Catching Tadpoles

I never did read that book of Rilke that you gave me, except for the first two poems. I didn't much like the first one, but the second one, I did. The one about moving in widening circles around God and the primordial tower. "I may not complete this last one / but I give myself to it". I like that very much. I should have kept reading. That book was a gift you gave me for Mother's Day last spring, and I should have honored it better than I did. I might even have enjoyed it. We all have our failures. That is good to remember. Still.

If it is any consolation, I keep the book on my desk, so I see it every day. And I think to myself, This weekend, this weekend I'll begin. But I never do. Maybe someday. Anyways, it reminds me of you each time I see it because of course it does. Who else in this house would read German poetry from a book called *Love Poems to God* but you? Who else ever lived in this house with me but you.

I do get lonely. I try not to worry so much about it. I certainly don't want to burden you with it. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything, but it's true, and I know I should be more honest with you.

If you still lived here you would tell me to read that book, and maybe I would, then. And when I finished you would ask me which poem was my favorite, and I would sit with the question for a moment, partly thinking of my own answer, but really just waiting for yours. And you would tell me, and you would have it memorized so when you spoke it, it wasn't Rilke's but yours, changed somewhere in your body, and you would tell me what it means, then what it means to you, and that would be more sacred to me than any poem in that book, or any other book I could ever read. If you still lived here, I could never be lonely.

I work mostly from home now. It's easier to call most of my patients and the meetings were all conference calls anyway. It's not that I have become agoraphobic in my loneliness, it's just easier, really. And I still leave the house to see some folks, so don't worry over me too much.

There's this man up in Dover I see on Thursday afternoons-- you'd like him. His name is Cillian McGrath, and you won't believe it, but he's Irish. He used to be a priest, until he met his wife.

We never went to church, did we. I've never thought to ask you if you regret that. I think I do. Not out of any particular love for the religious tradition, but because I have come to understand that a life is richer when lived with some kind of belief in mind. So much of life is lost when we think it has no meaning.

Mr. McGrath is in his nineties now. He has lung cancer, and so is shackled to an oxygen tank. It has become too difficult now for him to leave the house, but he seems nonetheless happy to still be alive. I admire people like that. In this line of work you meet so many people who, when faced with the question of mortality, simply and catastrophically crumble. They close themselves off from life, all while it waits like a dog, old and loyal, to be loved for one final second. And seeing that the door will not open, it grows tired of waiting and is gone. And then what. So much of life is lost when we think it has no meaning.

But Mr. McGrath is not like most hospice patients I have met, though I wouldn't blame him if he were. To be put on hospice is to be given an expiration date, give or take a month or two. It is depressing. And yet I do not think Mr. McGrath is depressed.

Just today I paid him a visit and when I walked upstairs I saw him through the open doorway, sitting upright in his bed, hands folded in his lap. The white linen curtains had been pulled away, the window opened. The forest, much older than him, rustled in the breeze of late spring, blossomed with birdsong. And that room smelled not like a hospital or a man on his deathbed but like pollen and pine and the blessed muddy soil at least freed from the snowdrifts and warming in the sunlight. He must have been paying a very careful kind of attention because he did not hear my footsteps on the old wooden floorboards, or my knocking on the doorframe, or even his own name, the first time I called it. I thought I might be interrupting a rare peace I wish I knew better, and so was silent and nearly left. Then he said, Robin, how good to see you. Like always.

There is an old green armchair his family keeps at the foot of his bed, partly so when I speak to him we might look each other in the eye, and partly so his son or daughter might keep vigil over him while he sleeps. It is always looming, the inevitable, unknowable end. I sat, he watched. We tried to forget.

"How are you today, Mr. McGrath?" I asked him.

He smiled at the window, closed his eyes against the warmth of the sunlight on his face. A breeze built, then broke. Faintly I heard the wind chimes on the front porch, humming their joy. The geese flew overhead, calling out in agreement. And that forest, so green and alive, whispering.

"It is a beautiful day, Robin. A beautiful day."

A pause. He watched me, watching him. He hadn't really answered and he knew it, and he knew I would wait until he did.

