

Book Marks

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From the Southern Review

I am worried about the woman. I am afraid she might hurt herself, perhaps has already hurt herself — there's no way to know which of the return dates stamped on the book of poetry was hers. The book, Denise Levertov's *Evening Train*, belongs to the New York City Public Library. I checked it out yesterday and can keep it for three weeks. Ever since my husband and I moved to the city several months ago, I've been homesick for my books, the hundreds of volumes stored in my brother's basement. I miss having them near me, running my hands over their spines, recalling when and where I acquired each one, and out of what need.

There's no way to know for certain that the phantom library patron is a woman, but all signs point in that direction. On one page is a red smear that looks like lipstick, and between two other pages, lying like a bookmark, is a long, graying hair. The underlinings, which may or may not have been made by the woman, are in pencil — pale, tentative marks I study carefully, reverently, the way an archaeologist traces a fossil's delicate imprint. The rest is dream, conjecture, the making of my story. It's a weird obsession, I know, studying other readers' leavings and guessing the lives lived beneath. Even as my reasonable mind is having its say (*This makes no sense. How can you assume? The marks could have been made by anyone, for any reason, over any period of time . . .*), my other self is leaving on its own journey. I've always been a hungry reader, what one friend calls a "selfish reader." But is there any other kind? Don't we all read to answer our own needs, to complete the lives we've begun, to point us toward some light?

Some of the underlinings in *Evening Train* have been partially erased (eraser crumbles have gathered in the center seams), as if the woman reconsidered her first responses or tried to cover her tracks. The markings do not strike me as those of a defiant woman but rather of one who has not only taken her blows but feels she might deserve them. She has underlined "serviceable heart" in one poem; in another, "Grey-haired, I have not grown wiser." If she exists, I would like to sit down with this woman. We seem to have a lot in common. We chose the same book, we both wear red lipstick, and though I am not so honest (the gray in my hair is hidden beneath an auburn rinse), I am probably her age or thereabouts.

And from what she has left behind on the pages of Levertov's poems, it appears that our hearts have worn down in the same places. This is the part that worries me. Though my heart has mended, for the time being at least, hers seems to be in the very act of breaking. A present-tense pain pulses through each marked-up poem, and the further I read, the clearer it becomes what she is considering. I want to reach through the pages and lead her out.

My interest in marginalia, reading between the lines, began when I was an evening student at a college in California, still living with my parents but working days to help pay my expenses. It was a lonely time. Untethered from the rock-hard rituals of high school, I'd been set adrift, floating between adolescence and Real Life, a place I'd heard about that both terrified and seduced me. As a toddler, I'd been one of those milkily content clingers who must be pulled away from the nipple; eighteen years later I was still reluctant to leave my mother's side.

My siblings had no such trouble. An older sister had married and left home, a brother was away at college, and my younger siblings, in various stages of adolescent rebellion, had struck out on their own. As for my friends, most had left to study at faraway colleges; the few who stayed, taking jobs at the local bank or training to be dental assistants, seemed even more remote than those who had left. Whatever had held us together in high school — intramural sports, glee club, the senior-class play — was light-years away. As was the boy who'd promised to marry me someday. He'd found someone else, and though part of me had always known that's how that book would end (we'd never progressed beyond kissing), nevertheless his leaving was the first hairline crack in my serviceable heart.

My only strike at independence was the paycheck I earned typing invoices at a printing shop. Though I reluctantly accepted my father's offer to pay tuition costs, I insisted on buying my own textbooks. I could afford only used ones, and the more *used* the book, the cheaper it was. Some had passed through several hands; the multiple marked-through names and phone numbers on the flyleaves bore witness to this fact. At first I was put off by the previous owners' underlinings, marginal comments, bright yellow highlighted sections, sophomoric doodlings and obscenities. Worse still were the unintentional markings — coffee stains, dried pizza sauce, cigarette burns.

After a while, however, I became accustomed to the markings. I even began to welcome them. Since I didn't live on campus or have college buddies — I worked all day, then went straight home after class — I appreciated the company the used books offered. I imagined the boy who had splattered pizza sauce across the map of South America. Was he lonely too? Had he eaten the pizza alone, in his tiny dorm room, while memorizing Bolivia's chief exports? What about the girl who had misspelled *orgasm* (using two *s*'s) in the margins of John Donne's "The Canonization"? Had she ever said the word aloud? Was she a virgin like me?

