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A LARGE FLOCK OF SMALL BIRDS: ESSAYS

By

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Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Creative Writing

A Large Flock of Small Birds: Essays

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Welcome to the Nuthouse

I have Instagram’s algorithm to thank. That’s what served me, on a Tuesday evening in late February of this year, an account called @squirrelsofmissoula. When I clicked, I landed on a sea of tightly framed photos of squirrels feasting upon sunflower seeds at a tiny wooden picnic table. It had snowed in Missoula recently, and in several photos the squirrels wore white flakes on their thick winter coats. In one shot, two squeezed their torsos underneath the table, scrounging for fallen seeds. In another, a lone squirrel stood on top of the table, tall on its hind legs, showing off the honey-hued fur of its belly. Its tail swooshed softly to the side as it held its paws to its chest. Its inky whiskers stretched wide. Snowflakes clung to its nose and chin. Creamy crescents of fur rimmed its liquid-black eyes. It was staring directly at the camera, directly at me. I realized I hadn’t taken a breath in a while. I inhaled deeply and then texted a couple friends—one of whom promptly informed me that a cousin of hers in Colorado had, for months now, been posting such photos of her own.

Alongside sourdough baking and jigsaw puzzles, squirrel picnic tables are a pandemic-era trend. The craze seems to have kicked off in March 2020, right as much of the country went into lockdown, when Rick Kalinowski, an out-of-work plumber in Pennsylvania, posted a few photos of his handmade table in a Facebook group called “All About Squirrels.” In the pictures, an eastern gray squirrel sits on its haunches at the table, which is mounted to a fence, and grips a peanut in its paws. The photos have been shared more than 280,000 times. Kalinowski would go on to set up an Etsy shop, Squirrelly Treasure Co, which got 400 orders in its first 24 hours. He’s since dismantled the shop, but there’s no shortage of other options on the site. \$19.99 gets you a simple cedar model with a screw through the center of the table serving as a corn cob holder. A farmhouse-style table (\$29.99) features a dark stain and white-painted legs, and you can add a

three-inch bucket in one of seven colors for \$1.80. Another with a torched finish (\$26, sealed and waterproofed for longevity) has a metal feeding bowl set into the table. A Navy veteran makes a dual feeder (currently marked down to \$35.95) that boasts both a corn cob mount and a tiny tin bucket. DIYers can score a \$15 kit, while high rollers can splash \$69.99 on a saloon featuring miniature barstools and a customizable sign. The latter has 74 five-star reviews and, based on comments, seems to have been a popular (and very well-received) Father’s Day gift. According to a *New York Times* story from December, a furniture maker in Long Beach, California, made a one-off table from several repurposed maple wood skateboards. A Michigan man, meanwhile, built an entire café: four tables encircled by a fence, a tiny coat rack at the entrance complete with hand-twisted wire hangers. A sign welcomes diners to Maison du Noix—French for “The Nut House”—and lists the four-course meal of mixed seeds, stale pizza crust, “peanuts on the full shell,” and a dessert of “counter-softened apples.”

Squirrel picnic tables might be no more than a pandemic fad, an adorable and perhaps slightly deranged manifestation of our collective cabin fever. But the act of supplying snacks for swishy-tailed arboreal rodents has deep roots in this country. In fact, it’s because Americans fed squirrels that the animals exist in our cities in the first place. That’s right: urban squirrels, so ubiquitous they’re little more than background noise, were deliberately introduced—and fed, and sheltered—by humans. In a truly fascinating paper published in the *Journal of American History* in 2013, a University of Pennsylvania professor named Etienne Benson travels back to the early 19th century to explain how squirrels, namely eastern grays, ended up in our cities. At the time, Benson explains, squirrels were woodland creatures, supplying meat for frontiersmen and Indigenous Americans. Occasionally hunted for sport, they were also known for swarming across rural landscapes in movements so massive John James Audubon believed them a distinct species:

Sciurus migratorius, or “migrating squirrel.” “Astounding,” “immense,” “unbelievable,” wrote 19th-century observers, describing throngs that likely numbered in the thousands or even millions and could become phenomenal pests in agricultural areas. “Mountains, cleared fields, the narrow bays of our lakes, or our broad rivers, present no unconquerable impediments,” wrote naturalist John Bachman in 1846. “Onward they come, devouring on their way everything that is suited to their taste, laying waste the corn and wheat-fields of the farmer.” In response, rural Americans set bounties and organized mass squirrel hunts. For a few years in Ohio, men got a \$3 credit if they turned in 100 squirrel hides with their taxes.

If there was a squirrel in a city, it was probably a pet; the animal was in vogue among wealthy families in the 18th and 19th centuries. In 1772, Benjamin Franklin, then serving as a diplomat in London, arranged for his wife, Deborah, to send a squirrel across the Atlantic to a friend’s daughter, a young woman named Georgiana Shipley. Georgiana called the little guy Mungo and he proved an enormous hit, until the day he escaped and was killed by a dog named Ranger. In an epitaph for Mungo, Franklin described Ranger as “wanton, cruel.” Of Mungo he had this to say: “Few Squirrels were better accomplish’d; for he had had a good Education, had travell’d far, and seen much of the World.” Deborah soon dispatched a replacement squirrel; Georgiana named this one Beebee and wrote to Franklin in 1774 that “he grows fat and lively, and has as much liberty as even a North American can desire.” In 1779 Georgiana reported Beebee still kicking: “The American Squirrel is still living, & much caress’d; poor fellow! he is grown quite old & has lost his eyesight, but nevertheless preserves his spirits & wonted activity.”

So as a rule, urban Americans didn’t share space with squirrels. The *New-York Daily Times* reported in 1856 that an “unusual visitor” in a tree near city hall had drawn hundreds of onlookers, who grew so rowdy trying to lure down the escaped pet that they had to be dispersed

by the police. But times were changing: as those New Yorkers gawked at that bushy-tailed runaway, other urban centers along the Eastern Seaboard were staging experiments in squirrel introduction. Philadelphia came first, releasing three into Franklin Square in 1847, soon followed by Boston and New Haven, Connecticut. According to Benson, 19th-century Americans saw squirrels as a way “to beautify and enliven the urban landscape at a time when American cities were growing in geographic extent, population density, and cultural diversity.” In other words, cities were industrializing, and as workers went indoors, town commons went from sites of labor to places of leisure. An 1853 article in the Philadelphia press captured the mood, arguing that the introduction of squirrels, peacocks, and deer would help transform public squares into “truly delightful resorts, affording the means of increasing enjoyment to the increasing multitudes that throng this metropolis.”

To support the newcomers, city administrators provided nest boxes and food. This was as much necessity as benevolence: public squares were island habitats, surrounded by dense and treeless settlement. During the years 1856–1857, Boston shelled out \$33.27 for squirrel food, which would ring in at just over \$1,000 today. A few years later someone floated a proposal to plant nut-bearing trees to save the city some cash. Which isn’t to say the squirrels were starving, at least not everywhere: an 1865 report noted that the squirrels of New Haven Green had “become so obese from good living that they are continually missing their hold and falling from the treetops.” Even so, these early squirrel populations didn’t last, wiped out by dogs or neglect or outright opposition from residents who feared squirrels would prey on songbirds, which would in turn cause insect populations to spike, and no one wanted that. By the mid-1860s, squirrels had mostly disappeared from the handful of cities that had hosted them.

But the squirrels didn't have to wait long for another shot. Starting in the 1870s, America began building parks on a new scale. These parks, including Central Park, Brooklyn's Prospect Park, and Boston's Emerald Necklace, were behemoths compared to the old town greens, and they weren't manicured into charming pleasure gardens but instead designed to mimic the natural world, with features that took after the area's hydrology and geology: rocky outcrops and streams, ponds and lakes, shrubs and flowers, and, to the incredible fortune of the squirrels, lots and lots of nut-bearing trees. New York City released a handful of eastern gray squirrels into Central Park in 1877. By 1883, managers estimated the population at 1,500 and were considering a cull, because the animals had stripped the trees clean of leaves and small branches in order to construct their nests. Two decades later, a *New York Times* reporter claimed the squirrels now numbered 5,000, adding that they had started to "invade" the Upper East Side, with some making it as far east as Third Avenue, nearly a mile from the park.

As scenic parks spread across the country, so too did the squirrels, from Washington, D.C., to Chicago to Vancouver to Seattle to San Francisco. Some sailed to Europe, Australia, and South Africa. Everywhere, the goal was the same: to provide urbanites a salubrious woodland experience. It was less of a woodland experience for the squirrels. They, after all, had not just the nuts and the seeds from the trees all around them, but also seemingly endless snacks from the bipedal giants constantly strolling by. At the time, Benson writes, charity was the central tenet of human-animal relationships, and Americans considered it their moral duty to provide for their new neighbors. And squirrels didn't just accept charity. They actively solicited it, paws clasped at their chests as if in supplication. Such communication signaled sophistication, to which the only proper response was a peanut. Parks were for leisure, yes, but also for performing moral virtue. Some even believed squirrels could help cultivate good behavior: in a 1914 article in

Boys' Life, naturalist and Boy Scouts cofounder Ernest Thompson Seton claimed that releasing “missionary squirrels” in towns and cities would cure boys of their inclination toward cruelty. (Seton had just received reports of boys “[sallying] forth in droves,” armed with .22 rifles, for Saturday afternoon squirrel slaughters.) “Everyone who feeds squirrels will become their friend,” Seton argued, “and this means that before many months the young community will have been turned into squirrel protectors.”

As the 20th century marched on, squirrels lived large, moving into the tree-filled suburbs and leafy college campuses springing up across the country, and availing themselves of the extra amenities: attics, which made for snug, dry, predator-proof nests; dumpsters, which provided extra sustenance during lean winter months; and power and telephone lines, which facilitated safe transit, away from the threat of dogs and cats and cars. When it came to feeding, some disdained squirrels as impudent beggars or even moral degenerates, but few opposed the practice, and devoted individuals carried on for decades. In the 1980s, the National Park Service estimated that a handful of feeders in Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C., were distributing 75 pounds of peanuts every week, resulting in one of the densest squirrel populations ever recorded, about 20 squirrels per acre, and leading to a late-night relocation effort in the fall of 1985. Officials had worried euthanasia would spark backlash.

Slowly, though, opinion was changing. National parks began to discourage roadside feeding in the middle of the 20th century—though Yellowstone didn’t close its last open-pit dump, a beloved feasting site for grizzly bears, until 1970—and by the ’80s, city parks had started to post No Feeding signs. It’s now understood that feeding can be harmful, with some kinds of food leading to health problems. That Michigan man, for instance, would be wise to remove stale bread from his menu. Moreover, acclimating squirrels to handouts may make them

overly dependent on humans, and could lead to volatile population growth. And, at the most basic level, squirrels don't need us. They're indiscriminating eaters—omnivores, actually—and biologically hardwired to hoard. Researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, have found that a single squirrel can bury up to 10,000 nuts each year, and they've been observed engaging in a practice called “chunking,” in which they carefully organize nuts by size and shape. Scientists believe this is a mnemonic device to help the squirrels remember which nuts they buried where. However they do it—and nut theft is reciprocal and rampant among squirrels—a Berkeley scientist who implanted microchips in hazelnuts found that only 10 percent were left behind. As for those forgotten nuts? Well, some of them turn into trees: the squirrels are gardening. They're clever, too: if a squirrel believes it's being watched, it will pantomime putting the nut in a hole and covering it back up, all the while hiding the real nut in its mouth.

If the squirrels don't need us, is it we who need them? It's not as if they're universally beloved, certainly not when they burrow into our drywall or ravage our flowerbeds or wreak havoc on our electric grid (by some estimates, squirrels are responsible for one-fifth of power outages in this country; in 1987 a squirrel chewed through a power line in Connecticut and the Nasdaq went dark for 82 minutes, losing an estimated \$20 million in trades). For many, squirrels inspire nothing beyond indifference. So why, two decades into the 21st century, do some people still feel such dedication? In 2019, when New York City proposed a ban on feeding wildlife in the parks, punishable by up to \$250 or a day's imprisonment, passions flared. At a public hearing, the opposition was an uncanny echo of yesterday, with one attendee describing the proposal as a “criminal act that runs against the morals and rules of a civilized society.” Others claimed urban squirrels weren't actually wild animals, because “the parks are not nature, they're

an artificial situation.” A wildlife rehabilitator who spoke in support of the ban received boos. Several described New York City’s animals as fellow citizens deserving of equal consideration. “It is not just about what we want,” said one woman. “It’s about what the squirrels and all of the other-than-human beings in our parks want, too, and they are constituents of New York City.” The parks department has made no update on the proposal.

For some insight, I called up Sandra Ramos, who with her boyfriend, Tim Cooper, runs the @squirrelsofmissoula Instagram account I stumbled upon in February. Ramos, a photographer who moved to Missoula early in the pandemic, learned about squirrel picnic tables when a park ranger friend, furloughed from her job at San Antonio Missions, built her own. “She just kept posting pictures and I kept saying how awesome it was,” Ramos told me. In December her friend surprised her with one for her birthday, which she and Cooper set up outside a window of their ground-floor apartment. Before she became the proprietor of a squirrel snack bar, Ramos had never had, in her words, “a squirrel thing.” She’s always lived places—Los Angeles, Austin, Fort Worth—with modest squirrel populations. Washington, D.C., was the exception, and she did delight in spotting the handful of albino squirrels that make their home in Lafayette Square. Now, however, she’s become wholly enraptured by the fox squirrels that visit the picnic table, which she can see from her desk. (Missoula has fox squirrels rather than eastern grays; the former are larger and flaunt fluffier tails. Native to the eastern half of the country, fox squirrels were introduced to Missoula, possibly by a University of Montana professor, in the early 1960s.)

Watching the squirrels breaks the monotony of her homebound days, Ramos said. I can relate—when I spent five weeks with my parents in Portland, Oregon, this winter, the desk in my childhood bedroom afforded me a view of nine (nine!) squirrel nests, scruffy clumps of leaves and twigs built in the branches of the cherry and birch trees lining the street. When stalled out on

my writing, I'd watch the squirrels chase each other, springing from limb to limb like trapeze artists. Occasionally, one would dip inside a hole in one of the trunks, its torso hidden but its tail free, swishing side to side. (The tail plays a major role in squirrel communication; a quick flick, for example, shows frustration.) Ramos said she and Cooper quickly noticed distinguishing features and christened the squirrels accordingly: Spock has pointy ears, Ringo is missing a band of hair from his tail, and Dot has a large blotch of pale fur on her back. Early on, only five or so swung by, but Ramos estimated they now attract a dozen—adding that they've become harder to tell apart as they've packed on weight. And it's been a learning process. Back in December, Ramos and Cooper bought a huge bag of birdseed. "We were very ambitious about the project," she said. But they soon realized the squirrels were picking out the sunflower seeds and leaving the rest behind. To accommodate their preferences, the couple worked to sift out all the unwanted seeds and now buy exclusively sunflower.

Does she have any qualms about feeding wild animals? "There's definitely the Leave No Trace angst," Ramos said. "Feeding wildlife is a no-no and something I would never do in any other situation." But these squirrels, she said, were already eating their trash—I failed to ask why she and Cooper didn't seal their garbage more securely—and a seed-strewn table seemed both less destructive and more entertaining. But she admitted to the occasional pang of guilt. "Am I contributing to the delinquency of these squirrels? So it is a thing. But just like everything in life, there are extremes. If I was encouraging pigeons to poop on everyone's cars, that'd be one thing. All I'm doing is feeding them so they don't eat our trash."

I asked Ramos what's most struck her about the squirrels. "They never eat together," she said, explaining how if a squirrel is feeding and another shows up, the interloper will get chased off. Ramos sounded surprised, and I wondered to myself if the squirrels' penchant for solo

dining would have struck her so deeply were we not living through a time in which we're so rarely eating together. Another observation: when a squirrel is startled, it will throw one paw to its chest as if in defense. Also: the day of the spring equinox, they started mating with abandon. For Ramos, it isn't just that her visitors are small and fuzzy and cute. It's "the unpredictability of wildlife," she said, this proximity to behavior we can't fully understand. Because it's not just that squirrels are ubiquitous—it's that they're easily observed. When they draw close, they give us a sense of what the writer Lyanda Haupt calls "wild nearness." Maybe this is what renders us so incorrigible. What enamors us so.

