on the hilltop where we'd scattered her ashes after I'd spent the night communing with our land. I realize now how deeply revealing it must seem when I tell you that my father and I had scattered them on preserved farmland that was not ours. Two years earlier, it had seemed poetic to place them at the highest point we could see from our house, where her spirit could look down at the lake. But that day this new landholder drove up in an ATV, snarling at the world even more so than at me about how he'd gotten this land in a development deal gone south, and how stupid farmland preservation was, and how the mayor of town was a snob. I told him I agreed about the mayor, as if I could even want to make friends with this person. He was ripped under his tshirt, and relished how much I cowered as he stood on top of the ATV. Like millions of Americans, I had just watched Trump stalk Hillary across a debate stage. Now I was living inside of that image. My doublespeak skills had never been more sharply honed, and though I took notes at the time, all I still remember is that I tried to defend open space protections by appealing to his ego. At the end, he seemed genuinely hurt that I was hesitant to get close enough to shake his hand. I did not offer him the satisfaction of knowing the personal reason why I went to that hill, and I have not been back since. When I think of my mother's resting place, I sometimes imagine it is just offshore from the southernmost point buoy in Key West, where I completed the drive from Portland, ME that I'd started while she was alive. Or I think of the ashes that coated plants running off down into the Great Swamp. I think of the ashes that remained on my hands, how I felt responsible for them, how I licked them off.

Each Night When I Go to Bed

I struggled with my first college experience. Towards the end of my first freshman year, my mother drove the few hours from northern New Jersey down to suburban Pennsylvania. I must have expressed doubts about the effects of such an urban environment on my nervous system, because after paying for me to get my toes done, she took me out to Valley Forge. An April day so lovely you could cry—that peculiar loneliness of someone you love trying to comfort you. A decade later I was a senior at a different liberal arts school in a different part of the country, and my French class read a scene in a Flaubert novella about a mother visiting her sick daughter. I often think out loud to the extent that I'm not certain what I'm about to say in an in-class discussion. What startled me was the force with which I empathized with both mother and child in this heavy scene that Flaubert had the good sense to thread lightly. Now I think, in parallel to my realized breakdown behind unshattered glass at the edge of a forest in Pennsylvania, of the time in my second sophomore year when we met for Thanksgiving at her sister's house in Fort Worth. On Friday we took our rental car further and further out and away, practically a dirt road. I documented a dead coyote. My shutter caught her timeworn beauty, looking over her shoulder holding invasive mistletoe. Pausing at the Eiffel Tower with a cowboy hat in Paris, Texas. Somewhere over the line into Oklahoma, I gave up trying to explain to my father, who had stayed behind, how to turn on the dishwasher in my childhood home. A single late afternoon a dozen years ago, the light shifting farther away on unfamiliar land, a hundred miles from anyone or anything we knew. Since I moved to Montana, I keep finding us there, both so fully at home.

Calculated Risk

My cousin James calls me when I'm sitting down to one of my first fall workshops at my professor's house. The class usually banters for the first few minutes anyway, and I already know we're informal, so I slide out the back porch. I need to focus to follow his words. I hear "fire line." I hear "accident." I'm gathering that someone he knows was injured, could have been killed, and that there isn't anything about the story that James can point towards to say why it wasn't him. The next day, we relax into a longer conversation about it. James and I were both raised in upper middle class households, our sister mothers both high powered lawyers. We are also both people who work, or have worked, in public land management. In Yellowstone, I learned that some of my coworkers were taking solo hikes, even though we were all told ad nauseum that that elevated the risk of a serious grizzly encounter. I spent that summer in fear of anything, which I've since learned is called hypervigilance, and is perhaps a logical side effect of my trauma. James and I were never close as kids the way I was to my other, much younger cousins from my dad's sister. We essentially met in adulthood, but we had so much in common, it was like we'd known each other all along. I think of sitting in the front of his parents' lake house to get away from the bugs, looking up at the stars. I was proud he'd told me he could train me to be a good shot, and without even noticing, the part of Yellowstone that I loved, that everyone wants to hear, that I'm never able to unlock, came out. I knew I needed to tell him about the wolves. That night, doped up on allergy meds for the juniper, I dreamed that he and I saw the Lamar Canyon pack together in Yellowstone. In dream logic we could have dogs with us, and his parents' German shepherd was fine but his blue heeler Micky was injured. I didn't want to burden him with the story as he packed up his mother's gourmet tuna along with his fire line gear, so I just told him I had a weird dream and I hoped he'd be careful. "We always are." I couldn't ever say it his way, but I remember it, and am comforted.

Delphi

My father didn't understand the limits of my child mind. He's a physics researcher with a genuine openness to sharing enthusiasms. Things he told me before I could read mystify me still, like when he told me to imagine a flashlight's light bending with gravity as it goes around in an enormous circle, eventually lighting up the back of itself. (What now?) Or when he hid with me in a blanket fort and then told me that it was theoretically possible that all the oxygen in the room would go to one corner and we'd asphyxiate. There are social science lessons I find difficult to categorize, like the idea that in America everyone was king of his own house. This was in contrast to Soviet Russia, which was then falling, where apparently they'd have us killed and then multiple families would live in our house. He told me I was special for being so smart, an interconnected perspective. And he told me that in Ancient Greece there was a woman named Cassandra, who could tell the future, but her curse was that she'd never be believed. He didn't explain why she was cursed, and I didn't ask. I was content to watch water skimmers in the crick and talk to the birch trees, for whom I had distinctive personalities. I made a "play house" home of remnants of an older tree, only to have him take it down, a theme of our relationship. When I started public school in the middle of kindergarten, I remember crying inconsolably, inarticulately, at what I now realize was the dissociating quality of the built world: that there was asphalt where grass used to be. I was grieving the grass.

Our Future City

I didn't grow up in Anywhere, USA. In 1993, my third grade science class took a field trip to our school's parking circle, to see an electric car prototype. One day everyone would have one. Because this was one of the wealthier suburbs west of Manhattan, I see a Tesla here or there when I'm back to visit. Last summer, a real estate pullout from the newspaper my father left out described an enormous monstrosity of a megamansion as "LEED certified." In 1995, my crush Alex told me and my best friend that sushi tasted better in his parents' brand new SUV. We saw a slideshow on the Amazon, and performed a "rap" about the "RAIN-forest, the tropical RAIN-forest." We also learned about saving the Everglades, but I could not have told you a single accurate thing about it beyond the alligators. "Nature deficit disorder"—shorthand for a supposed lack of interest children have in going outside. In Last Child in the Woods, Richard Louv actually makes a much more complicated argument, that if kids learn about nature as an abstract thing in peril somewhere else, they will fail to connect with what it actually offers. I read his book as an outdoor educator. I had been something of an exception. My parents owned twenty acres in two parcels when I was a kid, eventually buying two more for a total of 34 acres, all in the name of forestalling development. And I grew up outside with the birches and the water skimmers, aware that there were fewer and fewer places like ours. I don't know what I'll do with the land, if tax laws afford me a choice. So much land right around ours has already been developed that it's painful to go back. My father is 80 and right now I prefer to believe he will live to be at least a hundred. One of the four parcels, the field across the street, is a nine acre section in the middle of a viewshed that's about a hundred acres, the other 90% owned by other elderly folks. I also live in western Montana, where it would be pretty satisfying to prevent someone from cutting up a nice tract into trophy houses, and in the spirit of what my parents worked for when they worked on owning land. My childhood friends mostly live elsewhere, anyway. In 1996, we collaborated on group projects about Our Future City, something the sixth graders did every year. My friends and

I imagined a city connected to farmland, under biodomes, on the Moon. I'm stopped in my tracks to recall this, now, though I know that we were innovating more than prognosticating: that my two horseback riding friends and I imagined a future city not on earth.

Late Stage Capitalism, After Vogel

*I am the problem with America*, I caught myself thinking at a Walmart late at night during my first semester of grad school in Missoula. It was early 2017, and I'd been engaging in my complicity and culpability with a range of issues related to late stage capitalism and the accelerating descent of my country into fascism. But at that specific moment, I wasn't thinking about the 45th president. I was buying a square plastic bowl that was designed to make boxed mac and cheese microwavable. Many of my fellow privileged citizens of the global north would say to me that the environmental destruction that happens from my buying that plastic bowl is negligible in the scheme of things. I want to believe that that majority view is right about this. At the same time, I can't help but think of a grad school video chat where contemporary environmental philosopher Steven Vogel addressed my question about the alienation that comes from being aware of how strange the created world is. It's astonishing to him that we don't think more often about the work and human labor of it took to create the built environment—the lawyers and factories. Yet "all things are mediated by money." I think of a favorite Onion article, concerning a Chinese factory worker who does not understand the products he is making. When I was buying my square blue macaroni bowl, I wasn't thinking about the worker or the factory where it was produced. But now that I've read Vogel, I'll consider its production whenever I use it next. Capitalism contributes to our alienation from our environment by separating us not simply from the products our labor but also, more metaphorically, from certain aspects of the consequences of our choices. This decoupling contributes significantly to the rise in mental illness diagnoses in the developed world.