The used texts served practical purposes as well. In the case of difficult subject matter (which, for me, meant political science, chemistry, and botany), it was as though I had engaged a private tutor, someone to sit at my elbow and guide me through each lesson, pointing out important concepts, underlining the principles that would show up on next week's exam. The marked-up textbook was my portable roommate, someone to sit up nights with me, to quiz me with questions I didn't know enough to ask.

Not since I was a child sharing a room with Great-Aunt Bessie, an inveterate reader, had I had a reading partner. Bessie and I would sit up late in our double bed and read mysteries and westerns aloud. We'd take turns, each reading a chapter a night, and at the end, right before Bessie removed her dentures and switched off the light (she was a disciplined reader, always stopping at the end of a chapter), right before she slipped her embroidered handkerchief into the book to mark our place, we would discuss our reactions to what we had read and make predictions about how the story would turn. Because of Aunt Bessie, I never saw books as dead, finished texts. They were living, breathing entities, unexplored territories into which we would venture the next night, and the next. Anything could happen, and we would be present when it did.

Years later, carrying this lesson into my first college class, I was amazed at what I encountered: rows of bleary-eyed students slumped around me, their limp hands spread across Norton anthologies. Most never ventured into the territory Bessie and I had explored. This stymied me, that people could read a poem by Shelley or Keats or Sylvia Plath and not want to live inside it, not want to add their words to the ones on the page. Looking back on my college literature texts, I can trace the journey of those years. In the margins of Wordsworth's sonnets, beside the lines "The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers," I can chart my decision to quit my day job and pursue my studies full-time, even if it meant borrowing from the savings account I'd been feeding each payday. "I am done with this," I wrote in blue ink, meaning the commerce of getting and spending, the laying waste of powers I'd yet to discover.

And in the underlined sections of Gerard Manley Hopkins's poems, I can trace the ecstasy of my first spiritual awakening ("I caught this morning morning's minion"), made all the more ecstatic since, because I was unable to understand his elliptical syntax with my *mind*, I was forced to take it in through the rhythms of my body. This was a new music for me. My heart was no longer metaphorical. It beat rapidly in my chest, my temples, in my pale, veined wrists. Suddenly, within Hopkins's lines, I was breaking in new places: "here / Buckle! And the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion / Times told lovelier, more dangerous."

At the time I encountered those lines, I had no knowledge of the fire that awaited me in the eyes of a young man I'd yet to meet. I saw myself vaguely, like a character in one of the books I fell asleep with each night. In dreams I drank black coffee at street cafés, lay beneath the branches of the campus oaks, or wandered late at night, as Whitman's narrator had wandered, looking up "in perfect silence at the stars." In daylight, I pulled another used book from the shelf and fell into its pages. Could it be that Rilke's injunction, "You must change your life," was aimed at me? I highlighted it in yellow, then wrote in the margin, in bright blue indelible ink, "THIS MEANS YOU!"

Had I chosen to resell these books to the campus bookstore (I didn't; they had become part of me), their new owners might one day have read my underlinings, my marginal scribbles, and

wondered at the person who left such a trail. “She needs to get more sun,” they might have thought, if they could deduce I was a *she*. Maybe they would have worried about me the way I now worry about the gray-haired woman. They might even have responded, as I sometimes do, with an answering note. It might have gone on and on like that, a serial installment of marginalia, each new reader adding his own twist to Hopkins or Wordsworth — or to me, the phantom whose pages they were turning.

When life interrupts, you close the book. Or perhaps you leave it open, facedown on the bed or table, to mark your place. Aunt Bessie taught me never to do this. “You’ll break its spine,” she said, running her age-spotted hands across the book’s cover, and the tenderness in her gesture made me ashamed that I’d ever considered such violence. After that I took to dog-earing pages, but after a while even that seemed too violent. Now, whenever I encounter a dog-eared page, I smooth its wounded edge.

