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## Wild Imminence

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WILD IMMINENCE

A Thesis Presented

by

Beth Peller

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
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Department of English  
MFA for Poets & Writers

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ABSTRACT

WILD IMMINENCE

FEBRUARY 2021

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*Wild Imminence* is a series of prose poems taking the form of Deleuze and Guattari's *Rhizome*-engaging notions of destratification and lines of flight in a consciousness of place, queerness, language, intimacy, and the internal and external world as both ever fleeting and imbued with interlocking echoes. In this book, the idea of home is explored as a slippage of naming; referents that may signal belonging remain in flight. As such, the prose poems depart from one another and through theme, object and language alight again in systematic reverberation, reflecting both the desire to return to and impossibility to remain at terra ferma. Engaging color theory, Deleuze, ethnographic accounts of political violence and displacement, and the narrator's own experiences of love, family, and observations of a world in flux, struggling to be reborn, the poems are find ground in their own instability: that which is known can only be known in flight.

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“In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territory, but also lines of flight, deterritorialization and destratification.” Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Rhizome*

I want to find a beginning for my story, the first words to fashion a cartology (of everything). On a Greek island I build lean-tos from bamboo on the beach in summer and read Deleuze. Hand over hand I draw rope through branches of low-lying salt pines, tether shelter to a stone wall. I tie and adjust knots against the unrelenting wind. Libyan winds that carry dust from those deserts and coat me with the residue of somewhere else. I can't find words that signal an origin, just an air system moving through, and the word Deleuze loves most is *becoming*.



If a line of flight were an arrow of words, perhaps I launched from my first word—*bus*—into all the years that followed: *someplace, maybe, girl, goodbye*. A child presses a soft hand to the inside of a car window, squints through early autumn sunlight, and sees people in a bus moving through the world in a vessel other than family. Between tongue and word is the awareness that anything can happen.

Blue was the last color to be named. Homer's sea was not blue; it was not green-blue; it was not aquamarine. It was intoxication and shadow; not blue, but *wine-dark*. It remains to be known whether blue was the last color to be named because blue was imperceptible for a time to the human eye, or if we always saw blue, but only knew the color when we gave it a name.

I want her the way I get cold—through and through. I want her under my clothes, and down to my bones. The invasion, and then the tremble. I want her as a season—in inevitable return. Desire comes on suddenly, and what does identity matter? Orange groves illicit thirst. Revving engines ache for a destination, and I have only ever called myself a traveler. *Stone butch, hard femme, soft butch*, she says. I shake my head. I don't know the language of her people. What am I but nails chewed to the quick, a quarrel after quiet, a cautious learner?

I take comfort in the blue hours, in dusk and dawn. In-between time, unpunctuated time. In the blue hour the forest draws closer, all things bound in a blue tone. The beginning and ending of light finds a blue seam. Have I always been queer, or was I not queer until I called her name as she unfolded, unmistakably, in her bed and above me, in the fleeting hours between night and day? Here is the sky: a quickness of light, as overcast sheds to blue. The ocean, the lips of the dead, topaz, veins and bruises. Can we see what we have not yet named? How did blue become?

On the island, I bow my head and fold my arms around myself against the hard wind, a wind so loud villagers press cheeks against cheeks, and cup hands around each other's ears, and even with mouths so close, the gusts steal words right off their lips. I crouch in winding staircases off the narrow village paths, hide from god-haunted winds that whip past every bold rock face and uproot thyme from the hills. I once thought if I found the right words, my story would begin. With stones I hold down pages of Deleuze at outdoor cafés. Wind runs lusters of light over the sea, bends the stunted cypresses, and night is a spread of stars overhead and all their names I never knew. I think of Homer's colors lifted up and blown into other names: his honey was green, his iron violet. What did colors matter anyway with Odysseus' kingdom overrun?

Her favorite word is *hamartia*. A character's tragic error; a fatal flaw. Greek for sin. In ancient archery, *hamartia* described not the proximity of the arrow to the bulls-eye, but how far the archer's aim had strayed from the mark. Eden was lost when the first lovers had a dispute. When love became imperfect. I set the arrow in the bow years ago, leveled my words, and between destination and deviation, between queer and any other color, I called her Cardea after the goddess of hinges.

Maps are not useless to those who wander without a home, without a mark; sometimes maps just don't hold the information needed most. A friend sent a photo of me leaning against a lightpost, years ago, somewhere in Europe, cross-legged in heavy boots, a colorful city map spread across my lap. I am looking directly into the camera. I am still searching for words. Tell me where to go.

What coordinates can a woman find within another woman? The first time I was inside her, I saw the color blue— blood the light never hits. Language maps the known. In the Renaissance era, people believed the world was held together by an amorous force. Today, of course, we just say *gravity*.



