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## Writing an Existential Novel: An Environmental and Philosophical Exploration

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WRITING AN EXISTENTIAL NOVEL: AN ENVIRONMENTAL AND  
PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATION

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(Philosophy)

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## ABSTRACT

*Halfway Through the Wood* is a creative project guided by the question, does nature have intrinsic ethical, philosophical, and/or spiritual value, or do we project it there? As a subsidiary question, is our relationship with nature akin to our relationship with ourselves? The novel begins with a “man versus nature” conflict, exploring human relationships to land, then moves on to a conversation about self, which ultimately leads to an incredulous/existential discourse about interconnectedness. The novel explores the implications of experiencing grief alongside natural systems, and concludes that enmeshing oneself within a natural system is vital for discovering meaning after experiencing grief.

In memory of A.D. Whinston

Laid to rest in Old Rosh Pina.

If there ever was a place called heaven then

Old Rosh Pina was the dust upon it-

The last place left to be among the lions.

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## METHODOLOGY

A piece of writing advice often misattributed to William Faulkner, but which can more accurately be traced back to author Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, instructs writers to “kill your darlings”. The advice refers to the painful importance of getting rid of things—unnecessary descriptions, characters, plot points—that don’t serve the piece overall, but which have taken hard work to create. But, though this advice advocates for the removal of fluff and drabble, one thing it does not preach (whether deliberately or by omission) is not writing this drabble in the first place. In fact, one might argue that this is the claim that the advice is predicated on. Write that pretentious description, that unnecessary chapter from the point of view of a robin. Every needless word a writer types helps them to understand the world they are building that much more intimately. But what makes a polished final product is a draft without the blanks filled in. To make a draft great, you must kill that moment of realization, each moment the world expands your head, becoming that much more real. What matters is what comes after the realization, though it may not be as dear, as raw.

In writing my thesis, this was the most important lesson I learned about the process itself. Earlier drafts were filled with overly verbose descriptions of the wrong things, meandering scenes that didn’t say what I wanted them to (or, in some cases, didn’t say anything at all, really). It was only when I neared the end of the drafting process, and had a better idea of what my story looked like, that I was able to go back and had finally built the courage to kill those darlings. However, the things that didn’t make it into the final

draft were aspects that I still deem as necessary and vital to my novel drafting process as a whole.

In order to begin drafting the novel, I first looked at my research question and the premise of my novel. I wanted the story to be about the forces of nature talking to a main character as a more extended metaphor for my research question: ‘does nature have intrinsic ethical, philosophical, spiritual value, or do we project it there?’ And, as a subsidiary, ‘is our relationship with nature akin to our relationship with ourselves?’ I wanted the reader to ask, is the protagonist hearing voices, projecting her own experiences onto the natural forces around her, or do the forces themselves have their own voices and identities that the protagonist discovers as she becomes more enmeshed in her surroundings?

From there, I constructed a plot diagram, which I included in my initial thesis proposal. The diagram served as a loose outline of a few plot points I thought I wanted to include, because I wanted to have the direction of knowing where the story was going in a general sense without putting myself into a box so early on in the research process. I also constructed a preliminary philosophical arc that I wanted to follow, which split the novel into three sections. It was to begin with a “man versus nature” conflict, exploring human relationships to land, then move on to a conversation about self, which would ultimately lead to an incredulous/existential discourse about interconnectedness.

After I had figured this out, I started writing, and found myself drawn in different directions than I thought I would. In writing about environmental ethics and human relationships to land within the context of the climate crisis, it made sense that both my

research and the narrative would go in the direction of exploring grief as well, something I will discuss further in the critical analysis. In the context of this particular work, the feelings of grief the protagonist experiences are aimed towards and personified by her grandmother, whose soul she believes exists within a grove of birch trees. The grandmother did not exist in the original plans that I had made for the novel, but she seemed to fit in with all the research I was doing about nature in Jewish mysticism/Kabbalah and spirituality, and it seemed right to include her in the narrative as a whole. Again, her place in the narrative will be further explored in the analysis.

Around midway through the drafting process, I felt myself plateauing, experiencing what many have called 'writer's block'. There were two or three weeks at the beginning of June where I didn't write anything, and it wasn't initially apparent to me why I was experiencing this block and lack of drive until a reader pointed out to me how meandering the existing portions of the novel were. I realized that the reason I was struggling with knowing where to go next, and the reason that long sections of the novel read as aimless and neutral was because I didn't know what I wanted my novel to say. I had put a lot of thought into the arc, researched the philosophy I wanted to discuss and include, but I didn't have a firm grasp on the point I wanted to reach. I didn't know what I wanted the point of it to be, or what I wanted the reader to ultimately take away from my story.

I sensed this wasn't a question that I could answer on my own, or discover within the pages of a book. One of the most notable topics that my work revolves around are relationships to nature, a topic which is both profound and commonplace. Therefore, I



decided to ask the people around me about theirs, in order to gain a new, dynamic perspective. Something my mother said struck me. She told me that the reason she loved nature so much was because it was alive. She enjoyed immersing herself in nature and inhabiting natural spaces because she liked feeling that the things around her were alive, on their own journeys of growth, life, death, and rebirth, just as she was. This resonated with me. If Shoshanna's grandmother is a part of nature, she is part of that process of death and rebirth as well. The reason that my mother likes being around the vibrant life of the outdoors was because these cycles are relatable to her, and they make her feel like a part of something larger. Through the cycles of life and death, which no living thing is immune from, we as humans are able to see ourselves as part of a natural system. That integration degrades the invisible wall between humans and the natural world. It is the mortality of the outdoors that makes our connection to the world around us clear. That, I realized, was where the existential themes of my novel played in. If Shoshanna can see *herself* as part of that process, as connected to her grandmother and to every other living thing through that same universal system of life and death, through that connection healing is made possible. This is a theme I will also embellish in further sections.

This realization allowed me to revisit the structure of my novel. First, I decided on three dramatic questions that would fuel the narrative structure; one main dramatic question and two lesser dramatic questions. The main question is: 'Can Shoshanna heal from the grief she's carrying after her grandmother's death?' The lesser questions are: 'Can Shoshanna survive in the woods?' and, tying the latter and former questions together, 'Can Shoshanna engage in reciprocity, see herself and not just her grandmother as part of a natural system?' I went back to what I had already written and drastically altered and

edited the existing structure and content.

On a set of notecards, I wrote down a summary of each scene I had written thus far and how it contributed to the narrative. Then, I color coded each note card according to which dramatic question(s) the scene included. After that, I made a map of the way the lesser dramatic questions branched off and rejoined the main dramatic question, how they intersected and concluded.

I made a list of recurring/repeating objects and what they represented. The list included things like fungus, birch trees, wind, river, the nightmare Shoshanna has about roots, and the play *Hamlet*. These objects and what they represent will be explored further in the critical analysis portion. I made a posterboard of colors I associated with different characters, seasons, and settings using paint samples from the hardware store. This poster allowed me to better imagine the settings and people I was describing in my work, and using this visual aid, I went back to my existing work and embellished some descriptions. Moving forward in the writing process, I used this board as a reference as well. After this, refining and refocusing, the only thing left to do was to finish the novel and edit it into a polished “second draft”.

I ultimately decided to name the novel, *Halfway Through the Wood*, after a lyric in the song ‘No One is Alone’ from the musical *Into the Woods* by Stephen Sondheim. The full lyrics are,

*Sometimes people leave you,  
Halfway through the wood.  
Others may deceive you,  
You decide what’s good.  
You decide alone  
But no one is alone (Sondheim).*

I decided to name the novel after this lyric because the protagonist is left alone in the woods, left to decide what path to follow - whether to heal from grief and integrate with the woods around her, or to wallow in it, seeing herself as battling with the woods for her survival. However, she is not alone. The forces of nature speak to her and guide her, they are a part of her and she is a part of them, even when she is unable to see it.

## PURPOSE AND INTENT

Upon hearing that I chose to study philosophy, many people have naturally asked, as a follow up question, ‘why?’. The surprising answer to this question is, because of my love of fiction. I chose to study philosophy because reading novels with philosophical implications is the most enriching activity imaginable for me. I wanted to be able to think more critically and deeply about the writing I was engaging with, and moreover, I want to write something profound, something that handles philosophical ideas with finesse and profundity. Undertaking a creative thesis revolving around fiction writing seemed like the natural first step in this process. Not only would a creative thesis open up the opportunity to engage in research about topics that I am passionate about, it would allow me to creatively express and implement that research in an academically rigorous setting. A creative thesis would allow me to explore and improve my creative writing skills, and begin to develop a portfolio to apply for an MFA program. It is important to note that I don’t consider myself finished with this project after the thesis is completed. Rather, beyond the scope of the thesis, I hope to edit the novel further as well as continue my research about the subject matter. I see the value, in my own creative work, of putting something down and picking it up at a later time, of giving space to the work I wasn’t necessarily afforded because of the nature of this project and its deadline. The thesis is very much a culmination of my experience at university simultaneous to being a running start into the next chapter of my academic life.

I chose to center this work around natural spaces and human relationships to nature because conservation and environmental ethics are deeply interesting topics to me.

Throughout my college career, I have engaged in activism surrounding the climate crisis as well as its intersections with social equity. Notably, I founded a sustainability club at my last college, Colorado Mountain College, which also served as an affinity group for the non-partisan climate nonprofit Extinction Rebellion. I organized protests as well as engaging in community outreach, facilitating discussions about conservation. At the University of Maine, I gave talks at the Wilson Interfaith Center about Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Natural Landscape in order to outreach to the community and also to further my research. I served as the philosophy department's Levinson Ambassador for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Sustainability, a research position that enabled me to further the scope of my understanding about the field leading up to my thesis work. Most recently, I attended a protest in Washington, D.C. hosted by the Poor People's Campaign, about the inequitable environmental disparities created by class and socioeconomic status.

Suffice it to say, environmentalism is a subject that I have taken great pains to enlarge my understanding of, both academically and practically, throughout my entire college career. It was important to me that my studies would culminate in an exploration about the things I have learned. It was also important to me to take this opportunity to further enrich my knowledge on environmental ethics with further, more intersectional supplemental research. The bulk of my research into the subject matter consisted not of traditional environmental philosophy, but of indigenous and Kabbalistic views of natural spaces. This, I feel, greatly enhanced my understanding of my surroundings and what I wanted to write about.

I wanted to write about existentialism because I have found that I personally identify with the movement and the perspective that it teaches. I found it very interesting how the modern conservationist conversation has bonded existentialism with perspectives on the climate and the way it is changing, and how viewing environmental ethics and the nature of life through an existentialist perspective changes the conversation, and especially how that new, hybrid perspective addresses grief, climate anxiety, and despair. That idea is one that will be covered more thoroughly in further sections.

I began the thesis process with the intent that my work would provide a modern take on many existing ideas in the field of environmental and existential philosophy, and explore broad humanist and ecological concerns. This is a sentiment I still maintain as the core intent of my work. However, I would like to add that I want my work to say something about the way we experience grief and can overcome it through our relationship with natural things and, moreover, with the life around us.

The novel also serves as a junction between my spiritual and academic selves. As a Jewish woman, much of what I included about Judaism are my interpretations of what I have been taught over years of Hebrew school, as well as from spiritual services where I have read from Kabbalistic texts and the Torah. It is hard to cite all of these practical spiritual experiences which have taken place over years and years; hard to cite an oral tradition which is a distinguishing factor in the Judaic perspective that I have brought to the novel. In integrating my interests, it felt important to integrate the mystical Jewish perspective that I have learned to approach nature with. This also allowed me to deepen my understanding of the history of such facets of Jewish environmentalism as the

Ashkenazi herbal tradition, a subject of historical and practical study I am interested in continuing to research beyond the scope of this project.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout the thesis process, I read several texts in their entirety, finding myself more drawn to indigenous philosophy concerning natural spaces. I enjoyed connecting these (if we look at them in the Western sense) “non-traditional” works and perspectives with the more upheld voices in environmentalism such as Henry David Thoreau. Comparing and contrasting the Western and Indigenous/spiritual schools of thought allowed me to flesh out a solid perspective on what context I wanted relationships with nature to be explored in the creative project. In the remainder of this section, I will go into more detail about this comparison and the conclusions I drew from conducting research in this manner.

A major focus of Robin Wall Kimmerer’s collection of essays, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, is on the importance of reciprocity. She writes, “Gifts from the earth or from each other establish a particular relationship, an obligation of sorts to give, to receive, and to reciprocate” (Kimmerer, 25) and, “Through reciprocity the gift is replenished. All flourishing is mutual” (166). This reciprocity can be outlined, she theorizes, in the way that trees fruit – if one tree fruits, all of the others fruit alongside it, and there are no outliers (15). Below the trunks of these trees, root systems are connected through networks of fungal strands called mycorrhizae, which forage for mineral nutrients to give to trees in exchange for carbohydrates (20). In effect, trees and fungus have built a relationship of give and take based on the fungus’ ability to listen, and the trees’ ability to provide nourishment. This is an idea vital to the relationship that Shoshanna develops



with the natural world in the novel, and will be discussed more at length in the critical analysis portion.

Humans are not removed from, or unable to form, reciprocal relationships with nature. In Sherri Mitchell (Weh'na Ha'mu' Kwasset)'s book of essays, *Sacred Instructions*, human relationships to the Earth are compared with our relationship to our mother in the womb. Mitchell theorizes that our mother's womb is the first 'ecosystem' we are born into, and that, as we develop, we are sustained by an umbilical connection. After we are birthed, she continues, we form an invisible umbilical connection with the Earth mother, who nurtures and sustains us for the remainder of our human lives (4). Through symbiosis, Kimmerer writes, fields of sweetgrass which are tended by humans flourish, while fields that are left untended begin to wither, "If we use a plant respectfully it will stay with us and flourish. If we ignore it, it will go away" (163). The idea of reciprocity is an important one that establishes individuals as part of the natural world, and not separate. It is also one that echoes the perspective of Henry David Thoreau. Through reciprocity, things may serve their higher purpose, and be viewed intrinsically. In *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau writes, "Every creature is better alive than dead, men and moose and pine-trees, and he who understands it aright will rather preserve its life than destroy it" (Thoreau, 62).

The idea of reciprocity as Kimmerer describes is instrumental in the conservationist idea expressed by Thoreau. Viewing, as Thoreau urges, the forces of nature by their intrinsic value, or higher purpose involves seeing the interconnected, ongoing relationship between all things (including the individual). Scarcity and

conservationism, the flourishing of the entire system, is rooted in interconnectedness. Thoreau's belief in the higher, more complex value of natural living beings echoes the theories on living with regret and grief that will be detailed further in the discussion.

Kimmerer and Mitchell alike echo Thoreau's sentiment. Kimmerer writes, "But when you feel that the Earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one way street into a sacred bond" (125). Gifts from the Earth are what sustain us, and these gifts establish an ongoing relationship that requires us to give back. This is a foundation of interconnectedness. In *Sacred Instructions*, Sherri Mitchell goes into more detail. "When we live as multisensory beings, we find that we are able to comprehend the language of every living thing...And we come to realize that it is the interwoven substance of these floating rhythms that holds us in delicate balance with all life" (Mitchell, 7). Here, we begin to see the idea of universal reciprocity not just as one necessary for survival, but to be a subject with spiritual implications as well. Understanding, listening, and receiving extend beyond the lives we are living right now, is not just necessary for a balanced life but for universal harmony. Engaging in reciprocity is akin to weaving an intricate universal fabric that serves as the backdrop for every life lived. Becoming imbalanced implies a lack of spirituality, being out of tune not just with yourself, but with the universe as a whole. This interesting perspective shift from traditional outlooks on nature and its implicit spirituality proves that *how* we see interconnectedness is also important to explore.

In *The Stranger in the Woods* by Michael Finkel, a book about a man, Christopher Thomas Knight, who lived alone in the Maine wilderness for 27 years without human

contact, explores how we see human interconnectedness as separate from natural systems. This is not the case, in fact, all healthy communities function through reciprocity and symbiosis. Finkel suggests that oxytocin levels in the brain can be a determining factor of how much social interaction an individual needs. Knight, also known as the ‘North Pond Hermit’, likely did not have a high oxytocin threshold, which allowed him to live alone for so long in relative comfort.

He still, however, relied on the interconnected systems of the Maine wilderness (a system which he was decidedly a part of) in order to sustain himself. The system did not just involve or include the “natural” sources that surrounded him, but also the ‘camps’, or lakeside cabins that surrounded Knight’s remote wilderness dwelling, camps which he would routinely break into in order to steal food and supplies. Both the ideas of extreme solitude and a community network that does not involve people but does involve dwellings, ‘unnatural’ resources and natural alike, transcends popular conceptions of community. Knight was not able to maintain symbiosis, or reciprocity, with his community members, and was eventually apprehended, but this compelling story still raises many subversive questions. If one was to be trapped in nature and struggling for survival with a higher oxytocin threshold, how would they cope? In the case of the creative project, it is plain to see that the protagonist, lacking connection, begins to manifest presence around her. There is no way to escape life and presence, no matter where you go.

This presence does not necessarily need to be a verbal one, though, in the novel’s case it is. In *The Trouble with Being Born*, E.M. Cioran posits that life’s problems don’t

stem from the prospect of death, but the fact of birth, the emergence into a system, for you can't think your place in a system away, and will and determinism can't get you out of it, either. Cioran writes, "True contact between beings is established only by mute presence, by apparent non-communication, by that mysterious and wordless exchange which resembles inward prayer" (Cioran, 7). An exchange which is wordless is not one that is intrinsically without communication. This begs the consideration of a different kind of communication, one more fundamental, transcendent, and universal that comes with the participation in being, a collective knowledge of transcendental and vital interconnectedness. Already a non-verbal member of a larger natural system, or community, Shoshanna invents or discovers discourse surrounding the natural forces in the community. How she perceives this discourse is directly aligned with her internal discourse, in her relationship with herself. Again, this will be explored more deeply in the critical analysis section.

The way we relate to nature is not separate from how we relate to grief. Thrown out of balance with natural reciprocal systems, ideologies of war and conquest open wounds that, as Sherri Mitchell writes, "...cannot be healed by pretending [they don't] exist. [They] must be examined, cleansed, and tended" (Mitchell, 40). 'War', in this context, is broadly defined as the cause of mass grief. It is impossible to talk about environmentalism, especially in the modern sense, without discussing grief. Under what Thoreau deems as 'archaic laws' of modern society, we have been told to ignore the reciprocal nature of our relationship to our surroundings. In explaining his Just War Theory, he states, "Under these archaic laws and the ideologies that shaped them, we have come to believe that conquest is the natural order of things...we must conquer our

demons, our bodies, our enemies alike” (Thoreau, 45). Mitchell adds, “We have all been fed a great lie, the lie of war. It makes us see danger where none exists; it causes us to distrust our friends, and to label the unknown as our enemy. This great lie causes us to shun the sources of our survival and to embrace the causes of our death” (Mitchell, 41). Embracing the causes of our own death in the modern sense involves reliance on fossil fuel use, alienation from labor and consumerism perpetuated by a capitalist system, to name a few examples. Humans are the only creatures on Earth that engage in these damaging practices, practices that are not intrinsic, but must be taught. The use of fossil fuels and the purchase of fast fashion and discount goods are not correlated with our own survival, but the survival of the system of capital. By engaging in and relying on the damage of the Earth for profit, we are taught to shun the sources of our true survival: universal harmony and reciprocity with the natural world.

When we see the word ‘war’, it’s easy to think of warfare, of trenches and tanks and mass slaughter. However, in this case, warfare is only one facet of ‘war’. The internal strife that arises from failing to engage in reciprocity, the wall that we have built between ourselves and the ecosystems around us so that we do not have to acknowledge the interconnected nature of all things, that is ‘war’.

The pain of war is not something we can just ignore. Grief is not something that just goes away, in any sense.

*“...there is some pain that is inescapable, such as the loss of a loved one. When this pain rises up, it may trigger a resonant response in all of the hidden wounds that we carry, waking them up, causing them to cry out. Society tries to shield us from this pain by telling us we can’t wallow in suffering, we have to forge ahead. So, we medicate*

*ourselves, distract ourselves and avoid the depth of pain that's calling out to us, thinking that we can somehow get beyond it. But that's not how it works...*" (Mitchell, 66).

The grief that we feel at the death of a loved one is connected to the mass grief we feel at being told to "embrace the causes of our own death". Though, at first glance, they may not seem correlated, both can be healed by addressing and engaging in reciprocity, in effect, "becoming indigenous to place". This is a fundamental conservationist truth practiced by Thoreau, who lived alone in contemplation at Walden Pond in the wake of his brother's death. There, he developed a profound understanding of his own grief. Branka Arsic writes, in her work *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau*, "Far from working on 'economizing' his grief, as a modern mourner would do, Thoreau...[dedicates] himself completely to grief, [intensifying] it until it occupies him integrally, becoming identical with his life, which it will keep revitalizing" (Arsic, 29-30). Thoreau wrote in a journal entry during the period, "Make the most of your regrets-never smother your sorrow but tend and cherish it till it come to have a separate and integral interest. To regret deeply is to live afresh" (Arsic, 29). It is plain to see how divergent his view is from the modern rhetoric surrounding grief defined by Mitchell above. The phrase "To regret deeply is to live afresh" suggests that engaging in contemplation and seeing the effect of your actions and the way life has unfolded, is to acknowledge yourself as a part of something bigger, and this acknowledgement will allow you to live life afresh. Thoreau cherishes his grief as something larger and apart from himself, part of a bigger, universal feeling which revitalizes him. Dedicating oneself to such a painfully intellectual, immaterial feeling such as grief is to see oneself as part of something larger, a feeling foundational and existing alongside all forms of life. To see this correlation between all forms of life is to begin to enmesh oneself in a lively

ecosystem where each and every branch, leaf, each blade of grass is on their own cycle of life, death, and grief. Just as humans are.

William Shakespeare's classic play, *Hamlet*, is another example of the way reciprocity and nature are connected to grief and healing. At the beginning of *Hamlet*, the titular character is dealing with the aftermath of his father's death and his mother's marriage to his uncle, Claudius. In a remote part of the castle, he is visited by the ghost of his dead father, who informs Hamlet that he was murdered by Claudius. He tells Hamlet, "The serpent that did sting thy father's life now wears his crown," (Shakespeare 1.5.40-41). Throughout the course of the play, the Ghost haunts Hamlet, leading his mother to believe her son has gone mad. Only Hamlet can see the Ghost, only Hamlet is haunted by the loss of his father, and, in one instance, he puts himself and his friends Horatio and Marcellus in danger to follow the Ghost to an unknown location. In his grief over the unjust loss of his father, Hamlet is spurred to vengeance, to a state of war, looking for an outward outlet for his grief. This reaction perpetuates a cycle of abuse and grief in Hamlet's slaying of Ophelia's father, Polonius. Hamlet, mistaking Polonius for King Claudius, slays him in his mother's chambers. Because of this violent act, Polonius's son and Ophelia's brother, Laertes, like Hamlet unable to cope with the murder of his father, reacts vengefully and outwardly. Continuing the cycle of grief and war, Laertes challenges Hamlet to a duel. He tells Claudius, upon hearing of Hamlet's involvement, "And so have I a noble father lost; A sister driven into desperate terms...but my revenge will come" (Shakespeare 4.7.27-31). Because Laertes and Hamlet perpetuate the cycle of harm as a response to grief, because they react to the circumstances that beget their grief

in a 'modern' sense, and are unable to integrate grief into their lives, unable to begin the healing process, the play ends in tragedy.

Ophelia's response to grief serves as a foil for the responses of her brother Laertes and her lover Hamlet. As a character, she is constantly portrayed alongside imagery of nature. She is found walking in the sun, and this act is discouraged by Hamlet to her father, Polonius. "Let her not walk i' the sun: conception is a blessing," (2.2.198). After Polonius's death, stage directions indicate that she should enter court "fantastically dressed" with flowers. She responds to grief by citing herbs that are known to heal pain, particularly inward pain. "There's rosemary, for remembrance; pray, love, remember: and there's pansies, that's for thoughts...There's fennel for you, and columbines..." (4.5.195-200). In her grief, she looks to the natural forces around her, sees natural remedies as containing immaterial powers capable of healing inward pain, and, at the end of the play, she experiences her death as one with the forces around her. In her death scene she is depicted, most notably by Pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett-Milais, as wreathed in flowers, at one with the body of water around her. Her beauty is described at once as breathtaking and natural. She alone of all of the characters breaks the cycle of grief.

In his grief, Hamlet not only murders Ophelia's father, but mistreats Ophelia, whom he has previously professed to love. He scolds her, "If thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go; and quickly too" (3.1.148-150). Her grief is begetted by his. However, Ophelia does not perpetuate the cycle of grief by looking outwardly. Instead, she seeks out the natural world, looks inwardly, responds not by seeking to harm or bring



vengeance upon other humans, but by seeking out the forces that she has professed in court will minimize pain. Rosemary, daisies, rue. She alone is the character that, contemplating amongst nature and dying in comfort within the woods and water she knows so well, breaks the cycle of grief and harm in the play without any outside intervention. In contrast, Hamlet's and Laertes' perpetuation of the grief they find themselves unable to cope with only ends when they destroy each other *and* the kingdom around them. At odds with each other and their surroundings, they are unable to find solitary, healing peace as Ophelia has. Her journey is one that transpires mainly off the page, only told to us through the remarks of other characters, yet is plain to see by the imagery that accompanies discussions about her and the outcome of her particular storyline, that her journey of grief is a deeply inward and contemplative one, a journey that profoundly rooted in her loving relationship with nature. In response to Hamlet's attempts to break her heart, the love of her life and her brother dueling in futile attempts at vengeance, or her own father's death, she does not lash out in violence, or pass her grief along to another. She retreats and relies on a natural network to deal with her inward pain.

Jewish mysticism is an important practice which teaches an intersection of nature and spirituality, this immateriality within herbal remedies hinted at by Ophelia. In the introduction to herbalistic guide, *Ashkenazi Herbalism: Rediscovering the Herbal Traditions of Eastern European Jews*, Deandra Cohen writes, "Ba'alei shem [medicine men, 'masters of the name (of God)'] were syncretic healers: relying upon the Kabbalah (writings of the Jewish mystical traditions) for guidance, and dispensing remedies both magico-religious and herbal...to heal the individual and honor the Jewish mandate of

tikkun olam, ‘repair the world’” (Cohen, 9). These healers, she explains, were viewed by Jews in the Pale of Settlement as interceders between the living and the dead. They were seen as masters of the name, an extremely sacred title in the Jewish faith, because of their ability to bear witness to the interconnected forces of life and death both within humans and natural life, and their ability to harness this interconnectedness in order to provide healing to both. In the Jewish mystical tradition dating all the way back to medieval Kabbalah and Zohar, *gilgul*, a term meaning ‘to spin’, explains the belief that the soul spins onward through many bodies, striving towards perfection. In this way, death is not seen as final, but rather as the spinning of a wheel. All souls endure on their own cyclical journeys of life and death, as every natural force must do. Being able to harness connection with nature is to harness the potential of all souls, and to heal with plants is to use the non-material aspects of those material remedies. Cohen explains, “They [Ashkenazi herbal healers] believe that [herbal] remedies work not only because of the plants...they apply, but through the power of...scientifically inexplicable factors. In this way, the healer has been at once the restorer of balance and the symbol of the possibility of balance” (Cohen, 4). Intrinsically, nature has an immaterial force which has been harnessed by traditional practitioners of Jewish mysticism and herbalism. This spiritual perspective of nature reaffirms the claim that each and every living thing is indivisible in the regard that they are all balanced in a cycle between life and death. As previously established, this is the foundation of interconnectedness and the heart of the ethical approach to nature pivotal to my thesis research.

Throughout the literature, a picture of interconnectedness is painted, one which is full of contradiction and depth. The literature indicates that nature, a force which sustains

us and has value inherent to itself, gives to us. This gift establishes an ongoing relationship, one which is non-verbal but universal, a relationship which is symbiotic. A perspective of the interconnected nature of all of life is necessary in the face of death and grief, and seeing the immaterial present in one's material surroundings unlocks a vital source of healing.

## CIRITICAL INTRODUCTION/ANALYSIS

When I was thirteen years old, my Uncle Alan (to whom my novel is dedicated) gave me a vital piece of advice. “For sadness there is only one cure: ice cream”, he wrote to me in an email. My pet turtle had just died, my most formative experience with true grief. Sure, I had experienced loss before. A few years before, my childhood dog had passed away, but I was in fifth grade when that happened, too young to know the ache of real, true loss. All four of my grandparents died either before I was born, or before I was old enough to know them, and I grew up very sheltered, hidden away from acute pain. The death of my turtle was the first instance of a deep reciprocal relationship ending suddenly in death. I had taken care of my turtle; cleaned its tank, fed it turtle food from the pet store, given it islands to sunbathe on and logs to hide under. In return, my turtle had given me companionship, the feeling of not being alone, having someone to take care of who would give me love and loyalty in return. I felt that I had failed my turtle, guilty that I had not engaged in reciprocity, not followed through on the agreement I had made with my turtle to take care of it and protect it, and because of that it did not survive to love me another day.

“My advice. Go right out, buy another turtle, call it by the same name, and it will be like your turtle has been reborn,” my uncle joked. And why couldn’t I do that? Why was it so far-fetched that that might actually be a solution? After all, I had never spoken to my turtle, had never gotten to know it besides providing (or failing to provide) for its material needs. Why wouldn’t a second turtle serve the same purpose as the first? Had I falsely attributed individuality to a being I was unable to communicate with? If E. M.

Cioran's claims about the value of mute presence are to be believed, that was absolutely not the case. Somehow, paradoxically, I had established a unique relationship with another living creature, one profound and sorely missed, without the presence of words at all. My turtle had become a part of me.

Even now, almost ten years later, the email I sent him makes me emotional. "Dear Uncle Alan," I wrote, "I was just writing because my turtle died and I am really sad and I don't know what to do. Much love, Julia". These simple words are so charged with feeling, instantly transporting me back to the moment I wrote them in the first place. I can remember feeling despondent, and, overwhelmingly, like I didn't know what to do with all of the sadness I felt. It seemed too vast to me to be overcome.

Yet, the answer was not to overcome it, for grief cannot be overcome. That much is clear to me by the resurgence of emotion I feel at reading the email exchange years later. The grief I feel is still with me, informing my reading experience, my life in the modern sense. Healing, for me, did not mean overcoming, conquering, dismissing. Instead, living afresh with the grief, as Thoreau suggests, seems to be the only way to move forward. More profound still is the sadness I feel at reading the email exchange, because, barely six months after my Uncle Alan informed me that ice cream was the cure for sadness, he, too, passed away.