Aunt Bessie used embroidered handkerchiefs to mark her place, though to me they seemed unnecessary since she always stopped at the end of a chapter. Some readers are like that. They regulate their reading, fitting books neatly into their lives the way some people schedule exercise or sex: five poems, twenty laps. One of my friends always stops after twenty-five pages so she can easily remember where she left off. Though I admire such discipline, I’ve never been able to accomplish it. I fall into books the way I fall into lust — wholly, hungrily. Often the book disappoints, or I disappoint. The first flush cools and the words grow tired and dull, or I grow tired and dull and slam the book shut. Occasionally, though, I keep reading, and lust ripens slowly into love, and I want to stay right there, at the lamplit table or in the soft, worn chair, until the last page is turned.

Then suddenly, always unexpectedly, life interferes; it is what life does best. It usually happens in mid-paragraph, sometimes even mid-sentence — a kind of biblio-interruptus — and I grab something to mark my place. Though I own many beautiful bookmarks, they are never there when I need them. So I reach for whatever is close at hand. A newspaper clipping, the phone bill, my bourbon-fossiled cocktail napkin, a note from a friend, the grocery list. Once I plucked a protruding feather from the sofa cushion where I rested my head, once I used a maple leaf that had blown in through the patio door, once I even pulled a hair from my head.

Looking back on my nineteenth year, I am amazed at how easily I closed the books I’d been living inside. What replaced them were the poems the young man handed me across a restaurant table. “Pretty Brown-Haired Girl” was the title of one; “Monday Rain” another. Some were written in German, and I used my secondhand Cassell’s dictionary to translate them. The poems were not good — I remember thinking this even then — but they were the first love poems anyone had ever written for me. I ran my fingers across the words. I folded the papers, put them into my pocket, and later that night unfolded them on my bedside table. Already the poems were in my head, every

ragged line break and rhyme.

At twenty-one he had one of those faces that might have looked old all along. His hair was retreating prematurely, exposing a forehead with furrows already deeply plowed. But his eyes were bright blue, center-of-a-flame blue, simultaneously cool and hot. He wore faded jeans and a rugged woolen jacket and drove a motorcycle; his mouth tasted of cigarettes. Plus he could quote Wordsworth, which weakened me even more. He was independently brilliant, a part-time student with no declared major, taking classes in subjects like German and astronomy and horticulture — nothing that fit together to form anything like a formal degree. “Come into the light of things,” he teased. “Let nature be your teacher.”

Nature taught me so much over the next year that it was all I could do to attend classes, let alone sit up nights with pencil in hand, scribbling notes in the margins of textbooks. He’d moved into his own apartment, and his marks were all over me — his mouth on my forehead, his tongue on my neck, my belly, the smell of his cigarettes in my hair. All else fell away. When an occasional misgiving surfaced I pushed it down. I had reason to doubt that I was his only brown-haired girl, the only one to whom he wrote poems. But I hushed the voice of reason, even when it spoke directly into my ear.

My parents disapproved of him, and though Aunt Bessie had moved back to her Midwest childhood home, I was certain she would have disapproved too. I *knew* Carolyn did. She’d told me so, in the same loving yet blatantly forthright tone she’d used on me since I was small. Carolyn was my mother’s best friend, and had served as a kind of alternate mother for me as long as I could remember. Perhaps *mother* is the wrong word; *mentor* may come closer. She was a librarian who not only loved books but believed in them, even more so than Aunt Bessie. Carolyn believed that books could change our lives, could save us from ourselves.

My mother also loved books, but while she was raising her six children — sometimes single-handedly, when my pilot father was overseas — she put reading aside. I cannot recall, during those years, ever seeing my mother sit down, except to play a game of Monopoly or Old Maid, or to sew our Halloween costumes or Easter dresses. Certainly not to read. Late at night, when my father was away and she couldn’t sleep, perhaps she switched on the light beside their double bed and opened a book, probably her Bible, a beautiful burgundy-leather King James my father had given her early in their marriage and that she kept close at hand. I loved to feel the cover and the onionskin pages that were tipped in gold and totally free of marginalia. The only mark I could find was a handwritten notation on the flyleaf. “Deuteronomy 29:29. The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever.”

Over the years Carolyn gave me many books that she felt I needed to read at particular stages of my life. Some she'd bought on her travels; some had belonged to her mother; some had been gifts. She shared my passion for hand-me-downs, and never apologized for giving me used books. "Words don't go bad," she'd say, "like cheese. Read everything you can get your hands on. Live inside them." On the subject of my newfound love, she was adamant: "You're too young to give it all up for a man." Carolyn had married an older, stable, kind man who adored her yet allowed the space her inquiring mind demanded. "I'm afraid you're going to lose yourself," she told me. "Besides," she added, almost as an afterthought, "I don't trust him."