Let's Pretend This Will Always Be Like This

How to associate: I often find my way to the grocery store in my episodes. Specifically, at least for a while—the nicer, the pricier, the more genteel the target customer, the better. What I'm looking for is not a specific product, although in fact my lizard brain sometimes needs to be talked out of randomly expensive selections. I'm seeking an aesthetic of order, the peppers and pears neatly stacked just so. A freezer case of only amuse bouche desserts. Like everything else in prepared foods, their mysterious aura vanishes into disappointment when at home you realize that they look better than they taste. When my thoughts swirl at our monumental political instability, I need a tangible alternative. In the corner behind the premade smoothies and boxed precut vegetables, near the refrigerator cases of milk alternatives, the tsunami hits. The unsustainability itself of carting hothouse tomatoes and strawberries bred for looks across state lines is old news. The idea of an apocalyptic future where this store becomes a place of conflict is also uncontroversial in the circles I've been in. Just the tenderness of looking at me in this place right now, itself. How will I survive? My first year in this town, I courted the friendship of someone who seemed scrappier, perhaps also more skilled with a weapon. But I'm better at wayfinding than I might get credit for, and my verbal de-escalation skills are top notch. Anyway, I've been spending less time at the beautiful store where the staff were unnervingly cheerful. These days I often find myself at a store where the workers seem happy, or at least able to complain freely to each other in my presence. The fruit may not look as ready for the cover of a magazine, but they have what I need. This may or may not help my role in late stage capitalism. But at least if someone stops me to talk after I've bagged up, I know it's sincere.

After Epictetus

The last week my mother was alive, the last week I spent in NYC before Florida, there were things I did that in retrospect felt like preparation. At St. Mark's to meet a friend for lunch, I acquired my first mala. The Tibetan woman was watching a webcast of the Dalai Lama, who was elsewhere in the city that week. I remember her conversation about meditation as an attempt to suss out if I would take the prayer beads seriously; I remember feeling it important to pass muster, that I must wear them under my clothes, and that the total number of beads mattered less than the practice. And a day or two after, I found myself on the uptown to Columbia, calling my mom from the green, acquiring the Hackett edition of Epictetus. A whim to pick up this stoic philosopher's work and bring it, though I would soon find comfort in his words. Epictetus, who taught me I could only hold things from the side where they could be held—not that my mother was "taken back," but that she had fully tried to love me.

Reevaluating Socrates

My mental illness struggle exists on a continuum. There are moments when I feel genuinely low stress, as I gather friends around me or walk alone in the Rattlesnake wilderness gateway. And then the anxiety flares, and my thoughts will feel so tangled that I am not sure how I ever made it through my grad school application, let alone several years of full-time employment. This reached a zenith when I was working on a philosophy midterm at an airport hotel near Salt Lake City and considered how alienating it was that hardly anyone else walking through its lobby had thought about how bizarre it was for humans to exist in a built world. I still consider how the interior wildness of people, a concept I encountered in that class, could be connected to mental illness struggles. There is a narrative that late stage capitalism endorses that our mental illnesses are the result of biochemical imbalances in our brains. Certainly, the right combination of psychotropic medication can alleviate some of the suffering. Yet the unpredictable nature of adverse reactions and side effects in just my own lived experience reflects just how harmful this oversimplification can be. As I reread The Phaedrus for my philosophy final, an aspect of Socrates leaped out at me that I hadn't really given much thought to in my younger years. Between his daemonic presence, his disregard for others' opinions, his invocation of divine ecstasy, and his literal defense of madness, Socrates has characteristics that would cause a psychiatrist to diagnose him with a severe mental illness. Not only that, but he willingly drank hemlock at the end of his life, though his wealthy friends offered to pay ransom so that he could go into exile. Yet he lived to be 71 fully integrated into the day to day life of Athens. He was a good soldier in battle, and even those who dismissed him for his eccentricities viewed him as their equal in Athenian citizenship. I am critical of the contemporary counterculture's narrative that those who are today ostracized for severe mental illness would at one time have been viewed as shamans in contact with the divine. I think it romanticizes a great deal of suffering, and can be just as problematically objectifying of those who struggle with mental illness as the psychiatrist who dismisses and dehumanizes. Moreover, I've

been fortunate that my symptoms have only rarely reached above the crest of what I could control by connecting positively with my environment. I know people who have dealt with psychotic symptoms, and for all the mental health struggles that I have faced, I still can't really fathom the sheer terror that they must endure.

Phenomenology of Ego Death

I did extensive research before trying hallucinogens, like the nerd I am. (The idea sprang from state mandated drug education, where it was the only category to appeal to me personally.) After reading The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test for fun in high school, I wrote a paper on how LSD influenced Ken Kesey and his coterie, as if my interests were academic, or my thesis topic could even ever be separated out. A few years later I found erowid.org, a forum devoted to helping people connect to share psychedelic experiences and deepen understandings. There I found an overview that offered a framework in five stages, with the first being barely perceptible alterations. Level five, an ego death and oneness with the universe, fascinated me in the abject horror it seemed to cloak. For years after my dalliances, I wondered at the seasoned masters who treated level five's ego death as the ultimate goal of their journeys. It seemed so complex and terrifying that it passed beyond my comprehension. And yet on my first pass in then-street-legal Amsterdam, operating on advice from just such a habitual user and character, I did a larger than average dose of shrooms. My one obvious hallucination was a rainbow on my jeans which I knew to conceal a patch of dirt. In the three psilocybin trips that followed over several years at school in New Mexico, I developed an inward rhythm that was self-protective; turning my thoughts away from worst cases and towards people who loved me, planting my feet into the grass beneath the huge willow that anchored the only part of campus with a real lawn. The culmination was an acid trip at the college festival the weekend before graduation—fractals in the desert pebbles, fairy wings on my friends, glow patterns on my grooving fellow dancers. And then as friends gathered in a less-liked acquaintance's dorm room while he was elsewhere, a statement: "I could be [him]. We could all be anyone."

Anthropocene Meaning

These are things she takes: fancy deli sandwich, chocolate bar, bound journal, copy of Heart Berries. Water. Keys. Marmas gummy. Packs it all in a new lightweight, very hip with the athleisure crowd, purple and butterflies. Checks and rechecks contents. She leaves: her car, phone, wallet (with a hundred Canadian at all times), bear spray, binoculars. Vogel's Thinking Like a Mall. The not telling anyone is less a choice and more a matter of routine or principle, take your pick. She sets off along a familiar path, trammeled, not wilderness. The path broadly meanders along the river, for how long she's not sure, the edge of her experience still in contact with her city, she's heard that you can walk to Canada but she's never tried. Today she stops at a clearing, and the light—

Every surface in bright

sun and the grass already drying. She looks around as the awareness builds of the fires last year, they say 2017 was the worst, well except for 2000, but really, it's never as nice as it was in the eighties or early nineties, or so she hears. She keeps exploring up here, keeps Canadian money, but she knows she'd have died long before she left the city. She brought a deli sandwich! No future for the time traveler. She has stopped walking again. She sees an old stone foundation, remembers growing up walking to one in the rural New Jersey of her childhood, which could as easily be in outer space. Through this foundation, people built a sense of continuity in isolation, snowy winters, and not much sun, more than five miles to a much smaller town than hers. The light moves across the cast off pine needles. Trees sway. Disoriented, fragments of reality. She hears the river and remembers that she can't get lost, she knows this stretch of woods too well, has walked it most days for the past year. Between the rushing creek and the old logging road that traverses a low ridge through the trees.