The character Grandmother Miriam was largely based off of my uncle, with some distinguishing factors, and the relationship between the two women in my story is largely inspired by my formative relationship with him, though our bond developed over email instead of during visits, as he lived in Jerusalem, Israel, and I in the Rocky Mountains of

Colorado. My uncle loved his garden. He would write to me about the morning glories winding their way up the power lines near his house, and how hummingbirds would build their nests on the morning glories—little things that looked like the mittens or slippers of a child. An entire ecosystem existed around his little courtyard garden. Bees would pollinate flowers, loving labor invested into vegetables and herbs, their benefits reaped mere weeks later. What he described to me in emails was how he engaged reciprocal relationships within his garden, and how vital contemplation was for his own healing. I got to see that garden when I traveled to Israel for his funeral.

It took me time, but eventually, I tried to lean into his memory. He had left such a mark on me, one that, in my fear of grief, I shied away from. He loved his garden, he set great store in natural forces and in contemplation around other lively presences. So, eventually, I tried to spend more time in nature, recognize what was going on around me. The beat of hummingbird wings as they came to feed on sugar water from the hummingbird feeder. It began to feel like a secret way I could wallow in my grief without anyone knowing, grief I was young and naive enough to think everyone had gotten over already, and felt bad that I had not. Soon, I became the person who sought out nature for contemplation, who enjoyed gardening and looking out for the bees. I internalized those parts of him and they live inside of me now. Our reciprocal relationship did not end in death. I remember him, and what he taught me informs how I live my life. Thus, I began to move forward.

In many ways, the denial of my grief was similar to Shoshanna's in the novel. In the aftermath of her grandmother's death, it is hinted that she retreated, isolated herself,

and refused to acknowledge the massive amounts of sadness that consumed her. It takes her isolation in the woods, her enmeshment with the forces of nature, and the realization that she and her grandmother exist and are connected by the same system of life and death that forms the thrum of the universe, to give her the strength to fully acknowledge her grief. It is only then that she learns peace. In the aftermath of my uncle's death, I fell into the first of many depressive episodes that would shape my life. I developed severe anxiety and severe anger issues. Though my grief was not the sole cause of my depression, it certainly precipitated it. I took Hamlet's route, that of anger and vengefulness. It was only when I addressed the parts of myself that had been shaped by my uncle, the parts of myself that hurt because of the loss, that I started to know peace. His presence, or the lack thereof, informed every moment, until everything started to feel okay. He was fully enmeshed within me just as Shoshanna becomes fully enmeshed in the forces around her, which she believes encase her grandmother's soul. Thoreau, too, came to a similar realization during his contemplation at Walden Pond.

Perhaps it is no wonder, after being so affected and guided by my uncle during my more formative years, that I am so attracted to stories where one character teaches another something about life, imparts wisdom. In *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, one of my favorite books, there is quite literally a Giver and a Receiver, the former of which imparts all of the wisdom and history of the world onto the latter to keep. The process is one that is transformative and sacred, a tale of metaphoric sleeping into wakefulness. Another one of my favorite novels, *Ishmael* by Daniel Quinn, advertises itself upon the premise, "Teacher seeks pupil. Must have an earnest desire to save the world". The process of teaching and imparting knowledge is implied here as a vital step towards saving the

world. In this particular novel, an unnamed main character is taught by a gorilla named Ishmael. The novel closes with a haunting call to action, “With man gone, is there hope for gorilla? With gorilla gone, is there hope for man?”

I would consider *Halfway Through the Wood* to be firmly lodged in this ‘teacher seeks pupil’ genre. Like the unnamed protagonist in *Ishmael*, Shoshanna is first taught many valuable lessons, and then forced to make her way in the world without her teacher and realize the lessons she has been taught. In other words, she is forced to ultimately create (or recreate, restate in her own words) the meaning of her life and the life around her. This, the premise for most of the conflict that takes place in the novel, makes the work unflinchingly existentialist.

Shoshanna, in her grief and her search for meaning, is faced with two paths: the one of Ophelia (balance) and the one of Hamlet (imbalance). On one hand, she can react to her grief and her circumstances with anger, attempting to conquer the woods, seeing herself at odds with her surroundings, as she is tempted to do, close to death near the beginning of the story. Her other option is to take Ophelia’s path, one of inward contemplation, in collaboration with the life that surrounds her towards healing. Ultimately, she takes the latter path. At the end of the novel, Shoshanna floats away in the river, an end that mirrors Ophelia’s. However, whether or not she dies is besides the point. She is at peace. Through and despite the cycles of life and death that are constantly surrounding her, visible in every facet of her life in the woods, Shoshanna has found peace and healing. She is not alone. The cycle of grief, which, at the inciting incident, is taken out on the woods in Shoshanna cutting down the birch, is no longer perpetuated.



In effect, cutting down the birch releases Shoshanna's grief anew, something she had been suppressing and which was eating away at her, for the reason that she is metaphorically killing her grandmother all over again. If Miriam's soul is, like Shoshanna believes, encased within the network of birches beside her camp, cutting down the living birch is doing harm to her grandmother. She is, in effect, opening the infected wound of guilt and grief she had so shoddily patched up, and for this reason receives such a violent and haunting reaction in response. The reaction is her interpretation to the event because of the grief and guilt she feels. Much of the actions and dialogue of the forest is told only through the myopic lens of her perception, which is why it seems so sinister in the first half of the novel. In the second half of the novel, the dialogue and participation of nature is seen through more of a positive lens because of Shoshanna's internal shift in perspective. More specific examples of this will be explored later in the work.

In fact, throughout the novel, the birches do nothing but sustain her, teach her and orient her. The trunk she cuts down serves as the main support, the mast of her dwelling. It is at the center, both literally and figuratively, of the home that she builds herself in the woods. Disoriented during the first part of the novel, Shoshanna draws a map on a large piece of birch bark. A part of the birch has been used as a tool for Shoshanna's orientation. In turn, her dreams about the birches consuming her indicate that she still sees herself as separate from the natural systems that surround her. She views the trees, which have done nothing but nourish her, as adversarial and sinister, seeking to destroy her rather than integrate her into their system. In the third part of the novel, the third time she has the dream, her perspective has wholly changed, and this change gives her an opportunity to deepen her connection with her surroundings. She is able to tap into a

larger mycorrhizal network and connect with the trees in a new and more profound way. This new perspective helps her also to know herself, and her place in the system that she is sinking into and connecting with.

When Shoshanna has an opportunity to travel back to society with the hiker, Anthony, she doesn't take it. He implies that he doesn't think she's strong enough to make the journey back all by herself, and grows frustrated when she decides she cannot go back with him, telling her that she will die out in the woods. Still, she decides to stay. She is afraid to leave her grandmother behind, even as her grandmother will not speak to her, refusing to respond to her questions, comments, and monologues throughout much of the second part. This decision marks a vital turning point towards healing. Her decision not to flee from the woods at the first opportunity proves that she does not wholly view her surroundings as adversarial. Her decision to stay implies a feeling of belonging, a marked difference from the violent *otherness* she treated nature with as she struggled for survival in the first part. Though her grandmother, within the birch, has not told her there is meaning to being in the woods and beginning to form reciprocal relationships, Shoshanna can sense, all by herself, the meaning attributed with her growing connection to the woods, though at this point, forces such as the birches and wind remain staunchly uncommunicative and uncooperative. She understands that she has tapped into a vital connection that, though she does not know the scope of it, she understands the importance of. On a conscious level, she is afraid of living without her grandmother again, of discovering her and then leaving her behind for the hollow life she was living before. However, there is nothing truly proving that her grandmother is alive amongst the

birches. It is Shoshanna's blind faith, a meaning that she has discovered and attributed to the woods, which informs this pivotal decision.

The decision also marks a turning point into a relationship of true reciprocity with the woods. The moment Shoshanna decides to listen, the stilted, confusing and disorienting dialogue that has taken place during the novel thus far gives way to a meaningful dialogue where all participants contribute equally. Shoshanna begins to see herself as a part of a community that, instead of seeking to harm her, gives to her in equal measure as she gives to them, by listening. A marked example of this is in her third dream sequence with the birch roots. Instead of viewing them as adversarial, roots who pull her down and seek to suffocate her, as she did during the first two sequences, she encounters the dream with a different perspective the third time. Though the same events occur as did the first two sequences, her perspective makes all the difference. Seeing herself as becoming part of the system allows her to deepen her relationship with the root system, and she taps into a psychedelic experience, hearing the mycorrhizal system that connects the roots of the birches to those of other trees, at work. In effect, she has become one with the roots, fully enmeshed in symbiosis just as the mycorrhizae is.

Fungus, throughout the novel, serves as a support system, facilitating nourishment and communication. In the first section, as Shoshanna struggles for survival, it is a mushroom that breaks the cycle of starvation. Unlike the other forces, such as the wind, that Shoshanna views as hostile, the mushroom is straightforward in its sacrifice, telling her to, "take me". Later, when Shoshanna stumbles upon the oyster mushrooms, they tell her to listen, simply to pause and listen before taking. In taking this advice, Shoshanna

engages in one of the first reciprocal exchanges (albeit nonverbal) that characterize the last sections of the novel. These two interactions are significant in the way that the fungus guides Shoshanna first towards receiving, giving its consent for her to take, and then towards giving, instructing her first to listen, to give, before she is given to. Tapping into the mycorrhizal system is yet another opportunity for Shoshanna to deepen her connection with nature, deepen her understanding of what it means to give and take. The mycorrhizae supports her integration into the root system of the birches, just as it has supported her enmeshment into nature and reciprocal relationships since the beginning of the novel.

The wind, in contrast, is a force of doubt. Before Shoshanna is able to truly engage in healing, in reciprocal relationships with her surroundings, the wind taunts her and exacerbates the uneasy and unsteady way she approaches the woods around her. Like with the dreams, beginning to live a balanced life in harmony with nature, to engage in reciprocity and healing, drastically alters Shoshanna's perspectives on the actions and intentions of the forces around her.

This leads back to the guiding research questions: does nature have intrinsic ethical, spiritual, and philosophical value, or do we project it there? And, as a subsidiary question, is our relationship with nature akin to our relationship with ourselves? My research has led me to conclude yes to the first, because of the second. In the novel, Shoshanna's inner turmoil is a deciding factor in the way she perceives the outside world, as highlighted above. Her perspective, not outward changes, determine the situation she finds herself in. Though she finishes the novel too weak to make it back to society, in a

similar condition and circumstance to the beginning of the novel, starvation does not serve as a major conflict as it does in the first part. Throughout the story, the river/brook nearby to Shoshanna's camp has served as a place for rebirth and revitalization. She goes there to bathe, to clean off the grime of the forest, and to find peace in contemplation. In bathing and washing off, she is in effect reborn back into the woods. She begins anew. At the end of the novel, she floats away in that same body of water. She is healed, in effect, reborn. She is, at last, moving forward. It is therefore fair to conclude that nature has spiritual value because we are able to harness its spirituality in order to incite inner change. Though Shoshanna's material conditions have remained for the most part unchanged (save for the seasons), her mental state has evolved, her relationship with herself is entirely different. This marked internal change mirrors the outward change. Nature is no longer sinister but cooperative, and the relationship between the two forces is a valued one. The reciprocal relationship that Shoshanna shared with her grandmother throughout her youth does not end in death, but is fully integrated into Shoshanna's modern discovery of meaning, informing her relationship with her surroundings.

**“Unable to perceive the  
Shape of you,  
I find you all around me.  
Your presence fills my eyes  
With your love,  
It humbles my heart,  
For you are everywhere.”**

**-Jalal al-Din Rumi**

**“To die, to sleep;  
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub:  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil.” -**

**William Shakespeare - Hamlet, Act III, Scene I**

## Summer

1

It was a cloudy, temperate day when the trees began to speak to her. The wide chasm of the sky glowed with backlit clouds, a halo of light around the grey-blue smog. The air was tinged with the scent of balsam fir, oils in their needles evaporating into the forest, waiting for the being lucky enough to wander past and breathe. Inhale deeply and sigh. The river coiled and swirled, frolicking with itself in the journey down. Every particle gushed in the same direction. A violent force calmly flowed. She had traversed up and down its banks twice today already, parts of it dark, patted down and firm, parts of it rocky, parts of it muddy, sludgy, where the river had overflowed. The firm terrain made a clunking, hollow sound underfoot, with various tree roots protruding, stretching, yearning for a drink. She listened idly to the *thunk thunk* as the stick-ridden tarp she pulled behind her slid first over top of these roots, and then bore its weight back down on the hollow ground. Occasionally she paused to dislodge the tarp from a particularly protruding or quarrelsome root.

Nature was not idle. With every change it moved against her, every snag demanded energy, time wasted untangling her equipment from the ground. Some roots, like daggers, punctured and frayed the precious plastic. But what was she to do? Each slash wrought in the deep blue tarp reaffirmed some emptiness inside her gut. Each day began with sweltering heat, each night ended in a moist, permeating cold. It seemed to eat at her, gnaw her down to the marrow of her bones, slither in through each weak spot in her worn

sleeping bag. How long had she been out here? With each trip down and up the river, she found it harder and harder to scavenge for wood, fallen sticks and trunks her lifeblood. What was she to do when it all ran out? Sweat beaded on her brow, an intricate silver crown which melted down her face, stained her hair, was wiped away. Building this crown took energy, too, each canteen she filtered from the river would reappear hours later in this ever-regenerating diadem. The sun's crafty fingers beat down on her, stroking her, probing and invasive. Her scalp pulsated with heat where it had burned her. It hadn't rained in weeks. Not since she had lost herself out here, since the trees had taken her captive. How could she fight back against all of them at once, against all which consumed her, painstakingly, day by day? Each morning she awoke with a start and found that there was a little bit less of her, and a little bit more of the forest. Was this how nature subsisted? Did it feed off of those who begged for survival, was the forest floor beneath her carnivorous? With each step she took, dragging the tarp languidly behind her, more of her seemed to sink into the bed of leaves and dirt below her. The rushing river assaulted her ears, the *thunk* of her footfalls beat against her skull. Her toes wriggled in her shoes out of the holes left in her socks. She had been left for dead; half decomposed already.

She had lost something here; she had lost everything.

The decrepit structure she had been building rested some miles east of the river, or so went her estimations. *Before*, she had often been known to vastly overestimate the distance she had hiked on foot. *Before*, when hiking had been a fun diversion, when *she* had been the one to consume nature. When nature could be consumed in bite sized increments, when she could eat away at the sunset atop vast and domineering mountains



and lay her pack down at the end of the day, inside. Back when she had a home; something to hold things in. To keep. Her party would meander for a while, upon which she would say something like, “I think we’ve gone, like, three miles by now?” or, “We have to have hiked, like, four miles already!” or perhaps, “Look at the map, we’re definitely right there, dude!” and, upon which they consistently found that the distance they had covered was much less than she had estimated.

However, as she had now been left alone, her estimation was all that mattered, and she estimated that her camp lay some three or four miles from the river. It was not very structurally sound. It looked amorphous and half-formed, an abstract sculpture crafted using sticks and driftwood. Something to be looked at, not used. Two nights ago, she had awoken to find the poorly constructed structure imploding on top of her, wood pieces raining down. It had not been pleasant.

Underneath this small freestanding arch of sticks and bark, nestled under the shade of a large pine, lay a small backpack and sleeping bag stuffed in its navy sack, another deep blue tarp lain underneath them. In a tree some one hundred yards to the right, a food bag hammocked and rocked, suspended from a branch. There wasn’t much of it, and each day the cord that bore it grew a little less strained.

The wheel of the Earth turned, and the sun descended into the nether. She placed the pile of sticks she had collected, one by one, onto her hovel, re-fortifying it (though she had little idea what she was doing). In the golden glow of near sundown, insects nipped at her forehead, woodpeckers carved away at wood. It was easy to imagine she heard a sigh. Perhaps it had been her from which the sound had unwittingly escaped. In her long trips along the track of the river, she had grown exhausted, dehydrated. It had been several

days since she had finished her last meal, and she was now subsisting on handfuls of nuts, which were all that remained to her from the supplies she had brought, weeks ago. As she wiled away the time altering her structure, she considered the futility of shelter-building (and her lack of strategy), the necessity of using her depleting stores of energy (for what did she have that was not rapidly depleting?) to walk miles and miles to collect sticks.

But she couldn't, ultimately, admit to herself that she knew she was going to die. It was a prospect hidden too darkly in that pounding mind of hers, but always there was that little voice which asked, *are you building a shelter, or a grave?*

As the sun sank ever lower, she placed the last stick atop the comb of sticks, lashing it to the one below it with three long green blades of grass. Stepping back, she watched as, after a split second with no bracing or support the structure caved in on itself, slanting over and blanketing her small collection of supplies.

She stared at the shelter for a second before her vision became blurred with tears.

However, not a drop left her eyes. Had she a single drop to lose anymore, a single tear to spend on grief? In lieu of waterworks, her body slowly lent anger, a lethally bubbling thing which rose in her like venom. *This can't be it. This can't be all my feeble attempts at survival have come to.*

*Pillar*, she thought frantically, *I need a pillar*. Before any other thought could take its place, the vexation which had replaced blood, coursing through her veins, sending strength and fortitude to her muscles and bones had pressed her forward towards the fallen structure. Underneath the wilting arch, where her supplies and provisions rested, she dug around frantically. Her cracked and blistered hands finally reached around the

handle of her hatchet in a vice-like grip. With no preamble she swung it around, using all the force she could muster to tear asunder the outside of the birch tree directly beside her.

A chorus of wails devoured the woods.

*I heave and the world heaves with me. The Earth is a pulsating skin, and I pierce it again and again, weave in and out in a web of coils and points and life. The brown underneath me at times gives way, at times holds fast, stretching me, protecting me, there is nothing left of me without the vibrations of the crust above and below. The heavens mold to me, send breezes which billow around me. I am cloaked in wind and sun. I twine further into myself. I bleed, I replace myself many times over. In the center of everything, I writhe, and in tribute, the light gives me green more vibrant than that which will ever be seen again. Or do I grow green to greet the sky above? We are one in a constant dance, swimming around each other in fresh, crisp summer air which revitalizes and rebirths us in turn. Where do we go when the dance has ended, when we bow our heads and the music halts? This is a place we cannot return from. After the dance, when our love has left us, we die.*

In the time *before*, her grandmother's rough, wrinkled thumbs rubbed thick clear aloe juice into her skin. Red with sunburn, the firm and coarse grip caused a deep ache, which eventually and without fail gave way to something like relief. The vibrant orange plumes of the torch aloe had mesmerized and fascinated her in equal measure, though only the leaves were used. To soothe, to clean, to soften. But not eat, never to eat.

"It hurts," she would complain, as her grandmother rubbed and rubbed. "Please, stop, I don't want it."

Her grandmother would reply, "Wait. You may not feel it now, but your body will remember the touch of the aloe. It has served you and I across the ages," she cajoled, "from North Africa to the Pale of Settlement. This plant, this healing, connects the living to the dead, to those that came before you. *Bachareta bachiyim*."

Her grandmother always spoke in this way, preaching, with little preamble. The speech bordered on verse, a set of riddles perplexing and alluring in equal measure. At the time, she had insisted that her body, a living vessel, could not be connected to death, she could not be linked to those who came before except in anecdotal lineage. What did her ancestors have to do with her sunburn? All she wanted was for the pain to stop, and right away, too. Not the aching massaged deeper and deeper.

"Where did your name come from, if not from ancestral tradition, passed down from generation to generation? Who are you if not your name? Is your identity without it the same? Pah! I think not."

Shoshanna, that was her name. Something prickly, something soft. Something blood red.

Her grandmother had insisted, even when she was too young to understand, that there was some ineffable collection of information beyond what science could comprehend. She gave amulets, prayers, remembrances from past lives. She pulled from some record beyond what could be seen.

All Shoshanna had wanted was relief from her sunburn.

Relief would invariably come after the aloe, a plant which her grandmother tended to religiously. “If we tend to what sustains us, it will sustain us in return. If you neglect it, it will go away. Nature seeks its complement.”

Putting a name to a face, to a being, makes everything different.

The handle of the hatchet was uneven where the soft wood had been gauged by the outside world, so soft it was carved into like butter or cheese. It was hard to say whether these ridges made it harder or easier to grip, whether or not fingers finding grooves was some small way of coming home. The wood itself was dark and stained and the rings of the tree it had been molded from were still visible. It was a stunning contrast between tan skin and dark wood, an elastic force that jointly channeled strength and fortitude.

With each swing of the hatchet, the grove of birch trees renewed their cries, a collective of voices seemingly writhing in agony, swirling and congealing into Shoshanna’s eardrum. She didn’t stop, slicing ever deeper into the thin, pale bark. On the inside, the tree’s color almost exactly matched her skin. *This would probably have been easier if I had knocked down a dead tree*, she thought ruefully, but with one more reverberating sob, the tree careened over, leaving a stump in its place.

The woods, previously so full, were static with silence. By now, night had truly fallen, and only the last vestiges of lighter sky clung to the horizon line. Shoshanna felt keenly the sensation of dirt and sweat coating her entire body, the hollow of her stomach inside her abdomen.

*If you go to sleep now, you will not have to feel hungry until morning.*

*Hunger doesn't end with sleep.*

*Well, maybe it would, just for a little, if you pretended it did.*

The perspiration which, during the day, had served to cool her down in her tank top and hiking pants, now froze and throbbed in the breeze. If she didn't get into her threadbare sleeping bag now, she would never be able to regain the warmth that was leaving her before tomorrow morning. She couldn't imagine anything worse than a night spent in abject hunger, kept from sleep by cold, shivering and convulsing within the bag.

This wouldn't be her first night without shelter. She hoped it would be her last, especially considering that she didn't know how many more nights she had left. She wondered, idly, if things would be at all different if she had been the one in their group carrying the tent.

It was hard to know what role a flimsy piece of plastic could do to protect you from the world outside. But she had a feeling that, when it came to feeling exposed (nevermind dying of exposure), even a tent ridden with holes was better than no tent at all.

The woods were silent, save for the low vibrations of crickets and a distant chorus of toads. Shoshanna clumsily shifted the failed structure to the side and reached through to grab the tarp and her sleeping bag. Was exposure truly that much more life threatening than hunger? It was hard to imagine that there could be anything dangerous about laying a billowing blue tarp down on the ground, and falling asleep directly under the North Star.

She dreamed of the screams. Trees, which had no mouths to shriek, burst into a horrific song, one which seemed to only reverberate within her head. She knew enough to sense the silence without. The torment and punishment was for her alone. She was an alien thing, she did not belong.

One of the cries rose above the others. Her ears pricked at the sound of a keening more familiar and sinister. Was she known here? What was more, did she know? How could she pick apart each sound, each cry, when she wasn't even sure it was more than one at all?

“Stop it!” she yelled, clutching at her ears.

She was surrounded by birches and they pressed ever inward, their roots snaking through the forest floor like tentacles. The cry was so familiar, it was unfamiliar, it was impossible to hear, it was all she could hear.

“Stop!” She was sobbing, too. The pale, statuesque silhouettes of the birch trees shone hauntingly in the moonlight. The dark slats on their trunks protruded menacingly, horrifically, and suddenly sprung open. Beady black eyes stared at her from a thousand



directions. She had never been more exposed, there underneath the stars. This was what they warned you about in those backcountry safety videos.

She wrapped her hands around one of the trunks and tried to pry it from the ground, but she couldn't. It seemed planted so deep as to tap into the Earth's core. The birch gave another wail, winding its roots around ankles, but not over the skin there. She felt nothing glide and press over skin, but under muscle, cracking bone, licking marrow. The root tore up her leg, puncturing the hollow of her stomach. It wriggled around her liver and her lungs, constricting her heart like a thick, splintery python.

The wails never ceased; they had always been. On the first day there had been wailing, and beyond the last there would be - eternal. But this, here, staring into beady eyes, torn limb from limb by an ocean of bark, a sea of roots, here was that thing that danced at the edge of recollection. She stared straight ahead, even as her vision faltered, and roots snaked out of her ear canals.

With her last breath, she whispered, "Grandmother, is it you?"

By the time Shoshanna crawled out of her sleeping bag the next morning, the sun already shone brightly overhead. She sat up unsteadily, shoving the tattered, mass market copy of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* she cuddled at night to the bottom of her bag. Once, she had brought it as a chance to finally read it, finally say she had read it.

Tresses of medium length oily black hair were glued to her face with dried tears, remnants of the restless night before. She carefully unstuck each clump, grimacing as she ran her hands along the deep indentations they had left on her cheek. The grime made her feel terrible, unlike herself. She had the urge to strip it off. The thought of another trip to

the river felt unendurable, but nevertheless she couldn't dismiss her yearning to feel clean, to feel normal.

She rolled up her sleeping bag and stuck it, and her tarp, back under the pile of sticks. If only she had brought a longer length of rope, then she needn't have bothered with the sticks. How much energy she might have saved if she had only packed some twine. These woods had never heard of rope.

As she covered all of her supplies, she took stock of her small, ramshackle camp. The midday light filtered unsteadily through the pine trees overhead, casting an uneven, abstract glow. Shoshanna had few possessions, having only prepared for around a week in the great outdoors. A backpack, a chair, a boiler with a built in french press she had been so excited to use. A bag of food for the group that had now been reduced to a few handfuls of nuts. Nothing here really mattered. A nine ounce collapsible chair wouldn't save her from what was coming for her.

She thought of herself *before*, so removed from all but the basest requirement for a survival instinct. She used to complain about never having learned how to do her taxes in school. *If you neglect it, it will go away.* Money seemed like such a trivial thing now. The woods stood before there were taxes, and would only burn after taxes were rendered obsolete. The forest cared about no tax but that which it demanded in payment for survival. Shoshanna paid more tax because she didn't have a shelter, and had no way of knowing that what she really needed to know were those things that civilization had seemingly evolved past needing. How to build a lean-to, how to start a fire (one that didn't burn everything around you), or how to forage in the woods. She was afraid of

biting into something poisonous, she had nothing to hunt with but a small Swiss Army knife and a hatchet.

The remnants of her only kill, the thin birch she had assaulted the night before, lay where it had fallen, untouched. It felt like a crime scene. Though Shoshanna doubted the screams she heard could have been real, she felt hesitant to approach the slain tree. She felt at war with the woods, but here was proof of the battle inside her head.

The incident in the night had shaken her. She was no longer sure of her ability to tell dreams from reality, and could no longer deny some sort of mental deterioration. She had thought that maybe the act of cutting down the tree was separate from the nightmare that followed, but then, did that mean she had hallucinated the wails in a state of alertness? Next, she thought that perhaps she had dreamed the entire thing, but the tree laying on the ground, the hatchet abandoned beside it, was evidence enough that that could not be the case. Was it a good sign (or a sign of anything) that she didn't accept the wails as a new kind of reality? Didn't take them for granted? Or was it made so much the more agonizing that she was aware of the madness?

After assessing the wreckage, stalk straight, dressed in yesterday's crusted slept-in clothes (the horror, *before* her would have thought), she set off, her empty canteen and water purifier in tow.

Her muscles screamed in protest with each passing step, but she also felt as if she were floating. Sleeping on the hard ground night after night, coupled with the daily hikes along the river was taking its toll. So was the meager handful of nuts she allowed herself every other day. Enough to keep her from total delirium, to stave off starvation for as long as

possible. Not enough to keep her from feeling like her head wouldn't leave her body behind and float into the atmosphere, up up and out of view, like a helium balloon. Would it drift away, or thunk to the ground, waiting patiently to be plucked and ravaged?

One morning, she simply wouldn't wake up (she already woke up later and later each day) or she would stagger until she lost balance and never get up again. She would lose control of her body and fall off a sheer cliff, and within hours, whatever was left of her that starvation and constant exhaustion hadn't already stolen would be stripped away by coyotes or wolves or carrion birds. Crawlers that she knew were there, had heard and seen evidence of, but hadn't had the misfortune of coming face to face with. That was the ultimate thing. Tomorrow or the next day or twenty years from now, worms.

It was hard to imagine her body just not existing, the things she owned living on after she had gone. Everything she had collected and used to identify herself with would simply be sold, or given away. She would live on through these things, but all remnants of her would be unknown to their new possessor.

*What is there to fear from being consumed? To merge with another, becoming inextricable from a distinct force of life, is not the end of us. This consumption is the only thing that exists, as when two hearts merge, is one not eating the other? Is not closeness brought about by something all-consuming? How do you come to know me, if not by robbing pieces of me and merging them with your being, sticking pieces of yourself in the crannies you leave behind? We act as crucibles for one another, sheer presence burning away the ways we are worse when apart, until, one day, we grow to find we are more pure, shine brighter, when we are consuming each other. Consumption makes our light burn brighter. It should not scare you. Of all the ways to go, how stunning. How creative. How disarming.*

*You are mistaken in your assumptions, you know. Consumption is at the heart of creation. We are each other, inextricably, living on through each other's experience, through each other's eyes, decomposing into one mind, one sight. That is what we are leading up to. A reciprocal union. It's all that exists, all that will ever exist. I have guided you, I have loved you. I am more you than you know, no matter what skin, what shell, what earthly vessel.*

*What, then, is better, more pure, than being consumed by me?*

3

Humans, like any other animal, existed to survive. Any middle school science class could tell you that. From a young age the idea of *survival of the fittest* was presented as the

foremost driving force behind all of existence. Perhaps that was why Shoshanna rationed, why she prolonged this woodland suffering. Surviving took consciousness, fortitude, craftiness. But the decision *to* survive...was it even a decision? If you were taught something from infancy, and employed decision making skills based on the information available to you, did it mean that the decisions you made were limited by the philosophies you were taught?

How stupid it seemed that she had not thirsted for knowledge before. All she had were the bits that were fed to her, that she accepted myopically and unquestioningly. If she had known more, maybe she would have had the strength to decide to die.

It made sense that she should want to die. If she had been meant to survive, it should not have been so difficult to do so. If the woods, host to countless creatures which cooed and buzzed and howled and lived languorous lives, had not embraced her, (as she was taught that nature should), but instead attacked, poked, prodded; battled with her, it made sense that Shoshanna was not truly meant to be there.