She wanted me to tell her everything. Start at the beginning, she said, tell me about your life. She called me a wolf for my aura of hunger and hesitation; my surge, my pause. I reminded her of the history of detested creatures: man was unnerved by the direct stare of wolves, and shot them. Deleuze again: *The shadow escapes from the body like an animal we had been sheltering*. Tell me where you have been.

A friend arched her back, her head dropped into the water, her legs came up, and she floated on a lake. Neither of us could recall in detail the bodies we'd seen falling, but it happened something like this: muzzle flashes from rooftops, and the night a single siren. The surface of the lake was unbroken, and what we remembered was how the night sky had collapsed at our feet. It may have happened that way. A dragonfly opened and closed its wings, rested on a cattail at the lake's shore. My friend was the only woman I had ever met with hands smaller than mine. It was nearly midday, the fragile body of the dragonfly a luster of blue iridescence. In that strong light, the world circled back to itself, to its unredeemed beauty.

*Cardo* is Latin for hinge. The cardinal directions turn upon the center, a dot signifying *here*. Home hinges on knowing which way to go. Winds are named for their courses: the trade winds, the westerlies, the bora, the Bise. I once lashed a boat to the dock, and in the sun-struck morning found that the wind had nonetheless carried it out to sea. I try to steady myself against the strongest gusts, to stay in one place, aligned on an axis of remembered light.

Homer's poetic world was rendered primarily in greyscale. Arguments have been made that ancient Greeks suffered a universal color-blindness, with the exception of the color red. Red was the first color named—a coppery sword; a fiery horse hurtling into the apocalypse; a lover's nail down the skin in a crimson score. History searches for words, and we have always bled.

We are made from the collision of rock and light, accidental algae, repetitions of chance. Stars long dead, and all that have shone since. We are salt and cartilage, dirt and water. A gamble of blood reborn again and again. Grains of sand; my hand raised in anger; a spider that sways on its web in the breeze—all chaotic molecules burst into shapes. My father had a massive heart attack. The doctors operated on all four arteries, and I was pulled from my middle school science class. I arrived at the hospital, and everyone was already there—uncles and cousins, siblings, parents of parents. My grandmother stood in front of my father's room, pointed at me and said to those waiting: *don't let her in, if not for her, none of this would have happened.*

*Fuite*, in French, is not just flight: it is to emanate, to escape, to rupture. For Deleuze, a line of flight is a matter of *difference*. A wolf winds across a range, through tall grasses, beneath entanglements of branches and sun scattered with shadow. Tacks east, tacks north. The flight forward is unmapped: all directions possible. The wolf's trajectory is marked by the difference between what is yet to happen and what may become. The hunter has but one route: the course of the fleeing wolf. The line of pursuit is unchangeable. In running, the wolf can take any path, the future a wild imminence.

Last winter I learned to pick the lock at the marina. Night after night, I stole a tiny white rowboat and rowed into the lake, pulled the oars out of the dark water, and drifted. On those nights, I thought often about getting a dog. About the dog I had as a child, how once I punched her in the face, and realized that I would never be a good person. Tuesday, in the produce section, my friend felt avocados for their firmness, and I was unable to look away from a bruised peach: I wanted to tell him about the boy shot down next to me. How his lips curled back, and I abandoned him when I looked up and saw paramilitaries on the rooftops. I rowed back to shore at daybreak, the dawn sky the color of broken capillaries.

Words are uttered over the earth, and carried in a rush of air before they can be heard. In the ancient tongue, the name of the island was *Island of Not-hearing*. A law forbade the army from extorting taxes from the deaf. The residents of the island never spoke openly to one another, and tricked the invaders into thinking that none of them could hear. After all, Deleuze said, *There is no need to fear or hope, only to look for new weapons*.



A stranger once spread a cross-country road map across the floral comforter of a motel room bed. I leaned against the headboard, drank whiskey, and made plans to leave town with him the next day. I had met him over a pool game. It was November. There were borders to cross and to be turned away from. I threw my backpack into a rushing river. I've answered to many different names.

My father is on the solar eclipse trail; he is a solar eclipse hunter. There are thousands of them enroute to the same destinations—the beaches of Australia, a GPS mark beyond the lights of Shanghai, east Tennessee, the Cyclades, a Maghrebi desert. They book reservations months in advance nearest to the places determined best for viewing. They carry telescopes and special cameras. They hunt charging coronas, sun flares, spindles of waving starlight. They hunt a sudden nightfall. After a few minutes, the moon slides beyond the sun, and startled birds sing a rapid dawn. How many times might he have uttered, I love you, in those minutes? In the seconds when night flickers back into day, he might mean it.

The presence of semi-automatic weapons can halt speech. The guards wore ski-masks in the hushed courtroom, and when my friend was sentenced, he kept his back straight despite the handcuffs. Before I renewed my visa, I ripped up all the propaganda in my apartment, wiped his fingerprints from my furniture, and knew if they came asking, I wouldn't say a word.