"I am alive, and happy for it," he said. "I am lucky to see the days that I do, and today is a beautiful day."

I have had this job for nearly twenty years and yet I wonder sometimes if I was ever any good at it. So often I have no idea what questions to ask that man. It's like trying to teach a fish how to swim. I don't think there is a single thing I could say that could make the end of his long and graceful life any easier. He already knows.

He smiled. "There is no need. Sit with me and listen. I would enjoy your company."

So we sat, and we listened.

"Do you hear it?" he asked.

I heard the trees, the leaf bodies moving against each other. I heard that ancient forest whispering, and listened.

Hush. Be still. I am working.

You remember your grandmother. Of course you do. She was your beloved just as much as she was mine.

You remember driving here, to Vermont, for the summer. When you were little, and wild, and your grandmother not yet the still and painful body she died in.

You remember the hikes we took, the three of us, through the mountain forest. The plastic bag of wooden eyes, noses, mouths. The trees, watching.

You would laugh like it was the most wonderful thing in the world. A wooden face on a tree. It always seemed to me that the woods are more alive than we give them credit for, and now here was the mouth, the nose, the eyes, proving it. Here is a soul like mine. I laughed. You must have felt it too.

Those trees still have their faces. You'd be happy, seeing it. They are slightly warped by time but who among us cannot say the same of themselves? What do those trees say to each other about us? About our fast and brief lives? You would have a good answer.

The first time I met Mr. McGrath, I pointed to a painting that hung above his bed and told him you would love it. And you would. I find it odd, but you would like it. It's this old and yellowed screenprinting of a farmhouse, three women working in the yard. One in the garden, one with the chickens, one running between the others, or to someplace else entirely. You would say it reminds you of us -- you, me, and your grandmother. And I can see it, though we never did have any chickens.

I thought nothing of it when I said it, but I should have, because it sounded so much like asking. And then he was still a stranger who owed me nothing, certainly not a gift for my daughter. But he nodded earnestly,

said, Really? Do you think so? and began to offer it up like food into the hands of the hungry. So I said No, no, and Oh, I couldn't possibly, and after a while he conceded, then laughed.

"You'll have to commend your daughter on her taste in artwork. My wife loved that painting, God bless her, absolutely loved it, but I can't get either of my children to take it home. And even if I could it'd just waste away in some basement or other. I can't bear the thought. It needs a home, someone to love it."

"Don't we all," I said.

"Don't we all. Indeed."

It was snowing that day, heavy, wet snow that lands and does not let go. The snowflakes weren't even snowflakes, not really, but huddled masses, a hundred little bodies holding onto each other, braced against the fall. He watched. Then he asked for your name, and I told him. Mary. He liked that. Then he asked me about you. What's Mary like? And I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

To be fair, I've always found it difficult to talk about you. For a while it was because I hated those mothers who bragged and bragged and bragged about their children, and because I realized that that was all I could ever do. And then once I was alone I couldn't talk about you without remembering my own loneliness. The words I'd used to make you up now outlined the body of my loss, incapacitating me in a way for which I could never possibly be prepared. I was embarrassed and ashamed, and Mr. McGrath just looked at me with those kind, kind eyes, the ones that already knew, that had already forgiven. He smiled, and understood, and told me about his day.

You wouldn't remember, but when you were two, you had an infection in your kidney so bad you were in the hospital for a week and a half. I thought you were going to die. It's a terrible thing to say, and an even

worse thing to believe. Mothers aren't supposed to give up on their babies; they are meant to hope against hope, believe against belief, and I could not. I saw those doctors, their worried faces, and you, your small body filled with tubes and wires. And I was helpless. That is the only time I ever asked God for anything. I went to that hospital chapel, that room made for begging. I knelt before the altar. I bowed my head. And I begged.

At night I would crawl into your hospital bed and hold you in your sleep, touching your hair, your face, your hands. Remembering all of you. And when your grandmother found me in the morning, she would be my mother, too. She would guide me out of bed, make me eat, bathe, sleep. Hold me while I wept. Walk with me to the chapel. Kneel. Bow. Beg.