She bathed in a shallow pool along the river. The water wasn't entirely still, but didn't rush in the way the heart of the river did. Despite the (even limited) movement, mosquitoes still swarmed above, and she was only protected by the robe of pool swelling around her. It was some kind of catharsis she felt letting the waterway wash the grime off of her. She felt safe, contained. She had thought many times of moving her camp to the banks of the river, but the constant cloud of mosquitoes and the idea of straying too far from the place where she first realized she was lost dissuaded her every time. Though she tried not to dwell on the idea too much, part of her was also terrified of being approached

by a mountain lion, bear, or another large predator and not being able to hear it over the surge of river running. She must content herself with these stolen visits, that was all. Behind where the swirling water beckoned, plants dipped their roots in from the solid earth for a drink. Shoshanna idly reached up to stroke the leaves of some of the smaller plants. Her toes disturbed the mud and stones at the bottom of the shallows. She let her mind still for a second. This was where the magic of nature stepped in, the thing that had kept her coming back. What you caught in the glimpses between the horror. These moments made meditation easy. Her state of consciousness would alter, maybe who she was or the fact that she was here wouldn't matter so much anymore. Her outstretched fingers explored a soft, round leaf. She turned her face up to look at it, up towards the branches and the sun and the heavens. She whirled her body around to inspect it. Shoshanna was surprised to find that she recognized the plant she was holding. With a quick tug, she severed a sprig from the rest of its stem, bringing it closer to her face. The site of injury emitted a familiar, odorous stink. *Birthwort*, she thought. Thick, rotund leaves complimented the deep purple flowers, interspersed with pale yellowish veins which carved in from the petals' edges. The way they looked on the surface of the large petal was vaguely human-like, and somehow very disturbing.

Her grandmother Miriam used to mix birthwort with aloe, Shoshanna remembered. It made her think of times spent at her grandmother's house growing up, the countless pots that dotted the windowsill above the sink, table, and floor. She thought also of Miriam's long, colorful head scarves, which she would wound around her deep black hair. The colorful pinks and purples of the fabric would often deepen her green eyes, eyes which Shoshanna shared. It made Shoshanna think of a particular visit, one

where golden afternoon light refracted through the yellow stained glass of the kitchen window. She had sat at a table with long, sharp metal pruning shears clutched in her tiny hands. Grandmother Miriam cradled a mortar in the crook of her arm, grinding dried herbs into dust with a grey marble pestle.

“What is that smell?” Shoshanna asked, wrinkling her nose. “I don’t like that at all.” The more her grandmother ground, the more the pungent odor seemed to permeate the air.

“It is birthwort,” her grandmother replied, extending the mortar to waft it just under Shoshanna’s nose. She resisted the urge to smack it away, knowing that if she did, she would be clocked over the ears or slung over a knee.

“You know what this is used for?”

Shoshanna shook her head sullenly, crossing her arms over her small chest and pouting. “Some things you may not be old enough to learn, but will learn the horrors of in time.” Miriam knew the exact thing to say to pique the interest of a disinterested child like Shoshanna.

“What?” she asked, ineffectively concealing her growing interest. “You can tell me, I’m mature enough. Mom tells me lots of things that other people my age aren’t supposed to know.”

Miriam didn’t respond, but smiled mysteriously. Her grin was stunning, a remnant of her formal youthful glow, something that never quite faded away from the glint of her eyes. Soon enough Shoshanna would learn just what her grandmother, in the name of the Ashkenazi herbal tradition, used birthwort for. Sometimes, when she visited, young



women would come to the house, and after Shoshanna strained her ears to hear muffled voices from behind locked doors, the women would emerge. They would patiently wait in the living room as Miriam went to the backyard and dug up the earthen container where she stored some of her herbs and poultices, before eventually returning and sending the women away with a bag of dried, crushed birthwort. Sometimes they wouldn't come back. Sometimes they would come back bleeding (she never saw from where, but that didn't mean she didn't understand that they bled) and plead with Miriam to make it stop. Women with secrets, women who couldn't afford a clinical, safer alternative.

Sometimes, before rushing to a woman's house to help her give birth, her grandmother would dig up the box again and dart out of the house with it, doors clanging off of the wall behind them as she sprinted. Always left guessing, Shoshanna quickly learned that the bad smell was a warning, an indication, of something worse to come.

Some time after, she had been playing in the back garden when some wood from the unfinished raised beds (where the herbs grew) had splintered deeply into her finger. Erupting in tears, she ran into the house to show her grandmother, who, after giving the splinter a quick kiss, went outside again to unearth the box. Taking a little scoop and depositing some of the powdered birthwort into a bowl, she mixed it with some aloe. Horrified, Shoshanna had begged her grandmother not to make her eat the concoction. She didn't see the need, she was afraid of bleeding. She had been so, so afraid of pain. Miriam simply laughed, stroking Shoshanna's dark hair, before demanding the splintered arm again.

“Hand it over, Shoshie,” she cajoled. Her large, hooked nose and high cheekbones gave her a stunning, if not kindly look as she stared down at her granddaughter.

Shoshanna acquiesced. With a practiced hand, she smoothed the mixture onto

Shoshanna’s skin. Within a day the splinter had been drawn out, picked easily with a pair of tweezers, and into the trash.

Those days spent at her grandmother’s house seemed so long ago. Even in the time since, when people would touch her body, caress her, even in a completely different way (ways she would be horrified if her grandmother had ever attempted), Shoshanna was unable to stop herself from remembering the way Miriam would smooth aloe onto her skin, to soothe sunburns, to extract thorns. It was the most fundamental act of love she knew of.

After bathing, she scrubbed her crusty clothes under the water. Mud and grime billowed out from the garments like food coloring dropping into water. She had a small, precious supply of biodegradable soap which she applied sparingly. Though it wasn’t enough to completely wash the clothes, by the time she was done, they were worlds better than before. Shoshanna scurried naked through the woods, laying the clothes out to dry on some rocks along with a couple more cuttings of birthwort. She didn’t know if she would ever use it, but she couldn’t help herself. The woods had rendered her sentimental.

She took one last opportunity to bask in the sunlight, floating in the river, before dressing in her now damp clothes. With the last dregs of the day, she trudged back to her ‘camp’. Fixing her shelter would have to wait another day, then. Summoning the energy was tomorrow’s problem, one that didn’t exist until she thought it into reality. A soft breeze lifted the now damp hair above her ear and brushed it across her face. At first the words

were faint; she couldn't quite make them out. But soon they became quite unmistakable, the gentle but persistent mutter.

“This is all your fault.”

*Water won't wash off sleeplessness. It will not cleanse you of your sleepless night, your squinting eyes, your hollowed sockets. The night still happened, it marked you.*

*Therefore, whoever says that to bathe is to rebirth, revitalize, is simply wrong. I watch you, here in the morning, I watch you slip into the river. You limp, and the exertion it has taken you to get here is made abundantly clear. You take off what you are wearing, shed layer by layer, (a snake or a shaved tree or a horseshoe crab), and I absorb your pungent aroma. You dip into the river and scrub your exterior. You feel already seen, know, in your heart, that you are not alone, though you do not know why. It does not help in the slightest that I am here, watching over you.*

*But you know I have always watched over you.*

*I watch you all the time, I watched you even before you were aware you could be watched. You let the cold river water wash away, not who you are or what you have gone through, but what has caked on top of that, what has coated your being, dried, crusted off. The water bubbles, days of bodily squalor are memorialized only on the inside, in those muscles and eyes and whatever's in you that sees, understands, but can't be described. There is no way to scrub away the record that is held inside.*

*Who am I? Who am I to you? Am I you, looking down on yourself? How else would I know what clothing is, how the water feels invigorating, if not renewing? What is consciousness without you?*

She poured a handful of roasted cashews into a pile and carefully picked each one apart, halving them. It looked like more; it wasn't more. She ate slowly, chewing each half forty times before swallowing. She counted to twenty. Another half.

"Beware beware beware," cautioned the wind, whooshing, back and forth overhead like a carrion bird. "Beware."

It looked like it might rain, but it was too dark to tell. Shoshanna knew in her heart that the wind warned the *woods* to watch out for *her*. She couldn't exactly understand why.

It hadn't rained the night before like Shoshanna thought it would, but the next morning the sky was still overcast. The sun only infrequently peaked out from where it burned behind curtains of cloud. The birch still lay on the dark forest ground, fallen, where she had cut it down. What was the difference between picking a flower and felling a tree? When she was younger, her grandmother had warned her not to pick flowers, to leave them for others to enjoy. It was a lesson that would never have come from her parents, who were city people and hardly ever sought out wild things.

When Shoshanna looked down at the birch, all she could think of again was herself, reduced to a corpse. Often, when she would watch films that depicted death and violence, (or when she went through that true crime phase that everyone seems to go through at some point) it would strike her how quickly life could depart someone's body.

At the moment of departure, what was left behind seemed simultaneously similar but also starkly different to what had existed before. A beating or a stabbing, a sudden moment

where life abandons its vessel, and how limp that vessel goes. It wasn't something that consciously frightened her, but rather a thing that was wholly incomprehensible. How could it just happen that quickly? Such a big thing, the *ultimate thing*? A tree standing for thousands of years is reduced to a sheet of paper, recycled after a day.

Maybe it was time that tripped her up. All the years of pain and torment that made a life, all of the fortitude that someone had ever shown, just eliminated. For what? Where had it all led? Growing up in abject privilege had left her with such a deep impression of the inevitability of justice. She wanted to believe that every hardship endured was leading her to something better, and that the scales of life would balance out. The very fact of death, that most permanent and irreversible of hardships, robbed her of that assertion. There was no rebuttal for or towards death. Shoshanna was convinced that even having a religious upbringing, whether you believed in a heaven or a hell or some other post-death calamity, couldn't rob you of the fear of death. The Torah even commanded you to choose life.

*Bachareta bachiym. Therefore choose life.* Her grandmother always used to say it to her. The slippery slope between life and death didn't often feel like a choice, especially now. The very justice that she had grown up believing in had been stolen by the woods. After entering adulthood and learning further about the machinations of the world, she thought she had shed her previous notions of justice. It was now clear to her, though, that she had never truly stopped believing that the formative and skewed idea of justice applied to *her*. She was privileged, she knew that injustice existed, but never thought that the icy waves of mass tragedy and true hardship would reach so far as to lap at her feet. She had lost things, sure. She had lost her grandmother, an ache so pronounced it had never truly faded. She had lost friends, she had fought with family members. But, in all of these

instances and experiences, she always had a net to catch her, she sat always on a pedestal she couldn't descend from without finding herself at the top of it again.

“People bolder and braver than you will ever behave loved this land for thousands of years you know.”

What was that? Shoshanna had heard something. She stood abruptly from where she'd lounged beside her heap of supplies.

“You and your destruction are just a blip in our deep history.”

A message danced at the edge of her senses.

“Sentence blip note. Beware Beware beware beware.”

The culmination of her life, her woes, was this: she heard the wind, speaking unevenly and paradoxically as the force of the gust waxed and waned. She heard the trees. It was all inside her own head. The birch, laying beside her, had been robbed in much the same way, and by her. She knew nothing of its life, what transpired under its bark, in the dead heartwood at its center. But it was just one tree.

“Why do you care?” Shoshanna shouted at the trees, the air, the clouds. “I'm just one person. I'll die out here, anyways, as you well know!”

Who was she screaming at? No one was there.

“You understand nothing at all,” the wind responded first, and tentatively. It died out for a little, leaving the air still, humid, and charged with the prospect of its return.

And, after a brief spell, the gust did re-emerge. “You understand nothing and that is why you will die. You are a part of nothing. All alone. All alone.”

The heaviness of the voice robbed Shoshanna of breath.

“Tell me,” she beckoned. “Tell me what to do.” No response. She hugged herself and curled against the mounting wind. “It was just one tree. I wish I had never cut down the stupid tree.”

She was so, so hungry, and utterly incapable of climbing out of the sensation. Her hunger would cease, as would her breath, someday soon, but they would have to stop on their own and without any intervention from her. She no longer owned her body, and was no longer in control of it. Was that so much different from exiting it entirely, permanently? Shoshanna lay her head on the forest floor, feeling dried leaves crunch under her temple, thin blades of grass and shrubs pricking at her skin. Her nostrils were invaded by the earthy scent of dirt and the fragrant, aromatic tang of golden pine sap. Stubby, brittle sticks prodded her. She leveled with the pale, stinky birch. *It was young*, Shoshanna thought. Just a few days ago, it had thrived. Vibrant, almost neon green leaves coated its spindly branches. Laying down, it stared at her through a dozen unseeing black eyes. Just as it had done in her dream. It was almost like the eyes could see. She thought she might even have caught one of them blinking. The tree was knotted and ridged with ebony and alabaster. She looked along the line of its trunk, tilting her head to follow it all the way to its bushy tip. For a long time she lay idle, clear tears rolling down the bridge of her nose, her temple; watering the ground below.

A quiet but persistent thought: *am I about to die? Is this really where it will all end?* A bird whistled in the early afternoon gloom. A robin, Shoshanna thought, chirping from a far above branch. The sound was so energetic, so alive. *How long will I lay here? Have I always been lying here? This really is no different from anything else I have ever done. I've done nothing in my life but sit idly by and feel myself dying.*

At the tip of the birch's foliage, there was a peek of something salmon colored. It was almost like the trunk was pointing to something, she couldn't tell what. The salmoncolored thing looked a little like a bloom, perhaps, or a sedentary, unmoving critter. Was it, too, dead? Soon enough, would they all be dead? Would any of this exist when she wasn't here to witness it anymore? It all existed in the blink of her eyes, and if she closed them, it would all go away. Oh, how much, in this moment, she wanted that to be true. She could sink into the ground and be consumed by the roots below, just like in her dream, except she wouldn't have to feel it. That's what the woods truly wanted, right? And wasn't that what she ventured, against her very nature, to want too? Building and building. Breaking.

Her body, not her, arose to inspect the salmon colored thing. What did the body think it would find there? Shoshanna felt like she was simply along for the ride, thankful that she was unable to feel the expenditure of energy it took to cross the space. She was the bright, afternoon sun, peering out from behind the clouds far above. Unable to exert any real control. Each step shook the ground beneath, rocked the Earth on its axis. The light breeze picked up again lest anyone forget: beware. The body crouched down to examine the salmon bloom, which turned out to be a large cluster of mushrooms shooting out of the ground.

It looked like the water at the top of a gurgling fountain, rippling and tumbling over where the stem must no doubt have been. Striped in light orangey pink and white, the cluster was huge and close to the ground, growing off of a half buried, long dead log. The individual layers of the mushroom, which altogether formed the large fungal fruit, were thin, in fact, almost papery thin at their tips, the most pale section of the cluster. The



further inward she looked, the thicker the sections seemed to become, until the shadows cast by the topmost layer prohibited her view of the heart, the place where the mushroom sprung from the wood, bloomed from the mycelium network encased by the decaying, ground-bound log. Each papery thin section of the fungus curved in on itself, forming ruffles which Shoshanna's body now traced, slowly, awe-struck, with her index finger. Part of her expected to find the mushroom did not really exist, that it was some kind of specter or hallucination conjured by her malnourished brain. But, reaching out, she was relieved to find the bloom reassuringly solid. It felt firm under the pad of her finger, nowhere near rotten. It would not be tough to chew, the body knew, pausing in its brief and gentle inspection to dig one long, dirt caked fingernail into a thicker section of the mushroom further inward. It was firm, but not hard. It could not squish it between two fingers, but could cut into the meat easily. What was more, it had no discernible smell, nothing to indicate a rotten core. Nothing to indicate that she might poison herself with something past its expiration date. It was perfect, so perfect it was almost beyond belief. Shoshanna had never felt desperate enough to forage for mushrooms. During the long weeks she sat in the woods, striking mushrooms of all shapes and sizes had cropped up all over the place, seemingly overnight. One morning, she had woken to find that a cluster of black, urn shaped mushrooms had appeared almost fully grown next to her head. In her dazed, half asleep mind, some of them had looked almost like black olives, with a hole in the center where they would have been pitted prior to canning. However, with the more mature fruits in the clump, this comparison fell short. They were long and thin, not circular, and their skin, very obviously leathery, took on more of a sooty cast.

Still, even the most mature ones had looked appetizing, reminding her of the dark mushrooms she used to buy, wrapped in plastic, from the grocery store. She would take them home and pan fry them in butter, added to alfredo or pizza or God knows what other delicacy she used to feed herself with, and take for granted.

*What are you feeling tonight? Asian, maybe Mexican?*

*We had Mexican last night. Maybe we should go for some Italian?*

In the end, she had refused to touch the black mushrooms, the little brown ones she saw all over the place, the long mushrooms forming shelves on trees before releasing their spores, decaying, and disappearing.

Those other mushrooms hadn't looked half as appetizing as the cluster of salmon ones did. The body wanted them. The body that used to be Shoshanna's before she neglected it didn't bathe it often enough, fed it only bits of fat with startling infrequency.

The body wanted the cluster. To *it*, it no longer mattered that they may be poisonous. She knew nothing about foraging for mushrooms. She hadn't the slightest clue what was edible or poisonous. Somehow, that truth didn't much matter anymore. It didn't seem pertinent. The mushrooms would reunite her with her body, or sever the bond between them forever. Was going that way really more painful than the way she was dying already?

Starving to death was a long, languidly painful way to go. People would eat ox skin rugs, dirt, even each other to stave it off. Poison, by comparison, was but a few hours or days of acute suffering. With these mushrooms, she wasn't even guaranteed that. She didn't know what to expect. But discomfort, even death, could no longer be a deterrent for her,

so set against herself she was becoming even hour by hour. It certainly didn't dissuade the body. Maybe if she ate something, the voices around her would disappear, even if it were only a matter of minutes before she finally succumbed. For surely these voices, this beckoning *beware*, the wailing which still rang in her ears, were the result of hallucination.

“Take me,” beckoned the bloom. “Take me.”

The body, who sensed, and didn't think, drew a small pocket knife and severed the fruit from the part of the log that was still visible aboveground. It used its thin, spindly hands to shred the mushrooms. The pale fungus ripped apart like any cooked chicken breast would. As Shoshanna watched, distant, her body tore away at the still decrepit shelter she had spent hours lashing together. Dried grass gave way with a small *snap*, the weaker, decaying sticks broke apart with a resounding *crack*. The body fashioned a tipi with them and, with trembling hands, struck Shoshanna's flint and steel on some dried up grass and pine needles. Its hands were shaking, and it took a few attempts for the flint to finally strike true.

A fire erupted, tentatively at first, curling around the dead, dull orange pine needles that she had used as tinder. Slowly, it ventured upwards to catch on the stick structure in a violent, mesmerizing chemical reaction. Stoking the orange flames, the body placed the mushrooms, with her final ration of nuts, in her cookware near the embers (Shoshanna had long run out of propane for her backpacking stove). The mushrooms sizzled, the nuts crackled, and the smell was enough to send Shoshanna out of her body all over again.

One last time, the wind pleaded, “Beware!” And Shoshanna’s body bit into the scalding fungus.

*I*

*can't*

*speak*

*I*

*have no*

*voice*

*But*

*you can*

*hear me.*

*Hear me.*

It was similar to when she had hacked down the birch, but instead of her mind caving under pressure, it had been her body. Maybe there wasn't a difference. She had lost something when the tree had died. She felt such guilt, and for what? Men cut down trees every single day. In her life, Shoshanna had used thousands of sheets of paper mindlessly; hundreds of thousands, even. But something felt sacred about the birch. Something that defied explanation, could only be called ineffable. But, again, there was nothing logical about this. Either it was all sacred, or none of it was. Either all trees, all forces, had value unto themselves, or it was all meaningless.

Upon tasting the mushroom, Shoshanna shot abruptly back into her body. The scent of the smoky fire she had built invaded her senses as it ate away at wood. Dead sticks crackled in pain. At first, she couldn't taste the mushrooms, though she was scarfing down the fruit like a rabid animal.

"You know how each little mushroom grows so quickly?" Grandmother Miriam had asked her once, on a dewy fall morning. They had woken to find clumps of mushrooms dotting the overgrown field behind the homely little hovel, and shelving up on the trees. Shoshanna had looked at her grandmother with wide, inquiring viridescent eyes, so large and teary as all children's eyes were.

"Well, to start, what you're seeing isn't actually the mushroom."

"What?" Shoshanna had asked breathlessly, whirling from where she sat on her grandmother's lap to peer around. "What else could there be? A mushroom is a

mushroom, bubbe.” She was tempted to ask Miriam to stop tricking her, but felt afraid of posing such a bold accusation against her wisened grandmother.

Miriam had chuckled, a low, raspy noise that betrayed her age. Shoshanna caught a glimpse of her large, straight and yellowing teeth. “You can’t tell the full story of anything by merely looking at it. You see that little brown mushroom?” She pointed to the tiny cap nearest to where they sat in an unstained wooden adirondack chair.

“Underneath where it blooms is the real body of the mushroom, which stretches out and grows to be much taller and bigger than you or I. We just can’t see it. When the body is ready, it will start to craft a little finger, just like you and I have, to poke out of the dirt and feel the sunlight. It must get cold down there in the ground, don’t you think?”

“Hmm, I guess you’re right.” Shoshanna had never considered how cold it would be without the sun, so lonely buried under piles of dirt. It was often her fingers or toes which felt the cold first, and desperately sought out any source of heat.

“Block by block, the body will start building each little piece of the mushroom, in miniature. And, when it’s finally ready, it shoots water up into the finger and gives it life!” Miriam made a shooting motion with her hands which made Shoshanna giggle.

“Really?” she responded eagerly. “Do you think that fairies help the mushrooms build their fingers?” Shoshanna bounced up and down on her grandmother’s knee.

“Pah! It will do you no good to linger on such an improbability,” Miriam clocked Shoshanna gently over the ears. “But don’t rule it out entirely...”

Shoshanna had paused in her eating (how that was even possible, she did not know) thinking about her grandmother. She wondered what Miriam would say if she could see Shoshanna now, all matted, tangled hair, skin and bones. Borderline rabid. Her

grandmother would know, Shoshanna thought, how to survive out here. If *she* had been here, everything would have been okay. Her grandmother would know, Shoshanna thought, how to get them out, how to cool down this war between her and nature. Her grandmother was peace, all bundled up in a shawl.

She took a slow bite of the mushroom, absorbing its every flavor note and texture. It was the best thing she had ever eaten, a heavenly explosion of flavor, but, simultaneously, a reasonable inner voice acknowledged that it tasted just like an unseasoned chicken breast. It tasted chewy, slightly metallic and hearty. The fungus shredded just like chicken, its texture slightly stringy but not off-puttingly so. Was she dreaming? Did she really think the best tasting thing in the world was an unseasoned piece of poultry?

The hallucinations didn't stop. Not like she had thought (and maybe hoped) that they might, once she had eaten a decent meal. A day or two later, seemingly miraculously, Shoshanna stumbled upon what was unmistakably a cluster of oyster mushrooms growing out of heartwood. It reminded her of the days *before*, when she would dice them up finely and treat them as scallops in her cooking.

They tasted a little more fishy than she remembered, and only made her slightly sick. She thought that might be an indication that they were a little past their 'best by' date. Emboldened by these two relatively successful experiences, she had finally endeavored to go foraging, wandering around until she found a plant which appeared familiar to her. Shoshanna was dimly aware of how dangerous this was. Any misidentification could leave her weak or dead, strip her of even the illusion of hope she would ever make it back home.



However, she was wholly motivated by the idea of further starvation. She was now entirely out of the rations that she had been carrying for her trip, and if she didn't forage, she would die either way. It now seemed that food was all Shoshanna could think about, and the idea of this feeling in her stomach growing keener again was more than she could bear. In fact, she couldn't do it. She knew she couldn't, and would rather eat a thousand poisoned leaves, a million poisonous berries than continue living with the ache of hunger without resolution or respite. At least if she did eat them, for a moment, before it all went upside down, Shoshanna would feel full.

These woods, nestled deep in the New England heartland that Shoshanna called home, were full to bursting with vegetation. Each square inch seemed covered in some sort of greenery. The more Shoshanna became acquainted with her surroundings, the more shades of green she seemed to discover beaming at her through leaves, stems, and flowers. In places, moving through the brush was time consuming, requiring her to wade through it much like she would a swamp, hip deep in the overgrown brush. In other places, the vegetation was so dense bushwacking became impossible. Nearer to her camp, the brush thinned out, revealing a rich brown forest floor dotted with grass and clover, which was one reason she had decided to situate herself there.

After a few hours of traipsing around and ungracefully crashing through foliage (any nearby animal must have known to give her a wide berth), she came across a wild raspberry bush. The soft pink fruit stood out starkly against the green backdrop. She stripped it, snacking liberally, and promptly discovered another plant nearby which she thought she recognized as amaranth. It had a thick stem adorned with large, raindrop

leaves and topped with vibrant green seed pods. Excitedly, she trekked back up the hill, traversing the (indeterminable, but of course it felt like miles) distance to her pack.

Upon arriving back at her camp, she made a feast of raspberries, amaranth leaves, and pine needles (which she thought she remembered as being edible but had never done much to sate her hunger). It went without saying that the meal was both delicious and satiating.

As the sun set, each ray a paintbrush streaking the cloudless sky with soft pinks and purples, Shoshanna grabbed a wide piece of curving birch bark which had nestled into the ground. Next to the dying flames, she sketched out a map with a sharpened piece of charcoal from yesterday's fire, of what she knew about the surrounding area, trying to remember in what general direction she had collected her spoils. The charcoal leaked onto her hands, turning them deeply, darkly grey.

She knew that her camp was a ways away from a river. That seemed a good place to start. If she stood at her camp facing in the direction she knew the river to be, the grove of birches huddled directly to her left. Around two hundred paces to her right was a small clearing full of tall grass that reached all the way to Shoshanna's sternum in places. She'd spent a few hours in that meadow picking grass in order to lash dead sticks together. If she walked downhill towards the river, and then followed it downstream, it eventually flowed underground. Shoshanna reasoned that it might be more of a brook or a large stream than a true river. She had discovered this, much to her chagrin, early on when she hoped to follow the river towards a township or village. To escape this aimless purgatory. She had never forded the river, and didn't know what lay beyond it.

At the bottom horizontal edge of the thick, brittle bark, she drew a large, squiggly line. The bottom border. The line twisted around slightly, ending about one fourth of the way up the left side. A little ways up the hill, she drew a series of straight lines to indicate the grass. A little ways from there, she marked a small triangle. Her campsite. And, beside it, a sketch of two bushy little trees made up the grove. Further to the left of the grove, there was a slight divot, almost like a tiny irrigation canal for water to run down, which led to the river. That was the track she usually followed down and back up, unless she was lugging her tarp around behind her and needed more level ground. To the left of that were trees, densely packed and indistinguishable from other seemingly identical areas of the forest. To the right, beyond the grass, the woods continued in much the same way. On her map, she marked four arrows going outwards to indicate this homogeneity. She must have, however, pressed too hard on supple charcoal. It crumbled in her vice-like grip, leaving nothing but ashes behind.

“Fuck!” Shoshanna exclaimed frustratedly. She hadn’t gotten a chance to mark down the general location of today’s gathering, or add any more detail to the area where the trees thinned out closer to the river. She found she didn’t have enough energy tonight to whittle another piece to a tip again. She sighed deeply.

The sun was fading now, abandoning the sky above to a gradient of dark on dark. Shoshanna felt weary all the way down to the marrow, and soon after the fire had been extinguished, she had fallen into a more peaceful sleep than she could ever remember having out in the woods. It was deep, and dreamless, a sleep akin to the peacefulness of the grave.

The next morning, she woke to find that the seed pod from the amaranth, which she had placed in a mess bowl beside her head the night before, had deposited hundreds of seeds overnight. She eagerly scarfed them down for breakfast. They tasted like tiny macadamia nuts, crunchy and rich. It seemed like the blink of an eye before they had all gone, her stomach full to bursting. Standing up and stripping off her sweater, she strapped her water bladder to her back, her knife to her hip, and, rejuvenated, treaded again into the embrace of the brush.

Many days passed by in much the same way, with Shoshanna alternating between states of feasting and foraging, deciding what to eat and what to preserve. It was incredible to her how nature could produce such abundance without anyone telling it to. Nourishment filled every nook and cranny with its offerings, and Shoshanna was eager to harness that, to carefully experiment with the things that it had to give.

Shoshanna had long since given up hope of hunting (many unproductive afternoons had dissuaded her from undertaking this particular feat) but felt nearly content with the leaves, fungus, and fruit. In fact, if she were honest with herself, after a week or so of this routine, she found herself thinking that she almost felt *okay* for the first time since she had been out here. She would have appeared entirely so, too, if it hadn't been for the squeal of surprise the amaranth had let out as she ripped the stem up from the ground, or the sighs she heard, unmistakably, upon plucking each raspberry from its bush. *Stop, please stop, if you're going to take, at least give something back.* It seemed to tell her, wordlessly. What had she to give besides herself?

Summer wore on, and the sun seemed to beat down even more intensely from its precarious seat in the sky. The bugs were relentless. Clouds of gnats hung low over her

campsite. Mosquitoes drank her succulent scarlet blood at every hour of the day, leaving itchy welts that drove Shoshanna crazy with sensation.

When she was finally able to muster the strength, and felt she had gathered enough benign plants to be getting on with for the moment, marking down the especially profitable areas on her crudely drawn map, she began collecting sticks again. Gingerly, she had picked up the fallen birch entombed on the ground for so very long, and placed it in a deep hole she had dug in the forest floor with her faded orange hand trowel (affectionately named Raul the Traul on a previous camping trip). She dug trenches around the perimeter of the more worn of the blue tarps, arranging the sticks in a log cabin formation. Shoshanna spent countless hours trying to figure out how to keep the shorter sticks from falling out of the structure, for it took several of them lined up together in order to make an area big enough for her to sleep in. But she couldn't do it, she couldn't cut down another birch, and her hatchet was not nearly big enough to fell a bigger tree. If Shoshanna was being honest with herself, she was terrified of a larger fallout, a larger reaction from a tree which was taller, bigger, older.

Shoshanna ultimately decided to lash the sticks together with yet more long grass. The blades likewise squealed as she pulled them out of their sheaths in the ground. After wading for several hours in the small open meadow filled with tall stalks, picking the blades deemed the strongest of the bunch, she had woken the next morning to find three ticks engorged on her torso, leg, and scalp. It felt like an eternity spent trying to pull them all out of her tanned, olive skin with a pair of blunt tweezers. She had cried, but not out of pain, and been so frustrated with the tick lodged underneath her thick black hair she'd almost sawed it all off. *Bugs*, she thought bitterly. *I hate all these fucking BUGS.*

That afternoon, she lashed the sticks together, and then smeared thick layers of mud all along the sides of the roofless hovel, leaving it to bake in the sun and dry into what would hopefully resemble clay. Panting during this process, she paused, muddy hands grasping onto her bony thighs, and glanced up at the grove of birch trees, her neighbors.

*I'm still sorry*, she thought. The single silver birch that she had cut would serve as the mast that the roof of her shelter was built from. The grove stared back ominously, and what had started as a brief glance turned into an openmouthed stare. She could hardly tear her eyes away. She walked slowly from the clearing into the grove, snapping sticks underfoot and dragging her hands along cold, smooth trunks. The notched trunks of the birches left powdery white residue on her palms, which she spread from tree to tree. In the center of the mass was one more grand than the rest. It had grabbed her attention as she gazed at it from her camp a football field away, filling her with a deep, heavy feeling she was helpless to explain. The birch drew her in, standing tall and proud. Grand. Set apart. Reaching it, Shoshanna wrapped her hands around the gray surface, as if she would throttle it, as if she could. Her left hand ran up a small length of the trunk, and then reached up to examine some of the long, thin leaves that grew from the branches. She withdrew her hands to her sides again.

