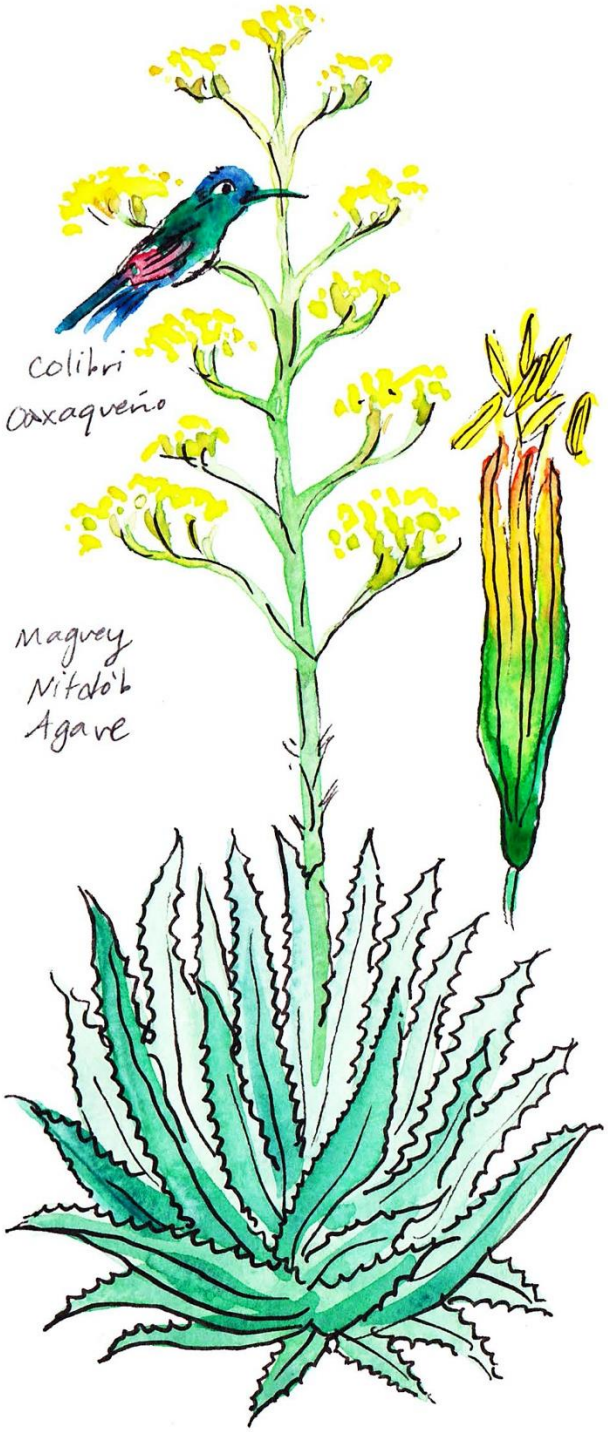
BITTEN BY THE LANTERN FLY

CONTENTS

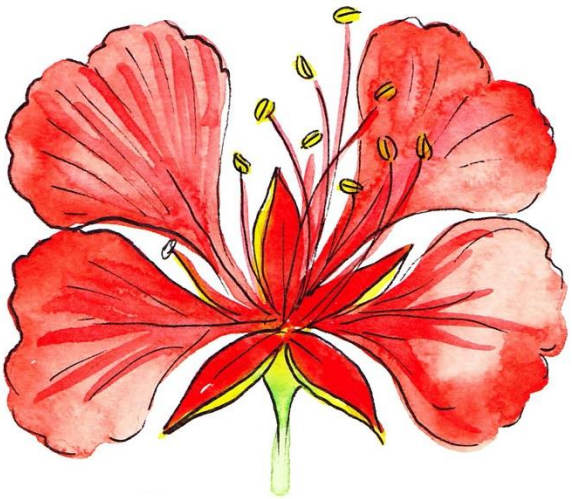
CONTENTS *continued*

For M.



Black trumpets

Do you remember when this all started, at the oak marsh north of town, where we filled our baskets with snow shrimp, hen-of-the-woods, hedgehogs, white-tooth fungus, oysters, lobsters, and horn of plenty? Oh, those ink-colored chanterelles—delicate, mushrooms of velvety funnel shapes, smelling of sweet butter. I was impressed—obsessed—with this unapologetically nerdy scientist, with your harvest baskets, paring knife for trimming the stems of mushroom fruits, paper bags to separate species, your small library of identification books, your knowledge of Latin names. And, back in the kitchen, we chopped the mushrooms and wrapped handmade pasta around these buttered morsels to make ravioli, and dried the rest in jars for future meals. I kept my jar of black trumpets as a memento of the foray—so long they developed a secondary fungus, and even then, I treasured the specimens.



Flamboyan - Delonix regia

Oaxaca

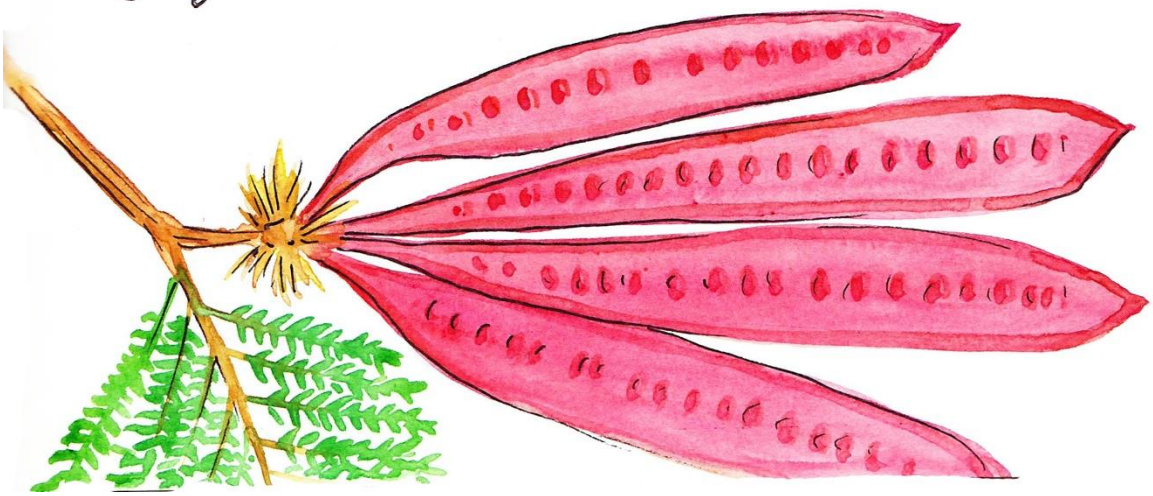
Many years passed until we crossed paths again, under odd circumstances—I moved from Burlington to San Francisco, then to Antigua. After six months there, after being mugged by knifepoint, I fled my job, home, and partner in Guatemala, and made my way to Mexico for escape and distraction. On the bus which crossed the border from Xela to San Cristobal, someone slipped something in my drink and I slept for eight hours. When I woke, slobbering all over my backpack, which I hugged like a baby, all of my money had been stolen.