I never told you how grateful I am to have had you with me when she died. Of course I didn't. People, myself included, spend so much time thinking of grief as a small and ugly stranger. Something to talk over and around, but never to know, and certainly never to love. I have always had my failures with that kind of strength, though, so I'm sure you knew more than I ever told you.

You were sixteen then. So you remember those days spent sorting, pruning, disposing. You remember the boxes upon boxes of photographs. The picture of your grandmother on her fortieth birthday, her right arm raised, hand in her hair. You were holding it like it was made of glass, staring like eventually it might move. You handed it to me, carefully.

"Whenever I knew her she was my grandmother," you said. "But I look at that and I see your mother. She was your mom. I'm sorry I never thought of it before."

It made me cry, but I was glad you said it. I think I got so used to being your mother that I forgot how to have one of my own. I forgot the tenderness of being somebody's baby. It might have taken me a decade to realize it on my own and by then the grief would have gone and I would just be the mangled remains of a body healed wrong, beyond comfort, or solace. You put your arms around me and did not let go.

I wish we could have kept more of her things. Her clothes, her magazines, her lavender perfume, which somehow smelled less like lavender and more like cigarettes. We used to complain about it, that awful smoke smell. How it would wake us up in the middle of those summer nights when she hobbled to the bathroom, removed her cannula, and lit a cigarette, blowing smoke into the vent shaft. You can smell it even now, if you are paying attention.

But so much is gone. Do you remember that truck, those men from 1-800-GOT-JUNK? I cannot forget. We said afterwards how efficient they were. Now I think to myself, Yes, how efficient. Next time I want to dispose of a life and all its evidence, I know exactly who I'll call.

So what remains? This old saltbox house. This secretary desk. Me. Somewhere I have stashed away all the letters and recipes she ever wrote. Everything in her handwriting. I'll have to find them all.

I keep one recipe, her favorite, hanging on the fridge. You remember the pesto risotto she used to make. It was the meal we had for all your birthdays, all of mine. The night before you went to college. You remember. Of course. That last supper. I was cooking then, so you will also remember she was the better chef by far. I try to do my best though. I hope you know that much.

But do you remember the summer you turned nine, the dinner we had on your birthday? It was the last year your grandmother kept the garden in the front yard. After that her knees and her hips kept her out of the plant beds. But *oh*, while it lasted it was so beautiful.

She really was talented. And at all these things I forgot to learn from her. Cooking, for one. And gardening. Growing. I should have been paying attention, because it was a kind of magic that is lost to me now. She grew basil, garlic, spinach, lettuce, kale, carrots, tomatoes, strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, and more, I'm sure of it. So the pesto then was always fresh, always grown from home and by hand. And it really was some kind of magic. I hope you remember, because I'll never have words big enough to hold it.

When I say that I try to do my best, I mean it. I've been keeping the gardens again, trying to remember what they looked like before. I thought it would make you happy. When you were little, that summer especially, you would sit between the hedgerows, communing with the blackberry bush. You grandmother never believed in pesticides so you could eat the berries right off the branches, and you did. You would spend whole evenings like that, seated with the berries and the other growing things, the sunset smiling on you as it dipped below the treetops.

I am no great gardener. My strawberries are too small and bitter, most of them gone to the rabbits anyways. I grow more kale and tomatoes than I mean to or can eat, so I have come to giving them away.

Mr. McGrath always seems pleased by a basket of fresh tomatoes. His daughter, he says, is a wonderful chef, and he promises his thanks. I should really just give the basket to her, then, if she's the one who'll use them, but the gift is to him. It isn't much. I'm no great gardener, I told you. The tomatoes are too watery and the kale tastes too much like kale, it is still a gift and matters that it's him to whom I give it. It means I still think he is alive enough to knowingly receive. Maybe that is the gift.

Just last week I brought him a basket and set it on his bed. He reached inside and withdrew a tomato the size of a fist, firetruck red. He held it up to the light, felt the weight of its body in his hand.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you."