But it was strange. When her hand had first met the trunk of this particular birch, something had rushed through her. A strange vibration, a sensation of...familiarity? Was that possible? It was as if the molten iron at the core of the Earth had sent forth a single pulse, so powerful and magnetic it failed to be absorbed by the mantle above. It shook the crust and upended layers of soil in equal measure. Yet, when Shoshanna shot a glance

toward the ground, nothing outward appeared to have changed. It was something inside of *her* that rocked, shifted invariably.

There was the foundation of her dream, the one where she was torn asunder by what hid underneath the ground. Here was the center of everything now, the thing that brought her home. She lay her forehead against the trunk.

*The ridged pads at the tip of each finger, lined palms and smooth, warm forehead are all that connect one being to another. Each little pinprick of connection is more than enough, for the touch of two bodies seems hardly noteworthy compared with the brush of true presence. Here, in this position, it is hard to tell where one ends and the other begins, but for me, this sensation of connection, so strong and amorphous, gives way to another, even stronger feeling: that of recollection.*

*I felt these pads before they were ridged, heat against loving heat, palms the size of an Eisenhower-head coin. When you breached the Earth and entered the world, there I was, standing tall, sentinel, unequivocally here. Beside you, as I am now. As you are beside me. Our roots will forever twine tighter, enmeshed in a way no force could ever hope to extricate, spinning through time like a corkscrew. Deeper and deeper.*

*Here we stand, in this moment, together.*

6

“Why do you think that the end of life means the end of everything?”

Shoshanna was crying. She clutched Miriam’s hand desperately, pausing only to messily wipe at her streaky tears. She was older now, old enough to know what she was losing,

old enough to sense the permanence of things. The sounds of her wracked sobs were only permeated by the *beep beep beep* of the EKG machine hanging on the outskirts of the small room. It smelled of stethoscopes and single use medical equipment wrapped in plastic, sterile and safe, like if someone died, they might be able to clean them back together. And, under it all, the slight aroma of bone marrow.

The first floor room was poorly lit, with only one window to Shoshanna's right facing outwards towards a well maintained courtyard. As she sat in the room, late afternoon crawled towards evening, and a fluorescent overhead light served as the room's main source of illumination. The artificial glow reflected from every direction off of the plain white walls, which were bare except for an artistic rendering of Mi Shebeirach, a Jewish prayer for healing the sick that Shoshanna had copied for her grandmother.

There had been happy times by Miriam's bedside, times they pretended nothing was looming, foreboding, on the horizon. There were times they didn't address it, refused to talk about it, kept all chatter light and unassuming. Currently, with just the two of them left alone in the room, and each remark met with Miriam's curt, blatant manner of speaking, this was not one of those times.

"I might never see you again," Shoshanna wept.

"And if you do, neither of us will be the same." She chuckled. "Our time on Earth makes our view so myopic. Why does my death scare you?"

Shoshanna felt breathless; she was without breath, and wordless. She couldn't have spoken if someone had tied a wire to her soul and drew the language from her very being.

"There are so many things you don't understand, Shoshie."



Shoshanna glanced up. Miriam, strong as ever, whip smart to the bitter end, patted her hand, gently. Miriam was dying, and it was Shoshanna who needed comfort.

Once, many years ago, she had planted flowers with her grandmother, their hands (both big and small) covered in mud, dirt caked under their fingernails, smiles diffusing into the fresh summer air. A couple of days after transplanting the flowers from orange terracotta pots into the raised beds in the back of the house, she had gone to water them and found a few dead in the ground. Oh, how heartbroken Shoshanna had felt that their hard work, all of the love and time and energy they had put into germinating the seeds, watering, making the plants grow, was for nothing. A life cut short, rendered entirely meaningless. A waste of ecstatic potential.

Her grandmother had asked her, “What does life mean to you?”

Shoshanna hadn't known what to say, and stayed silent but for her sniffles, staring ashamedly down at the bed. Her soft, tiny hands fondled the crisp, withered leaves of a flower that would never bloom.

Miriam came to sit on the splintery wooden edge of the bed, next to her weeping granddaughter. “Once, you know...” She began. “There was once a man who owned a vineyard, just like the one you visited with your mother and father last summer, remember? This man grew grapes for a living. He poured his entire heart and soul into those vines, day after day, hours spent under the hot sun, hoping that, once the grapes had grown large and juicy,” she poked Shoshanna in the side, teasing a tentative smile out of a conversation that otherwise demanded seriousness.

Shoshanna repressed a giggle. “He could make them into wine. That wine would be his livelihood, these grapes would bear fruit to see him through the rest of his days. However, this was not to be. To his dismay, the grapes soon soured, rotted, and died. He woke up one morning to find that the vines, his children, had wilted. This upset the man greatly, and, heartbroken, he resolved next year to plant a different crop.

“But the next year, if you can believe it, the same thing happened! He planted another crop, and by the end of the season, it had soured and wilted, just like this little flower.”

She gestured to the dead leaves. “In tears over his loss, he begged of anyone and everyone who would tell him, ‘what is the meaning of this death? Why do I pour my energy, my heart and soul into something that will die, that will one day leave me? How many times must I watch them sour and wilt?’ And do you know what he was told?”

“What?”

“Are you sure you want to know?” Poked once again, in the stomach this time.

“Yes, oh grandmother, *please*,” Shoshanna begged. Miriam often played with her like this.

“Very well. ‘Up to a thousand generations.’”

“What?”

“You heard what I said.”

Shoshanna wrinkled her tiny button nose. “What does that mean?”

“What do you think it means?”

Shoshanna wrung her hands together, lowering her head in a bashful blush. Her stringy brown hair fell forward, casting benign shadows over her cherubic face. “I don’t knowww.”

“You are so young, Shoshanna. Too young to be telling yourself such lies.” Miriam reached down and brushed the curtain of hair around Shoshanna’s face behind her tiny ear. “For every ‘I don’t know’ you say, a squirrel loses its tail.”

At this, Shoshanna looked up sharply. “That’s not true, squirrels don’t just lose their tails. You can’t say that!”

“See? You saw right through me. Look how intelligent you are!” Miriam grabbed her chin, tilting it up so that they were making eye contact with each other. “Now don’t tell me you don’t know, because I can’t believe that, not coming out of such a smart girl. Pah! Have you learned nothing from me, child? Speak up!”

“Up to a thousand generations.” Shoshanna could not imagine it, could not fathom this length of time. She was slightly afraid of her grandmother, a figure only two generations removed from herself. She sometimes felt nervous before her parents dropped her off here, during the long drives where she was left to think and stare dramatically out of the car window. A thousand generations seemed equal to the period of eternity. “So the farmer’s crops will always turn sour?”

“Yes,” Miriam responded, simply.

Yet again, Shoshanna frowned. “Was that supposed to cheer me up? You’re not very good at this.”

“There’s something you’re not seeing.” It was off putting, this tendency of Grandmother Miriam’s to talk to Shoshanna as if she were fully grown, no matter how childish she behaved (and she tended to act quite childish around Miriam). If Shoshanna was being honest, Miriam’s treatment made her anxious just as much as it drew her in. All that she wanted was to be treated like a grown up by the people around her, but perhaps not exactly in the way Miriam did it. She left each visit at her grandmother’s house feeling almost nothing but the weight of responsibility, the sheer heaviness of being required to think and act for herself.

Shoshanna whined, but quietly, knowing that if she fully committed to the sound she’d be subjected to another, more forceful clock over the ears. Using the toe of her worn sneaker, she dug into the dirt adjacent to the raised bed. “Why are you asking me this? I already told you *I don’t know*.”

“Alright then, I give up!” Miriam raised her hands over her head, palms facing the sky, and then brought them down to rub against her patterned dress, as if she were wiping her hands clean...of what? Of this frustrating conversation with her young granddaughter? She stood up gracefully, and, back to her granddaughter, began to stroll inside.

“Wait!” cried Shoshanna. “Where are you going? Why can’t you accept that I just *don’t know*?!” She, too, threw her arms up in exasperation.

Miriam kept walking, pale, slender fingers grabbing at the handle to the sliding glass door like talons grasping at a branch. The door slid open with a quiet *whoosh*.

“Wait!” In her panic, Shoshanna had finally grasped onto something, and ran towards her grandmother and the door. “I’m the flower, right?”

Miriam whirled around, a mercurial smile carving lines on her cheeks, around her large, hooked nose. “Very good. We all are. All of the farmer’s crops, each plant you see here, even you and I...all part of the same cycle, growing better and better each time around.”

“So, you’ve always been my grandmother? I’ve always been your granddaughter? Even when we were plants or snails or fairies?” Shoshanna had had a childish fixation on fairies, natural beings that lived in the woods and tended to the trees. She would make little homes for them, and scatter them throughout the yard, but would never venture too far out...

Miriam stroked the top of her short head, ruffling the already tangled mop. “That might be a question for another day.”

“But we’ll see each other again, after all of this is over? When we wilt, too?”

It was a question that didn’t belong on the lips of someone as young as Shoshanna had been. Sitting now beside her grandmother’s death bed, she couldn’t remember what Miriam had said after that, or what they had done upon re-entering the house. So many of her memories of that time were lost, blurry, vague. She was terrified that one day she would no longer remember anything about the days the two had spent together, except for the fact that they had happened at all.

Though her grandmother would never admit it, Shoshanna thought she saw tears filling the corner of those wrinkled, yellowing eyes. Miriam’s skin was dotted with sunspots and

the deep lines that usually accompanied some kind of long, well spent life, and these signs of age frightened and grieved Shoshanna in equal measure.

“Do you remember what I said to you, all those years ago, when you asked me if we would greet each other after death?” It was as if Miriam had read her mind as she gazed inquisitively, though wearily, at her granddaughter. Shoshanna shook her head.

“You don’t remember at all?”

“I was just a kid, bubbe.”

“Pah! It is when you’re young that you remember the most, I think. At least the most about what matters. That’s what I said to you even then. I said, ‘it shouldn’t take much for you to remember our souls spinning in tandem with each other.’”

This sparked some recognition in Shoshanna. “And then I asked you how I could possibly know about something that happened before I was born.”

“And I responded that of course, dear Shoshie, you know I have always said to you that our bodies contain the memories of what we have experienced across the ages. Why do you think we follow tradition? You must be sure,” her speech was broken up by a bout of violent coughing. Shoshanna leaned forward in concern, prepared at any moment to act, to call in the on-duty nurse. “You must be sure that you keep with the traditions even when I am not here to teach you anymore.”

Shoshanna felt tears brimming her eyes once again, a river flooding its banks, an ocean at high tide, pouring into tidepools.

“But you are also forgetting the rest of what I said, so I will remind you of that also. I said, ‘Who is to say that you and I aren’t one soul, one being, one I?’”

Shoshanna spent a moment in helpless silence, both a silent sob and the act of consideration temporarily robbing her of her voice. Finally, she managed to choke out, “Then I will lose half of myself when you go.”

She clutched even more tightly at her grandmother, resting her head against the hard knuckles of her spindly hand. Her body, even then a thin, wisp-like thing, shook violently with silent tears, which streamed freely down her olive face and onto the hands, and bed, below.

“What a thing to say to a dying woman. Are you trying to guilt me, Shoshanna?”

“I’m sorry,” Shoshanna responded, after a moment, fruitlessly wiping at her tears.

“That was thoughtless of me to say.”

Miriam waved her away. “Shhhhhh. It’s alright. Hush now, Shoshanna. I would be sorry to see you try and block out grief. Grief is how we learn. It is a force that drives our souls to seek perfection. It is what will drive us to find each other again, you and I, whenever we are able. You are not losing me. We are simply spinning on slightly different cycles. How boring it would be,” Her frail hand twitched under Shoshanna’s, “if we spun in exactly the same way.

“The deep history we share can’t simply be broken. Don’t forget who you are.”

Miriam’s hand broke away from the bed to trace Shoshanna’s cheek. “Don’t forget who I am.”

*Shoshanna and Miriam. Shoshanna and Miriam. Shoshanna and Miriam.* Their names, their identities, a record of them listed side by side in perpetuity. Perhaps, indeed,

they were one soul in two bodies, though now it felt more poignantly, painfully evident than ever where one began and the other ended.

*You are probably being borrowed from the universe. The same iron found in the leaves you devour churns, molten, at the center of the Earth, the carbon that twines through each cell of your body, builds, block by infinitesimal block, all that is around you, and will crush you into dust. Are we not the same as the things we are made of? Are we worth more than the sum of our parts? We are all just arrangements of the same core material, uniting in amorphous combinations which make us averse to each other, suddenly and utterly unblendable. Are we not all fragments of remnant planetesimals? And, the idea that strikes everyone at some point in time: are you and I not made of stardust? Do we not inhale the particles present at the sudden burst at the start of time? With each jagged breath, this substance brings us closer and closer to the beginning of everything; the end of it all.*

*That same vibration that resonates deep within me, maintains motion, keeps me from leaping at any given moment out of it all, that drone is present in you, also. I feel it echo at each juncture where your body meets mine. You and I - two notes in the same song. Our dulcet music forms the constant thrum of the universe.*

7

Perhaps it was the loneliness eating away at her. After all, it wasn't easy to be left by yourself for weeks on end. No company but the ghost of starvation passing through like a constant, haunting draft. The sinister woods, creaky and foreboding when you needed silence, silent and stoic when you didn't. Was this duress, manyfold, the reason that she



had started hearing voices? Were they all specters, inventions of her mind? She hadn't a clue exactly *what* she would rather believe...did the woods talk to her, or was she at odds with herself? Was it, in some way beyond her ability to fathom, a petrifying combination of both?

In school, Shoshanna had been taught that man has three fundamental needs for survival, and that these are food, water, and shelter. Her time in the woods had taught her that this was a lie. Someday, she reasoned, nearly everyone learned that there was one more addition to the list. One seldomly admitted or discussed. Touch. Food, water, shelter, touch touch touch. Shoshanna would rather sleep under the stars, in perpetuity, then live with this pricking underneath her skin, which at certain moments grew so pointed as to become an urgent, throbbing ache. But perhaps she only said that because winter had not come yet.

She had once, mindlessly scrolling inside on an endless rainy day, stumbled across a reality television show where contestants were dropped into a remote environment with a few select supplies and equipment for self documentation. Each was separated by massive bodies of water or impassable mountains and left to fend for themselves with only a satellite phone for forfeiting. For many of the contestants, it had been the bitter loneliness that did them in, leading to their removal from the program and back into the civilized world. It crept in without so much as a sound, the snap of a twig or the rustle of a branch, in the moments they tried to pretend everything was perfectly fine. For some, it was the idea of confronting those more sinister forces of nature with no one there to protect them, to lend them strength. Facing the reality of dying alone. Everyone must die alone.

Some of the contestants went mad, suffered irreparable damage that would be theirs to bear for life. Dirtied themselves digging pits in the earth with small shovels, ran naked through the trees, baked large rocks in embers and built themselves sweat lodges.

Shoshanna could not recall if any of them had gone mad enough to see something that simply wasn't there.

A satellite phone. What foresight. If Shoshanna had had more money, taken the threat of isolation more seriously, in short, known what would befall her...but she hadn't. She had no way of knowing what the future held. Later today, not tomorrow, not on her very last day or the start of her next first day.

“Bubbe.” She spoke Yiddish, to a birch. The birch didn't respond.

One tanned, slender arm reached out again to stroke the trunk, inhaled, as if to speak, paused. The arm dropped again, Shoshanna's mouth closed. There had come, she thought, when she had held it before. There had come a whisper. Two whispers. A crowd of whispers, like you might hear in a dining hall, one with towering, elegant ceilings that echo and refract the voices below. She felt as if she were on the outskirts of something, some great conversation on the tip of the tongue of the world.

Leaves rustled in a soft breeze (a speechless one, this time). The rustle filled her with the feeling of fullness that came with breathing in fresh air or being held for the first time in a long while. She inhaled, exhaled, inhaled, exhaled. Repeated the sequence twice more. Reached up again to touch the birch.

It was incredible to Shoshanna that the trees could wail so loudly her eardrums felt at the point of bursting, bleeding like sticky sap dripping painstakingly into soil. And that they could also whisper so silently she couldn't make out a single word they said. Were they even using words she had the capability of understanding? She had never had cause to wonder what language, exactly, trees used to speak. Every indication in her previous life pointed towards some kind of chemical language. This formed, it seemed obvious, the fundamental difference between humans and nature, because trees used chemicals as a form of primary discourse, and humans merely used them as a more guttural, subtextual form. The sensation Shoshanna felt when these leaves rustled, when she breathed in fresh air or felt herself enveloped in arms was merely a chemical message sent from one internal operation to another. However, it was such a reaction she could express using words, making it all the more sophisticated. Connective.

Her experience in the woods had upended this belief. The idea that forces of nature could be *speaking to her* had cast a fair amount of doubt onto a once plain and obvious philosophy. Instead of merely touching her hand to the trunk of the tree, Shoshanna was overcome with the sudden urge to place her ear up against the cold, vibrant stalk. As she leaned towards it, head turned to the side, the air seemed to grow even more frigid, as if the tree in front of her was displacing the very atmosphere around it. Shoshanna saw a small black ant skittering frantically away.

She felt first the cool brush of the birch against her cheek, once so plump and full, reduced now to deep hollows that distorted the proportions of her face. Cheekbones jutted. Her green eyes were rendered huge by the skeletal state of her face, a now pointy

chin with a small cleft in the center and large nose, which was also made to look larger by the lack of fat around it.

A tress of Shoshanna's oily black hair brushed the tree next, something felt in the scalp, an itch, a tickle. The malleable cartilage of her small ear finally came to rest upon the massive birch.

Shoshanna was most likely a spectacle to behold. If anyone had been brave enough to venture this deep into the thick foliage, if anyone, like her, had been stupid enough to stray into the brush, they would find a woman gone native (dirt caked under nails, wrinkled clothing beginning to show wear, and, the horror...overgrown eyebrows), bent at the waist with her ear pressed to a tree, eyes pressed shut so tightly that creases appeared in the young, otherwise smooth skin at the corners of her sunken eyes.

But she could hear them again. The second she had made contact with the tree, she was roped into some living conversation, the whisperings of conspirators that had never been made known to her, never been shouted like the echoes of 'beware,' the wailing of grief. Even so, the faint mumbles seemed meant for her, directed towards her, in a way. She couldn't make out the exact words—not yet—but couldn't help but feel, the longer she listened, that the voices were repeating something over and over again, spelling it out for her, making sure she got the message.

"I can't hear you," she breathed, audacious in her attempts at negotiations. "I can't make out what you are saying."

The mutterings halted, abruptly. Now, suddenly it was Shoshanna who was being watched, glared at and assessed by the conversation's genuine participants. An unwanted member of the group, a voyeur. What had she expected, that this obvious and

fundamental border that separated man from nature would suddenly blur, that this bewilderment wasn't a sentiment felt only by her?

Incredulously, the sudden silence of the trees reminded her of a time she had gone snorkeling in the Caribbean. Lackadaisical sun-bleached days of playing tourist, donning unflattering plastic masks and inhaling ultramarine sea water in her enthusiasm to dive deeper. To see more. Shoshanna could remember the look of smooth brain coral, mustard yellow in the muted underwater glow. The sharp twists and turns of their shallow canyons fascinated her, but mostly she had always enjoyed stumbling across brain coral to see the christmas tree worms clutching at the smooth and level coral growth. Little pink, white, blue, orange, red spirals protruding like a drill bit through a plank of wood, minding their business, swaying with the slight current.

Upon spotting a cluster of brain coral, Shoshanna would swim as close as she could, flippers splashing on the surface, a sharp inhale and smooth kick as she ventured into the nether. She would swim around and around the coral, closer with each pass to her prey like a carrion bird. An alien force, a disturber, someone who didn't belong. She would reach her delicate fingers towards the tiny worms, slowly, so as to not disturb the water around the coral. Then, when the time was right, Shoshanna would snap.

The snap would be soundless and slow, water pressing against her waterlogged fingertips, wrinkled like a newborn's, forcing its way into the cracks between her thumb and middle finger. The snap would be made as if in slow motion, ripples and zephyrs of underwater movement springing from Shoshanna's hand. Instantly, the christmas tree worms would retract into the coral as if they had never been.

It was like that with the trees, now. The instant Shoshanna had made herself known, disturbed the air with her breath, her sighs, her dialogue, she was met with retraction, silence. It was as if the voices never existed. Perhaps they hadn't.

Nevertheless, something had disappeared. Something had ceased to exist, a thing that had surely been present before.

Shoshanna slumped against the birch, fell to her knees, her forehead pressed against the bark. She realized, idly, that she was crying. Her eyelashes, waterlogged, stuck to the tops of her cheeks as tears carved canyons of their own down the dirt and oil on her face.

Was she truly alone out here? Why had she grown to hope, to believe in something so ridiculous and far-fetched? Had she really believed that her grandmother, a woman who lived on only in distant memory, was present in this grove? These trees had no doubt been standing before Miriam was even a glimmer in her mother's eye. Shoshanna realized now, as salty tears ran into her mouth and watered the Earth below, that part of her had subconsciously believed that the nature around her was trying to convey something profound. Something that danced at the edge of recollection, that had, thus far, narrowly escaped her comprehension.

She had never wanted to be here. She never wanted to get lost in the woods, so hopelessly lost that it felt like there was no chance of recognizance. Never in her life had Shoshanna felt so forsaken, not even when her grandmother had died and it felt like the very thing that tethered her to Earth, the very gravity underneath her feet, had ceased to be. After Miriam's death, Shoshanna had floated. She had drifted away, a balloon that hadn't been held onto tightly enough, not treasured and protected as it should have been. No caution; no reverence. Forsaken.

She hadn't even felt this way when she had first realized she was hopelessly lost, and that no one was coming to find her. It had been real, but not real enough. The realization had dawned slowly, lethally, and it had hurt, oh it had hurt, but never as acutely or searingly as in this moment. The burning began at her diaphragm, directly where her breastbone halted and ribs stretched, invading the rest of her torso. Fire, white hot, consuming, and acute spread to the stomach, causing it to flip, toss itself over and over the same way a hot potato is tossed, the way you clutch something when you know it could burn you. Lightly, barely. Fearfully.

A beat. A moment. An instant. A single voice, a whisper that was scarcely heard, barely uttered into existence. Tentative. Then another. Repeating, just as the wind had, the bushes had, the birches had. There was something they might teach her, if only she had the patience to listen. In seconds, there were so many staggered whispers, their message was barely intelligible. But Shoshanna had heard what she needed to.

*Bachareta bachiym. Therefore choose life.*

It's not so bad up here.

The air is thin, meager, and chilled. As I float ever onwards,  
it feels like I may frost over, that my surface will crystallize.

Perhaps I will pop, but that is just the way it goes.

There is no way to prevent popping. Many have tried, saying that just  
because it has happened to all others does not mean it will happen to  
them, too. Maybe it's possible to cheat death.

They forget where they came from.

They forget that what goes up must come down.

I can't decide if I enjoy it or not, bobbing along, watching the  
roads and fences and paths turn into ley lines stringing each life  
together like a popcorn garland.

If our owners are careless, have sweaty palms or gentle grasps, up we go,  
through no choice of our own, with no idea where we will end up.

It gets lonely up here, and I can't stop thinking that perhaps I was let go  
on purpose. Maybe I wasn't wanted anymore, more of a liability once  
the novelty of my floatiness, bright color, and curly tail had worn off.

Maybe they would rather I drift up and away, out of sight, then  
crowd the ceiling of their house or apartment for a few days until,  
like a falling autumn leaf, I drift down into nothing again.

I came from the same place dust comes from. Rocks, ground water,  
fossil fuels. I think maybe dust is not so different from us. What is dust  
if not a remnant, a memory, an echo?



I'm scared of being forgotten, intentionally.

A lapse in judgment is one thing. The days grow longer. Busier. Soon a week has passed, a month, since you thought of that thing which once seemed so pertinent. Time passing; one of many intricacies which escapes our notice.

As long as I float away, I am remembered as something that has floated away. Wanting, that's the key.

Not having, that's the essence of wanting.

But can you really ever have me? You clutch my ribbon for as long as you possibly can, but even if I don't float away (as I have, quite apparently), I will end up as nothing but a fuzzy memory all the same.

Floating is inevitable if you are filled with helium.

And everything has the ability to float, but if we really care about something, we must hold onto it with a vice like grip, while at the same time acknowledging that there will come a day when we can't hold on anymore.

Still we will hold, we won't let go on purpose.

If we really care about something, we will always remember the way it felt to wrap our grubby hands around its plastic ribbon, and stare up at it adoringly, knowing in our hearts that in our hands we held pure magic.

**“The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a  
Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.”**

-John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

**“Who was my sister  
Is now an empty chair**

**Is no longer,  
Is no longer there**

**She is now emptiness**

**She is now air”**

-Margaret Atwood, *Dearlly*

## Autumn

1

In act one of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, palace guards upon the battlements urgently relay to Hamlet's friend, Horatio, that they have seen a ghost traipsing around, one which seems to resemble Hamlet's late father, the last King of Denmark. Not believing them, but unable to ignore that tiny nugget of doubt, Horatio, on one dark, cloudy night, follows them to their post and waits, hoping for the specter to reveal himself again. After a time, one which probably felt like an eternity—the tension in the crisp, night air palpable, the sounds of their ragged breaths ringing in each other's frigid ears—the ghost returns. In this first visit, and each subsequent one, he confirms that he is, indeed, the fallen King, murdered by Hamlet's uncle Claudius.

*Is not this something more than fantasy? Is it not like to the king?*

*As thou art to myself.*

The appearance of the Ghost at the beginning of the play incites a chain of events, diverts the course of several lives, and provides an imperative perspective that ultimately leads to tragedy. Drowning, stabbing, bleeding. To be or not to be. A new king, and then another, a cycle without an end.

But all of this fallout seemed to Shoshanna somehow anecdotal compared to the really fascinating thing, the driving force, she interpreted, behind the play's events and the reason it had endured to be analyzed and perused in equal turn: motivation. Why had the

ghost chosen to reveal himself in the first place? When the late King warns Hamlet not to delay revenge, not prolong the suffering of Hamlet's mother, is this facetious?

*So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.*

Do the idols in our lives have plans for us that transcend our understanding, is that why they linger and haunt? Is each reconciliation simply the beginning of another twisted game of chess? Was there something Shoshanna was missing within the muddled language?

Yes, she had finally gotten around to reading *Hamlet*. What was it that they said; if a copy of *Hamlet* was stuffed to the bottom of a sleeping bag in the first act, it must be read by the third? She had found it difficult to understand, as expected. The language was coded in such a way as to beguile, to alter her state of consciousness until she was no longer sure she was reading, but rather spinning, viewing the scene through a kaleidoscope which was constantly refracting and shifting, though never sacrificing its vibrance. Line after line of iambic pentameter wove themselves into a beat, a vibration beyond her comprehension.

Fall had always been Shoshanna's favorite season. In Fall, nothing was mounting, building, steadily, as in Spring. Nothing was rearing up to burst. Instead, something waned, winding down before a long, restful slumber. The leaves were just changing, a hint of yellow among the green, the flash of a cherry red beacon. The woods looked different. Here was the place where she had lost everything she knew, where her life

*before* had ceased to exist. Now, it all felt different. Here in the thick brush, in the embrace of dense foliage which poked and prodded with its thousand arboraceous thorns, she had found...something.

“Blip. Sentence. Note.”

Shoshanna sat on the firm ground, a warm blue tarp folded between her and the ground as a cushion or shield. She could feel the stiff, curved surface of the large birch tree digging into each ridge of her spine, cool and unforgiving, painfully tingling when she shifted and her back knocked against the trunk. But it was a good pain. It was the kind of pain that came from nurturing, a force so massive and full of life it was liable to crush and suffocate, that fused humanity to meaning, spirit to body. With her small pocket knife, she sliced a small bundle of morel mushrooms in half (that very morning, she had caught a glimpse, out of the corner of her eye, of the branch of a birch tree shaking violently, though there had been no wind. It waved downwards, as if it was pointing to something there on the vibrant leaf-strewn ground. Shoshanna had simply followed the direction of the bow and found a cluster of morels. And then another, and another. She harvested them hungrily) and blew into their hollow centers.

“Your arching, aching feet treading on the soil of the world is akin to a single note, a sixteenth of a beat, resting on the sheet music of time. A blip of ink on a page, perhaps a blot, a sentence or a line—”

Shoshanna was talking, rambling away. There was something about her grandmother that inspired a certain brand of childish innocence within her, though she had ever been treated as someone who possessed this particular breed of naivety by Miriam, who approached everyone with much the same regard, no matter her personal feelings. Rather,

as Shoshanna had aged, the only perceptible thing that seemed to have changed was the level of embarrassment she felt at retaining this sense of childish wonder. The distinct way of assessing the world was drawn out of her, unwittingly, by the presence of her grandmother. It was a role she had slipped into easily during the long, sunny days at her house, and had even been present, to Shoshanna's increasing horror, on occasions when her grandmother would come to visit *them*. (Though she had to admit these were few and far between. Her grandmother hardly ever drove long distances if she could help it.) On these infrequent occasions, her parents, and whoever else had the misfortune to be present, were privy to bouts of incessant chatter, seemingly inconsequential anecdotes, and albeit rare but persistent choruses of humming from Shoshanna.

In the days following Shoshanna's discovery of the identity of the great ash, there had been an abundance of humming, anything from The Beatles' classic 'Ob-La-Di Ob-La-Da' to Jewish cantorial tunes her brain hadn't managed to flush out from her time in Hebrew school. She figured that it had been a while since her grandmother had heard any music, and assumed it had been missed. She missed it. She'd even, sitting in this very spot, leaning against the pale, drawn trunk, read a bit of *Hamlet* out loud, acting out dramatic characters like Claudius and Horatio with comical, booming voices. Reading it out loud had helped Shoshanna to understand what was taking place in the story a bit better. She drew the conclusion that bringing a play like this as reading material hadn't been the best decision. It was meant to be seen, heard, felt, and not read. She had grown a little sad reading the tragedy out loud, and ended up stowing it safely back at the bottom of her sleeping bag before reaching the fourth act.

Now, as the pads of her thumbs delicately pressed on the uneven, comb-like surface of the morel caps, as she sliced through each with the tiny stainless steel blade, she talked about nothing at all, really.

