

## To Open

*The cherry tree in my front yard hasn't had a flower in four years. Spring is eroded and the pink buds scheduled to dot thin branches never come, replaced by green foliage that falls away with the turn of the seasons.*

*Set against red brick and white siding, the cherry sits last in the line of similarly barren shrubbery that has all been left at least half-dead from one particularly frigid winter. Its beginnings were couched in the delicacy of fragile twigs and petals of pale silk. Now, its branches stretch toward the sky, almost reaching the roof before they are pulled back down toward the earth by their own weight. The trunk has fattened and rough gashes split soft bark. The tree weeps.*

*Trees have the power to tell their own history — I remember learning this in elementary school. I wonder what would happen if I split open the trunk. Are there markings between its rings that show me sitting barefoot and cross-legged, enveloped in pink? Some days I had a book. On others I pulled at grass and watched the wind move the clouds.*

*It is painful to watch the swift decay of the few flowers that do open. Petals fly around like snow, disrupting spring. They vanish into the air and may never return. I wish that they could ignore their cycle.*

## Lady Lazarus

Colorful made-up shapes and mangled tin foil men fixed to the kitchen walls would seem too absurd for my mind before it had no choice but to revel in the space and in the people that I shared it with. In England, I lived with four other girls who I had never met before. We were all studying abroad on a program that was allegedly going to be the hardest thing we had ever done in our lives. Our flat was not yet lived in: the wiry carpet was impeccably clear of mud and scraps, and shoes were absent from the soon-to-be repurposed bookshelf. This was what it looked like when we first met, when each of us stood in front of her own bedroom door that lined the long hallway. Just like the newly cleaned space we were moving into, our introductions were sterile: we approached each other, exchanged names, hometowns, and shook hands. I recognized no faces but one name — someone a professor had told me about. They all seemed like suitable people to share a space with for a year. I hoped that they would do their dishes.

For the first few weeks, my dinner ritual consisted of chicken, rice, salad, and a glass of water. I carried my plate from the kitchen to my bedroom and ate at my desk or on my bed. I think I was afraid of eating in front of them. My room was sparsely decorated (I didn't have room for posters in my suitcases) and only came with the furniture and linens provided by the program. On the shelves I placed the books that I brought with me, all Virginia Woolf and all for academic purposes, but I think I would have snuck *The Waves* into my bags even if I hadn't signed on for a course on literary modernism. The courtyard I overlooked was silent, save a chirping bird perched on the dogwood tree or the occasional soft whirr of turning bicycle wheels. When winter came, the chairs that surrounded outdoor tables were overturned, discouraging

congregation. In my humble, quiet bedroom, I wrestled alone with my own insecurity and softly urged myself to break free from it. I never drew my curtains and rarely closed my window.

For a while, the kitchen only occupied our accumulated shopping bags and the dishes that came with the apartment. Familiar with the space of emptiness, I slowly broke from my own white walls and stepped into the white walls of the kitchen. I stopped spilling hot sauce on my duvet and I began writing essays at the table or on the couch. Most of the time, I was still alone, but there was the chance that I *might* interact with someone else.

One night we began an art installation. Using push pins, Maeve fixed an abandoned Porsche keychain, a TSA-approved lock, and a quarter, eagle side up — “a testament to our American roots!” — to the wall. A small piece of me worried about the tiny holes that the pins made in the plaster, but I quieted my rule-following and let myself enjoy the fact that I was laughing.

I gave myself up not to the space, but to the people, and the people always seemed to be changing their hair. Two years earlier, in my first year of college, I was astounded when both of my roommates told me that they regularly cut their own hair. A ritual, I get a haircut once a year by the same woman who does my mother’s and my sisters’. Each time, my freshly chopped locks curl under my chin and I become a ghost of my mother and her reliable stacked bob. But whenever I come home from the salon, I press the ends through the flatiron for a blunt finish. Eighteen years old, then, I watched as my roommate’s curls rose from her chest to her chin to her ears, in awe of the almost ineffable power and confidence.

By the time I reached Oxford, I was less phased by spontaneous cuts or DIY dye jobs. Kathleen started the year by turning bleach blonde and ended with bangs in their natural color.

Maeve chopped some off and bleached the underside and returned from a trip to Venice with bangs. Lucia's defining long black hair only underwent a small trim in the springtime. Letting go, I started to part my hair down the middle. I repurposed colorful scarves as headbands, wore pigtailed around the flat, and borrowed one of Maeve's clips to try a loose and lazy updo.

One day in March, I felt red. I walked to the indoor-outdoor mall that seemed a strange design for the English climate and purchased a bar of natural hair dye. Sensing my impulsivity, the woman in the store asked if I would like to sample a square of the red and a square of the brown — I could try each on a swatch of my hair and decide which I liked better. I told her that my friends would want me to go all in, but I asked for the free square of the brown to add to the mix and reduce the intensity. I wanted to jump, but not into cold water.