I walk the coast at dusk. Seabirds glide white-tipped wings over the surface of the water, struck with immanence, so bound in body, and I am in a rage. Where is home?

I read about the Grenfell Public Housing Tower fire in the newspapers. On the thirteenth floor, Mohammed al-Haj Ali sends a last text—*the fire is here now, goodbye*—the soil of Lesvos still on his lips, still the man who kissed the shore the night his rubber dinghy didn't capsize. Mohammed from Aleppo, when Aleppo still stood. Mohammed in Europe with salt in his hair, his mother's shadow stretching the length of the Euphrates. No sprinklers, one exit. From London to Syria: *goodbye*.

During an eclipse, the moon conceals the sun because the sun is exactly 400 times as far away, and 400 times as big as the moon. Circles over circles. I count my days on the island. I walk the beach, pull stones from the water, turn them over. Beneath my fingers, circles within circles score in the stones, centuries of tides, each brecciated coil a stone cast over another, and then the tides, and all the days, like this one, when the wind picks up the surface of the water, slowly form rings that arc perfectly over the previous ones, and like this set the years gone by like typography into stone.

All across Europe, I think I see my friend. I board trains, and glimpse him in another car. Across plazas, in crowds at open air markets, I look up, and for a brief, bright moment, there he is. I don't send the letters I write to him. I stop writing to him altogether. In a year, I will sign up for the university and turn in essays about hunger strikes, and quietly pray that the guards cede to his demands, and that he eats again.

Moments after my mother stopped the car to choke me with her forearm against the passenger side window—mid-morning, mid-intersection, after the divorce—we were struck from behind. My mother was a painter; all turpentine and smoke. At the galleries, people said she had vision. She was loaded into the ambulance in a neck brace. I turned away, and walked the three-and-a-half miles home. I was ten years old—it was the farthest I had ever walked alone. The city was a roar of traffic and radio rock. From so many glass surfaces, light returned angled, altered, imperfect, and God was a prism of dust kicked up into the glare. Outside the Georgia Avenue projects, a man without teeth pointed at a plane passing overhead, held his belly and laughed. The city may have rolled on forever, for all I knew. There was the broad sky, and the steady hum of planets just beyond.



A woman dropped her baby from a window, in the hope that someone would be below, the smoke behind her thick from the approaching fire. We can't know her story, her face vague at the window, pleading against the glass. We only know what it has been to be poor. A man who had run out of the burning tower only minutes before caught the baby. It was a miracle he was there, a miracle he looked up.

For a decade, I bought international calling cards, stood in phone booths, and let the phone ring into my family's house at dawn, when I knew they would still be asleep. I imagined the sound cutting through the hallway in the house I'd left, the house they lived in still. The last time I stood in that hallway, the woman who is not my mother put her lipstick on in the mirror before leaving for the day. Don't be so hard on your father, she said, and left. No one answered those calls, and I didn't expect them to. I called because that's what people do. People call home—expats, foreign students, tourists who fall in love and skip their return flights. They call home.

I sit with a man outside his house in Kosovo. Late dusk binds the world in grey, and soon the trees, the house, and the man's face will become muted outlines. Today the fields were burned to prepare for new planting. Boys from the village gathered downwind from the fire's crackling border, and used burlap sacks to catch rabbits bounding out of the flames. They held the rabbits up by their hind legs, and showed us their broken necks and singed fur. The man tells me about the bones unearthed from those same fields, Albanian bones, he says, and Serbian bones after. Also the bones of Roma, he says, slaughtered by both sides. We pass honey wine back and forth, and the night breeze carries the smell of apples through the village. The moon hangs just beyond the corrugated rooftops. Cicadas hum in the trees. Wolves howl in the nearby forest. Spreading his arms out to the night, the man says, it truly is beautiful here; I can't imagine living anywhere else.

The stitches are out. The swelling has gone down, and I am told the fracture will heal itself. There is blood still hemorrhaging in my brain—the bleed is registered on various screens in various rooms, and reported in low murmurs in echoing hallways. The translator repeats: you will absorb this. Years from now, when the police are on trial for attempted murder at the height of summer, witness after witness will appear before the thin-lipped judge, and I will learn for the first time the details of what happened to me. I will testify as well, in a skirt and button-down shirt, distracted by a cockroach languishing belly-up on the courtroom floor, kicking its tiny legs against the heat-swollen air.

Deleuze: *Is it not first through the voice that one becomes animal?* She reveals herself gradually. She tames the feral dogs she keeps out on the land with composed gestures and a steady murmur of commands. She is a keeper of dogs descended from the forest, once chained up to howl through cold nights, dogs thrown pieces of pink, slippery meat out of back doors, dogs with welts from rocks the neighborhood kids throw at them. Dogs with low rolling growls driven by blood until she crouches next to them, and soothes them with the deliberation of her flat voice. She teaches them to avert their black eyes, and submit to a world not their own. By and by, the dogs match their cadence to hers in the quiet drive of instinct.