At the end of our call, I learned Ramos and Cooper live three blocks from me. "If we're looking out the window, feel free to wave," she said. I passed by on a walk that evening. No squirrels. Maybe they'd decided to stay in for supper to avoid the drizzle. Up the street, though, I came upon a squirrel clinging to the trunk of a Norway maple. It stared at me, right at eye level. We stayed like this for a while, until it spiraled up the trunk and skittered out onto a limb, stopping directly above me. It chittered wheezily and wagged and snapped its tail. I gazed back up, letting raindrops collect on my glasses. At one point, and then again, it cracked open and nibbled at a seed pod. Then it began making its way up into the crown of the tree, leaping from branch to ever-higher branch, the distance growing between us. Each time it landed, it stopped and peered down at me, as if checking to make sure I had seen what it could do.

A Fair Shake

As the carton moved down the line, my anxiety mounted. A few friends and I sat on a concrete stoop beneath a canopy of flame trees, their bell-shaped flowers glowing orange against the pale blue sky. Maarten, a droopy-eyed German whose demeanor toggled between despondency and exasperation, was bogarting the carton while chatting up Dipo, a Malawian actor with a no-bullshit way about her. Finally he passed to Effie, an ebullient Brit, who took a quick glug before handing the carton to me. I sized up the one-liter waxed cardboard box. It was much like a milk carton, with the top shorn crudely off. The liquid swirling inside looked like bathwater—yellowish, cloudy bathwater speckled with chunks of something resembling sawdust. That was insensitive, I scolded myself. Maybe a runny banana smoothie, given a generous shake of cinnamon. Its pong was pungent: yeasty, sour, a hint lemony. It frothed at me in greeting. Then it gargled. It seemed very much...alive.

I squeezed shut my eyes and took a deep breath, bracing myself, and brought the carton to my mouth. I had been advised to open my throat wide, guidance I promptly forgot once the liquid passed my lips. It was grainy against my tongue, with the sharp tang of spoiled yogurt. It burned, bike-like, going down. My body squirmed, overcome, and I shoved the carton at Thoko, another Malawian actor. Dipo thundered a throaty laugh. “I think the American likes it,” she said.

“You have to get used to it,” said Effie, squeezing my shoulder.

“Pass it back,” Maarten said. “I think it’s good.”

Chibuku Shake-Shake is Malawi’s commercial version of traditional sorghum beer, and after a couple months in this landlocked splinter of a country in southeastern Africa, I’d at last given it a try. I’d heard about Chibuku before I arrived. “A carton of Chibuku is very cheap and,

with its gruel-like texture, surprisingly rich in nutrients when compared with most alcoholic drinks,” chirped one of my guidebooks. “For most travelers, the thick texture and bittersweet taste are not appealing,” another cautioned. Most beers in the West are clarified. Chibuku is opaque. Its name comes from the need to give it a literal shake before opening: this vigorous agitation mixes the liquid and solid elements, which tend to separate. The cartons, striped in cheery red and blue, proclaim “INTERNATIONAL BEER.”

But I wasn’t swilling for kicks. I was here on assignment. As a fresh college grad on a yearlong stint in Malawi, I’d landed a writing gig for an American website supported in part by National Geographic, a detail I dropped in faux-casual tones to anyone who asked about the notebook I carried with me at all times. And at this tavern in Zingwangwa township, just outside the southern city of Blantyre, I was taking notes for a story on traditional Malawian beer. It was a humid Saturday afternoon in November, and customers clustered outside on wooden benches or beneath small thatched-roof huts. A few played pool inside a squat, unlit concrete building, its exterior walls painted red and blue to match the stripes of the carton. “Chibuku: The People’s Choice,” one wall read. Under makeshift shelters of corrugated tin and faded bedsheets, the Chibuku mamas, as the servers are called, found shade from the sun or waited out storms. The weather this time of year was fickle; we were moving from the hot, dry season to the rains.

Our group—two Malawians and three white foreigners—had attracted attention upon entrance. Chibuku taverns are very Malawian, and very male. I’d spotted only one woman aside from the Chibuku mamas. But these customers were my sources, so I left my friends to their drinking and went off to report. “Obama!” I called, surprised at my own confidence as I waved my hand at a patron dressed in a t-shirt emblazoned with the face of the then-President. It was 2009 and Barack Obama was everywhere in Malawi. You could buy yards of fabric printed with

his smiling face. Women wore him as a skirt. This Obama-adorned man darted over for a fist bump. “Bo!” he hollered. “Bo-bo!” I returned. The fist bump loosened me, and I entered the dim concrete shelter, where I met Francis and Yamikani, an uncle-and-nephew duo for whom a visit to this Chibuku tavern was a Sunday ritual. “We come at 5 and stay maybe two, maybe four hours,” said Yamikani, sipping at a carton. Francis clutched a red plastic bottle—a scud, which ran 70 kwacha (approximately 50 cents) to the carton’s 75. At the bars where I’d been hanging out with other foreigners, we paid 200 kwacha for a bottle of Carlsberg.

Two young guys sitting outside flagged me over. Kumbo wore short dreadlocks and freshly polished black dress shoes. Lucky had on ripped jeans and black Converse knockoffs. A thin silt clung to each man’s lips: no matter how well you shake-shake, a sludgy layer of sediment collects at the bottom of a Chibuku carton. It’s standard practice to slurp this up, which leaves visible traces behind. Kumbo and Lucky had strong feelings about Chibuku vessels.

“The carton is better,” Kumbo said, claiming the cardboard created an earthier, richer flavor. Nine such cartons lay at Kumbo’s and Lucky’s feet, most with their tops sawn off. This is one of two ways to open a carton. When a Chibuku mama made her delivery, you indicated whether the carton was for solitary intake, in which case she’d peel open a corner, or for group consumption, in which case she’d produce a knife from the folds of her skirt and slash off the entire dome: a modern-day calabash.

Kumbo handed me the decapitated carton he and Lucky were nursing. I took another deep breath, held it. Research, I reminded myself, and pulled a deep swig. Kumbo and Lucky whooped as I suppressed a squirm, and I earned myself two more fist bumps.

Chibuku in commercially packaged form has been around only since the 1950s, when Max Heinrich, a white man in what's now Zambia, industrialized the process, making it on a mass scale for miners in the Copperbelt. (Heinrich was possibly German, possibly South African, possibly of Jewish descent. He possibly studied brewing in Berlin. He possibly had a book where he recorded brewing ideas and consumer comments, which is possibly how Chibuku got its name—a variation, possibly, on “by the book.” Accounts vary.) In the decades since, Chibuku has become big business across the region. In 2009, Malawi counted four production facilities, which pumped out more than 80 million liters annually.

The beer's influence extends beyond Africa: in 2000, a nightclub called Chibuku Shake-Shake opened in Liverpool. Its British founder had spent a gap year in Malawi.

But as home brew, sorghum beer dates back centuries. Prepared by women for weddings, funerals, and other celebrations, it's still made in villages across southern Africa. In Malawi it's known as *masese*. The unaged, nonalcoholic version is ladled by the cupful at markets, sold in recycled plastic bottles on the street, and serves as a welcome when arriving in a rural home.

Sandor Ellix Katz, an extravagantly mutton-chopped food writer and self-proclaimed “fermentation fetishist” who's been profiled in the *New Yorker*, devotes several pages to sorghum beer in one of his books. He cites a report by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization: “Opaque beer is more a food than a beverage. It contains high proportions of starch and sugars, besides proteins, fats, vitamins, and minerals.” An anthropologist in Burkina Faso found that sorghum beer accounts for half that country's caloric intake. “Homemade,” Katz writes, “it is fresh and appealing, with a complex sweet-alcoholic-sour flavor.”

Homemade sorghum beer was exactly where my story was heading, and I had enlisted the help of Dipo. Dipo was a few years older than me, and a few weeks ago I'd seen her in a

theater show in which she'd worn a grass skirt and stood, legs akimbo, while roaring like a lion. She was quick and funny, and at the bar she regularly reduced others to babble. When I'd asked her, quaking a little, to play master to my apprentice, she was enthusiastic. I was thrilled. Dipo knew what she was doing: her mother made *thobwa*—the lightly fermented, nonalcoholic maize drink that ages into the boozier *masese*—every week while Dipo was growing up. She volunteered to bring ingredients to my house the following weekend.

The appointed morning was warm and sticky. I'd attended back-to-back weddings the day before and was still sipping my tea, swallowed up in one of my ugly mustard-colored armchairs, when I heard the dogs bark in announcement of a guest. For \$150 a month I rented this two-room concrete house from a Malawian academic, whose family lived in the same gated compound. Everyone in this middle-class neighborhood lived in a gated compound. Dipo strode to my door. Her black halter top plunged. Her maroon skirt shimmered. She carried plastic bags of milled grain in one hand and a purse in the other. Nkwachi and Mphundu, two fellow actors, flanked her. One hauled an *mbaula* charcoal stove.

“Good morning,” Dipo barked. I was rapt, and more than a little intimidated. She kicked off her gold ballet flats. “Let's begin.”

Dipo arranged the stove on a scrubby patch of grass in the shade of a wild loquat tree. “Don't show your teeth when making fire,” she said, “or else it will go out. You can smile once the fire is burning.”

I nodded at Dipo. I feared my wide eyes revealed my panic. Dare I press her? Suddenly Nkwachi, lugging an enormous scrap-metal pot sloshing over with water, shouldered me aside. I'd worry about superstitions later.

Waiting for the heat to build, my education began. I readied my notebook. “Real thobwa should be taken without sugar,” Dipo said.

Mphundu punched the air in agreement. Needing to add sugar was a sign of a poor brew. “My auntie in Rumphu makes thobwa without sugar, but it’s still sweet,” he said, estimating that he’d consumed some 90 or 100 liters of her divine elixir.

“Malawians believe that on a long journey, it gives you energy,” Nkwachi added. “We carry it on trips. It quenches your thirst better than water.”

Thoko, another actor, soon arrived. “My ancestors inform me it will rain at 2,” he said, bowing his head at us. Mphundu’s wife Mercy followed, joined by Maarten and Katerina, another German. I’d had no idea so many people were coming.

The water reached a near-boil and Mercy stirred as Dipo sprinkled in finely ground maize flour. My kitchen had come stocked with a wooden spoon the size of a cricket bat, which Mercy handed to me as Dipo continued to add handfuls of maize. Dipo pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows at my technique. “You need to stir in an S-shape,” she instructed. I shakily snaked through the thickening porridge. Dipo wrapped her fingers around the spoon, just below mine, her hand still powdery white with maize flour. Mphundu plunged in from the wings, clutching the top of the spoon, the fingers of his other hand pinching a lit cigarette. It felt like dancing, how we moved our arms and torsos as one. Eventually they let me stir solo.

As the porridge stiffened, I scribbled. Dipo told me that if you carried a pot of hot porridge on your head, snakes would fall into it and die. Viwi, my landlord’s adult daughter, said the quality of my masese would depend on the hands that had stirred it. With bad hands, it would sour after just two days. Good hands? It would stay sweet longer. Mphundu said that if a poor man cursed a rich man’s masese, every time the rich man took a sip, the poor man would receive

the intoxicating benefits. He then recounted a maselese-soaked night in a town in northern Malawi, during which he'd allegedly driven over a bridge more than 10 times before reaching the other side. The brewer, he said, hadn't wanted him to leave. Nkwachi, who'd attended secondary school in a rural village, had learned to drink maselese as a teenager. There were no bars, so everyone drank outside people's homes, sitting on the ground or maybe on an overturned Coca-Cola crate, if they could find one. The houses were on rotation, so there was always ripe maselese somewhere. The rivalry was fierce; everyone had their favorites.

After 15 minutes or so, the porridge, looking now like Cream of Wheat, began to spurt, shooting into the air little maize-goo geysers that left behind craters on the surface. "Hot porridge is dangerous," Dipo warned.

"Come, you can hear the smell," Mphundu said. I closed my eyes and strained for the synesthesia. It bubbled with sass. The aroma was sweet and faintly musky.

After the porridge cooled, it was time for the malted grain. Commercial Chibuku uses sorghum—so much sorghum, in fact, that Malawi went from producing 20,000 tons in 1995 to more than 127,000 tons in 2007, an increase attributable to the company's decision to use as much local sorghum as possible. But Dipo's mother favored finger millet, so that's what she had brought. Dipo sprinkled the fine, almost ashy powder into the pot as Mercy stirred. It swirled and dispersed, leaving the milky gruel flecked with brown.

The mbaula free, Dipo set to work carving up two chickens for a late lunch. Thoko's ancestors had been right about the rain, and we huddled under the corrugated tin eaves and set the mbaula right outside my front door. Blood spattered on the steps as Dipo sliced. Mercy cooked *nsima*, the stiff and sticky maize porridge that is the staple of the Malawian diet, on my hot plate's one working burner. She heaped enormous mounds of it on my mismatched plastic

plates and then turned her attention back to the hot plate, where bitter greens stewed in their juices. Nkwachi flipped the chicken, streaked red with spicy peri-peri powder.

Then the eight of us, all barefoot and damp from the rain, gathered around my coffee table, a few perched on those ugly armchairs and the rest of us kneeling on the cold cement floor, and tore into the meal with our fingers.

The next morning, alone in my kitchen, I reheated the slurry as instructed and poured in a packet of commercial yeast. While this hungry yeast gobbled up the maize sugars and converted them into alcohol, I continued in my quest to learn all I could about this ancient libation. In the Society of Malawi's reference library, located in Blantyre's grandest colonial-era home, I found midcentury recipes for maize beer, which called for a truly staggering number of steps: multiple additions of malt, much ladling of the mixture between variously sized earthenware pots, careful straining through baskets, and so on. A British nutritionist named Jessie Williamson, who'd lived in Malawi during the middle decades of the 20th century, devoted several pages to beer in her 1955 guide, *Useful Plants of Malawi*. "It is of interest to find," she wrote, "that African women by long experience and handing on of the knowledge from generation to generation have learned to adjust the temperature of the brew after the boiling on the first day to about 40 degrees Centigrade, the optimal temperature for enzyme action."

I had made no such temperature adjustment with my brew, but enzyme action seemed to continue apace. Each time I peeled the aluminum foil from the pot—Williamson would have preferred I cover it with leaves, though she failed to specify what kind—my masese gurgled sweetly. My landlord's six-year-old granddaughter, Eme, poked her nose under the foil and then recoiled, scrunching her nose at its souring whiff. Nigel, an eight-year-old Zimbabwean who lived with his mother and sister in the small house adjoining mine, came by, his head bobbing to

“Thriller,” which played from the tinny speakers of a hand-me-down cell phone, and gave it an approving beam.

At Blantyre’s Chibuku factory, I got a tour from the local operations manager, a man named in my notes simply as “Mr. Sitima.” Mr. Sitima was in his eighth year at Chibuku, where he oversaw brewing, quality control, and distribution for southern Malawi. This plant ran 24 hours a day, and alone made 25 million liters annually. Countrywide, Chibuku pumped out 80–85 million liters per year—several times the annual production of Deschutes, one of the largest breweries in my home state of Oregon.

“In December, it goes like hotcakes,” Mr. Sitima said. It was late November, and the factory was installing new tanks to accommodate demand. “Christmas, I don’t sleep.”

Inside was a sweltering, slick-oiled machine. Webs of snakelike tubing ran from massive steam boilers to gleaming brew tanks to squat cooling towers. Workers in hairnets, rubber boots, and cobalt blue jumpsuits, the Chibuku logo splashed on the back, toiled at a maze of conveyor belts. In the lab, white-coated employees checked the pH and alcohol content of batches as they emerged. The result: 80 cartons per minute, produced in a cacophony of clanks and thunks.

Outside hulked a 400,000-liter water tank. Due to Blantyre’s erratic water supply, the factory kept its own reserves. Thanks to Malawi’s frequent gasoline shortages, the company also carefully plotted delivery routes to maximize fuel efficiency. “Vigilance,” Mr. Sitima said. And, because Chibuku ferments so quickly, going from about 0.5 percent alcohol by volume on day one to roughly 4 percent on day five, after which it tips into undrinkable swill, trucks had to be loaded with precision. The youngest Chibuku went in first, which meant it was the last to be unloaded: good and ripe by the time the truck reached its final destination, likely a remote village

at the end of a dirt road. “By the third day, it must pass through a throat somewhere,” Mr. Sitima said, “or else I am in trouble.”