I sat in a chair on the kitchen floor as Maeve stroked her latex-gloved hands through my hair. The henna dye had a consistency like brownie batter mixed with concrete, and it made my head feel heavy. When it was all done, my hair hardened and it looked like there was a volcano sitting on top of me. Just as the saleswoman had promised, the change was subtle, and it brightened my hair's natural undertones. I think that brisk is a proper word to describe the way that I felt. Not as in quick, but brisk like how you would describe the weather. A 60 degree day in the middle of August — like a jolting, refreshing cool. Something new, impulsive, surprising. I didn't have to hide there.

As the year passed by, our makeshift art gallery grew until almost the entire wall was covered in works of spontaneity and drawings of butterflies. We used kerchiefs to turn lamps into characters named Earnest and Ertha. Kathleen cut rainbow homes from their sketchbook, drawn like dollhouses so you could see all the colors inside. To split our home in half, like a

dollhouse, would be to see love and too many jars of unused pesto. But we were not dolls. On Easter, we sat on top of the fallen flowers of the dogwood tree and ate the ham that Lucia's mother made. Maeve bought daisies for my birthday. I baked banana muffins and left one on the counter for Lucia's midnight snack. I wanted to dance in the kitchen, and they danced with me.

*I can feel myself learning how to be with people. It might be more accurate to say that I am being taught, or maybe even that I am being given permission to exist in something other than myself.*

When I visit Lucia's room, furnished only with a bed, dresser, and desk as is typical of the college dorm room, I always sit cross legged on her floor. Most days we talk and laugh and watch reality shows about weddings. We joke about what it would be like to be each other's bridesmaids. Lucia says she probably won't have a wedding party, but that I could be a part of the trusted entourage who shares opinions on dresses at the bridal shop. We decide that Kathleen would fill the role of the brutally honest friend delivering criticism from the couch; Maeve, the hype-man. I often feel the most myself during these moments of fortune-telling. I predict a future of tight bonds, looking past the annoying diffidence that overcomes me in waves. I tell Lucia that I will join the group on the couch, promising to be truthful without being too harsh.

One day amidst our fantasies, Lucia looked down at me from her twin bed as I wiggled around on the linoleum plushed with her multicolored area rug. I was trying to keep my legs from falling asleep, but she didn't know that.

“Do you want to come up?”

“No, I like spreading out on the floor,” I said, lying without any real reason. I guess I was just reluctant to break down my own barriers.

A few weeks later I asked Lucia if I could sit with her on the bed — it made it much easier to see the lace detail of the wedding dresses if we were at the same eye level, I rationalized.

“Of course,” she replied, rolling back the covers and handing me a pillow for my back. “I always thought it was weird that you didn’t.”

*It’s a kind of self-sabotage. I get caught in a cycle where my assumption of others’ disinterest deflects back to me. I open, but I close. I am aloof, cold, unloving.*

## **Splintered**

College is a transitional phase, a time to test your independence while having the dining hall omelettes to rely on instead of your own watery scrambled eggs. In time spent alone in a room that is more like a cube, you are tied to little else except the expectations that you set for yourself. Of course, deadlines and meetings clog up your daily agenda, but you’re the one who ultimately makes the decision to cross items off of your to-do list. Me, I have tried to imagine myself in a world where I feel like I can spread my arms. But these plans seldom survive unbroken. I know this. We are taught that something has to end for something new to begin. I know this too, yet I also believe that something has to happen into the middle. When transition melds into reality, we hope that these disparate phases of life will blur together to make a new, bright color. But sight becomes monochromatic when an end comes from nowhere, when you get

an email that gives you two days to leave the place where you were finally feeling whole. Sound stops. It becomes hard to move. Everything turns black.

My room in New York was all white. The mattress had been stripped bare, and the floor was clear except for trash bags and empty wine bottles. Mismatched items were thrown into boxes, and I stuffed my little life of the past four years into a 5 x 5 storage container. It was a sudden goodbye, like that trick where you pull a checkered tablecloth away but all the dishes stay intact, except this time the magician failed and crystal glasses have shattered everywhere. Maybe he was paying for revealing his secret, for becoming vulnerable.

I don't think I've ever hugged someone so tightly as I hugged Maeve, ever been held as tightly as she held me. Her hands went up around my neck and mine up and around her back. She rested her head on my shoulder, and I bit my bottom lip and tilted my head toward the ceiling. My throat tightened and my insides felt like they were being doused with water. I heard myself say I love you, and I felt lighter.