You were the only person I knew in Oaxaca at the time, so I sent you an out-of-the-blue email, and met you on a bench in front of a cafe in the city. You were living there for a month, teaching a course on botany to study-abroad college students. I stayed on your couch for a while to get my bearings.

Do you remember when I cut off all my hair, using the only dull pair of scissors I could find? You didn't recognize me at first. Do you remember the garlic-flavored beans we harvested from the trees outside our door? And that trip we took far from town to the university, where I delivered a woodblock print for a contest, then we lay in the grass an inch apart, nearly touching. Do you remember the night we danced, and I mistakenly called your couch "home," as in, "take me home." When you kissed me, I recoiled—it wasn't the right time—you had a lover back in Vermont, and I had a lover back in Antigua, and although we were both in open relationships, it all felt too sudden and complex.

After that month in Oaxaca, we each returned to our other lives, and our little blip of romance disappeared. You went back to Vermont to teach botany seminars and research ferns. My relationship with Mario ended disastrously back in Guatemala—a flaming mess of emotions from both parties. I escaped to Iowa to start a creative writing MFA program, where, to my delight, I found an abundance of wild mushrooms, particularly the delectable morel. I sent you photos of these fungal discoveries, but after a few emails and texts, our communication faded to a faint humming in the background.

Guaje tree – Leucaena Leucocephala



Interlude

On a break from grad school, I traveled to Vermont to see my mother and sister. I bumped into you on the sidewalk outside the bakery in the Old North End, and you invited me to visit your office in the herbarium. You met me there with a fool's grin, brewed a pot of coffee, and showed me dried fern specimens with shaking hands. You introduced me to your colleague, who rolled his eyes, and I knew what this look meant—"what do you think you're doing?" We ignored him and you brought me to the bookshelf, where we browsed your collection of old botanical illustrations: orchids, mosses, lichens, liverworts, trees of Oaxaca.

You walked me to the door and I told you to write me a letter. Your face changed then. A wet, twisted blush. "No," you said, "I can't write you a letter. If I do, I'll have to deliver it by hand, and I'll show up on your doorstep in Iowa." I was confused—why, if you and your partner were polyamorous, why was I the forbidden love? Why did she draw the line before my feet? We didn't speak for half a dozen years, but I wrote you many unsent letters, about every strange fern, mushroom, bird, and stone I found in the woods, and about all of the spices, the herbs, the bone broth, the fat rendered from cured meat, the warmth of the meals I made in your absence.

During the years of our silence, you had a daughter. You taught, wrote, traveled, studied ferns, and made music. I wrote and published books. I finished my degree, moved back to Vermont, bought a cabin in the woods, which is then destroyed in a flood. I adopted a dog. I cycled through several intense relationships: a woman who became a man and then left me for his other lover; a psychotherapist who asked me to spend the rest of my life with her and her two Maine Coon cats after only a few months of dating; a sweet, noncommittal poet who had a hard time telling the truth; a farmer who seduced me with wood-fired pizza and runner's legs, who tried to juggle too many girlfriends in one hand-built tiny-house loft-bed; a Russian doctor who lured me into her home with literature and wine, then dropped all tenderness at the door.

Refrain

One day I see you walking towards me on the sidewalk with your daughter—now four years old, with curls as red and bouncy as little orphan Annie's. Up close, I can see in your smile that everything, and yet nothing at all, has changed. You invite me along on a foraging walk in the woods, and I see now the basket in your hand, with a little pocket-knife for trimming the stems of mushrooms, and paper bags to keep the fruits ventilated. We drove to Ghost Brook, to exactly the same trail where it all began—the woods, the mushrooms, my crush on you—perhaps this is a new beginning, a déjà vu- style reunion. At the water's edge, we sit on a log and watch your daughter hunt for frogs in the shallow water. Out of her earshot, you fill me in quickly: the deceit, confusion, anger, resolution, separation, and how all the while you longed for simplicity, and for me. Well, here I am.

You make me feel

Like I’m back in highschool, sneaking around, trying to find a place to kiss where we won’t be seen—on the baseball diamond at night, in the dugout, out on the secret driftwood beach on a sandy blanket, on my mother’s porch. You make me feel like a word that doesn’t exist—a cross between blushing and blooming—*blooshy*. Delirious from lack of sleep. Smelly from wearing the same clothes too many days in a row after spending the night at your place. Sticky sweet from spooning an entire watermelon for dinner, from sweating underneath you, and from swimming in the shallow waters of our lake. But there’s something else, something below this saccharine surface, a feeling I have to trace the shape of with my tongue:

Relief.


PASSION
FRUIT
passiflora

The heron and the beetle

When we climbed the roof to get closer to the stars, I had to lift you up, though you're the heavier between us—I’m more nimble and have climbed a few more rooftops. You nearly pulled me down from my perch, and I briefly envisioned our two bodies flying towards the weeds, suspended momentarily under the Big Dipper. Perched together on the peak of the roofline, I claimed you as my Great Blue Heron, for your blend of grace and awkwardness. You claimed me as your Bombardier beetle, the species you've been obsessed with for eight years, that you're only now learning how to identify in the wild.

Doubling

When I visit you in your old apartment—the one you shared with her for ten years, where she still lives, but while she's away she lets you stay there, because for a month you have nowhere else to sleep, and my apartment is too crowded with chatty, prying women who tell stories all about town—when I'm in your old apartment, I set my hat and mittens on the bookshelf by the door, next to the framed photograph of the two of you. There you both are, in the prime of your love and your youth, in the beginning, when you stood proud and she clutched at your hip, before you had a daughter together, before her affairs, before your depression, before you "went off the rails," before her skin leathered in the sun down at the farm, before your belly took on the curve of one too many weeknight beers, before you both knew it had to end. "Come in," you say to me, "make yourself at home." You kiss me in the kitchen over a pan of slow-cooked pork, and I can't help but feel the gaze of your younger self and her shining smile from the photograph on the bookshelf.

On Lovesickness

When you pull your bike next to mine and I am silent, it isn't because my mind is blank—I have so much I want to say—about the smell of Queen Anne's lace along the path, and how badly I want to reach across the bike path and touch your face, and my nauseating longing to kiss you. I don't want to say anything, in case you feel otherwise. I don't want to wake your daughter, asleep in the trailer hitched to your frame, dreaming of catching frogs with a net in the peat bog. Instead, I turn my head away, towards the lake, and pedal ahead of you, out of sight.

While you’re away

I swim over a shallow bed of zebra mussels, climb halfway into the heart of a giant oak, gain two slivers from an old, rotten dock, and sample a handful of not-quite-ripe wild grapes. I visit an exhibit of paper whales which hang like electric ghosts from the ceiling, pulsing with light. I read a short story about a little girl who finds a stone in the woods. Every other line reminds me of you, so I hold the pen close while I read. When I finish, the page looks more like an ink painting, saturated in blue scribbles.

While you’re away, I catalogue flora and fauna specimens to document and share with you from afar—this is my love language—here, a dead bat in the grass, its body transformed into mush by ants, but its wings still intact, paper-thin translucence framed by delicate bones. Here, a myriad of alien bodies: chanterelles in the moss, puffballs on a log, and a choir of backlit oyster mushrooms singing their spores into the wind. Here, a minuscule aphid with fluorescent green skin and a spiked tail, bobbing up and down on my notebook as though he’s dancing for us.

