

WHAT SHE BELIEVED IN

By A. L. Phillips

It was a white winter day, all roads disappeared into gray skies. The roads were narrow, and she was driving close to the side, creeping along where in the summer she might brush trees. There were no cars ahead or behind, none anywhere in sight. When she reached the top of the incline, a flock of crows circled in front of her, slow, suspended, a laden world, turning and turning.

Everything slow and hazy and drained, it all happened around the word *seemed*. It *seemed* to be day, it *seemed* to be familiar, it *seemed* to be real. Birds pushed against the wind, then turned to ride it. A dust of snow flew upward from the field to obscure her vision, and the car felt as if it fought to keep straight. Nothing belonged to her.

She got out of the car. The wind stopped. Bare winter trees revealed luminous clouds past the crest of the next hill, and the snow was packed thick and hard, slick as ice. A double-parked postal truck tilted down toward a ditch near someone's driveway, and a yellow school bus approached. Children gazed out, heads pressed against the windows. This was where it had started, her

husband's descent to the bottom of the road, his crash. Again, she was awake to the world, feeling the painful weight in her chest.

The first days back. The first days back from decisions she hoped had been the right ones. The first days after what most immediately needed to be done: taking him off life support; having his body cremated; consulting on the obituary; putting off the memorial service, an accomplishment in that it was a decision. That's what their friend Steve had done when Marie died. Quietly made those early, necessary decisions. Honored her later. Maybe Steve had felt then as she did now: as if he couldn't reach himself to know if he was present. Maybe, like her, he'd kept expecting Marie to return. Maybe there were things he hadn't known, questions he was searching to answer.

The first days back were her first days alone, really alone, in almost twenty years. She and her husband had spent time apart, of course—at one point enough to render them temporarily separated, for all intents and purposes. But she hadn't felt alone then as an out-of-body experience. Or alone as incompleteness. Alone as confusion. As expectation. She kept waiting for a sign from him, even though she wasn't a person who believed in signs.

She couldn't stop moving, but didn't feel her body in motion. She wouldn't remember going from one room to another, or she would seem to wake up one moment and be driving to town the next, and not recall anything in between. She washed dishes, scrubbed surfaces, swept the floor, cooked and baked, though she ate little. It was as if she were making food for the sacrifice, leaving it in the backyard compost bin whose contents were frozen, inactive for

now. The kitchen reeked of cleaning fluid that was supposed to smell of pine and lemon. She pulled out the stove and scrubbed the hardened rivulets of oil on its sides with a metal sponge, took inventory of canned goods, paper towels, toilet paper. There was a room on the first floor they'd rarely used, and she propped the door open with a cast iron fixture from the fireplace. Windows cast panes of light, and there were motes of dust and an old, ripped sofa they had hidden under a bolt of flowered cloth. She split wood until her hands roughened, stacking it neatly the way he had, trying with mixed results to splinter off thin tinder for kindling. She made frequent trips to town to stock up, and then didn't stock up, but wandered the aisles, forgetful. There was no reason to, not really. She passed the spot and stopped and looked for broken glass from where the wrecking crew had loaded his car onto their vehicle, and when she found little square greenish chips from his windshield mixed in with snow, she said, "That's bullshit," and kicked at them.

It felt like she had entered some secret place inside life, the doorway to which was usually invisible. Inside that secret place, she had no body; there was no time.

She wanted a sign. She expected a sign, except that she didn't believe in anything except the material world and its plentiful mysteries. She hoped for a message from him, an explanation. Why had he been on the wrong side of the road? If it was truly an accident, had he had any intimations—in dreams, perhaps—that the end was near? Nothing indicated he'd been texting or had a

heart attack, seizure, stroke. The chemicals in his blood had been checked, but she'd said no to an autopsy after looking up what it would entail. A quick Google search, a few images, were enough to convince her that it wasn't worth it, though now she wondered if it could have offered an answer.

As if she'd conjured him, she felt him in the corner of the bedroom one evening after she'd brushed her teeth. She wouldn't look around. She organized the bottles on the dresser and got into bed. He stepped into the less dense center of the bedroom. Before she had a chance to ask him why he'd been driving on the wrong side of the road, she saw his mouth moving. "I just want to talk to you. To ask you a few more questions." She was struck by this, that he wanted to ask her questions. Struck by the fact that he had never asked the most crucial ones when he'd still been with her, or if he had, she hadn't answered, or if she had answered, he hadn't listened. And so of course he had come to ask her questions. Except that he hadn't. Except that she was in the room alone, unable to sleep, a little frightened, wishing he'd come back, wishing they'd have another chance to get things right.

Still, she heard his voice, very clearly. "What's the snow like?" he asked, the country twang of his family more apparent, the way it was when he was tired.

She closed her eyes, trying to remember. "It's covered the ground again. It's falling into the stream. It's beginning to pile up on the tops of branches, thicker near where the branch meets the trunk of the tree. It's covering the roofs of houses and barns, the roads and train tracks, the graves."

“Graves?” he asked.

“The graves in the Civil War cemetery. We used to walk there.” She remembered how it was. Remembered very well. She closed her eyes. Spoke from memory, though he wanted her to see it for him. The feeling of the snow. The feeling of him. They had walked long distances together, especially in the first years. They had walked long distances in snowshoes. It was something they’d enjoyed.

“I read somewhere that everything spirals,” she said. “If our eyes were more acute we’d see how the snow, even that, doesn’t fall straight down but spirals. I’ve read that the wind is a current and shapes the movement of what it carries. A tree is a current pushing up through the earth. We are currents pushing our way through life.”

“And life—what is that a current through?” he asked.

She ignored his question, the way she always had when he used his ironic tone. “The snow is beginning to build up on the front porches of houses, fence posts, trees. A wild dog has begun to howl. We’ll have to push against the door to get it open in the morning.”

She walked outside. She stood still, the wind gusting soft snow against her. She shielded her face with her hand. Did she hear something in the shed? She ought to look, but it took guts, like swimming across a pond at night or opening the door to a dark room. They had swum in dark water together, woody ponds near the tops of mountains, natural lakes. They had stripped down. Once, in Canada, they’d watched a pair of loons call back and forth then fly one after the other toward the tall pines. She’d never liked

dark water.

She tried to relax, to let the cold go through her. It had been a long time since she'd felt the snow—truly felt it—maybe not since childhood when she'd lain on her back in it. It had been a long time since she'd craned her neck to look straight up at the stars. A long time since she'd truly tried to tell him what she saw. She closed her eyes again. There were different kinds of snow. This was the soft one. Powdery. The kind that took no mettle to withstand. The kind that wouldn't hold together. They hadn't liked it as children. It didn't stick to the ground. They couldn't make it into snowmen or pack it into snowballs. It couldn't become a weapon.

“What other kinds of snow are there? Please remind me.” He sounded forlorn.

“There's wet snow. It hits the windows in fat clumps and slides down. You have to hang your head when you go out into it, or you feel assaulted. There's snow that is icy on top but soft and buttery underneath. When you walk in it your shoes break through the surface, and you leave behind fat prints. Snow that falls when you're sleeping, covering everything in a honey-thin drizzle of ice.” She broke off.

In the spring, snow that is thick and wet, sloppy. The sky knits up, becomes gray and sullen looking, so cold it's as if winter were just beginning...” Her sense of him was fading. She was talking to herself.

“There's the snow that begins so imperceptibly that you don't even see it at first. You go outside and something touches your face. You look up and tiny flakes are falling in the window's light.”

He had gone—not that he'd really been there—and she went inside.

Unable to sleep, she went through the closets and chest of drawers in their bedroom. She rummaged in the pockets of his clothes and found nickels and matches, crumpled receipts, and scraps with pencil diagrams, as if of a house he was going to build.

The things she didn't recognize or understand as being part of him, she set aside. These he'd left her as clues. All that was familiar she loaded into bags and took out back. She built a fire in the pit. She would let go of everything about him that was familiar, to bring the clues into relief. The clothes slowly burned, giving off little heat. In some ways, it seemed terrible to do this, but she was strong and could do it. She was practical, and there was no reason to keep these familiar things. It would have been less wasteful to give them to someone in need, perhaps, but that wouldn't have accomplished what this did: clear away the undergrowth in its entirety, let the light through. They gave, and gave up, nothing. They made her feel that she knew him, when she didn't. She was clearing the way to him.

The woodshed was pitch-black, and she felt for split logs with her hands, adding them to the pit until it blazed. When she went back inside, she assembled what she'd kept on the coffee table in the almost-empty room, turning them around and rearranging them like the pieces of a puzzle.

