

The Birds of Autumn

By the fourth time her boyfriend threatened to kill her, Maura had stopped worrying. He said so in a text message when she was grading papers in late October, burrowed up in a bare office accentuated only by two framed diplomas, a salt lamp, and a few bookshelves. Maura liked the office because of the window, facing west and almost the size of the wall itself, and the high ceilings, both allowing for natural light and a view of the sparrows that nestled in the oak trees outside the English building. Decorating wasn't in her budget. Instead, she used command strips and a bit of sticky putty to hang former students' essays and letters above her desk. One day, she might frame them and send the back with a nice note saying, "thanks for getting me through the tough days." For now, she was happy to meet them for coffee when they weren't busy.

The text from Anderson came around 5:30. Hearing the buzz, and looking for a sign that it was time to play something more conducive to grading than Spotify's Foo Fighters radio, Maura abandoned her remaining stack of Modernist critical analyses--her students were struggling through Eliot's poetry, just as she did as an undergraduate--for her phone. She tapped her pinky ring, a silver band, against the case twice.

If you threaten me like that again, I'm not even joking this time I will kill you.

There was a moment of initial shock, as there always was when Anderson suggested he might hurt her, something of a shudder and a sudden building heat that made Maura clutch her stomach. Her hands, dry at the knuckles, began to shake. Her vision faded at the edges. This was about their fight earlier, Maura grasped, when she suggested to Anderson over breakfast that she might have to call the police the next time he was poised over their third floor balcony, prepared to jump, because she simply was not equipped to deal with the situation and only wanted him to be safe, didn't he understand that she only wanted him to be safe? Evidently, he did not, forcing Maura cover the splattered coffee burns on her neck and jaw with a wide lavender scarf.

As swiftly as the rain came and went in late summer, the panic disappeared, leaving only the remnants of shaking fingertips. The fear subsided a few breaths later, and her surroundings came back into focus; cut grass wafting through the cracked window, chatter from the green, the amber glow from the salt lamp. Spearmint gum. Maura sighed and set her phone face down on her desk. There would be time to fight at home, so for now, she preferred to lean back and rustle her hair into a messy braid, letting the end of daylight wash over her body and warm her skin. She had paused the Foo Fighters and was singing quietly to herself while her nimble fingers worked through knotted hair, uttering in a cracked, breathy whisper,

She wore faded jeans and soft black leather,

She had eyes so blue they looked like weather.

Letting her hands fall into her lap, Maura realized she could not remember the title of the Tom Petty song, only that she had heard it in a movie years ago. She tapped her pinky ring on the desk. Somewhere, a bird stopped calling.

There was a knock at the door. "Come in," Maura said, straightening out her scarf, then, "Hey, Connor." She swiveled toward the door where one of her undergraduates, taller, with a curly mess of blonde hair and a thick beard, was poised cautiously, his head and shoulders leaning in and the rest of his body paused outside. He had sunburned cheeks.

"Do you have a minute?" he asked, leaning against the door frame. "I know office hours end at four, and it's probably late for you, so I can come back another time if this--"

"Have a seat." Maura stood and beckoned to the wooden chair beside the bookshelf. She lifted an electric kettle off the corner of her desk. "Tea?"

“Oh.” Connor propped down in the chair, much too small for him, and slung his backpack to the ground. “Sure.” Leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, massive hands clasped, he looked more like a first year student expecting to be reprimanded than a senior linebacker in Greek letters. Maura had seen him in passing on some Saturdays, surrounded by his brothers at the bar or grilling on his front lawn with a baseball cap and cut-off shirt, but in class he was quiet, keeping to the back of the room and rarely lifting his eyes from his books. Throughout September, Maura and the professor had discussed ways of garnering his participation--he was clever, after all, and his writing insinuated that he had much to offer--but he chose to remain mostly quiet, only occasionally piping up on poetic form or narrative voice. By October, they decided it was better to let him be.

“So,” Maura handed Connor a mug and sat back in her chair. “How are things?” Connor nodded through his first sip, wincing when the hot water bit his upper lip but drinking anyway, evidently too polite to set the tea down and too proud to wait for it to cool.