I Forgive You

A year or two after the accident (it blurs, even then), I'm still too skittish by far to get on a bike anywhere near more than four moving cars. So it happens that I'm walking a rental cruiser along Flatbush from Brooklyn's Sixth Ave to the ornate civil war monument, Grand Army Plaza. Oncoming, a mob of teens, but city life and my own advancing age means I've mostly stopped bracing when I see them advance. Then one girl, precocious looking but can't be much older than fourteen and probably closer to twelve, assaults me. Grabs my boob, jeering at me towards her friends. None of their reactions stand out as much as the whites of her eyes up against my face. The image stays static that way even as she continues down the street, as I yell out "Go fuck yourself," as I recoil and slink away, as she begins another barrage. I've been a gentrifier in Brooklyn for several years and feel quite safe among my neighbors even with all the racial tensions I read about. My most memorable moment of street harassment happens at the hands of a middle school girl? I turn it over as I pull myself onto the bike and begin the exhilarating downhill portion of the Prospect Park bike loop, past the pond that lightens my winter depression just enough. On the slog uphill, it dawns. As retroactively obvious as anything; she must have been assaulted herself, and reenacting the trauma. And suddenly I'm hurting for her, even as my heart still courses all the adrenaline she inflicted on me. My last words, spat in anger, ache back to me, and I long to replace them with new ones. I forgive you, I think. I forgive you, I forgive you, I forgive you. She was never mine to save, but maybe I can take that kindness along with me. Now I think it every time I want to be angry, and especially at trophy houses that clutter up what was once habitat. I forgive you, I think to someone cutting me off in traffic only to drive too slowly. I forgive you. I forgive you. I forgive you.

You Can't Intervene

The summer I worked Yellowstone, I was sometimes the lunch relief for retired park staff who came in two week stretches to greet the public at a historic building. One week, the volunteer told me of two teens abused in the isolation of homeschooling. The kids had come into this exact building, more than a decade earlier. Said just enough that that person had a hunch, got others involved, got the parents into questioning. I guess you wouldn't forget that. On my day off, in my camouflage (tourist garb), I was visiting a new friend an hour from my usual work site, down at the Upper Geyser Basin. A boy cried hysterically amid the throng of tourists in the Old Faithful Inn. Small for his age, maybe 10 or 11. His parents scolded him strongly. For being ungrateful, for being tired, for the emotions themselves. Already overloaded, I found respite in a stall of the public toilet. The brilliant white tile looked so calm. Outside, the chaos continued. Why doesn't anyone talk about the comfort of public restrooms? A minute's peace. I could think.

Maybe She Was an Honors Student

Maybe she doesn't see her. Maybe she sees her too late. Maybe she was going a little fast. Maybe she was texting. Maybe she had just put down her phone. Maybe she didn't have time to swerve. Maybe she was too tired. Maybe the impact jolted her back. Maybe she was laughing with her friend—there was a friend, or a boyfriend, wasn't there. Maybe the music was up. Maybe she was dealing with a rough break. Maybe she was ill. Maybe she was drunk. Maybe she couldn't make out the form in the twilight. Maybe she was high. Maybe she was going to a party. Maybe her grandmother had just called. Maybe she was on the way to the hospital. Maybe her brother's baby had just been delivered. Maybe her aunt was sick. Maybe her grandfather, her uncle, her mom's boyfriend, her track coach—in a dark room, in daylight behind the bleachers. Maybe she was late for work. Maybe she still sees this unknown woman now, paused, in dreams, in front of her late nineties SUV, suspended seconds before impact. Maybe she still wakes crying out at this, at the fact of it, at someone's mother's blood through her windshield, on her dash. Maybe she drinks now, because. Maybe she's a shell of what she was, could have been. Maybe she hangs on to what the daughter apparently said to the responders that night, that she forgave her. Maybe she couldn't hear that, just as the daughter couldn't hear her, though she was screaming, belting out, I'm sorry. Maybe she's a mother now. Maybe she weeps at the visceral thunk of it. Maybe she was hurt by someone she trusted, the vulnerability exploded. Maybe she had to leave town. Maybe she found Jesus. Maybe she never talks about it. Maybe she goes to different high schools as a motivational speaker. Maybe she's eleven months sober. Maybe she got crisis counseling. Maybe her friends helped her through. Maybe she willed herself to forget it all. Maybe she's dead.

Obliterate

I tell people I've given up almost all substance use because I don't want further cause to contemplate all the "end times shit." My first summer in Missoula, a visiting friend and I floated the Clark Fork, though the sky choked orange on wildfire smoke. That night we went out a back road looking for the Leonids but could hardly see the trees in front of my car. "I don't think you should smoke this," she said, and I was grateful to her for caring about me a little more than I could will for myself. The same summer I drove to the eclipse totality, and then hundreds of miles past it, to contemplate Japanese internment in rural Idaho. I paid exorbitantly to shower in luxury in a hotel room in Jackson Hole with its AC cracked out to freezing—what is reality. In Yellowstone park housing, my friend decried the accelerating erosion of people who would see once, for one day, a place she loved with her whole soul. A decade earlier, in Churchill's London bunker, I followed my guidebook's suggestion to click on August 6, 1945 on the interactive timeline, and the whole screen wiped itself out.

Last Day

She wouldn't stop for a cheesesteak in Philadelphia, and she drove the whole way. I was texting with an internet pal I had a crush on, and though I felt guilty for not giving her my full attention, we both assumed we would be together throughout the week. I considered asking her if there was anything about her early years of marriage to my dad that had been difficult, but thought it could wait. The plan was to make time for as long as we could on the inland freeway running parallel to the coast, which meant that the first day was mostly for getting through. I wanted to hear her talk about their marriage in a more intimate setting. She talked about going to see Charleston, Savannah, and Hilton Head Island. Meanwhile, I had been thinking about an idea I kept having for a post-apocalyptic novel. Fiction hadn't really ever interested me, but this idea was hard to shake loose. After spending a summer at a bay beach wrecked and littered by people in Queens, I kept imagining a population cull announced totally at random, luck of the draw. But I would stop short, hesitate on the idea that either of my parents could be so killed, at the real implications of imagining this future world.

Not the End

Little and throwing a tantrum about something trivial, I heard my mother comfort me with a burst of emotional resonance. “It’s not the end of the world.” And I’d ask, “It’s not?” What stands out to me now was how differently my parents handled their worries. My father would announce his fears as if they were indisputably true, leaving my mom the reputation for being the nervous one. But my mom was constantly four steps of her anxiety, which I would describe as clinical, and for which she never sought formal treatment. If my father forgot to tell her about bringing some visiting international colleagues home from the lab, she still had wine and finger foods at the ready while she pulled together a divine dinner from the pantry and freezer staples. If there were a flight for us to catch to his conference, she had made all the preparations and reservations, and had preassembled spare travel toiletries to simplify packing. She did this while also having her own career, which had the breadwinning revenue stream. I realize now how kind it was for her to say that and not something more trivializing about an unfair history teacher, a badly skinned knee. How often, since a certain night in 2016 when I slept curled up shivering in grief and fear in my too-warm Brooklyn apartment, have I wanted her to say that to me again. And yet, as she was fond of telling me then, life goes on. Now I live in a time and place when I walk outside almost every day. I think of a line in the Alcestis, that even the old and close to death can still love the sunlight.

Postmortem

Back for winter break, and a day or two before Christmas, I suggest that my dad pick an activity that includes me and takes advantage of the afternoon light. We walk along the pickup access route behind our barn, rickety where the haywagon got it last summer. I wasn't there for that. I'm around for less than ever, so I show him where I found an especially large downed tree. Not half a mile from our property line, in October, a tornado destroyed one of the last stands of old growth forest, all around a creekside cottage that grew vast quantities of twee green outbuildings in the late nineties boom. Together we parcel out how a stray gust of wind took down part of a sweetgum, which felled a sycamore as it went. In his prime my father could wield a chainsaw, probably still can, but I've never had the inclination. Onto the list for the tree guy it goes. I trace these steps every day I'm there, sometimes with him. In my head, I compose lines to a friend in Missoula, which don't make it to the card I don't send—that some day some other child will grow up here, but they won't know in exactly which far corner the pheasant eye narcissus come up in early March, north of Emma Forest and the crick we called Hesna Brook for my mom, perpendicular to the property line from the 1800's where we tapped an old line of sugar maples that cold snowy winter of '93. The Friday after, I'm there to help receive a couple whose husband is looking to bale our fields into timothy, in exchange for hours worked, a letter for us to file for the New Jersey agricultural tax exemption, and a handshake. All week my father's been asking me if I think this is the right thing. He'd be crazy not to take it, I think, but I'm more diplomatic out loud. I know this is a hard emotional weight for him, this letting go. It helps that we both like the folks. They're probably between us in age, though since I'm 35 and my father is 80, that doesn't narrow much down. They're making a go at a place they just got out in Hunterdon County, where the land still has a touch of wildness. I think of it wistfully. But I'm lucky to have my own place elsewhere, a tenth of an acre just a few miles from one of the largest sections of undeveloped

land in the lower 48. And right where we're standing, halfway down our driveway near the stone bridge, what my father tells both of us feels true. Harding still is how Harding always was.