Their marriage hadn't been bad. They shared friends and a ferocity for work: he a historian and professor, she a potter-turned-sculptor. They both

would have said that among the wonderful things in their lives were early morning walks in the old European cities they visited—Dubrovnik, say, where they'd gone the previous winter—a cup of coffee on a cobbled stoop, buying fresh vegetables at an open-air market. They both felt passionate enough about social injustices and environmental abuses to sometimes write letters or canvass for votes. They laughed at how completely they fit the stereotype of an academic-artist couple, down to the used Volvo and newer Prius in the driveway, or the new Prius that used to be in the driveway and she still expected to see there and that surprised her when it wasn't. They were grateful to be free in all the *important* ways, he to spend days reading and writing, she sculpting. The compromises she had made for him—like settling in Maine when he'd gotten his position at the college—had benefited her because she'd come to love this place; Maine, that was, and their property, with its beautiful, vast barn that had allowed her to grow into an artist. They'd considered themselves lucky. And yet, by thirty-nine and forty-three, their respective ages when he had died, they had also come to be somewhat estranged. She had never thought there would be an unbridgeable chasm between them, only a little tear that would eventually be patched.

She slept on the sofa, the flowered cloth over her and her coat, which smelled like smoke, balled up under her head. Except that she didn't quite sleep, only seemed to, as in her mind she rearranged those pieces on the table.

She plugged in the landline, turned on her cell. She began answering the phone. She knew it was crazy, but she kept thinking he would call. Her brother called, a

few of her close friends, galleries in Boston, Santa Fe, and San Francisco that showed her work. His family, friends, and colleagues called. The people who knew her well said she shouldn't withdraw.

She stood looking out at the yard. She felt she was speaking on behalf of the real her, who was missing and currently unavailable. She was fine, she said. It wasn't the middle of nowhere, it was their home. If she left now, the pipes would burst. She'd been feeding the birds for years, and they would starve. She didn't need anything. She didn't need to go elsewhere. She wasn't ready to see anybody yet. It was too soon to talk. She was thinking. She knew it would take a while.

His sister called. They had never been friends. "We need to talk," Judith said.

Outside, a flock of sparrows devoured seeds on an otherwise spotless expanse of snow. The blackbirds that had flown away when she'd walked past the window returned, swooping down on the sparrows, driving them off. She tapped the pane. Sparrows and blackbirds flushed in separate folds. The sparrows settled and looked from the clothesline, moving like a single thought.

"The ashes, right?" she said. She hadn't known if he'd wanted to be cremated, hadn't thought they'd needed to think yet about what to do with their bodies. While she'd lost the juvenile sense that she'd live forever, death had still seemed more distant than near. Once, a few years earlier, they'd been driving somewhere together—where would it have been? —and he raised the subject. What had he said? *We really ought to have a living will, you know.* Something like that. Maybe around the time Marie was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Or

maybe he'd gotten his driver's license renewed—they always asked you if you had a living will, if you wanted to be an organ donor, made you realize that death was always possibly near. *I suppose we should, but not today*, she had said. Maybe he'd had in his mind a plan to end things?

Judith hadn't responded.

"And the ashes, the memorial," she said to prompt Judith, allay the uncomfortable silence. "It would seem appropriate to do something at the college."

"Yes, all of that has to be decided," Judith said. "That's all up to you. What I'm talking about is the accident, about understanding what happened. He had a long history of depression. As you well know."

Yes, I do well know that, she thought. "Understanding," she said, then stopped speaking. She wanted that too, but didn't want to admit it to Judith. She touched the window. Glass was a liquid; her hands felt cool solidity. It was nonsense, what they told you about the nature of things. The birds had returned to the feeders and swooped down upon the scattered black shells of sunflowers on the ground. The snow lay unbroken beneath the lightness of the birds' bodies. She squinted, the birds became shadows. She tapped. They scattered, leaving no evidence of having ever populated the yard. Whether it was an accident or not was the question, and of course she was puzzling over it, but there were other questions too, and she was trying to uncover them. Understanding didn't just involve finding answers, it also involved finding the questions.

A call came that brought only silence on the other end. At around five

in the afternoon, when John should have been on his way home. The first time it happened, she thought it must have been a mistake. But it happened again, then again. Someone was trying to reach her, but was unwilling to make a connection. Wasn't there a way to reverse call? You were supposed to dial a number in the sixties. Sixty. Sixty-one. Sixty-two. Sixty-three... Nothing.

In the night, she heard noises. What was it exactly? Something like a ball that had lost its air, bouncing against the floor and wall. From outside. She wondered if John's dog Sadie, who had disappeared the day of his accident—he had blamed himself—had returned. A black Labrador, she'd been motivated by food, sometimes broke free and went in search of it. Maybe looking for Sadie had taken him out on that road at an unusual time and caused him to drift as he sought some sign of her on the landscape. Maybe losing Sadie had upset him more than she'd known. She didn't want to get up and investigate, but she got up. Maybe the phone call was not from a woman, as she presumed, but from someone who knew she was out here all alone and had nefarious intentions. She put on her coat, opened the door, stepped out and listened. The clothesline creaked. The ropes hung in heavy arcs, wrapped in ice, and the birdfeeder, tiny icicles suspended from its corners, swayed. This time of year, bears came close to the house searching for food, but no signs of them tonight.

She walked over to her studio barn, a few hundred yards from the house on the other side of the road, to see if what she'd heard had come from there, even though it was unlikely that whatever it was she had heard had carried over

such a distance. Flashlight in hand, she walked into the vast space where she sculpted now and had once made pots she'd bartered for produce. She generally took winters off from sculpting. The barn was cold, even with a wood-burning stove, and the clay got stiff and cold. The natural patterns that inspired her were not as visible.

She liked to say that December through February were her fallow months. But, as in the fields, these months were not truly fallow. They were her time to file taxes, photograph and catalogue work, update her website, organize shows, get ready to teach at the college where her husband worked.

"Who's there?" she called, her flashlight moving over shapes like dim headlights over uneven terrain. Long plywood work tables dusted with old clay. Shelves with dozens of small figures she used on the dioramas that constituted her newest series of work. The life-sized, raku-fired figures she'd done a few years before and that looked surprisingly threatening, surprisingly human, in the relative dark. The figures were usually covered in sheets, but she'd removed them the day of his accident for a photo shoot. She switched on a bank of lights, and the threatening humanness of the sculptures disappeared.

She crossed the threshold, feeling the fear she had as a child descending the stairs to the basement. The moon was half full and came through the windows. Already her eyes were adjusting, and the studio didn't seem as dark as when she'd entered. She climbed to the loft.

When they'd first married, they'd built the loft imagining the children they planned to have playing and napping there while she worked. But he'd not wanted children, he'd confessed when the time had come. She'd gone away for

a while to consider this, and because she was ambivalent about having children—what woman wasn't? a friend of hers had said—she'd returned. Her thirtieth year, she'd come to think of it. "That was my thirtieth year," she would say to her close friends when she talked about how she'd needed to choose. First the loft had been a reminder of something that had changed, then a storage place, a reading nook. Tonight, it was reminder again.

After draping the raku-fired figures in their dark sheets, she left the barn. She crossed the road, and went to the shed behind the house where *he* worked, her first visit to this space since— she couldn't remember when— weeks or months before his death. The air that came to her, dulled by cold, smelled faintly of gasoline. "Is anyone here?" she called. She clenched her free hand to stop it from shaking. He'd used this shed as both study and shop. Remnants of the life of his hands, and the life of his mind, were here. His rusty blades that he'd not been able to discard, his worn shoes, the dog collars he'd saved, the screws, carefully sorted into little plastic drawers according to size.

As her eyes adjusted to the light, she saw that his organization had deteriorated at some point; what had been a refuge of masculine order was in disarray. Several books had been removed from the shelves along the long wall, leaving gaps, volumes stacked on the floor, as if he'd been searching for some hidden compartment behind them. The cardboard boxes that had recently arrived from the university, with the contents of his office inside them, were haphazardly arranged beside the door. Most had come media mail and contained books. She ripped the tape from one of the lighter boxes. Objects of different sizes were within, wrapped in white foam, tightly taped. She cut

through tape with a pair of scissors and pulled out a vase of that God-awful brown and orange from the 1970s that you find in thrift shops—she had no idea where it had come from. It was like having documents delivered in a language you did not understand and could not translate. Documents whose importance seemed crucial and significance great, so that you could not help thinking constantly of them and of what they might mean, frustrated by your own inadequacy. She would have to take this vase inside with her, and add it to the other items on the coffee table.