On the third day of my brew’s fermentation, it was also time for it to pass through some throats. I hosted a tasting at my home, setting my motley collection of mugs on the coffee table alongside a bowl of roasted peanuts. Twelve adventurous souls showed up, representing six countries.

When I stripped the foil off the pot, that distinctive yeasty pong suffused the room. Eme, who had claimed one of the armchairs for herself, clapped her hand over her nose. I stirred—the pot was much too full to attempt to shake—and then ladled out the brew. I didn’t have enough mugs to go around. People slurped, passed to a neighbor. Silence hung heavy. I again found my anxiety mounting.

“It’s not *that* bad,” offered Charles, a bald-headed Brit known for his elan on the dance floor. “I think it’s nicer than Chibuku.”

“It’s definitely sweeter,” said Daz, a Malawian who’d donned a pink sateen tie for the occasion.

“Thicker, too,” said Sella, a Kenyan-German writer. It was true: my home brew required a certain amount of mastication, prompting one taster to liken it to baby food and another to grits. “It crunches in your mouth,” said a dark-haired Canadian journalist named Angela. “I think it’s stuck in my teeth.”

“I mean, you can totally forego dinner,” an American researcher named Karen said.

“And it’ll double as breakfast tomorrow,” Charles replied.

“I think it has a lot of potential,” Maarten said.

“Yeah, like if you add vodka to it,” said a Malawian named Tammy. (Actually, it’s not uncommon to juice up under-fermented Chibuku. Taverns typically sell plastic sachets of cane spirits.)

I asked my panel to rate it on a scale from one to five. “Four-point five as breakfast, two as booze,” said Dave, a Fulbright scholar working at an HIV clinic in Blantyre. Drew, a Malawian DJ, awarded it a 4.5. For my part, I found its sludginess impossible to overcome: I gave it a 2.5. It averaged to 3.2. The score seemed awfully soft, I thought. This slurry barely resembled what I’d sipped in Zingwangwa. (Later, I would learn I should have let it ferment for as many as 10 days. Home brew runs on a more leisurely pace than the mass-produced stuff, and the yeast hadn’t had enough time to convert the starch into alcohol, so that’s why my maseke was so sweet, so thick.)

I collected the mugs, some barely touched, and piled them in the kitchen sink, which is also where I washed my hair; I had no hot water and couldn’t steel myself for more than a minute or two in the shower. Chatter bounced off the walls. People were making plans to decamp for Mustang Sally, a bar just a few hundred meters away. Charles shimmied his shoulders. Eme screeched. Dipo laughed, and it boomed. Even Maarten was smiling. I took another sip. Nope—still not into it. I poured it into the sink, coaxing the gloop down the drain. This hardly seemed worthy of a website supported in part by National Geographic, and in my head I was already trying to write an ending. I caught a flash of silver as Dipo flung a skinny scarf around her neck. “Rebecca, you coming?” Drew asked. I turned back to the room, to my 12 guests. Yesterday had been exactly two months since my arrival in Malawi. I was 22 and 10,000 miles from home and it occurred to me that I had never convened a gathering of so many people.

As everyone spilled into the evening, I tucked the foil back onto the pot of my masese—all of which I would eventually dump down the drain—and ushered a dawdling, whining Eme out the door. I'd figure out the ending later. For now, I turned the key behind me and dashed to join the others.

Elemental

I awoke to a pitter-patter against the roof of the cabin. A faint pitter-patter, but persistent. The rain hadn't let up much that spring. I had begun to doubt it ever would. I tugged rain pants on over my jeans. Two jackets hung from hooks by the door. I slid into one and tucked the other beneath my arm; I'd need it after the first soaked through. My hiking boots had surrendered a couple weeks ago, but a coworker, bless her, had lent me a pair of knee-high rubber boots.

Outside, the air hung heavy, and the dampness gave it a stubborn chill. Moss drooped from the huge Doug firs like a thousand strands of fuzzed-out yarn. You could squeeze that moss like a sponge, sending tiny shimmering jewels of moisture down your fingers. We liked to tell the kids that Doug firs were the grooviest trees in the forest. They'd look at us askance. Then we'd bring them in close, noses up against the bark, thick and coarse and flaky, with furrows so deep you could practically lose a hand inside. Grooviest trees in the forest, we'd repeat, with a casual shrug of the shoulders. They'd nod back, sagely.

Before breakfast, I cut over to the bluff. The bluff was where, when it wasn't raining, we held campfire. I'd been a 17-year-old out here, leading a hundred people in song, slapping my thighs so hard I would discover bruises the next day. Now I was 23, a year out of college and back in Oregon, and in disbelief to have scored a job at the environmental ed program I'd grown up in. Every sixth grader in the county spends a week at a site like this, peering at scat through a magnifying glass, learning to identify one conifer from another, and gathering, nightly, to sing in the woods. As a high school student, I returned each year for weeklong volunteer stints. This morning, standing among the logs we used as benches, I looked out over the densely treed canyon, at the bottom of which the Bull Run River sliced its path. The Bull Run supplies one-fifth of Oregon residents with their drinking water, its 30-some-mile trip west powered purely by

gravity. When a cult-favorite Tokyo ramen shop looked to open its first foreign outpost, it chose Portland. Why? Because of that water, unfiltered and minimally treated, with a pH of 7.5. The shop's CEO had taken a trip across the US, he told a reporter, "just looking for waters." And Portland's water, he had said, "makes our broth the best."

The Bull Run is a tributary of the Sandy, which originates in glaciers high on the southwest slopes of Mount Hood, that definitionally perfect mountain that hovers on the skyline of this region like Buddha on the altar, and it flows for 56 miles before spilling into the Columbia River. On its course, the Sandy wends through thick forest: Doug fir, western hemlock, western red cedar, Sitka spruce. Tucked here between Mount Hood and the Columbia you'll find the area's last stand of low-elevation old-growth, trees that are hundreds of years old and hundreds of feet tall, with trunks six or eight or ten feet across. Follow your gaze upwards and you may barely glimpse the sky; the canopy is so complete that in the summer it shades 95 percent of the forest floor. That forest floor, and the understory right above it, are an eruption of green, green so green it stings your eyes: leathery salal and shamrock-shaped oxalis, rambling brambles and explosions of lichen. Ferns, too: shiny, big-shouldered sword fern, bombastic and indelicate, always a little bit of a mess, fronds springing clumsily skyward. Lush and lacy lady fern laying low, feigning modesty. Quietly cool maidenhair fern, splayed in a fan, glossy black axis popping stylishly against bright green blades. And the *moss*, the moss! Growing everywhere, with such dedication—draped over branches, springing from stumps, and blanketing nurse logs, those fallen trees that nourish the forest floor and decompose into downy habitat for all sorts of living things, fungi to saplings to salmonberry to salamanders to seven-inch-long banana slugs.

This is temperate rainforest, part of the planet's largest ecosystem of this kind. All forests are alive. But the forests of the Pacific Northwest? They're particularly alive. Here, the biomass—the amount of living (and decaying) matter in a given area—is off the charts. Epiphytes, those air plants that grow on the surfaces of other plants, all those lichens and mosses, thrive. There is literally more life here than in most other places on earth, including tropical rainforests. In part, it's the rarity of fire that allows such life to flourish. It's not that temperate rainforests never see fire. But unlike drier forests, which require fire for regeneration, temperate rainforests are home to trees that can regenerate in shade. And, of course, there's the abundant rainfall to thank: these forests between Mount Hood and the Columbia get 70–110 inches of precipitation per year. Working outside, we learned to welcome the rain. We wore, and nattered endlessly about, impermeable layers. We strung up tarps to keep students dry as they studied the layers of soil and the turbidity of water. We sang, and sang and sang, in an attempt to lift spirits, or at least to distract. For one number, we revamped Katy Perry's "Firework": "Do you ever wear, wear a plastic bag / walking through the woods / on your way to flag?" Our rendition built to a chorus that declared: "'Cause baby I'm a science nerd / I want my sling psychrometer!"—which, appropriately, is a tool spun in the air to measure the humidity. It was such a hit the kids chanted requests for it at campfire.

We called it Gucci wear when we dressed the kids in heavyweight garbage bags, which we only did after we ran out of bright yellow ponchos. We ran out all the time that spring, which was Oregon's second wettest in 117 years of record keeping. Rainfall in March and April was double the normal levels. Any clumsily strung tarp sagged under the weight of the water. Trails turned to slurry. We wrapped the kids' feet in plastic bags before squeezing them into squelching shoes. And we held only a handful of campfires at the bluff, instead tracking mud into a low-

slung, wood-paneled building that served as a chapel during the summer, when this was a Catholic camp, and huddling clammily on benches. After campfire, it was my duty to watch over the cabin area as the kids went to sleep, and the only covered spot was under the eaves of the bathroom, stinky from the bedtime rush. During wakeups the next morning, when I pushed open the door of each cabin, my nostrils would fill with the musty funk of clothes that had failed to fully dry overnight.

One winter, several years into adulthood in Portland, I started tallying. *Damp day no. 9*, I noted to myself. I'd been counting as an attempt to draw meaning from the unrelenting drear, and to divert myself from fantasies about how it would feel to see the sun again. Though I scanned the sky each day for its faint halo, like some perverse grayscale version of *Where's Waldo?*, I could rarely discern it. This made it near-impossible to guess the hour, and the shift between day and night became imperceptible: dark gray to darker gray. Sometimes I biked across a bridge painted the same color as San Francisco's Golden Gate and it always shocked me, this singe of orange against unbroken silver.

Pedaling through the rain, drops pattering placidly against my full-body Gore-Tex armor, I watched tech bros dart from office to Uber to condo, shoulders hunched and faces turned toward the pavement. Insistent on cotton hoodies, they seemed to take the drizzle as personal affront. I, meanwhile, liked to imagine it as quiet protest against all that had changed in recent years, against a skyline cluttered with new apartment towers and streets clogged with SUVs that had never seen an unpaved road. Slacker rain. Rain for a bygone Portland. Rain existentially at odds with the way the city tried to hustle now.

This is the sort of rain you can only hear against the roof if you listen extra hard. The sort you can only see if you squinch your eyes extra tight. The sort that sometimes, even, you can only feel if you tilt your head back and peel your face to the sky. Does it even fall from above, or does it just exist, suspended in the atmosphere all around you? This is why Pacific Northwesterners scoff at umbrellas, because our rain doesn't follow a determined vertical path—it's a listless sort of precipitation, an unhurried swirl of water molecules, and it will cling to you like all that silver glitter we swept across our eyelids before middle school dances. Try to brush it off and it only spreads.

A year or so after that second soggiest spring in history, news stations started reporting on "atmospheric rivers." Rivers in the sky: long, skinny jets of air that carry enormous amounts of water vapor from the tropics and unleash torrents when they make landfall. They're not new phenomena—though researchers have only studied them since the '90s, they've always been part of the ecosystem here. But it's also true that climate change is making them more unpredictable, and stronger. It's a simple mechanism: warming oceans release more moisture to the air, and warming air in turn can hold more moisture. The result is the opposite of slacker rain. This is rain that stomps on the roof, announcing itself like a toddler newly enamored of her ability to create such incredible noise.

Thing is, Portland already has a river, the Willamette—rhymes with "damn it," I once had to tell an intern—which splits the city into east and west. The Willamette might not have the majestic sweep of the Columbia, the river into which it flows, but it's Portland's, and in my lifetime it has gone from a waterway so polluted that fish were born with skeletal deformities to one that's clean and safe enough to swim in, though the Oregon Health Authority does recommend you shower afterward. I cannonballed into it on my 27th birthday. I've warmed

myself at bonfires on its banks. For years I biked over it daily. One summer I appeared on the cover of the newspaper where I worked, wearing a floral sundress and balancing on a slackline, the river at my back. Now I watched it run so high it flooded the esplanade on the east bank, the path's concrete pillars extending from the river like rigid arms, elbows locked, rigor mortis. This river through the land, it merged with this river in the sky, and when all that wetness smeared my vision, I could barely tell where one ended and the other began.

It was a hotter-than-normal summer. They were all hotter-than-normal summers. During my adolescence, Portland counted an average of twelve 90-degree days each year. This year, the year I turned 30, there would be 24. In August, smoke blew in from wildfires across the Pacific Northwest. The air quality was worse in Portland than in Shanghai, Beijing, and New Delhi. Parks & Rec closed pools; outdoor movies and concerts were canceled. The city opened cooling centers. When a couple friends and I planned a backpacking trip, we chose eastern Oregon's Wallowa Mountains, largely because they were less smoke-choked than other parts of the region.

To reach the Wallowas, you head east on I-84 through the Columbia River Gorge, that spectacular canyon of dense green forest and waterfalls upon waterfalls—Portland's collective backyard playground, with its infinite hiking trails and swimming holes. These 80 miles are where the Columbia cuts through the Cascades, and this is in fact the only spot where that 700-mile-long mountain range, which stretches from northern California to British Columbia, experiences any significant break. The Columbia is wide and mighty here, which I like to imagine as a cool assertion of seniority: the river's reminder to its mountain neighbors, to those ostentatious volcanic peaks, that the water was here first. The land itself is proof of the power of

water, for the Gorge owes much of its drama—steep walls, exposed basalt cliffs and columns—to the Missoula floods.

The Missoula floods: words uttered here with reverence. An ancient, cataclysmic gift that deserves our eternal gratitude. We tell the story as some might an origin myth: some 15,000 years ago, when much of North America was still covered in a thick frozen shell, an ice dam in what is now western Montana gave way. This ice dam had blocked an enormous lake of frigid glacial meltwater, which now rushed west across the Idaho panhandle and into eastern Washington, where it joined the Columbia River. The flooded Columbia sloshed south and then swerved west, soon entering the narrow Gorge. Here, walls of water rose to 1,200 feet and surged at speeds upwards of 60 miles per hour. With colossal force, the floods scoured and steepened the flanks of the canyon, exposing sheer basalt cliffs and towering basalt columns—the remnants of millions-year-old lava flows. On the southern bank, in what is now Oregon, the force of the water tore away creek junctions, leaving streams to plunge over the sharp lip of newly cut, near-vertical walls. Thousands of years later, Lewis and Clark would name the surrounding mountains after this chain of spectacular waterfalls. Growing up, they're where we ate lunch on family hikes with our beagle, Lily.

Geologists estimate Glacial Lake Missoula took just three days to drain. After it emptied, the ice dam reformed, and the lake refilled. Then it blasted through the dam again. This process repeated dozens of times over about 2,000 years, widening and deepening the Gorge on each pass. This shape renders it, essentially, an 80-mile-long wind tunnel. In the winter, cold air from Oregon's high desert rockets west, seeking Portland as its bullseye. Gusts in the Gorge can reach 100 miles per hour. In the summer, windsurfers and kiteboarders come to catch swells regarded as some of the best in the world. The Forest Service calls conditions "bodacious." I've never

clung to a sail in the Columbia, but here's what I can say: While riding my bike in the Gorge, crosswinds have whipped me to the opposite shoulder of the road. I've had to shift into my lowest gear, on flat ground, to gain any purchase against the headwind. And I've stood on Crown Point, a hulking basalt promontory that peers over the river like a watchful queen, and leaned my full body weight into the airstream, letting it cushion me like a giant balloon.

After our long weekend in the Wallawas, we pulled back onto I-84. I got a text from my dad letting us know to expect delays; there was a fire in the Gorge. We grumbled. It's already a six-hour drive from the Wallawas to Portland and we all wanted a shower. It didn't help that we were intermittently blasting the heat in an attempt to cool the car's temperamental engine. Shortly after The Dalles, the interstate hit a standstill. All traffic, we learned, was being rerouted across the Columbia, to Washington. By Hood River, our moods had bottomed out. We stopped for pizza and beers, and by the time we got back on the road, it was dark.

We crossed the Hood River Bridge into Washington and turned west onto SR-14. Here the Columbia is hugged by hills on both sides of the river; this part of the canyon stretches up to 4,000 feet high. Looking to Oregon, we saw smoke rising. The sky shone ruddy. It smelled like campfire. We rounded the bend at Carson.