"You won't be able to put it down," booksellers claim as they ring up your purchase. But of course you do, you must. The oven timer goes off, the children come in from school, your plane lands, the nurse calls your name, your lover kisses the back of your neck, your heavy eyes close in sleep. By the time you return to the book — if you return — you will be changed, will not be the same person you were ten days, or ten years, before. Life is a river, and you can't step into the same book twice.

One night after we'd made love, he lit a cigarette and leaned back onto the pillows. "I'm in trouble," he said. "There's this girl." Smoke floated around his eyes; he blinked, fanned the air. "*Was* this girl. It's over, but she's been calling. She says she's pregnant." Something hot flashed through my head, then was gone. All I could think was *He will marry her, and I will lose him.*

"There's this place in Mexico City," he continued. "It's nine hundred dollars for everything, to fly her there and back. I have two hundred."

I had seen the word *abortion* in biology textbooks, but I had never uttered it. In 1969, even at the crest of the free-love movement, it was not a legal option. I had fourteen hundred dollars in my savings account, all that was left of nearly two years of typing invoices at the print shop. Each Friday I had taken the little vinyl passbook to the bank window, where the cashier recorded the deposit, half of my paycheck.

"I'll get the rest," I said, surprising even myself.

"I can't ask you to do that."

My next line was from a movie. Something out of the forties. I should have been wearing a hat with a feather. We should have been in a French café: "You're not asking. I'm offering."

"I'll make it up to you," he said.

To this day I can't recall if he repaid me. The passbook shows no record of the money being replaced. Within a year we were married, and what was left of my savings was pooled into a joint account. There was little money and much to buy — a dinette table, a TV stand, a couch. One night he suddenly sat straight up on that couch. "I'll bet she was lying all along," he said, as though continuing a conversation started just seconds before. "Maybe she just wanted a trip to Mexico.

She probably spent the whole time on the beach.” I wanted to believe him. I hoped the girl *had* spent the weekend on the sand. I hoped she’d gotten a tan. But I knew she hadn’t lied. I knew because of what had been set into motion since I’d handed over the money. The shadow over our marriage had first approached in the bank’s parking lot, had lengthened and darkened with each month, and has never completely lifted.

The girl’s name was Barbara. She had blue eyes and long brown hair, and she lived in Garden Grove with her parents. She had a lisp. That’s all he ever told me. The rest has been written in day-light imaginings and in dreams: Barbara and I are sitting beneath a beach umbrella reading books and sipping tall, cool drinks. The ocean is crashing in the distance, and the child crawling the space between our knees is a girl. She is a harlequin, seamed down the center. Not one eyelash, one fingernail, one cell of the child is his. She is the two best halves of Barbara and me, sewn with perfectly spaced stitches: this is the story I write.

Studying the markings in *Evening Train*, I surmise that the gray-haired woman is an honest reader, unashamed to admit her ignorance. She has drawn boxes around difficult words — *epiphanies*, *antiphonal*, *tessellations*, *serrations* — and placed a question mark above each box. Maybe she’s merely an eager learner, the kind who sets small tasks for herself; she will go directly to the dictionary and find these words. Or maybe someone — her husband, her lover, whoever broke her serviceable heart — also criticized her vocabulary. It was too small or too large. She asked too many questions.

In the poem about the breaking heart, she has underlined “in surface fissures” and “a web *I* of hairline fractures.” She probably didn’t even notice the fissures at first. Maybe, she guessed, this webbing is the necessary landscape of every marriage, each act of love. But reading on, I sense that more has been broken than a metaphorical heart. She has circled the entire poem “The Batterers,” about a man who, after beating a woman, dresses her wounds and, in so doing, begins to love her again. “Why had he never / seen, before, what she was? / What if she stops breathing?” I tell myself / wouldn’t have stayed in that kind of situation. As it is, I’ll never know. He never hit me, though one night, desperate for attention, I begged him to. (How do we live with the knowledge of our past selves?) He’d come home late, at two or three o’clock, with no explanation. Earlier in the evening, returning from a night class and looking for clues to his absence, I’d found a woman’s jacket behind a chair. It smelled foreign yet familiar — her musky perfume mingled with the memory of his cigarettes. They had been here together, in our apartment. He had not touched me in weeks.

