

The Year I Disappear

Ma, last week I was driving,
And the evergreens lining the highway
Grew into the house I shared with Leah—
The one in Rhode Island.
My one track mind put me in the kitchen,
Making breakfast.
I could smell the corn tortillas being toasted,
Her fake bacon—
Cherry red and warped, popping on the stove.
I could see her, alive again,
Slouched over the living room loveseat,
Her hair, purple and blonde,
Blending to form a kaleidoscope violet.
I could hear her, voice thick with sleep,
Calling out to ask
Whether the oil was hot enough—
If the burner would need to be turned up.

I'm in New York—
I repeat it until I feel real again.
I treat this modern day grounding spell
Like the prayer you would say to me
Every night before bed.
As I got older I would ask you to repeat it
Until I felt safe enough to curl in on myself.

Thank you God for Aubrey Bird.
Thank you for sending her to our family, God.
We love her so much.
Keep her safe while she sleeps,
And send her good dreams.

Ma, I have one foot in the door,
And one foot out.
The seasons are changing and I'm not.
The leaves are falling
And my windshield ices in the morning,

But I can't escape the humid heat of her dying—
The heaviness of his hands.

Two nights ago when we talked on the phone,
I sat heaving in putrid smoke,
Hoping you couldn't sense sexual assault
In my speech.
I want to spell it out for you—
The nights spent in the Bronx,
Empty bottles of Pappy Van Winkle's
Famous whiskey,
Medical pagers that emit a screeching sound
Only after he's finished—
But you know him.
I showed you his photo earlier this summer.
He was in a gray suit,
Black hair pushed to the side,
Accepting some award
For research on cardiovascular systems.
When I told you he was thirty-one
You asked if I was joking,
Because surely no man that attractive,
That successful,
Would align himself with the likes of us—
You and me Ma.
It's always been you and me.

When dad told you to leave,
I packed our bags.
At sixteen those high-school assemblies
On domestic violence consumed me,
As I told you to transfer enough money
To last us a month.
Dad never touched you,
But I took the extra car key for good measure.
You said you would take us
To a meditation retreat up North—
Yoga and forced sobriety would do you good.
We ended up at grandma's, just a mile away.

Ma, I keep thinking about the photo of us
At the beach,
The one that sits in the gold frame
On the mantle in the foyer.
I'm maybe three and you've wrapped me
In a Ralph Lauren teddy bear towel.
I'm swaddled close to your chest
And you must've said something *so* funny,
Because my mouth is open,
Revealing the chicklet teeth of a toddler.

The night when he was inside of me,
He called out my name,
And I answered with the whooshing sound
Of waves lapping the shore.
I wasn't there Ma, I was with you—
On the beach.
It's been almost two months since it happened,
And I know what highways to follow,
What exits to take,
But I'm lost.
I'm still in Rhode Island—
Wrapped in a terry cloth towel,
Stranded on this simple shore—
And you're not.

Ma, I want a man to love me.
I want the antidepressants back,
And I want to be around long enough
To deliver my friend's babies.
I want this feeling in my stomach to go away,
And Leah to be alive again.
I want it all for us,
But the days are getting shorter
And I'm going to sleep earlier.
Last night, standing naked
In the sweltering silence of my room,
I realized this is the year I disappear.
Look for me in that photo on the mantle Ma.
I'll be there.

The Antidote For My Fear of Death

When I was six,
My mom explained death to me in a sweaty bar booth.
She used big words, like 'heaven' and 'rejoice,'
And I cried into my chicken tenders
Because I didn't want to go there.
For the first month Mckenzie was dead,
He made nightly appearances,
Whispering how God was good, and I would be too.
He doesn't come anymore,
And now I lay here most nights,
Fearful for my brother in Boston,
My mom in the room next to mine,
And for myself.
So I go to Rwanda instead,
And sit with Amani and Pinga, the Mountain gorillas.
Together we strip the leaves off of bamboo,
And if she's feeling sentimental,
Amani will gesture for me to sit in her lap
And she'll inspect my hair for insects,
As Pinga digs the dirt out from between my toes.
Some nights Amani transforms into Ryan,
And I'm sitting in his lap at dusk.
Everything is yellow, yellow, yellow,
And we're talking about the name Margot for a girl,
And there's a bumble bee stuck in the grass that needs saving.
He's laughing as I tell him, *this is my heaven*,
And sometimes Ryan just isn't enough,
So then I'll pad up the stairs
And sit on the frayed carpet next to my brother's bed.
He'll tell me to leave, and I'll say *no*,
And then we'll sit, as the TV blares,
In silence.

Jay

I ration you like a sadistic treat—
Only letting myself think of you
While driving,
And then it's September 1st again.
I'm in your apartment in the Bronx
And you're asking how old I was
When 9/11 happened—
If you should open another bottle of wine.

*Are you in Vegas right now?
It's just starting to thunder in New York.*

I watched myself die that night—
Your phone screen reflecting,
Recording,
My naked torso, snarly hair,
Surprised offset eyes.

*It's getting harder to talk to you.
Do you think that's the age difference?*

The morning after you dropped me off,
I threw up three times.
Laying on the cold checkered linoleum
I listened to a friend explain
How you had committed a crime—

*When I told you about Leah,
Did you cry?*

She hadn't even been dead
Two full weeks,
And you still managed to take from me
Every good thing Leah left behind.