Snoqualmie

I merged onto the interstate, signs for Seattle. Spokane faded fast, and the first miles of countryside reminded me of all those miles further east, around Billings, my best friend's hometown. Grass golden on all sides, sky of painter's clouds. I picked up a call from a friend raw with grief over her mother, dead from addiction. I offered her mother's spirit my meditation at the Columbia Gorge. Lost daylight on the approach to Snoqualmie, the pass backlit by sunset's end. The car concealing me into a shape like other shapes. Just before I began to lose elevation, the vista threw me, as if I were looking back at where I'd just been. The headlights I could see, though far away, looked more like where I was supposed to be than the taillights of cars I'd soon pass. The moon high and bright, nearly full, throwing shade from the tall evergreens. I won't discount the possibility of the divine. I'm always thinking about how liminal the experience of space-time can be. I felt as though I were crossing a threshold, as if at any moment I might encounter my mother. That October night, the surreal became tangible. Back on the wild Olympic coastline for the first time since she took me there, I saw my late mother in the form of a banana slug. On All Hallow's Eve, thirty five years exactly after she'd labored to deliver me, I left her a whiskey ginger on my mantelpiece. When I returned to it several days later, the liquid was half gone. I told myself it was air currents and fast evaporation. But it smelled fresh.

City Walls
*For K*

Derry
24 June 2007

I didn't know I had it in me, but something was in the way you pressed your knee. We sat next to each other among hostel acquaintances at the anarchist bar. I'd crossed my legs away from you. Your knee found the space—a gentle ask for my attention sent me reeling, wondering what else I didn't know. We traded off on buying pints and the next morning shared a cab out to Giant's Causeway. I woke you delicately.

I wanted to hold your hand. I was too shy. This was all new.

That next night after our afternoon and evening of pints, I was drunk enough to ask you to take me walking up on the city walls. Derry is called the maiden city because no army ever invaded in the time since the walls were built. I'd read this in my guidebook, but I let you tell me anyway. We stopped above the place where you thought Bloody Sunday happened.

In the moment before our lips connected, I quoted Prufrock to you in a panic. "I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker, and in short, I was afraid." I was glad I'd played you in Scrabble the day before. You asked with your eyes, occasionally your words, "Is this okay?" It was spectacular—to feel, to connect this way. In our long silence, I looked out at a church glowing with orange lights. I thought of your Lutheran minister father. I thought, I know I have the brakes, but I don't want this to end.

Coentanglements

1. “It was good to see you, too—enjoy the rest of your day!” I say to someone I scarcely know, as if my saying so would be enough to make it true. I try not to dwell on all that this opens in my unconscious mind.

2. “In the Bohm experiment the atomic fragments separate after interaction, flying off in different directions freely.” You wrote this on my wall in 2005, when “The” Facebook was a small town on the internet. “Subsequently, measurements are made of their spin components (which here take the place of position and momentum), whose measured values would be anti-correlated after dissociation. In the so-called singlet state of the atomic pair, the state after dissociation, if one atom’s spin is found to be positive with respect to its flight path, the other atom would be found to have a negative spin with respect to an axis with the same orientation.” When I still thought you were my Oxford boy, when I pined for you from Rockefeller Hall, this became another of the signs that we were fated. Other distant lovers could look at the same stars. We were coentangled fundamental particles.

3. I moved, and moved, and moved again. I don’t know your coordinates, or your current state of entanglement. I’ve long since stopped trying to write you for your birthday, or at all. Just yesterday I dashed off some short letters, and most were to people I met since I moved back to the west. But in another frame perhaps I am still capable of conjuring your ice blue eyes, your soft Californian cadence, and most of all the ready smile that I first fell for in our physics class. You hovering nervously in first period over my C++ workstation, offering to help me with the French quiz I had in fifth.

4. I began reading insufferable amounts of Verlaine and Valery, symbolist poetry concerning the four humors and the old gods, that year. Did you ever guess at how badly I wanted to impress you? I wanted anything from you, except to tell you how much I wanted you. "She's so stupid," you muttered as I prattled on at our physics extracurricular. Instead of confronting you, or recognizing that perhaps this was a momentary lapse in your opinion brought on by stress, I doubled down in the nerdery, distancing myself from whoever you actually were.

5. "Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angelic order?" Rilke implores at the beginning of the Duino Elegies, which I began reading the same year I left my first college. Moody on the surface but accessibly tender, Rilke came around to save me, picking up nuance of emotion where the symbolists layered on abstractions. He brought me into a conversation I am still finding my way through. "Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror," he writes in that passage, as if he knew firsthand how all that we want becomes unattainable when we ourselves put it out of reach.

6. I am trying not to make gods out of men anymore. God knows, I have had that in common with more women than just Sylvia Plath, anyway.

7. In my high school self study of the dictionary, I learned that the French have a word for the sound of wind through leaves. "*Friselis*," a homophone. Sometimes I hear a late fall breeze, and against my better judgment, I think of you.

Authentic

1.

At a party, I tell friends an anecdote about my weird upbringing. I've found I need to strike a balance. Let them know I'm in on it. Too heavy, they'll look at me with pitying horror. To get the timing wrong is worse. Looks of confusion deliver me to the threshold of my insanity.

They know about the three of us in the woods, but not the big stone cottage by a lake. That one I keep closer now. "Is it true you live in a castle?" Asked in high school, by someone I really liked.

Took me too long to learn. Maybe I didn't know there was a lesson.

These people at the party probably know I was raised by eccentric intellectuals. Wolves might have been a better bet but here we are.

I was ten and they had me reading Reader's Digest. Did I mention they were older than anyone else's parents? I loved the quotes. One resonated: "We worry about the person the child would be tomorrow, and forget he is someone today." Put it on the threshold of their bedroom after they'd gone to sleep. Really rattled them, according to my mother. She was always telling me things that belonged with the therapist she never sought.

Back to my friend, the party: she laughs delighted. I am redeemed, however momentarily, my weird held charming.

2.

I encountered tarot the second time I went to undergrad, the time that stuck. A friend picked up a Goddess deck, years before the trend. I didn't think to ask what brought her to it. This was Santa Fe: she could have gotten it anywhere.

Summer lavender in the courtyard. Our campus transformed into a resort for older people, we the few actual undergrads still in classes, shunted aside. Some of our friends worked laundry service at the behest of the continuing ed campers. Weeks that no real adults were paying board, the cafeteria served off brand hot dogs cut into spaghetti sauce, the pasta oversaturated. The Bread Loaf people were the worst, all those disgruntled high school English teachers. We thought we'd never be like them.

I seldom read cards, and only as a favor to people I already know. I tell them I'm going to view it as a window to the unconscious mind. They can tell me as much or as little as they want. I don't have the deck memorized, which could be an asset. When people already think they know what the cards say, I get overloaded.

Skeptics, I tell that years ago my deck kept telling me to move to Brooklyn. "Did you?" Of course I did.

3.

"We often think of a mask as something that conceals our identity. Yet contemplate the possibility that The Mask permits our true identity to be revealed. It allows. The Mask gives voice to that which was previously rejected."

I talk to the friend who introduced me to tarot a few days after drawing that archetype card. It's the day after my birthday and suddenly I'm weeping. I'm going through a lot, but these days it seems like everyone is, all the time. I feel guilty for taking this space.

All the friends who've loved me have learned to be gentle. That just beneath the person who talks over, intellectualizing, is someone fragile and scared. But my friend is always so kind, her voice lilting and breathy.

Suddenly the true story of my childhood wells up. "That's what was so fucked up about my parents! The widespread emotional neglect! I had everything material I needed and they cared about my education, and at the center, they were so cold, so concerned with my grades, with who I could be! I didn't really believe they or anyone could possibly love me for who I already was! I have to try so hard to be charismatic!"

And I'm tired of hearing myself talk about it, so tired. Who do I think I am. Other people had it worse.

My sweet friend pushes me past this. Her voice tethering me to this phone call, this moment in time. Until I find the words to ask, "What if the real me is the person I can sometimes be, who's charming and funny and caring and wise?"