When his fist finally flew, it landed on the door of the filing cabinet where I kept my class notes, term papers, and poetry drafts. This should not have surprised me. For months he’d been

angry that I'd returned to school. "What are you trying to prove?" he'd ask. "Where do you think this is going to get you? Just listen to yourself, can't you just hear yourself?" Though I still worked parttime at the print shop, he spent whole days on the assembly line, drilling holes into bowling balls. Anything to make ends meet. He was hoping, beyond logic, that as a married man with a full-time job, he would be saved from Vietnam. He was terrified; his draft number was low.

The force of the blow was audible: a thud, a crack. Loose sheets flew from the top of the cabinet. He cried out, then brought the fist to his mouth. Surely it was broken, I thought. I rushed toward him, but he held up his other hand to block me. Time slowed. White paper fluttered around me like birds. I stared at his hand, and something went out of me, I could feel it, a sucking force, tidal, pulling me out of myself. Then the moment was over. He turned and walked away, his wounded fist still pressed to his mouth, his blue eyes filling. I knelt on the floor and began to gather the papers. My eyes were dry, my vision clear. This is what hurt the most: the clarity of the moment, its sharp focus. Each black word, on each scattered page, distinct and singular.

Two years ago, when Carolyn was dying, when she could count the remaining months on her fingers, she wrote from her home in Virginia, asking me to come as soon as possible to help her sort through her books. "You can have whatever you want," she said. "The only thing I ask is that you don't cry. Just pretend it's a book sale. Come early, stay late. And go home with your arms full."

It took two full afternoons. Too weak to stand, Carolyn sat on a little stool, pointing and nodding, directing me shelf by shelf. Each row called forth a memory. Her life's story unfolded book by book. She told me she was glad she'd lived long enough to see a grandchild safely into the world. She was glad I had found a husband who was good to me, this time, and she wished me all the happiness she had known. When my car could hold no more books, she handed me a large envelope and explained that one of her jobs as assistant librarian had been to check the returned books before reshelving them. The envelope was labeled in Carolyn's scrawl: *Woodrow Wilson Public Library, Things Found in Books*. "You'd be surprised at what people use as bookmarks," she said.

When I got home, I emptied the envelope onto the floor, amazed at what spilled out. Bits and pieces of strangers' lives, hundreds of markers of personal histories. Love letters, folded placemats, envelopes, sympathy cards, valentines, handwritten recipes, train tickets, report cards, newspaper clippings, certificates of achievement, bills, receipts, religious tracts, swimming-pool passes, scratch-and-sniff perfume ads, canceled tickets for the bullfight, bar coasters, rice paper, happy money. Studying the bookmarks, I slid into each stranger's life, wondering which book he had checked out and whether he had finished it. What calls us away from books, then back to them?

When I am in pain, I *devour* books, often stripping the words of conceptual and

metaphorical context and digging straight for the meat. The gray-haired woman seems to be doing the same thing, taking each word personally, *too* personally, as if Levertov had written them just for her, to guide her toward some terrible action. Certainly this wasn't the poet's intention, yet the more I study the markings, the more I fear what the woman is considering. In "Dream Instruction" she has underlined, twice, "gradual stillness," but appears to have missed entirely the "blessing" in the line that follows. The marks in "Contraband" are even more alarming. I want to take the woman by the hand and remind her of the poem's symbolic level, a level that's nearly impossible to see when you are in pain. Contraband, I would tell her, represents the Tree of Knowledge, the tree of reason, and the fruit is the words we stuff into our mouths, and yes, that fruit might indeed be "toxic in large quantities; fumes / swirled in our heads and around us," but those lines are not a prescription for suicide. There are other ways to live with knowledge.

For instance, you can leave, gather up what remains of yourself and set off on a journey much like the journey of faith Levertov writes of. Or, if that proves too difficult, you can send yourself off on its own, wave goodbye, step back into childhood's shoes and refuse to go one step further. You can cut off your hair, take the pills the doctors prescribe and beg for more, then lose yourself daily in a gauzy sleep, surrounded by the books that have become your only food. His deferment dream did not materialize, so you have followed him to a military base where you know no one. Vietnam is still a possibility. Your heart is divided: you dread the orders yet pray for them. If they come, you will be able to retreat honorably to your parents' home. In the meantime, you have the pills and the books and the bed grown huge by his nightly absence — he is sleeping elsewhere now, with someone else, and he no longer even tries to hide it.

