

## My fellow passenger

*she*

they fail  
to match me,  
whether  
by choice  
or by nature  
a mystery  
their cold boring eyes  
reminding me  
that I'm better off  
being lonely.

*He*

The book on her knees pierces me  
with licks of hot shrapnel across the aisle.  
*The Little Book of Philosophy*. Is it to her  
the same trapped breath, the same  
fire striking rod that scrapes the heart  
as it is for me?  
Does she see my screaming eyes? A false cough and pleading sneeze  
become fodder for the devouring screech of the stop.  
Book extinguished and bag shouldered, she leaves me  
alone again  
on the island.

## **Your coming-of-age summer, as requested**

### **1. Enter the national laboratory**

Here she is  
the Fresh Young Scientist  
her fingertips dipped in sweet anticipation  
her irritated scalp prickling with Dad's reminders.  
She makes eye contact with, leans attentively towards  
the security guard by the driver-side window  
nodding when the guard tells her father that  
using the bathroom is a security risk.  
*You may drop her off, but you must stay in the car.*  
Her hopeful luggage bumps in the back  
jostled by the miles of road that cut through fields and run past bison:  
A comically long driveway, as if designed to let opening credits roll.  
She doesn't know it yet, but Beach Boys and Turtles will fight  
for the rite  
to the opening act.  
The road finally twists, injects her into  
A blue-orange cluster of housing units that must have  
blipped into permanence in 1969  
squat along streets named Neuqua, Shabbona, and Sauk.  
Though her scalp still prickles,  
she clings for a moment as she says goodbye.

### **2. Pianist in the laundry unit**

The faceless music swirled  
from behind the locked door  
as easily as sliding hands into water  
and dragging fingertips along the surface.  
A scientist? Custodian? Intern?  
Though part of her wondered,  
the other savored the mystery.

### **3. Is it laziness?**

After years of home-cooked meals, even in college,  
she unlearned her hunger  
not out of self-hatred or vanity  
but from the *NO* she had planted  
like a slick avocado pit  
at the center of her skull –  
slice the meat to remove.  
Does she need to eat now?  
NO.  
Better to wait. She can manage.  
She could taste stale kitchen in the rice and beans

and gummy pasta that she brought to work.  
Yes, she saw how the maids made it clean every other morning,  
but the room, the counter, the utensils  
touched her food with a Midas hand of spotless filth  
leaving her with only pretzels and nuts and  
raisins for sustenance.  
Once, when her parents brought food,  
she ate half a loaf of bread all at once  
with globs of honey and  
greasy chunks of unmixed peanut butter to stave off  
the choked breaths and electric emptiness  
that couldn't even bring her to tears.  
She felt better after,  
but weeks and weeks of *no* still remained.  
She curled away from the walls  
of her electric fence box  
for the foreign bed, blanket, and carpet which were said to be hers  
only ever screamed *not here, not now, not ever*.

#### **4. The most obvious secret**

The other Fresh Young Scientists  
would ask her if she was sure  
when, day after day, she'd say that  
she would stay late.  
*Thanks for the offer.*  
She remained as a lone lamp in the office  
hours after everyone else had driven off,  
sprinkling the keyboard with quick raindrop fingers,  
coding commands like a dressmaker inserting her careful pins.  
She filled her ears with the sounds of decades-old summers:  
Leslie Gore, the Monkees, the Hollies.  
Lives she had never lived haunted her  
as she walked the two miles back to her dorm  
through splashes of shade that slipped  
from the outstretched arms of the trees above.  
She gazed across the fields to  
the unmarked buildings behind  
the DO NOT ENTER – PRIVATE ACCESS signs,  
smiling inwardly as she sensed the badge that tapped against her chest.  
Would the guards ever realize  
that what they were protecting wasn't just buildings or bison  
but also the shimmering fields and  
warm winds that wrapped around the hands and  
the soft sky that  
was wide and open and clear and just  
asking to be stumbled into?

### **5. Reprise**

Though she heard the piano again,  
its master forever eluded her.

### **6. Sunset over Warrentville**

It was only after she divorced herself from her nighttime calls  
that she could see how her lifeline had strangled her,  
how it had kept her from taking a good look at the other interns.  
They all walked to Warrentville for dinner on one of the last nights,  
electrified with the wistful sense of camaraderie that only endings can bestow.  
She brought her ukulele – the one she'd salted with a funeral of tears when  
she'd tried to comfort herself on the village soccer field just a few weeks prior.  
No one heard her there, but here,  
her friends knew the words to her favorite songs.

That night, she slept in a bed that was now hers.

### **7. Impossible**

How on Earth could a suitcase  
a car  
the end credits  
roll under the weight of it all?

## Notes from the window seat of flight UA1780, San Francisco to Chicago

On the day I didn't miss you  
God gave me my turn  
On His soul-seeing platform.

No clouds hid  
The cracked red earth  
Sprinkled with industrious white windmills  
Each thinking that if they spin just a little faster,  
They can clean up the mess of the selfish.

No clouds hid  
The colorful squares of field  
A patchwork we desperately stitch together  
In the vain hope that we can make it work.

Clouds hid, but then emerged  
The stadium we screeched past just a week-century ago  
And the tracks that clicked and bumped us  
As head rested on head rested on shoulder  
And my patched-up heart spun and spun.

Seeing the fresh ghost jolted my heart,  
But I was still dancing to your tears –  
Fool Disease acts slowly, after all.

From up there, it was obvious:  
It was written in the earth that we sprinkle and stitch  
To give and feed and make  
For the sake of giving and feeding and making,

Written in the clicking metal veins that course  
Through a city of ants, a testament to the way  
We try and move and do  
For the sake of trying and moving and doing.

Only away from you could I see that  
My desire to work the dirt into something useful, something beautiful  
For the sake of making something useful and beautiful  
Is more virtue than vanity.

Only away from you could I see that though I felt safe in your arms,  
You only wanted to sit perfectly still for the sake of nothing  
While we both tried to ignore the clouds wrapped around your head.