The sun's bare corona is not visible to the human eye. After all, one cannot look directly into such glaring light. When I was a child I clutched my knees to my chest in the coat closet as my parents fought and broke furniture. I wanted to be hidden so I could be discovered again. The light of the sun can only be perceived when the moon has eclipsed it totally.

An eastern wind drives gusts of snow from the prairie to the Missouri River, where all that heavy air turns to mist. The dawn is still, and I hold my axe up in the thin light. When it comes down, the wood splits. On the banks of the Cannonball, the feathers of migratory birds tremble with the wind coming through the reeds. During sunrise prayers, men are carried back to the riverbank in pickup trucks, lunar-eyed, casino-dizzy. Oil workers drill on the ridge, while natives are held in sniper scopes. Last night, driving the plains, a wolf was caught briefly in my headlights. I pulled over, astonished, and the wolf bounded into the switchgrass without looking back.

From her bedroom I can hear waves crash into the cliffs. Her taste, like saltwater, is still strong in the morning. At night on the island, a fisherman points upwards, and tells me the Milky Way came about when Zeus tore off his mother's tit and splattered milk across the sky. I admire her long body stretched across the bed, her hair fanned out. I envy the language that composes the night sky into stories. I want to look up and see her clearly overhead, from the vantage of open seas.



I water my plants in silence. I sit in cafés and watch people pass. I walk in demonstrations without looking up. Strangers recognize me at grocery stores, on the corner waiting for traffic lights to change, between ordering drinks. They pause. They open their mouths to form a question, change their minds and turn away. A security analyst from the American embassy is on international television, discussing the armed groups. When asked if he thinks anarchist terrorism will spread to the United States, the analyst points to an American girl who made headlines after a near-fatal injury from the police. *Embedded* is the word he uses.

On my way to the hospital, I pass a small child who has thrown himself onto the sidewalk in a fit. In his red jumper, he is like a bright bird fallen from above. His father stands there, dapper with heavy eyelids, tells me as I walk by—he is just putting on a show. I want to say: *pick him up*. Pick him up, and return him to the sky.

At the seawall, she and I saw waves crest and draw back before crashing. Overhead, the break and run of clouds in the wind. Children climbed the jutting rocks, wet hair clinging to their faces. In the distance, smoke from a steamer curled in the air. I pointed out the cold eddies churning beneath us. I told her that from a plane, the coastline must look like a silver ribbon.

What happened today was as simple as a bird taking flight from a winter-stripped branch. An ordinary breath, a flash of light over the bay—and then regret, regret.

As a child I walked the city alone at night, and gazed through the windows of other homes. I paused on the sidewalk, looked in from the dark to bright dining rooms, and watched as families set the table, brought food out. I watched as they ate and talked together. How easy it would be, I thought, to just walk up to the door, turn the knob, and sit down to another life.

Bird call draws sweet honeysuckles, spring moss, and all the wind-run clouds into address. I want to walk on dusty paths in dappled sunlight, and yield to pine shade. I want cool well-water in my hands, stone footpaths on the sides of soft-sloped hills, dandelions puffs and pollen in the air. Rotting wooden docks, slow decay, the stillness of reservoirs. Beyond the boundaries of my daily movements, there is the possibility of all that is essential. Some everlasting pulse. The absoluteness of a mountain face. The smell of phosphorus: here shadows quicken and make an ember-glow of her features as she lights a match in the dark.

On the rooftop, belly down, he and I watched as young men and women were pulled into the back of cars. They would never be seen again. I was not thinking of the possibility of my own death, though the sound of gunfire was close. Mist hovers over the river in the still of early morning and he crouches next to me with the dishes, and tells me that he never learned to swim. The mountain gives itself up for viewing, but never reveals itself. Between tobacco stalks, he wipes sweat from his forehead with a bandana, and I know how to levitate: I am twenty years old. Horses at rest in the midday heat stamp their hooves in the fields, and it rains all at once.

The sea enters my dreams, and I dream that Athens is a fold of the sea. The streets brim with blue glimmer, and my father is there, smiling. My father and I are in a rowboat, and I trace the whole horizon with my arms spread wide. *The ship is a fold of the sea*, says Deleuze, and here is my father, smiling, his face a blue glow of reflected sea light. So much I have wanted is kept in the crease of my dreams.



The Zen archer watches his arrow soar high past the target and land in the sagebrush beyond.  
*Bull's-eye*, he says.

