

the hospital, the blue buds, and all the rest

My grandmother looks meek in her hospital bed. Her hair is a white, piled halo. A lopsided snowbank, gone dull from the leave-in shampoo. The tuna sandwich they brought her for lunch sits on its cafeteria tray, grey and untouched.

She's restless. In the last hour, she's tried three times to slide her stiff body out of bed. Hands grasping the bed handle, legs swinging out over the edge. Every time, a nurse materializes. They return her to the sheets; I don't budge from my chair.

The flowers I brought, tiny blue buds, sit still on the windowsill. They're real flowers, in dirt. Not cut, so she can plant them when she goes home. The book in my hand is useless. I keep trying to read but even the first two sentences of the chapter elude me. Illegible, they run right through.

This curtain-split room has another occupant: a woman my mother's age, waiting on stomach surgery. Mimi keeps drawing back the curtain between them in an effort to start conversation. The woman is mildly amused, not that anything comes of it. Mimi's words are quiet and garbled, they fall out of her mouth like matted yarn.

She gestures to me, so I stand and step closer to the bed. At her elbow, where her IV bites into her arm, blood and tape and loose skin puckers together. My stomach roils. I excuse myself and meet the floor of the hallway outside.

My dad arrives in his staple bowtie, straight from work. Mimi eats her sandwich; I am excused. The leg infection improves, or whatever ailment had her in the hospital. She goes home. I'm not sure what happens with the blue buds.

Over the summer, she'll die in another, different, bed. When her room is momentarily empty, she'll pull the cannula from her nose, and that's how they'll find her.

I won't be there, but in Vermont instead, and I'll get the call on a wide porch swing that I've known since I was eight. I'll cry in the cool and dark, under cover of crickets. Summer in Vermont is such relief.

There's the place where things happen, and then there's the place where things happen to you. Mimi died in her old folks home in Olney, Maryland. Mimi also died on a porch swing in Vermont, and in a Quaker meeting for worship that fall in Georgia, and a year later at her burial in Lancaster, New Hampshire. If you asked her, she might have died when her husband died in 1973, or later, when her body grew tired and ready.

Either that, or she never died. And she's sitting somewhere right now, at a kitchen table, peeling a potato in one long delicate curl like she used to. Waiting for me to find her.

All Night I'll,

At night I bury myself into I crouch and cuddle
into a memory of his bed in his parents' house before I left
for school or he went to prison The sky is bright
the only way a winter sky knows how The trees
are empty

If I'm remembering a specific moment
I am probably ass-naked laid out on navy jersey sheets
a candle on his bedside like he taught me
If I'm being really honest which is maybe not what
you want If I'm remembering nothing specific at all
it could be anytime his bed or mine whatever view
outside whatever sheets beneath But it's always him
and it's always me

The trouble with this memory
is only that I can't be inside of it I can wrap myself
in the figment the filament of dreams Caught in a wisp
of love but I can't return You can't go home you can't
go home you can't there's none home go away
you can't

After Andrew, and a Night in the Woods of Tate, Georgia

It's late and I'm sick
over the toilet in a cabin in Georgia.
His hand is rubbing small circles
into my back like my mom used to,
like friction, it warms. *I'm embarrassed,*
I gurgle as strands of spit make spider
webs into the bowl. Stretching,
stretching even as the flush
takes it all away.

In a different time, maybe six
years ago, he's walking away
from the Nashville River to go kiss
someone else. The meat of my calves
scrapes the concrete wall I'm straddling
and I'm sad, maybe devastated,
but I don't let it in. Not until
the next morning, until I know
for sure.

Just before I got sick
and met the inside of this toilet
in this cabin, someone broke a glass
in the center of the living room and I danced
my way over to the broom and tried
to ass-shake my way to the ground
as I cleaned it up. The broom got taken
away from me quickly.

In another time, just shy of six
years ago, I'm sitting on a bus after dark
crossing the state lines between Tennessee
and Maryland. I'm digging my head
deeper into my pillow pet, into black
and white spots, because it's soft
and better than crying out in the open.
He's sitting one row down
from me and looking back
in my direction, fixed, his eyes
soft and sad because he knows
he's done something wrong like kiss
someone else, and I refuse to look up,
because I know, too.

Just before I shook my ass
to the glass-covered ground,
we were making drinks together
in the kitchen. Just us, muddling
over one round and then another
for all our friends.