“Um, not bad,” he said, in a grizzly voice like cracked wood. His legs were jittering, Maura noticed, a nervous tick to which she was also prone at times.

“Football going well?” They saw each other in the gym some mornings, Connor with his teammates and massive four-plate squats and Maura, sweating, with a tiny kettlebell. She had never seen one of his games.

“Yeah, it’s-yeah,” Connor stumbled, having finally humbled himself into setting the tea down until it cooled. “We play Brown this weekend, so...” his voice trailed off and his blue gaze escaped toward the far corner of the ceiling. “Should be good.”

For a brief moment, they sat in silence, lips pursed, while the room flooded with evening’s last thrust of sunlight, gold and burning. Maura was curious to see Connor stop in; he had never come to office hours before, never seemed to struggle enough to ask for help, but now, he looked vulnerable with deep circles dropping below his eyes and a hunch in his back and jittering, his whole body jittering to the rhythm of his right leg, the conductor.

Maura tried a smile. “Well, what can I do for you?” She glanced back at the stack of papers on her desk, all their blue scribble accentuations. “I haven’t gotten to your essay yet, but I’m sure it’s fine; the last few you handed in were--”

“No,” Connor interrupted as politely as he knew how, with a forced laugh and outstretched palms. “Thank you, though.” He cleared his throat, sat back and crossed his arms. A hint of a tattoo glanced out of one of his sleeves, though Maura couldn’t make out what it was meant to be. “Um, I heard that you had a writing concentration in undergrad,” he began, speaking more slowly, more deliberately than usual and dragging out his words with a shade of apprehension coloring the gravel in his voice. “And, professor Hudson told me you’ve been published in the *Kenyon Review*.” This time, Maura was the one staring at her shoes. Connor’s eyes were too blue to meet directly.

“Oh, no, yeah,” Maura sputtered, swiveling her chair back and forth. “That’s not really...” she shook her head. Excuses were rushing forth, and she directed them with sporadic hand motions. “I got lucky, I was writing on something really topical right as it was gaining national attention, so.” Glancing up for an instant, she found Connor’s glance more inquisitive, bluer than before, and turned, embarrassed, to gaze out the window. “Right, no, it wasn’t a great piece of writing, but it was timely, and I think they just needed something fast on the topic.” A deep breath brought her back to face the curious student before her, and, resigned, she folded her hands in her lap. Her pinky ring made no sound against the back of her right hand.

Surprisingly, Connor was still seeking eye contact. “But it’s the *Kenyon Review*,” he articulated, leaning forward in his chair. He had enormous hands, Maura noted, and could probably wrap them around her neck and strangle her in seconds. She forced the thought back; that was an Anderson scenario, and she would leave it for home.

“Right, sure, okay,” Maura conceded, “I wrote something decent in college.” A few shorter pieces of hair had fallen out of her braid and now framed her face. They tickled. “You can find it online, probably, but if you’re going to tear it apart, don’t tell me.”

A bit of color snuck into Connor’s face, normally pale and muted. “No, that’s not…” He fidgeted, cracked his neck, let some air out before he burst. “Look, I’m thinking about submitting some work to the *Nassau Review*, and I know it’s competitive, so I wanted to have someone trustworthy--and, I don’t know, someone I respect, I guess--look at it before I do, and I figured with your experience and skill you might be a good candidate. Right?” He inhaled deeply, then sighed it out. “And yeah, I looked up your essay on the website, it was incredible, so don’t give me that ‘they only took it because it was timely’ shit.”

Except for a few bird calls, the green was quiet now, humbled by the echo of confessions and conversations it had absorbed that day and trapped down, deep down in the soil where they would be safe and cold and forgotten. In the same ground that held Sonia Sotomayor’s undergraduate secrets was the freshman biology major’s hurried admission that she had been raped by her boyfriend the night before and her best friend’s words of concern. In that ground were the racial slurs that no one heard the group of white men speak at night; the drama student’s quiet recitations on her way to class; protest and dissent; a gentle *I love you*; Anderson’s 5:30 text. The ground corralled them into its mausoleum and shut the doors where every whisper, every outburst found the same dark rest.

