

Alison's body was feeling inhospitable. What she really wanted was to crawl out of her own self, but a walk in the woods was an easier option.

Pulling off her jeans, she resented the deep imprints from her waistband. Pulling on her leggings, relief. Orange compression knee socks. A fleece pullover. A vest.

Locking the house from the inside and quietly stepping out the unlocked back slider, the chill hits her hard. She steps back in, grabs a pair of sweats from the pile of clothes on the chair in the corner. Pulls them on right over hiking sneakers, stretching out the opening at the ankles, expanding like a cervix, giving birth to her own feet. With each step, the socks revealed like probing tongues, peeking. Licks of orange at her legs.

Everything is still with a half-frozen quiet. On the trail, just a few hundred feet from where she lives, the mud has become something unexpected and sculptural. Underfoot, the crunch. It's a very ephemeral world. The rocks are gray with ice crystals. Each leaf shrinkwrapped with cold.

*"We are so glad to have had the opportunity to talk with you about your qualifications."*

*"This has been such a hard decision, but we will not be advancing your candidacy."*

*"You have so many interests, do you really think this is the right opportunity for you?"*

These phrases flutter through her thoughts. Old emails. A rock. Leaf. Ankle twist. Sniffle. Twinge in the lower back. Thorns catching on shoelaces.

*"The lump is probably nothing."*

*"Surgery doesn't seem to be required at this time."*

*"What about another round of physical therapy and then, if that doesn't work, we can try a transvaginal steroid injection, and if that doesn't work, transvaginal Botox."*

The path is so easy to stay on. It just calls out and tells you, step here. Follow me. If it's so easy to follow the damn path, why am I always feeling so lost?

Alison thought mostly in words. At least, when she realized she was thinking, she could tune in, as if to a friend in conversation. But also, not at all like a friend. No, not like a friend.

It was cold even as she picked up the pace and could feel that some part of her center was starting to turn on. She thought about running (no). She thought about swimming. The cold water called to her with a promise: I'll make you want to stay alive!

The beach, about a mile further down the trail, sandy at its shore and quiet. In the summer she watched the crabs walk back and forth in the shallows. Wondering what she looked like to them, staring down.

The trail, easy and well marked, just up from the beach, with a large loop and a few paths zigzagging through the conservation area, was empty. After an hour of walking, Alison still hadn't seen anyone else. Sometimes she ran into one of her neighbors walking his dog.

Where are the crabs now? She thought, and turned from her usual looping path to one that cut through the center of the woods. In quiet, real quiet, she felt her breathing shift.

A rustle, but much too cold for a snake. Then nothing else, for a long time. She walked.

Looking up Alison could tell the sky was going to be blue. It had been gray for so many days in a row that noticing it now Alison felt happy. She breathed it in. The bare branches. The noise of two trees in a rocking caress.

Maybe things weren't so bad.

Alison, full of blue and ready to move, turned and found herself face to face with a buck.

I'm in his house! She thought.

Before she could decide whether to keep staring or look away, pivot, he was off. And Alison was left with the prayer of animal movement.

Thinking of the buck, she squatted down, stretched herself back up, and wanted so much to feel her animal self, unburdened. She walked, quietly, carefully. Disrupting less, noticing more.

Noticing more. And then noticing. Again. The sky.

From a different perspective this time. And the heat.

A kind of flooding of too much information with no context.

Through her right shoulder. Leaves and something so hot. And a man.

Dressed in camouflage, a blaze of orange hat, yelling. Running and his arms and his hands on her body, searching. And the two of them, looking at each other, and this unwanted arrow, the connection between them.