I wonder if it isn't too late to plant the blackberries. You're meant to do it in early spring, which, in Vermont, might qualify as May. It's a nice thought. A pretty picture. Blackberries heavy on their branches, an offering from shrub hands. Glistening like gemstones in the sun. I like to imagine your reaction. The way you would gasp and laugh and run down the hill to sit between the hedgerows again. Still small, still wild. And I would watch with the soft contentment of that hard work and the quiet gift I never knew to ask for but craved like water in the desert. It would make you so happy. But it would not bring you back.

A few weeks after I began meeting with Mr. McGrath, he asked about you again. He'd already told me by then about his family. His daughter, Fiona, a high school English teacher in Connecticut. And his son, Patrick, who owns a bookstore in New York. You'd like them. They're in their thirties, so older than you would be now, but people always said you seemed older than you were. They'd like you too. Fiona and Patrick. Everybody always did.

"Tell me about Mary." He was soft when he said it. Undemanding. I could have said no. He didn't ask like he deserved it, like I owed it to him. He asked like somebody who knew I needed to say it, thought I didn't know myself. "What's she like?"

I thought about it. About you. About those mothers who brag about their children for hours, the ones I said I hated. The body of my loneliness, familiar and exhausting. I could have said no. I could have stopped myself before I started but I was so tired of it. That loneliness.

The year my mother died, you made me a bible. From books and from poems and from the well of your own insight, you paraphrased and quoted and juxtaposed, and wrote on a piece of purple construction paper that became the cover, The Bible, by Mary. My favorite line was your favorite first, the one you explained to me. The one by Hermann Weyl, some German mathematician, though you never did like math. He said, "Only to the gaze of my consciousness, crawling along the lifeline of my body, does a small section of this world come to life as a fleeting image in space which continuously changes in time." You told me something about how physicists don't really believe in linear time, though it's the only time we know. And you said something wonderful about memory, how we get to come back.

So I told him. Everything, all of it. I told him how smart and how talented and perfect you are. The stories you write. How you always read with a pen, and love to be outside. How blackberries are your favorite. How proud I am of you. How much I love you, too much for words.

He could see you. He could feel you. He knew. How precious, how sacred you are to me. And he asked, "Where is she now?". But he already knew. I looked down at my hands, flexed my fingers back. You always said we had the same hands -- hitchhiker thumbs and the same shape of nail.

I told him. The truth, what he already knew. I felt the words in my mouth, the taste of bitter metal, like pennies. I heard them, too, but they were distorted, wrong. No, no, that doesn't sound right. That can't be true. That's not where you are. You're on your way home, coming back. On Route 100 by now, I bet. And I'm going to plant the blackberries so when you get here, when you come back to me, I will have something good to give you, the gift that says what I don't know how to. The language I can't speak.

"How did it happen?"

You remember. You were there. Almost a year ago to the day. Text me when you leave the airport, I'll see you when you get here. Call me if there's any trouble. That's what I said. And you said, It's only an hour from Bradley, what could go wrong. And I said, Drive safe anyway. I love you. You said, I love you too. See you soon. The phone call from the hospital. Route 100, the car and the tree. Don't know why, they said. Don't know why. The book they found in the backseat, somehow still intact. *Love Poems to God*. Rilke. Your handwriting inside the cover, your blue pen. Happy Mother's Day, love Mary, and a little blue heart, smudged on the opposite page.

How did it happen? Yes. How did it happen?

I wanted to hit that policeman who asked me if it might have been suicide. No. Of course not. I love you too, you'd said. See you soon. The book in the backseat. No. Not a suicide. Not you. Not you.

What to call it then but an accident. What to tell this old man but the truth.

"An accident. Nothing more."

When you were little, I would say, as all good parents do, that accidents happen. I said it because it would stop you crying, but also because I really do believe it. Accidents do happen. I'm not one of those people

who thinks every single thing in this life happens for a reason. I know better than to try convincing myself that this kind of loss is good. But I said before that so much of life is wasted when we think it has so meaning. So how do I reconcile that kind of contradiction? How did it happen?

I think that the idea of everything happening for a reason would necessarily imply that for every single event in every single life, there is a purpose, or a function. So every good thing, and every bad thing, can never be concerned with only its own being. Then joy is not joy, but the opposite of sorrow. Then life is never what it is, and only what it is not. Tell me, where is the love?