While you’re away, I find a cluster of glowworms in the dirt on a night hike. I scoop the moist earth into my hands to bring the light of these bioluminescent grubs closer to my eyes. I want to share this vision with you. Instead, I soak up their light and translate it into a story to recount to you over a meal of smoked fish and fried peppers. "Tell me again about the glowworms," you ask, and I will, over and over until you see them in your own hands.

Helen

I wake slowly from a dream involving spiky-scaled parasites versus faceless scientists. Over coffee, I read one book, then another. I walk my dog along the lake and listen to a radio program to distract myself from my own emotional discomfort around relationships, my body, and the passage of time. During lunch—a bagel sandwich in the park—I read from yet another book. It's midsummer, and I'm starting to craft my syllabi and reading lists for my fall classes, building, assembling, re-arranging. On my walk home, I call my grandmother, who reads to me from Virginia Woolf's collected letters as she rests on the couch, her two dachshunds curled on her belly. She and I only talk about books and teaching; I don't tell her about my relationships, my self-doubt, my fear of commitment. All of our nonverbal conversations exist in the books that we read together: Marilynne Robinson for crises in faith and floundering patriotism, Virginia Woolf for questioning monogamy and sexuality, James Baldwin for rage and social critique, Margaret Atwood for our apocalyptic sense of doom, Mary Oliver for tenderness. I never have to explain to her why I do what I do. She knows, having built her own life around literature.

Snug

Your daughter has just turned four, and she already stacks rhymes with speed, spins tales about pirates and mushrooms, and wields a sarcastic wit. She splashes around in the tub, naked save for a cheap starfish necklace. While you're in the kitchen brewing bone broth soup with meatballs and green onions, she pretends to cook me dinner using the ingredients at hand: water, suds, an empty yogurt container, and a dash of imaginary spice, "Pepper, and salt, and noodles! And Poodles!" She erupts into maniacal laughter at her own joke, and I respond, "What a poet you are!" She says to me, "Oh *Frances.* You're so silly," in the same tone that she says to my dog, "Oh *Tintin*, you cutie pie." After bath time, she hops up on the couch, pats the cushions on either side of her little bum, and calls out to the house, "Come on everyone, it's time to read *Little Nemo,"* referring to the enormous, colorful volume of Windsor Mckay comics from 1910-1925, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*. The book is half as tall and half as heavy as her body, and when she spreads the pages on her lap, she nearly disappears. I sit on her left, the dog curls up on her right, and you—the man who taught her how to rhyme—you take up the far left space. I'm book-ended by sweetness. We alternate reading each page aloud and pointing to the drawings so that she can link the action to the words. When it's my turn to narrate, you nuzzle my neck, out of her view—it may be too early to try to explain to her that I'm more than your friend. After my parents divorced, I hated all my dad's new girlfriends, but then again—they never read to me on the couch, or sat on the edge of the tub while I made bubble soup.

Midnight pickles

It’s late—long after your daughter’s bedtime, she’s tucked away in the quiet, dark cave of her closet bedroom—I’m only here to deliver you a quick kiss. I touch down with my sudden storm of coats, scarves, boots, and an excitable pup who runs into the kitchen to try to lick your face. You’re belly-up to the island countertop, elbow-deep in pickle brines, salted meats, and kimchi. What force broils in you to cook through the night? You hold one finger to a recipe in an open book—a book now caked in flour and spice, and with the other hand you try to pour me a drink, though you miss the cup entirely because your eyes are on the recipe. I want to offer my service as sous-chef, but I know that this frenzy of yours has nothing to do with the food—this is your therapy, your private pleasure. I bid you goodnight with a squeeze and leave you to your stovetop alchemy.

Monkton harvest

As we drive away from the city, street names ring like chapters in a storybook as we sing them aloud, “Witchhazel,” “Old Hollow,” “Mutton Run,” “Four Winds.” We pass a grandfatherly fellow, dressed in Carhartt pants and a grey wool sweater, touching up the paint on his porch. He stands in the flower bed, his boots crushing the annuals which are already past their blooming prime. The killing frost is only a few days away. He leans in with a small brush to paint the delicate trim. A pipe dangles from his lips. I would paint his portrait, if only I could infuse my brush with the smells of garden-grown tobacco, overripe apples, and the first batch of fallen maple leaves. A painting of the painter, in his element.

The morning fog melts into the hills as the sun heats up the cornfields. The sugar maples have turned half-red already, and the wild apple trees have dropped their fruits, save the gnarled, stubborn orbs which will cling to the upper branches all winter. We stop to gather the drops, never mind the worms or bruises.We pull onto Nuthatch lane to join our friends at the cider press—rinse, quarter, chop, press, and ferment.

Spirits

Amaro—bittersweet nectar of pungent herbs—the name is the echo of *amor*, spirit of tender root and fire breath. First, we harvest the apples from twisted trees in overgrown orchards, then we press the cider and let it overwinter, distill the fermented juice once, twice, thrice, separate the head from the heart of the liquor, and infuse a dozen bottles with seeds, twigs, roots, and leaves. We blend our first batch with maple and a hodgepodge of our favorite bitter herbs: juniper, gathered from the red cliffs, the inner bark of the black birch, from the edge of the pond outside of town, and chamomile, lemon, orange, cinchona, black pepper, cinnamon, licorice root, gentian, bay laurel, and saffron. It enters with a bite and melts with a burning sweetness.

Zookeepers

On the first day of class, my students tell me about their pets: snails, a turtle named Myrtle, a kitten named noodle, and an albino bristle-nosed pleco.

At home, on the couch, you and I read about Maria Sibylla Merian's metamorphosis of butterflies in the 1600s. She made watercolor studies of the insects to communicate her sense of wonder at the strangeness and beauty of these "day birds" and "night birds."

What is this human impulse to study, collect, name, and hold these creatures of myriad color and form? You and I seem to suffer with this strong urge to name—to name plants, mushrooms, fish, birds—it’s the poet in me, and the taxonomist in you, but these disciplines overlap in the sweet spot of linguistics. Tonight, this is zoo enough for me—you at my side, and my dog in my lap, curled into a ball with her head tucked in tight, as a hedgehog might do.

Natural history after hours

Your friend has the keys to the basement collections of the Natural History Museum in Boston. He snuck us both in after hours, grinning and jangling his key ring like the keeper of the city's secrets. First to the orchids, dried and mounted between heavy sheets of paper, each partnered by a hand-painted watercolor of the flower's organs and roots.