Maura had been biting the inside of her lip, she realized, when it started to bleed. None of her students had ever asked about her *Kenyon Review* essay, and none had ever come seeking creative critique. Gazing at Connor with her eyebrows bunched together, she could not distinguish flattery from the apprehension--perhaps fear—that told her she wasn’t good enough for this. Another piece of hair fell over her eyes. “Okay, yeah, I’d-” she paused, swallowed, scratched at her eyebrow. “Yeah, I can take a look for you. Just shoot me an email, I should be able to get to it this weekend.” Another pause; she tried to smile. “Cool?”

“Cool,” Connor relaxed back into his seat. “I really appreciate it.” He stood up and slung his backpack across his shoulders, turning to examine a few of the titles on Maura’s bookshelf, even running his finger down the spine of *To the Lighthouse*. “It’s verse” he said, making his way toward the door.

“Huh?”

“The work I’m sending you, it’s verse.”

Maura crossed her arms. “I guess I never would have pegged you as a poet.” She allowed him a smile, a real one this time. Connor only rolled his eyes.

“That’s what everyone says, uh, football player and all.” Leaning against the doorframe once more, he looked down at Maura. “I’ll send that to you tonight, but look at it whenever you have time, you know? No rush or anything.”

“Cool.” There was a catch in Maura’s throat. “Looking forward to it.” Expecting him to leave, she swiveled back to her desk and laid the stack of papers in front of her, but Connor remained, staring out the window with his thumbs in his belt loops. Maura raised her eyebrows. “Anything else?”

Connor's right leg jittered. "Yeah, I just--and I hope this isn't out of line, but--I just wanted to check and see if you were okay? I guess?" He trailed off slowly, avoiding Maura's gaze. "I don't know, I guess you seemed tired, maybe, and quiet, and like, I noticed these marks on your neck, so I--"

"I'm good." Maura tapped her ring against the desk. "Thanks for checking in." Connor was nice, she thought, a good student, but there was no use in his asking such questions, only worry. "I'll see you Monday, yeah?"

"Yeah. Right, thanks again."

Maura smiled one last time. "Good luck this weekend, against Brown."

To watch him walk away with his great, swaying steps would have made Maura's embarrassment—shame, really—too intense, almost painful, as it sometimes was after especially bad nights with Anderson. There would be an ache behind her eyes, throbbing deep beyond the sockets. Sometimes, her knees hurt. When her students asked, as they always did, she cited a past surgery she never had, but she knew they knew she was lying. Instead, Maura swiveled back to her desk and let her head fall into her hands in frustration, elbows dug into the scratched wood.

As easily as ice melted into water, Maura's shame became guilt, and like water, guilt flooded over and spread into spaces it didn't belong, spaces with electrical sockets and exposed wire where people would be hurt by her carelessness. She was sorry Connor saw the burns on her neck; she had caused his worry (perhaps other students' worry) and now faced the terror of its being brought up again. The splotches of red skin could be seared into Connor's memory by now, Maura thought, clutching a fistful of her hair. Or perhaps he didn't care. Like usual, she could not tell her hands were shaking until she saw them.

Minutes passed, of bird song and car exhaust and shadows of a day that was, and when Maura finally lifted her head, nighttime was pressing its paws against her office windows. A few months ago, she had given up hoping that Anderson would be in an easy mood when she got home, tired of chasing after a situation growing increasingly rare and disappointed when, inevitably, he wasn't. Instead, she put on armor: red lipstick, sharp rings, an attitude. She began to gather up her things, piling the ungraded essays at the top of her bag. Her scarf could stand to be wrapped a little tighter. Outside, in the limbo between the safety of university brick and the oppression of home, she tried a mindfulness exercise she learned in yoga a few weeks prior: name five things you see, four things you hear, three things you smell, two things you feel, and one thing you taste. Maura said them to herself with each step. Grass; the trees; a student with black hair; the birds; the birds. The edge of her shoe bit her heel when she stumbled over cracked sidewalk. Traffic; her footsteps; music from one of the campus houses; a cough.