The sun, at its zenith, is a white disk, and the tiny beach dazzles like an overexposed image. In the morning, she asks me to trust her, and I swim straight out into the sea until I have no energy to return to shore. Past the rocky embrace of the cove, the water is cold. My arms tremble. My body, once buoyant, heaves, and I push and pull. I can no longer make out the strip of sand, but the sheer sandstone cliff beyond is radiant in the light.

A dozen villagers hid beneath a small embankment at the bottom of a wide valley. They clutched one another, and didn't make a sound. Insects hummed in a steady pitch; small birds cried in the treetops. The voices of the Contra soldiers searching for the villagers carried down the slope and echoed off the granite ridge. Light filtered through the forest ceiling and glinted off the threads of spider webs. Beads of water from morning condensation hung on the ferns. The smell of moist pine filled the air, and the forest was perfectly still. A woman in the group tried to nurse her baby. Though she shushed him, and rocked him, his cries began to rise from the valley. She looped her shawl around her hand and, looking away, covered his mouth and nose.

I can't decide if this city on the coast really is beautiful. It may depend on which direction you are walking, and what you did the night before.

On the playground, a boy asks me about the bruises on my arms. I like to imagine that shooting stars don't stop burning, they just get smaller falling at us. Maybe my bruises are dead stars streaked from sky to flesh, maybe all the things that happen to me are just the hot landfall of dizzy starstuff. Years later, the night fog clears from the Chiapan highlands, and the mountain ridges are bound against the lunar sky. For the first time, I see constellations. I point up, and with my finger draw Orion's belt and the swift line it makes to the dogstar, Sirius. The bright pinpoints form a cartography across the dark—*From there to there, and all the ways it can hurt.*

A philosopher who praised taking risks drowned in the ocean after saving two children when the weather took a sudden turn. Stone footpaths weave through fig groves and down dry hillsides. The sky is a blue rule. When I cross a small meadow, my legs give out—I know she will leave me. I can hear it in the ease of her promise to stay. Time passes, the sun strikes red through my closed eyelids. The sound of bells at sheep's necks, the whistle of their herder, and my own inertia become remote. I have tried to make a map of language, to chart with my tongue all the words that might lead to *belong*. It's not a matter of risking one's life—it is that one risks *life itself*.

I learn not to flinch under missiles. I learn to move carefully in war, to brace myself against the walls of the hallway as the city shakes. Held by sulfur and flesh wounds of sky, I don't cry out. Glass is already breaking, and I know regret well. Even the stray dogs are gone now, and where is July?

The Contra attack began in the early hours of New Year's day. The people in the village awoke to the sound of grenades reverberating through the valley, followed by the startled whistling of birds. A woman ran into her kitchen. She found her daughter in the thin light pulling a rifle from its hiding place beneath the clay oven. The last thing she said to her daughter was, Mija, you can't go wearing that, and she rushed back into the bedroom to find a darker-colored shirt.



In her absence, I read temperature pitches on women's bodies. A stranger leans back in an intertube at the pool, her rib cage protruding, I dip my head under the water and go fever-down. A hairline at the nape of a waitress's neck, the thin underside of a wrist at the doctor's office. Everywhere a mercury burn or a low, blue flame. An ink spill, perhaps. Blue ink she shook out over the world in her last letter to me. If the hue of my desire is queer, blue is the color of drowning.

A small razor blade, and powder that shimmered a little under the light were kept in a carved wooden box that my father hid behind the large books that I knew he talked about when he went to work. He spelled their subject out to me: “law”. There was another word, “apartheid”. I asked how that one was spelled, because the tall men with strange accents who sometimes appeared and slept in the empty room next to mine said it was their biggest problem, and my father said that they were brave people. He said I should learn to be brave like them, and not be so needy. When a guest from the New Government arrived, my father took the carved box from its hiding place, and after a little while he dragged me up to my room by my hair and locked me inside alone. I spent all day and all night there, fighting hunger, memorizing the pattern of the curtains. I used chalk to mark the lines of receding afternoon light on the floorboards. The next morning I heard a key turn, and my father stood in the doorway, looking defeated, dark crescents below his eyes. I rose and went to him, and he held his hand out to me. I took his hand in my own, and clasped my slender arms around his waist. For a moment, I embraced my father, amazed at my own bravery.

On her kitchen counter she used to keep a jar of stones I'd collected from the Aegean coast, where the sea meets the shore, stones rolled over and pulled in the tides. The stones mimicked the island on which I found them—brick red, as where sea bluffs caved inwards; white, slightly more pearly than the village walls; dull green like the rosemary that gripped hillsides in the wind. She picked one of the stones from the jar and kept it in her pocket. It was smooth from the sea, and dark with bright swirls of orange, and speckles of yellow. She named it Saturn. For a time I was like a ring of light, orbiting her from afar. In her pocket, she curled long fingers around the stone, felt it warming in her palm—I don't trust words, she used to say, I trust my hands.