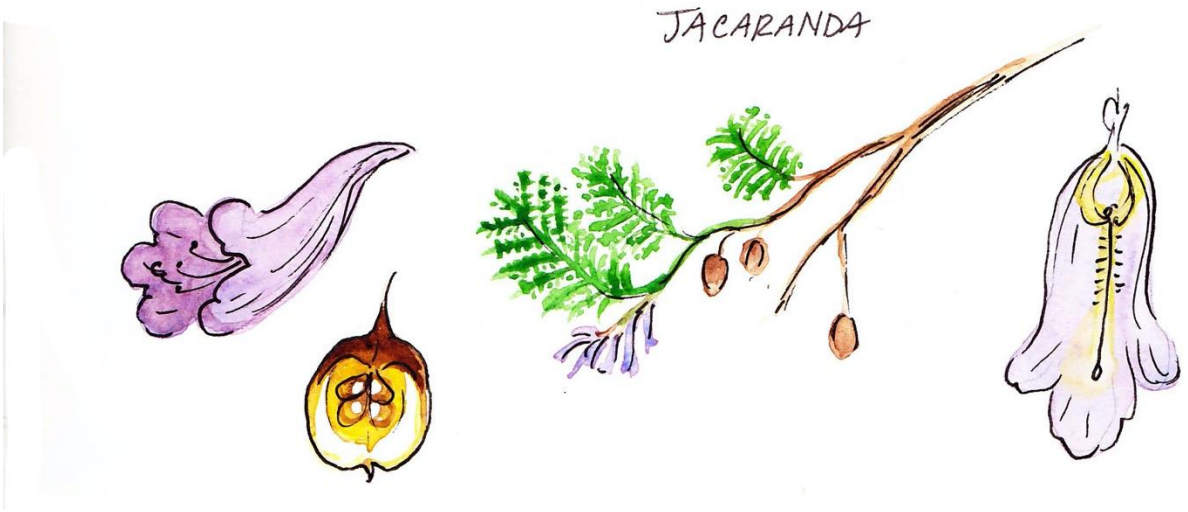
Then, to the spirit collection: leaves, blossoms, seeds in bottles of ethanol. Here we found orchids swimming ghostly and translucent, smaller than the wings of a fruitfly. Above the space-saver cabinets which slid on tracks like the ladders of an old library, we fondled seed pods as big as Sunday watermelons: "Coco de mer," your friend coos affectionately to the seed, and I note how much it resembles a lady's buttocks, more curvaceous than my own.

Finally, tucked away on the lowest and dimmest floor: the wood lab, where specimens of porous twigs hide like dark licorice in dusty jars. Your friend shoved a block of petrified cedar out of the way with his boot, "only at Harvard would we use a three-million-year-old fossil as a doorstop." He opens the door to the stone lab, where we pour over shelves and drawers of carboniferous ferns and bird feathers. We spend so long with our noses in drawers of mineralized plants that when we leave the building, we sneeze fossil dust all the way to the bar, where we toast to science and wash the old stone ferns down with beer.

Seed

I try to take a nap in your bed while you're at work. I pull the stained sheets off the bed and stuff them into a dark pocket, out of sight. I build myself a nest in clean, white linens—with a window for breath and a sliver of light. Even here, in all this softness, the noise blooms—from within and without—the sun filters in sharp doses between passing clouds. I dream your hands into being. Here they appear, curved around my curves, weight on my weight. They wake me from my half-nap, and I welcome the interruption.

First, I dream I am eating a croissant—airy and buttery at its core, with perfectly crisped layers. Now, I *am* the croissant, and you are gently ripping my pastry flakes open, biting into my soft center. Now, I am a rose, blooming upwards and outwards. I feel the sensation of spreading and falling as though the petals are my own limbs. Now, a sea scallop, as wide as the plate it rested on, with creamy white flesh. Simply the scallop, on its own, without garnish, begging to be eaten.


JACARANDA

Snoring beast

Your snores become the soundtrack to my fitful sleep—a morsel of a dream here, an interlude of snoring there, and back to the dream.

Tonight, I am a young woman sitting by a row of hedges, holding a gnarled carrot in one hand and dipping my other hand into a bucket of smashed blueberries. I am posing for a painting; my mother is the artist, and she is working on a portrait that will be the defining masterpiece of her artistic career. I eat the carrot too quickly and she must reinvent the vegetable in the painting: sliced open, glistening, with tendrils and extra legs. Is that what you call the forking roots of a carrot which resembles a little creature—legs? My hand and mouth are stained red from the berries, but I can't stop eating them. Later on, in the dream, we will host a party in the mansion on the hill. It will be my task to choose the lamps with the softest, most ambient light.

I am pulled from the field, the berries, the carrot, the paint, the big house, the lamps, by your sleep sounds: your nose rattles and I lose the dream.

When you're not snoring next to me in bed, you join me in my dreams. One night I visit your dreamself at an academic institution, perhaps a boarding school where you are working as a live-in professor. There are many rules and steady supervision, which adds to the allure of our forbidden kisses in the hall, and our hushed embrace in your lodgings. We finally find a moment alone on your small, dormitory cot, and just as we lay down together I see a figure hovering in my peripheral vision. Without turning my head, I ask you, whispering, "who is that?" You pull back, blushing, ashamed. "My wife." I look up, horrified, face to face with your secret spouse. She looks tired, but curious, seemingly not put-off by my presence,just observant. She doesn't say a word. I look back to you, and you say, as though this will explain away my trepidation, "It gets lonely here while you're gone."

Or, we are both walking barefoot through a dark room where the dirt floor is crawling with scorpions, spiders, and cockroaches.

A portion of these dreams are nightmares, influenced by real-life viruses and interpersonal drama; in one, you and I are making love in a janitor’s closet in a hospital. The door to the closet is slightly ajar, and in the midst of our canoodling, you hush me to say in a half-whisper, “I think that’s my ex, walking down the hall. Let’s not let her see us.” Too late, the mood has soured.

One night, we climb a mountain in Japan and discover a secret garden with a terraced lawn, a timber frame house, and all sorts of crazy exotic flowers and creatures: seed pods resembling penises that leapt up to bite when you step on them, frogs made of wood with painted stilts. There is a bookshelf in the house with an identification guide to wild edible Japanese mushrooms

and plants. In the house, I find you looking through old botanical drawings, "look at these treasures!" You exclaim.

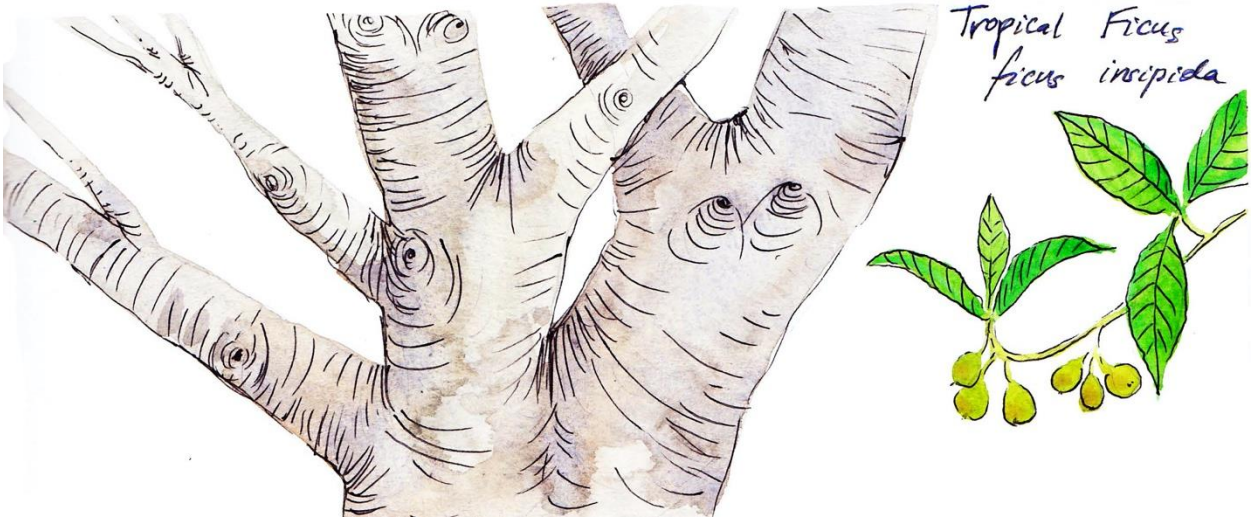
Sometimes your snores enter my dreams as characters. I’m strolling along a country road at dusk, when a deer leaps from a snowy hill above me, from the cemetery. The deer nearly collides with me, and then another deer leaps, and another, and before I have a chance to catch my breath and still my heartbeat, I see the face of a bear appear over the ledge of snow: the deer are fleeing this predator, and now, so must I. The bear growls, louder and louder until I am awoken once more by your snores. Not a bear at all, just you.