"Oh my god." The words tripped from my lips. "Oh my god." My friends turned to face me in the backseat. We moved our mouths, fished for impossible sentences. My eyes blurred. I blinked them clean.

The hills glowed red. Singed trees cast skeletal silhouettes. Vast clouds of orange smoke billowed above the ridgeline and into the night sky. The moon, nearly full, was Mars.

We pulled off the highway. It felt wrong to watch and also like the only thing we could do. Dozens of people leaned against parked cars, collective gaze unmoving. Tucked somewhere behind those hills, not 10 miles away, was the bluff, where, in a few weeks, kids were supposed to gather to sing around a campfire. Tonight, the blaze cracked, sizzled. Every so often a flare leapt and ignited another stand of trees. Each time, involuntary gasps and sobs burst from the crowd. Strangers exchanged helpless looks and I was struck by the communal experience of grief. Together we bore disbelieving witness.

We would later learn it was a 15-year-old boy with a firecracker who touched it off. On the fire's third day, high winds pushed it 13 miles westward. Live embers leapt two miles across the Columbia, igniting forests in Washington. Nearly 50,000 acres and three months later, it would finally be fully contained. Nine months later, it would be found still smoldering in places.

But we didn't know any of that yet. That evening, when I crawled out of my friend's car in Portland, sometime close to midnight, the air was acrid and thick with smoke. We exchanged tight, silent hugs and I climbed the stairs to my third-floor apartment. I unlocked the door and dropped my pack. I was dusty and tired and sore. Kicking off my sandals, I padded across the room. As I approached my bedroom door, I stopped. I noticed I had left my windows cracked. A fine gray powder clung to the white-painted sills. I turned and saw a trail of prints on the oak floor behind me. I curled my toes and felt the grit against the bare soles of my feet. When I ran a finger across the sill, it left a smear. I slid the windows shut and shook my hair free from its ponytail. In the shower, I watched the dust run in rivulets down my shins. Then I turned my face to the stream and let it rinse away the salt of the sweat and of the tears.

One Across

I could tell by the look in the unfamiliar man's eyes that things were not good. He crouched by my side—hovering, bobbing slightly. His eyes felt very close to mine.

“I didn't see you,” he said, “but I heard it happen.”

He repeated himself and then paused. “You were out for a few minutes, but I'm here with you now.” He was so kind and gentle. “The ambulance is on its way.”

Ambulance? I glanced around. I was crumpled on my side next to a dusty trail. The late-afternoon sun flickered through a canopy of Doug firs. I pushed myself to a seat and put a hand to my face. A cool trickle of blood dripped down my cheek. My right hand was beginning to swell.

“You crashed your bike,” the man said.

My awareness jolted. I sputtered. The word “no” spilled from my mouth, and then kept spilling. “No no no no no,” I said. I shook my head. “No. No.”

“I came back when I heard something.”

Something. What had he heard? Had I screamed? Had he heard my body smack the ground? My helmet was cracked in two. Had he heard that?

Within minutes, two paramedics arrived and lifted me onto a stretcher. I protested as they loaded me into the ambulance. It was too expensive, I said. My parents lived in town, and I wanted to call them. I hadn't been in an ambulance before. I wanted that kind and gentle man with the concerned eyes to stay with me. The door slammed shut. Facing backwards in vehicles has always made me feel ill.

I became aware of the brace around my neck. When had it appeared? Plastic crinkled and ripped. Then there was an IV in my arm. The paramedic was so efficient. He did this all the time, I thought. I ran my tongue against my teeth. They felt intact. There was that.

The paramedic put a phone to my ear. My parents were on the other end. I told them what I thought had just happened, and then the paramedic took back the phone. He was calm. But he sounded serious. After a few moments he cut short the call. “I have to go,” he said. “She needs my help.” I realized I had been babbling.

I was struck by a sense of near-cinematic novelty as I was unloaded from the ambulance at the hospital and wheeled down a white corridor. Someone told me that my bike, which had been in the ambulance with me, would be locked up safely outside. Someone else removed my shoes and rolled my body onto a firm bed and tucked me under crisp white sheets. The sheets felt warm against my skin. I shut my eyes. I felt relief at the stillness and the quiet.

My parents arrived with a whoosh, their hurried strides sliding into slow motion as they rounded into my room. I managed a weak smile, which seemed to take the edge off their fear. They found seats on the side of the room, where they stayed as the narcotics took effect and a litany of tests ensued. An x-ray revealed a displaced break of my fifth metacarpal, my right pinky. A boxer’s fracture, it’s called. I’d had a concussion, but a CT scan showed no bleeding or swelling in my brain, and no fractures to my skull. A subsequent scan, however, confirmed three hairline fractures of my cervical spine: C5, C6, and C7, the lowest part of my neck. None in the main spinal column, all in the transverse processes, those nubs that protrude from the vertebrae like little wings. A nurse drew a sketch in blue ink on the whiteboard to the right of my bed. I peered out the corner of my eyes; I couldn’t rotate my head in this neck brace. Heals with time,

they told me. Could have been so much worse, they told me. Remember, they told me, I was wearing a helmet—a helmet that now sat, in two pieces, on a counter by the foot of my bed.

My dad, a doctor, took notes as diagnoses arrived. He asked follow-up questions and jotted down the name of each physician, each nurse. After each conversation, he folded his sheet of white printer paper back into sixths and returned it to his front shirt pocket. This is how he's always kept his notes.

A few hours on, a nurse picked dirt and grit from the bloodied right half of my face and the skinned flank of my neck. She matched me wince for wince, repeating how sorry she was that it hurt. I wanted to tell her that she didn't need to apologize, that she was doing her job, and also that it's such a gendered thing, that women apologize way more than men do, way more than they need to. I would need to keep these abrasions clean, she told me.

Close to midnight, a jolly, ursine orthopedic resident wrapped my hand and wrist in plaster while chatting with my dad about Michigan and medical school. A surgeon, taciturn but tender, simultaneously sewed up my busted upper lip. He explained, more to my dad than to anyone else, that he was using non-absorbable sutures due to the complexity of my gash, which was messier than a simple linear laceration.

Sometime after midnight, a nurse removed my neck brace. No need to go home with it, she said. My mom laced my shoes, then cradled her arm around my waist as I padded, slowly and stiffly, down the hallway. I asked her to stay by my side as I opened the door to the bathroom, in case the shock of the mirror overwhelmed me. I did my best not to look. Outside the main entrance, someone had pasted those hospital admission labels—stickers bearing a barcode and my name and date of birth—to both the handlebars and the saddle of my bike. At my apartment, where we stopped for a change of clothes, my dad waited in the car while my

mom accompanied me upstairs. I hurried to pack a bag; my mom is German and, like the paramedic, very efficient.

Once home, my parents directed me to the guest room in the basement, where it was cool and dark. The sheets were pale pink and soft and I was afraid I would ruin the pillowcases. Don't worry, my mom told me.

When I woke the next morning, I peeled my cheek from the pillowcase, leaving bits of tissue behind, hostile speckles of red on the pale pink. Pain detonated down my neck. I hobbled upstairs.

This wasn't my first over-the-handlebars somersault. Six years earlier, while on a third date—a third date!—I'd hit a rough patch of road, or maybe it had been a pothole, and careened onto my face. When I came to, I was prone on the asphalt, my date horrified at my side. That had resulted in two chipped teeth, a stitched-up chin, and winks from the nurses on the graveyard shift. “So, had you two been planning on spending the night together?” one asked. After that incident—and the ignominy of being ghosted by that guy a few weeks later—I thought I'd paid my bike crash dues.

As I curled into the couch in my parents' living room, that sense of unfairness knitted with an incredible feeling of idiocy. I'd done this before! I knew better! This crash had occurred on a sunny June afternoon. It was my second time on my first-ever mountain bike, and I had ridden to some ostensibly kid-friendly trails. At the entrance to the park, a dirt trail led down a short, steep hill. I stood at the top and assessed its slope. Then I turned back, to give myself a few pedal strokes before the drop. Again I stopped at the top. Come on, I told myself. On the third attempt, I went for it. My memory stops here. But I presume I picked up sudden speed, squeezed

the brakes, and flipped over the bars. My bike made it halfway down the hill. My body landed at the bottom.

I knew it could have been worse, just as everyone at the hospital had said. I should have been grateful, but instead I felt stupid and ashamed and exceptionally sorry for myself.

Riding wasn't a childhood hobby, and no one else in my family is much of a cyclist. But as a 20-something in Portland, Oregon, bikes had been a shortcut to street cred. I started commuting on a heavy hybrid, a hand-me-down from my mom, brandishing my helmet like a championship trophy. I discovered I liked it, and soon graduated to a zippy road bike that led me up long hills and on 60-mile, 70-mile, 100-mile rides. A sturdy steel steed—an ice-blue model called the Space Horse—carried me, my tent, and my camp stove on solo trips through central Oregon and around the Olympic Peninsula. In place of a car, I owned a stunning array of rain gear and voluminous panniers for schlepping a week's worth of groceries. On soggy days, I swapped steely looks of solidarity with other cyclists. On sunny days, I sped past stopped traffic, feeling sorry for (and, I'll admit, slightly superior to) those sad souls in their gloomy metal boxes. During previous Junes, a month in Portland devoted to themed rides, I had donned garage-sale dresses for bike prom, slapped the bag on the Tour de Franzia, and joined Team Prince for a two-wheeled showdown against Team Bowie. Once—and only once—I'd summoned the mettle to join thousands of Portlanders on the annual flesh frenzy that is the World Naked Bike Ride (also a totally chill way to run into coworkers and ex-boyfriends).

Riding made me feel powerful and free. The mid-thigh tan lines that earned me nods of recognition from fellow cyclists didn't hurt. But I also rode bikes because it was hard. I hadn't been an athletic kid: picked last for kickball, whining about laps at soccer practice, afraid to catch anything thrown at me. I'd danced as a teenager, and competently enough, but I'd mostly

resigned myself to spots on the side, never caring to practice my fouetté turns or barrel rolls like the other girls. But on a bike, I pushed myself. I panted up big climbs. I braked nervously down them. I followed friends onto dirt trails and gravel roads, even though the terrain made me nervous. I'd gone so far as to pin on a number for a few cyclocross races, a heckle-happy sport that's essentially an obstacle course on two wheels. If I could do hard things on a bike, I figured, I could do other hard things in my life. The saddle, as I learned to call it—so much more sophisticated than “seat”—became my proving ground.

A month before my crash, three friends and I had ridden from Klamath Falls, just a few miles north of Oregon's border with California, to the Columbia River, where the state meets Washington: six days and 364 miles on mostly dirt and gravel roads, through remote high desert and ghost towns that once produced millions of pounds of wool and whose boarded-up storefronts now loom like horror movie sets. Midway through the week, while on a 10-mile descent along the Crooked River, a rainstorm struck. Once it passed, the smell of sagebrush and juniper—pungent and sharp and clean—walloped our noses, and we swapped sodden, speechless glances. Later that evening, sipping whiskey from a communal flask and drying our socks around the campfire—some unknown Samaritan had left a bundle of wood tucked beneath a picnic table—we poked our thighs, admiring our muscles. We all agreed we had never felt stronger.

After a couple days without bathing, my mom propped me on a stool in the shower to wash my hair. I whimpered when the water splashed against the raw skin of my neck. She tied a plastic bag around my cast and left me alone, and I cried as steam filled the room.

Several times a day, my dad took a warm, damp cloth to the abrasions on my face and neck, which were leaky with fluid. I called it pus, and he corrected me—it was the healthy form

of exudate, he said. The word comes from a Latin verb meaning “to ooze,” and that’s exactly what my wounds were doing, drooling sticky, yellowish stuff that dripped slowly down my face and neck before crusting over. I had to tie back my hair or else strands clung to my wounds; it hurt to tug them free. And it hurt, too, when my dad scraped off this exudate, a word that sounded too clinical for such a plainly disgusting substance. I blubbered at him. “I know, Rebecca,” he told me. “But I have to.”

I believed him. Trained as a pediatric anesthesiologist, he performed the task with purpose, and he said my name with such sorrow and such care. The ooze was gross, but it didn’t gross him out. And he understood that helping meant I didn’t have to study my shredded face in the mirror.

A slew of appointments followed in the week after my crash, and my dad drove me to all of them: to an office park in the suburbs where a bumbling medical assistant cut off my cast; to a clinic on the other side of town where a kind blonde woman molded a splint for my hand; back to the hospital, where that same taciturn but tender surgeon removed my stitches and peeled scabs from my upper lip; to the physical therapist, a very attractive Hungarian man who flinched visibly at the sight of my bruised and dribbling face.

The day before my crash, I had given notice to my editor at the magazine where I’d worked for three years, telling her I was off to graduate school in the fall. But first I had to finish my final assignments, including one-handedly typing up a feature story about the world’s oldest performing drag queen, a Portlander named Darcelle XV. My dad drove me to and from the office so I didn’t have to take the bus.

I was used to sitting shotgun next to my dad. He’d shuttled me to high school for two years, when a heinous zero period had required me to be in class at 7:10 a.m. And he often

picked me up at 9 p.m. from dance team practice, letting me fume, uninterrupted, about the three hours I'd just spent with 45 other teenage girls in a fluorescent-lit gym. At home, I'd scoop myself some ice cream and flip the newspaper to the crossword puzzle. My dad offered tips when I was stuck—reminding me, for example, that the title for a former Russian ruler could be spelled “tsar” or “czar.” Sometimes, when he'd asked and I'd assented, he'd fill in a square or two on a puzzle I'd left open on the kitchen table, or maybe scribble a hint in the margins. I used a pen, because that's what he told me serious crossword puzzlers used. At 16, I spent a summer away from home at a journalism program at Northwestern University. My dad mailed me photocopies of the daily crossword. “I hope you enjoy the enclosures,” he wrote in the first letter. “If you want clues, send me text messages.”

The next fall, when I applied to college, I wrote my admissions essay about crossword puzzles, weaving a clue between each paragraph. Only later did I understand it was really an essay about him.

Three years before my crash, my dad was fired from the hospital where he'd worked for 19 years. He called my cell phone to deliver the news. Sitting at my desk at work, I grabbed for a notepad, as if writing something down could reverse what had just happened. He sounded embarrassed, and a little startled, but not entirely surprised. He said they'd gotten tired of him, which to me seemed an oblique way of admitting he had been something of an asshole at work, unfriendly and aggressive on occasion, and unpredictably so; I knew he had a quick temper.

In the years since, I'd kept my distance. If you'd asked me at the time, I probably would have said I was busy, which I was—writing about '70s-era abortion activists and cannabis-infused yoga for the magazine; learning how to use an ice ax and then watching the sun come up

from the summit of Mount Hood. But the truth was that being around my dad pained me. When I visited my parents' house, he performed happiness at seeing me and attempted to sustain interest in my stories. But I caught his face when he thought I wasn't looking, saw the empty expression and stubbled chin and slack cheeks. I noticed how he napped for hours, tucking his long, skinny legs underneath the covers in the afternoon, and how he scrolled through his phone at night.

The summer after he was fired, he showed up to help me move to a new apartment, my first to myself. On a Saturday morning in July, we loaded a U-Haul at my old place, a once-charming 1908 home whose floorboards had so deteriorated you could see into the basement from the kitchen, and drove to my new place, a one-bedroom in a still-charming 1928 building with tall ceilings, generous east-facing windows, and a near-guarantee to collapse should that long-promised megaquake ever strike the Pacific Northwest. But I couldn't have afforded a newer or seismically retrofitted apartment, and this one had red oak floors and a back stairwell that climbed to the roof, where I would later sip rosé with friends and sob to Joni Mitchell after a breakup.

He was a bit of a mope that morning, and he retreated to a wingback chair in the corner as I ferried furniture to the truck. His behavior wasn't altogether unusual; my mom, brother, and I often joked about his retreats to his own world, how he would seem blank but would in fact be rewinding the past and spinning the future into elaborate, dire, and entirely unlikely scenarios. At these times, he would sit upright and stare ahead, totally still, his brown eyes focusing on no point in particular. He once told me he'd been hypnotized, and it didn't surprise me he'd been susceptible. He'd been interested in Buddhism for ages, and I used to whine about the Buddhist books on tape he'd play in the car. One of the few books I'd seen him actually read when I was a kid—he liked reading in theory but got restless in practice—was *Wherever You Go, There You*

Are, Jon Kabat-Zinn's 1994 bestseller about meditation and mindfulness. His own meditation practice was inconsistent, but he liked to quote from the book in conversation.