She sat down in the big soft chair next to the wood-burning stove he'd installed four or five years ago, when he'd decided to use the cottage as a study year-round. She switched on the floor lamp. The bulb was warm, dim, yellow; the shade stained. Several empty glasses on the table, darkish rings inside some of them. He drank coffee all day long, from glasses if he couldn't find mugs, and switched to whiskey in the evening. He'd not been excessive in his drinking, just enjoyed one or two slow drinks. These days they were saying even one wasn't good. She picked up a small black notebook from among the many strewn about, only a few pages of writing in any of them, a scrawl she couldn't read.

The phone on his desk rang. She said hello. "Hello? Hel/lo?" she said. She kept her voice steady, gentle, *welcoming*. She didn't want to frighten anyone.

Once she started thinking about his dog, she also started to worry about her. And to think that maybe her worry was a message from him, even though, in a

certain part of herself—the part that was a twenty-first century American—she knew it wasn't a message. It couldn't be. He had had an accident that seemed a possible suicide. The trauma to his body had been great. His neck had been broken, throwing him into cardiac arrest. There'd been nothing in his eyes before he'd been removed from life support. He'd been gone. But maybe Sadie had ended up in a shelter and was waiting, unclaimed in a cage, head between her paws, opening her eyes at the tremor of footsteps on the floor, listening for the sound of John's tires approaching on the road, the slam of his car door, his appearance with all the invisible scents and senses it carried. How had she not tried to find his dog?

She made flyers with photos of Sadie, John's disembodied leg next to her, photo-shopped from a larger picture of Sadie panting after a run along the beach with him. She was completely immersed in this activity. Hours went by, part of a day. She drew a fifty-mile radius around their home on a map, and marked the shelters her internet search turned up. Folding it up, she remembered that he'd never put maps away properly. She remembered being in the car with him and grabbing a map in anger. She wondered how long you had these memories, memories of nothing, *nothing*, that took your breath away. Grabbing the map and shouting, "How many times have I asked you not to do that?" He had persistently done certain things that bothered her, even when she'd asked him not to. She'd accused him of not being able to change. He'd told her to look at herself. That was when they'd gotten knotted up, which had rarely happened, but when it had, it would seem to come out of nowhere and was terrible: a terrific, pitiable waste in light of what now was.

Before daybreak, she scraped ice off the windshield and backed down the driveway, map beside her. Even though her addresses were in the Garmin, she liked having a paper map for reference. The mark where their home was, the circumference drawn around it, the points in red where there were shelters: she understood the lay of the land, she was a part of the order.

It could have been the same winter day as the sun broke above hills, diffuse through clouds with the dark spots of birds cutting through, the same winter day as before and after, the same road disappearing into the same gray sky. It could have been the same flock of crows, the same school bus and double-parked postal truck that had been there always and would be forever. And this—none of it—was what she wanted today, this cold northern field, even though the stars you saw were extraordinary and the silence so immense it made you want to call out. Despite what she told the people who called, she was free to leave. She could go almost anywhere she might wish. She could just keep driving, if she wanted to—today, or tomorrow, or the day after. The house didn't need her, not even the pipes if she were to shut off the water. What kept her here? They had usually gone away between the fall and spring semesters, but this winter, when she possibly should, she couldn't.

She sat in the parking lot waiting for a shelter to open, drinking tea from a thermos and listening to the news on NPR, which paled next to her loss, when it used to be that her concerns were nothing compared to the global: catastrophic climate change, greed, corruption, poverty. After a round of ads and a traffic update, the identical broadcast began. She put in a tape from the pile in the passenger's seat, which had been among those in his car transferred

to her after the accident. During his commute to school in the morning, he'd tracked his ideas by recording them. She'd not tried listening to them until now.

It had been years since she'd used the Volvo's tape deck. Even the CD player had become relatively obsolete since they'd bought the car several years before. After the tape clicked a few times, she heard it begin to run through. His voice, rhythmic, said, "Border. Stop." She rewound and listened a few times, then wrote down what he was saying, related in a rhythmic voice with clear stops between sentences that was both like and unlike his:

Night makes no distinction between this and that.

Here is the end of one; there the beginning of another.

Here people are safe; there a child watches shadows on a white-washed wall.

Beside the station between this country and the next there used to be a field.

We have longed to know what would happen if there were no greeting, no blessing, no distinction.

Is this the way his ideas had come to him? It sounded more like a poem than the notes for a paper or chapter of a book. Before he'd settled on history, he'd considered becoming a writer, but he'd always dismissed this as nothing more than the temporary aspiration of a young man who had enjoyed reading and not yet found his true path. He'd be embarrassed if he knew she was listening to this, she thought. She was embarrassed as she listened, that embarrassment you feel on behalf of someone who has been exposed.

A worker arrived in a pick-up truck and turned on the lights when he got inside. She waited about five minutes and followed him in. She told him she was looking for a dog and showed him her flyer. He said Sadie didn't look

familiar and asked if she would consider adopting a different dog. She said she wasn't ready for that, not yet, and asked if he was sure. She told him Sadie's name and how she'd been a sweet dog, for the most part. For the first time since getting there some of his words stood out to her. "Like I said," he said, "lots of Lab-like black dogs come through here. So I don't know if yours ever did. We destroy them after a few weeks. Sometimes sooner." She didn't ask how. It had been two weeks since his accident. More time had passed than she'd been conscious of. It had seemed like one long fluctuating day. Or like a place she'd been, unmarked by time.

She circled out from the center point on her map, stopping in towns she'd never visited in all her years in Mid-Coast Maine, taking back roads on a whim and watching the Garmin try to right her, resisting when it insisted she take a U-Turn, driving until a new route appeared, weirdly satisfied at the thought that she had won. *Fuck you*, Garmin. She walked through shelters, hard-faced, hand rising—"No"—to stop the words when the workers began their spiel: "I'm just looking for my dog," she said. "Not someone else's." She drove aimlessly for a few hours in the direction of Portland and decided to go downtown. She parked at a garage and was walking between packed banks of snow on a tree-lined sidewalk without remembering having gotten out of her car or where she put the parking stub. Two men walking in her direction, black overcoats and briefcases, turned to the side to give her room to pass on the cleared section of sidewalk. "I don't know why anyone is worried about global warming, given the winter we've had," one of them was saying. Had they been listening to the same broadcast as her, and, if so, what of the connectedness?

She stopped in a store and bought a hat with a brim and swatch of velvet ribbon, and when she got outside and put it on, realized it was meant for a different woman. Why had she not known that in the store, when she was looking at herself in the mirror? It was as if the mirror had failed to capture her reflection. Or she hadn't been able to see it.

She stepped into a theater to catch the matinee of a film whose title she couldn't remember within a minute of the movie starting, an early Meryl Streep film, part of a festival. It was supposed to be a comedy but was sad: a woman searching for love, a man tired of love.

They found one another in a bookstore. The night was rainy. They stood by the window, she dripping wet, and when they left, he sheltered her under his umbrella, since she never thought to carry one. Of course. Partway through, someone sat down next to her, though the theater was nearly empty. He had the dark shadow of a few days' growth on the lower part of his face. He leaned toward the armrest between them. She kept her arm where it was. She wanted to push his away. Instead, she left. It had been a long time since a man had intruded on her space in that way. She didn't like it. At first, she thought it might be that in some mysterious way she was giving off that she was now, newly, husbandless. But then she realized it probably wasn't so mysterious that she was on her own, given her solitary presence in the theater. She'd not go to anymore matinees alone in the middle of the day.

At the diner across from the theater, a girl behind the counter was pulling a baseball cap down over the eyes of a young man.

"I'd like a coffee," she said.

“Take a seat, and I’ll bring it to you.” It was the girl who spoke. Her cheeks were flush, hair loose. In the presence of the girl’s happiness, she felt tense. She wasn’t normally an angry person. She’d always felt so *blessed*. More or less.

A red and green string of lights left over from the holidays began blinking, a pop song to play. The girl must have turned them on for her. The linoleum was scuffed. A sturdy plastic bucket of mop water in the corner. The coffee was that thick bitter from having sat too long on the burner. She pushed it away, put a few dollars on the table, left. The young man and girl were standing hip-to-hip in front of the grill, oblivious to her.

Late afternoon brought her to the last shelter, just before closing. When he’d died, it had been almost dark by 4:30, but today, sunlight clung to trees and illuminated the snow with an orange glaze of light. Inside, a young man was sweeping a pile of sawdust into a dustpan; he nodded and went into the back while she stood and listened to the restless movement and sounds of animals, her eyes fixing on a cage where a dog kneaded a blanket. Lights went off. He came out. “You’ll have to come back tomorrow if you want to adopt an animal.”