*I am writing about things that happened two weeks ago, about a letter that came in the mail yesterday. Insights sprout and I have to let them live somewhere. Growth is constant, but for the unforeseen future, I think I'll be a little stunted.*

The place where I feel the most connected feels so far away, something that *was*, only mine through photographs — I didn't take enough. It's still there, though, 395 miles away. 6 hours and 25 minutes by car (remember to take the Tappan Zee bridge instead of the George Washington). 8 hours on the Megabus, just slightly longer on the train. It's less than an hour

and a half in the air, but the only time I've flown is when my grandmother died and I needed to get home quickly for her funeral. A professor drove me to the airport and my friends slipped tender notes in my tote bag. I wrote my grandmother's eulogy at the gate, to honor her and to say goodbye and to show that I could care.

I'm home now, and it seems like I have entered a new season. The conflict I've felt for the past three and a half years of calling a temporary dorm room home when the two-story red-bricked house I grew up in still existed won't have to be felt again. My brother, younger than me and also stuck here, calls it a prison. He also drinks tall glasses of skim milk, which I find repulsive. The doors to the outside are the only ones that close. The breeze is shut out, and we are trapped inside.

*Can I be homesick for a home that I will never go back to? There is a word for this feeling in Welsh: hiraeth. It is a kind of yearning so vast that translation fails to capture it. But, I correct myself— that dorm room was never really my home. If I were to travel those 395 miles back, I would find spring but no one to share it with. We watch our own trees grow now.*

I've been doing a lot of walking lately. I take a book with me and I stroll in loops, up one steep hill and down another — our house is in a valley among peaks. Sometimes when I make it back to my front yard, all dug up and invaded by crabgrass, I look past it and walk up a quick molehill to the street above mine. I do laps around the culs-de-sac.

I've never paid much attention to the houses in my neighborhood. When I was growing up, I remember my mom used to call it our "plan." But it's not like Levittown, where each house

is twinned from the one next to it. There are ranch style homes, split-levels, the classic two-story. My favorite is the color of a creamsicle. It has a wrought iron gate at the patio and a golden retriever that barks from the backyard. It's fun to walk around and imagine the layouts and the lives, what bursts inside. There is one house past the hill, on the street parallel to mine, that is identical to ours. A bench sits in their front yard instead of pokey shrubbery. I think there's another on that same street that is my house mirrored; everything inside is opposite and nothing is predetermined.

Kathleen mailed me a letter, and I can feel homes converging. The envelope feels substantial. I pull out a piece of loose leaf paper covered in Kathleen's wide script along with three little paper houses, the ones from our kitchen in Oxford. After taping them to my bedroom wall, I looked down at my hands expecting to see the pads of my fingers colored from wet marker ink. They had been given a year to dry, but they felt new. In the letter, Kathleen wrote: "They clearly belong to you."

### **Treetops**

It's Easter again and this time we're making cakes — Grandma's recipe. It has cherries and walnuts and it won't come free from the bundt pan. A third cake is in the oven because the pan of the second cake crashed when my mother flipped it over. My mother pounded her fists on the kitchen counter.

The cake had separated into two. One half sat humbly on the plate where it belonged, and the other refused to loosen its grip. The truncated top crust opened up the inside, which was speckled with maraschino cherries. I almost suggested that we should call Grandma to ask if she

had any suggestions: maybe we weren't letting the cake cool enough, or we should butter and flour the pan instead of greasing it with Crisco. Something washed over me again as I looked over at my sister and saw that she was crying. We were thinking the same thing. I knew that my mother thought it too because of her red face and frustrated yelling. I couldn't take the not saying anything. To me, acknowledging loss and pain and grief silently only works when you're alone. When you're with someone else, leaving things unsaid is a crashing void. This is what I have learned.

A week before the cake incident, my mother asked Elena and I if we believed in heaven as we drove away from a cemetery visit. I wanted to answer no, but I don't think that would have been most helpful at the moment, to me or to them. I think I have to believe that something exists after, after death, after life feels like it has fractured. Like preserving hope in a jar.

*It's coming on spring now, and I can see magenta buds on branches of the cherry tree. In my absence, dead overgrowth has been clipped and dead twigs encircle the base. When I step inside the tree, I notice that the lowest hanging branches are empty of life. They break easily, snapping quickly and sharply, their insides a brown decay instead of pale stringy green. What will never open falls away.*

*At the top of the tree, the part I can't reach, there is only growth. Maybe this year it will bounce back. Winter was mild and there's someone here to hope for it.*

When I sit at my desk amidst my yellow walls, I can see about a quarter of the tree if I lean sharply to the right, tilt my head, and look out the window. It reaches upward and outward through its cycle of germination, buds, blooms. I worry that the sudden drops in temperature we have been experiencing lately will freeze the flowers away. The fragile branches are threatened by windstorms that pull petals to the ground, across the lawn, up the street.

I ask the internet how to press a flower. The supplies for this craft project are damp flowers saved from the grass, parchment paper stolen from the kitchen, a heavy book of quotes with novels stacked on top, and time. I will send them in envelopes to North Carolina, New Hampshire, Vermont, to the people I love, connecting my splintered homes.

*They keep their color, everlasting pink. Petals will not fall away. These are flowers that bloom forever.*