You remember. You were there. So was my mother. So was I. That clearing. That pond in the woods, below a break in the canopy. The creek flowing in at one end, out at the other, so the water was always clean. The lilies, rising from the water until their bodies bowed under the weight of their flowers, leaning towards one another as if passing on a secret. The dragonflies above the cattails, armor glistening, blue and purple and magnificent.

You stood on the shore in that green swimsuit you loved so much, net in hand. Your grandmother was already in the water, knee deep, one hand holding her own net, the other urging you forward. So you watched as the water creeped higher and higher up your legs, lifting your arms like a baby bird, balancing. Then she pointed at the shadows in the water, and gave them names. Around your ankles, see, the minnows, the sunfish. And in that underwater grass like mermaid hair, that's where their babies grow. Those bubbles over there, just below the surface, those are frog eggs, like jelly with a little life inside. And there's the momma over there on that lily pad, she's watching us. Tell her 'don't worry, momma'. We're just saying good morning. Now take that net I gave you, she said, hold it tight, yes, just like that. Slow and careful, sneak it under, towards the bottom. Don't give anybody a scare. Good. Start on one side, over here, go all the way across. Yes, very good. Now lift it up, careful, careful. What do you see?

Against the pink string of the net, the dark bodies of tadpoles, tails pushing, and nothing to swim through.

"Tadpoles!" you said.

"Yes! Tadpoles!" my mother replied. Both of you laughed with the miracle of it all.

"Now what?" you asked. And she put her hands over yours and lowered the net into the water. The tadpoles swam out.

"Just saying good morning."

You looked at me. I was standing on a flat, mossy rock, in the shade but close enough to the clearing that the sunlight was moving on my skin, as the breeze moved the branches. And every so often the sun would touch the corner of my eye, and then be gone, a flash of light as if refracted through diamond. So you looked at me and smiled and laughed and when I saw you, you were sparkling in that summer light, sending tadpoles off to live the rest of their short and stunning lives.

I don't know what the meaning is, but I know that it is there. I have seen the world from the mountaintops and the valley troughs, and I can tell you that I went to neither place thinking of the other. Life is exactly what it is. The unknowable dream. Every day is sacred because it is. I cannot give you a thesis, or a number, or the face of God, but I can tell you that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, and the blackberries come in summertime, and all those tadpoles you let go turned into frogs and had tadpoles of their own. You are the most precious thing to me in this world. That's all I need to know.

Mr. McGrath is getting worse. Fiona called on Sunday to let me know. He'd slept through the last two days and would not eat or drink. The doctor had been by that morning and said in so many words that this was the end of the line.

So yesterday I went to Dover. Patrick let me in and led me upstairs. He sat down on the foot of the bed, rested his hand on his father's bony leg. Fiona had crawled alongside the old man, her head laid gingerly on his shoulder, arms and legs bent into her body so she was small, and someone's daughter.

Mr. McGrath himself was awake and upright but seemed to be somewhere else entirely. Through the open window I could tell the air was dense and humid with the coming storm. The wind, harsh and unsteady, like the trembling inhale of a sobbing child.

Do you remember that book I used to read to you at night? You were so young then. *Love You Forever*, it was called. "I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always. As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be." The song, the promise from a mother to her son. And then when she is old and dying, when he holds that beloved body and repeats the old refrain.

I told you once that losing a mother is the hardest thing a person can do, and that I hoped you never had to do it. I don't know if I still believe that. Maybe it's not the hardest thing. All of life is hard. Losing my mother. Losing you. Finding a dear friend and watching him die. I question my place in this life, often. But I don't know where else I'd go. That hard, flat rock made soft by moss. From the lifeless, life. There is no nothingness. I try to be grateful. If nothing else, at least I know you never had to lose your mother.

Mr. McGrath was watching the window, like always, until he wasn't. His children felt the change, and stood, and kissed his head, and left.

"Robin. How good to see you."

"Mr. McGrath. How are you?"

Like always.

He looked at the window, smelled the rain on the wind, that promised storm.