The bubblegum tree

I take a trip mid-winter to Oregon to visit my father. You'll join in a few weeks, but for now, it's just me, the parents, their ancient dog, rambunctious new puppy, and their complacent cat. I take the pets on long, ambling walks around my father's neighborhood, examining herb gardens and blackberry brambles. It's maddening when I find an odd plant that I can't name, and you're not around to tell me the story of this strange fern with branching fronds, or this tree with shiny blue fruit. The berries wear red, star-shaped hats, like court-jesters. For now, I'll call it the bubblegum tree, but this nickname is a poor substitute for your Latin names. Or, maybe I don't need the names, I need you, standing next to me in this stranger's garden. I want to see you pick a leaf and pull it close to your face, tenderly, like all that matters in the world are the floral curiosities of a walk in the woods.

Willamette

I went looking for you in the Arboretum. I knew I wouldn't find you there, but the next best thing to holding you was to sink my fingertips into the soft, rain-soaked bark of the Redwoods. I looked for you in the clusters of tiny periwinkle fruits of the beauty-berry bush. I asked the hummingbird high on a wire above my head if he had seen you, but he zipped away without a word. Mount Hood shone, crisply blue, through a window of branches, and I squinted into the sun to trace the edges of the volcano with my eyes until they burned. I crumpled bay leaves under my nose so that their pungent air would distract me from my longing. It didn't work. Now, I am home again, and the moon hangs bottom-heavy over the city like a bowl of whipped cream, tinted yellow with honey. She looks tired—only half full but still tilted with the weight of such rich milk, ready to pour a little off the top into the Willamette river. If I stay awake long enough maybe I'll get to see it.


Tropical Ficus
ficus insipida

Pastrami

I’m assembling a feast in preparation for your arrival: cured and cold-smoked pastrami, handmade horseradish mustard, pickled eggs and red onions, sourdough rye bread with a starter fermented from scratch. My stepmother observes over my shoulder, “you must really like this one.” The day that you fly in, the house fills with smoke; it takes five hours to bring the pastrami up to temperature. The culminating meal is indulgent and satisfying; we pile the table high with mustards and tender slices of meat. The smells linger on my skin and in my hair for days—I hope I haven’t accidentally turned myself into a piece of salted, cured, smoked meat for the sake of love.

Morphology

Our idea of a hot date is a Sunday excursion to the science museum on the river to see the “Exquisite Creatures" exhibit of pinned insects. You spot Nabokov’s blues right away—tiny, cobalt butterflies the size of my fingernails. I’m more drawn to the bicephalous snake, with two sets of teeth grinning in opposite directions. I could stand here for days, listening to you describe the morphology of the giant roly-poly who lives on the ocean floor, the soft-shelled turtle with a little green beak, or the black-winged bat fish. I point to a bug which looks like a moth with a peanut on its head. You tell me in a hushed tone, “this is the lantern fly.” You saw one during one of your research trips in Costa Rica, where the locals warned that if you’re bitten by this nut-headed creature, you must have sex within a day or you will die.

Nabokov's blues

An erasure of Nabokov's essay, "Butterflies" 1948, which you and I read together on a rock at the river's edge, pausing to underline our favorite lines and exchange stories about the author.

In the Russia of my boyhood, a Swallowtail made for the open window, soaring eastward, over timber and tundra, to the Rocky Mountains—to be overtaken on a dandelion after a forty-year race.

In my youth, I found herbariums in the attic full of pressed edelweiss and maple leaves.

I felt the urge to explore the marshland beyond the River Oredezh. Peasant girls, stark naked, romped in the shallow water. In the pine groves and alder scrub, bilberry shrubs with their dim, dreamy blue fruit, I sought the perfume of butterfly wings on my hands—vanilla, lemon, and musk.

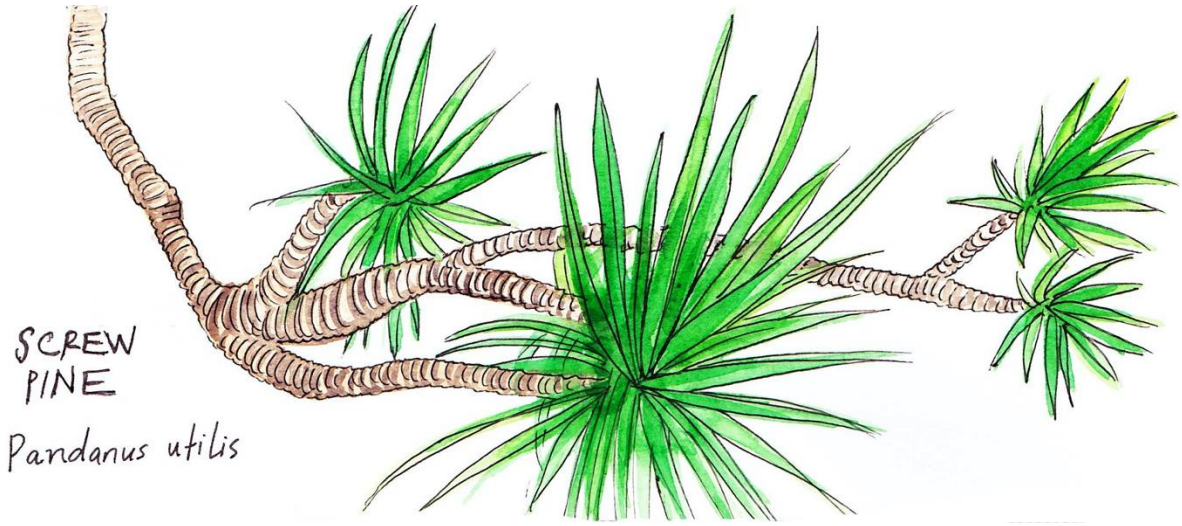
Nature and art showed me the same enchantment and deception— the magic intertwinkling facets of entomological exploration. I used to sugar for moths on my family's land—molasses, beer, and rum—painted on tree trunks. On a boulder, a mountain ash and an aspen had climbed, holding hands, like two clumsy, shy children.