I call this my "higher self" now, which is probably another irritating habit to someone else. But if the self is a construct, it's a useful container. I can put my love of gossip, my mood swings, my knack for making things too intense down and away. A part of me that does not define me.

I can discuss my thought processes at length. Like anything else about any of us, how charming it is depends mostly on the observer.

Cult of Domesticity
*(Apologies to Gertrude Stein)*

A Chandelier

A proper alabaster, a fine cut alabaster, a dainty bronze, an elegance of purpose, dangling downwards, and warmer steady pink against red walls casting aside cold gray. Bronze crosshatch flush with powder, vertical symmetry. Four lines towards a circle, a floret flourishing above.

The Bannister

A teal wall against dark. A wood of old growth firs. A ray, a design below each step. Spindles, square above and below, tapering like candles. An elegant lady's fan. An insouciance fluttering up or down. A square of purpose at the anchors. A turquoise triangle. A well poised statue, greeting Buddha. A curved line, aglow.

Alight

A ceiling of intersecting lines, circular, like gears. Three paper globes, elongated. Enfolded geometries. A fern emerges from a box. A square sided box, a cube, reduplicated square. Intricate lace. A table of a flower of a table needs direction to explore. Dirty brick. The cat Bastet squires the dried peony, the amethyst agate. The elephants interlock. The tarot on a hexagon.

A Square

Reduplicated line redolent with its edge reflected across the chairs, eight. Four legs stand at corners, love all. Curved backs, front feet straight. Warm elm squares, four at every corner. Square deep warm beauty. Room, square. Table, square, is sturdily acquired from that process of hand fashioning.

Flowers

Sunflowers, dead flowers. Wood flowers carved with no deeper meaning or purpose, reduplicated. Amaranth inlay. Lisianthus. Lotus, yes. Unicorn in Persephone dress. A square box, straw. Tchotchke tealight uplifts plastic egg, purple. Found feather in curved cube of teal glass. Meaning, all. Red walls.

Orange and Fall

1. Children of Academia, Take One: for my father it is not sufficient that toddler-Emma learns that the word "orange" refers to the brilliant globe exploding with tangy juice. He explains that most fruits are not named after their colors, that asking for a "red" will not yield an apple. But what could be more perfect than that juicy sphere? The apples from our orchard are never so uniform in color as to be confused with an orange.

2. I ramble through most school assignments less than half planned, attempting to preempt my predisposition for confusion. In my pass-fail art class, however, I take the prompt of varied tempera shades edging straight lines very seriously. Mine becomes the abstracted beacon of a lighthouse, all in orange. I am ever too clever with the quadrilaterals, showing off with the hardest proofs in my Honors Geometry class that year. My art teacher claims I'm mixing in too much of other colors to let the orange shine through, stretching into burgundies and yellows and even green. I counter that I was following directions, and I sense her grudging admiration. The finished art piece assumes a position of honor, displayed in our family room for a week or so. (A rarity in my adult-centric household.)

3. The color of fall, the opposite of green, the end of the year. They say synesthesia is common among small children, and though I've forgotten most of mine, I remember Russia as a small orange place north of green France as my mother read to me. Pulling places off a globe, I still remember which countries were which colors then. Was my birth month, November, always orange? Every year, I try to hate Halloween less, but then the tacky orange lights come up, and the candy corn, and the pumpkins, and I just hate it more and more and more.

4. At a pumpkin patch with my nursery school, I will not be deterred from my green pumpkin selection. “I want this one! I want it!” My mother tells me this in high school, when I’m being willfully different again. “And then the damn thing kept getting more and more orange all the way to Halloween, and you were so disappointed!”

5. I seemed so well adjusted after the accident that killed my mother. Everyone remarked on it. After years of less than sanity, punctuated by a drug induced manic episode, and what I prefer to call “the ideation,” I became a novelty: a person, with cause, who has not lost their shit. But I constantly get to my mother’s sudden death inwardly. To the hotel in Fayetteville, NC decorated for Halloween, to the Hess station light whose glare my father blamed. In the orange haze of street lights I waited my whole life for the first responders to tell me what I already knew. “I saw the whole thing,” I said, hoping to seem wise. “I know it was pretty bad. Tell the driver I don’t think it was her fault.”

Clean Lines

The city was a holding pattern. I had close friends around my neighborhood, a nice apartment near Prospect Park and the Q train, and a day job I adored. I had spent the first few months of my mother's absence working in the Everglades at a seasonal ranger job that had already been arranged. In Florida, I'd told myself that when I got back to NYC everything would be normal.

And then nine months after she died, back in the city, I decided I was open to getting a tattoo. I lived in Brooklyn, where every other person had a tattoo, and I suppose I'd been mulling it over. Subconsciously, it felt like a big enough breach of the protocol of my much older parents that I decided to think it over some more.

The found poem came to me so suddenly, it was hard to believe it hadn't always been there, waiting to be revealed. Two lines of Euripides' Alcestis, and two lines from Rilke's Third Elegy; foundational texts:

> fortune is dark; she moves, but we cannot see the way / nor can we pin her down and study her by science
> you placed the night-light not in the darkness, / but in your nearer being, where it shone like a friend

I wanted the poetry all over both wrists, framing the veins, emphasizing imaginary lines I looked at a little too longingly. I mostly wanted to survive.

A year and a half after witnessing the accident that killed my mother, I went to Hawaii. I'd inherited more money than I'd ever planned on living with, and I thought maybe taking a nice trip would help me make sense of what happened. Or at least that made as much sense as anything.

I still hadn't gotten my tattoo, citing intimidation over the waiting period if asked. In Hawaii, I immersed myself in cultural museums, thinking about how much she'd love them. I learned that Pacific Islanders got tattooed following an elaborate code, so that they could recognize long lost

relatives by comparing their markings. I was awed by the complex beauty of this physical symbol of their sea journeys.

Indigenous people found Hawaii using surprisingly small wooden crafts that they powered partly by wind and partly by oar. They climbed into the boats together and sailed.

They traveled thousands of miles by open sea, populating the least landed stretch of the globe. That made their tribal tattoo system so essential. They would crew their boats with a particularly sensitive person as navigator. In addition to following the stars, gifted navigators were adept at using the tiniest change in wind to find a promising place to go. Sometimes they'd jump into the ocean deep and feel for currents as they swam.

Most historians theorize that some ships were lost, all passengers drowned or starved. But I never wondered why the seafarers left their known world behind.

I stayed with friends of a good friend in Honolulu. I had thought that being around people might help me cope with dislocation, and this was partially true. My friend was a grad student studying comparative philosophy, so at least all his friends were fellow nerds. One night, the guy I'd just met offered to smoke me out, and I felt I should participate. The two of us sat outside on his fifth story balcony, looking out at a less savory part of the city down below.

After the weed took hold, I remember two conflicting sequences of events. In one, he and I were discussing our lives alongside the negative impacts of colonialism, aware that we were both colonizers ourselves. In the other, unconnected with the first, I was convinced that I could at any moment decide that it was time to climb over his railing, and then fall off the balcony. I did not want to do this. I recalled other intrusive thoughts occasionally, seemingly at random, throughout my life.

Over and over I told him I was worried about jumping off the balcony, as if it were something that could happen to me against my will. He reassured me that he would restrain me if it came to that, and then we'd pick back up with the intellectual conversation.

At night on the open water, Native Hawaiians traced long lines in the stars. As the child of a physicist, I was wired to respond to a discussion of astronomy. They used these lines as axes to calculate the geometries of latitude and longitude, presumably without writing notes by pen and paper. The constellations that I grew up with were invented by the ancient Greeks, who traveled the Mediterranean and probably the Atlantic in triremes similar to the Pacific Islanders' crafts.

Constellations are discrete entities, relatively small on the scale of the sky. The Pacific Islanders' lines can't ever fully disappear over the horizon, and this is one of many ways that they offer a superior method of navigation. The English couldn't negotiate along latitude until the invention of the modern clock, well into their recorded history. The Pacific Islanders had long since left archaeological and anthropological evidence that suggested a sophisticated understanding of navigation without Earth bound landmarks.

fortune is dark
she moves
but we cannot see the way
not can we pin her down
and study her
by science

you placed
the night
light not in the darkness
but in your nearer being
where it shone like
a friend

The first full day I spent in Hawaii, I found out that I was being pulled out of the stack of federal resumes for a summer season at Yellowstone. I worked all that summer in a field of geysers that looked like somewhere that was not on Earth. When I came back to Brooklyn in late fall, the subway unsettled me. I couldn't say why; it certainly was not something obvious that a person might

have guessed. I continued to ride it. For a few beautiful moments my Q line train would rise above New York Harbor, offering perfect views of the water around the Brooklyn Bridge. Looking back, I probably couldn't bear to be that far away from the sky, on a train hurtling through space thirty blocks at a time, underground.