“Bubbe, do you remember when we went out to that Mexican restaurant together in D.C.? And we drank those frozen margaritas...I think that was the first time we ever drank together, after I turned twenty-one. Except during shabbat, of course. And you were *sooo* affected by that *one* margarita that you couldn't even walk in a straight line back to the parking garage.” Shoshanna paused to chuckle to herself. “You couldn't admit anything was wrong, though. You insisted everything was fine, I remember, but you must have crashed into me like three or four times just weaving on the sidewalk.”

That visit to D.C. had been a difficult one, but for other reasons, ones unrelated to Mexican food and frozen margaritas made from a sugary mix.

The birch remained silent. It was normal, Shoshanna had come to realize, that the tree hardly ever gave a verbal response. If she was honest with herself, she didn't know what to make of that. She thought perhaps it was difficult for Miriam to speak, that whatever chorus of dialogue emanated from the trunk at her back was painstaking, the product of ridiculous effort. But those wails, those terrifying wails had been so persistent, unignorable, and permeating. She figured that if the trees were capable of such a repetitive and haunting sound, what trouble was a small chuckle? Any acknowledgement of the things Shoshanna said to her should not be too difficult.

Yet it was enough, somehow, to know that Miriam was there at all. Listening, waiting. The trees—she wasn't sure whether to call them *her*, or *they*. Were all the trees Miriam, or just the one great ash?—All of them had spoken, reciting, in Hebrew, her grandmother's

favorite verse from the Torah. *I call heaven and Earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse:*

*therefore choose life.* All of them had declared it to Shoshanna in exactly the same way that Grandmother Miriam used to, prophetically, enigmatically.

“What exactly does it mean?” Shoshanna could remember asking her grandmother once, around the time she was starting Hebrew school in the attic of her local Chabad community center.

It was nearing the end of the year, and they had reached the week in the Jewish calendar associated with Parshah Nitzavim, which Miriam had exclaimed was her absolute *favorite* parshah. Sitting together on Miriam’s well-worn leather couch, they had read it together.

“Well,” her grandmother began, tentatively. “Your teacher has probably told you, or will soon, that Nitzavim is one of the most important passages in the Torah, not only because it preaches unity,” here she pointed to a line near the beginning of the parshah, “practicality,” she pointed further down, “and redemption, but because, Shoshie, of what it tells us about our ability to choose.

“‘I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse,’” she recited. “Now, we can only assume that your parents taught you well the difference between right and wrong, but that’s not what matters here. You, Shoshanna, have the ability, the capacity, to choose your path without any outside influence. Inside you is the ability to strike a balance, to decide between blessings and curses, life and death. To exert free will over the decisions that your circumstances present to you. ‘Therefore, choose life.’”



The network of trees hadn't responded to Shoshanna since that day, over a week ago (though of course, it felt longer than a week there in the woods, knowing Miriam could contact her but chose—wittingly or no— to leave her all alone) where they had recited the passage. Shoshanna tried, vainly it felt at times, to fill the silence left by the object of her attention, but she could only go so far before invariably lapsing into silence, for a time. “I still remember that day in DC, you know,” Shoshanna continued in a last ditch effort for the day, referencing her earlier comment. “It really stayed with me, for some reason. It seemed so revelatory to me at the time that someone I had looked up to for my entire life, and put up on this pedestal, could have a moment that was so utterly *human*. I mean, it didn't make me lose respect for you or anything.”

There came a pause in which Shoshanna reflected. She kept her head hung, staring daggers at her busywork with the morels. A faint blush blossomed in the pools of her cheeks. “I guess I would say it's to the contrary. I felt like the process of becoming an adult was really just a glorified mourning period, where I was just intensely grieving the loss of my childhood. I felt like all of my experiences and perceptions of the world and the people around me were somehow corrupted by this new understanding that “being an adult” gave me, I guess understanding built on the idea that I had to do things for myself now, and there was no safety buffer, no one else to do things for me. My consequences were my own, now. Obviously, I guess, I mean look at where I am right now. There's no one coming to get me.

“Maybe most people would say that the idea of discovering that my parents, who had taken care of me my whole life and taught me most of what I know, were human, flawed, not the end-all-be-all, would probably factor into the instability of that period. I don't

know. For me it definitely felt like the opposite. Like, the older I got and the harder time I had adjusting to shouldering greater responsibility, the more I realized how together my parents had it. The less approachable they became.” Another pause. “I just felt like I could never live up to that. Whatever mistakes they made, they had built a life for themselves, a stable household for me to grow up in. That seemed so unattainable for me, I guess. I was broke, I was on my own for the first time, like, ever. I’d never even moved before. I felt like, on my own, I wasn’t capable of building the kind of life that they had. The kind of life that you had, with your garden and your beautiful house and all of the people that seemed to rely on you and love you. It was like they...it was as if all of you were more godly than ever.

“But that touch of instability right in front of my eyes. Not conceptual. Material. Getting drunk off of one margarita. It was like maybe something that I would do? Something that I could see myself doing. You weren’t quite so far away when you were doing something that I could do, something that brought you down to my level, even if it was just for a moment. It made me feel closer to you than ever, really. Even though you had built this amazing network and home and worldview, you could still slip up in the same way I could, and didn’t try to hide it from me. You drank your frozen margarita too fast. I loved you so much that afternoon. Like, more than I ever thought I possibly could.”

The woods gave no response. All stayed as it had been before, with the flies buzzing all around, clouds of gnats frolicking to and fro in little pockets of air, a faint breeze that occasionally, in bursts, seemed to murmur, “blip, sentence, note,” before fading away again, just as it had for most of the day, and several sporadic days beforehand. Shoshanna clove her last morel in two. Nested inside the hollow of the tiny fungus was a

decomposing fly, long dead, dark, and viscous. With her pinky finger, she extracted the fly from the morel and with the hem of her grimy, dark grey shirt wiped the remnants away before placing the two halves in a pile with the others.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “I don’t know where that came from.”

*Close. So, so close. That day had been so cold, I remember, the chill down to the marrow. I could not retreat from it, could not shed my leaves and sink into the warmth at the core of it all. I perched, like a bird, on the face of the world, connected to nothing, feeling each and every bite of fridity. Each point where it burrowed and nested. I knew precisely where it dwelled within me. I remember smelling rain in the air, back when I could smell, that peculiar pricking sensation at the nostrils. Unique sensory connection, a tang indicating the presence of rain. The taste of peppers and spice lingered, and I told you...were you listening? Even now, do you forget me more and more? In my mute presence, do I elude you?*

The next day, Shoshanna knelt naked beside the river again, splashing water all over her body and clothes, scrubbing each in equal measure. The sky was overcast, bordering on gloomy, a perfect foil for the brilliant leaves that were beginning to gather and shrivel underfoot. It might have sounded strange, but Shoshanna awaited the shriveling eagerly. She was looking forward to hearing them crunch underfoot, of raking (with whatever makeshift instrument she managed to build with lashed-together sticks) the dehydrated, decomposing leaves from around her campsite into large, plushy piles that begged to be leapt into. It was an urge grounded so absolutely in prior experience. Of shaking birch trees in order to make the vivid leaves rain, walking home from work or school on a sidewalk overcome by those same leaves. Thinking about it made her feel not quite so far removed from it all. She was still here, watching the leaves fall, drinking warm water steeped in dry herbs.

Still, there was a miniscule sense of foreboding that now colored her enthusiastic perception of autumn. A hesitancy. The more the leaves fell, the more barren they left the branches above, the colder it would get. Right now, early in the season, it was easy for Shoshanna to ignore this fact. In this moment, she could dismiss the dread she felt when she considered a winter spent in the woods with no mushrooms, coats, or plants to see her through. She had long since given up hope of making it out of here. Had given up, she thought, early in the summer when starvation rendered wandering the woods unfeasible and unsustainable. Now that she was able to eat more regularly, most of her energy was invested in homemaking. Maintaining her campsite, foraging for food, drying out herbs she thought she recognized and might one day find use for. Just like Miriam, after

carefully wrapping the herbs in a bit of tarp she had cut from the ragged, deteriorating one that she usually liked to lug behind her, she placed them into her dry bag before burying it in the ground. She was running out of space in the bag, and would either need to find a new container for them or make use of some of the herbs (thankfully, she had not, as of yet, had to deal with a medical emergency that would require their use, and hoped, if she faced such an emergency, she would be able to dig them up in time). Still, she had to keep with tradition.

Today, the wind was blowing. Shoshanna could feel the gusts playing keenly over her body, on the wet patches of skin that she was trying vainly to free of dirt and grime. She was almost out of biodegradable soap, and it felt as if every time she washed herself clean, no matter how loosely she rationed it, the dust would instantly readhere itself to her like an itchy, infuriating parasite.

Every time the wind bit, she could hear it speak, sometimes in single words, fragments of phrases, or, if the bluster was particularly strong, entire sentences. At first, searching for another indication of her grandmother's presence, she tried to piece these sentences, phrases, and words together. She did not know if the birches had merely been a vessel, a temporary channel an intangible soul might use to communicate with "the other side", not truly the reincarnation of someone she had known. Quickly, however, Shoshanna had dismissed this notion. For one thing, keeping track of the wind's messages, the same wind now stirring the ground-bound leaves and rustling those still left on their trees, had proven to be an unruly and infuriating task. With every gust, it would begin anew, and sometimes, it seemed the wind would just choose to infuriate Shoshanna by lobbing the same word over and over again for an entire afternoon.

For another thing, Shoshanna just had a feeling. A hunch that the voice of the wind was not Miriam's. She couldn't explain it really, and had no reason to believe that it wasn't the case that they were one and the same. Hadn't Miriam herself even believed in a soul split between two bodies? Still, Shoshanna knew, somehow, that whatever being blew past her in violent flurries, irritated the living daylights out of her, that being was not her grandmother.

"Blip," the wind muttered, biting at Shoshanna's damp, exposed skin. *Beat*, it taunted. "Barely a note. Played and then gone." It died down again, leaving the trees still, the leaves, unmoving, scattered about.

Shoshanna sighed, wringing out her last shirt and watching the water cascade out of the worn woven fabric, dripping into the water. Further down the river, she could hear the water rushing, a relaxing white noise at odds with the tumultuousness required to produce such a sound. The section further down where she bathed and washed was still and reflective, mirroring almost perfectly the palid clouds and the outline of the Sun barely peeking out from behind them. Standing up from where she crouched atop the rough pebbles that coated the bed of the river, she shook out the shirt and laid it out to dry on a patch of grass next to the large, flat rock that most of her other garments rested on. Picking the driest outfit of the bunch, she quickly dressed herself, shoving the dirt-encrusted soles of her feet into her dirt-encrusted hiking boots (without socks) and twisting her ratty, damaged and soaking wet hair (unbrushed) into a bun at the nape of her sun-scorched neck.

"Sentence," a gentle breeze greeted her. "Note." She ignored it.

Leaving her clothing to dry overnight (she doubted any critter would find the rags interesting enough in comparison to some of the woods' other treasures to make off with) she slung her bag, now filled with a full water bladder, two tall battered water bottles, and a small collapsible water skin, over her shoulder, and wended her way between the trees and back into the woods beyond.

By nightfall, the clouds muting the overcast sky had darkened, bogged down with water vapor. The heavens, at any moment, threatened to spill their contents onto the world below and thunder, a distant, menacing presence, bloomed on the edges of Shoshanna's senses. She had hunkered down in her small shelter, a plastic solar lamp hanging from a makeshift hook in the ceiling, and squinted at the tiny text in her folded copy of *Hamlet*. For a while she tried to drown out the taunts of the wind, which had picked up as the storm approached, with the words of Claudius and Gertrude. When that didn't work, she tried holding the mass market paperback with her elbows and plugging her ears with her fingers. Still, between the nearing *booms* of thunder, she still heard (or imagined she heard) the gust's whooshing voice, diving in towards her campsite like a bird of prey. The storm had quickened its voice, and it now spoke frantically, without pause or break. Where did animals go when it rained? A naive question, Shoshanna knew, but one she had never given much thought to. Growing up, she had a family dog who was scared of thunderstorms, and her mother had even bought a little shirt for him that was meant to soothe pets during storms. The same dog, she remembered, detested getting wet, or swimming in the lake with the other dogs. He was a husky mutt, albeit a tiny one, too small to pet if you were standing upright. She had been told once by someone at the dog



park or a family member, she couldn't remember which, that huskies didn't like the water because their instincts told them that if they were to be submerged, their fur would drag them down and cause them to drown. Dogs, in Shoshanna's experience at least, seemed to be largely motivated by instinct, almost as if every decision they made was predetermined in some way. Why, then, had her dog been scared of storms? What did wolves, the great and formidable forbears of all dogs, do when they could sense a storm approaching? They could scarcely hide underground, don a thunder-soothing shirt made especially for them and hunker down for the night, safely indoors. What did deer do, or moose? Was getting soaked a death sentence for them like it might be for Shoshanna, in the wrong conditions? She wished she could look it up. There was so much she did not know, so much she still had yet to learn.

So much she would never be able to discover. There was a chance, she knew, that *Hamlet* would be the last piece of writing she ever read.

“Your archingaching feet treading on the soil ofthe world is akin to a single notea sixteenth of a beatresting on the sheet musicof time Ablipof ink on apage perhaps a blota sentenceor a line ona record that willsoonbe scrubbed andwhose fault is that It’sasif you can’t decidewhetheryou’re staying or goingand that’s your problemRespect reciprocitydoesn’tcome in halvesso why are you wandering aroundturningeverystone touching everytree acting like it doesAnd that’swhat your history will showyou knowThe note thatplayswill leave behind an eerie echooffsetting thegale that follows ita disproportionateeffecton the piece asa wholea blotofink cloudingthe turn of phraseit coversa secret thatwill neverbeknown a necessaryone and soonjust likeyou it will be

goneand forgottenand everythingthatmatters will be forgotten withitSo stay or go you think I careI can't tellyouwhat to doyou haven'tbeenlistening your mind is elsewhereyou takeandtakeandtake and don'tthinkabout what you'lltake with you whenyou go you don'tunderstand sentenceblipnotesentenceblipnote just don'tstay while you wanttogodon't hear me vaguelydon't let your minddrift youarehere Or there"

It was as nonsensical to Shoshanna as some of the old English she had yet to decipher from the play nestled between her thighs, her elbows pressing the pages open so far it creased the spine in a new place, a new line of white crossing out, negating, the bold name written there. Her fingers, buried deep in her ears, failed to block out the outside voice. Sighing loudly, she pulled the fingers out, wiping the sticky wax on the hem of her sweatshirt which her mother had bought for her at a sports game a million years ago (her mother had always been interested in team sports. Shoshanna, in contrast, only followed singles tennis with any sort of interest or regularity). She slammed her book shut with a high pitched *thump* and shoved it back to the bottom of her sleeping bag before following it down and nestling inside the bag.

She hoped that the sleeping bag possessed some noise canceling properties, though it may have been more accurate to describe them as noise *muffling* properties. Shutting her eyes tightly, she tried to remove herself, to get far, far away from the haunting outside gale.

*Each time you return from the river, you are recreated. Melted into the rushing, foaming water, reassembled bit by bit. Similar, but not the same, a new form returns. The parts of us that have latched on to you, so caked as to be indistinguishable from your own skin have been stripped off unceremoniously. When you return, it becomes abundantly clear what belongs to you and what belongs to us, where before the grime had blurred*

*the lines. The soft white powder on my exterior, mirrored on yours. The salt of the Earth smudged on your skin is the Earth rising up to create you. With each rebirth, you enter the woods anew, as if we had never known you, as if you haven't gone native. But we will reclaim you. There is no denying that you are ours, we are you, and foaming water might prolong this realization, but it will not halt it. One day, you will return, reborn not into yourself, but into us. Into us. Just as I have been reborn, here, with you.*

The wind inhibited her sleep. She tossed and turned, falling into a brief, uneasy slumber before being woken abruptly again by the rush of words. Now, late in the evening, it had taken to repeating just one word over and over again, a new one this time.

“Halves.” Over and over and over again, with scarcely a space between them, a pause to inhale. She supposed the wind did not need to breathe. Shoshanna tried to ignore it, knowing that her prior attempt to reason with it had been unfruitful. She burrowed down deeper into her sleeping bag and cinched it tight, leaving only a hole big enough for her nose and mouth. But still, it was not enough.

Dejected, frustrated, and, if she were honest with herself, angry, she crawled out of her sleeping bag, kicking the rest of it off once it waded around her calves and feet.

Smoothing her matted hair, she ducked underneath the small solar lantern and out towards the doorway, slipping on her hiking shoes. Gently, she moved her makeshift door (several sticks hacked to around the same length and then, of course, lashed together) and climbed out into the forest beyond, pale in nightfall and eerily lit by the waxing moon glinting far above.

“Please,” she pleaded to the open air, the intense wind causing her to stagger slightly. It whipped her disheveled hair this way and that as she pressed forward further into the trees. In the distance, thunder was still ringing. “Please, stop! I don’t care anymore. I don’t care what you have to say, you obviously won’t be clear with me, so just don’t waste your breath. Please, I can’t take this anymore, man!”

The bluster mounted to a fierce squall that cascaded around her, gusts of voice swirling into her ear canals. It pushed and pulled, an invasive and alien presence that threw her off balance. Eventually, she couldn't fight against it anymore, and was cast down to her knees. For a split second, everything went black, the world returning to her in slowly building patches. She found herself staring, sideways, at the trees around her, damp earth clinging to her cheek. It was as if the sky was right beside her, caressing her, and at any moment she would fall off the face of the world and into its awaiting arms.

Nothing grounded her.

Disorienting, that was the word. Disorientation and a wave of intense déjà-vu that overcame her suddenly. Vaguely, she registered a slight pricking around her feet and ankles, and no sooner had she become aware of it did she feel the prickling traveling upwards, engulfing her calves, her knees, her bony thighs. Dragging her head downwards along the ground, Shoshanna saw something long and thin wriggling underneath her skin. It snaked around her, inching ever upwards. The tendril looked so wrong in there, invasive, gnarly, but in observing it, she felt somehow detached from it. That couldn't be her leg, that parasite could not be writhing through *her* body. Even through her fatigue, however, she knew it must be her. No one else was out here.

*Oh no, she thought, drowsily. Oh no, this isn't good.*

The tail of a root system began to constrict around her organs, under her skin, and when she reached down to run her hands along her abdomen, she could feel the protrusions of the roots twining like rings around her. The surface of her skin seemed smooth and soft,

but under that outermost layer, where the wood was, the rest of her body felt stiff underneath her probing fingers.

The sensation on her organs themselves was strange. Underneath the skin, the touch of the roots caused waves of intense nausea, shooting outward from what felt like the bottom edge of her sternum. They gave her stomach the weightless feeling she often experienced when she didn't eat for a while, like her stomach bile was gurgling and curdling in frustration, nothing for it to digest, no purpose to fulfill. She started to cough, and the coughing quickly gave way to vomiting, not much more than the remnants of a few leafy greens and pine needles she had eagerly scarfed down before retiring hours before. The foul smelling bile leaked under her cheek where she was laying on her side, and soon she was convulsing in a pool of her own sick.

She pressed down on her torso, on the pinnacle of one of the ridges, and could sense the texture of the wood, identical to that of the bark visible on the surface of the trunks around her. *As above, so below.* The act of pressing down itself didn't hurt, but the roots' reaction to it was instantaneous. She was suddenly met with the overwhelming experience of near asphyxiation, of that feeling you get when your diaphragm is pushed up under your ribcage and inhalation is rendered painful and necessarily shallow.

Panicked, she dug her long, jagged fingernails into the skin of her abdomen, and the sting was excruciating as she ripped and tore, trying vainly to free herself of the tightening roots. The more she ripped, the more difficult it became to tear more. The area became slick and hard to latch onto, blood and plasma spilling, almost gushing onto her shaking hands. In the fading moonlight, her blood looked black and unnatural, like it didn't belong to her.

She could hear the sounds of her own sobs, the trees whispering, “Let it happen. There’s nothing to fear.” Shoshanna couldn’t hear beyond it, couldn’t tell if the wind was still blowing as she gasped and writhed there on the solid ground, bleeding out, suffocating. She wiped her scarlet-drenched hands on her legs, before realizing they weren’t there, she was wiping them on the dirt, the cold ground watered with her blood. She could feel that her legs still existed, but at some point they had been dragged underneath the forest floor, only the top of her right thigh remaining unburied. Through the violent convulsions, she attempted to wriggle her legs, to pull them out of the dense, tightly packed earth, but she felt like she wasn’t even in control of her body anymore, and could not exert her weary will over it. Slowly it dawned on her, to her horror, that she was being dragged further underneath.

“Wait!” she croaked, but she was already neck deep, roots echoing the place where her clavicles were, poking out of her at the notch of spine that protruded at the nape of her neck. She was nothing more than a knot on the vast root system, no longer herself.

She opened her mouth to scream again, to tell them, no beg them, to stop, but as soon as she did it, her jaw was filled with dirt. Underground rocks scraped agonizingly against the hole she had dug in her abdomen, which, she could feel, was being used as an entryway by yet another root snaking its way up to the skin of her arm and bursting searingly out of her fingertips. She tried, again, to scream, but inhaled the dirt, coughing harshly as the particulates reached her lungs.

*Grandmother? She thought in terror. Bubbe? Help me, please. Are you there?*

“Come,” the trees echoed, pulling her fully down into the forest floor, not a finger left aboveground to witness the stars. Down, down into the depths of the Earth. “Come,” they repeated, roots coating every inch of her muscles, puncturing her lungs and liver, snaking out of her nose. “Come.”

Shoshanna woke abruptly in a violent cough, clutching frantically at her abdomen under her sweatshirt. There were no scratches, no marks or ridges. A soft beam of sunlight, muffled by the beds of pine needles that coated the branches above, poured into the small crack between the roof and wall of Shoshanna’s camp.

“It felt so real,” she told the great ash, slumping down against the tree. “And the thing is, I’ve had that dream before, I think. Or at least something similar to it.”

She picked up a tiny greenish yellow fruit from the metal mess bowl clutched in her hand and bit into it. She had gathered the fruits a few days ago from a plant with sharply toothed leaves. Underneath the light green leaves and the stems they grew from, there had been green and yellow pods scattered underneath, big enough that she was only able to fit about three or four comfortably in her tiny palm, and on a whim she had gathered them, picked a few other pods off of the stem, and left them in the bowl. She had picked some of the pentagonal yellow flowers, too, on the off chance they might be edible, but, upon trying them back at her campsite, hadn’t much enjoyed the taste or texture.

Within a few days, many of the pods had ripened, turning entirely yellow and blooming to reveal what looked like a small cherry tomato. The inside of the one she had just bitten into was dotted with tiny seeds. Shoshanna dropped the other half of the fruit back into the bowl. She’d taken to waiting an hour after first tasting an unfamiliar plant to see if she



had a reaction to sampling it, after becoming violently sick from eating a few dark berries she thought were black nightshade late in the summer, but must have been misidentified.

“Even before I knew you were here,” she carried on, “like knew for sure that your soul was inhabiting the woods, I sensed you there in the dream. But it’s weird, because when I was dreaming that the roots were invading me,” she shuddered, peering around nervously, as if she thought mentioning it might spur the trees around her into action.

“You weren’t like, a benevolent force. I wouldn’t even say you were belligerent, though.

You were just...absent. But I could still feel you there. I-I don’t know how to explain it.”

She lapsed into silence for a while, fiddling with the collapsible handles on her mess bowl and fingering the fruit inside of them, using her index finger to stir them. They made small clinking noises as they were pushed into the side of the bowl. Around her, insects buzzed and croaked, birds twittered and cooed, the high pitched vibration of hummingbird wings floated somewhere above Shoshanna’s right ear. All was as usual.

“Maybe it felt like you were a sinister force in the dream, or something. I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense. I’m sure the dream was just due to the wind. It won’t leave me alone, bubbe, I don’t know how to get it to stop, it’s not making any sense. I just don’t understand why it *insists* on tormenting me.” She sighed. “But it’s fine. It’s fine. I know that there’s nothing you can do to control it, you are entirely separate from it, just like me. I just don’t know what to make of all of this sometimes. It can get overwhelming. I’m sorry. I don’t know.”

She spoke with the level of insecurity, apology, and defensiveness that usually accompanied someone trying to construct an entire conversation on their own. The trees

around her rustled, and for a second, Shoshanna internally cringed, expecting the return of the wind who had so violently chastised her last night and in the days and weeks before. Instead, she heard the same chorus of whispers that had mounted into wails, far below, like a pit of writhing snakes.

*What makes you think I am separate? A whisper.*

“Bubbe?!” Shoshanna whirled around, upsetting her bowl of fruit, and slapped her palms against the smooth trunk of the birch tree. “Grandmother? What do you mean?!”

But the woods were silent once again.

“Grandmother, please,” she croaked, beating her long, spindly fingers against the trunk. Furry squirrels scuttled along the upper branches, and many other robins were visible flying off of its lower branches and into the sky. “Talk to me. Please don’t go away. I don’t understand. Please, just please don’t leave again!”

Nothing.

“I can’t do this without you. I thought I could but I can’t. Please. Please come back to me. Help me. I don’t know what to do. I’m so lonely, Bubbe. I need you. I need you.”

Shoshanna melted down the trunk of the ash and onto the ground. She was sobbing, hiding her contorted face in her dirty hands. She didn’t know what to do from here, where to go. Each beam of hope, each scant tendril of surety she was offered seemed instantly robbed from her. Exhausted, it wasn’t long before the force of her sobs rocked her to sleep.

*You do not know I am everywhere. That you are everywhere, too, in fact. The same wind that bites at you contorts within you, rushes through your mind and your blood, terrifyingly natural. I thought I had told you that this should not scare you, I thought I told you that this was the way of things, to take what is outside, and reflect it within. The speech of nature is a grammar, my dear, benevolently and wholly understood by few, and to recognize this speech is to recognize yourself in all things, to recognize God in the wind, in your very veins. When you are able to see what is outside reflected within, to give and know how to receive, to harness this spiritual energy you refuse to acknowledge. Oh, how this discourse, this inner beauty, will become known to you. Magic is created by this divine speech, after all, in this ability of the corporeal to transcend into the spiritual. I, and you, and we, all form the inner workings of God himself, and, in understanding this, we activate the divine energy that pulsates throughout the universe. So now, you must listen. You must discover for yourself, and must come to know. Again, and again.*

5

Shoshanna's beige heeled sandals clacked against the smooth, waterlogged grey concrete of the sidewalk. Miriam's dark blue worn espadrilles, in contrast, made no noise, but every so often, as the weaving, roving path of her gait crossed Shoshanna's straight one, the waterproof fabric of Miriam's pale blue raincoat would rustle and scratch against her granddaughter's. Though they were both of similar stature, the force of Miriam's bumps felt almost disproportionate, as if she were channeling the force of a much larger woman in throwing Shoshanna off balance.

It wasn't often that Miriam visited the city, ventured out of her quaint country home, further than then the quaint country town that lay a few miles south of it. It wasn't often that Miriam came to visit Shoshanna. The strangeness and singularity of this visit, the alien atmosphere in which the two women reunited had resulted in a stilted, awkward dynamic. Contained inside a concrete jungle, without the sprawling, *breathing* landscape that usually served as a backdrop for their conversations, they compressed more into themselves. Hid away from each other the essence of themselves. Gone was the easy manner in which they communicated, pretense and insecurity replacing it. The difference between their ages, something that hadn't seemed an issue before, yawned into a wide chasm that neither seemed able to ford.

As the visit wore on, Shoshanna had found herself looking forward to the day her grandmother would leave, pack up her worn carpet bag and vacate the hotel just around the corner from Shoshanna's dorm room in the heart of D.C. Recognizing this feeling, this guilty want, had been heartbreaking. Her mother had informed her over the phone a few months before that her grandmother's health was failing. It was starting to show, to wear on the older woman. She was frailer, more drawn and pale. What other reason, besides these numbered days, would Miriam be so eager to visit? After all, it had been so long since they had last seen each other. The older Shoshanna got, the less often she seemed to see her grandmother. The world had gotten in the way, she supposed; the future beckoned. Her parents had ceased to dictate where she went on the weekends, or during breaks, which meant that the visits to grandmother's house had become much more limited. Shoshanna's adulthood had robbed them of their closeness, if not their fondness.

It had taken two frozen margaritas to finally begin to thaw them, warm them to each other. Miriam's inhibitions had been lowered more than Shoshanna's, but though Shoshanna was able to walk in a straight line and think (mostly) coherently, there had been a marked difference in her, too. The honesty and earnestness between them had returned, if only momentarily. They had taken advantage of this by speaking about mainly inconsequential things. A dinner spent remarking upon the importance of owning a kiddush cup (Shoshanna did not, though she did own candlesticks, and usually just used a wine glass to celebrate shabbat. Miriam had implored her to consider purchasing one), the quality of Shoshanna's chicken enchilada (not the best, but not terrible, either), and where Miriam had gotten her dress, an exquisitely draped purple thing, long sleeved with a fitted waist and a-line skirt (she had made it from an old set of blankets). Now, as they made their way back to Miriam's hotel for the afternoon, the pair had lapsed into a long stretch of relaxed silence, which was only permeated by the sounds of the street. Cars honking and accelerating, the vague sounds of outside conversations, the clack of heels against pavement.

"You know what I do not like about D.C.?" Miriam asked, gazing upward towards the faint rainbow that glinted off of the post-rain sky, partially hidden behind the low buildings so distinct to Washington.

The hint of afternoon autumn sunlight beamed off of the silver in her long braided hair, lessened the severity of the wrinkles around her hooded eyes, and deepened the light green of her eyes. Shoshanna paused, momentarily awed by her grandmother's beauty. Her large, hooked nose, a feature Shoshanna had always been grateful not to have inherited, only made Miriam appear more stunning in this light, regal and formidable.

Her tanned skin and black hair lended her an exotic quality, rich and full of life.

Shoshanna tried not to think of that light, that life, leaching out. Leaving behind a dullness that was so unlike the woman beside her, who was, in every moment, so vibrant and so present.

“What I do not like is how contained the trees are.”

Shoshanna laughed at that, an unrestrained, slightly tipsy and unruly sound that elicited a sharp glare from Miriam.

“No, I am serious, Shoshanna, stop laughing and *listen* to me. You are always talking, never listening. Pah! Stop it!” Her voice betrayed none of her clear intoxication. She did not slur, but instead spoke in a crisp, clear, manner, though her deep drawl was slightly more accented than usual. She bumped into Shoshanna again as they crossed the street, Shoshanna’s shoes more quiet against the faded white lines of the crosswalk. Miriam’s candor knocked the giggles right out of her, and she quickly retreated into silence.