I have an acute desire to be alone. The older the man, the queerer he looks with a butterfly net in his hand. The lepidopterist has a special gentle awkwardness. I find my own paradise in lupine, columbines, penstemons.

I do not believe in time. My ecstasy is sense of oneness with sun and stone. Butterflies and moths are tender ghosts humoring this lucky mortal. The ghost of purple under a moist young moon—a Hummingbird moth above a corolla.

Succulent thief

It began with the single leaf—a sharp-lipped specimen which had fallen into a nest of cactus fur. It didn't belong, so I plucked it out and held it in my palm as we walked around the greenhouse. I kept it there in my hand like a secret while you gave me a tour of your favorite plants: the silver-dollar, a squash relative, with coin-like leaves and spiral tendrils, the cork-stemmed passionflower with little black fruits. While you bent your face into the flower which smells like rotten fruit, I stole a leaf from the Spiderwort and slipped it into the pocket of my wide-legged pants. You gave me a demonstration of the pollination dance of the bird of paradise, and I snapped three globes from the string-of-pearl plant. Later, I potted my loot in a ceramic cup in my kitchen. If they survive, I'll confess.


SCREW
PINE
Pandanus utilis

The art of losing

Your recent habit of leaving important objects behind, just when they're the most needed, reminds me of Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art." First, on our way to Canada, you realize you have misplaced your passport. Then, when we play hooky and arrive at the Camel's Hump trailhead for an afternoon ski, we find all the equipment we need in the hatchback except your skis. You lose your toothbrush, your razor, all manner of socks and shirts. You wear the same outfit for a whole week, out of convenience, and you're lucky I like the way you smell. When we visit my parents across the country, you leave your winter boots in their closet, which you don't realize until we're back in Vermont. I tease you about these minor losses, but I don't mention the loss of your recent relationship of ten years, nor do I mention the apartment you two shared through domestic partnership. I don't tease you about the loss of your second apartment, or the third. I try to stay visible and easy to track down so that you don't lose *me* in the shuffle.

The poet and the botanist

I have a living botanical encyclopedia at my fingertips. If you're not walking next to me on a trail in the woods, clutching at my elbow, enthusiastically pointing to a spring ephemeral bloom poking through the still frozen mud, a snowdrop or bloodroot perhaps, though you would use their scientific names—if you're not by my side, I send you photos of the flora and fauna which stumps me and you respond with immediate results.

I'm on a business trip to San Antonio, traveling from the land of snowy gutters to the land of humid gardens. You're down in Mexico teaching a month-long botany course.

I send you a string of photos of scarlet blossoms, purple leaves, speckled moths. You reply, "Dermatophyllum secundiflorum - Texas mountain laurel," and I blush and grin like a fool as your messages roll in, "Ailanthus webworm! I love that moth. Tillandsia recurvata —grows in Oaxaca as well. And that little purple guy is lantana, and you have bougainvillea and tradescantia..."

I describe a choir of vocal morning birds, and for once I know their names, I can join the conversation, "grackle, magpie, cardinal, turtle dove," and in this manner, the morning song unfolds between the poet and the botanist, separated by distance but linked by the joy we take in naming.


SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS
GARDEN BLOOM
SPIDERWORT
TRADESCANTIA

Coquito

Seven years after my we first kissed in the shadow of the Guelaguetza after one too many mezcalitos, we return to Mexico: I will spy on your botanical research; observe you in action, as you teach students from the University how to identify street trees of Oaxaca, the cacti and maguey in the dry fields, and the orchids and ferns of the cloud forest in the mountains which surround the city. When I tag along on field trips, I may be your most enthusiastic audience member, sketching and taking notes on the periphery of your lectures. During a tour of the botanical gardens, the official guide points to prominent trees and flowers, and you whisper Latin names under your breath, filling in the gaps of the tour, providing secret knowledge to those who lean in close enough. While your students ogle the vanilla orchid in the greenhouse, you sneak a kiss by the giant philodendron, the vine they call the "telephone flower," for its blossoms stand tall and erect as mid-century household phones. Later on, as we botanize in an urban park by the mercado Bonito Juarez, we watch the fluorescent pink flowers of the pseudo-bombax tree erupt into bloom, as they do, like clockwork, around sunset every evening. I spend an entire afternoon painting their blooms in Alizarin crimson, and when you see the painting, you declare, “It’s *our* tree!”

Pseudobombax ellipticum

AMPOLLA

Coquito

Bitter, sweet

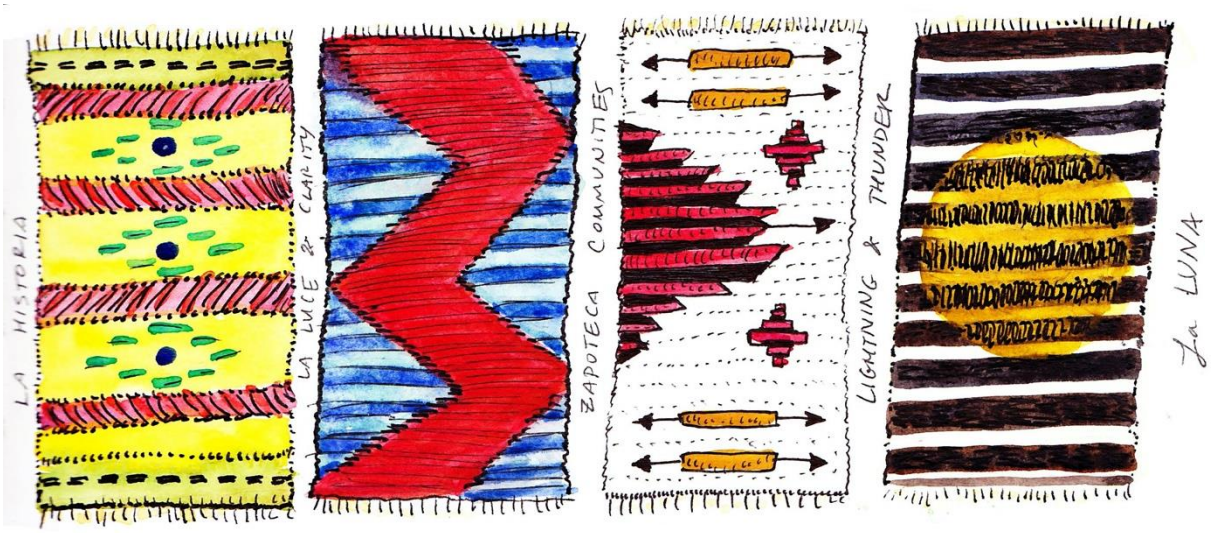
While you take students on a camping trip to the mountains to study ferns and tropical plants, I walk through the shadow of the grand Basílica de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad on an afternoon hot enough to melt the bottoms of my shoes. As I mount the steps of the church, the conceptual memory of the time I spent with you in this city seven years ago transforms into a physical sensation, more than a mere mental picture, rather—a whole-body pang, like someone has pulled on a thread connected to my belly button, or like I am a gourd, split open, and scraped with a spoon. It's not a pleasant nostalgia, it's a longing: for the uninhibited joy of my younger self, and for the intoxication of a budding crush, before we stumbled into the complications of middle age: shared-custody parenthood, health insurance, mortgage payments. I long for the sweet simplicity of our first trip here. I retrace the streets we walked together, nursing this strange thing called love, as one might nurse either a wound, or a hard candy lozenge.