"I am dying, Robin."

"Yes," I said, because I would not lie to him, "you are."

"It's still a beautiful day, you know." The dark grey clouds, the thunder in the distance. "So many people would say, No, it's going to storm. But this has always been my favorite kind of weather." He paused. "Would you mind if we stepped outside?"

So with Patrick's help, I settled Mr. McGrath into his wheelchair, rolled him to the staircase, which he descended on one of those moving chairs, back into the wheelchair, and then out to the back porch so the cast iron bistro table was at his left. I sat beside him. Fiona brought us lemonade and a bowl of fresh fruit.

From that porch you could see the creek, where it widened and might even be called a river. Great slabs of stone and their little pebble children, scattered nearby. The white of water where it rushed and tumbled through the air. And beyond, the forest. The conifers, tall and full, needles which, from a distance, looked almost soft. The elms, arms old and everywhere.

Creek, laughing. Forest, whispering. Thunder, marching. Closer.

"You know, back in Ireland, I lived on a farm. My family, all ten of us. I was the youngest. I was eleven when my mother died. She'd been sick for a while, long as I can remember. So we knew, and had known for a long time, that she would be dying. We waited for it. For her to die."

The rain began. Soft and intermittent, like you might have imagined it.

"So one day she was sitting on the porch -- we had one just like this, only in the front of the house -- and one of my sisters and I were playing in the yard. It was sunny that day, all day, which is rare. And then all of a sudden these clouds, these big, heavy storm clouds come rolling in. Like *that*." He snapped his fingers. "So my mother told us, Go check on the cows. And we did. We ran off to the pastures, and everything was fine. A little rain, and then the sun was out again. So we came running back to the house. Cows are fine, Ma, cows are fine. I

thought she might have been sleeping, her head on her shoulder like she'd just forgotten to bring a pillow. But she was dead. I'd been waiting all my life so I could be there when it happened and she'd gone and died in the five minutes I wasn't looking." He shook his head, laughed.

"We see a lot of that, funny enough," I said. "Mothers don't like to die in front of their children. I'm sorry. I don't mean to make it less meaningful--"

"No, no. You're right. It makes sense. I don't want to die in front of my children. I'm no mother but I love them enough to wish I could spare them at least that sorrow."

Lightning flashed in the high, far distance. Three seconds, then thunder.

"Did you ever read any Mary Oliver?"

"Yes," I said. "My daughter gave me a collection, once."

"You know she had cancer, a few years ago. Lung cancer. A smoker, like me!" He laughed. "And she wrote this poem, in four parts, called 'The Fourth Sign of the Zodiac', and that last part, dear God in heaven, it's so beautiful."

The rain was steady then, a silvery veil, and everywhere. And the wind had picked up, too, so the rain blew in fitful gusts onto the porch, finding skin, a cool, brief kiss. Mr. McGrath closed his eyes. Raindrops collected on his face, so much like freckles in the sunlight. He didn't flinch, or wipe them away, but felt them, breathing in that rain-smell.

"I don't want to die," he said, almost a whisper. "I have so loved this life. I have so loved my children. This place. I am not ready to let it go. I don't think I ever will be. And my wife, I have so loved her, too, but I'll see her again, I know it. That was always the comfort. That she would be there, waiting. But this--" he raised a hand into the air, catching rain in his palm, "this life makes no promises. None at all. That wildness. That is what I can't let go."

I had nothing to say. He looked at me. He knew. And he'd already forgiven.

When I came home I went to the bookshelf. *Blue Horses*, you gave me that book. So I found that poem, and looked to the fourth section:

> Late yesterday afternoon, in the heat,
> all the fragile blue flowers in bloom
> in the shrubs in the yard next door had
> tumbled from the shrubs and lay
> wrinkled and fading in the grass. But
> this morning the shrubs were full of
> the blue flowers again. There wasn't
> a single one on the grass. How, I
> wondered, did they roll back up to
> the branches, that fiercely wanting,
> as we all do, just a little more of
> life?