“I simply mean that it is so interesting to me how cities pave over all of this natural stuff and then bother to go and recreate it in these *unnatural*, contained spaces,” she gestured towards the median between the free-flow traffic, where a patch of tall, leafy trees had been planted, immaculately mown grass at their base. “Imagine being a tree and having to stand in the center of all of this,” her gesturing grew more frenzied, encapsulating the entirety of the area surrounding them. “So far removed from everything natural and peaceful about growing. Do you not wonder what it feels like, being controlled in such a way? Is that not the heart of all of this colonization we have done? We are fortunate to be

some of the few *humans*, even, who do not have to consider this reality. I wonder what stories they have to tell. I do pity them. ”

Out of politeness, Shoshanna tried to hide the renewed urge to giggle, but couldn't entirely conceal her incredulity. “*Imagine being a tree?*”

“What, is that so hard for you to picture?”

“It's just that trees don't really *do* anything. They just stand there. You really think I have time to just stop and think, ‘hmm, I wonder what it would be like to be a tree right now, here, in this exact moment!’. Seems a little fruitless, bubbe.”

“Goodness, Shoshanna, sometimes I do not even recognize you. Do you remember any of the conversations we have ever had? Anything I have ever taught you?

Has all of my time been wasted? Perhaps I should not be so surprised. After all, you *chose* to go to a university in such a sprawling, blank city.”

Shoshanna scoffed. “Are you really judging me for going to a city school? I thought you were happy for me. Why did you even come if you don't like it?” The unspoken answer to this question hung between them. They both knew why.

“Shosh—”

“Besides, it's not like I haven't learned anything from you. Don't insult me like that! I respect you and trust your word but that is such a hurtful perspective for you to take. I still go camping, I still enjoy my time in nature, an enjoyment that you and I both know I didn't learn from my parents. I haven't just disregarded all of that. I don't understand why you're getting so combative right now.” Her voice had raised, slightly, without her

noticing, and a passer-by on the sidewalk shot them a curious glance. He obviously wasn't from around here.

“Shoshanna, you are not listening to me, and if you were, you would know that I am not insulting your perspective. Why would I? It is important for you to understand the difference between insulting your perspective and pointing out its limitations. Goodness, you hear, but you do not listen.”

“I don't understand why you always have to lecture me about everything. Can't you ever just admit that I might know as much as you about some things? That your perspective might not be so much more all-encompassing than mine?” It was an ignorant thing to say, and Shoshanna knew it instantly, but the anger coiling in the pit of her stomach demanded release, lest it fester down there in the dark. Every conversation with Miriam had to turn into a lesson. It was a fact, a feeling, that often made it difficult to spend time with her, as guiltily as Shoshanna felt admitting it to herself. Couldn't they ever just *be*? Her grandmother didn't respond, and the conversation lapsed into an awkward silence as they continued walking uphill along the sidewalk. Their breathing grew labored as they passed first a jewelry store, then a gelato shop, then a bookseller. The gelato shop had a long line snaking out of the storefront, and Shoshanna and Miriam had to weave carefully onto the shoulder of the busy road to avoid it. The humid autumn air clung to their skin and Shoshanna could feel sweat beginning to bead along her hairline and under her eyes. She would need to touch up her makeup soon. She ran her hand absentmindedly through her frizzy black hair, artificially lightened in places with strands of caramel and blonde. It didn't suit her as well as the natural black, Miriam had told her.



The small argument had sobered her grandmother up a little bit, and she stopped crashing into Shoshanna as often, or as forcefully. The weaving of her quiet, graceful steps had grown less pronounced. Shoshanna almost missed the contact, mentally kicking herself for allowing the awkwardness to resume, the air to grow charged once more. The anger that had flared in her so suddenly had dissipated just as quickly, leaving her with a hollow feeling in her gut. The sensation of regret, the vain, impossible wish to take it all back.

“I was not aware,” Miriam whispered, almost inaudibly, “that we were comparing our perspectives. That is not a conversation I would ever engage in, and I trust you know that. How quickly we are to cast doubt on each other. I am sorry for that.”

“I’m sorry, too. Bubbe, I—”

“Please do let me finish.”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry,” Shoshanna responded meekly.

“Maybe it is impossible to truly appreciate the perspectives of the trees. But I know I have taught you that it is not just *our* perspectives that matter. Not just you and I. Sometimes it is worth wondering what the trees think, what they see, what they know. That is something you are removed from in all of this concrete, I think. It is too easy to ignore your surroundings, your *true* surroundings, here. Sometimes you must go and listen to what the forces have to teach you. Sometimes, it is worth weathering discomfort.”

Shoshanna considered this, before responding, “Don’t you think that wondering what the trees are thinking is sort of futile? It’s impossible for us to know that. Anything we could come up with would just be us projecting something onto them. Imagining they can think is just imagining that they’re like us, right?”

“Ah, but that is where the *listening* comes in. When you listen, you do not need to wholly imagine, just interpret. Yes, it remains a subjective thing, to be sure, but not as limiting as never knowing in the first place. And, of course, you also ignore another reality. That imagining the perspective of others allows us to broaden our own. That is something I know I have taught you, regardless of whether you remember or not.”

Again, a pause as they both caught their breath at the top of the hill. They were both so easily winded, it seemed almost comical. At least Miriam had an excuse. She was dying, after all. Shoshanna just wasn’t in the habit of moving, not like she should have been.

“What did you mean earlier?” she asked, “when you said that I don’t listen?”

Miriam hesitated. Shoshanna knew that the gears of her sharp mind had started whirring, carefully crafting a graceful and articulate answer, as was her wont. Shoshanna had always envied the way her grandmother was able to do this, a tendency she hoped she would grow into, but hadn’t as of yet.

“When you were younger, still a child, you were stubborn, yes, but you knew when to quiet down, you knew that there were other valuable experiences which would fill the gaps your silence left. I wonder where that intuition went. It seems as if you have forgotten how to be a child.

“When we are discussing the trees, you have turned the conversation first to your own perspective and imagination, and then onto your ability to listen. What *you* will get out of the exertion of imagination, what *your* perspective may bring to the trees. You see? Sometimes, we must rely on the voices of others, not for our sake, but for the sake of balance. It is not enough to stop talking. You must be ready to listen. You must humble yourself before the forces that are beyond you. Only then will you truly learn. Will those around you truly come to know you. Will you achieve balance. Look at the life within you. Look at your ability to see, to decide. Look at how that life, your life, is the same as the life within the trees, and because of that, you have something to say to each other. Never forget that.”

Shoshanna felt speechless. Robbed of speech. It was normal for her grandmother to say exactly what she meant. Turn this leisurely stroll through rush hour D.C. into a life changing conversation, interject her scathing observations into what had started as an innocent conversation about trees. Shoshanna had asked, she had to remind herself. She didn't know if she fully understood what Miriam had said. Still, it felt insulting. Honest. A shortcoming, a deep rot within Shoshanna had been exposed. Laid bare.

She could feel her heart breaking, a little. Slightly lost at the criticism, like the good person she imagined herself to be and aspired to become was far out of her reach. What if she didn't know how to listen, couldn't glean the things she needed to from all that surrounded her? What if she read a book just to read the book, and didn't pause to absorb what it had to teach her? How vain it was that everything she did was mindless, when there was so much meaning to be gleaned.

The knowledge that this flaw in her had been perceived cut so incredibly deeply. It was unimaginably uncomfortable to be confronted with such a limitation within herself. A rottenness that she possessed, one that she felt powerless to expunge. What if that was just who she was, not a very good listener, unable to be taught? Unable to acknowledge that the workings of the world didn't just concern themselves with her?

Someone...someone not whole?

Miriam released Shoshanna's hand abruptly and began walking again. It fell down to her side again, cold, *without*. She stared after her grandmother, frozen, open mouthed in front of a Nordstrom department store. They were almost back to the hotel. After a moment of stunned silence, Shoshanna scrambled to catch up, the clacking of her shoes against the pavement renewing. It was a struggle to hold back the tears that welled in her dark glazed eyes.

"I'm sorry, bubbe. I'll remember. I promise."

*You*

*can*

*hear*

*me.*

*In*

*fact,*

*I'm*

*UNIGNORABLE.*

*But*

*are*

*you*

*listening?*

When Shoshanna came to, she was curled up on the ground again. She could feel something crawling on her arm, an ant or possibly a spider. The sun pressed uncomfortably against her eyelids. She must have fallen asleep earlier in the day, her vehement tears guiding her deep into unconsciousness. The sun, having just barely risen when she settled in the grove that morning, was now positioned around mid-afternoon, barely visible above the treeline. She had slept the daylight mostly away.

She sat up, groggy, rubbing the crust away from her eyes and face, which felt stiff with dried tears. Glancing over at her forgotten bowl of fruit, she noticed that they had been disturbed by some sort of critter while she slept. The amount of food in the small metal bowl had been much depleted, and a few were half eaten, as if the critter had grown full in the middle of one of them and scampered off again without the rest.

“Son of a bitch,” Shoshanna muttered to herself. She knew she shouldn’t eat the rest of them until they were washed, and if she used what was in her canteens, she wouldn’t have enough to drink before her next planned trip down to the river. She had other things to do there, too, things she couldn’t finish with the scant daylight that was left to her. Her neglected stomach growled loudly and angrily. After all, Shoshanna realized she hadn’t eaten anything all day. She knew that if she wanted to retire to her camp satisfied, she should start gathering, and quickly. The sun was rapidly approaching the horizon, and she didn’t want to be stuck in the woods after it had grown dark.

Stretching, she moved unsteadily to her feet. She felt her back give a satisfying *crack* and realign itself as her arms stretched over her head and her torso twisted to each side.

Shoshanna sighed, grabbing her pillaged mess bowl, and started off towards camp to grab her birch-bark map.

It wasn't long before she found a cluster of mushrooms. Between her constant gathering, (walks where she had assessed and familiarized herself with her immediate surroundings, marking each lucrative flush with a little charcoal symbol on her crude map), and her ever growing boldness to try things she might not immediately recognized, (toeing a dangerous line, she knew), she had grown quite adept at finding food on her foraging expeditions. It wasn't long before she came upon the next flush of a cluster of previously marked oyster mushrooms, scampering up a tall red oak. The cluster sprang from its heartwood, pale and exquisite. The caps were smooth and velvety to the touch. As Shoshanna braced them against the tree, gills ruffled underneath her palm. She took a knife to their base and her mouth started watering. Shoshanna's mind was already far, far away, as she started to saw, imagining what the fungus would taste like when she had roasted them over an open flame. When the tendrils fire had lapped them into something tender and sanitary.

So deeply immersed into daydreams was Shoshanna that she nearly missed the whisper. Nearly. She was snapped sharply back from the world of fantasy into reality by the quiet, insistent sound of the word, "stop". Instantly, her small pocketknife halted its progress, halfway through the supple bloom.

"Stop," it repeated, insistently.

She pulled her knife out, slowly, as if prolonging the exit would minimize the pain she induced. Her knife came away with a small, thin shaving of the oyster, and it was all

Shoshanna could do not to pop it into her mouth right there. “I’m sorry,” she responded sheepishly. She retreated a short distance away, bashful and embarrassed.

“No,” the mushroom stated.

Again, the oyster stopped Shoshanna in her tracks. “No?” she repeated confusedly.

It confirmed, “No.”

There came a long stretch of nothing, a standoff, in which one soul (fungal) stared into another (human). Though it didn’t have eyes, Shoshanna had the sense that the mushroom was watching her, assessing her. Waiting to see whether she would stick around, whether she was patient. Worthy enough to hear the secrets it had to tell. The silence felt somehow significant, though she was dimly aware of how ridiculous it was that she stood frozen in the heart of the forest as precious daylight leaked from the world, waiting for an oyster mushroom to speak.

“Come,” it beckoned, sooner than expected. Only a couple of minutes had passed.

Shoshanna looked around, puzzled, as if to beg of the air around her, *can you believe this?*

“Come!” the mushroom repeated, more insistent this time. “Come closer!”

She stepped forward through the brush, rustling the bushes and grasses standing between her and the tree, crunching the undergrowth with the muddy soles of her shoes.

Finally, she arrived directly in front of the bloom again, back from where she had retreated at the first signs of speech. The staring contest resumed.



“Closer!” the oyster demanded, the tone of its voice rising hysterically. She took one step forward. “Closer!” it ordered again.

Shoshanna bent her head towards where the mushrooms perched on the side of the tree, flinching at each high pitched chime of, “Closer! Closer!” Until her ear came to rest where her hand had moments before against the gills. They felt different against her ear than they had under her palm. The side of her head was more sensitive to their coolness, but could not feel each groove and crisp curve like her hand had been able to.

No sooner had she pressed her ear up against the fungus did it go silent.

After a confused beat, Shoshanna began an incredulous, “Wha—,” but was cut off before she could finish the word.

“Shhh!” the mushroom admonished. “It’s time to *listen*.”

A memory twirled at the edge of Shoshanna’s recollection, pricking behind her eyes in a dance of vague colors and shapes. It felt just like a lightbulb flickering on inside her brain, the way they usually depicted ideas in cartoons. D.C. Something Miriam had said to her. But, before she could grasp onto it, the light blinked out again.

“Listen,” the word hung in the air, echoing off the faint breeze. It was the most peaceful sound Shoshanna had ever heard the wind utter, an echo of the soft admonishment given by the delicate fungus. So, for what may have been the first time, she stopped speaking, stopped thinking, even. In an effort of Herculean proportions, she rid her mind of all of all of the objections and questions that spun around in there. And just *heard*.

First, there came the high-pitched coo of the birds, basking peacefully in the bronze glow of the warm afternoon. Theirs was a call with no agenda, a loving and harmonious drone. Larger insects could be heard buzzing close by, a high whizzing sound that threatened itching and imminent invasion. Far in the distance came the vaint snapping of a branch. She was not alone out here. Another creature, no doubt giving her a wide berth, had also chosen to stroll through the woods. Gathering. Living. She could not hear its breath, but she knew if she got close enough, she would be able to feel it in the air. Even the air itself, it seemed, had a sound. It pressed in on her eardrums, *whooshing* inwards, towards her brain, and then out the other side. Reminding her it was there. There for her. There was nothing and nowhere it could not, did not, permeate.

Behind these acute sounds came the ever present susurrations of the trees, branches of all different shapes and sizes, trunks of varying length, reaching out for each other. Always reaching. It was easy to forget that the faint swishing was there, for it never ceased. The sound was one to be relied upon, to look to, to orient oneself with. It echoed inside of Shoshanna, filling her in a new and interesting way that she hadn't experienced before. She would have been lying if she said that it wasn't uncomfortable, something foreign and wholly *new*. But somehow, simultaneous to the feeling of alienation came one of coming home. The sound was meant to dwell within her, to echo in the hollow of her chest. She was meant to be there, actively listening, as she was. It wasn't ever meant to be background noise. The trees rustled for her. She listened to them. Above her. Around her.

The birds chirped merely in response to this, entering the cacophony of conversation that comprised the forest, composed it anew with each and every sunrise. Was Shoshanna a part of that? Was she a part of the woods, too?

Shoshanna had to strain her ears to hear it, hold her breath even, but after a while of her ears adjusting, the sound became unmistakably clear. It could have been minutes, standing there with her ear pressed against the oyster mushrooms, before she heard the soft twang of notes. One, and then another, and then another, overlapping into what was (and there was no way to deny it, for it just *was*) a song. The sounds expanded and contracted, waved through the air, crescendoed and faded. The closest thing from her life *before* that Shoshanna was able to compare it to was maybe the twang of a synthesizer, though it really wasn't too close at all. The music was just so eclectic, and had such a vast range she could only imagine that she was hearing bits and pieces of something so full and expansive. The range of her perception limited her. How humbling that limitation was.

The existence of an old self, a dead one, one unable to fathom or process an experience like this, implied the existence of a new self, one who was seeing and feeling right now, in this very moment. Belonging. One which belonged to the woods, existed only *because* of it, and not despite the struggle and strife that had marked her days here. She never could have imagined, back in D.C. or in undergrad or childhood days spent at carnivals with her parents, listening to doors slam and grandmothers speak and perennials grow and wilt, that nature would have anything quite like this to show her. She was only the smallest part, she sensed, of something vast, something she might be able to one day witness, if she let herself.

Slowly, her green eyes, hidden under heavy eyelids as she listened, saw again as those eyelids retreated. Her head tilted at an unfamiliar height and angle, she found herself staring at a rock embedded in the ground. The grey, granite-like stone was partially covered in dirt, a small berry bush (that Shoshanna dared not touch) obscuring it further from view. She never would have noticed the rock otherwise. She'd occupied this area before, marked it on her map as an ideal foraging spot, and never noticed this particular boulder.

Oh, how much she must overlook.

Spray painted on its otherwise muted face was a stripe of bright ultramarine blue. *A trail marker.* Someone had been here, however long ago. Someone had marked this as part of a trail, yes, an overgrown trail. Scarcely used, but a trail nonetheless.

Shoshanna tore her head from where it rested against the mushrooms, glancing up and around until she found the next marker painted on another, darker rock a football field away. She reached her hand back and twisted the oyster mushrooms from the tree, before bounding ahead to the next marker, and then the next one, and the next one, eyes trailing on the ground like a sniffer dog in the heat of the chase. Before she knew it, she was in a part of the woods she didn't recognize, one she hadn't marked on her map. The trees around her were unfamiliar. An ounce of doubt nagged from the back of her head. *Maybe you should go back? Are you sure you shouldn't just turn around now?* It was easy, almost too easy, to silence that voice, to push it aside and continue onwards. She clutched the mushroom so tightly in her hand that it was beginning to crumble, separate into parts. Her yearning bred destruction.

Thoroughly robbed of breath, Shoshanna paused for a moment, bracing herself against the scratchy, crusty bark of an old pine. Her loud pants obscured the sounds of the forest which had previously, for a split second in time, rushed through her. Broke her down and filled her up. Now, the thump of her own heartbeat clanged through her eardrums instead. She thought she had run pretty far, though it was hard to say exactly how far. The sun was truly starting to set, now, and she didn't know how she would get back in the dark. It didn't matter to her right now. The trail below had grown more visible, as if this area was more heavily trafficked than the section nearer to her camp. Shoshanna knew that the impatient beats of her heart were not just an indication of her exertion, but of her excitement. She might be able to get out of here, she might, finally, have found her way out. It had been under her nose this whole time, mere minutes from the campsite where she had languished and suffered during these past months.

She did not know how far she would get without her gear or any provisions, it was true, and her canteen was only halfway full. Her party had been days into their trip before things had gone awry, days into the unforgiving wilderness, and Shoshanna was not likely to make it back that night. On foot, frenzied and weak. But still, though it defied logic, she continued on. She *had* to. She couldn't go back, spend another night in her camp, knowing that there was a way out. *Knowing the way out!* Beyond the trail markers, a scant few miles of trees and shrubs and rocks, lay her apartment, warm and inviting. Her refrigerator, her stove, her oven. *Restaurants*. All of the creature comforts she could imagine, there at her fingertips.

She didn't want to think what had changed while she was away, if her landlord had removed all of her possessions. Signed on a new tenant after she had defaulted on rent

and failed to materialize. She couldn't consider it now. The determination coursing through her could only be maintained if she imagined her life just as she had left it. Glossy white tiles, vintage shag carpets, Ikea bookshelf. All of it was waiting for her. For her, and her only.

With a deep sigh, she pushed herself upright and continued on the trail. Above her, the sky erupted in reds, pinks, and blues, so beautiful and bold she imagined that the forces that be were exploding fireworks in celebration of her victory. She was going to get out of here. Finally. *Finally*.

She was so distracted, so frenzied in her fantasies, that she didn't hear the sounds of approaching footsteps, crunching matter under sure feet nearing, ever closer. Zeroed in as she was on the trail markers and the ground below her, she didn't even notice anything out of the ordinary until she heard a pronounced, slightly perplexed voice.

“Hi?” the hiker asked.

Her head snapped up. “Hi,” she responded.

7

Instantly, the manic mood that had overcome her at the sight of the trail marker drained out of her. The pace of her thoughts slowed, and her spirits sank back to Earth. She didn't know what she had been thinking. She couldn't go home tonight. She couldn't leave. Not yet.

Shoshanna was very aware of what she must look like. The habit of brushing her hair, one she had once committed to so religiously every morning after getting out of bed, had fallen to the wayside. She had taken to simply tying the shoulder-length ebony locks up

after washing, and, when she wore it down, simply pushing whatever bushy mess she happened to wake up with behind her ears where it wouldn't bother her. It was oily, too, stripped down and worn, a nest of split ends and sun damage. The glossy sheen and once carefully maintained luster had been lost. Faded into a dull charcoal. Her face, too, was oily. She could feel the countless raised bumps on her forehead, chin, and cheeks each time she rubbed her face. After all, it wasn't as if she had the time or the means to wash it regularly, or even very often. It tended to get dirty relatively quickly, the grime from her hands adhering to her sweaty face whenever the two came in contact. The dirt would remain there, caking on in layers and layers until she finally had the chance to wash it off. She hadn't, not for a few days. Or had it been several? She was losing track.

Her clothes hadn't been properly washed in a long while. During her labor intensive stints at the river, scrubbing and scrubbing with negligible amounts of biodegradable soap, she was able to remove some of the most immediate grime. The deeper stains were a different story. They latched defiantly onto the fabric, and she was helpless to extricate them no matter how hard she scrubbed. They had grown, too, exponentially it seemed, until each outfit had morphed, metamorphosed, into one large brown stain. Holes had begun to materialize as well, on seams and in the knees of trousers, the hem of shirts. She had no thread to repair them with, and had not figured out how to cover them up.

Shoshanna was skeletal. It was far from healthy. Yes, she had put on some weight since she had begun gathering and not simply relying on quickly depleting past rations. But the amount that she consumed now wasn't even comparable with what she used to eat. It wasn't enough, but it sustained her. It got her from day to day.

There was no way she could ignore the fact that this mixture of wear and tear, the mark a woodland lifestyle had left on her appearance, was not alarming. She saw it in the way the hiker's eyes widened in shock, in the small, involuntary step he took backwards, retreating into more familiar territory. Back in time.

Though he appeared slightly grimy, too, the hiker was none the worse for wear. His cropped honey blonde hair was smooth, the radiance of the sunset forming a halo around his head, his oval face, his dark almond eyes. Shoshanna thought he might be slightly older than her, in his early thirties, maybe. He had wrinkles around his eyes and in the corners of his mouth, but he still appeared youthful, there was no doubt of that. He was tall, much taller than Shoshanna. The thought struck her upon seeing a tall, powerful man for the first time in months, that he could do anything he wanted to her out here. She was a stranger, gone native. He could kill her and no one would be the wiser. She was a deer in the headlights. But so was he.

"Hi," he said again, less of a question this time and more of a statement. It was clear to see that he was at a loss for words, hadn't the slightest idea of what he had just stumbled upon, and was trying to figure it out. His mouth opened and closed, pressed shut, creasing into the fine lines she had seen around his thin pink lips.

Shoshanna, for her part, was stunned too. Staring at another person felt alien to her, wrong, somehow. The sensation within her was akin to one she might feel if she stared at a word for too long, and started to convince herself it looked misspelled. Something about him wasn't quite right. Was this how a human body was supposed to look? Was this how limbs attached themselves to torsos, how flesh looked stretched over muscle and bone? She felt like an animal, appraising something *other*, something she had never seen



before. Something unknown and unknowable. This couldn't be what *she* looked like, too. It was all wrong.

“How's it going?” The words felt like putty in her mouth.

“Are you...?” He leaned in almost imperceptibly. Assessing. “Are you okay?”

Part of her wanted to cry. No, she was not okay, actually, he couldn't imagine what she'd been through out here. He didn't know what it was like to feel so unadulteratedly *lost*. He didn't know what it was like to be found in a place that was so absolutely foreign.

Another part of her wanted him to go away, and yet another wanted to scream, *get me out of here! Please, I'll do anything!* To hell with the pretense. There was a way out, just waiting. Beckoning.

“Yeah, I'm okay, are you? I'm Shoshanna.” She reached a dirt-caked hand, the one not holding the crumbling oyster, out to shake his. He looked at it like it might bite him, as if he wasn't sure whether to accept her chivalry or not. She might have imagined it, but she thought she saw an expression of disgust flicker across his handsome face.

After a split second, the look had passed. He took her hand. His grip was firm, warm, alien. His palm felt dry against her clammy one. He had a faded cursive tattoo at the base of his thumb, which stretched upwards towards the nail. Even squinting, Shoshanna couldn't make out what it said.

“I'm Anthony.” After a second, he dropped her hand.

Shoshanna didn't have any tattoos. It was one of the few Jewish laws she hadn't ever broken. She couldn't, for some reason, ever bring herself to mark her own skin, even

after her grandmother had died and her old college friends suggested getting a tattoo to commemorate her. Her relationship with Miriam existed more than skin deep, further down than that first layer of skin. Miriam was, and always had been, tattooed on her heart. Permanently marking her skin had seemed too small of a gesture, somehow insulting in its miniscule scope.

“What are you doing out here all by yourself, Anthony?” A faint smile flicked up the corners of Shoshanna’s mouth. The irony was not lost on her.

“Oh, um,” he seemed to pick up on it too, somewhat. Something seemed off to him, too. Something about her. “Just trying to get one last trip in before the season’s over. I’ve always, uh, liked going out by myself. Gives me time to think.”

“Yeah, me too...” She trailed off slightly before snapping back into reality. “So, are you planning to camp out here tonight?” Of course he was. The sun had almost set, and they were far from any hotels, memory foam mattresses and down feather pillows.

“Yeah, uh, I was just trying to find a spot.”

“I might know of one,” she conceded. She wasn’t sure why she said the words, but felt suddenly certain that she wanted him to spend the night near her camp. She couldn’t let him out of her sight. She wouldn’t be able to sleep imagining him sheltered somewhere else along this stretch of woods. If they parted ways, what was there to indicate that he hadn’t just been a figment of her imagination, that the stripes of blue painted along the rocks hadn’t appeared for one day only to be gone the next? Without someone else, how would she know anything that she experienced today had been real? She was already starting to have trouble distinguishing between dreams and reality, between things that spoke to her and the voices in her own head. How could she trust herself? With him, she

could escape this nightmare, this constant turmoil which even now doubled down in its effort to make her go completely mad. Together, they would leave here, she knew.

“Oh, um...okay. Are you sure?” He seemed very hesitant to follow her anywhere, this tattered specter of the forest. Maybe he had imagined her into being. This could be where *his* nightmare began.

“It’ll be okay,” she reassured him. “I know where I’m going. I’m not going to kill you, I promise.”

“Um, I don’t—”

“I’m not crazy! You’ll be perfectly safe.” Her appearance and general, frenzied demeanor seemed to suggest otherwise.

“Okay...” he said, seemingly perplexed that the conversation had taken this turn, at her adamance. He was now, quite apparently, expected to follow her further into the brush. Most hikers coming into contact on the trail simply shot each other cursory hellos and then continued on their way. Nothing about this situation was normal. “Why not?”

But she had already grabbed his hand again, and was leading him down the path highlighted by the spray-painted trail markers. In her other hand, the cluster of pale oysters still nested, and her birchbark map sat curled in the front pocket of her once green hiking pants.

By the time they had gotten back to her camp, night had already fallen. The hike back had been a quiet affair, the two strangers barely speaking to one another.

At one point, just as the sun had descended past the horizon line, the wind swooped downwards, beseeching, “Beware!”

“Shut up!” Shoshanna had shouted upwards, her screech filling the open air, echoing off of branches and stones.

“What was that?” Anthony had asked in alarm. “Is someone else there?”

“No,” Shoshanna responded grumpily. “It was nothing.”

As soon as they had made it back, she busied herself in preparing a fire. She had never had company there, not unless you counted the birds and the bees and all of the disturbing natural forces that stood out as pesky features of everyday life. She wanted her guest to steep himself in warmth, feel welcome next to her hearth. It was how she had been taught to host. Besides, she needed the fire to cook the mushrooms she had gathered. There wasn't much, not really enough for two people, but it would have to do. Anthony sat perched on her bench, which was really just a decaying fallen log she had discovered a couple months ago and dragged laboriously back to the ramshackle camp with her. He peered around the camp in apparent awe, as if he couldn't believe where he was. It all seemed quite rudimentary to Shoshanna. Her shelter was poorly built, she was no carpenter. The dried mud that crusted the outside was unevenly spread, the structure leaned slightly to the right because of the way she had set the logs. Once the fire had been built, she set her mushrooms on the worn pan to cook, and was surprised when Anthony, who sat silently while she worked, asked if she could boil him some water.

“How much?” she inquired, “I only have enough for maybe one cup of tea, maybe one and a half before I'll have to make another trip down.”

He didn't ask 'down where', but pulled a nalgene out of a bottle pouch on the side of his pack and handed it to her. "It's okay. Use this."

"Are you sure? Will there be enough for the journey back?"

The air was charged with unspoken questions. Neither of them had yet processed the strange and singular positions they found themselves in. "I'm sure it will be fine." For his part, a question followed soon after, just as she had put the water on to boil and retreated back to sit near him on the bench. The toe of her mud-crusting shoe dug a small pit in the dirt in front of her, sweeping aside a layer of faded fallen leaves to reach the cool ground. She had always been a digger, even as a kid, when she used small twigs to dig trenches for ants and uncover small pebbles lying dormant in their shallow graves.

"So, uh...how long have you been out here?" His body was tilted away guardedly, and he didn't look at her, just straight ahead into the crimson flames.

She considered the question. "Since early June, I think. I'm not sure what month it is now, though, so I can't say for *sure* how long it's been."

His head shot up, and he met her eyes abruptly, nerves temporarily forgotten. "You've been here since *June*?"

"That's what I said, isn't it?" She wasn't sure why she was getting defensive.

"Jesus Christ, I don't mean any disrespect or anything, it's cool you're out here and all, but might I ask *why*?"

Shoshanna couldn't stop herself from laughing. The sound originated from somewhere underneath her ribcage, spreading outward and upward like a cloud of gas. It was loud,

derisive, and sarcastic, a bitter and unrestrained thing which caused her fellow hiker to avert his eyes again and close himself off even further.

“You think I *meant* to be out here for this long?” She dissolved into a fit of laughter again.

This second bout seemed to annoy him. He sat up straighter, before stating adamantly, “I guess I’m confused. I don’t really see what’s so funny here. Couldn’t you just hike back if you wanted to?”

Her laughter died down. “I didn’t know the way.”

His eyes narrowed. “You didn’t know the way? Why not? I guess your setup is pretty far out, but didn’t we cross paths near the trail?”

“I didn’t know the way, not until today when I caught sight of the blazes again.” She sighed. “You can’t imagine how I felt following them back towards the clearer path again.”

“Okay, I’m definitely confused now.”

“About?”