Philodendron
"telephone plant"

Pandemic intimacy

We make it back from Mexico before they close the border, though it's tight—I witness a woman pass out on the floor in the Mexico City airport, surrounded by security guards—panic attack or viral attack, I don't linger long enough to find out. Back in Vermont, we hole up in your new apartment, where you have no furniture other than boxes filled with books, and I have to steal two bowls, two spoons, and two forks from my mother's kitchen. This is all temporary, we keep telling ourselves: the quarantine, the pandemic, the chaos of your new home in the middle of a move. The worst part is that you have to wait fourteen days to see your own daughter—her mother's rules, just in case you're a host for the virus. We pass the time in the kitchen, cooking and working remotely. This is the benefit of two bookworms in one space: we don't have to explain why we're perpetually reading, reading, reading.

One night, to break a spell of cabin fever, we sneak into the herbarium at night with a bottle of pet nat, a baguette, and prosciutto. We're here so that you can examine fern specimens under the microscope, and I'm here to browse your botanical library and make sketches of plants in the green house, but we carry ourselves with a celebratory and rebellious air, as though we've broken into the king's larder and are wining and dining on royal loot. I don't mind being quarantined with you.


LA HISTORIA
LA LUCE & CLARITY
ZAPOTECA COMUNITIES
LIGHTNING & THUNDER
La LUNA

First day out

Before your fourteen-day quarantine finally ends, you prepare the perfect nest in your new apartment for your daughter's arrival. Her bedroom is fit for the littlest queen: a small bed tucked in the corner, towering with plush pillows. Look at all of those books—and art supplies, all displayed to encourage spontaneous creativity. On our first day out together, she explodes with giggles as my dog licks the crumbs from her lap. We drive to Raven's Ridge, a wilderness area south of town, so that we can hunt for frogs in the marsh. She has an adventure bag prepared, complete with a bucket for amphibious bounty, and lots of picnic snacks. She's only four, but she already has caught the botanizing bug: she stops every few feet in the woods to point out fancy mosses, strange trees, big rocks, and your favorite—beetles. When she finds a few small specimens of jelly fungus on a twig, she holds it up to her face and says, "I think these two mushrooms are different species!" You and I share a glance, and I can see you are teetering on the edge between crying and laughing out loud—such pride for your budding scientist! You catch yourself and say, "You're right, they *are* different species." The day's tally includes two fat, black salamanders, one smaller, pale-grey newt, several beetles, and a handful of worms.

I have the same feeling as when I was in college, babysitting the neighbor's four-year-old, that I have to perform stability, humor, and jubilance for her, so that I can win her favor. She's not my daughter, and I feel that I'm treading a narrow line between approval and rejection; she's very shy and sensitive, and doesn't open up often. I also have in the back of my mind that I am the 'other woman,' not quite a stepmother but more than a friend, who kisses her dad and sometimes spends the night. How strange all of this must be for her: the split, the new partners of each parent, a new home, all within a year's time. All the way back to the car, we each hold one of her hands and swing her high into the air between our hips. "Again!" she says again, and again.

Academics

When we're both just waking us, clutching our mugs of coffee, sitting side-by-side at the kitchen counter reading in our various disciplines—I've got my stack of poetry books, student papers, and newspapers, and you have your science journals and ecology textbooks—and your voice leaps into the silence to exclaim,

"Ooooo! Pachira aquatica! Did I tell you about the best part of my trip to the cloud forest with my students in Mexico? When we stood by the river, and I pointed overhead to the gorgeous tree, *Pachira aquatica*, the tree they sell in miniature in Chinatown, they call it the 'money tree,' anyways, I was talking about this tree to my students and all of a sudden we heard a loud noise, something had fallen into the river. It was the fruit of the tree! A giant fruit, which exploded as it hit the water, since its seeds are distributed by water—it's as if the tree wanted to assist in my demonstration. I couldn't have asked for a better teaching moment!"

Your face is flushed, particularly that patch of your face at the crest of your cheekbones, that adorable, blooming visual signal of your passion for science. During a long day of study and work, that's the peak of my delight.

Ephemerals

On the first day of spring, we venture to Pease mountain, where only the bravest of ephemerals bloom: we find periwinkle-tinted hepatica flowers near the top, and the small, curled, spotted leaves of the trout lily are just starting to pop up at the bases of trees. Your daughter swings from vines like a little monkey, my dog leaps over logs and rocks chasing after chipmunks, you hunt for beetles under stones, and I lay down in a bed of winter moss. The reindeer lichen is so dry it crumbles in our fingers. Your daughter sprinkles this powder, "fairy dust," in our hair, and then she runs off to gather acorns in her skirt. Another day in early spring, on the eve of the pink moon, we travel to your secret meadow of wild leeks—ramps—which sprout shyly up through the mud. We gather a small bundle for dinner, and the sharp, garlic aroma of their torn stems clings to our fingers through the afternoon. At the lip of the marsh, near the beaver dam, we find the remains of two lost friends: owl and deer. Your daughter brings home talismans of each: a skull with a full row of molars, and a broken wing with a baker's dozen feathers still attached. She pulls a tooth from the old deer's jaw and puts the bone under her pillow, to trick the tooth fairy.

These days feel just as fragile as the early spring blossoms. Your daughter is so little. Her rubber boots could fit in my pocket. Her fingers are little string beans. She's a doppelgänger of little orphan Annie—same age, same flop of orange-golden curls—it helps solidify this parallel that she's memorized all the lyrics of the Annie musical. Every time she gives me a hug, or a kiss on the cheek, or when she says, "Frances, I miss you when you're not here," I want to paint the moment in time. I receive her sweetness with a dose of fear, that she'll grow out of her affection, and into a grade-school standoffishness, or worse—a pre-teen anger at the world. What will she think of me then—the girlfriend of her dad—if we're still together, that is. Best not to think of it. Maybe we can devise a way to trick Father Time: deer tooth under the pillow for the tooth fairy, and a jar of mud to swap with the hourglass of sand. Or, let the season unfold, the spring ephemerals pop and wilt, and wait to see what bounty the fall brings.

ORCHID
paphiopedalum

What keeps us up at night

We try to balance the good and the bad, I've been shaking all day worrying over the end of hope for American democracy, the pandemic and long-term social isolation, and all those rejections—jobs, book manuscripts. You've been livid after arguments with your old neighbor and lingering tension with your ex partner, about deceit and child care, division of labor, career troubles. You don't want to /can't have sex, too much on your mind—all I want is to be close to you. It's not the sex I need, it's the intimacy. I can't sleep, I say, two hours later. Give me an image, I ask. To help me dream. Without pause, as though you already had this scene
in mind to deliver to me, your insomniac lover,

Think of the rocks at the base of Hierva el Agua in Oaxaca. Imagine that you're standing at the bottom of the petrified waterfalls, Looking up.