I was trying. I applied to grad school far away, and had an essay published on The Toast, a queer indie lit nerd website that impressed my circle. I got inked that winter, more than two years after she'd been gone. I didn't have a long wait. Michelle, my artist, was a kind soul who showed up every day and did clean lines. She tweaked the text, wider spaces between the letters, before projecting it onto the backs of my shoulders. My shoulders stung a little, but the vibration felt worse – like dentistry.

Tattooing had helped the islanders cope with changing places. I thought about this whenever I remembered something my mother had said to me in late elementary school, one of the many times she had to drop me off when I missed the school bus. I was almost out of the car and about to shut the door behind me. I heard her say to my turned back, "Remember who you are."

Field Notes from the Statue of Liberty

She gleams aqua green from her island perch in the harbor. In one of my earliest memories, my parents call my attention away from my backseat daydream. "Look, Em! There's the Statue of Liberty!" Like many with a lifelong affiliation to New York, I no longer notice the enormous statue in quite the same way that I did that morning, when my father told me she was made of the same material as pennies. Yet she remains one of the great wonders of the modern world, and so she draws me in. I decide to defer grad school to spend the summer and fall working for the National Park Service on Liberty Island. It is my fifth such seasonal appointment, following stints at both Yellowstone and the Everglades. It is 2016.

Visitors are my environment. As soon as I step into the July heat, tourists surround me, caring only that I appear to work at this attraction. I find myself explaining the crowd control policies that were implemented after 9/11 on repeat. The bureaucracy offers an online reservation system that strands many visitors outside the structure, and I am powerless to help. Meanwhile, sweat accumulates in pools underneath my nearly indestructible poly blend uniform. I remind myself that I'm not doing this job merely for money. I draw on reserves of patience I didn't think I had. Being an interpretative park ranger is fantastic at most parks, but this job can feel like a chore.

I find it impossible to stop thinking about the election. I must remain nonpartisan in public, and in an ordinary election year, that would hardly trouble me at all. Meanwhile, at morning meetings, we are reminded that there are security cameras all over everything. This surveillance makes me uneasy, but I share my political worries with a select few of my coworkers, anyway. Rational paranoia: to know that the government is watching you. I take comfort by imagining the faceless watchers scanning the rows of live feeds for cute girls taking selfies or fast boats in the harbor. I strengthen my doublespeak with every in-depth visitor interaction I enjoy.

Mostly German and Anglo anyway, I tend to keep my Lebanese lineage to myself. It feels "too political" to mention to American tourists with 9/11 memorial gift shop bags. Yet I think about my immigrant heritage most mornings as the staff boat departs the modern seawall of Manhattan's southern tip. We cross from Battery Park to Ellis Island, before arcing around the front of Lady Liberty. In the summer that my light-skin-cloaked Arab American identity becomes politically volatile, I wonder whether either of my Maronite Catholic great-grandparents passed through New York Harbor. They met in Philadelphia, and raised eleven Arabic-swearing, yet assimilating, children. Though my grandmother died of old age when I was six, I have a handful of memories of her adoration that carry me through. Moreover, my outgoing exuberance tempered with a shy sensitivity reminded both of my parents of her. This I know: she had a tenacious ferocity I admire, and she would have damn well told the visitors she was proud of her family.

If either of my Lebanese ancestors came through the Port of New York, they would have seen the Statue of Liberty under construction. They came to the "New World" in the early 1880s, and the Statue was unveiled on October 28, 1886. I picture them marveling at the half-completed Statue, which pioneered the modern engineering principles we use to build skyscrapers.

Many contemporary immigrants visit the Statue, their stories intertwining with my Lebanese and German great-grandparents'. Given how worried I am about the political climate, the thousands of visitors I talk to each day are a welcome distraction. In early June, still new to the Statue, I am guarding the gateway to the security checkpoint when I check the pedestal tickets of a large family, women in hijabs, all with eyes dark like mine. I greet them with a smile, and the same question I almost always ask visitors. "Where are you folks visiting us from?"

One of the men seems particularly confident in his English. "Well, we are living in Jersey City, but we are originally from Syria."

"Oh, well, welcome!" I say heartily. "My great-grandparents on my mom's side were from Lebanon!"

"It's the same blood," says one of the women, and they all agree. "We are like family."

"Thanks!" I respond as they walk past me to the checkpoint. "Have a great time, and make sure you look through the glass ceiling to see inside the Statue!" My thoughts swirl, but I must reset to welcome the next family. And the next. Inwardly, I am still thinking about the warmth that these American newcomers showed me.

Late that afternoon, I have an hour scheduled for professional development, and since I'm still learning about the Statue, I change into my commuting clothes early to take the audio tour in camouflage. The soundtrack swells with violins, and after some background material, the narrator instructs me to turn to face the front of the Statue and think about what she means to people around the world. Recalling my Syrian American visitors, I think of the worsening refugee crisis in the Middle East in contrast to my great-grandparents' ease at entering the free world. I sob. There are other Americans who would exclude those who look like my grandmother. And I just look like me. Another white American.

I try not to talk about partisan matters with the visitors, but of course the election comes up. I meet another Syrian family on another day, as we are shooing everyone off the island in time for the last boat. One of the men says of one of the women, "She is wondering why she can't come through Ellis Island." I start to explain that they arrived too late in the day to have time for both islands, when he cuts me off: "Not to visit the island, to move here, to move to the US."

"That's a good question." I'm the only ranger on the brick walkway that faces towards Manhattan, and there aren't any other visitors right around us. "Personally, I don't agree with it," I continue. At this, they begin to open up to me. I mention my ancestry as we chatter on happily.

Before too long, I am reciting "The New Colossus," Emma Lazarus's famous poem, to them. They point out that the poem, written in the Statue's voice, states clearly that she welcomes refugees. I can only agree. Meanwhile, we round the corner to the flagpole plaza, and I walk them all the way to the ferry. I show them an old snapshot I have saved to my phone of me with my mother and maternal grandmother. Though they are sad to leave Liberty Island, I feel at least as sad to see them go.

Even as they loom large on my conscience, Syrians are a small fraction of a percent of the visitors. Though people from everywhere come to visit the Statue, when I ask the self-selected group for my outside walking tour where they're visiting from, the twenty or thirty people are almost entirely Americans. We start with a picture of the Statue surrounded by fireworks, in an artist's rendering from her unveiling in 1886. At the sculpture garden, we talk about small bronze statuettes of notable figures, and I linger on Edouard de Laboulaye, an underappreciated French thinker, who had the idea to give a statue celebrating American freedoms to the United States. Laboulaye was influenced by Alexis de Tocqueville, the author of Democracy in America, and thought a lot about the great experiment in popular government that this country then represented. Laboulaye, I mention, did not particularly care for the tyranny of Napoleon III. So we talk about France's relatively unstable government as the U.S. was getting off the ground, and its complicated admiration for American ideals.

In the shade of some sycamores, near our resident flock of Canada geese, I point out to them that they can see her upturned back foot – that she is walking. Then I pull out my most important slide, and show them one of the Statue's open secrets: the broken shackles and chains around her feet. Lady Liberty, I explain, celebrates the end of slavery in the United States – the idea for the Statue was conceived not long after the end of the Civil War – by walking out of her chains, from slavery into freedom.

Her true full name is Liberty Enlightening the World. As we walk out to the side pier for a three-quarter profile view of her, I reflect that the light that she carries out with her spreads beyond any one place or time. That she represents freedom from tyranny, worldwide.

At the pier, I pause to let them snap some pictures of the Statue up close as I savor the open sky of New York harbor. When I sense that they're ready, I tell them a little about myself. About thinking of my German great-grandparents coming past the Statue on their way to Wisconsin in 1906. About my own experience as a suburban New Jersey high school junior on September Eleventh, stressing the ordinariness of the horror. That several of my classmates had parents who went in to another day at the office and did not come home. I show them how to notice the gap in the skyline where the Twin Towers once stood. And I let them know that it has been my honor to be part of the Statue of Liberty in 2016.