He hesitated for a moment. “How did you lose those blazes in the first place? How did you end up so far out of the way? I guess I just, um, don’t really understand like how you got stuck here for *four months*.”

Had she really been out here for four months? It felt like years; an eternity spent under the banner of the trees. Four months. So much could change in that space of time. She

wondered how her coworkers were doing. Even her parents, whom she hadn't talked to in more than a year and a half prior to her stint in the woods, flickered through her mind's eye. She had definitely been evicted from her apartment, then. It was a shame.

She had worked so diligently on the interior design.

"Your water's boiling," she said evasively, pointing at the scorched pot nestled in the throbbing neon embers.

Anthony unzipped his green backpack and pulled out two terrafilm packages and a small plastic packet (which turned out to contain an orange microfiber towel). He ripped the seal of each package open before leaping up to his full (considerable) height and, wrapping his hand in the towel, gingerly removed the boiling pot from the flames. He carefully poured the steaming water into the terrafilm packets, an equal amount in each, before sealing them again. Placing the empty pot on the ground, he turned back to her.

"So what happened?" he sighed.

Shoshanna considered not telling him, but she couldn't see any reason why she shouldn't explain herself, at least partially. It would be easiest to just answer, she decided.

"Hmm...do you want the short version, or the long one?"

He gestured around him. "I don't really have anywhere to be. I'm sort of at your mercy here." It was his turn to give a little laugh.

So she did tell him. Part of it, at least.

"Well, I was going on this mid-summer camping trip with a couple of friends from college. We had planned it all out, taken time off work. It was meant to be a sort of a

reunion, I guess. They drove from D.C.–which is where we had gone to school together, and met me up in Providence before we made the drive all the way up here. It was only supposed to be for a couple days, a forty mile loop, I think it was. Easy enough. We divvied up our supplies and everything, I mean it all started off great.”

She paused, glancing over at him from where her gaze had been fixed on the fire.

He nodded encouragingly, gesturing for her to continue.

“We got into this massive fight about halfway through. I’d really rather not get into it, but some things were said on both sides, the two other people I was with told me that they had felt for a while that I wasn’t a good person to have in their lives. They wanted to take this trip to see how I was doing, to check up on me. They said they had hoped I was doing better and could be the kind of friend...the kind of person I used to be when we were close, in school. We used to love spending time outdoors together, the three of us. It was a big reason we bonded in the first place.

“Apparently I couldn’t. You know, be *that kind of friend*. The sort they needed. They told me that after the trip they didn’t want to hear from me anymore. It was the best thing for all of us. You know, the usual? I was really hurt, I’m sure you can imagine, but I guess it hurt less that I was losing the friendship at the time then the fact that they had confronted me with this in the middle of nowhere. Two people who knew how rotten I was, down deep in the core of my being. Two people who had known me, intimately. And I was forced to see this trip through with them. I was wrecked and upset. And, you know, irrational.”



Her hands fiddled absentmindedly with the cuffs of her sweatshirt, a nervous habit she had never quite shaken.

“So, that night, while we were all sleeping, I packed up my stuff and left them a note, saying I would head back on my own and that they wouldn’t be hearing from me again. ‘Have a nice life,’ all of that stuff. I didn’t know what I was thinking. Maybe that we weren’t that far from the parking lot, that I could make it in a day if I really tried, set off right away. But it was dark, and I was angry, and I refused to turn back because I was afraid of running into them again. By the time the sun rose I was lost. And I haven’t been able to find my way back. The rest is history, as they say.”

It was the first time she had discussed it with anyone. Though it wasn’t as if she had much of an opportunity to get into it before, she hadn’t even explained it to the birches on any of her drawn out, hours long rambling sessions. The fact that he was a complete stranger to her, and human, made it easier to talk about than it might have been otherwise. If she was completely honest with herself, she hadn’t really even given the event that much thought, other than to reason with herself that they would have no reason to check up on her to make sure she had made it back okay. It wasn’t a hard trek. They probably thought she had been considerate enough to leave the car for them (it had been *theirs*, after all) and just hitched a ride back. That bridge had been completely and thoroughly burned. They would have no reason to call search and rescue, either, and as the weeks had gone by and she started to succumb to the pangs of starvation, she had known that no one was coming to find her.

“Oh,” Anthony breathed, letting it all sink in. He grabbed the packets resting upright against the log-bench, and, grabbing a set of utensils (also from his backpack) he stirred them.

“I’m sorry, I know that was a lot. I mean, you barely know me. I’m a stranger to you.”

“No, no,” he said softly, handing her one of the packets. “It’s okay. I asked. That sounds like it was hard, I’m sorry.”

“That wasn’t even the hard part,” she mumbled ashamedly, staring at the packet he held in his outstretched hand. “What’s that?”

“I think it’s, um,” he checked the label on the side, “yeah, I think this one’s pad thai.”

“Is that for me? Are you sure?”

“Yeah, of course. You look like you need it more than I do.”

“Oh, well, thank you. That’s very kind.”

“Sure.”

For the next several minutes, the only sound emerging from the bench was the slurping of noodles as they both scarfed down their dehydrated meals. He was a loud chewer, she noticed, and this might have annoyed her in a situation where the novelty of his presence had worn off. Now, she didn’t mind so much. Her thoughts were otherwise consumed by the pad thai he had given her, which ignited her mouth the second she had slipped the fork past her lips. Flavor coursed through her tongue, nerves shot rapid signals into her

brain. She felt like she was high, and scarfed down the backpacking meal as quickly as possible. She wanted to harness this feeling, steep in it. She was pretty sure she had moaned audibly at one point, but Anthony was considerate enough not to say anything and give her space. Shoshanna was grateful for that.

All too soon, she had reached the bottom of the packet, and, as if momentarily forgetting she had company, she turned the packet inside out and licked it clean.

“Jesus,” she heard him mutter under his breath. She couldn’t find it within herself to care. It was delicious. She had never eaten anything like this before. Shoshanna was tempted to ask for another one. It would be so easy, only a handful of words in exchange for such a pleasurable reward. He would probably even say yes. The strange hiker had proven himself a generous guest. But just as she was about to open her mouth to ask, she felt a wave of nausea cascade through her entire body like a tsunami. She bent over, head between her knees, and threw up the meal she had just finished. It didn’t taste nearly as good coming back up as it had going down.

“Jesus!” Anthony repeated, more concerned this time. “Jesus, are you okay?”

“You say ‘Jesus’ a lot,” she croaked.

8

He let her use his microfiber towel to clean up the residue the vomit had left on her face.

“Sentence, blip, note,” the evening breeze cautioned, but the whisper of the wind came fainter than usual. Its warning sounded much more distant. Shoshanna wondered why that would be.

“Do you mind if I ask you another question?” Anthony requested politely, once she had fully cleaned up and rinsed her mouth out with water. She noticed that he was still chipping away at his dinner, and it looked like there was a sizable amount remaining. She must have eaten her portion too quickly.

“Yeah,” she replied bashfully. “Sure.”

“Has no one really come to look for you? I mean, I know your friends might have no cause to make sure you returned okay, though I’ll admit I certainly would have if it had been me in the situation, but what happened when other people noticed you were gone? Wouldn’t they have reached out to the other people on the trip to ask where you were? Didn’t you leave numbers?”

This was tricky. Answering this question truthfully would require Shoshanna to discuss her life before the trip. It wasn’t an easy topic for her. “I...I guess it might have raised some alarms at work when I stopped coming in, but maybe not for a little while, at least. I wasn’t exactly, um, reliable when it came to going to work. I mean I used to be, but...” she trailed off.

“And you don’t think anyone would have sounded the alarm?”

“I...I don’t know. I didn’t leave my friends’ names on a piece of paper in my apartment because I didn’t think anyone would be going in there. I’m not really close with any of my coworkers. I didn’t give the names to my parents because...well I guess we didn’t exactly have, like, the best relationship. We haven’t talked for a while, is my point. Not

since a little after my grandmother died.” She shot a glance towards the grove to their right. Nothing emerged from there apart from constant, unsurprising silence.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” His apology actually sounded genuine. What were the odds Shoshanna had actually stumbled upon a decent guy out here, so deep in the woods?

“It’s okay. There’s no reason to be sorry. I hate when people apologize for things that they have no control over.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he mumbled again. She ignored him.

“I guess no one would have really known to reach out to anyone, and my work or my landlord must not have reported me missing. Or, if they did, it must not have been a big enough investigation to reach my *former* friends.” She emphasized the ‘former’. “So, here I am.”

“Here you are.” He took the silence that followed as an opportunity to continue eating. She stood up from the bench, wiping her hands on her filthy pants, and threw a couple more logs onto the dying flames. As each lichen-covered piece hit, a chorus of orange sparks scattered into the night air. Color and vibrance dazzled in the darkness. After she was done, Shoshanna plopped down again beside Anthony. He was nearly done eating, and they both sat there until he had finished, setting aside his trash (notably unlicked). They both stared into the hypnotizing flames.

“So…” he began.

“Have you ever read *Hamlet*?” She blurted.

“What?”

“*Hamlet*. Like, the Shakespeare play.”

“Oh, um, I’ve seen it performed—”

Though she had asked him the question, she continued on as if she hadn’t heard him give an answer. “Sometimes I feel sort of like I’m similar to Hamlet, you know. I mean really, when you think about it, Hamlet’s just some guy who’s trying to deal with drastically altering life experiences the best that he can. I mean, his father died, murdered by his uncle. And then his uncle tries to kill him?” Not to mention the ghosts. “I mean, it’s no wonder he lashes out. Questions his mortality. It’s just like, there’s this feeling you get when life isn’t what you bargained for. When it changes. Like, ‘I didn’t sign up for this. I didn’t sign up to feel this way.’ Life’s in breach of its contract and I want out. I don’t want *to be* anymore. Someone has to pay for this, someone has to answer for the way things are.” She spoke as if she had forgotten he was there, staring deeply into the dying flames, as if in a trance.

“I’m sorry, I don’t really remember the play that well. But didn’t Hamlet, um, kill his girlfriend’s father?”

She jumped, as though he had startled her, which, to be quite honest, he had. “Oh, yeah. Ophelia’s father Polonius. He thought that his uncle Claudius was behind the curtain, and didn’t stop to make sure...yeah, that’s not really a good look. And then he gets fatally wounded in a duel with Ophelia’s brother Laertes...”

“Oh, right.”

Their stilted dialogue lapsed into an awkward silence. They both sat facing forward, not acknowledging one another.

“I guess I’m just thinking about it because it’s the only reading material I brought.”

“Oh, damn, that’s quite the vacation read,” Anthony responded politely.

She laughed. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

“What was the thought process behind bringing that one? Kind of a morbid tale to get stuck with.”

“Well, actually, there is a lot of hopeful stuff in there, the more you look.” The air between them relaxed a little.

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Well, my grandmother bought it for me a while ago at this bookstore in D.C., and I thought I should probably get around to reading it.” She said this with a purposeful nonchalance, before changing the subject. “So, what’s your story Anthony?”

“My story?”

“Yeah, your story? Where do you work, where are you from, you know, what’s your tale of woe? It’s only fair you spill, I mean, I’ve already told you mine.”

“Part of it, at least,” he grimaced. He was a quiet, considerate sort of man, Shoshanna was beginning to gather. Something she had noticed also was that he had dimples, perfect indentations on his cheeks that were made to appear deeper still by the harsh shadows the firelight cast on his face.

He was extremely handsome, and she could appreciate that. She was almost tempted to kiss him, knowing just how easy it would be to lean forward, to reach out and feel his warmth. It had been so long since she had anyone to keep her warm. Felt the presence of another human. But it would also feel unnatural, she knew. It always felt unnatural with men.

“Well, I’m from around here. I’ve never really been too interested in straying too far from the area. I mean, look where we are.” He paused, and then seemed to think better of the comment. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for that to come off as insensitive or anything.”

“No, it’s okay.”

“Okay...well, anyways, I work at a bike shop, and I live in a small place pretty close to my parents. I’m pretty close to them, I guess. Wouldn’t want to be too far away from them. My dad would have come on this trip, too, but he had to work. He’s a carpenter,” Anthony explained.

“Oh, that’s cool. You two must know a lot about building things.”

“Yeah, we really like to do that kind of thing. I think the ability to work with my hands is something I got from him. We’ve made furniture together, fixed up cars, that kind of thing. Real grunt work, but enjoyable.”

“Some pretty manly stuff there.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I guess. Traditionally masculine hobbies. That’s not why I like them, though.”

“Oh, of course not. I wasn’t trying to say—”



“I didn’t think you were.” Another awkward pause.

“I used to have a relationship kind of like that with my grandmother,” she murmured.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, we used to garden together, mix herbs into medicine. She taught me a lot about noticing what’s around me, making do with what I have, the importance of relating to plants. That kind of thing. You know, real womanly stuff.” To boil down her relationship with Miriam that way felt like such an abhorrent minimization. Shoshanna regretted the words as soon as they had left her mouth. The time she had spent with her grandmother, the things she had learned, transcended words, time, and space. This stranger beside her could never understand.

He laughed again. “Okay, okay, enough with the gendering. That all sounds amazing, very enlightening and peaceful. I like to do that with my dad, too. Like I said, he’d be out here with me if he wasn’t working.”

The air between them was thawing a bit, in a more permanent, settled way.

Commiseration usually had that kind of effect on strangers, Shoshanna had noticed.

*Listen*, the mushroom had implored. She was pretty sure Miriam had once said something like that to her, too. That it was important to listen to others if you wanted them to get to know you. But she couldn’t place exactly when, right now. She hadn’t taken it as seriously as she should have. She was slowly forgetting. The notion terrified her. She never wanted to forget, not ever.

“Shame he’s not here, too! We could be having a grand time together,” she remarked lightly.

“Yeah, it is a real shame,” Anthony smiled. “It would be cool if your grandmother were here, too. I’m sorry to hear that she passed.”

Shoshanna was tempted to tell him that Miriam *was* here, barely one hundred feet away, her soul housed somewhere inside the grove of birches, whispering, coiling. But she didn’t want to scare him away. She knew it sounded crazy, and besides, how would she even be able to prove it to him? It wasn’t like the birches had been especially talkative, not even when she needed them to be. She’d tried so hard to connect with her grandmother she had been greeted almost exclusively by staunch, disappointing silence. Shoshanna was beginning to lose hope. *Listen*, the fungus had told her. *It’s time to listen.*

“No need to be sorry,” she whispered.

“Well, I can be sorry that something happened without being personally sorry for causing it.”

She thought about this. “I guess you’re right, in which case, thank you. Thanks for your generosity.”

“Of course.”

By now, the fire had started to die down. The brightest thing within the perimeter of the little round of stones Shoshanna had placed around the makeshift pit were embers, glowing hot and bright. The waning moon was starting to rise, visible overhead only between the branches of a mid-size pine, and night had long since fallen.

“We should probably pitch your tent, if you’ve got one,” she told him. “It’s getting late.”

“Oh, it’s okay. I’ve just got a bivvy.” Anthony pulled a small drawstring bag from his backpack, opening it and drawing out a long slate grey bivouac shelter. “I should be okay.”

“Perfect.” He might have been kind, but he was still a stranger. Shoshanna didn’t want to risk giving him the wrong idea by inviting him to sleep in her shelter, even though it was warmer and more established. Even if, on the off chance, he chose to attack her in the night, his assault on the door would give her enough forewarning to grab her bear spray.

“It was really nice to meet you, Anthony, and start to get to know you a little bit. Goodnight.” She started to collect her things.

“Hey,” he began. She whirled around in surprise. “I think you should come back with me tomorrow. I gather that you’ve not had the easiest time here, and I know the way pretty well. We won’t get lost. We’re not too far, actually. It would probably only take us two or three days to get all the way back.”

Shoshanna couldn’t contain the grin that overcame her, spreading quickly over her broad features. She hadn’t had much cause to smile in a long time. Tomorrow, she could leave this nightmare behind. In months, she would remember it only as a particularly unfortunate period of time, one lodged purely in the past. She could move on. She could heal.

“Thank you,” she responded. Tears glinted in the corners of her eyes. “That sounds like a plan.”

Sleep eluded Shoshanna. No matter how firmly she tried to grasp onto it, to fall into its comforting depths, it remained staunchly, infuriatingly distant. She could have pretended

that it was the knowledge that Anthony slept somewhere nearby. It would have been easy to claim that it was simply residual excitement from the eventful evening that kept her awake. But Shoshanna knew better. She knew the true reason.

A leaden rock sunk to the pits of her stomach, unmoving and unmoveable. The weight of it, this slab of dread, was a persistent thing, difficult to sweep aside or ignore, even in the name of rest. It kept her rooted, helpless to do anything but twist and turn, writhe atop her leaky orange sleeping pad. The dread was inexplicable, its cause enigmatic, and yet it overcame every sense and nerve with its heaviness. She would be going back tomorrow, returning to the life she'd had before her tragic stint in the woods. She'd found the trail back, and someone willing to traverse it with her. She would have closure, a satisfying end to this disastrous debacle that she'd wanted out of since the very beginning, since the exact moment, in fact, that she'd realized she was lost.

She'd hoped, even though the falling out with her friends had been an explosive one, that they still might make sure she'd made it home safely. Hoped that, when they couldn't reach her, when she didn't show up for work and never returned to her apartment, that someone might call search and rescue. They were the considerate type. But if emergency services had been called, Shoshanna had never heard or seen signs of them. She wasn't even that far off from the trail, it turned out, only five or so miles at most from where she had collected the oysters. But she guessed she couldn't blame her friends for not checking up on her. Their abandonment only served as evidence of Shoshanna's betrayals and mistreatments. They'd given her so many chances, made so many sacrifices for her. They were some of the only friends who still bothered to keep in contact after she had abruptly withdrawn during their last semester of graduate school, ceased attending social

functions, showing up for their weekly trivia nights, or even, for long stretches of time, answering her phone. She hadn't even bothered to attend her own graduation. The only evidence signifying that her studies had been completed was a diploma mailed to her almost exactly six months after her last class ended.

Gen and Caleb had still checked up on her, two of the only friends she'd had who'd shown up to pay their respects while the family sat shiva for Miriam. They'd even tried to make a kugle, a sweet noodle dish with raisins (which Shoshanna hated) and cinnamon that sat abandoned by Shoshanna's family soon after its tentative sampling. The two friends convinced her to go to class, to finish her thesis, and communicate with her professors. They'd still invited her to parties and functions long after her other friends had given up with her, invited her to come visit them after she'd gotten that Rhode Island job and practically fled D. C., where she once thought she'd stay forever. She hadn't even said a proper goodbye to them, using the move to close herself off even further. They'd tried, they really had, and it hadn't been their fault that Shoshanna had been unable to be the kind of friend that they needed. She knew that now. Shoshanna didn't know why she'd agreed to the backpacking trip after dodging their invitations and olive branches for so long, or what she had expected them to say after months of not hearing from her. "We'd hoped that you would get help," Gen had told her that night, her long, dark curls casting her thin, heart shaped face into shadow. Firelight had glinted off of her huge dark eyes. "We hoped that, when you accepted our invitation, that meant that you were ready to move on. That you were getting better."

"You can't do this forever, Shosh," Caleb had added. "Becoming a regular Boo Radley, hiding away, all of this self sabotage isn't going to make your grief go away."

“Wow, another one of your literary colloquialisms. How long has it been since the last one, five minutes?” Shoshanna had responded wryly. “I had almost forgotten that you studied english. So glad that I have you to remind me how smart and well read you are.”

“This is serious, Shoshanna,” a threatening edge had appeared in Caleb’s voice now. “We can’t do this anymore. We can’t lift you up, help you out, place our trust and friendship in you, when you refuse to do any of that stuff for yourself. We can’t keep being friends with someone who constantly pushes us away.”

“Then don’t be! If I’m such a terrible person, don’t be friends with me! I know you both think you’ll be better off without me, without all of this emotional deadweight. I’m not stupid, though I question how intelligent you two are for planning a trip with someone *so horrible*.”

Caleb had turned to Gen, then. “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t. I’m done.” They’d turned back to her, long blond braid swishing over their left shoulder, meticulously maintained eyebrows arching angrily. Their light eyes flashed as they spat, “I’m done.”

It was at that point that Gen had enveloped Shoshanna’s petite hands in her large ones.

“Shoshanna, it isn’t healthy for *anyone* to live in grief. Is this really the life you want to live? Do you want to spend your one life, all of this limited time you have here, wallowing in grief? Pushing people away? Doing nothing about your feelings? I mean, when was the last time you even talked to your parents? When was the last time you talked to anybody outside of work besides us?”

Tears had flowed freely down Shoshanna’s scrunched up face. “They didn’t even care about her. After all she did for them, they didn’t even take care of her. They cared too

much about their stupid, busy lives to see that she was dying. And I did, too. I didn't listen to her. I never visited her. I wasted so much time—" She was sobbing now. Gen had told her that she had the ability to heal. What if she didn't want to heal, Shoshanna had screamed, casting the other woman's hands aside, what if she deserved the way she felt, deserved to be alone? She couldn't restrain herself. She had yelled and yelled and yelled until her last chance with two friends who cared for her so much had been spent. Two friends who used to spend the night to make sure she was okay, used to cook and clean for her when things got really bad. Friends who had never wavered in their support, never abandoned her when she needed them. And it was what she deserved. The last thing Gen had said to her was how painful it had been to see Shoshanna wilt. "It's like nothing exists of you anymore except for that hole no one but your grandma can fill. You think you can't fill it by yourself but you can. It doesn't have to consume you, but I can't watch you let it, anymore."

Those were the things she could never tell any stranger. She wouldn't, no, *couldn't*, introduce anyone else to the ugliness inside of her. To all the ways she had failed. She knew Gen was right. There wasn't any part of her that hadn't been consumed by the lack of Miriam, but what was so bad about that? Miriam had been her soulmate. They shared one soul, split into two bodies, and were more powerful and whole when they were together. It only made sense how incomplete Shoshanna would feel now, walking around handicapped with only half of herself in existence. She knew that she deserved to be that way, because she hadn't harnessed the power that came with being whole, of having such a singular and powerful connection with another human being, when she'd been given the

chance. How was she expected to move on from something like that, to keep going with her life after she had lost something so vast and irreplaceable?

Except, she hadn't. Out here in the woods, she had found it again. She felt again connected to her center, a spiritual force so strong and unwavering it had to be Miriam, it simply had to be. She had sacrificed nearly everything in the process of finding her grandmother again, but wasn't that just the way life went? You had to give things up, to make sacrifices, to get the things you truly wanted. Was she just making the same mistake by choosing to leave Miriam again? Had she learned nothing?

Shoshanna's toes brushed the battered, mass market copy of *Hamlet* at the bottom of her sleeping bag. Sighing, she reached down into the bag, contorting her body in an effort to grasp it. She felt the crisp, dry pages against her fingers, dark ink slightly raised in places, the creases on the cardstock cover, and the places the spine had been unfortunate enough to crack. Grabbing it firmly, she brought it up to her face, grabbing the solar lamp from her bedside table and clicking it on. It took her squinting eyes a moment to adjust to its harsh brightness.

Once she was able to see, she glanced down at the book. So small was it that it nestled between her stretched out thumb and middle finger. The cover was printed a vibrant turquoise with a spot of white and red in the corner—was that meant to be blood?—and the title *Hamlet* danced across the blue in neat white cursive letters. UPDATED EDITION, a banner near the top announced, WITH DETAILED NOTES NOTES FROM THE WORLD'S LEADING CENTER FOR SHAKESPEARE STUDIES. Shoshanna had never bothered to read those notes.



She flipped to the title page, where “by William Shakespeare” had been crossed out and the words “by Edward de Vere, the 17 Earl of Oxford” had been written in neat script underneath. A private joke from Miriam, who, though she didn’t dedicate much time to reading much of anything outside of Hebrew scripture and Kabbalistic texts, maintained an obstinate and paradoxical love for Shakespeare’s works. Like she had for every conceivable subject under the sun, Miriam bore strong opinions about Shakespeare’s plays, identifying herself as an *Oxfordian*. She believed that Edward de Vere had written Shakespeare’s plays, not the Bard himself, and could carry on about it for hours if anyone asked. Shoshanna didn’t know much about the theory, except that it annoyed her mother, who was a high school English teacher, to no end. Maybe her mother had been right about the identity of the playwright, but Miriam was a better arguer, and it had been an endless source of entertainment for Shoshanna when she was younger to see her mother undermined in such a way.

She ran her fingers across the blue ink of Miriam’s writing before turning the page. Nestled between the next pages was a folded piece of paper, which Shoshanna drew out with the utmost delicacy, as if one wrong touch might cause the paper to catch fire and crumble into ash. She took her time unfolding it and drawing out the small sprig of pressed rosemary contained inside. It still held a small remnant of its past fragrance, which diffused quickly into the stale air of the shelter when the note was unfolded. Holding the sprig between her thumb and forefinger, Shoshanna’s eyes passed over the note, scrawled in cramped, tiny letters, on the paper.

*To Shoshanna –, it read. My rose of May! Happy birthday. I had hoped to take you to see Hamlet this visit, but we ran out of time. Still, I hope that you will read it so that we may discuss it on a future visit. It is a beautiful story with some lessons I think you will benefit from. Once you read it, you will know why I included this rosemary from my garden, from the same plant which you helped me seed three years ago, if you remember.*

*I hope you will never forget this visit, or the things we talked about.*

*Much love, Grandma*

There had been no future visits, and Shoshanna hadn't ever read the play, instead stashing it away on her cluttered bookshelf and getting on with other things. She hadn't seen Miriam again until she was on her deathbed, much sooner than anyone expected. No one saw it coming so soon. No one had known what to say, what to think. And before they could figure it out, she was gone.

Of course, now that Shoshanna had read it, she knew why Miriam had included the rosemary. 'There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray, love, remember.' She could recall the quote by heart, now. Shoshanna had cried when she found that line for the first time, uttered by a grief-stricken Ophelia to her brother Laertes after her father's death. Naming plants which are known to ease pain. Oh, how Shoshanna had wanted someone to ease her pain.

Miriam had in the note, for a reason she did not understand, called Shoshanna *her Ophelia*. But Shoshanna did not agree. She saw her grandmother as Ophelia instead, meeting her end wreathed in flowers like in the painting by John Everett Milais, memorialized amongst the herbs and rivers she loved so much. It had been fault that her grandmother met such a lonely end. Her fault that she had allowed her relationship with Miriam to lose some of its closeness and poignancy, and realized too late exactly what treasures she possessed. Her fault. She had hurt Miriam, just as Hamlet hurt Ophelia. Shoshanna hadn't meant any of it, hadn't known any better, just as he hadn't. But all the same, it was a tragedy she must pay for. She, like he, was made to answer for it, to feel the sheer weight of the pain they had caused.

But, here in the woods, she had another chance. Here, she could change things, subvert tragedy. Gingerly, she placed the rosemary back into the note cradled in her hand, folded it, and nestled the delicate paper back into the book.

10

"I can't go with you," she told Anthony the next morning. He had greeted her, short hair tousled and unbrushed, with a bowl of instant oatmeal and asked if she was about ready to pack up.

The day had dawned clear and bright, if brisk. It was starting to get cold enough for fog, and a thin layer of frost coated some blades of grass and shrubbery that were closer to the ground. Anthony had bundled up in a sweatshirt and impeccable white windbreaker. *That has to be hard to clean*, Shoshanna thought. He had removed his backpacking stove from his pack and, quite apparently, used it to boil water and cook the oatmeal. He had also prepared a packet of instant coffee, clouds of steam wafting up from a collapsible cup on

the ground. *Wow, this guy really has everything.* Shoshanna wondered how long it had taken him to collect all of this gear, or, alternatively, whether his family was affluent, and simply humble enough not to mention it. Maybe he owned the bike shop he told her he worked for. He looked old enough, she thought, to be the owner of a successful business. He'd said his father was a carpenter. She wondered what his mother did.

Shoshanna was privileged, extremely privileged, there was no doubt about that, but she and her friends had had to pool their stipends from being teachers' assistants and split the cost of supplies, which meant they were usually always either going on trips together or asking to borrow supplies. They had each saved for second hand backpacks, sleeping bags, sleeping pads, and pillows, at least, and Shoshanna thanked her lucky stars every day for that. Even if her inflatable sleeping pad did release a huff of air every time she went to lay on it.

Anthony looked up from the oatmeal at her words. "I'm sorry?" He questioned.

"I can't come with you," she repeated.

He let out a confused chuckle. "Okay, and why not?"

"I just can't, I'm sorry. I have to stay out here."

His smile faded. "Okay, hardly a thing you've told me since I've met you has made any sense to me, but this *really* doesn't make any sense."

It didn't. Shoshanna knew the decision was crazy. Why should she choose to return to the debilitating loneliness, the constant struggle to fulfill even her basest needs? She couldn't fully explain it to him without sounding even more out of touch than she already did.

"I'm just not ready to go back. Please don't report me to search and rescue or anything. I'll be fine."

His expression grew even more concerned. "No, you won't be fine. It's October 3. Soon it will be cold. *Really cold*. Trust me on this one. You already look extremely malnourished, I'm sorry to comment on it but it is worrying. Come winter, you aren't going to be able to find food. You think I'm just going to leave you to die out here?"

"I'm not going to die. I know my limits. Don't worry about me."

"When was the last time you looked at yourself? No offense, but you look like you're wasting away, like you might be too weak to make it back, period. Please don't blame me for wanting to make sure you do return safely." His voice was gentle, persuasive.

"*I'll be fine*," she reiterated through gritted teeth. He was making this more difficult than it had to be. She was going to be seriously angry if her brief rendezvous with Anthony tore her away from those birches, this woods, that sky. I mean, she didn't even know his last name. "It's a little creepy that you're *this concerned* about me making it back, after knowing me for barely a day. It's not healthy to worry yourself this much over the welfare of strangers, dude. Please. If you make me come with you, or send someone after me, I'm just going to come right back. I haven't done anything wrong, and you can't watch me forever."

"Please don't make me feel like my worrying is outrageous." An edge had appeared in his voice, though he was trying hard to conceal it. "Please understand that this situation

is...extenuating. I think that *anyone* concerned about the welfare of others would want to make sure you're safe right now. Besides, you told me last night that you wanted to come with me. Am I supposed to believe that you just don't want to anymore? That you just decided against it between last night and this morning?"

"Yes, actually. I know I told you before that I wanted to go, but I can't."

He stood up, mussing his hair in his hands and then burying his face in them, before he looked at her again. "I don't think it's sinking in. If you stay out here *you will die.*"

"I'll be fine!" She insisted.

"Please stop saying that." The edge had grown harder to conceal. "You're really starting to freak me out. Please explain to me how ten hours of sleep has made such a pronounced difference in your decision-making. I promise I won't hurt you, if that's what you're worried about. I promise you'll be perfectly safe."