“I don’t want to adopt an animal,” she said. “I’m looking for my dog. A black Lab.” She took a flyer out of her handbag.

“Not here,” he said. “You’re sure?”

“When did he come up missing? he asked. “She. The middle of December.”

“We only keep them for two days before we do a temperament check.”

He was buttoning his jacket. He smelled of cologne. There had been a time when he would have wanted to talk to her, even about nothing.

“A temperament check?” she said as he went from cage to cage, filling dogs’ bowls with water and kibbles.

“To figure out if they’re adoptable.”

“And if they’re not?”

“We have to put them down.”

“How’s that done?” she asked. She didn’t truly want to know, but, as it grew darker, she had an urge to keep talking.

He didn’t immediately answer. Then, “We use gas. That’s the most humane. I don’t remember any black Labs. Not recently. They’re usually adoptable.” He turned and was looking at her.

“She could be high-strung. My husband used to...”

He cut her off. “High-strung isn’t good. Not even *just sometimes*.” Was he mocking her?

“We have to be careful. Some of the people coming in for animals have kids.” Dogs had begun to whine.

She looked out toward the parking lot. Night had fallen, and it seemed impossible that she could go back through night to that house where she was so alone, alone with his ashes in the closet, with his hovering yet impossible-to-detect presence in every room, with whatever questions he’d wanted to ask, with the rhythmic sound of his voice reciting lines she couldn’t imagine him conceiving, with people pressing her to move on when she was still turning the pieces over on the table.

“Since she’s not here, I’d like to adopt a dog, a new one.”

“Now?” he asked, looking up at the clock. It was twenty minutes to five.

She nodded and said she lived alone in the country since her husband’s recent death. She wanted him to ask about her husband, but when he asked about her, instead — “You’re afraid?” — she felt grateful for an opportunity to talk about herself, entwined with John, yes, yet distinct from him.

“Afraid is maybe not quite the right word.” She hated that she was being so qualified. “It’s just that. Sometimes I need to go out at night. To investigate things. It’s pretty dark where I live.”

He took her to a cage. A medium-sized white-whiskered dog respectfully rose and seated itself on its haunches, waiting with averted eyes. “A Shepherd mix,” he said.

She remembered the questions John used to ask about dogs. “How old is she?”

“About three.”

“What’s she doing here?”

“Someone found her running down the highway.” “How do you think that happened?” she asked.

“Who knows,” he said. “She may have wandered away from home. May have been dumped.”

“People do that?” She asked.

“That and a whole lot more,” he said, looking at her as if to ask where the hell she’d been her whole life. “Animals bring out the best in some people and the worst in others.”

“I guess I knew that,” she said.

He disappeared in the back again. The lights came on.

She walked away from the dog and circled around to look in at the other cages. There wasn't one for her, as there had been for her husband, an instant liking or moment of rapport between herself and any one dog. All seemed equally pathetic and strange to her. She couldn't imagine making her own decision and exited the shelter by the front door before the young man came out from the back.

On the way home, she thought of how the young man had interrupted her when she'd begun talking about her husband. She turned her headlights off and drove a short distance in complete darkness. She was not a risk-taker and didn't know why she did this. She pulled off to the side as soon as a meridian appeared, cut the car's engine. The only sound was the creaking sway of trees. She was born Catholic, but it had never worked for her to pray. She walked towards the woods: a place where she could worship. But at the outer circumference of trees, she stopped, unable to bring herself to penetrate the darkness. Her fear was too big.

At home, the phone was ringing. On the other end, there was a catch. She waited for what was to be said. After a minute, the connection was broken. This was the call of a woman whose heart had been broken.

That night, again, a thumping. She identified it as coming from the attic. She would go up there in the morning. Not now.

She half slept. At first light, she crept up the stairs. She opened the door to the long timbered space that would have been beautiful had they renovated it and created a finished room, something they hadn't done because they hadn't needed space. A trapped blackbird rushed against a window. It banged its head on the glass and dropped, stunned, before rising to try again. Wasn't it once believed that the souls of the dead inhabited birds?

She opened the gabled windows along the length of the room and stalked it, the attic so cold she saw her breath. She wanted to capture it. She wanted to let it go. Again and again, the bird crashed against the upper sheets of glass instead of flying through the lower raised part of the window. A few times she got close enough to sense its heart beating in its chest with fear or exertion or both. It filled her with wonder and excruciating sympathy to see it panting. She reached out, somehow thinking it would let her pick it up and cradle it, but just as she might have grazed its tucked wing, it mustered. Finally, as if by accident, it passed through an open window. As it flew out, a tree-full of crows rose up in a cacophony, dozens disappearing in its wake, following into distance. She stayed at the window. An abstract painting was before her: the snow a radiant white sphere beyond or within a scrim of clouds. Like something out of Rothko, his black and white period, when he'd been depressed and painted the walls of a chapel. They'd been keeping watch, waiting for their brethren. These were the mysteries she believed in, the wonders.

From up here, the isolation of their house was fully visible: through leaf-shed trees she saw snow-covered hills and roads of twine linking one to another, Maine in winter. She'd come here from Boston because of him, as

she'd not had children because of him. Of course, she could never have had the studio she had here in Boston, the kilns, the space to run workshops. Or could she have?

In the study downstairs, unopened bills and cards were piled on the desk. She turned on the computer. She typed in, "soul of dead, bird." She read the first hit:

*Birds assume a variety of roles in mythology and religion. They play a central part in some creation myths and frequently appear as messengers of the **deities**. They are often associated with the journey of the human soul after death. Birds also appear as **tricksters** and **oracles**. Ravens and other species that feed on carrion, the flesh of the dead, may be symbols of war, death, and misfortune, as well as **mediators** between humans and the supernatural world. Other birds represent strength, love, and wisdom.*

She clicked other links. Birds were associated with birth. The notion of storks delivering babies was a remnant of ancient beliefs. But, belying the seeming wealth of information, she recognized cut-and-pasted passages from one website on others. She typed in his name.

His books, his page at the university, came up, his obituary in the local paper. It seemed there should have been more: a man coalescing who was not the man she had known; a man who, in being unfamiliar, was all the more real. Someone who didn't belong to her. Someone who she thus hadn't the power to abandon, or forgive. Someone she didn't belong to. Someone she couldn't reach.

She listened to more tapes. His voice, reminding himself of tasks,

errands, ideas, take the car in for an oil change, write a recommendation, 1793... he trailed off. He must have been thinking of the year. She paused the tape and typed “What happened in 1793 in the U.S.?” into Google, hoping for a clue as to what he’d been interested in. The first hot-air balloon flight (Philadelphia). The first fugitive slave law passed, requiring the return of escaped slaves. First U.S. Catholic priest ordained. First state road authorized, between Frankfort, Kentucky and Cincinnati. Lots of firsts, and she could only imagine why any one of a number of them might have been of interest to him. Though perhaps “1793” wasn’t a reference to a date. Maybe it was the last four digits of someone’s phone number. Maybe it was the price of something.

She turned the tape back on. *How wonderful it is to be thirsty when the last mammals in the sea give us hope*, she heard his recorded voice saying.

And when a blind man holds a fig to his nose, hands steeped, so clearly pleased when the gypsy girls touch him.

And when in the pine pall wolves howl but pose no threat. You can say, “This is real.”

On their trip to Dubrovnik, they’d watched some young gypsies flirting with a blind man on a train they’d taken, and she wondered if he was referencing this. The thought that she may have tracked down something about him excited her at first. She listened and listened and finally realized what she was listening for: not to understand what it was he had recorded but where she was in his life and the records he had kept.

Judith called and said she was going to visit, whether a visit from her would be welcome or not. Her Boston gallery left a message that she needed to start working on the upcoming exhibit, or cancel it. The voice of her dealer was soft and sympathetic, which made her angry. The university emailed about her upcoming seminar.

The world was trying to get in. She crossed the road to her studio. Inside, she inhaled deeply and started to stretch. She needed to get warm. She unrolled her yoga mat and did sun salutations, downward facing dog, warrior pose. In the cold she both smelled and felt, she recalled the long summer days that had been. The dust in the shafts of light from the windows all around and sweat trickling down her forehead, inside her arms, her legs. A different life. Not hers. Now, last summer was spread out around her, the things that wouldn't have mattered except that they'd been put away before he died. The things she had gathered on her walks, which her husband had rarely joined in on anymore: a bird's nest; pale blue eggs; the tiny bones of animals; the severed wing of a barn owl; smooth stones whose shades she'd tried to duplicate in glazes; tree branches; leaf spines; snake skins. The things you find in the country when it's warm and you're looking. There were notes, lists, postcards she'd tacked up. If she'd been the one to go, would he have puzzled through them? Would anyone call and not know what to say? What would he wonder most about? Would he feel his absence among her things, or would he find some semblance of who he'd been to her? Would he try to reach her, as she was trying to reach him, and through what means? Would he tell her things, giving audible utterance to his thoughts, trying to convince himself that she was

listening?