I snapped him from his daze. "Dad!" I shouted. He shuddered to, just as he'd done since I was a kid. "Huh?" he answered, blinking at me.

"I need help with my mattress."

"Oh, right! Your mattress!" He scanned the room as if he'd been asleep and needed to remind himself where he was. "Let's bring it downstairs."

After nearly a year out of work, my dad picked up a temporary gig at a hospital in Muncie, Indiana. He lived there for six months, during which he attended services at the local Unitarian Universalist church (my dad is Jewish; I get my curls, which I love, from him) and occasionally texted me after he saw a campus theater production at Ball State. But I found it easier when I didn't have to be around his gloom, which, while tempered by the Muncie job, persisted. I also got to use his car while he was away, and I had grown very fond of loading groceries into a Subaru Forester rather than onto my bike.

A few months after my dad returned to Portland, I got a Monday evening phone call from my brother. "You need to come over," said David, who was living with our parents at the time.

"I just got home from yoga," I whined. "It's dark out."

"This can't wait," he said. My brother has a penchant for the absolute. "Nobody's dead and nobody's dying. But you need to come over."

He picked me up, and we spoke in formless, empty sentences on the ride. I asked no questions. He gave no clues.

David walked through the front door of the house ahead of me. Our parents were in the kitchen. I studied their faces for hints: nothing. Without exchanging words, the four of us gathered around the dining room table, my mom to my right and my dad to my left, at the head of the table. David sat across from our mom, leaving a space next to our dad. “What’s going on?” I asked. My mom tipped her chin at my dad. I turned to him.

He took a breath. When he spoke, his voice was thin and high and choked. “I’m an alcoholic,” he said.

I sank against my chair. I reached out a hand to him. My mouth moved but produced no sound. It made no sense and it made perfect sense, and I wondered if these revelations often felt this way.

“But when?” I finally asked. “When did this happen?”

“It’s been five years,” my mom said. Why was she answering the question? And why had she said nothing to David or me until now? I scanned my memories; I recalled no drunken behavior. But I’d spent little time at home during the last few years, and my dad explained that he’d been a secretive drinker—he drank alone, in his car, in his closet. “Cheap red wine,” my mom said. “Or cheap gin.” I recoiled at the images building in my mind. Why was she giving these details? I wanted none of them.

“At work?” I asked.

“No, never,” he said. I trusted him on that. Even when hospital politics exasperated him or he snapped at chattering nurses in the operating room, the practice of medicine was near-sacred to him. I used to watch him prep supplies on Sunday evenings, unwrapping and assembling IV start kits on the kitchen counter. That sound of crinkling plastic in the ambulance had been familiar to me.

Tears leaked from his eyes. I squeezed his hand, the instinct to comfort a parent an unfamiliar one.

Yet it also made sense, perfect sense: his mother, now in her 90s, had battled with alcohol as well, and I'd heard whispers about his older brother. It explained the occasional wobble I'd seen when he stood from the couch, and it made me wonder about those midday naps. But because drinking numbed him out—it didn't make him explosive, or at least not around me—I'd never suspected it.

Then a memory flashed. “When you helped me move into my apartment—you were drunk that day.”

His face caved in. My mom clenched her jaw. She looked away, unable to suppress a sigh of disgust.

“You showed up in the morning and I smelled it,” I said. In the years since, I'd done my best to dismiss the memory, convincing myself I must have misidentified the odor. “I asked if you'd been drinking. You denied it.”

“I'm so sorry,” he said, the tears coming faster now. “I'm so sorry.”

Midway through my week of post-crash convalescence on my parents' couch, sometime after my mom deposited several Rubbermaid bins before me—given that I was home, she figured I might as well sort through some 20 years of schoolwork and childhood debris—she and I got into a high-volume fight. We've been honing these since I was in elementary school. Then, they'd been vicious scraps that sent my brother scuttling to his room and left my dad too intimidated to intervene, helpless in the vigor of our vitriol. They've mellowed considerably since, and we've become close as adults in a way that would have astonished my younger self.

But we still have it in us. The reason for this particular row—like the reason for any of our rows—was immaterial. Fighting was the way we showed each other we cared. A year before, the two of us had seen writer Sheila Heti speak at a bookstore in Portland. She described how some people can tolerate boredom in a relationship, while others demand “aerobic suffering.” My mom and I exchanged knowing, somewhat weary looks.

I thundered upstairs to find my dad. I cornered him in the hallway.

“I can’t deal with her any longer!” I screamed. I felt like a child. I didn’t care. “She makes me unwelcome here, and I can’t stand it.”

“Rebecca, your scar, your lip—you shouldn’t stretch it like that.”

“How can that be your response?” I spat.

“I want you to heal,” he said.

But he listened, and my ire subsided, and we wound our way into conversation about struggling to live up to our own expectations of ourselves and the subsequent shame we bear, a not-infrequent topic between us. I may have moaned about those Buddhist books on tape as a kid, but as an adult, I meditate and keep a few spiritual texts of my own on the shelf. And, as had by this time also become common between us, talk turned to his alcoholism. He’d stopped drinking more than a year earlier. I kept bracing for news of a relapse, trying to soothe myself by reading about how recovery rates are higher among those who develop alcoholism later in life. But he seemed, miraculously, to be truly sober.

As I wiped tears before they could roll onto my still-oozing wounds, he told me I had said two things, both shortly after he had come clean to the family, that had been vital to his recovery.

I lurched from self-pity. “What?”

The first, he said, was a few weeks after that Monday night admission. I had asked if he'd been going to AA meetings. Sometimes, he told me. He needed to attend more often, I said. And he did—he started going daily, sometimes twice daily, so often I worried one addiction had supplanted another. He went out for breakfast at greasy diners and on the occasional hike with friends from AA, a turn of events that amazed me, as I'd rarely seen him socialize without the company of my mom. He even texted with his sponsor.

“And the other time was last June, when you and Mom went on vacation together.” I had booked a Forest Service cabin in a remote, sagebrush-covered region of Oregon known as the Outback. “Mom wondered if I should come along, too, and you looked at me and said you didn't think it was a good idea. And your face was so sad.”

“I'm so sorry, Dad,” I whimpered. “I was scared. I didn't know what to say.”

“I didn't want to see you look at me that way. You made me want to change.”

I flinched at the comment, so mawkish and out-of-character for my dad. It made me uncomfortable, too, the thought of taking any credit for his recovery. I knew his sobriety had come only after he'd disclosed his drinking to the entire family, after my mom had spent years pleading with him to stop, after she had threatened to leave. I wanted no congratulatory role in a story that, it seemed, had caused so much more pain to the rest of the family than to me—to my mom, most of all, but also to David, who had spent much of the past few years living at home, unaware of our dad's drinking but subject to his odd moods, his depressive slumps, his self-alienation.

But his words shook me, of course they did. At some point in my 20s—before the alcoholism, before the loss of his job—my dad had told me he'd felt a profound closeness with me since I'd been a small child. At first I had rolled my eyes at him. “No, listen,” he said. He

reminded me of how when I was young and couldn't sleep, which was often, I would tiptoe to the basement, where he would be watching television. I'm not sure what we watched, or even if we kept the TV on. The point was: we were awake, and we were together. The closeness he felt scared him a little, he said, because part of what he recognized was a shared tendency towards self-examination—and, in turn, to suffering. When he told me this, I realized our closeness scared me, too, because I saw the hurt this tendency had caused him, and I didn't want that for myself. His company at times felt like a cautionary tale.

I sensed some of that mutual fear as we stood opposite each other. But this time I didn't turn away from it, and I let us cry together.

Two months after my bike crash, I left Portland for grad school in Montana. It had been, to put it mildly, a difficult summer. I had spent seven weeks with a splint on my right hand, which made typing tedious and packing next-to-impossible. I owed nearly \$3,000 in medical bills; the ambulance alone, after insurance, was \$600.41. One weekend, my mom had volunteered to help me box up my kitchen and I had barely staved off a silverware-related meltdown. Unable to ride my bike, I went to the occasional yoga class, but I seethed at students able to bear weight on their hands—or, worse, on their heads. My fractured neck put headstands out of the question.

Crying jags arrived unannounced. Headaches thwacked me. At first, I chalked it all up to the general shit slurry of the summer. Then I remembered I'd suffered a concussion, which consumed my Google searches for weeks. I read and reread the page on the Mayo Clinic's website about the "complex disorder" known as post-concussion syndrome. "The only known

way to prevent post-concussion syndrome is to avoid the head injury in the first place,” it taunted.

By the date of my departure, my body had mostly healed: my splint was off, I could swivel my head with minimal discomfort, and the scar above my upper lip was already fading. The headaches had stopped, too. But I was still weepy and sensitive, so when my parents offered to make the drive to Missoula with me, U-Haul and all, I accepted without question. When we arrived, I hadn't yet found a place to live, which meant several frenzied days of apartment visits and rental applications. Back at our Airbnb, the three of us ran a highlights reel of our signature squabbles, as if in perverse preparation for living hundreds of miles apart. There was, at least, a diverting visit to the Western Montana Fair, where my mom lost her mind at the size of a ram's testicles and we all watched, rapt, as no-nonsense judges assessed the livestock in the 4H competition: “This young man,” said one portly judge, gesturing to a towheaded teen, “brings us a shapely, expressive sheep.”

My dad woke at 5:30 each morning to attend an AA meeting, returning to the Airbnb before I was even up. I'd open my door to find him with a cup of coffee, ready to report on the lovely Montanans he'd met and their discussions about change and the dangerous lure of perfection. I started to wonder if a meeting was ever mediocre; their uniform magnificence made me suspicious.

My parents' last night in Missoula, I couldn't sleep. My bikes were in a storage shed across town, and I became convinced they would be stolen. At 2:15 a.m., I drove the four miles to check the lock. When I returned, my dad was awake on the couch. “Come sit with me,” he said, as I guiltily dropped the car keys.

I don't recall exactly what we discussed that night: probably my nerves about grad school, and probably his own sense of dislocation in Portland after the tumult of the last few years. We joked how my fear of bike theft was the projection of my anxiety about moving. My bikes were my only friends in Missoula; how would I go on if they disappeared? I do know that I described, in more precise terms than I had before, how riding made me feel—how it helped fuel my belief in myself, and how it brought temporary calm to my perpetually racing mind.

“Bike rides are your meetings!” he cried. I laughed, not wanting to say aloud that I found the comparison ridiculous. Bike rides took effort, physical strain. Meetings? All you did was sit there.

It wasn't until weeks later, after I'd gotten back on my bike and taken my first cautious spins around Missoula, that I realized, with embarrassing clarity, how wrong I'd been. I hadn't seen the years of relapse and defeat. To me, my dad had gone from drunk to sober in a day. He'd made it look so easy. He sought no congratulations. There was no helmet he swung like a trophy, no tan lines he flaunted. I thought back, then, to our conversation a few months earlier, after I stormed out of the fight with my mom. At one point, he had reached into the pocket of his jeans. “Have I shown you this?” he asked. I shook my head.

In his palm he held an AA sobriety coin. Bronze, to mark one year clean. He returned it quickly to his pocket, as if sheepish to have shown it to me, or perhaps afraid of misplacing it.

Now and Then

Picture this: Four 12-year-old girls ride their bicycles down a country road in Indiana. It's the summer of 1970 and they're dressed in cuffed shorts and colorful Keds, riding shiny step-through steeds. One of the girls has tied a tiny yellow transistor radio to her handlebars. The opening notes of Badfinger's "No Matter What" strum and kick, and soon the girls begin to sing along: "No matter what you are / I will always be with you / Doesn't matter what you do, girl / Ooh girl, with you." Two point their index fingers at each other on this last line, punctuating the "you." A third lifts her feet to her handlebars, balancing easily as her bike sways below her. The four ride under a rail bridge as a train chugs by, and then past some grazing cows. One throws a hand to her chest, tossing back her head as she croons. "Sing it girl!" another calls. "If you would give me all / As I would give it to you!" the first screeches, answering her friend's encouragement with transparent zeal.

It's an indulgent scene, nearly a minute long, and it's followed, not two minutes later, by another swoony sequence on bikes, this one soundtracked by "Knock Three Times." You know the one: "Knock three times on the ceiling if you want me / Twice on the pipe if the answer is no." The girls are now on a dirt road and again singing along, drumming their palms on their handlebars and dinging their bells in perfect time with the percussion. One squeezes her eyes shut as she draws out the last line of the chorus and tilts her face to the blue summer sky.

This is *Now and Then*, and as an eight-year-old at the time of its 1995 release, I was smitten. I'd loved Shirley Temple movies for their dance routines, and for their protagonist's ringlets—I had a knotted mop of curls I had yet to master—but they'd begun to feel childish. When I stumbled upon *Now and Then*, which I imagine must have happened on a visit to Blockbuster, it spoke to me in a way technicolor tap numbers never could. The film follows four

friends over the course of a single summer as they investigate a mystery, wrestle with grief, and greet the onset of puberty. Even as a kid born deep into the '80s, I loved it for its joyous '70s nostalgia, and for its soundtrack plucked from my parents' oldies station: the Monkees, the Archies, the Jackson 5. I loved the bike rides, and the revenge prank that sees the girls snatching the clothes of a rival gang of skinny-dipping brothers. But most of all, I think, I thrilled to the film's vision of friendship.

Now and Then, much to the dismay of my eight-year-old self, doesn't open on 1970. The first 10 minutes of the movie are set in 1991, as the friends reunite in their hometown of Shelby, Indiana. We meet Samantha (Demi Moore) first, sucking at a Marlboro and squinting through tiny tinted spectacles as she drives down a tree-lined road. She's a sci-fi writer, and in husky voiceover explains what's up: "Thomas Wolfe once said you can't go home again. Well, that's great for old Tom, but he wasn't a chick who made a pact with her friends when she was 12 to get together whenever any one of them needed each other. So here I am driving back to my childhood home in Indiana, a place I can tell you I never wanted to see again."

Sam's headed back because Chrissy (Rita Wilson), a housewife who never left Shelby, is pregnant with her first child. Also still in Shelby is Roberta (Rosie O'Donnell), an obstetrician who pitches shutouts on the softball field. The fourth friend is Hollywood star Teeny (Melanie Griffith), who pulls into the subdivision in a white stretch limo. "Hey, bitches," she purrs as she emerges, dressed in a white blazer, miniskirt, and stilettos. "Good lord," Chrissy sputters.

But soon enough, the film flings us back in time, the Allman Brothers thrumming as the girls push each other on the swings. Moore, on voiceover, reintroduces the characters on a tour through their bedrooms. Sam (Gaby Hoffmann), whose walls are plastered with posters of the

planets, reads by flashlight as her parents argue in the next room. Roberta (Christina Ricci), a tomboy whose mom was killed in a car crash when she was four, stands before a mirror in a white bra. “No matter what I do, they just keep getting bigger!” she moans, grabbing a roll of masking tape and wrapping it around her chest. Teeny (Thora Birch), an only child with absent country-clubber parents, swans around in strands of pearls, practicing her post-Oscar interview. And Chrissy (Ashleigh Aston Moore) brushes her hair in her candy-striped bedroom as her mother—Bonnie Hunt, with a perfect bouffant and a colossal pink bow across the front of her dress—deploys euphemism-based parenting. “I believe you’re too young to be informed,” she says, perched next to Chrissy at the vanity, “but since your friends are trash mouths, I think you should hear it from me—the facts. This is going to come as a shock to you, but—” She picks up a potted plant. “Here. This is a flower, right?” Chrissy nods. “Well, all women have a garden and a garden needs a big hose to water it. Or a small hose, as long as it works.”

Voiceover: “As a direct result of this conversation, Chrissy will spend a significant part of her adult life obsessed with gardening.”

At 12, the girls teeter between childhood and whatever is coming next: they play Red Rover one day and smoke their first cigarettes the next; they pool their money for a treehouse while taking Cosmo sex quizzes at the diner. They also hold candlelit séances at the cemetery, which sets them on a quest to find out what happened to a boy in their town named Dear Johnny. This, ostensibly, is the plot of *Now and Then*, and the girls are dedicated gumshoes: they ride their bikes nine miles to the library in the next town over to page through dusty bound volumes of old newspapers; they break into Sam’s grandma’s attic to sleuth around; and they even make a visit to a local mystic, played by a deadpan Janeane Garofalo in heavy eyeliner and a shag mullet.