The man had spent his entire life in his wheelchair. He seldom left his house made of scraps of wood and bamboo. The man's legs hadn't grown right, and were twisted haphazardly. When the Contras came, the people in the village too young or too old to fight fled through the forest. Despite the haste of their departure, someone came for the man, lifted him from his wheelchair, and left him in a ditch that ran behind the houses, in hopes that the Contras would not find him there. All day and night he lay in the ditch, and listened to gunshots and explosions, then the roar of burning homes. Many years later, the man heard a news report over his handheld radio. He wheeled to where his neighbors were gathered beneath an orange grove, and told them about a wave the size of a mountain that had swept over an island somewhere in the Pacific, killing thousands. His neighbors turned away. None of them had ever seen the ocean.

The TV is on while I dress for the day. Lately, the news makes me tremble. The president is on the screen. He says that anyone who throws a rock at a soldier will be shot on sight. I pull a sweater over my head and my hands shake. What options do I have? I have a rock.

I run all the way into winter. Run until cold stops me, until cold runs me off the tarmac, out of train station waiting halls. With whatever money I have left or have borrowed, I rent a cheap room to wait out the months in the dull light of snowfall. She is gone, and the white noise of her has stopped. I chop vegetables, and watch the frost weigh on the birch branches outside my kitchen window. What is left is the sound of my knife against the wooden cutting board. I always thought—I just haven't found the right town, the right country, the right language, the precise words. This time, things will be different. Except I've cut my finger now, making lunch. I hold it under the faucet until the blood runs thin, and I think of her, the tip of her finger in her mouth to catch the bright drops.

I think of women who kill their newborns. Microwaves, trash disposals, hedges thickly bordering parking lots. Girls on the outskirts of town smeared with mucus and blood. I think of ways to cut myself off from the future, to cut myself off from the past.

I tried to tell her my story: the time I lied, the time I fell in the lake, the time I ran away and only turned around after a decade had passed. Time and time again. I drop Deleuze into the bathwater, for a *rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo*. Blue, and my terror of the centuries before the sky was named by its color. My terror that, should part of my story remain unnamed, she will never find her way back to me. Language is always between things, the road on the way to somewhere else.



I sit at a café near my apartment, staring out the window. How long have I been staring? The café is run by a Lebanese couple. When I told them I was in Beirut during the war, they shook their heads in disbelief. I haven't been charged for coffee here since. Sometimes I am angry at the dead: surviving is harder. Sometimes I think there should be some karmic prize for surviving: a love who does not leave in the night, a coastline to walk and find solace. You will get neither of these. With luck, you will get a free cup of coffee.

Every year the people of the village take the same walk. They begin at dawn, and hike all day through the forest. They talk in murmurs. When the sun is at its peak in the broad sky, they sing hymns from the days of the revolution. Men hack at coral snakes with machetes. A woman carries a framed portrait of her only daughter, and tells the young ones in the group: we do this so you will know how we fled the Contras. At dusk, the villagers walk in the shadow of the mountain, miles below the pine forests, where abandoned logging roads cut through the red clay earth. A flock of swallows fly over the treetops. They make no sound in the waning light.

For a year after my father left, my mother sat on the porch, shrouded in cigarette smoke. Cardinals alighted in the sycamore tree in the front yard, and the neighbors' rhododendrons blazed orange and violet. Light reflected off the surface of objects, made shapes and colors, and my mother sat on the porch still imagining the car in reverse, still the long, gravel driveway. Sometimes I stood in front of her; said it was mid-winter, and I could see my breath in the house. My mother stared straight ahead. That year, she only noticed the aftermath of strong summer storms. She called me to the porch, smiled at the darkened sky and electric air. How my mother loved rushing winds, downed power lines, the streets stunned with branches. To see the wreckage just in front of her—to see it out there.

Last night, my friend and I sat in the bare living room beneath a portrait of his brother taken before his brother's body was found amongst the others. Fluorescent light flickered on the lime walls, and the dead stared, unblinking. Our resilience surprises me, our resilience despite our regrets.

I think about going to Japan. I read about a pilgrimage on the perimeter of the island, and monks who walk hundreds of miles in silence through woodland glades and ocean mist. Maybe solace is a trail hemmed with wild azaleas. The offensive in Aleppo has begun. On the radio, a reporter interviews a twelve-year-old boy, the sound of the frontline in the background. His school has been closed for weeks. The reporter asks what the boy tells his younger brother during the air strikes. *Don't be afraid, he says, you can't be dead as long as you're living.*

I have a seizure by the roadside, and I think I see her. I know she still goes by the same name; I know she has returned for me. The neighbors find me shaking beneath the blue wisteria on the front arch, crescents in my hair. When I come to, I tell them I could touch her. A humming bird was trapped once in my kitchen. He slammed at the window; a stutter of rapidly beating wings. In that strong light, the glass barely reflected his tiny body, and outside, the crowns of white alders were stark against the sky.