On the shelves under the waist-high counters where she'd stood working was the sienna-colored clay, hundreds of pounds shrink-wrapped from Italy. Her hand reached out to touch a bag, and she felt the cold clay up against plastic. Maybe his sister had been right. Maybe he should have been buried.

She warmed the clay under a heat lamp. Her hands touching the clay, even through the plastic, awakened her imagination. Or maybe just her memory. She wasn't sure there was a difference. She could feel a plate rounding under her hands. It was an excruciating feeling, really, that sense of a perfect utilitarian form taking shape if you remained centered just so at the wheel. Your posture, your state of mind, your feeling for the clay—it all came to bear on whether or not you could make a plate. Maybe she'd have her students make plates this year. They always wanted to rush to art, and she usually let them, even though she believed that if you missed making plates, or something like them, you risked having no foundation for your art.

While the clay warmed, she prepared an armature. To form the bulk of her head, she wrapped wet newspaper and tape around the timber she'd affixed to a base. When the clay was warm and pliant, she packed a thick layer around the newspaper, looking in the mirror in the bathroom, thinking of the shape of her own head. She worked in rough gestures that could be refined. She pushed in the sockets of her wide-set eyes, then stitched in a rough brow line above with a strip of clay. She packed clay around the muzzle of her face, which jutted willfully forward when she was angry. She made ropes of clay and placed them where her cheekbones were.

She circled her image and thought of her husband, visualizing his head more easily than she could her own, relieved by that. You could only visualize something you had studied, and you only studied something you loved. She concentrated on the way the muscles whose names she could no longer remember spiraled from the back of her skull around the neck and into her chest. His body had been so broken. She wrapped flatter pieces of clay in corresponding orchestration on the bust. Yet in spite of her careful looking, in spite of using calipers to measure the back of her head and face to ensure their harmony with principles of proportion, the head she sculpted did not resemble her, so much as an amalgamation of the two of them. How the child they could have had might have looked, for instance. She couldn't help thinking that. And how she'd been left with nothing.

That night when the phone rang, she didn't answer. Twenty minutes later, it rang, and she answered. Breath on the other end. She replaced the receiver gently, put on his coat, and went outside. He would often take a last walk at night with Sadie, over their fields and into the woods. Of the two of them, she'd always considered herself the stronger one, but he'd not been afraid of the dark the way she was.

The snow had all but stopped falling, revealing one of those winter nights, when the expanse seems unending. She looked up: the earth spiraling beneath stars, the trees spinning up from the earth.

Everything she would require was in his pockets. The thick coat smelled

of him.

She crossed the road and went into the woods. She looked back at the house, but it wasn't there anymore. It could have been 1700 or 2050. All was earth and sky. Body. Moon. Cold. Tree. Wood smoke. Light shone through leaf-bare trees, revealing the cobweb of branches. Trees and nets. To capture what? She walked without fear, not because of their familiarity or the light of the moon but because that had been his nature, and she was wearing his coat; she was putting him on so she could take him off; she was getting inside him so she could gain an exit. His coat was so big she disappeared inside it.

She could almost feel Sadie at her feet. The wind blew soft snow off branches, and she stopped, looking around again, listening. This was where the deciduous trees grew. They were creaking branch-to-branch, free of leaves, but otherwise the only sound was the humming electrical silence of her own eardrums. She pushed through to a small clearing, stopping a little farther on at a barbed-wire fence—the eastern border of their property. Someone else had put the fence there; not them; they never would have. They'd thought alike on so many subjects it was as if they'd pooled together sometimes. She returned to the clearing. From the lumpy look of the snow-covered ground, she guessed there was wood beneath the snow. He had always liked this spot—far from home, close to the border. Borderlands had been his subject. He'd understood them to be in the most unlikely of places, which had been the genius of his vision. She cleared a large flat rock and a patch of ground in front of it.

She gathered wood, sorting it into stacks—one for twigs, one for loose bark shorn from logs, one for medium-sized chunks, a stack for bigger pieces.

She wedged his knife into the logs that had already begun to shrink and split, and, pressing down with her weight, cleaved them piece-by-piece in two. Most of the wood seemed reasonably dry and would burn well. She had to stop when her hands got cold, and she sat down to warm them between her legs. Her breath billowed into the air, and she thought of the early days, the only days, blowing clouds into the starry night sky as they walked. In her studio were mementos of their first walks, which she'd held in her palm when she'd been there earlier that day, trying to sculpt her self-portrait. Heavy things—a rusty iron railroad spike from a walk along tracks in Eastern Washington, a granite sett cobblestone from Prague; a book on St. Thomas they'd found on a path in the woods. Light things—bits of sea glass soft like nubs of soap, tufts of moss. She liked heavy things better.

When feeling returned to her fingers, she shaved thin curls of tinder off one of the drier logs with the tip of his knife. The knife slipped and sliced into the flesh between the thumb and index finger of her left hand. She felt a chill, though no pain at first. She instinctively flexed all her fingers to be sure she hadn't cut a tendon. Though her right hand was dominant, she needed both hands as a sculptor. Pink flesh was visible before the blood rose to the surface and ran down her palm. She cooled the wound in snow, then took his handkerchief from the pocket of his coat and bound it tightly. She returned to her work using her uninjured hand only, setting her tinder in the middle of her newly established fire pit.

She built a teepee of twigs around the shavings. Crouching, she tried to get them to catch using his lighter. The wind coming through the winter

plainness of trees cut her face. She waited, then tried to light the shavings again, buoyant with satisfaction as tiny flames merged and grew. She fed progressively larger sticks and bark to the fire, a few small chunks of wood. They started to burn. She lay down on her stomach and blew into the fire, first barely more than a long, deep exhalation, but, as it grew strong, with a breath that left her lightheaded. The flames grew strong, and she glimpsed outside their circumference the flat blackness of night. A squall of fear went through her.

The feeling passed, and she leaned back against the stone, staring into the fire, blind to the darkness, settling in for the night.

She saw the vague shape of a woman's face that neither materialized nor vanished. She felt physical discomfort, impossible to ignore: a cold, aching head, a hand that throbbed and gushed blood when she bent her fingers. She unwrapped the blood-soaked handkerchief. She reached into the deep inside pocket of his jacket and found his empty flask. She'd given him that flask.

Cigarettes and a lighter were inside a pocket. She'd thought he'd stopped smoking ten years before. Only one cigarette remained. She tossed the packaging into the fire. With the surface of the ground crusty, she poked his knife through to the warmer earth beneath and dug a hole, dropping his lighter in, the stones, the gum wrapper, the thin little white sheets of memo paper scrawled with drawings, the notes she couldn't read. Surely the ground was softening, even though it was still winter. Plants would soon get through. There were a sand dollar and powdery shells in his pocket. When had he gotten them? Why had he kept them? She covered with earth the things she'd put there, getting up to finish with her boot.

As a girl, she had buried countless things, but she couldn't remember what or why, merely the sensation of having done so. She couldn't remember if indeed she'd been so many days alone, but she remembered digging in the earth with her hands, the underneath of her fingernails black, skin dry and cracked—the earliest sign of her craving to work with clay, perhaps. When the wind had blown, the fields of grass around her had become blurred. Sometimes her hands had dug a hole in which to bury things, and sometimes she'd dragged her curled fingertips through mud to make canals. She'd swum in lakes. She'd passed through the fire. A quote from Leonardo that she'd tacked up in the barn, next to her kiln, came back to her: *A vessel of unbaked clay when broken may be remolded, but not one that has been passed through the fire.* His emphasis, *the fire.* What would her husband had thought of that? That she, too, had her concern for borders and some longing to dwell near them?

In the morning, a black BMW was parked in front of her studio. Maryland license plates, so it wouldn't be Judith. Maybe someone was lost. She was leaving for the doctor's, but changed her mind and pulled in behind the BMW. All but the driver's seat was packed with boxes, a hard-shell suitcase. Tracks led from the driver's door to the barn.

She walked in the tracks. They were much larger than her boots but that didn't necessarily mean they belonged to a man. The snow was crusty on top and soft underneath, which caused the icy top to collapse in chunks when you stepped on it. She turned the barn doorknob with her right hand, pushing in

with her upper body. She wondered if someone had latched the door from inside. It seemed less inclined to give than usual, but it must have been that the wood had swelled, since it eventually gave.