But *Now and Then*, like most coming-of-age movies, isn't really about its plot. Far more important are the games of Truth or Dare, where the girls discuss whether you can get pregnant from French kissing (no, but prudish Chrissy thinks it might send boys the wrong message) and Teeny asks Roberta if they can see her boobs.

"Drop dead!" Roberta scowls.

"Weirdo," Chrissy tells Teeny, her mouth full of sandwich.

Teeny's face falls. "I don't have any real ones yet," she says. Then she sticks out her chest to show her friends what she's sculpted today, reaches into her blouse, and pulls out a balloon. "It's filled with pudding," she says, clearly delighted with herself, as each girl gives it a squeeze. "Jell-O was too jiggly. Pudding has a heavier, more realistic texture."

Or there's the moment the girls spot the Wormer brothers skinny-dipping. The groups are sworn enemies: earlier in the movie, the boys had bombed the girls with Jell-O-filled balloons (it's this incident that inspired Teeny's experiments). As payback, the girls snatch the brothers' clothes. "Nice undies!" trills Teeny, as Sam tosses a pair of tighty-whities into the air. The chase scene, set to the buoyant bubblegum of Vanity Fare's "Hitchin' a Ride," may set a record for the amount of naked adolescent boy butt ever committed to film.

In other words, the film is about this very specific moment in girlhood, one where you still play with your friends, only now you sometimes also play at being adults. One minute you're jumping into puddles, and the next you're smooching Devon Sawa (the kiss between Roberta and the eldest Wormer brother is a thing of radiant, awkward beauty, and is responsible for the dawning of my first celebrity crush). The movie's also about the loss of illusions, as Sam contends with her parents' separation and Roberta continues to grieve her mother's death. And

Now and Then doesn't shy away from these matters—or, just as significantly, from the magnitude of its characters' emotions.

In one scene, Teeny sits on the roof, watching a movie as it plays at a nearby drive-in. Sam, who's just been subjected to dinner with her mom and a new man, crawls up to join her.

"How come you're out so late?" Teeny asks.

"Needed to do some thinking," Sam answers.

Teeny raises an eyebrow. "In the summer?"

What follows is a scene that leans not into thoughts but into feelings. As Sam reveals that her parents are getting a divorce, Teeny strokes her hair and listens. Teeny wraps an arm around Sam's shoulder, and then Sam, crying, curls Teeny into a hug.

"It's okay," Teeny whispers. "It's okay. I'll always be here for you." When they break from the embrace, Teeny peels off her beaded necklace and splits it with her teeth.

"What are you doing?" Sam asks, shocked. "You love those."

Teeny silently ties one strand around Sam's wrist and the other around her own. They clutch hands. "Best friends for life," Teeny says.

"For life," Sam answers.

Now and Then was a box office success, earning \$37.5 million worldwide on a \$12 million budget. The press, however, dismissed it. A "pleasant, sweet, coming-of-age movie," wrote the *New York Times*, but ultimately "a little dull and much too predictable."

TV Guide: "Light on drama and heavy on sentimental contrivance."

"A gimmicky sitcom," said Roger Ebert in his two-star review.

Many critics were distracted by *Now and Then*'s similarities to *Stand by Me* (1986), another coming-of-age story about four 12-year-olds trying to solve the mystery of a dead kid as the difficulties of adulthood loom before them. But here's the thing: girls of the '90s didn't have many opportunities to see themselves onscreen, which meant that *Now and Then*, no matter how derivative, mattered. (For my part, I think it's more self-aware homage than cheap knock-off. Take the moment when the girls ride their bikes under a rail bridge, a nod to the scene in *Stand by Me* when the boys outrun an oncoming train.) And sure, *Now and Then* might trade some amount of depth for sentimentality. But as a kid with bigger feelings than I knew what to do with, it moved me to see characters consumed by their emotions. The film takes these girls and their relationships with one another seriously, in a way few other movies of the time dared. *The Baby-Sitters Club*, based on the book series and released the same year as *Now and Then*, treats heavy subject matter with sanitized gloss. *My Girl* (1991) has a fully realized 11-year-old girl at the center, but it doesn't take up female friendship in the way *Now and Then* does. Other '90s stories of female friendship—*Clueless*, *Thelma & Louise*, *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion*—are about older characters.

Now and Then gets so much about friendship right. It understands the asymmetries of intimacy across a group, how not everyone is equally close, and also that when a friend calls an emergency meeting in the middle of the night, you'd better toss on a bathrobe and show up. It understands that some jagged edges or annoying habits—Chrissy's whining, Sam's occult fascinations—are to be accepted, while other acts go too far. When Roberta fakes her own drowning, Chrissy belts her. "Don't you ever do anything like that to me again!" she yells. "Ever!" It's an honest display of anger, one that makes clear the depth of their importance to

each other. No matter how much you love your friends, sometimes they piss you off—and sometimes they need to be jolted back into sense.

It's not a flawless portrait. There's some icky fat-shaming of Chrissy, such as when Teeny asks Sam which member of the group she'd kill for food if the girls were stranded on a deserted island (Chrissy, mercifully, isn't present for this query). But in so many ways, *Now and Then* puts forth a vision of friendship based not on exclusion, cattiness, or conformity—a dynamic so effectively satirized in *Mean Girls* a decade later—but on generosity and support. At a softball game, when Roberta goes up to bat, a dough-faced kid hollers at her that girls can't play softball. She slugs him. He calls her a "crazy bitch." A brawl ensues between the two, and the other girls come to Roberta's defense. "How's it feel to get the crap kicked out of you by a girl, huh?" Sam asks.

"Too bad your mother's dead," the boy spits at Roberta. "Somebody needs to teach you to act like a girl."

Immediately, Sam heaves herself at the bully. These are girls who come to each other's defense, and it brings them power—next we see Sam, she's pedaling home, hair mussed, cheeks smudged with dirt. She dismounts her bike and lets it fall to the lawn, a dizzy, disbelieving look of triumph on her face.

In one of the final scenes in 1970, before the movie returns to 1991, the girls snoop around Sam's grandma's attic for clues about Dear Johnny. Sam finds an old newspaper that reveals Dear Johnny and his mother were shot to death by a burglar who'd been caught off-guard during a nighttime prowling. As the girls take it in, Roberta storms to the record player and slams it shut. "Roberta, it's okay," Chrissy says.

“No, it’s not okay!” Roberta screams. She throws something at a mirror and it shatters. “It’s not okay! Why did they have to die? Why did she have to die?” The girls look on as Roberta, through tears, tells how her dad has been concealing the full details of her mom’s death. She sobs, heaves, collapses. “Why did she have to die? Why did he have to lie to me? He’s all I have left, and he lied.”

Chrissy quietly makes her way to Roberta’s side. “He’s not all you have left,” she tells her, and then Sam and Teeny join them, cross-legged, on the floor.

“All I can count on is you guys,” Roberta says.

It’s a beautiful moment as the girls make room for the magnitude of Roberta’s grief. It might startle them at first, but they don’t dismiss it or tell Roberta to calm down. The message is clear: while friends may not be able to sweep away your pain, letting them in—even when you doubt they’ll understand—can be an enormous balm.

When I returned to *Now and Then* recently, it must have been 20 years since my last viewing. I’m now 33, the same age as the adult characters, and it surprised me how much of it held up. The child actors give lived-in, animated performances; the soundtrack is a total romp; and the kiss between Christina Ricci and Devon Sawa is a case study in consent. The editing can be jumpy, the script a little wooden, and yes, perhaps the vision a touch sweet—that condescending descriptor applied, overwhelmingly, to stories about girls. But I’m still moved by the film’s nuanced portrait of friendship, and the space it allows for big emotions. It still makes me laugh, and cry. It also aces the Bechdel test with ease.

Watching the movie now, I can feel the hope I must have held as an eight-year-old viewer, and how so much of that hope had wilted by the time I turned 12. At eight, I counted few

friends at school but belonged to a glorious girl gang in the neighborhood, and we spent our summers swimming in the lake and challenging each other to watermelon seed spitting contests. When I was 10, my family moved to a new city, and I struggled to make friends. Any social success was short-lived: at 12, I experienced my first friend breakup, an unfortunate incident involving a ruined belt and a lunchtime spat in the girls' bathroom. Like Teeny, I was still waiting for my boobs to come in, and there was no Devon Sawa in sight. So my affection for the film faded, in part because teen movies exerted such illicit pull, but also because *Now and Then* started to feel like a broken promise: no lonely 12-year-old wants to watch a movie about inseparable 12-year-olds.

But at 33, I watch as someone who knows what it means to feel a friend's love. It took until well into my 20s, and at times it's been messy and painful: I've watched friendships change, and end. It's not the inseparable clique I'd hoped for—in hindsight, probably an unwise wish—but rather a web of friends who've buoyed me after loss, shown me the power of softness, and joined me in joy. In fact, one of the delights of revisiting *Now and Then* has been learning how many of my female friends also loved the movie when they were young. When I mentioned it to my friend Kelly, she broke into “Sugar, Sugar,” which the girls sing as they paint a garage door, twirling around one another. Danielle told me the film's bike rides are forever cemented in her mind, and Sarah immediately brought up Christina Ricci's boob taping scene. My college roommate Allissa and I, who began catching up regularly during the Covid-19 pandemic after years out of touch, spent 90 minutes on FaceTime dissecting the foursome's social dynamics. I like to imagine us, all of us, as girls, scattered across the country, each aspiring toward what we saw onscreen. And sometimes, I wonder if it might soothe that younger self of mine to know that while the boobs might never really show up—and sorry about that—the friends absolutely will.

“Very, Very Dangerous to Live Even One Day”: Reading *Mrs. Dalloway* as a Post-Pandemic Novel

“We are all Mrs. Dalloway now,” wrote Evan Kindley in a *New Yorker* blog post in April of last year. In the beginning of his post, Kindley noted how in the early days of lockdown, Twitter users had taken to rewriting the famous first line of Virginia Woolf’s novel. He rattles off numerous examples: “mrs. dalloway said she would disinfect the doorknobs herself,” “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the sanitiser herself,” “Mrs. Dalloway said she would scroll through pictures of flowers herself,” “Mrs. Dalloway said she would have the flowers delivered because they were [a] non-essential need, but she would make sure to tip the delivery guy at least 30% herself,” and, finally, “Mrs. Dalloway said she would make the mask herself.”

It was appropriate, Kindley said, because *Mrs. Dalloway*’s “opening pages are probably the most ecstatic representation of running errands in the Western canon.” He went on: “At a time when our most ordinary acts—shopping, taking a walk—have come to seem momentous, a matter of life or death, Clarissa’s vision of everyday shopping as a high-stakes adventure resonates in a particular way.”

But are we really all Mrs. Dalloway now? (Or were we, back when adrenaline was running high and pandemic fatigue had yet to set in?) Perhaps it’s reading too deeply into a cute line, but the sentiment feels off. In part, it rings false because at no point while running errands in the pandemic have I thought, as Clarissa does to herself on the first page of the novel, “What a lark! What a plunge!” My tasks may feel high-stakes, but they’ve hardly been thrilling, not even on those first fresh spring days. On a more substantive level, however, to suggest we’re all Mrs. Dalloway now obscures the ways in which Woolf’s 1925 novel is a post-pandemic story, set in a post-pandemic London, about a post-pandemic survivor. It is not the immediate incident of

trauma that interests Woolf but rather its aftermath, and *Mrs. Dalloway*, in often subtle ways, shows how traces of the pandemic—as both global catastrophe and individual illness—live on in society and in the bodies and minds of survivors.

Mrs. Dalloway, set on a single day in June 1923 as its eponymous character prepares for a party, never explicitly mentions the influenza epidemic of 1918. But references appear as early as the second page, when a neighbor of Clarissa's notes to himself that she has "grown very white since her illness." A few lines later, Woolf tells us, in a parenthetical aside (many of the novel's references to Clarissa's experience of illness come as asides, though not always as parentheticals) that Clarissa's heart had been "affected, they said, by influenza." Clarissa later echoes the observation of her neighbor, thinking to herself that "since her illness she had turned almost white." According to Elizabeth Outka, author of the 2019 book *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature*, "any reference to influenza in 1918—especially one with continued serious side effects—would have evoked the pandemic." (The frequent ringing of bells in the novel would also have brought to mind the pandemic, as flu deaths were commonly marked by a peal of the bells; some communities, Outka says, had to stop when the tolling became nonstop.) Yet Woolf tells us glancingly little about Clarissa's actual bout with the flu: we learn that the imperious Lady Bruton believes Clarissa got in the way of her husband Richard's political career, not least because she "had to be taken to the seaside in the middle of the session to recover from influenza." Rather than details of the symptoms Clarissa suffered or the quality of her time in the sickroom, most everything we learn is about the aftermath of her illness—how, for example, Richard still insists "that she must sleep undisturbed," in a narrow bed in an attic room, and that she take "an hour's complete rest after luncheon," a decree he will deliver "to the end of time, because a doctor had ordered it once."

Woolf scatters such breadcrumbs and then glides along, and the result is that influenza sits in the shadows of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Far more present is the era's towering tragedy: World War I, which provides the novel a more obvious backdrop of mortality. It's through the lens of the war that such passages are usually understood: "This late age of world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears. Tears and sorrows; courage and endurance; a perfectly upright and stoical bearing." That the trauma of the war lingered in the British populace is scarcely something we need to be told. It's also the case that, according to Outka, World War I overshadowed the pandemic at the time. The pandemic killed somewhere between 50 and 100 million people, inflicting several times more casualties than World War I. But for a variety of reasons—including the way war news drowned out pandemic reports, and the fact that a death from influenza could not, unlike a death in battle, be seen as a patriotic or courageous sacrifice—the flu became secondary in the societal narrative. In the literary narrative, too: Outka notes that "writing about the flu could feel disloyal and unpatriotic, a problematic dodge of the more important story, and thus its representations often go underground, reflecting the very ways it seemed subordinate at the time." So what's unmissable in *Mrs. Dalloway* is the war and how it lives on in the shellshocked deliriums of Septimus Warren Smith, who hears birds in Regent's Park chattering in Greek and imagines Evans, his dead friend and commanding officer, emerging from a stand of trees.

But, as Outka suggests, the fact that *Mrs. Dalloway* doesn't explicitly tackle the flu isn't just some attempt on Woolf's part to dodge potential accusations of disloyalty. The subordinate placement of the flu in the novel can, in fact, be seen as her way of reflecting, even highlighting, Britain's myth-making priorities, which may or may not have been her own. Woolf, it is

important to keep in mind, understood the seriousness of illness. Kindley outlines Woolf's intimacy with illness in his blog post:

Her mother died of heart failure brought on by influenza in 1895, a tragedy that precipitated the first of Woolf's many nervous breakdowns. Woolf herself came down with serious cases of the disease a half-dozen times between 1916 and 1925, and needed to remain confined to bed for significant stretches. Influenza affected her heart, just as it did Clarissa's, and may have played a role in her worsening mental health during this period, as well. In 1922, she had three teeth removed in order to prevent future infections, on the advice of her doctor, Sir George Savage (the basis for the odious Sir William Bradshaw in *Mrs. Dalloway*).

Woolf also grappled with the matter of writing about illness. In her 1926 essay "On Being Ill," Woolf wonders why illness, "[c]onsidering how common [it] is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings ... has not taken its place with love, battle, and jealousy among the prime themes of literature." But no, Woolf writes, rather than novels devoted to influenza—or epic poems to typhoid, or lyrics to toothache—"literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, negligible, and non-existent." Woolf pushes against such mind-body dualism, arguing vigorously that "the very opposite is true," that "[a]ll day, all night the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours, turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February. The creature within can only gaze through the pane—smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant." And yet, laments Woolf, "of all this daily drama of the body there is no record."