I leave the last word to Emma Lazarus. I pose as I recite the sonnet in full—my ranger hat, the crown; my laminated slides, the tablet; and my fluorescent orange water bottle, the torch. I linger on the less quoted final couplet:

"Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, / I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

Another day, I'm up in the Crown for the busy middle of the day. The visitors gather up here to look out the tiny windows that form the jewels of her crown. My coworker and I greet them and explain what they can see – the tablet below the first windows, and Manhattan way out past her left ear. Straight ahead, we see the historic forts of Governors Island, and Brooklyn's rapidly gentrifying waterfront, including the Red Hook Ikea. Seven miles distant, the Verrazano Narrows Bridge looks tiny, though it is sixty feet longer than the Golden Gate. The enormous bright orange Staten Island ferry looks like a toy boat, as do tugs and tourist ferries and even the mercantile barges and occasional military ships.

On this particular day, a little boy is among our Crown visitors. When I ask where they're from, his mom answers that they're locals, visiting from Brooklyn. "Local tourists!" I exclaim. "Where in Brooklyn? I live there, too!"

She's a smart dresser, with a chunky necklace and a nice bag, and she has dressed him in a button-down shirt, like a little man. He's at that maximum cute stage of missing teeth, with a halo of black curls and a big grin. He climbs on top of the central support bar that connects the statue's forehead "skin" and armature bars to the interior framework just inside her head, and as he looks out the central windows, I point out Brooklyn landmarks, like Coney Island and the Brooklyn Bridge, for a minute or two. When I turn back after taking another family's picture, he's still there, still rapt at the window. I think of my time as an environmental educator at other parks wistfully, and before long I am telling him things I learned when I started visitor interpretation as a summer intern at Liberty Science Center, just across a narrow channel from this island, seven years ago. We talk about the estuary – fresh water of the Hudson River meeting the salt Atlantic. We talk about the diamondback terrapins and the fish and other creatures that like living in the mix. He's excited to consider this natural world below the mucky surface of the bay.

I don't mention the astonishing disappearance of the northeastern salt marsh that was the price of northeastern civilization, nor the slow and unfortunately unsteady process of trying to preserve and restore native spartina grass. We don't talk about the resurgence of osprey after DDT was banned, either. And when it comes to oyster restoration, I know my own ignorance.

It's enough that I ignited a sense of natural wonder in this urban little boy. I hope.

When we close the monument, the two rangers who were posted at the Crown for the last hour walk quickly down each side of the double helix spiral stairs after a routine radio call. We join the two rangers at the top of the pedestal, and split into pairs to check the two interior staircases. We

race, an informal game that is doubtless against the rules. A little more than halfway down, we go outside onto the lower balconies. I relish glimpses of the Statue from below, the harbor a cool breeze for our late afternoon run. As we zip down all those stairs, a meditative calm takes hold and I am glad to have a job that makes me as tired in body as I am in spirit.

All of that is future – for my memories of the Statue are, like stress dreams, eternally in the present tense. In the Crown as close draws near, any one of my work partners might nap. We might chat or look out at Manhattan or watch the occasional chopper fly round her head, like a fly buzzing her eyes. I can take my time to see things about her that most visitors will never notice. Up close, the Statue's green surface is mottled with gray spots and other discolorations, and each fold of the sleeve of her raised arm is enormous. But mostly, I just sit and read. If it's too hot, or I don't want to chance a conversation with a particularly troublesome coworker, we'll turn on the fan booster I affectionately call the "aircraft carrier."

On one such afternoon, I was curled into the staircase, resting my eyes. I heard a scratching sound, and though I thought I might have dreamed it, when I turned off the industrial fan it was louder, more insistent. I leapt carefully up the stairs and over to the platform under the windows. As I looked out, I saw that crows had congregated on her wavy hair. The murder gathered in black swooping darts just outside the panes but did not linger. They flew out to Brooklyn, tracing dark lines across the light sky.

Adventure House

I knew it before I knew it. Nestled into a quiet tree lined block near the river, my house looked like a kid's drawing of a house: a big square with a triangle on top. It had a turn-of-the-last-century porch, unusually clean lines of trim, and a large and elegant window on the second floor that was all original glass. Inside nothing screamed anything but benign neglect. "No one ever ruined it!" I said more than once in phone calls to trusted elders during the mad rush to put in an early bid. The hand-carved staircase even had its original dark wood finish intact. The backyard had potential. And then there was the holy grail of my real estate search, the thing I really wanted but was willing to compromise on: an attached garage.

Like a cosmic sign, the listing had appeared in my email maybe ten hours after I'd devoted a therapy session to my self-consciousness about having family money. My shaking hands crosschecked its address against the gorgeous façade in the first thumbnail picture. I knew timing was essential, but I didn't want to trouble my realtor, who was out of town with family. When he realized I was serious, however, he immediately arranged to have a buddy let me inside.

My offer was accepted. In the middle of June, I called my financial planner to transfer funds to an escrow account. The next Monday, I was late to my own closing because I thought it would be at the house itself. Eventually I parked my banged up red Camry on a random downtown block and walked through heavy rain into an office where everyone greeted me, at attention, even though I was only there to sign a few pieces of paper. (I accepted the complimentary branded bottle of water.) The title company man shook my hand, smiling in that fake American way, and gave me the keys. "I'd get those changed soon, if I were you," my broker told me.

"Thanks," I said. "If you could tell the listing agent to take the For Sale sign off the lawn as soon as possible, I'd really appreciate that."

I'm not saying the house was perfect. Standing inside, activating my homeowner's insurance, all the ways that it could improve began to stand out over the bigger picture—that it was square in the middle of my price range, that it had no obvious defects, that it was structurally sound.

Though I'm into retro kitchens, mine in particular had aggressively nineties wallpaper and four layers of vinyl flooring. The carpeting was probably also put in when I'd been in my teens in suburban NJ a good twenty years prior. Though the carpet was mostly on the second floor, it also made an unsettling cameo in the dining room. The bathrooms had been updated by the previous owner, an independently wealthy woman who rented it out to her son's friends on the university football team, the tiles and fixtures picked seemingly at random. And almost every wall in the place was property management off yellow.

But this was all exactly what I'd told my broker I wanted the summer before, when a lark of a house visit elsewhere had led me to think more carefully about buying. That other house had been flipped in ways that I didn't agree with. I wanted a historic house that was just a little unpolished so that I could be the one to see it shine.

I walked over to my first look at my house on one of the first really nice warm days, in May. The weather reminded me of the day I had fallen in love with Missoula while traveling, four years prior. I tend to mine this story for its humor. I had flown in from New York to see a close friend who lived over in Butte—several hours, but like nothing, in the intermountain west—and he kept telling me that once I saw Missoula, I'd connect with it and move there for grad school. To which I'd been replying, "I'm not going to grad school, I'm not moving to Montana, and I'm definitely not going to grad school for creative writing." Like all the best jokes I tell, this one was on me.

Underneath my humor, I was raw. My mother's death was then in the recent past, and had been sudden, violent, and accidental; my friend, the first person I thought to call to talk through my

initial shock. We had planned this visit to begin to give ourselves new memories, more recent than the times we spent together in college. After I flew back to the east coast, I spent the summer working full time and trying to avoid dealing with my trauma, which is a very old story. By the following fall, my memory of the accident was curdling into generalized anxiety disorder. I put in for a work transfer to Yellowstone, where the natural world helped, but my burnout symptoms accelerated. When I moved back to the city, I realized I couldn't last there much longer.

My mother loved traveling, and for several years after she died, I chased the rush of seeing a new place through her eyes, connecting with her far from anywhere she'd ever been. Her death left me with an inheritance that was both modest enough that I still live in the land of finite resources, and far more than I ever expected to receive when she was still alive. At some level, I think I have felt responsible for enjoying the money she set aside for a retirement she didn't have. But she was at heart a practical person who lived her entire life in the mid-Atlantic, within a hundred miles of where she was born. I knew she wouldn't want me to wander so far that I couldn't find my way to a home. When I bought the house, I thought of my parents buying their fixer upper at about my age, how they had always talked about it as a stationary adventure.

I am someone who is living a mostly good life so far, but experienced something truly terrible. The balance is something I will deal with, inside of therapy and out, for the rest of my life. Moving back to the west, going to grad school for the arts, buying my house—these have all felt like they were part of the same momentum, pulling me away from the version of reality where both my parents were alive, and into an uneasy peace with the accident itself.