If you're lucky, one night your hand will find the phone, and if you are doubly lucky and have a mother like mine, she will arrive early the next day, having driven hundreds of miles alone in a car large enough to hold several children. Though she is a quiet woman who rarely interferes, in this case she will make an exception. She will locate your husband, demand that he come home, now, and when he does (this is where the details get fuzzy, you have sent yourself off somewhere), together they will lift you into the backseat of her big car and rush you to the emergency room, where the attending physician will immediately direct you to the psychiatric wing.

I would remember none of this part, which is a blessing. Had I recalled the details of the breakdown, I might have felt compelled to tell the story too soon, to anyone who would listen: strangers on buses, prospective employers, longtime family friends, men I met in bars or churches (for months I would search both places, equally, for comfort). "There's no need to tell," my mother said after my release, and she would repeat this many times, long after I was out of danger. Though I've finally decided, after nearly thirty years, to tell, I still hear her words in my head: "You don't need any more hurt. It's no one's business but yours."

This is my mother's way. Though she freely gives to anyone in need — food, comfort, time,

love — there is a part of herself, the heart's most enclosed, tender core, that she guards like a secret. In this way, and others, I would like to be more like her. Less needy, more protective of private fears and desires. Less prone to look back, more single-minded in forward resolve. Though I had rehearsed his leaving for months, when he finally went, for good this time (isn't it strange how we use *good* to mean *final*?), I was devastated, terrified to imagine my future. "What should I do," I begged my mother. "What would you do?" I don't know what I expected her to say. My mother has never been one to give advice. Experience, in her view, is not transferable. It is not an inheritance you pass on to your children, no matter how much you wish you could.

If her words held no answer, I decided, then I would read her life. Certainly there were worlds it could teach me. She had left her parents and the family farm to follow her husband from one military base to the next; waited out his long absences; buried one child and raised six others; watched as loved ones suffered divorces, financial ruin, alcoholism, depression, life-threatening illnesses and accidents; nursed them through their last years. "Take me with you," I begged, meaning back home, to *her* home, to the nest she and my father had made.

My mother remembers this as one of the painful moments of her life. "I wanted more than anything to say yes," she recalls. "But I knew if I did, you'd never find your way. It was time you found your own way." So she took my face in her hands and said *no*. No, I could not follow her, I could not come back home. Then she helped me pack my suitcase, and, so I would not be alone, so I would be safe if worse once again came to worst, she made me a plane reservation to my brother's town in South Carolina. Half a world away, or so it seemed to me.

The narrator of Levertov's *Evening Train* sets off on a journey too, and though I suspect that the luggage and racks of the book's title poem are intended to be metaphorical, I cannot help but feel the heft of the bags, the steel slickness of the racks. And as I study the phantom woman's markings, it seems clear that, like mine, her journey required a real ticket on a real train or plane, and that by the time she arrived at the poem called "Arrived," she had already sat alone in a room with "Chairs, / sofa, table, a cup —" and begun the inventory of her life. Was she, like the poem's narrator, unable to call forth the face of the one she had left, who had left her? Why else mark these lines: "the shape / of his head, or / color of his eyes appear / at moments, but I can't / assemble feature with feature"?

In my pain, I prayed for such moments of forgetfulness. How pleasant it would be not to recall his hands, his tanned, furrowed forehead, the flame-cool blue of his eyes. My only release was to stuff my brain with cotton. That's how it felt when I took the pills. Though they no longer had the power to put me to sleep, they lifted me to a place of soundlessness and ether. I thought of T. S. Eliot's hollow men, their heads filled with straw. The image of scarecrows was comforting, as

were thoughts of helium balloons, slow-floating dirigibles, and anything submerged in water. I was an aquarium, enclosed. Amniotic silence surrounded me hour after hour, and then suddenly — *What's that noise?*, I'd think, startled, amazed to discover it was my own breath in my lungs, my heart thumping, the blood thrumming in my ears.