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf does pay attention to “this daily drama of the body.” As Kindley accurately says, the opening pages of the novel are an “ecstatic representation of running errands.” What generates this sense of ecstasy? It’s Clarissa’s aliveness to the reality of physical sensation. Clarissa is keenly aware of the sights and sounds and smells around her, among them the “little squeak of the hinges,” “the rooks rising, falling,” “the bellow and the uproar,” “the triumph and the jingle and strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead,” “a beating, a stirring of galloping ponies, tapping of cricket bats,” “the whirling young men, and laughing girls in their transparent muslins,” and “the earthy-garden sweet smell” in the flower shop. Woolf’s lyricism strikes with colossal force in these early pages of the novel, and even as she dips in and out of Clarissa’s thoughts, she returns repeatedly to the tangible materiality of the city around her. There’s even tactility to the air: Clarissa registers “how fresh, how calm ... the air was in the early morning” and later “the soft mesh of the grey-blue morning air.” To her, “Arlington Street and Piccadilly seemed to chafe the very air in the Park and lift its leaves hotly, brilliantly, on waves of that divine vitality which Clarissa loved.” There is a sense, as Woolf writes in her essay, that Clarissa has “[turned] to wax in the warmth of June.”

As readers, we see the inextricability of Clarissa’s body and mind, and also how quickly shifts in one realm can sway the other. When her mind turns to her daughter’s tutor, Miss Kilman, Clarissa feels her hatred of the woman as a “brutal monster” stirring in her soul. “It rasped her,” Woolf writes—and, in a typical aside, adds that “especially since her illness, had power to make her feel scraped, hurt in her spine.” Our thoughts can cause us physical pain, perhaps even more so after an experience of illness. It’s been documented that influenza could leave lingering mental instability in survivors, as may have occurred for Woolf herself. The specter of a monster is linked, too, with fears that influenza might return, an anxiety that Outka

says was “pervasive after the pandemic.” But, just a few paragraphs later, Woolf suggests that physical pleasure can play a role in soothing or even healing the mind, when in the flower shop Clarissa feels “this beauty, this scent, this colour ... [as] a wave which she let flow over her and surmount that hatred, that monster.” The body and mind exist in reciprocal, inseparable relationship to one another; to claim otherwise would be to deny reality.

But Clarissa does not spend her entire day in the ecstasy of her errand to Bond Street. It’s not yet 11 a.m. when she returns home, where “[t]he hall of the house was cool as a vault.” When the maid shuts the door, Clarissa feels herself “like a nun who has left the world.” Later she will be described as “cloistered, exempt.” Such language of isolation had appeared earlier as well, while Clarissa was on the streets of London: “she had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxicabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone.” This description is notably similar to another point Woolf raises in “On Being Ill,” which is that the experience of illness can leave the patient with a sense that “the world has changed its shape ... [that] the whole landscape of life lies remote and fair, like the shore seen from a ship far out at sea.” In her essay, Woolf also likens illness to desertion: “we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters.” This comment casts new light on the moment when Clarissa’s maid, Lucy, “taking Mrs. Dalloway’s parasol, handled it like a sacred weapon which a goddess, having acquitted herself honourably in the field of battle, sheds.” After a brief spell in the army of the upright, Clarissa has retreated from the combat zone and now she goes, “[l]ike a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower,” to her attic room. Here is where Richard has insisted since her illness that she must sleep undisturbed, making clear that it’s not just feelings of isolation to which Clarissa is subject but actual physical isolation. “Narrower and narrower would her bed be,” Woolf writes, suggesting that illness has deprived Clarissa of agency and left her environment

subject to regulation by others. It has also robbed Clarissa of her sexuality: in that attic room, where she sleeps badly, “she could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet.” A nun, a child, a virgin wraith—that’s what illness has made of Clarissa.

Clarissa feels not just a sense of remove from society but from her body itself—a remove tied up not only in illness but in aging. When she stands by the open staircase window before climbing to the attic, she “[feels] herself suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless.” And: “It was all over for her.” These sentiments recall Clarissa’s earlier thought about Evelyn Whitbread, who is herself chronically ill, as a “dried-up little woman.” Also earlier, wondering how she would do her life differently if she could have it over again, Clarissa expresses disdain for her appearance and then reflects how “often now this body she wore ... this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing—nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown.” At her party, Clarissa is intent on hiding her illness from Lady Bruton, knowing the other woman thinks her weak. Woolf lets us in on all of this: in her representation of Clarissa, and in her exploration of the myriad ways Clarissa continues to feel both the physical and psychological impacts of the flu, Woolf brings illness out of the shadows.

In showing how her experience of the flu continues to isolate Clarissa from others (and from herself) well after her actual period of infirmity, Woolf dramatizes one of the obstacles of writing about illness she identifies in “On Being Ill.” In that essay, Woolf lists the challenges writers face in taking up illness. Writing usually neglects “[t]hose great wars which [the body] wages by itself, with the mind a slave to it, in the solitude of the bedroom against the assault of fever or the oncome of melancholia.” In other words, Woolf understands that illness is violent but solitary—though we may face a collective enemy, as in a pandemic, it is a battle the

individual body must fight alone. And “with the mind a slave” to the body, illness becomes a fight against oneself; we are home turf and enemy territory all at once. No wonder Clarissa feels alienated from her own body. Moreover, Woolf writes, our tales of suffering serve only to awaken our friends’ memories of their own suffering, reminding them of “*their* influenzas, *their* aches and pains which went unwept last February” (emphasis hers). Illness may be universal, but suffering is particular—an experience that “cannot be imparted,” which paradoxically thwarts the possibility of sympathy for anyone. Rather than feeling sympathy for the sufferer, we feel pity for ourselves, and the cycle continues. In Clarissa’s desire to conceal her illness from Lady Bruton we see this self-perpetuating shame and isolation.

Yet Woolf also writes in “On Being Ill” that “[a]lways to have sympathy, always to be accompanied, always to be understood would be intolerable.” And it’s here, five pages into her essay, that Woolf takes a turn, concerning herself no longer with the suffering of illness or the difficulty of writing about it, but with its surprising gifts. For in illness, Woolf writes, there is “a childish outspokenness ... things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals.” Illness, in all its particularities, releases us from “an illusion,” “this make-believe” that “[h]uman beings ... go hand in hand the whole stretch of the way.” The army of the upright go off to battle, Woolf says, while the deserters “float with the sticks on the stream; helter skelter with the dead leaves on the lawn, irresponsible and disinterested.” Illness, simply put, makes us honest. It liberates us from social artifice and allows a disregard of conventionality. Indeed, as Clarissa stands in her attic room, looking at Baron de Marbot’s memoirs, she thinks to herself that “really she preferred to read of the retreat from Moscow.” In this way her attic room becomes a place of both isolation and independence, her body subject to Richard’s regulations but her mind sovereign.

In the same paragraph, still alone in the privacy of the attic, Clarissa thinks to herself how “she could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman” and then has an erotic, even mystical, vision of “a match burning in a crocus.” This comes to her as “a sudden revelation” and is quickly over, but in its vivid intensity speaks to another gift of illness Woolf discusses in “On Being Ill”: its creative potential. Illness alters our powers of observation and spurs “other tastes [to] assert themselves; sudden, fitful, intense.” In the sickroom, for example, our preferences for literature change—we become “disinclined for the long campaigns that prose exacts” and turn instead to poetry or Shakespeare, for “[i]n illness words seem to possess a mystic quality.”

Woolf goes on:

We grasp what is beyond their surface meaning, gather instinctively this, that, and the other—a sound, a colour, here a stress, there a pause ... Incomprehensibility has an enormous power over us in illness, more legitimately perhaps than the upright will allow. In health meaning has encroached upon sound. Our intelligence domineers over our senses. But in illness, with the police off duty ... words give out their scent, and ripple like leaves, and chequer us with light and shadow.

Indeed, as Clarissa is overcome by the vision of the crocus, she also thinks (parenthetically) to herself, “(so strange is the power of sounds at certain moments).” Though she is not ill in this moment, it’s not unreasonable to imagine that her acute experiences of illness remain mapped onto the room—embedded, as Outka argues in *Viral Modernism*, “in the way a traumatic memory might work.” And note the way Woolf describes words as “[giving] out their scent.” Moments of synesthesia, particularly related to the merging of the visual and auditory, pervade *Mrs. Dalloway* as well: the repeated way, for example, the leaden circles—the peals of Big Ben—dissolve in the air. At another point, when Clarissa is “lying on the sofa, cloistered,

exempt,” she experiences “robes of sound from the street, sunny, with hot breath, whispering, blowing out the blinds.” In this case, sound becomes both visual and tactile, merging with warmth and wind.

That sensory experiences are not discrete, especially not for those who’ve suffered illness, is also clear in the character of World War I veteran Septimus Smith. Septimus’s hallucinations are usually understood as symptoms of what we’d today call post-traumatic stress disorder, but Outka points out in *Viral Modernism* that influenza was also known to “cause short- and long-term mental instability,” and that flu outbreaks in military camps were widespread and vicious. In a 2014 article, “‘Wood for the Coffins Ran Out’: Modernism and the Shadowed Afterlife of the Influenza Pandemic,” Outka notes that “patients who recovered [from influenza] frequently reported depression, mental confusion, and even schizophrenia, and the latest research suggests that the flu was behind the rash of suicides after the war that had previously been attributed to the war itself.” She mentions a soldier stationed at a camp in Dorset who “would recall years later that ‘a small wood below the camp was called ‘suicide wood’ because of the number of men, who had flu, committing suicide there; the flu seemed to leave people with distracted minds.’”

Whether it’s PTSD or the lingering effects of influenza (or both), Septimus experiences mystical, synesthetic possibilities in the world around him, perhaps most powerfully when observing the trees at Regent’s Park. When a nearby nursemaid spells out the letters an airplane is making in the sky, Septimus feels that her voice “[rasps] his spine deliciously and [sends] running up into his brain waves of sound, which, concussing, broke.” This recalls how Clarissa experiences her hatred of Miss Kilman as a rasping, though not a delicious one. Septimus finds it

“a marvellous discovery indeed—that the human voice ... can quicken trees into life!” The quickening continues in the next paragraph:

But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches. Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were a significant as the sounds.

In *Septimus* we see clearly how the mind’s perceptions tangle with physical sensations, and how boundaries between the body and the exterior world blur. “Rashness,” Woolf writes in “On Being Ill,” “is one of the properties of illness—outlaws, that we are.” And some around Septimus seek to make him, due to his dizzying flights into clairvoyance, into an outlaw: Sir William Bradshaw, most notably, is dismissive of Septimus and his deliriums and his talk of suicide, saying merely that he lacks “a sense of proportion.” And “proportion, divine proportion,” is Bradshaw’s “goddess,” his battle cry (the word seems to repeat endlessly whenever Bradshaw appears on the page), so he seeks to confine and isolate Septimus in one of his “homes.” To Bradshaw, when a man threatens suicide, “you invoke proportion; order rest in bed; rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends; without books, without messages; six months’ rest; until a man who went in weighing seven stone six comes out weighing twelve.”

Such prescriptions of proportion go against all that Woolf explores in “On Being Ill.” On the contrary, rather than silencing ourselves when ill, we should welcome “the spiritual change that [illness] brings.” In the enormously long first sentence of the essay—itsself somewhat feverish in its roving syntax—Woolf describes how illness can disclose “undiscovered

countries,” can bring to light “wastes and deserts of the soul,” can reveal “precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers,” and can uproot “ancient and obdurate oaks.” Woolf had personal experience of the extraordinary creative possibilities awakened by illness, which she described in a 1930 letter to Ethel Smyth: “After being ill and suffering every form and variety of nightmare and extravagant intensity of perception—for I used to make up poems, stories, profound and to me inspired phrases all day long as I lay in bed, and thus sketched, I think, all that I now, by the light of reason try to put into prose...” That phrase, “extravagant intensity of perception,” feels the antithesis of Bradshaw’s unceasing promotion of proportion. Woolf sees how illness can serve the individual, perhaps especially the artist, should we allow it to do its work.

Woolf scholar and biographer Hermione Lee has used the phrase “recumbent literature” to describe the writing made possible by the view from the sick bed. Woolf explicitly considers the vantage of the recumbent in “On Being Ill,” how the sick become “able, perhaps for the first time in years, to look round, to look up—to look, for example, at the sky.” There is an incantatory quality to her repetition of the word “look,” highlighting the powers of perception and the deep curiosity illness grants us. Woolf’s lyricism here is worth quoting at length:

The first impression of that extraordinary spectacle is strangely overcoming. Ordinarily to look at the sky for any length of time is impossible. Pedestrians would be impeded and disconcerted by a public sky-gazer. What snatches we get of it are mutilated by chimneys and churches ... Now, become as the leaf or the daisy, lying recumbent, staring straight up ... really it is a little shocking ... this incessant making up of shapes and casting them down, this buffeting of clouds together, and drawing vast trains of ships and waggons from North to South, this incessant ringing up and down of curtains of light and shade,

this interminable experiment with gold shafts and blue shadows, with veiling the sun and unveiling it, with making rock ramparts and wafting them away...

Woolf is winningly hyperbolic, too: “The fact seems to call for comment and indeed for censure. Some one should write to *the Times* about it. Use should be made of it. One should not let this gigantic cinema play perpetually to an empty house.” The constantly shifting appearance of the sky—the idea of it being as absorbing as a film—turns up often in *Mrs. Dalloway*, as when Elizabeth Dalloway takes her solo trip down the Strand. Woolf’s description here, right before Elizabeth boards the omnibus, is keenly perceptive of shifts in the sky and of the ever-changing quality of light and shadow:

For although the clouds were of mountainous white so that one could fancy hacking hard chips off with a hatchet, with broad golden slopes, lawns of celestial pleasure gardens, on their flanks ... there was perpetual movement among them ... Fixed though they seemed at their posts, at rest in perfect unanimity, nothing could be fresher, freer, more sensitive superficially than the snow-white or gold-kindled surface ... in spite of the grave fixity, the accumulated robustness and solidity, now they struck light to the earth, now darkness.

In the intense lyricism of its description—how the eye perceives the solidity of the clouds, the attention to shades of gold, the movement between light and darkness—this passage bears striking similarity to the previously quoted passage in “On Being Ill.”

So what, then, is one to make of “this gigantic cinema”? What does sustained watching of the sky teach the recumbent? After the initial “stirrings of civic ardour,” Woolf writes, the recumbent observer comes to understand a stark truth about the sky: “Divinely beautiful it is also divinely heartless. Immeasurable resources are used for some purpose which has nothing to do with human pleasure or human profit.” No matter how we conduct ourselves, whether we pay the

sky any mind or not, it will go on “experimenting with its blues and golds.” At this point in the essay, Woolf asks if we might instead find sympathy in “something very small and close and familiar.” So she turns to examine the rose, considering “how it stands, still and steady, throughout an entire afternoon in the earth.” The rose maintains “a demeanour of perfect dignity and self-possession.” And “it is of these, the stillest, the most self-sufficient of all things that human beings have made companions.” Why have humans befriended flowers? Woolf’s answer echoes her argument about the sky: “It is in their indifference that they are comforting.” Like the sky, flowers care not a whit what we do. They may “gently incline their heads to the breeze,” but for humans they have no concern.

Here Woolf builds to the essay’s crowning argument, another passage worth quoting at length:

It is only the recumbent who know what, after all, nature is at no pains to conceal—that she in the end will conquer; the heat will leave the world; stiff with frost we shall cease to drag our feet about the fields; ice will lie thick upon factory and engine; the sun will go out. Even so, when the whole earth is sheeted and slippery some undulation, some irregularity of surface will mark the boundary of an ancient garden, and there, thrusting its head up undaunted in the starlight, the rose will flower, the crocus will burn.

This, then, is the ultimate gift of illness: the insight that nature “in the end” will triumph over humans. Rather than directing fear or anger toward the painful, pitiless, and destructive qualities of illness, the ill find consolation—perhaps even transcendence—in the everlasting beauty and power of nature. As Outka writes in *Viral Modernism*, “Woolf translates nature’s indifference and its possibilities for pandemic-level annihilation from a horrifying spectacle to a special vision granted to the ill.”

Throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa is attuned to her own mortality. Early in the novel, while she watches the taxicabs in Piccadilly, we learn “she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day”—and then, three sentences later, that “to her it was absolutely absorbing; all this.” In other words, her alertness to death does not diminish her love of life. (Her understanding of the danger of living one day also seems like something one would know after contracting a highly contagious virus for which there was no easy treatment.)