I should not have blamed my mother for her absence, or for the cities where I slept. Sometimes the only way of knowing a place is by trying to leave. Prescient rabbits burrow before the dogs are turned out.

My friend and I ride the subway. We talk about internment camps on the border, the tally of the missing since a hurricane. We talk about another friend who went back to the bottle and hasn't been seen since. The train is crowded in the morning, and my friend says, Do you ever look around and wonder if anyone is happy? She is seven months pregnant with a baby she has wanted for many years. I almost say—but aren't you? She has already chosen a name. I stop myself. This is not her first pregnancy. It is the first pregnancy she hasn't lost.



My father writes me a letter: he prefers to never speak to me again. He wishes me a long and meaningful life. The hospitals are full; the curve far from flattened. The pulse oximeter warns my oxygen is low. The peace lily by the eastern window droops slender stalks and broad glassy leaves to the floor. Slumped, the peace lily signals for water. Survivors of suicide bombings develop rashes on their skin, small swellings that itch and don't go away. When the bomber blasts himself into fragments, minute remnants of his flesh and bone fly at such velocity that they embed themselves into the tissue of those in the nearby radius. I think of these survivors, days or weeks later, carrying bits of the bomber with them lodged into their own flesh, scratching and bleeding, trying to get him out.

Fugitive light splices the valley to the hills, to the room I passed through, years ago, where a phone rings, and is left unanswered. I pause on the staircase, turn back to the street, and lift my face towards the rain-shattered sky.

I wanted to be free from the burden of love, so I moved far into the mountains down south. The locals turned dogs out to run down whitetails there. Late afternoons, the dogs arrived to scratch at my door, and on the front porch I shoveled spam into baking pans, took a serrated knife to their tracking collars, tracked hours on the wall clock until the whines lowered and hushed. The train whistle, the red streak of foxes at the forest's cusp. The seconds between thunder and lightning: that many miles from rain on the ridge. In my dreams, the mountains were a broad brush stroke—everything mixed. Some mornings I opened my door to let the dogs in, though I knew they were already gone.

Once, I wanted to tell her that you cannot love if you cannot regret, but instead, I gazed in silence out of her passenger-side window. I wanted to say that we carry so much with us, earth that never leaves our hands. That day was a while ago—she had already changed the subject, and we were in another country, years after the fact.

The stone streets are bare this morning, a halo of fog above the corrugated rooftops. My breath against the cold, I've returned to these highlands, and still know the names of streets too small for a posted sign. Here is my shirt on his bedpost: a white flag of surrender. These small things: trembling beads of water on the unbroken thread of those years; the afternoon I split a pomegranate with him beneath the cathedral tower, red juice on his chin; the corner where his pickup truck broke down in the rain. I do not expect to see him, and he is not waiting up for me. Cats pass in the shadows, gripping the walls; figures lean endlessly in the doorway. I have no ticket home. I want to forget. Forget the nights I arrived soaked through and laughing. Forget the poetry I tacked to his wall, the wine I spilled in his kitchen. I want to be forgotten to be remembered again.

The diagnosis is self-evident, and so it lacks charm. I fear abandonment; I am prone to run. I buy lottery scratchers at the corner store in order to disprove fate. My friend explains: fate and luck are different. Unlicensed, in a pandemic, and far away from everyone I know, I buy a used hatchback. I store jugs of gasoline behind an abandoned house, watch the death toll multiply in red dots, press a nickel down and wipe silver threads away. I think of the cruel mathematics of a virus. I measure my life against probability. When it is quiet, what remains of us lies in each gesture. She drops her head towards the floor, or walks outside and cups her hand over her eyes in the sun. I let my elbow fall, an axle rotates, and as I hurtle off the roadway, I know that everything is held in the smallest deed.

The Atlantic ocean never called to me like the Pacific, and I was always headed that way. My mother yanked me back by my shirt collar, and I had only crossed the front yard, the sidewalk sloping up the street all cement and promise. My father said I was intolerable, and between the shore and the bridge, I swam and swam. Once my cousin tried to swim, too, a straight line from the beach into indigo water. When I asked him what happens when you die, he said nothing. A good samaritan pulled him out. My sister was the first to get a passport, and I was the first to learn to soft-fall from a second story window. As for now, I can't say where my parents are, only where I came from.

I make the table for breakfast. My hands, in their grammar, rid the morning of plot. The night before, I searched the neighborhood for the dog I left outside in the snow, and forgot. I found her trembling behind a neighbor's bushes, her skin taut over pointed rib bones. I held her face. I told her she was a good girl. I told her I was sorry, but she refused to follow me inside. It was only a dream, only my hands making the table in the morning, all those years of Odysseus wanting to return home.