When this happened, when I was brought back to myself, I'd think, *No, please not that*. I had forgotten for a while that I was alive, that there were hands at the ends of my arms, fingers that could burn themselves on the gas stove, the iron, the teakettle's steam. The world was too much with me. Why bother? (*This is the way the world ends . . .*) I fell back into bed, finding comfort in Eliot, and later in Job. The New Testament was stuffed too full of promise and light, but Old Testament sufferings were redemptive, though not in the traditional sense of the word. I was long past questioning why a loving God would destroy Job's house and cattle, afflict him with boils all over his body, and kill his children. The worst is yet to come, I thought — and almost said, aloud, to Job. Happiness is what you should be fearing. Why waste your breath talking back to God, calling out for salvation? The cure might be worse than the disease. If God answers, out of the whirlwind and the chaos of destruction, beware of what will be given: healing, forgiveness, six thousand camels, a thousand she-asses, seven sons and three daughters, each fairer than the next, your life overflowing, another high place from which to fall.

I didn't want to live, but I couldn't imagine dying. How to gather the energy? I didn't own a gun and could see no way to get one. I had no courage for knives. Pills seemed an easy way out; I tried, but my stomach refused to accept them. Over the next weeks I started taking long drives on country roads, staring at the yellow lines and thinking how easy it would be to pull the wheel to the left, into the oncoming truck, which was heavy enough, I was sure, to bear the impact without killing its driver. (I didn't want to kill anyone, not even myself. I just wanted not to live. There's a difference.) Or better yet, pull the wheel to the right, into that stand of pine trees.

What terrified me was not the thought of the mangled metal, the row of wounded trunks, or even of the sheet pulled over me — a gesture that seemed almost a kindness, something a loved one would do. What terrified me that late summer day was the sudden greenness of the trees, the way their beauty insinuated itself into my vision — peripherally at first, vaguely, and without my consent. I blinked to stop what felt like tears, which I hadn't tasted for so long I'd forgotten that they were made of salt, that they were something my body was producing on its own, long after I thought I had shut down. O.K., I said to the steering wheel, the padded dashboard, the pines. If I can think of five reasons not to die, I won't.

When I got back to my room, I pulled from the pages of Eliot a blank prescription refill form I'd been using as a bookmark. I found a pencil in the nightstand, one without an eraser, I recall. I remember thinking that I couldn't go back on what I'd written, couldn't retrace my steps if I made a mistake. I turned the form over and numbered the blank side — 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 — with a

black period after each, as if preparing to take a spelling test. It was the first time I'd put pencil to paper since I'd left California. I thought for a while, then wrote beside number one, "My parents," immediately wishing I'd split them into "Mother" and "Dad" so that I could have filled two lines. Then to my surprise the next four blanks filled quickly, and my hand was adding numbers and more numbers to accommodate the names of my siblings, my nieces and nephews, the handful of friends I still claimed and even the ones who were gone. I filled the back of the form and probably could have filled another, but I didn't want to try, I couldn't bear any more just yet — the stab of joy, the possibility.

As months passed, the world slowly continued to make itself known, appearing in small, merciful gestures, as if not wishing to startle: voices, a pair of hands, golden leaf-shadow, a suggestion of sky. Then one morning, for no reason I can recall, the world lifted her veil and showed her whole self. She looked strangely familiar — yes, I thought, it's all coming back. Put on shoes, brush teeth, smile into the mirror, pour orange juice into a glass. *This is the way the world begins. This is the way the world begins. This is the way.*

I smooth the center seam of *Evening Train* and run my hands over the marked-up lines. Poems can be dangerous places in which to venture, alone, and I'm not sure the woman is ready for "After *Mindwalk*." She has underlined "panic's black cloth falling / over our faces, over our breath." Please don't, I want to say. Don't do it, don't drink it, don't eat that apple. I want to tell her about the pine trees, the list, Mother and Bessie and Carolyn and Wordsworth and Hopkins and Job. Look, I'd say, pointing to the footnote. See, *Mindwalk* was a film by Bernt Capra, it's not a real place; don't worry. It's about Pascal and the Void. It doesn't have to be about you. But it is, of course. That's why she is not only reading the book but writing one of her own as well, with each scratch of the pencil. The printed words are Levertov's, but the other poem is the woman's — written in the margins, in the small boxes that cage the words she cannot pronounce, in the crumbled erasures, in the question marks floating above the lines. Wait up, I want to say — a crazy thought, but I can't help myself. Wait up; I want to tell you something.

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