In the morning light, it took a minute to see the back of a long shearling on the other side of the studio; medium-length red hair; a woman. Her visitor must have heard the door open or felt the cold air come in, because she turned from the shelves she was perusing. The woman was about her age but of a different tribe. “Hi,” the woman said. “I’m Amy. Amy Steltzer.” Something hit the side of the barn in a rhythmic interval, like the snap of a flag against a pole.

The wind had been gusting all night. The life-sized, androgynous figures lining one side of the barn had been uncovered. That this stranger had apparently removed the sheets from her sculptures angered her. Raku-blackened, glazed in white, they haunted the space with a premonition of disaster.

“Excuse me?” she said.

“I knocked, thinking you might be working, but you weren’t. Probably too early for you. At first, I waited in the car, but it’s so cold and seemed wasteful to run the motor for heat.”

“Isn’t it just as cold in here?” she asked.

Perhaps noticing her anger, Amy paused a minute, then started explaining again, her tone different, apologetic. “I was here once before—ages ago. You left the studio open then, so I assumed you might still. The door was unlocked, and the same money basket is on the counter, though I did notice the sign is faded. The basket where money could be left. I took it to mean you still

allowed visitors. The way you used to, you remember.”

“When were you here before?” she asked. It had been years since she’d sold her work out of the studio. People had stayed for hours. She would work while they browsed, even did the occasional impromptu workshop. She had loaned her books and let people take pottery with the promise of sending a check. It was surprising how often she’d gotten paid, and surprising how often she hadn’t.

“About ten years ago. Maybe twelve. It’s all a blur, more than it should be.” Amy smiled without showing her teeth, self-mocking, slightly conspiratorial: *you know what I mean*. She seemed to be suggesting that, even if not for the same reason, time had likely become blurred for both of them. They’d both gotten submerged in some way, been drawn along, as happens with women.

“I can see I’ve overstepped,” Amy was saying. “This place stayed in my memory. I wanted to see it again. I wasn’t even sure I’d be able to find you, but I still have your card from years ago. Amazingly, the GPS got me here.”

Amy took a supple wallet from a loosely-draped bag and handed her a business card from when she made pots, cups, plates. It was soft along the edges, stamped with a sunflower and the name she’d gone by then—Katie, the diminutive of Katherine, her given name and the one she went by now. Yes, the sunflower had once been her symbol. A different life. Something pulled up from before, the earth clinging to its roots. Almost from the moment she’d stepped into the barn and seen the back of a shearling coat, she’d thought she was finally going to meet the woman who’d been calling. She’d been ready to

dislike this stranger because of what she imagined she'd disclose about her husband, because of the answers she had. She'd been preparing to lash out at this stranger, deride her, become hysterical—let herself go. *How could you? Another woman's husband?* But, instead of relief that this woman hadn't come with knowledge, she felt as lonely as a child who is waiting after dark to be picked up by a parent who never arrives. She wanted to go up into the loft, pull a blanket up to her shoulders, go to sleep in this crypt-cold studio. This woman, whoever Amy was, wasn't here as a competitor, she wasn't here to open the door to a room Katherine hadn't known was there, like in a dream she'd had once where she'd found new passages and chambers in her very own house. A marvelous dream that she'd thought might come true this morning, the secret caverns of her husband's life becoming visible.

She told Amy that she went by Katherine.

"Katherine. That suits you better than Katie," she said.

"You came here when I used to sell pottery," Katherine said. "I was a lot younger then. Just starting out."

"You must have been about thirty—the same as me. I'm in my early forties now." "I'll be forty in a few months," she said.

"There's no reason you would remember me," Amy said.

She flexed her left hand, which was in the pocket of her coat. It pulsed with blood. "Why come now?" she asked.

"I guess you could say it was an impulse. Though I have a lot of self-control, generally, I sometimes find it hard not to act on impulse. It's gotten me into trouble. Or maybe I should say it's led to heartbreak." She tried to laugh, as

though to convey that nothing she said was terribly serious, when it instead communicated great disappointment, perhaps even sorrow. “A long relationship just ended. I’m moving to Montreal. It’s not too late, you know. Along the way, I decided to visit places that were important to me.”

Katherine heard Amy pause between sentences as she spoke, as though for everything Amy said, something unsaid staked out its unspoken space. It wasn’t too late for what? She wondered, then thought about what a strange thing it was to do, go back to visit the important places. She couldn’t imagine doing so herself, maybe because she’d finished with each place by the time she left, she felt, or used up in its entirety the part of herself that had lived there. She hadn’t really left that many places or people, except, perhaps, in some way she hadn’t understood, herself.

“Where else are you stopping?”

“This is the last place,” Amy said. “I spent a few days in New York, took some long walks. I lived there in my early twenties with a man I was then married to and went back to some of our old haunts. We divorced when I was in my twenties. We married young, which was a mistake. He acted badly, I acted badly. There was no going back.”

“There never is,” she said. She wasn’t used to being confided in and couldn’t think of anything else to say, even though she felt Amy expected her to say more.

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” Amy said.

Katherine looked long and hard at the blood-soaked bandage on her left hand. “Do we ever?” she asked. She felt bewildered. Or was it lightheadedness?

“You’ve hurt yourself,” Amy said.

“It’s just a cut,” she said. “It may need a stitch or two. And I can’t remember the last time I got a tetanus shot. You’re supposed to get one every seven years, I think. The last one I remember getting was when I stepped on a nail as a kid.”

“It doesn’t look like just a cut to me. What happened?” Amy asked. “I was using the wrong tool,” she said.

“You look like someone who’s used to using tools,” Amy said.

“Not to shave tinder,” she said. “That was my husband’s job. He also took out the garbage. It’s just me now.”

“I’m sorry,” Amy said, understanding—though Katherine hadn’t made it explicit—that saying her husband was “gone,” meant he’d “passed,” died. She wondered why Amy would make such an assumption, which wouldn’t have been the first conclusion Katherine would have drawn, had she been in Amy’s place. Amy had a look that said, I can’t possibly express my sympathy adequately. Katherine recognized in Amy’s expression the strain her own face showed when she needed to let someone know that she was really, truly, very sorry. It was a look that appeared more performative than genuine. Maybe sympathy was always performative.

“Was it unexpected?” Amy asked.

“It happened in the evening, when the roads get slippery. He was on his way home. I don’t know why I mention the slippery roads. They actually had nothing to do with it. He was driving on the wrong side of the road. Which has raised questions, you know.”

“What do you mean?” Amy asked.

“Whether or not it was intentional in some way.” “What do you think?” Amy asked.

“I don’t know,” Katherine said, surprised by the plaintiveness in her tone. “I really don’t know. It’s hard to imagine, and yet it’s not.” She took a deep breath, and began to pleat a piece of paper on her work bench. She could not even decipher her own notes.

“Was anyone else hurt?” Amy asked. “No,” she said. “Thank God.”

“Do you need to get your cut taken care of now?” Amy asked. She had the distracted look of someone trying to decide whether or not to say something other than what she just had.

“I need to have it checked before the blizzard hits. I don’t want to be on the roads when it’s snowing. Were you planning to be on the road today? You’ll not get far once the snow starts.”

“I have time,” Amy said. “I don’t need to be in Montreal for a while yet. I’ll just hole up somewhere if I need to. Lots of vacancies in Maine in the winter.”

Katherine couldn’t imagine Amy holed up in some small town. That was for writers, artists, young men and women who were still searching, the adventuresome, the lost. Not for a chatty, chic, middle-aged woman. Though your typical chatty, chic, middle-aged woman wouldn’t visit the studio of a potter she remembered for no particular reason. “Did you go to see anyone special when you were in New York?” Katherine asked. She also had a hard time imagining this woman alone in New York, she realized, walking and

reflecting upon her past.

“I don’t really know anyone there anymore. Your studio is different from what I remember,” Amy said.

“Well, you were only here once,” she said, resistant to the idea that the studio had changed over the years, though it obviously had.

“Maybe it’s that when I came before it was summer. We had a long conversation. I got here in the afternoon and stayed until evening. You’d been separated from your husband for a while and had just come back.”

“We talked about my separation?” she asked, wondering what she might have said. She’d had no memory of talking to anyone about it. It had always been between her and her husband, only between the two of them, that she thought of that time as a separation.

She moved to the stove, stuffing it with balled-up newspaper and small pieces of wood. Instead of putting a match to it, though, she joined Amy on the far side of the studio, where she was inspecting leftovers from long-ago summer sales—the plates, bowls, and cups from when Katherine had been more of a potter than a sculptor. Amy was looking at them inattentively, in that way one does when trying to chase down a memory about something else altogether.