Three concrete steps, separated by moss and dandelion stems, led Maura up to her building door, old and wooden with peeling red paint. Soil; stale beer; burning skin--no, that was only a memory. It had been more than six months since those scars healed, leaving only white streams across her thigh that might have been stretch marks. Soil; stale beer; basil. Maura tapped her ring against the metal handrail, unlocked the door, and climbed to the third floor. Heat rising from her gut; weight on her chest. She stepped inside her apartment, slid off her shoes, and waded into the kitchen, where Anderson was sitting over the table, propped up on his elbows, reading his phone. He looked handsome today. That steel blue shirt with the top buttons undone brought out the light beneath his skin, made his cheeks seem rosier, exposed just enough of his collarbones to make her think, if only for a sliver of a moment, that he might be a good man if she saw him for the first time across a crowded bar room. She leaned over to kiss him and tasted nothing.

“How was your day?” Maura asked, gliding toward the cabinets. “Are you hungry?” There was an onion, garlic, a bag of lentils she could curry with carrots and tomato. She pulled a saucepan onto the stove and began chopping her aromatics until heavy footsteps behind her and a hand on her waist, palm spread wide, made her turn. Heat seeped forward from his body. An unusual softness in Anderson’s eyes, a late August gold, gave her pause long enough for him to kiss her, softly, as though he might have meant it, and to wrap his arms around her, fingertips creeping like ivy toward her spine.

“Work was fine,” Anderson said, finally, with no intention of releasing Maura from his gaze. “And I’m always hungry.” His cologne was sharp, professional, dangerous.

Maura tugged her cheeks up to force a smile. “Good.” With a cup of his cheek and a final smoothing over of his collar with her cracked hands, threatening to split and bleed in the colder weather, she turned back to the stove. “I’ll start dinner.”

Three years together had given Maura ample time to learn the intents behind Anderson’s different sighs. The sad ones that the depression pushed out in the late, quiet hours were lower, pained groans from deep in his gut, while the confident ones, the sighs she heard when he loomed so broadly over her in bed, on the tile floor, were louder, growling and curved like his evil grin when he realized his strength could settle any domestic uncertainty. Maura knew that the sex would hurt after that sign, and it would not end quickly, but he would be too tired to do any more damage for the rest of the night.

The sigh that Anderson--so handsome in his steel blue shirt with the top buttons loose--expelled now was dangerous, angry, similar almost to a steaming hiss escaping madly from a boiler. A hiss like burning skin. Maura froze; she shook, went cold, but did not turn to him.

“Look, I’m sorry about this morning,” Anderson said, letting a hand fall down and smack his thigh. “And I’m sorry about what I texted you earlier. I obviously didn’t mean either.” Maura poured the lentils into the boiling saucepan, and stirred. Silence, then, “Are you even going to look at me when I’m apologizing?” What he said next was inaudible, caught beneath his breath, but it sounded vicious.

The lentils were swirling in their cloudy water, so Maura turned toward the anger because she had been here before, had tried this time again, and knew she could never ignore him. Her lips threatened to quiver when she saw the fear in his scrunched eyebrows, a fear so mixed with fury his ears blushed hot and his arms threatened to burst through his sleeves. Clothing could never betray his strength; even beneath a blue button down, Maura could spy a pulsing muscle. Gold glowed behind his eyes.

She smiled again, and said, “It’s okay,” but neither was genuine. Before she could reach him to run her fingers through his hair or along his jaw, another dangerous sign stopped her on the kitchen tiles. “It’s okay.” But the golden heat was rising.

“Maura,” he dragged, limping back to the table and sinking into a wooden chair. “You’ve been giving me absolutely nothing lately.” Maura hated that, the way he breathed out “absolutely” like cigarette smoke, like he had not been drawling the same cruel accusation every night since things got violent--was that a year ago, more? “It’s like you want me to feel like shit. You know I don’t mean any of this. Why are you acting like I’m so fucking evil?”

There was a list of things that Maura knew better than to do--challenge Anderson when he was drunk, for example, or refuse him when he asked for sex. Shuffling over to the table and sitting beside him when his mood got bad was certainly on that list, but Maura did so anyway, patting his arm with one hand and tapping her ring with the other. “Look, I’m not upset,” she tried to soften, to sweeten. “It was an accident.” Anderson was nodding now, rocking back and

forth because the rage, the desperation had nowhere else to go but his fist, her body. From the stove, the saucepan bubbled. “I love you, and I know you’re hurting.”