"My decision-making process is none of your business, quite frankly. How am I supposed to trust you? I barely know anything about you, and you don't know anything about me *or* my life."

"If I wanted to hurt you, don't you think I would have done it already? I know what situation you're in. I know that I care, as a human, whether you live or die."

"Things live and die every day in the woods!" She posited in desperation. What was she supposed to tell him, that she couldn't leave because the forces of nature were speaking to her, and that one of them was her dead grandmother, contained within the firm bark of

a birch tree? As if that would serve as a deterrent. If anything, it would make him more certain than ever that she needed to be returned, and promptly institutionalized.

“You can’t stop people from dying, or from making choices about their own lives. Even if I did want to die, what’s so wrong with that? What’s so wrong with me taking agency and deciding what to do with my own life?”

“Because your life has value, Shoshanna. Not just to you, but to the people around you.”

“What people? Where are they? I certainly can’t see them.”

“I’m here. And I might not know you well, as you’ve stated, but I believe that every life has value, period! It’s wrong to throw yours away so cavalierly. I can’t allow that to happen. You don’t have to go back with me, but please at least hike back. Before it’s too late. I’m scared it might already be too late for you to be able to make it back on your own.” He paused, thinking hard. “Please don’t make me leave you here.”

“So my life has value, but not my agency?” She was pushing his buttons, and she knew it, but she could feel herself growing impatient. In desperation, Shoshanna could feel her temper rising as well, a viper hissing and spitting. Giving its warning.

She was starting to think that maybe she should have gone about this a different way, pretended that there was another concrete reason for her choice to stay, rather than simply telling him she couldn’t come, period. And then, of course, getting argumentative. Even thinking about it now, she couldn’t decide on another good reason. Was that a sign she was making the wrong choice? Was she, in this moment, putting a seal on her fate? She could have told him that she didn’t feel safe, but how easily would he overcome that objection? Paradoxically, he seemed not to have any ulterior motives for wanting her with him. Simply a genuine interest in her wellbeing.

He groaned in frustration. “You know, up until now, I’ve believed everything you’ve told me. It seemed a little far-fetched, I’ll admit, that you would just abandon your friends out here and get stuck for *months*, but you gave me no reason to doubt you. I’m a big benefit-of-the-doubt kinda guy, you know. Now you’re saying all of this, changing your mind and not explaining yourself, I do doubt you a little.” He looked so confused, helpless, earnest. She had elicited this reaction out of him. She had taken advantage of him. It had been a mistake to bring him here. “Did you really abandon your friends out of anger? Why do I feel like there’s something else going on here?”

“I promise you I haven’t lied,” whispered Shoshanna. She was many things.

Irresponsible, sometimes cruel, an ommitter of truth, maybe. But not a liar. Never a liar.

He continued as if he hadn’t heard her, his expression growing more strained. “You know, even if you had been telling the complete truth, I guess I should have gotten a little suspicious when you said that you got into a fight with your friends. A fight so bad they said they never wanted to see you again. I kept thinking to myself last night, ‘what could she have possibly done to get that reaction from her friends? What kind of friends must they be not to check up on her after she ran out on them?’ But you know, my grandpa always used to say it takes two to tango. It had to be both, not one or the other...it’s all starting to make sense to me, though. At least on your end. It’s becoming sort of obvious you seem to be in the habit of accepting generosity and then pushing away people who are trying to help you. I’m trying to *help you*.”

She felt herself suddenly close to tears. “I don’t understand why you’re so angry with me,” she pleaded.



“Angry? *Angry?*”

“Yes, angry. I don’t understand. We’re strangers, we hardly know each other. I don’t understand why you’re so riled up.”

He scowled. “*You* don’t understand the difficult position you’ve put me in, of meeting someone out here so obviously in need of help and then having them ask me to leave them to die.”

“*We hardly know each other.* It won’t take you too long to forget about me!

Besides, I’ve made it this far. Please, *stop.* ”

“*I don’t* know you, *quite apparently*, so answer me this. Are you the kind of person who ever stops to think that your actions and decisions affect the people around you? Did you ever think how your friends would feel waking up to you gone?”

““Good riddance?”” She suggested bitterly.

“Or how about how your parents will feel about never getting the chance to see you again. Did you ever think they might be worried sick about you?”

“I—” This stopped Shoshanna up short. “Like I told you, I haven’t talked to them in a long time.”

“What, and you think they just wouldn’t hear you were missing? That your job wouldn’t call them when you failed to show for *four months?*”

She felt cornered, panicked. Desperate. “I—I can’t think about that right now. You don’t understand, things will just be worse if I come back—”

“I can’t imagine that,” he interjected.

“Well, they will, and I’m not ready to come back, I’m not. I can’t. Thank you for your generosity and *please just leave without me.*”

He paused, seething. “Fine. If that’s what you really want. I can’t control you, and I’m not about to try. But you can sure as hell bet that your death will not be on my hands.” It was the first time she had heard him swear. “You know, I didn’t want to say anything out of fear of hurting your feelings, but from everything I’ve gathered about you in the time we’ve spoken, all I can think is that you seem like a really broken person. I hope you make it out of here before you do any damage you can’t undo. You have a chance to make a change, right here, right now, to start over, but you won’t. I hope you realize how heartbreaking that is to see.”

Anthony threw his windburner in his pack and cinched it up. “You can keep the mess ware,” he stated, all of the emotion suddenly gone from his voice. He heaved his backpack onto his shoulder, turned, and started to make his way back in the direction they had both come barely half a day ago. How easy it was for him to remember; how easy it was for her to forget.

“Wait!” Shoshanna cried. He halted in his tracks, turning to face her again. His expression was unreadable. “Before you go...do you happen to have any other reading material?”

*Returned. You have returned to us.*

“You have chosen,” whispered the wind. It sounded louder now that Anthony was gone, more pressing. “You have chosen.”

Shoshanna hadn't moved from the log where, just hours before, someone else had been. She had seen and spoken to another human, an experience she thought and lamented she'd never have again—who was gone now. He might never have been. How much of what Shoshanna saw and felt on a day to day basis was even real? The question was beginning to feel arbitrary. What did it matter if it was real, so long as she felt like it was? What was the importance of reality, anymore?

She sat there, lost in thought, staring but not seeing. She still had the oyster mushrooms she had harvested yesterday, and should probably fry them up for dinner tonight, but right now she felt nowhere close to being hungry. It was interesting, because she'd had no respite from that particular sensation almost since she had been out here, and so much of her time was invested in trying to stave it off. Her attempts at abating hunger and building up strength had been futile, quite apparently, at least according to Anthony. He didn't think she was strong enough to make it back on her own. He thought she would die sometime during a two or three day hike, delirious, without anyone to feed her or guide her. Had she just said goodbye to the last chance at making it back to civilized society? Somehow, the thought was not nearly as distressing as it might once have been.

*You seem like a really broken person.* She still didn't understand why he had said that, why he had gotten so upset at her for not wanting to go back with him. She tried imagining how she would feel if she found someone who looked like they were dying,

and who refused to let themselves be saved. She didn't know what she'd do. Perhaps his reaction to her decision cut down to some eternal truth. To help someone, they had to want to be helped. They had to want to help themselves. And, if they didn't, no matter how much you wanted to help or how capable you were of helping, you would be rendered powerless. She knew that it probably wasn't easy to want to help someone so badly, and feel powerless to put that into practice. By exerting her agency, Shoshanna realized, she had robbed him of his.

The frustration she had been met with was no doubt the result of his feelings of powerlessness. He had felt powerless to help her, couldn't do anything but watch her make a decision that may prove fatal to her. Just as Gen and Caleb had been rendered powerless, watching her waste away. They had all been stripped of their power, taken advantage of, and all by her.

*She* had felt powerless, watching her grandmother grow worse day after sullen day. And then, sooner than anyone expected, she had died. No one at her bedside, clutching at her hand, guiding her into nothingness. The first thing Shoshanna had felt after her mother had called her with the news was regret. Not grief, that insurmountable weight, no, that would bear down later. Regret, so pure and unadulterated that she hadn't known how to go on, how even she would make it out of the exact moment she was in. Her grandmother, who made sure she never felt alone, expressed to her how vibrant and connected life was, had died by herself, locked in a sterile room, away.

Shoshanna had fully realized, on that day, how truly selfish she was. Other things had been more pressing than sharing in her grandmother's last moments, other things she could not even remember now. Could not remember for the life of her. And it felt right

that she should not forget that fact. She was selfish, she was. And, only when it was too late, her grandmother was all she could think of. Every waking moment the lack. The anger at herself and the person she had become despite all of Miriam's attempts at teaching her, of nurturing her into someone complete, something Shoshanna was not. She stared down at the oysters again. She remembered everything. She had stayed because she remembered. She could not abandon the person her grandmother had wanted her to be, not now. Not now.

Hauling herself up from where she had sat for so many silent hours on the log bench, she traced the worn, familiar path into the grove of birches. Hope dogged her every step, each footfall heavy with meaning. Upon reaching the largest birch, Shoshanna kneeled down. Slowly, she stretched both arms outward, jointly, thumbs pressed firmly together, and lay both palms flat against the ridged trunk. Her slender fingers, fingernails caked with dirt, splayed out, wrapping around the trunk as her palms began to slide against the dry, cool surface. Her palms did not feel clammy, as they were usually wont to do, but hard crisp, just like the surface she now tempted with each pad of her finger. She could feel the ridges of her fingerprints pressed against the tree, just as she could feel the ridges of the trunk pressing against her. Both of them, the same, tempting each other in a languid caress that—and she could feel it heavy in the air—precipitated something significant. Her hands slipped off of the tree as she moved to embrace it, now sensing the coolness that she had felt against her hands moments ago against her chest, there underneath her shirt. Her hollow cheek squished against it, too, as she whispered, “I’m ready. I’m ready to listen.”

Like before, when she had obeyed the oyster mushrooms, her ears grew heavy with the sounds of the forest around her. The screech of what was perhaps a bat filled the air, high pitched and joyous. She wondered where it had come from, what cave or cavern it retreated to, and wondered that it had not gone into hibernation yet. She felt that it was here, for her, calling to her. Shoshanna's being, her very soul, reached out to it too, stretching beyond the bounds of her body. It reached downwards too, down into the coils of whispering that she had only been able to hear flashes of before.

When the birches had spoken to her before, it had seemed to Shoshanna that each syllable reached her ears only after painstaking effort, as if the words were forced to ford through a barrier, a wall. A surge, and then a disappearance. Now, it seemed as if floodgates had opened, and Shoshanna was inundated with a rush of rapid, unintelligible speech with no indication of any pause or respite.

The wind, whipping through the last leaves on the trees, vibrant red and orange things which clutched desperately onto the branches they belonged to, whipping through Shoshanna's dark hair had altered its speech slightly from, "You have chosen," to, "You have chosen us."

The sun itself buzzed on the horizon, a vibrantly lively drone, the grass below her rippled and danced. It was as if the woods had come alive for her, like they had been waiting, patiently, for the words. For the day Shoshanna would see them. Listen to them.

"I hear you...I hear you." It was so much, she could hardly parse out a single line of dialogue, just one message, but she felt like she understood, loud and clear. She was home now.

What does it mean for a life to end?

To come to an end.

The being to whom the life belonged ceases to be, Goes  
somewhere other beings possessing life cannot go, Or  
does not go anywhere, anymore.

The end of something, but the end of what?

Where before, I was concentrated into something,

A body, which shed but stayed together The  
bonds of life keeping consciousness in check.

Safely encased, safely stored.

Now, there is nothing keeping me from diffusing

Pervading

Into unsuspecting lungs, a credit card amount of me a week

Into grass, sand, I fit right in, like I have always belonged.

And beets, eggplants, tomatoes,

A microscopic amount of me snakes up roots

Chopped up with stainless steel.

The end of a life means the end of a bond.

Or maybe, simply, a chance for new bonds to form.

Where in floating, I felt as one with the blue above,

A bond ending abruptly in the popping, the unmoored death event,

My connection with the sky severed.

This made way, I think, for new connections.

Before, wallowing in my floatation,  
I never could have felt the sea breeze,  
Never visited its shadowy depths  
Shaken hands with its waves  
Inhabited its creatures.  
I never would have met you,  
If I hadn't, like ashes, lost myself to the wind.  
To the world.



**“Sometimes people leave you,  
Halfway through the wood.  
Others may deceive you, You  
decide what’s good.  
You decide alone,  
But no one is alone.”**

-Stephen Sondheim, *Into the Woods*

## Winter

1

Again, Shoshanna could feel that faint, uncomfortable wiggling under her skin, something that split skin from muscle, from fat and bone. It started near her ankle, where, had she been standing, she would be rooted to the ground. Snaking its way upwards, around, the roots consumed Shoshanna just as they had before, constricting her lungs, bursting out of the tips of her fingers, dragging her down into the frozen ground, icy with early morning dew. It felt so real, so ultimate, the intense pressure of the roots wrapping around her, knowing that there was nothing she could do to fight them off. She had learned that lesson before. No matter how hard she fought, how loudly she screamed, she'd inhale dirt into her trachea, the roots would puncture into her. It would hurt, badly. But she didn't want to fight. Not anymore. Sensing the now familiar prick at her feet, she welcomed the sensation of carving, of being carved. Closing her eyes, and not in horror, she focused on the feeling, the precise pricks, that wended their way up her body simultaneously to the passage of the roots. The wending didn't hurt, she realized. Not really. They didn't dig trenches through anatomy, violently pushing aside what had been there before, clawing and breaking. The roots, she felt, weren't attacking her, but melding with her. Coming home, as if the ridges they now occupied had always existed underneath her skin. Unused, neglected, cobwebs being cleared away. They were coming home. The roots' passage was accompanied by the feeling any body might feel at being used in a way it had not been in quite some time. Something had been missing, there underneath her skin. A whole was now being filled.

She didn't resist as the roots dragged her down into the ground, dirt suctioned into her nostrils with each inhalation, threatening to penetrate underneath her eyelids. She didn't struggle as the roots constricted more tightly around her. This was familiar. This had happened before. There was no avoiding the uncomfortability. However, just because they were uncomfortable did not mean they were unnatural. Who was she to struggle? Who was she to fight against the course of nature?

“Come,” came the whispers. This, also, was familiar.

In the moments they didn't speak, the seconds that filled the gaps between the mutterings of 'come,' the world was filled with stark silence. Shoshanna could hear nothing past the silence except for the grating of stones and the undulations of worms and other insects burrowed in the ground. The farther down they went, the less there was to hear. The gaps between the whispers were lonely gaps, gaps that fear and doubt threatened always to slip into. But then, the whispers would return, and all would be right again.

*I'm coming, she thought. I'm coming.*

The further down she was dragged, heavy earth sliding around her, the more root she felt, the less human. Her bones no longer felt like bones, but instead like firm, sentinel wood, one central stalk branching out into limbs, out of the tips of her fingers. Roots snaked out of her eye sockets, but what did she need eyes for down here? Her mission was not to see, but to absorb, to connect.

“Come join us,” the whispers elaborated. “You are one of us.”

*I am one of you.* There was no difference between them, no place where

Shoshanna ended and the roots began. They were all one, a jumbled network of organic matter, of livelihood. It felt like hours she sunk, pulled through no will of her own, into the crust of the Earth. Shoshanna had no idea it was this deep. It felt like she had been sinking for so long, they must have reached the center by now. But maybe that's all the center was. A core of life, a web, a community.

Abruptly, the downward movement halted. The whispers stopped, and this time, they didn't return. The earth was cold, Shoshanna realized with a shiver. *She* was cold. She had no way to warm herself up, curl into a ball and run her hands up and down her arms to generate heat. She had no use of her arms, none of her face, or legs. She wasn't herself anymore, couldn't move by herself. She could sense, an eerie awareness that reached up past the crown of her head, sunlight playing on leaves, warmth and light. A source she so desperately needed. One that remained staunchly distant. She tried to reach upwards, to move her body, but none of her normal impulses seemed to be working. It took the most intense, teeth-gritting effort to move her big toe even an iota. She was stuck here, there was no going back. But, strangely, the panic that had invaded her last two interactions with the roots didn't set in. Though she had ceded all control to the force which had overtaken her, though she could not breathe, and the pang of her lungs redoubled every second, she did not feel scared. Though her eye sockets ached, as did the tips of her fingers, everywhere the roots had broken their way through tissue, she could not bring herself to give up hope, not just yet. The shift within her was pronounced and indefatigable.

*Hello?* She thought curiously. *Is anyone there?*

“Hello.” The response, a typical whisper, was given back to her in her own voice, the questioning tone gone.

*Who are you?* She thought. Something brushed past her, tickling her back. But she could not move, couldn't see even if she wanted to, what it was that had touched her in the dark.

“I am you,” Whisper-Shoshanna responded.

Shoshanna realized that she was right. The awareness that had been building up past her head, the one that had identified the distant warmth of the Sun far above, was only one of many awarenesses that tingled past her limbs, past her feet, her stomach and chest. She was connected to the voice which had just spoken through a finger, she was sure. It felt, bizarrely, as if she were talking to herself using a hand puppet, as if she were some sort of immobile ventriloquist who had no predisposition to where the conversation would lead. “*We are you,*” the plural whispering had begun again, hundreds of hand-puppet-whisper-Shoshannas chorusing through the darkness.

It made sense, too. How else would the whispers know what she was thinking? How else would they be able to read her thoughts? Whatever had brushed her back touched her arm, and then her chest.

*What is that?* Shoshanna wondered. *Who is touching me?*

“We are you,” another, more high pitched group of Shoshannas responded.

*This* notion stretched credulity. How could she be touching herself? She couldn't move, and even if she could, she was sure she wouldn't be able to reach the place on her back that still tingled from the graze. With the other, lower pitched whispers, she could feel

them coming from somewhere on her person where roots protruded and stretched outward into the ground beyond. It made sense, because she was now a part of that root system, one knot, one juncture of many junctures on a vast network. But this, the last chorus of 'we are,' didn't come from anywhere within her. She knew she could not feel the presence which had given her that response. And yet, the responder could still read her thoughts. Shoshanna felt so confused. This was so *much*, she realized suddenly, the situation was so outlandish. She didn't understand why she didn't feel panicked, felt her reaction was mismatched to the circumstances she now found herself in. It was surreal to realize you should be scared, but not to feel in the slightest bit afraid. To have your mind tell you that what was happening was wrong, dangerous, but to have your being feel so at peace. So right with it all. The thing brushed her cheek.

*Who are you?* Shoshanna repeated, frozen. It brushed her arm, her fingertips, somewhere out beyond.

And then, though Shoshanna had no eyes to see, she witnessed the world explode. Greens and blues and pinks bloomed, and then refracted, pulsating and churning. The spectacle was all-consuming, a view that existed only in Shoshanna's mind, a candle lit in her soul. She had never seen colors so vibrant, so bright, and so much of them. Colors on a spectrum she had never seen before, that no description in the world, no matter how detailed, could hope to capture. If she had been able to, she would have cried, would have sobbed and crumpled, bowing before a performance so awe inspiring it inhabited a category so wholly separate from anything she had ever experienced before, or would experience again.

From each individual hue, each section, from everything that existed and ever would exist, came the screeches. There was nothing else to hear, and had never been, but a violent, jubilant call. "*WE ARE YOU.*"

2

Snow was falling. The snowfall, first of the season, was a blanket felt by all, first draping, then melting, on stalks, branches, mess bowls left out on the ground. And on skin, the fading, leathery hue left by the summer and early fall contrasting ephemeral white flakes. On dark eyelashes, sun-faded hair, worn gray sweatshirt. Shoshanna lay on the ground next to her camp, beside the fire. Closing her eyes, she listened, just listened, to the woods, their reaction to the passage of time, the spinning of the seasons.

The snow hummed, slightly, as it fell. The hum was high pitched, reminding Shoshanna of, paradoxically, Alvin and the Chipmunks. The melody seemed to be parceled into every little flake, one little note bundled up into each, releasing in utter catharsis as the globs reached the ground. Shoshanna didn't recognize this particular tune, well, of course she wouldn't, it was her first season here, but the woods around her seemed to recognize it, harmonizing in familiarity. At each point that the snowflake melted, the branches or the grass or the brambles they fell on would let out a note of their own, enhancing the sound of the snow. Greeting it. It was, Shoshanna thought, beautiful, fitting that the jubilation of the woods would translate as music, something transcendent and ineffable, to Shoshanna's ears.

Laying there, as she was, she was overwhelmed with the feeling that she rested at the center of the world, and that every sound, every voice, down to the smallest snail or tardigrade and up to the largest pine, swirled into her. She was the supermassive black

hole at the center of a starlit galaxy, and beyond each swirling limb, stars burst out of being and the remnant matter formed into new things. She was privy to it all, there, at the center. She hadn't eaten in days, but she felt full. So full of everything, so full of life, her insignificant body could hardly stagger a few steps before she was steeped in it all again, the grass and the trees and the cold winter Sun. It didn't matter where she was, where she lay, where she slept. This small patch of forest in this small state in this small world. She belonged to it.

*You, like me, have developed roots in this place. They extend down from the base of your spine, blooming like spring, bonding you to us.*

"I am you," Shoshanna responded, hearing the birches stir. She need not even speak. The connection was a nonverbal one, a bond transcending words.

*You said to me, Shoshanna had said to her, at our first collision, a sonic boom of awareness and connection, that you finally understood.*

Shoshanna had told her, cheek pressed against the sturdy trunk, "Every moment I've been out here. You've informed every moment. Everything you've taught me, every thing you've ever said to me, you have led me to this moment. You've made me."

Miriam had been the woman who, in frightful days when Shoshanna was a child, buried birthwort in the damp, packed earth like a secret for the world to keep. Miriam understood the workings of the woods, the way mushrooms fruited. Was it not her who had first made Shoshanna aware of what it meant to be conscious? Her grandmother had reached into her soul and pulled to the forefront Shoshanna's intrinsic ability to balance



good and evil. Shoshanna knew. She remembered. The things that her grandmother had inspired within her became who she was in the woods.

“I just couldn’t go back,” Shoshanna mused, days after the first event, dazed at all of the words the woods had to offer, but not as dazed as she found herself in present days. “Not to somewhere where so much of you lies dormant. Out here,” she ran her hand absentmindedly up and down her stomach, “The part of you that lives within me comes alive. *I come alive.*”

*We are whole, one whisper rose above the rest.*

Now the snow was falling, blanketing each rock, each hovel. Underneath its pale layers, everything looked as it was: the same. Bare bushes bore the burden of the now more slowly melting flakes. If Shoshanna rolled her head to the left and right, feeling the plush ground underneath her hard skull, she could see it all, without having to move. From this vantage point, she was level with the points where all plants burst forth from the ground, seeking the sunlight. Level with the point of life, where underground dwelling met the livelihood above. It was amazing to her how intricately each stem, each blade, was rooted, how delicately they all intertwined with each other, leaving space for each to grow, to thrive. Watching them, pulsating greens and browns and oranges and reds, was a mesmerizing ordeal, one that demanded hours of intense focus.

Even if she didn’t move, she could still sense the coolness, the ground hardening, thin stems bowing. There was no need to move, and she hadn’t, not for hours. Sitting vigil here required her to dedicate her entire being, parsing out each and every voice. Of course, the one she looked for the most was Miriam’s. The more Shoshanna listened, the more she came to realize that her grandmother’s voice was only truly a ‘voice’ in the way

that the voice in her own head was. If asked to explain the timbre or volume, she wasn't confident she could do so. The voice was simply there, or it was not. She couldn't compare it to the way she remembered Miriam speaking, back when she had a body, a human body. Her voice had been so unique and singular, raspy but simultaneously elegant. She had such a formal way of speaking, as if, at all times, she was giving a presentation or reading a poem, with theatrical pauses spliced in. Even the cadence of her speech was markedly different now, which had thrown Shoshanna off, at first. Cause for a moment of doubt. A moment of isolation, again. Thankfully, this had passed.

Embracing her grandmother in the woods, Shoshanna had come to realize, meant embracing her every form. Embracing the difference not in content, but in cadence, timber. Accepting the parts of her grandmother that came out of herself. Loving those parts. And, by doing so, she had the capacity to give, to listen. Everywhere she stumbled in the woods, her grandmother followed, like their souls had adhered to each other and could never be separated. Like there were no two souls, but one instead, one beautiful, blinding light, one ephemeral but eternal note in the cadence of the universe. "Note," cautioned the wind. "Note."

Yes, note.

And that was how they lived.

3

Shoshanna had found herself by the river again. In the harsh filter of winter, the river appeared almost black, uninviting and macabre. But Shoshanna knew better. *This river cleansed you, created you anew, rebirthed you to the woods*, came the echo of her grandmother's voice.

The day was a bleak one, the Sun hidden behind slate clouds, so invisible it felt as if it had never existed in the first place. The sky, up until recently so blue, had abandoned its color for the harsh cast of white. Had abandoned; had gone to sleep, along with the green-soaked world below. The birthwort, which languished beside the bank, which Shoshanna had picked ritualistically throughout the summer and autumn (though she had never used it) was gone, as were the long grasses that framed the flow of water. Left behind were the barest shrubs, clear icicles hanging from their woody stems, and the hardiest weeds, coated in frost. Numb to the ever pervading, bitter cold, Shoshanna kneeled by the water, mesmerized by its zephyrs, its cadence. It was so quiet. At Shoshanna's back, the forest was drenched in whispers, in song. But here. The river did not speak, and had never spoken, to Shoshanna. Sometimes the quiet was necessary. One could also lose themselves in silence. Shoshanna, capable of vocalizing, of adding to the chorus of the woods, was also capable of quiet, of participating in quietness, of adding to drowning silence.

*I remember you reading Hamlet to me. Am I to take it that you finally made use of my gift?*

“Yes, bubbe. I didn't exactly have much else in the way of reading material out here,” Shoshanna taunted.

*This is what it took for you to make use of my gifts? The birches had joked, not now, but before. Time was tricky. What was it you said, also?*

“Pardon?” Shoshanna responded, momentarily distracted by the other whisperings of the woods, central among the grove of birches, she lay curled on her side.

*Am I mistaken in thinking you had given me your opinion on the play?*

“Oh,” Shoshanna blushed, thinking of one of the many rambling tirades she had gone on during picturesque fall afternoons. Afternoons where she had spoken, but received no response. “Yes.”

*I had a good deal of trouble hearing you—*

“As did I, you.”

*—but I am still curious to know, what did you say? What did you think?*

“You wrote in your letter that there was a reason you gave me that particular play, and I think I know why. That’s what I was telling you on the day you’re asking about.”

Shoshanna felt hesitant to revisit anything she had said, to lay claim to the desperation and deep sadness that colored her perspective, then. Before she had realized. Before she had woken up.

*And? Am I never to know the answers to my questions?*

“Well...” she trailed off.

*Yes? The birches goaded.*

“At the time, I thought you gave me the play because I saw a lot of myself in Hamlet. The pain he felt at his father’s death. I related to his desperation in chasing after his ghost, of alienating Ophelia, of *not knowing*.” The words were flowing out of her rapidly. “How to carry on, how to connect. That bitter, hateful feeling of knowing you’re causing other people pain because you can’t really handle your own. Of people giving up

on you, the way that Hamlet's mother Gertrude gave up on him. And knowing that you deserve it. I mean, the play's named after him because he begets the tragedy, right? Just like *Romeo and Juliet* is named after the two characters who make the play tragic. I just related a lot to him. I felt a lot of shame knowing that I related to someone so antagonistic, someone centered in so much chaos.

"And so I thought that you gave it to me as a cautionary tale. I mean, I remember what you told me during that last visit to DC about who I was becoming, what I was forgetting. And I didn't listen enough to that at the time. I dismissed it because I felt ashamed. And then you died, and that seemed to prove it. I failed you. And when I actually sat down to read *Hamlet*, and recognized so much of myself...I don't know. I read it and I felt like I failed you. Like I'd become everything you didn't want me to be."

*Interesting, the birches considered.*

"Interesting?" Shoshanna felt pricks of nervousness for the first time in days, overwhelmed by all of the whisperings and mutterings that had faded to the background of her conversations with the birches. Part of her old, saddened self had returned.

*I had always seen you as Ophelia. Wide eyed, beautiful, passionately loyal to your loved ones.*

"I don't understand," Shoshanna replied.

*And what is it that you don't understand?*

"Ophelia goes crazy. She drowns herself. She gets her heart broken and she drowns herself."

*You believe she drowns?*

“I’m pretty sure Gertrude says that she drowns. What is this, another one of your Shakespeare related conspiracy theories?”

*Even as a birch, I remain a staunch Oxfordian.*

Shoshanna chuckled, but all too quickly the laughter died in her throat. “I don’t understand how you could see me as Ophelia,” she stated, slyly curious as to what her grandmother would respond.

*You only hear from Gertrude that Ophelia has actually drowned. If you’re willing to believe her word, be my guest.*

“You’re not answering my question!” Shoshanna accused.

If birches could sigh, Miriam did, a wispy, rustling sound, unmistakable even amongst the persistent timber of the wind, the movement of the grass. She answered, *And is it so unbelievable that I should see you as the character who breaks the cycle of tragedy?*

“Breaks it? I don’t understand.”

Another sigh. *You think that Ophelia could not have lashed out like Hamlet, like her own brother, Laertes, did? You think that she could not have contributed to the tragic aspects of the play?*

“I—”

*When I look at Ophelia—when I look at you, dear Shoshanna—I see two women faced with uncertainty, and, perhaps, tragedy, who walk a line. In both cases, I hope, these women choose to rise from their circumstances, to be reborn, instead of letting this uncertainty be the end of them. I see strength in the face of adversity. I believe I’ve made*

*it clear that I don't think Ophelia dies. I see her turning to herself for the answers, contemplating, feeling, allowing the hurt. I see her entering into that water, and emerging reborn, remade. Moving forward, a part of some larger future. I see her choosing life, choosing her own compass, rather than falling into the tragedy others have determined for her. Bachareta bachiym. Is it so hard to believe that this is a choice you are capable of making as well? Look around you. The woods have been reborn alongside you. With you.*

And it was true. One need only listen, to the excited whispers, the warnings, the music, witness the colors, the death, the life, the minute changes that followed the cycle of time, to know.

In the present, Shoshanna found herself in the freezing cold water of the river. Chilly tendrils, both of icy water and of silence, lapped at her sides, curling around her arms as she floated on her back. Cold air nibbled at her exposed wet skin. She did not know, possessed no awareness of how exactly she had made it there in the water. All she could think as her tattered clothes dragged her towards the bottom, the forces of the rocks whipped her from side to side was, *I am the river reborn. I am the fish I am the rock I am the root. I am Ophelia, penned into existence so long ago. Moving towards a beginning.*

*Me. A part of it all.*

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