“We talked about creativity,” Amy said, “children, change, enchantment. We talked about love. You gave me some advice. I don’t remember exactly what it was, but it helped. I was at the time head-over-heels with someone who wasn’t available. You know how it is, when you’re going through a tough time—sometimes you’re inclined to talk to strangers in a more meaningful way than normal. You said, ‘Who is ever, really, truly available?’ That stuck with

me.”

Katherine wondered if she'd really ever said that. If she had, did she still believe it? She supposed she did.

“I'm partial to these sorts of plates and bowls. They feel substantial,” Amy said. “Human made.” She held a bowl Katherine had made many years before in her palm, as if weighing it. Amy's hand was trembling.

Katherine's earliest work was plain, clear glazes over clay. Then she'd begun to experiment with glazes and color had appeared and dominated. Finally, she'd painted designs on the clay. They'd planted a sign at the end of the driveway and passersby had stopped in, locals usually but occasionally someone driving on back roads. That had been their early days here, still days of youth—at least for her.

“My husband said they made him feel like a peasant.” “What did he know?” Amy said.

Something in Amy's tone made Katherine feel the same conspiratorial whiff as before— this time, the shared thing being, *we both knew him, after all, and, yes, what did he know, right? He thought everything, but he in fact knew nothing.*

Amy went over to examine Katherine's portrait from a few days before. “This looks like you,” Amy said hesitantly.

“And yet it doesn't,” she said. “I know.”

“And those sculptures?” Amy gestured to works that had brought Katherine her recognition, such as it was: tiny raku-fired trees with blackened limbs, no leaves. Tiny raku-fired trees with blackened limbs and the bud of a leaf here or there. Raku-fired trees with blackened limbs and leaves tinted with

faintly green glazes opening. “I love these,” Amy said. “You’re telling stories, right?”

“I don’t see them as stories, exactly,” she said, again feeling resistant to this woman and anything she might say, especially if it was close to the truth. At first, she’d sculpted individual pieces, and then she’d assembled them on clay platforms to create miniature dioramas with trees, animals, bowls, angel-like figures. She’d been thinking of the small altarpieces she’d seen in Italian homes. How long had it taken for the first pale green porcelain leaf to tip a blackened branch? So pale it was nearly white. She was growing, unfolding, She couldn’t help it. Her hand ached.

“I do,” Amy said. “This one, for instance.” Head tilted, she was studying a diorama with an angel and moon in crackled white glaze against a singed backdrop. When she’d made it, Katherine had been thinking of the imprints of shadows. Arms vanishing in smoke. History. Borders, though her husband would never have guessed that. Along with the angel, there was a tiny blackened tree, with a shallow bowl and rabbit beneath it. A small, half-burned candle was in the bowl. Digging in her bag, Amy brought out a book of matches and lit the candle—not bothering to ask if she could. Even before Amy said, “This one is about—I don’t know. It gives me a strong sense of loneliness. I feel when I look at it that it was made by a woman who has found her life—.”

She could see that the work was more personal than she’d realized and interrupted to say, “I was just working with textures, juxtapositions of light and dark. I wanted to see how many unlike things I could bring together for effect. There’s not really a connection between the rabbit, the bowl, the moon, the

angel and the tree, but I wanted to see if a relationship could be imagined if I placed them next to one another in a seemingly dramatic setting. The human mind is always trying to find connections, which is the reason we do, I think.”

“The reason we do what?” Amy said, “look for connections?”

“Find connections, even if they’re not there,” she said.

“So you don’t think connections are *real*, if we find them only because we’re seeking them?” Amy asked. “Isn’t it possible that our imaginations allow us to apprehend things we wouldn’t otherwise detect but are nonetheless very real?”

She’d underestimated Amy. She had a tendency to do that, underestimate people. She felt ashamed.

“They’re probably expensive, right?” Amy asked.

“A few thousand dollars,” she said, which was true: some of her work sold for thousands now, though she didn’t feel that necessarily meant it was worth that. Still, she wanted to place a barrier between herself and this woman.

“Way outside my budget,” Amy said. “It would be for me, too,” she said.

“And if I bought a single tree?” Amy asked, “how much would that be?”

“I don’t usually sell them separately, but I could, I suppose,” she said. “A hundred or so?”

Amy picked up a tree. Like the one on the diorama, it was blackened by fire, but a few faint green porcelain buds tipped some of the branches. “I don’t know,” Amy said, “I don’t want to come across as simplistic, but I see these

sculptures as the story of loss and recovery. You went through something, and a large part of you was scorched—that is, marked—but you weren't destroyed. It makes me feel better to know I'm not the only one who's experienced that."

"It's interesting to hear what you see in it," she said. "I just do the work and rarely have a chance to know what other people see in the things I make."

"Do you still barter with people?" Amy asked.

"What did you have in mind?"

"I won't be offended if you say no," Amy said. "I cut hair. Some of my clients are celebrities. They pay a lot. You probably haven't been taking care of yourself. It's not a shallow thing, you know. I have my scissors in the car. It wouldn't be very nice to get your hair cut in here—too cold—but we could go over to your house. It's probably warmer there?"

This must be a ploy on Amy's part. Amy wanted to see her house, which was the reason she'd suggested a barter. Sure, she said, she'd be willing to trade a haircut for a sculpture. She didn't want Amy to go yet.

Amy got haircutting accoutrements from her car, and they crossed the road and went inside the house. The phone was ringing. If there was silence when she answered, she'd feel less certain that Amy was here because of John. But, no. It was the doctor's office, calling to see if she was still planning to come in. They were closing early because of the weather. She explained that she hadn't left but still planned to come in and would get there before the office closed at four. The bleeding had slowed but hadn't stopped. She thought she probably needed a tetanus shot—had she mentioned that to them already?

While she was on the phone, she watched Amy. She was going around the room looking at the paintings and quintessential family photos from previous generations on the wall. At the corner bookshelf, she ran her hand over the titles, crouching to read the ones on the bottom, pulling over a chair to clamber on to examine the ones at the top. The doctor's office had hung up, but Katherine stood, receiver to ear, pretending the conversation hadn't ended.

"I rinsed it in cold water," she said, "warm water made it bleed more." She waited a few beats: "I didn't have any iodine but bathed it in hydrogen peroxide." She wasn't sure she'd ever known someone to make herself so at home in a stranger's house, but aestheticians, like nurses, often had this familiar way with people.

"Your family, or his?" Amy asked of old photos on the wall that she gestured toward. "His," she said.

"He had a deep connection to his family?" Amy asked.

"I'm not sure if it was that, so much as his interest in the past. He was a historian, you know." Ever so slightly, she'd raised her intonation at the end of her sentence, hinting to Amy that she suspected she might already know this about her husband, as well as know about the scar down the center of his breastbone from when he'd had open-heart surgery at birth.

"This one has an interesting face," she said. "Who was he?" Amy was pointing to the photo of John's great grandfather, who John had greatly resembled, and Katherine told her what she knew about him.

Amy sat down on the couch in front of the table where Katherine had been putting those things of her husband's that puzzled her. "These things

belonged to him,” Amy said.

“How did you know?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” Amy said. She was looking at the vase brought in from his office with an expression like the one you might have when looking back at a vanishing view of your home. *Goodbye* could not do that look justice. It was an animal’s sense of loss.

“Shall we get started?” Katherine asked and led Amy to her kitchen, which seemed like the most suitable place for a haircut.

“Do you have a mirror you could bring in?” Amy asked.

Katherine said she didn’t like looking at herself when she got her hair cut, but Amy said she needed to be able to see her face while she stood behind her working. Katherine went upstairs for a mirror, and when she came back, Amy had gone back into the front room, and stood just inside the doorway looking bewildered.

“Is something wrong?” Katherine asked.

“I’m just trying to imagine what it must be like for you out here alone,” Amy said. “It must be hard.”

“I’m used to spending time alone,” Katherine said. “Still, it must be different,” Amy said.

“Yes, it’s different,” Katherine said. “Do you ever feel scared?” Amy asked. “Nervous,” Katherine said.

“Do you ever consider leaving?” “Maybe at some point,” Katherine said.

Back in the kitchen, Amy, standing in front of Katherine, unclasped the

barrette that held her hair and combed her fingers through it until it hung straight on either side of Katherine's face: long, thick, and dark. They were close in size, Amy an inch or so shorter than Katherine's 5'6" frame. Amy studied her face and hair so closely, with such a sober expression, that Katherine again felt certain that she'd come with a question or purpose in mind, and it was that which her gaze pondered, not any consideration of what hairstyle would most suit Katherine.