He began to cry into his hands, shuddering between labored breaths that made his shoulders heave. At no other did he seem so frightening as when he cried. The sounds that escaped his lips were ancient, raw, rising from the deepest caverns of the Earth where the first man learned what it meant to mourn. “Maura, I’m sorry,” he gagged, and he descended. Maura held him as he wept, rubbing his back and whispering, “It’s okay, you’re okay,” until a year might have passed and her voice was cloaked, finally, by the saucepan bubbling over. From the kitchen window, nothing peeked but night, entire night stripped of any late daylight that had clung to autumn so furiously until now. “Come,” she said.

Whimpering faded into a tired past, so tired that Anderson nestled his head down in his arms and Maura could sneak out to the stove. The lentils were not burned, she found, just gummy, good enough to be salvaged. “Can I help?” Anderson asked in a voice quickly sobered. Maura could not see him--the mess on the stove required her full attention--but she knew he would have wiped his face on his sleeves, crafting deep blue shadows while his cheeks dried up, went pale. Both cried ugly, but Anderson recovered fast. Walking up behind Maura he shifted, shuffled, but did not reach out to touch her.

He agreed to chop vegetables. Unwilling to cook together in silence, Maura switched on the kitchen radio; the same one that greeted her with “All Things Considered” when she came home from school every day as a child. She didn’t understand much of it, then. The war on terror and the Great Recession and hanging chads were all too much for a little girl. Now, as a grown up, they seemed so mundane; even collusion with Russia was growing tired. A few soundbites burst between snippets of an interview with an up and coming jazz artist while Maura stirred and Anderson cut, and those soundbites swirled upward to mingle with waltzing steam and curling wisps of cinnamon. They did not look at each other even after they sat down to eat.

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By midnight, the weight on Maura’s eyelids was as heavy as the day had been. The essays were finished, leaving nothing left to do but rest. Maura hesitated. Though she was tired, did not want to leave the pine candle that was still burning, and she could hardly be tempted by a shared bed with Anderson, even if he had fallen asleep an hour ago, burdened by the exhaustion characteristic of his breakdowns. Instead, she stared down at Connor’s essay laid out in front on her. His was not the best she had read that day, lacking in critical focus and failing to use contextual analysis and close reading necessary for a deeper thematic understanding, but he picked up on the essentials, which many of her students failed to do. An air of uneasiness hummed around her brain when she tried to put the paper down, certain that the longer she stared at his words, the clearer she would be able to see and understand him. Connor was smart, though she could tell he hardly cared for Eliot or the Modernists, and he understood literature because he, himself, could write. Certainly, he had a grasp on theory and criticism. His essay, however lazy, demonstrated that. Maura deeply wanted to expect more of him, but she remembered his football t-shirt and Greek letters, thought back to her time as an undergraduate and the essays she skimmed, and decided it was best to let such an expectation go.

Until that day, they had never spoken one-on-one, and though Maura would never admit it, she had been thinking about their meeting since she left her office at dusk. When he came to mind, as he did over dinner and again while she graded, Maura would cup her hands over her cheeks to hide the heat from Anderson, from herself because even alone, the embarrassment was unpleasant and dangerous. Each time, she saw him standing in the doorway: “Are you okay?”

That had to be where the embarrassment came from, Maura told herself. He had seen something so vulnerable, a secret so precious the entire world may have walked in on Anderson pushing her into the wall and spitting *bitch* in her face. Of course, that was it.

But the alternative arose, the idea that Maura was still thinking about that evening because Connor was interesting, he was curious, he was so different in that moment that Maura wanted to know more. *Don't*, she told herself, *it's unprofessional*. That idea, however, was stronger than her embarrassment. Maura tried to fight it off with images of Anderson, and when that didn't work, because of course it didn't, she insisted that Connor was just a dirty frat boy on the football team who couldn't really be that concerned about her or the essay she published. *He doesn't care*, she insisted, tugging at her hair. *He just needs a reader, and the full-time professors are too busy with their own work, so he came to someone who couldn't say no*. The thought washed away when she wondered, again, what his tattoo was.

Maura tapped her ring against the table. Slipping back into bed could feel, some nights, like surrender. She would be grateful that Anderson slept through the night, or he may have asked her why she blushed.