Years passed. Laden with debt, not knowing discernment from fear, and always just passing through, I spotted the new family on a beach not far from the city where I grew up. I barely recognized my little half-siblings, not little anymore. The couple wearing reflective sunglasses who sat in sagging beach chairs were unmistakable. I can't know if they saw me as I paused where the water reached the hot sand. Nobody waved.

I bought a redbud sapling at the farmer's market. I can give a sapling what I cannot give myself—firm soil. The last light lopes the mountain, distant houses echoed by the birch and pine beyond. The leafy porch. The mountain, and the tiny hearts of wrens racing in the tree branches. A dream wakes me with stray desires in the dark. A wasp circles the filament overhead, dares the heat. I carve a cardinal into linoleum, ever aware of airport codes hovering in search engines, earth on the snouts of burrowed animals, earth where the redbud sapling will grow. The occasional whoosh of an eighteen wheeler past the tree line. Truckers: spectral faces no one has imagined. Strapped into cabs, blinking the miles away in the dull glow of dashboards, struck by an unexpected memory at some state line; a boomerang flung from a year long past. There is the buzz of the breathing machine, the carefully considered ergonomics of the steering wheel, the beautiful geometry of asphalt laid endlessly through the night. The arc of the moon overhead. Outside the driver's window, a rush of air and fleeting landscapes, and a pendulum swings between wanting a home and wanting to forget. The truckers on the pass at dawn will see the sun rise over the eastern peaks. In a few minutes, the light will reach the valley floor and stream into the kitchen where I am chiseling the outline of a cardinal's wing spread in mid-flight, careful with the sharp instrument around the curves.

Deleuze lost a lung to tuberculosis. He spent much of his life breathing through an oxygen tank. He said that we are all made of lines, with neither beginning nor end. She wanted a story, and word by word I gave her a splintered atlas. For Deleuze, *each plateau can be read starting from anywhere and can be related to any other plateau*. He died lunging himself out of a window. A breath of fresh air, an open window.

I wake, barely breathing, one blue dawn. I wake in Paris to the flutter of bird wings at darkened shutters, a train ticket on the table. I wake in a car in Brooklyn with a high school equivalency degree. I wake in a stranger's house in Rome. I wake with chapped lips in the Sahara, dunes etched in peach peaks against the sky. I wake to an international cease-fire agreement, and soldiers at a border checkpoint breathing into cupped hands in the morning frost, my head against a bus window. I wake to the tapping of a pistol grip on the glass. I wake to the whine of the street dog in Mitrovica who snaps its jaws at me. My name entered into a database somewhere, I wake at-risk and delinquent. I wake to the whistle of rail workers in the Grand Forks freight yard. I wake with sweat on my temples. A hotel in Tegucigalpa, an abandoned finca on the outskirts of Zaragoza. I wake to the knuckles of a thousand unwanted women across the Bible Belt rapping on my spine: run, run, run. I wake with bills jammed into knee-high boots, and quotes from the Greek classics penned on my forearm. I wake with two felonies and the memory of dusk in summer: writing my name in the air with a sparkler in the front yard. I wake and for a brief, flickering moment I am still legible from the kitchen window. Street vendors ice oysters in buckets until moon-set, and I wake on a ferry crossing the Bosphorus after cutting my lip on a hawked shell. I wake with my head in my friend's lap, and mumble promises to kill her boyfriend, not knowing he would be the first to take down the rifle from the wall mount. I wake with one hundred-and-seventy-five lira and an expired visa. I wake kicking off the sheets. I wake late to a lunar afternoon in Oaxaca, my friends long gone, years after my mother yanked my shoulder out of its socket. I wake in Syria before the war, Lebanon during the war, Kosovo after the war. I wake on a strip of beach on the Black Sea with sand in my hair, and I still stack my father's law books on the living room coffee table, the goldfish my sister won at the county fair swinging in a plastic bag by my side. I wake in Asheville and my friend is still alive—enduring navigator, she turns the town upside down, and sails us with a sure hand. I wake and chant aloud the names of city streets, subway stops, and ports, like small scriptures I repeat details of whichever place I find myself. I recite verb conjugations and addresses, and each utterance casts an anchor into the blue dawn: this life here, this life there. I wake and think I see a figure in the deep azure shadows, a vaporous form alongside me taking account of this life here—this life, or a trick of the light. I wake and know that no one is looking for me.

After the war I saw a doctor for my nightmares, and he recommended that I think of something beautiful before falling asleep. That night, I lay with my eyes closed, and imagined sunlight breaking through cloud cover, a forest bright in late winter, cedars dripping with rain. There was wind over tall reeds, and the shadows of sparrows against a cliff face, one following the other. A child stood laughing in a driveway at the end of a country road, the hills behind shot through with mineral colors. I woke in the dark bedroom, gasping, overwhelmed by the possibility of another life.