

NEIGHBOR AS SELF IN MANDAN, NORTH DAKOTA

It was all fun and games until their youngest was hit by a truck. We were the lesbian poet moms in the rambling blue farmhouse with the peace sign on one corner; they were the careful Christians in the classic yellow Victorian on the other. There was a mutual keeping of distance, a joint appreciation of the asphalt between us. Their daughter walked over each summer to invite ours to Vacation Bible School, which was thoughtful but annoying, as was the conversion van—get it?—that they parked in our favorite spot. I'm sure they had their issues too, like Lucinda Williams swearing from our windows, the way we'd let the weeds grow with the flowers, how our dog approached their dog in a not-so-Christlike manner. Then their son's skull cracked, and we stopped thinking about parking.

SIMPLE REPETITIONS

I do it and I watch it disappear. Every act is eaten by the next, by someone's. Every paper written is unwritten. Every grade given is forgotten. Every grade is a scar. Every house entered is unentered. Every parting is forgotten. Every parting a scar. Every dishcloth is dirty, then clean, then dirty. The child bangs her drum, learns her tune, and after the concert stuffs her music into the fire. My books grow lonely; they grow unread. They atrophy and unalphabetize. The snow collects under the shovel, bitterly scraping, scraping. The snow collects. The old man pushes at it, floats it, dividing white from white. The sky is a fractious mess of snow, a blur, a smear. The trees are coronary systems laid bare. They split a metaphor I did not write, one I wish I had.

ON SCARCITY

We are short a pair of brown shoes in our house. My partner put them on this morning and I'd already dressed in brown pants, striped socks, and a nice green shirt; all I needed were the shoes she was already wearing. I can't believe she took them off. I can't believe I asked her to. It's true they're mine, but I would cut out a kidney for her, even a lung, and so why not give her the shoes? They are perfectly wide and comfortable. She is older, smarter, and doesn't have as many nightmares. We should have better boundaries, at least different-sized feet. We should plan better. She says that it happens on Thursdays. There is something about the end of the week, when everything starts running out.

CONCEPTION

My child was conceived in Vladivostok while I read *The Idiot*, highlighting avidly, in a library six thousand miles away. She stole winter squash, eating it raw, while I cooked mine with raisins, butter, nutmeg, sea salt, olive oil, and wine. I missed her soft forehead all those years she scavenged acorns while I was in graduate school; all those years she hid where she could while I studied fiction.

PROCESSIONS

I dreamt of my grandfather crossing the road, mute but his silence was kind. He was the one I didn't know past nine. He is frozen in junior fiction. He is sweating in the sun on the road. He is touching corn he never even saw. His shop is dusty; it is still there. The ledgers and the lumberyard, a few boards drying at dusk. Things long to be used again, like his fingers forming numbers, balancing columns, saving for a trip back to the war zone. His cancer was an orange in that belly we leaned on while he read. There was nothing to know then. All that existed was what I could touch. Pain led to pleasure: a broken leg to a week of TV, sunburn to a bowl of strawberries. His funeral to the dinner afterwards: fizz-pink Shirley Temples, one after another at the bar.