"What do you do?" my neighbor from across the street asked me after we'd happened to park our cars at the same time. We were just meeting, and I could sense him gauging how young I

looked, especially with my peach pink hair. It was only a few weeks into my tenure as a solo female homeowner, but I already hated this question, especially for how the conversation always went.

"I'm in the grad school here at the university."

"What are you studying?"

"I'm doing the creative writing program." And then he looked at me again, the way these real adults mostly would.

"It's a good investment to live in this neighborhood," he finally said, as if this were something I had not considered. I'm sure I rambled on insufferably about how dead my mom was, when what I wanted more than pity was respect.

What could I say? I'm at the point now of identifying proudly with the autistic spectrum, with help from a good friend who was diagnosed in high school. That friend pointed out how much ableism there is in the way that people address someone who they think "ought" to be working. Sexism, too: I have difficulty believing that an independently wealthy young man, or a woman supported by her husband, would be subject to quite this much implied scrutiny. While it might be more satisfying to some to describe myself as an "investor," and no less accurate, that's not how I think of myself. And of course, as a dear friend and mentor sternly reminded me, intellectual work IS work.

Autistic folks who, like me, are perceived as "high functioning" frequently rely on a certain amount of scripted language to get ourselves through everyday conversations. (It doesn't go well when you deviate from these scripts—if you don't believe me, try answering the "how are you?" question honestly.)

The script for being a young homeowner came to me long after the situation arose. Nearly a year later, I found myself talking with a grad school acquaintance that I'd liked from afar. I summarized this chapter of my life with the phrase, "After my mom died, I found myself in a

financial position where it made sense to own real estate, but it took me a while to get my adulting together enough to follow through."

He nodded patiently. This is brilliant, I thought to myself.

There is also what a good friend told me just the other night: "I really think you're overthinking all of this." Our other friend nodded in agreement.

I'm open about my autism now because I can no longer hide it. I spent the years after college working skilled jobs, both before and after my mother died. Working seasonally with the National Park Service, I put on a bright face to greet the public and engaged in banter that was actually studied and premeditated. I was proud of my work and I still miss it, having traded a job that had a tangible and very public benefit to society for the murkiness of a creative path. (I could add my own observation that many of the best park interpreters have some autistic traits.)

As I sit here in a house that bears the evidence of my inability to put anything away, writ large, I know I would ultimately be less stressed out if I cleaned up in small pieces, if I hired someone to help, if I invited a friend to share in my shame by watching me shred old files. "I'll help, I'll help!" people say, and I respond kindly, knowing this is a social script that they're on. Maybe they do mean it, but since my mother died, I have become aware of how ultimately, we must rely mostly on ourselves.

Meanwhile, the house is the chicken and the mess is the egg, or maybe the mess is my mind. And the egg is scrambled and the chicken is in here somewhere, I just saw it.

Here are some real facts about my first year with the house: after I updated my address with my credit card company and then the autopay for the electric bill stopped working, I came within days of being disconnected twice before I had the autopay set back up. In that same time, my insurance agent transferred my file to another office in my town, and I didn't notice until it was

accomplished. When I called the trash company to pay my summer bill, they invited me to pay the spring one as well.

A common symptom of ADHD and autism, intertwined, is executive dysfunction. I have been late to see friends I desperately looked forward to seeing that whole day because in all my anticipation, I forgot to think about what time I'd need to start getting ready to leave. And that was for something I wanted to do. The anxiety seems self-explanatory.

I wish I could tell you that having money makes it all easier, and maybe that's true to some extent. But what I must say instead is that it makes all the problems that you have look completely different. I can't lie, it feels amazing to solve those problems that money can fix—to fight off being stranded at the wrong airport by means of a two hour taxi ride, to pay the roto rooter's overtime fees without a second thought.

And then there you are, staring at the problem that is intractable. Yourself, this person that you are. Because it's absolutely not great for your character. I have been cursed with a capacity for self-recrimination that's limitless, and blessed with extended family that did just fine on far less money than my self-made parents did. Still, I'm beginning to suspect that the asshole complaining that his French red wine was not served at the correct room temperature, like the lady sniffing that the purebred dog in her purse cost more than your car, hate themselves at least as much as you or I do. But I digress.

I didn't decide to take a break from the workforce any more than I decided to open up about my autism. Both were situations that existed either way, which could be mitigated by money. I was also burning out long before I hung up the ranger hat. I've since learned that even aside from my own experience of trauma, this is nearly a universal autistic experience: that the better we are at camouflaging ourselves into neurotypical society, the worse our burnout becomes.

Which makes a funny kind of sense. The time that I spend paying attention to others' social cues could also be measured in energy that I don't have to devote to figuring out what's important to me. I'm sure that there's other reasons why I'm often too exhausted to figure out how to start cleaning my house, but this has been a useful way for me to practice more self-compassion.

I'm writing this in an upswing of my mental health and functioning. Two friends who are like sisters to me each visited at different times this summer, and they helped me to remember that I do know how to tidy up after myself, I just had too much else going on for a while. Returning to therapy did even more to get me the perspective shift I needed.

The house will never be finished. I could have been here for twenty years, an outcome I hope for that sometimes seems unfathomable, and there would still be new projects. I know this firsthand because my father and mother began working on their own project house forty years ago, and as of this writing, there are still things for my father to fix.

And then the goals shift as progress gets made. I've eliminated much of the offending yellowish beige from the interior, and now what stands out to me is the taupe exterior. It's not awful, and I'd consider recommending it for a different house if I were working as a decorator. But it's not me, and it won't do for my house.

I had some self-employed housepainters on retainer for eight months straight. Together, we joked constantly about being on a home renovation show. I performed a variation of myself, the trustafarian who can't get her shit together. (In the neurodiversity community, we call these performances of partial selves "masking.") They did a lot of hard work for me, notably restoring my staircase while eliminating the runner carpet, and reclaiming old growth fir that had been a component of the subfloor into beautiful flooring. They also nearly drove me insane with how much their ADHD was multiplying my chaos, but I never doubted their good intentions.

With guidance from the painters and my friend Jeff at the paint store, I picked out paint colors that might be "too much" for many people. True red Tango with coral window wells for the interconnected living and dining rooms. A pretty pale yellow with mustard accent for the guest room, which my conservative father wholeheartedly approved. Vintage, dusty teal and a modern bright turquoise in the front hall. Blue Persuasion, color match of the Missoula summer sky, wrapping from wall to ceiling in the office. And in my own bedroom, a medium saturation periwinkle purple against which the indigo ceiling and wall wrap look nearly true blue. I can't stop smiling when I see these classical and vibrant colors throughout the house. I'm ecstatic that we were able to save so much of the wood flooring after pulling up the carpets. This is particularly true since I've realized how important color always was to me as an autistic person, a sign of my neurodivergence hiding in plain sight.

I've come to realize that writing a long and reflective piece is a lot like the house in at least one way: both are a process, not a result. And both take up a lot of my creative bandwidth, a problem I'm extraordinarily lucky to have.

Now my attention has shifted towards the kitchen, and how much I hate the bathroom remodels as they came to me. I'm aware that these are good problems, but it can be hard to keep perspective. And at this point, I've run through a good chunk of the renovation budget that I brought to the house with me. Some of it will have to wait at least a few years. (On the subject of the kitchen, I took a page out of my dad's playbook and got halfway through the demolition process without a renovation plan in place. The humor in this situation doesn't escape me on an abstract level, but it can be a little hard to find when I consider cleaning the exposed subfloor.)

It's been hard for me to see at the low points, but I have had a lot of help throughout this process. My father's and my relationship improved a lot with this common experience across time as

a focal point to our conversations. He finally has his chance to tell me what to do and expect me to listen. He flew out to support me during the building inspection, and he suggested improving the garage roof into a deck that could be walked on. Writing this, I was called away (not reluctantly) and up to take a look at some trim that my builder and neighbor is putting together for the door outside. I stand up there and there it is, the single biggest request to the universe that I made in this process: a view of the mountains. Compared to the much larger Missions, they're really big hills, and golden every afternoon with light. The perspective is only a little different from the one I had when I once told my best friend, "This is it. You were right. I do want to live here."

I'm pulling ahead. I'm uncertain about the state of my country and what's going on in the world, but I keep waking up every day. And as I drily remarked about spending my first winter of grief and despair in Florida, "I could think of far worse places to be convalescent." A new friend toured the house recently, and she told me she could see gatherings of writers and artists around my dining table. I haven't gotten there yet. But I've gotten over to where I can see it.