"Was your husband jealous of your success?" Amy asked.

Because their careers had been so different, it had never occurred to her to wonder about that. Her success had not made him jealous, she said. He'd been proud of her and appreciated the checks for thousands of dollars she'd started to net. But about the same time her career had taken off, she now realized, he'd begun fretting that he might not have another book in him. Which had turned out to be true. She'd not really seen them as being connected, but maybe they were. "He was happy for me," she said.

"He was happy for you?" Amy asked, as if she knew more than Katherine did. Their eyes met, and Amy said without falter, "I mean, men often struggle when their wives are successful."

"We never competed with each other," she said.

"What are you thinking you'd like me to do?" Amy asked.

"My hair has always been the same, basically, except when I was young and experimented with it," Katherine said.

"How young was young?" Amy asked.

"Nineteen, twenty, I'm not sure. At some point in college, I stopped

caring what I looked like. Maybe about the time I discovered the ceramics studio in the basement of the art building.” Those had been profound nights of solitude and grief after her mother died. She’d not connected until now the beginning of her career in clay with her mother’s death.

“Well, you’re one of those lucky women who looks good by eschewing fashion. That’s not true for all of us, you know.”

When she was young, her mother used to wash her hair on Saturday afternoons at the kitchen sink. As she leaned over the sink, she remembered this for perhaps the first time ever, since, before today, it had been an experience from childhood that had remained in the past, like a puzzle piece that fit so snugly in place there was no question of where it belonged. She’d been born several years after her brother and had always felt like an only child. Her parents had been relatively old when they’d had her, already in their forties. At first, she’d been relieved when her mother passed: she’d been fighting cancer for years, it had been awful by the end, like in Bergman’s *Cries and Whispers*. At least John’s death had spared her that experience again. By the time he died, he was gone. His poor, broken body. Amy, seeing his body, would not have done as she had and stepped back. Amy would have stepped forward. She would have made contact with him physically. She would not have needed to think about what to do. She would not have needed to give herself instructions. *Touch him. Speak to him. Even though he is clearly on his way.*

She leant over farther, elbows perched on the edge of the sink, the muscles in her neck, spine and legs, aching pleasurably with the stretch. The water from the spray nozzle was cool on her scalp. Amy massaged shampoo

into her hair, putting pressure on her scalp, her temples, the place in the back of her head where the skull met the cervical spine. Amy washed a second time, rinsed, slathered her hair with conditioner, rinsed, wrapped her hair in a towel, then had her sit in a chair at the kitchen table with her feet flat on the floor. She had already propped the mirror up against the wall in front of them. She combed Katherine's hair out around her head and pinned it up in sections.

Burdened by Amy's proximity, Katherine was glad for the mirror, after all. A mirror gave you somewhere to look, when the hope that made you think you could find commonality of experience vanished. She could watch herself, watch Amy, ponder their reflections in the reflection of her kitchen, the kitchen window, the world outside. Escape this awkward physicality. This awkward silence, which had a physicality to it. And Amy in like kind could see what she needed to track, and there could be between them the barrier Katherine valued, if truth be told, and that had made John a perfect partner: present but not, even in death. That little bit of distance that—she couldn't help seeing—she fostered between herself and others.

Amy combed her slick hair out straight, shaving off stray bits that fell below the line of the cut. "It already feels better," Katherine said, her tone not that of the real, or *a* real, Katherine as it had been at certain moments during their conversation, but of the Katherine who said what was expected, the Katherine who *seemed* real but wasn't.

"Let's say there's a woman out there who loves him," Amy said. "I say loves, not loved, because when someone dies or leaves our life for some other reason, our feelings don't die. We continue to love or hate that person who's

gone. We might even feel compelled to reach out. Maybe he wasn't having an affair, or wasn't any longer—assuming it's a woman who's been calling. Maybe she knew him before you did, and still had something to say to him, something important to communicate. She thought there'd be time. She periodically Googled him, the way we do, and discovered he'd died. Now—imagine—she's left with this uncommunicated thing. What's she supposed to do with it?"

"That's all possible, of course," Katherine said after a minute. She had deliberately sidestepped Amy's question. She could certainly attest to having undergone just such a thing. Her college boyfriend had thought they were going to get married. After her mother's death, she'd not been capable of a relationship. She'd withdrawn from him. She'd demanded of him. She'd railed against him. It was the only time in her life she'd known her human messiness to show. And, yes, after a certain number of years, looking back on that time in her life, she'd wanted him to know she was sorry. She'd Googled him, he was a doctor, married, two children. On and off, she'd considered emailing him, but she hadn't, not yet. Maybe it was that she didn't want him to think she had regrets. Maybe she didn't want him to think that because she did. Even though she knew, really knew, that there'd been no other way.

Amy went into the pantry that was contiguous to the kitchen and came back with a broom and dustpan. Of course, she knew where those things were kept, Katherine thought. Amy swept up Katherine's hair and asked if she had a hair dryer, which of course, she didn't. "It's a nice cut, and you could let it air dry, but I think you should see what it looks like before I go, in case you'd like to make a change," Amy said. She seemed deflated, despondent, distant now—

disinterested. As though, like Katherine, she'd been expecting something that had not come to pass. She donned her shearling before going out to get her hair dryer: re-armored, re-armed.

Her hair was shorter than she would have wanted. It brushed against her neck now. She pulled it back with one hand, and there was only enough to make an inadequate ponytail. That couldn't be changed. It was irreversible.

Water she'd put on for tea was heating and gurgling on the stove. She measured loose-leaf Darjeeling into two slippery net bags and dropped them to the bottom of the capacious cups she'd made in her twenties. When she poured hot water over them, the tea's scent suffused her with the familiarity of the woods she'd played in as a child as something known in the tiny cellular bits of her being that absorbed sense and recognized its reappearance with emotion. She sat at the kitchen table until the cup's shell cooled, and she could hold it against her face—one, two, three four, five—without any discomfort. Amy wasn't going to return. She wouldn't have a chance to answer Amy's question. She wouldn't have a chance to say what she wanted to say.

While they'd been inside, it had started to snow. Amy's tracks were clear in the fresh skiff. In the studio, the tree Amy had admired was still on the shelf and next to her old money basket was a book Katherine had long ago relinquished as something lost. She'd visited Istanbul when she and her husband had separated, and this book of photos of the Hagia Sophia was from then. Little pieces of paper marked pages. She wasn't sure if she'd put them there before Amy had borrowed the book, or if Amy had done so after she'd taken it away. Now, through the conduit of the book, she could convince herself that

she remembered Amy, after all: how, the summer afternoon Amy had visited, Katherine had felt that Amy had not stumbled accidentally on her studio, as she'd claimed, but had come to meet her, ponder her, assess her, as one does the woman one has lost to. She'd wondered if, in the interlude while she'd been gone, Amy had been *the one*, the woman her husband had fallen in love with. She and John had talked about the fact that there'd been someone. She couldn't blame him, and they'd mutually agreed to push it off the raft, drop it into the ocean, let it go. Push her, Amy, off the raft. Yet neither of them had weighted her down; they couldn't have.

She used to put mementos inside books and flipped through to see if she'd left any traces of herself that she might come across at some later time when she pulled a book out to reread. In this one, there was a ticket stub to a Tarkovsky movie she'd gone to see in Istanbul, a train ticket from Portland to Boston, a pressed flower with time-singed lavender-colored petals, its pollen gathering at the spine like dust. She wondered if, after all these years, the pollen was still regenerative. Here and there in the margins, notes in her tiny script that she didn't remember writing and whose significance she couldn't quite recapture or comprehend. Did he or did he not? She could, she would, she had to make decisions and find answers. They were as wired to do that, humans were, as they were to find connections. And if it was true, as Amy suggested, that connections, despite being imagined, were real, then maybe answers, despite being arbitrary, were right in that they were *found*. There would never be a final question, since every question shape-shifted as she closed upon an answer, continuing to haunt her, to provoke her, to draw her on. The world would keep

opening, because that's what it did.

She followed on the small road to town the one set of tire marks that could only belong to Amy. Her hand still needed tending, but she followed the tracks through town and past the doctor's office and beyond where what had obviously been Amy's treads blended with the traces of many others. Snow had started to fall more thickly. It might be the last blizzard of winter. And then it would be spring. The road had a slight incline, invisible unless you looked into the distance toward that point where, as if the world were flat, it seemed to come to an end. When she got to the highest point, she pulled over, got out, and shaded her eyes, panning them across the fields.



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