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A Year After the Breakup

Snow can forgive almost any landscape.
The cemetery is clean, each tree branch clothed
and holy. Even the overflowing garbage can and the rusted backhoe
wear matching white uniforms. Tomorrow, I'll wake to the scrape
of shovels against salt. The ER will overflow with heart attacks,
men who insisted they were still strong enough to dig their way out.
On the walk home, my fingers stiffen with numb, unable to grasp
the keys, undo the deadbolt. Each night this week, I've thought of you
in the flickering bursts between awake and asleep.

Bright yellow walls, IKEA bookshelf, screws loose in the carpet.
A broken blue mug in the sink, apologies in your car's front seat,
our bodies in a twin bed, cold feet intertwined. I replay your questions
and wish I had an answer, some cool water to throw on my loneliness.
It's January now, and each day is gray and short, gray and short,
monotony broken only by the sudden rush of snow.

After I left, I wished I had at least loved you, so I could feel
the torment of loss and describe it. Instead, I felt only
a suspicious hollowness, a vacancy where pain should live.
When I open my window, I hear the quiet noise the snow makes
as it meets ground, a thousand falling bodies becoming one.
I have never given myself over to anything. Perhaps this is an apology
for my reservations, for the way, even in calm moments, I anticipate
the broken streetlights, the scraped-up palms, the way snow melts
and leaves the world sodden and uglier than before.

The Part I'll Never Do Again

My dad says crickets in August sound like going back to school, and he means it's a melancholy sound, in the way late summer is like the end of a party, like picking up crushed beer cans from the grass.

Tonight, their chorus drifts through my window, muffled by the opening chords of "Jack and Diane" bursting from the neighbor's radio. I've always been suspicious of songs like this, that try to make me nostalgic for something I never had: eating chili dogs and hooking up with the quarterback outside the Tastee Freez. Whenever I hear that guitar riff and drum, I feel sorry for those made-up kids who peaked at sixteen, and sorrier still for the real-live adults who sing along like this is their story too.

When my dad was a kid, the words in his books shivered backwards on the page so by high school he was gone, 500 miles from home at a boarding school for students who couldn't belong back home. He tells me New Hampshire has an extra season between winter and spring called *muð*, when the earth is wet and slick like a fresh wound.

I've never been to New England, but I imagine *muð* feels like trudging to class every day, even on the hollow mornings, even after the no-sleep nights, even when the nonessential parts of your face are so cold they call it quits, go numb, and the sodden ground grabs the heels of your boots and the release of each step sounds like a small gasp.

My dad told me, *at fourteen, everything is hard*, and he was right. I kept a notebook and tallied every bad day, promised myself when I reached fifty marks, I'd *do something*, but never did. If I wrote a song about high school, it would mostly be about period cramps and quadratic equations and the specific headache you get from leaning against a schoolbus window, every bump and pothole rattling your brain into delirium. There would be no handsome, handsy boyfriend tugging on my jeans, no beer in the cup-holder or cheers from the bleachers. Maybe it would be about those cicadas who sleep for seventeen years just waiting for their lives to begin before they erupt from the dirt, screaming.

This morning, I found a hummingbird egg in the grass,
so tiny I thought it was a Tic-Tac before I pinched it
and the yellow yolk broke between my fingers.
Isn't it incredible that anything that starts so small could make it?
If there is any gift from those years, it is this: they ended.
But they still live inside me like rings of a tree, marked by their tightness,
a spot you can point to and say *drought*, say *starving*, say *something struggled here*.



Talar Kalajian, *Through the Eyes*, photograph

An Elegy in April

Today I got my first sunburn of spring.
An afternoon on the balcony ended with pink shoulders,
a newly freckled face, cool aloe on my fingertips.

Winter was so gray, I'd forgotten what the sun could do.

I thought of your death when the pear trees burst
their rancid petals and dropped their stink all over the sidewalk.

Today I opened every window and let the cool air flirt
with the curtains, the candy wrappers, the loose papers on my desk.

Tonight all the beautiful girls at the bar were smiling and I wanted to smile too.
Condensation wept the sides of my glass, my too-strong gin & tonic
melting in my hand. On the walk home, I listened to a podcast

about the color blue. Rare, in nature, if you don't count the sky or water.
Rare because of light rays and food sources and science too complex
for my tipsy brain. The neighborhood smelled like fresh-cut grass

and I wanted to tell you that I almost understand you. Sometimes,
when I'm swimming, I stop kicking and pulling and just let myself sink
to the sandy bottom, pretend my body is weighted at the hips,
heavy and sedentary, and count how long I can hold my breath.

Today, the world smelled like mulch and leaves. The spider plant
on my desk is having babies. The orchid has called it quits
and, truly, who can blame her. It is exhausting to stand straight,
to hold your face bright and open, to drink one ice cube at a time.

I don't know why I'm writing to you, except to say today was warm
and I remembered outside is for more than just rushing from car to front door,
car to front door, coat pulled tight, head down, ears stinging.

Joy, cut with sorrow. Because the grass grows back and my skin turns pink
but you are dead regardless, new year after new year.

Moss Hollow

The summer the coyotes came,
the mountains swelled with noise.
A chorus of bullfrogs and cicadas
interrupted by sirens, by yips and shrieks
like panic, like screeching brakes.
We'd sit around the campfire
and try to guess the number.

It was the summer Farfar stopped
chopping wood, his hands gnarled
like burls on a tree, and we pretended
not to notice. The neighbors lost their dog
on the Fourth, spooked by cheap fireworks,
and our flashlights sliced up the mountains.
We never found him.

It was the summer I learned
how to backstroke, the pond lazy
and swollen. Snapping turtles hovered
beneath me like shadows, patient
and algae-slick. Farfar spoke of selling
the farm, started mixing up Danish
with English, and it caught us by surprise,

like a snake in the grass, like the glint
of eyes in a flashlight beam. Some nights,
he'd wake himself kicking the wall,
fighting who knows what. We rearranged
his furniture, gave him a bedrail like a child,
rolled up the carpet and shut his window at night.

August came heavy, the Osage orange tree
teeming with inedible fruit. We'd slice them
with pocket knives and count the seeds,
juice sticky as the sun on our backs. September
smelled like fresh paper, like spiral-bound notebooks,
and we started sleeping with blankets again.

When it was time to leave, we packed
our bags and gave gentle hugs,
not too tight, didn't want to feel
the bones fluttering underneath.
We were never good at endings.

On the drive out, the gravel road
was blocked by a wild turkey,
pacing slow, infinite circles, clucking
to himself, shaking his head.



Christopher Woods, *Sentries*, photograph