First, a round of vodka gimlets,
sweet and strong. Then, tequila sunrises.
The orange juice and grenadine clapping
into each other smartly. We laugh
and laugh in the kitchen together,
everyone else outside in the living room.
Our project alone: keep drinking,
keep drinking till the joy runs out.

When it runs out, my head hangs
in the toilet bowl and splatter paints
the orange and red sunrise and the thin,
clear yellow, and his hand is on my back
as he says *there's nothing to be embarrassed about,*
that this happens to everyone.

And that's the rub, we're older now
and whatever versions of us
that grew up on each other stay swimming
above us, on the ceiling of the bathroom.
Only I can see them, he clearly can't.
But they're running and running towards each other,
and just when you think they might collide
in some violent, snarling mass, they slip
right by. Translucent again, caught
in opposite corners of the bathroom ceiling,
in this cabin, in the woods,
in Georgia.

*if lightning struck above you,
[did you duck your head and run?]*

Middle school and I'm in the center of an open field. Rain threatens and someone says: This is the worst place we could be. Lightning strikes the highest point, it has to come down somehow. We run. Land on concrete, maybe a ramp towards a school portable [agh, now I'm making stuff up.] We're huddled under an awning, standing on concrete [no, that's not right, back to the beginning.]

We're in the middle of an open field. It's soccer practice, middle school. We're all clad in cleats and shinguards and thick soccer socks, each layer plastered to the next with sweat [and maybe add a visual of dirt here.]

Or instead: I'm in my car, older, twenty-something, in a deep cut of a neighborhood I haven't driven through in six years, staring at an open field, where one time I had soccer practice.

[This is the practice of embedding a memory.] If I close my eyes—onto that black red, black orange, of squinched lids—we're standing in the middle of an open field. We're staring at the sky above us, only it's gray yellow and taunting. The circle of sky browns at the edges and now it's almost a hurricane, only nothing is falling. No thunder has cracked over in a passion of light. We're just staring at this tormented sky and reminding ourselves, out loud, that we could die right here. Right now, we are in the center of an open field, the highest thing around, and there is a high likelihood of death, and I have to wonder: *Why do we remind ourselves of that just in the moment that it's happening.*

The lightning never strikes, not in the memory, old or new. [But it might strike now, because that's how this poem should end.]

There's All Sorts of Trash I See On My Walk to the Park

On the walk to the park there's a hospital
with a billboard that says: "AMAZING THINGS
ARE HAPPENING HERE." There's an oak tree
dropping acorns as small projectiles on the people
below; there's the smell of dog piss because
it just rained, the air is flush. There's trash bagged
and loose, a wet broom lying in the dirt, recyclables—
an empty Van Lewen pint and a handle of Absolute
just able to be made out.

In the park there are two different dogs
named Rosie being simultaneously called
by their owners; there's a man blowing one cloud
of smoke and then another, leaving them behind and suspended
like Morse code. In the park I am still thinking
about the hospital—what hospitals are usually for
and what they have been used for in the past two years.
I am thinking about the virus, and the refrigerated trucks
they sidled up to hospitals in New York. The cold,
the metal. There has always been sickness.

In my family there has been sickness, always.
I remember middle school, before soccer practice,
home alone with my brother. My cleats are on
and my bag is ready, and my brother materializes beside me—
his hand to his chest. He needs help he says, he needs
the hospital. The front door dissolves and I'm in the street
now, cleats untied and making a hollow sound
against the asphalt as I turn my body left and right, looking.
My chest heaving now, arms wide to take in the street,
as if that might help.

The car that comes
to save us is familiar. It's the carpool,
of course, so my friend's mom drives us to the hospital.
The ride is just my brother's face, his hand still
to his chest, and his assurances that he is dying,
he is dying, he is dying.

In the hospital I am tucked
away as if in an envelope, as in alone, useless.
In the waiting room, perched on a waiting chair, I am too young
and small to supplement any information. Just old enough
to be scared. The tests come back normal; the diagnosis

is nothing. My brother is sent home and I am left alone to verify that something was wrong, un-okay, dangerous, close to death. That the end came over him in a vision that they ground into sand at the hospital and scattered through the halls.

So when I walk past the billboard on the hospital wall, it doesn't slide out of my mind within the hour, as so much that I see on my walks must. Here I am, cutting through the grass like all the people with dogs do, wondering about the hospital's advertising man, and if it's a team rather than just him, so the idea would've been okayed by a whole collection of people to end up there, in such large letters, the absurd idea that AMAZING THINGS might happen, THERE.