Thoughts of death frequently cross Clarissa’s mind, often in the same instant as she reflects on her love of life. In the afternoon, alone and resting, she considers her day: “All the same, that one day should follow another; Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday; that one should wake up in the morning; see the sky; walk in the park; meet Hugh Whitbread; then suddenly in came Peter; then these roses; it was enough. After that, how unbelievable death was!—that it must end; and no one in the whole world would know how she had loved it all; how, every instant...” It’s fitting, in the context of “On Being Ill,” that Clarissa mentions both the sky and roses. One could even argue that Woolf’s discussion of flowers in the essay puts *Mrs. Dalloway*’s famous first line in a new light—Clarissa’s decision to “buy the flowers herself” becomes not just an act of self-determination and independence but a clear-eyed confrontation with mortality. During the party, from across the room Clarissa hears a “blaze of laughter” from Sir Harry, “her old friend,” and finds herself reassured “how it is certain we must die.” Again, these thoughts of death do not depress Clarissa—they reassure her, and even seem to make her more receptive to those “waves of divine vitality” she loves. And “blaze of laughter” is yet another lovely synesthetic phrase, yoking warmth, color, shape, and sound.

Just as she does not name the pandemic, Woolf does not explicitly link Clarissa’s sensitive perception of both trauma and joy in everyday life to her experience of illness. But

mentions of her illness appear in the same breath as descriptions of her sharpness of perception: “one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes.” Or could it be both? Perhaps what Clarissa feels is both her weakened heart and her keenness of perception.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa locates consolation not quite where Woolf finds it in “On Being Ill.” Both revel in the beauty of physical reality. But for Clarissa, it’s not the fact of a victorious nature that brings her comfort. Early in the novel, she asks,

Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met...

What consoles Clarissa is this near-mystical certainty that she, and all those she knows (and doesn’t know), will live on in some way in the places and people they leave behind. Life is the terrifying thing, the day the dangerous thing. But death? The individual may “cease completely,” but threads of attachment remain, and that gives Clarissa comfort. It also offers another explanation for parties, her “offering,” as ways to strengthen these threads and ensure—so to speak—post-death survival.

Understanding Clarissa as a survivor of illness also brings different contours to the novel’s ending. In the final pages of *Mrs. Dalloway*, word of Septimus’s suicide reaches Clarissa’s party. The two didn’t know each other, but the Bradshaws are guests at Clarissa’s

party, and they carry the news into her home: “Oh! Thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here’s death, she thought.” But of course death finds its way to the party, just as death always finds its way into Clarissa’s thoughts, even in moments of beauty and wonder. At first, Clarissa seems annoyed: “What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party?” Then, just a few sentences later: “Always her body went through it, when she was told, first, suddenly of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes.” Again Woolf draws the reader’s attention to the body. Clarissa’s vicarious experience of Septimus’s death is a bodily encounter, not a cognitive one. In its remarkable tactility, it is a moment of physical possession—of consuming sensation, in stark contrast to the moments in the novel when Clarissa feels alienated from her body. She experiences it almost as a survivor might reexperience trauma.

In the next paragraph, Clarissa considers death as “defiance ... an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death.” She wonders if Septimus had “plunged holding his treasure,” which echoes Septimus’s own thoughts before his suicide: “(for [Rezia] was with him) ... Life was good. The sun hot.” Though Clarissa thinks to herself that he has “thrown it away,” she also understands, intuitively, that Septimus’s suicide cannot be understood as simple failure—that in its defiant effort to communicate, it may be, somewhat paradoxically, a bid for connection, as well as an attempt to preserve his integrity. Significantly, Clarissa also sees Bradshaw for what he is: “a great doctor, yet to her obscurely evil, without sex or lust, extremely polite to women, but capable of some indescribable outrage—forcing your soul, that was it.” She wonders if Septimus might “not then have said (indeed she felt it now), Life is made intolerable; they make life intolerable, men like that?”

Indeed, in his final moments, Septimus positions himself and Rezia in opposition to Holmes and Bradshaw, and his suicide, occurring right as he is to be committed to six months of isolation, becomes a refusal to submit to Bradshaw's perverse prescription of proportion. Clarissa understands that in taking his own life, Septimus has refused to let Bradshaw force his soul.

Septimus's suicide brings Clarissa's own survival into stark relief. Woolf describes "the terror; the overwhelming incapacity" that Clarissa feels at having been given "this life, to be lived to the end." Throughout the novel, Clarissa has been acutely aware of the danger of existence. But, in this moment alone at her party: "She had escaped." And then she thinks to herself: "Odd, incredible; she had never been so happy." This revelation hits Clarissa with incredible force, recalling Woolf's moments of being. In her posthumously published memoir "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf describes moments of being—distinct from the "nondescript cotton wool" that makes up so much of everyday life—as "sudden shocks" that hit with "sledge-hammer force." In these instances, Woolf explains, she is instinctively and intensely conscious of her own existence, and she becomes able to glimpse "behind the cotton wool," where a hidden pattern reveals that "we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art." Clarissa, too, feels "a shock of delight." Septimus's death hits her with the "sledge-hammer force" Woolf describes in "A Sketch of the Past," but it quickly translates into an intense feeling of aliveness. As Clarissa straightens the chairs and adjusts the books on the shelf, she thinks to herself how "[n]o pleasure could equal" what she has found.

Then Clarissa walks to the window, not to fling herself out as Septimus has done, but rather to look at the sky—not letting, as Woolf warns in "On Being Ill," "this gigantic cinema play ... to an empty house." Clarissa parts the curtains: "It will be a solemn sky, she had thought,

it will be a dusky sky, turning away its cheek in beauty. But there it was—ashen pale, raced over quickly by tapering vast clouds. It was new to her.” This sense of newness recalls the very beginning of the novel, when in the fourth sentence Clarissa thinks to herself “what a morning—fresh as if issued to children on a beach.” She has lived a day, something she knows is “very, very dangerous” to do, and she has emerged at the other end—for it is now 3 a.m., as the clock reminds her—again astonished at its perennial newness. The sky will go on creating itself afresh, and the observation seems to give Clarissa a profound sense of renewal: “But she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter. And she came in from the little room.” The novel isn’t quite over, but this is the last moment Woolf allows us into Clarissa’s mind. Her thoughts, with their repetition of “must,” read as interior commands she cannot disobey: an instinctive determination to return, to connect, and to survive.

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A Large Flock of Small Birds

The glint caught my eye out the glass of my balcony door. It was a January afternoon and I was sipping tea made from milk thistle and roasted barley, an impulse purchase made for a holiday gathering back in the days we had holiday gatherings. Then something sparked bright and I lifted my head, and there, just above eye level from my second-story perch, was a large flock of small birds swirling in synchronized formation. They swooped and corkscrewed and I felt my jaw go limp as I stood and shuffled to the door. My eyes lurched as the flock split in two, like performers departing for the wings, and then reunited in one whirling, wheeling mass. In some parody of wonder, I may very well have placed the palm of my hand against the cool glass. Indeed, when I texted my friend Maya to tell her what I'd just witnessed, I first typed that the birds had been outside my wonder.

It wasn't until later, on a sunset walk under coral clouds, that I wondered if it had been a murmuration, one of those swarms of starlings that pulse and dive as one, like airborne dance troupes. I'd learned recently that starlings maintain their murmurations by each attending to seven neighbors: one starling tracks seven other starlings, and each of those seven starlings tracks seven others, and it multiplies out from there, a mathematical marvel documented by Italian physicists who spent years filming the flocks above a train station in Rome. Is it difficult, watching seven neighbors tear through the air as you, too, tear through the air? Or maybe they're not watching, but somehow sensing—each tiny bird body sensing seven other tiny bird bodies and responding instinctively to changes in direction or speed. They must be proprioceptive pros to avoid crashing into one another, for murmurations can count hundreds or even thousands of starlings; in 1999 a flock in southwest England was estimated at six million. Huge murmurations look almost liquid as they ripple and wave. I once heard them described as “ornithological lava

lamps.” There’s speculation that starlings rely not only on vision and hearing but also on the tactile sense of onrushing air, yet scientists can’t say exactly how they pull off their aerial feats.

What’s the purpose of these billowing avian clouds? The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, a British charity that has its roots in 19th-century campaigns against the wearing of feathered hats, has this to say on their website: “We think that starlings do it for many reasons.” (Let us pause a moment to appreciate that “think,” that nod to the limits of human knowledge.) One reason, RSPB believes, is self-preservation. By flying in mesmerizing swarms, starlings put predators off their path. Even peregrine falcons, known for their deadly velocity, struggle to target a single bird as thousands swirl in unison. The group also provides warmth, as well as an opportunity to exchange information, such as intel about good feeding areas. That information exchange takes on incredible sonic complexity: starlings can click, chirp, chitter, chatter, rattle, sputter, squawk, pop, purr, whirr, whistle, wheeze, whiz, warble, and trill. They belong to the same family as mynas and like many mynas are keen mimics, able to imitate all sorts of other birds, including hawks and jays and meadowlarks, and also the symphony of our cities—car alarms, ringtones, police sirens, jackhammers, barking dogs, ice-cream trucks, creaking doors, squealing children. In 1784 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart strolled into a pet shop in Vienna and a starling greeted him with the motif from his latest piano concerto. He recorded in a notebook that he paid a few kreuzers for the bird, which lived with him for three years, until it died and Mozart held a funeral complete with veiled mourners, hymns, a procession, and an elegy: “He was not naughty, quite, / But gay and bright, / And under all his brag / A foolish wag.”

Starlings love cities, actually. Cities are warmer than the country and offer all kinds of cozy roosts—roosts that we have made for them. Starlings build their scraggly little nests almost anywhere: under bridges and eaves, in the crevices of warehouses and office buildings, and, in

my favorite move of all, on theater marquees, where they get to enjoy the warmth radiating from the light bulbs. Which brings me to something important to know about starlings: people hate them. Thoroughly, utterly detest them. They're loud, they poop everywhere, they spread invasive seeds, they transmit disease, and they damage crops in this country to the tune of \$800 million per year. Even the Audubon Society wrote a blog post titled "It's Okay to Dislike Some Birds," arguing that avian aversion represents a deepening of one's relationship with the animals. The author of the post suggested beginning birders start by cultivating a hatred for the starling. Because not only are starlings a nuisance, they're also nest bullies, booting bluebirds, owls, and woodpeckers from their homes. Which brings me to one more thing to know about starlings: they're not supposed to be here.

No, North America's starlings, all 200 million of them, descend from a few birds brought to this continent 130 years ago. Back in the late 19th century, the hottest trend was introducing European species to the New World. Enter Eugene Schieffelin: pharmacist, seventh son of a wealthy New York family, and, according to birding lore, Shakespeare enthusiast. Schieffelin, chairman of the American Acclimatization Society, wanted all the Bard's birds on this side of the Atlantic. Never mind that attempts with the nightingale, skylark, and chaffinch had failed, or that Shakespeare had mentioned the starling only once, in the third scene of the first act of *Henry IV, Part I*. Schieffelin paid a pretty sum for a flock of starlings—60 or 80 birds, depending on who's telling—and released them in 1890, on a sleeting March day, into Central Park. It wasn't much of a welcome, but the starlings stuck it out. Later, a few were found nesting in the eaves of the American Museum of Natural History.

Schieffelin released 40 more the next year, and starlings began to take hold, spreading in waves across the continent. They've since been subject to countless and desperate eradication

measures, including firecrackers, fire hoses, shotguns, electrified wires, high-frequency radio waves, and, in 1914 in Hartford, Connecticut, teddy bears tied to trees. But starlings are tough and adaptable, audacious and omnivorous, with powerful muscles in their jaws that allow them to push into the hardened winter ground and then spring open their beaks in search of food. So from Alaska to Mexico they've thrived, these little bruisers that weigh less than a deck of cards but have such impressive body density that the aviation industry calls them "feathered bullets." In 1960, Eastern Airlines Flight 375 took off from Logan International Airport and six seconds later sucked a flock of starlings into its propeller engines, and the turboprop plane slowed, veered left, dropped tail-first, rolled counterclockwise, dipped nose-first, and then crashed, almost vertically, into Boston Harbor. Sixty-two of the plane's 72 passengers were killed. It remains the worst bird strike in American aviation history.

So I get it, the fist-shaking at these invasive, noisy, boisterous, crop-ravaging, disease-spreading, indiscriminately defecating, plane-crashing birds. But I can't bring myself to blame the starlings themselves. Nor am I all that angry at Schieffelin. Humans are constantly making decisions for which we can't predict the consequences, and there are historical figures far more deserving of such an exhausting emotion as ire. Maybe starlings didn't belong here 130 years ago, but now they're just trying to make it in this world, and the feathered imps are doing a damn good job of it. Speaking of feathers—at a distance starlings look black, but in summer they wear plumage that shimmers an iridescent purple-green, an oil slick of color. In winter, they have white spots all over. A friend of mine found a lone fledgling by the side of the road in Lincoln, Nebraska, and when she called a wildlife rescue organization she started crying, overcome by the beauty of this bird she'd never seen before. "Oh," said the woman when she showed up in her minivan, in a *you seriously called me to come rescue a fucking starling?* sort of tone. But she

came around, and when she drove off with the bird nestled into a box, my friend felt confident it would be saved.

Since that January afternoon, I've looked most days for the starlings. They show up around a half hour before sunset, which I now realize is because they roost nearby: acrobatics as bedtime ritual. Once I watched them swoop west, taking their show to a new part of the sky, and another day the moon, a few hours from fullness, rose behind them. They impress me with their spacing, how each bird allows room for the others. It reminds me how, as a teenager, I used to navigate around some 45 other girls as part of our high school's competitive dance team. We traveled not across the sky but across the gym floor, chins cocked high, blinking past fake eyelashes at judges seated on the top row of the bleachers. And how we *tore* across that floor, with big leaps and barrel rolls and occasionally in a headlong sprint, making shapes with our bodies as we went: circles collapsing in on themselves, a star exploding outwards, a bowtie bursting to a diamond, even one we referred to as "penetration formation." Our coach, Sara, drilled us on these transitions, and it ate up hours of our weekends as we practiced racing from one spot to the next, repeating until everyone hit their marks on time, without collision. The effect was impressively kaleidoscopic; our team took home eight state titles in a nine-year span.

To be in it, though, to exist in that moving mass of bodies—that was thrilling. After I made the team, the older girls told me about "getting the chills," assuring me I would know it when it happened, which felt oddly like what I'd heard about something else I had yet to experience. But the first time it occurred—a sudden lightness, a tingle bristling across my skin—it really was its own form of transcendence. There was exhilaration in the proximity, in the whoosh of movement, in the shared fight to stave off exhaustion a few eight-counts longer. We, of course, were executing choreography, while starlings make it up as they go. Which is true—to

an extent. The starlings have no Sara, no series of steps they've memorized. But in studies, researchers have found that starlings' movement patterns mirror not just those of schools of fish and swarms of insects—even of migrations of wildebeest across the Serengeti—but also those of bacterial colonies and cells during wound healing. These are all examples of emergent phenomena: when complex, collective behavior arises from a sea of simple interactions. In other words, when the group manages something the individual could never.

So this scrappy group of starlings out my window—they can't be more than several dozen—continues to awe me. I know I'm not alone in my newfound fascination. Birding has boomed since the pandemic began, with people seeking entertainment, connection to the more-than-human world, a shred of solace. I'm in it for all of that. But the longer I watch these starlings, the more keenly I notice something else: longing. As I write this, we mark a year of isolation. The birds, meanwhile, continue to gather, and I am jealous.

The first Friday in March of last year, I went out dancing. I bumped hips with strangers, felt sweat-slicked arms slide against mine, and hugged friends I hadn't expected to see. Five days later, the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a global pandemic. I haven't danced with others since. Now out my window I watch the starlings, craving that feeling of wheeling as one. "I am thinking now / of grief, and of getting past it," Mary Oliver writes in "Starlings in Winter." Getting past grief—I think of that, too, especially as the days grow longer and the flock comes home later, reminding me that time, however suspended this moment feels, is turning.

On a recent afternoon, the sky was azure and clear. The starlings' show didn't last long—I watched them part and reunite, give a twirl or two. Then they whirled downwards, bound for their roost, and as they spun their simultaneous somersaults, the sun flashed off each round and upside-down belly, making them look, I swear to you, like silver confetti falling from the sky.