It's dark now, and the storm outside is raging. The wind pushes against this house and makes it groan, and shiver. I am thinking of Mr. McGrath. I worry that I have failed him. I am supposed to provide comfort to those who are too sick and too weak to carry on with the business of living. To make death a more habitable place. And I couldn't do it. Mr. McGrath, who so loved God he became a priest. Who so loved his wife, he married her anyway. Who so loved his children, he could not let them watch him die. Who so loved this world, he could not bear to leave it, no matter what paradise is promised on the other side.

When I think of you, you're on Route 100, coming home. Even now. It's a little trick I play, a delusion that lets me sleep at night. You're still somewhere, to me. You're on your way. I'll see you soon. And I think I will, someday, but that day won't come for a long time. So here I am. What to do.

It's hard for me to reconcile what Mr. McGrath said to me with the knowledge that I have lost you. Because it's true; life is so stunning, and wild, and we want more of it, always. A life is the fullest thing a body can know, and still, it is never enough. And you are not here. The fantastic dream of it all is, for you, finished. There's a part of me that wishes I could tell you that you aren't missing much, but you are. I hope that you saw, and knew while you could, how magnificent it is to be alive. The best I can do is know it was a tragedy to lose you, feel that grief, measure its depth as if it were a well. And looking upwards, I see all of creation, no less sacred for the cavern in its side. The best I can do is see this life through to the end, and know I was lucky to live at all.

Mr. McGrath died in his sleep. I went to the house this morning. Irish tradition says to bury the body three days after death, so I arranged the burial for Thursday afternoon. I don't normally go to patients' funerals, but I was invited, so I'll be there. They gave me that painting, the one I said you'd like. He wanted you to have it, Fiona said. It's hard to say no to these things. Custom be damned.

I haven't been to a funeral since yours. I had hoped it would be the last one. Do you know where I buried you? I bet you could guess.

That pond is technically on the property, so no one could say no when I asked that you be buried there. It's where we spread your grandmother's ashes too, you remember. It seemed right. They mowed a bit of grass, dug a hole, and laid you down. Moved the dirt back over your body like a blanket, like you were only sleeping.

For a while your grave looked so much like a scar, the jagged interruption of the standard living thing. The pond, same as it ever was, the lilies and cattails and the sparkling water. Then you in your grave-bed, so palpably gone.

I'm sorry to tell you all of this. And I said I didn't want to burden you. The truth is I do not know why I am telling you any of this. Maybe I just needed to tell it to myself. Write the words down, and know that they're true. So then why not just journal, or, heaven forbid, get a therapist. Why do I always come back to you, even now, when you could not possibly come back to me? An accident, I guess. Nothing more.

I told you I was lonely and that is true enough. There are no living human bodies left in this house but my own, and so I feel that quiet, that physical aloneness. But I have been walking, hiking the same trails we would back then, back when there were three of us.

I walk down the hill, through the gardens -- I planted those blackberries, finally -- down to the treeline, into the woods. I follow the trees with their wooden faces to the creek. I step on the biggest rocks and cross. Then I come to the clearing, to the pond, and to you. For a moment, it's like nothing has changed. The water still sparkles, the cattails still sway. The dragonflies still march through the reeds in their armor, wings flashing. I sit on the same flat stone, still covered in moss. From here I can look across the pond and see your headstone, small and dark against the grass. The scar is healed over, almost perfectly, green, and cherry blossomed.

So there you are, I tell myself. Not on Route 100, or disappeared entirely, but just across this pond. I can hear the frogs and the toads, singing from their homes in the mud. If I squint, yes, I can see the frog eggs, a blur beneath the surface. And look, there go the tadpoles, new to this life and thrilled by the miracle. And after it all, there you are. Just across the pond.

You told me once that nobody likes poetry until they have to, until they need it, and I think that's true. Otherwise it's like reading someone else's diary, or eavesdropping on a prayer. It doesn't make sense until it's yours. "I may not complete this last one / but I give myself to it".

I have so loved this life. It will be longer than I can stand and end before I'm ready. I give myself to it.

The blossoms crawl upward. Blackberries come in the summer. The tadpoles turn into frogs.

Everytime.

I'll see you soon.