Thank you, that will help. A few minutes later, we are both still wide-eyed, sleepless, so you offer another,

Once, I hopped a train that rode over Mt Shasta. I was in a car with half the roof exposed, and I could see the bright moon and stars above, but was so cold at night that I had to get up and do jumping jacks, even on a train moving at 60 Mph. When the train descended and the sun finally rose, and the feeling came back to my fingers, I saw an old man on the side of the tracks, just walking along, minding his own. He was wearing the same hat that I had on my head—a bucket hat, like on Gilligan's Island. When he saw me standing up in the train, his face lit up, and he waved his hat high in the air with a joyful greeting. It's like we both recognized ourselves in each other—young, old, both hopping trains—or maybe he was just lonely and thought it was neat that we had the same hat, but either way, it's an image I return to often in dark times.

Omen

The spring is struggling here. She's indecisive, or maybe shy, or maybe she's stuck in transit in some warmer climate. It snows on Easter Sunday, and the blooming maple buds wilt. It is hard to leave the bed today—we both drank too much wine last night with the braised lamb and pasta—it was all so delicious and we seem to be losing hold of any sense of restraint. I used to wake up early every morning. Now, the hours blend together and I lose track of my circadian rhythm. Rules, order, dates, time, what does it all mean when you're under house arrest during a global pandemic? Why not drink a whole bottle with dinner? The *not* to the *why* is this headache, which follows me all the way up the hill as we hike to the tower. But here, proof of spring, every few feet: one ladybug on my boot, one beetle on the path, and altogether three snakes. Must be good luck, you say, and I hope you're right, we need it.

Circus

Sorry about the confusion I caused this morning. I know it must seem like I staged an "accidental" encounter with you, your ex, your daughter, my dog, and my mother in the yard of your new apartment—how else could such an absurd bit of theater occur? Well, I assure you, this was not a planned scene, it was just the most convenient route to my office, and my mother insisted on accompanying me. Oh, the panic that five minutes of social complexity can create! First, my dog wrenched out of her leash and flew across the yard, whining with excitement. She loves you the most, even though I feed her and walk her and hold her every day—perhaps it's your pheromones, or your alpha stature. Well, how could I have known that everyone was in the backyard, transferring the kid? I hadn't seen your ex in months, nearly a year in fact. She looked just as shocked to see me, and we gawked at one another wordlessly while your daughter chased my dog around the driveway, and you stood by, your palms in the air, waiting—for what? I'm paralyzed by my own thoughts: *I wonder if she thinks the reason your pants are unzipped is because we just rolled out of bed—but they're just broken, the zipper is broken! How weird that my mom is here to witness this. I'm not supposed to have a dog over to your apartment, your landlord is going to complain.* Meanwhile, my poor mother breaks the silence and makes small talk with your ex, "How was your Easter?" After I finally wrangled my pup and we all bid our awkward adieus, I couldn't explain to my mother why my heart palpitated long after we walked away. She says, over and over, "but it went so well. Everyone gets along *so well!"*

Enigma of attraction

Even when you're sitting directly in front of me, you're not close enough. I want to crawl inside your mouth, or maybe take a bite of your cheek, your jaw, your neck.

It's odd—this feeling, somewhere between pleasant and painful, like the tingling of legs while biking uphill, or the turning of a hungry belly as the onions caramelize on the stove.

When you're only two blocks away, I feel the same hollow tug as though were two continents away. One day, then two apart, and everything reminds me of you. When I watch a film, the handsome protagonist—a German detective war vet—reminds me of you, even though you look and act nothing alike. He plays the role of the love object of several women in Berlin, and since you play the role of my love object, he is therefore synonymous with you, to me. When I read a book, no matter if the love story follows a young orphan boy who lusts after the proprietress of a whorehouse, his desire feels parallel to mine—I read myself into his urges.

It is a particular discomfort, loving you, but I hope it stays. I fear that if I ever fully close the gap between my longing and you, between subject and object, that the attraction will evaporate, and with my belly filled, I'll have nothing left to crave, nothing to keep me up late, wanting.

Sourdough Sunday

Although the days during this pandemic blur together, I find a nostalgic tranquility in the concept of “Sunday.” Sunday as a day of rest, even as an atheist, even in the absence of an office and routine. Baroque on the radio, newspapers scattered around countertops alongside the half-loaf of sourdough bread I baked the night before, and my rhubarb jam to celebrate spring. We’re straining to find new forms of connectivity: my sister has also been on a sourdough kick, and even though she’s living all the way across the country, we share recipes, tips on kneading and temperature, and photos of the crumb. I acquired my starter from a neighbor, who left the jar on my porch; I sanitized the jar just in case—an action which felt absurd, given the nature of the jar’s contents—a wild ferment, carrying yeasts from the air and the rye berries which I ground, dry and full of noise, in a blender. Everything feels different, and yet nothing has changed—sourdough is not a craze, it’s not “in” because we’re quarantined, but it’s fun to pretend that we have embarked on a novel adventure. Something to keep the hands and mind busy.

Mud season

Some days, an unnamable dread descends like an opaque curtain, blocking out the light. Yes, it is a sunny, clear day in May in Vermont. Yes, the wildflowers are blooming—they taunt me in my gloom. I let my dog pull me along the trail as though I were the leashed creature needing direction. I can't help it, I am human, and today I fully indulge in the most human of emotions: jealousy, anger, worry, regret. I know that they are useless, I don't need to be told. Look at those two loons out there in the middle of Colchester Pond—I hate them for their happiness. Some days, as today, I fear that you are just another man, a man with all of the regrettable stereotypes pinned to your lapel, a man driven by his penis to make inappropriate decisions and then whine about them or cover them up, and what does that make me? The fool. Yes, I spent an hour last night on my phone stalking that young woman you had a fling with just before we got together—your rebound, your "big mistake," and yes, I regret stalking her, but her face is burned into my vision and I can't shake her out. She is now the pale phantom haunting my sunny hike. I fear our future, what it will or will not hold. I curse my own romantic sensibilities, why do I allow myself to plunge so deeply in, with no ladder to climb back out? These metaphors feel flimsy and cliché, but that's all that this day deserves: tired poetry for a rotten mood. At least the mud along the Eastern shore of this pond matches my thoughts—mud for mud, I'm going to allow myself to wallow.

Six-spotted tiger beetle

During the pandemic, it's a blessing and a curse to be quarantined with you. One day, I cry for hours over nothing and everything—perhaps it was as trivial as your neutral facial expression when you greeted me on your porch, or perhaps it was my fear that love is false and all relationships are doomed, based on all of my prior failures—but you hold me on your bed until the snot clears from my nose and I'm finally able to speak, and we make love while the salt of my tantrum is still wet on my cheeks. The next day, I cook you an epic feast of salmon, arugula salad, fresh sourdough bread, wine. I'm trying to seduce you, daily, into loving me, eternally, through good food. We work side-by-side in our various creative pursuits: you pin beetles in your living room laboratory while I paint watercolor diplomas for my graduate students. We speak about the elusive six-spotted tiger beetle, which I spotted earlier on the bike path by the lake. "Oh," you say, "you're so lucky, I've been trying to catch that beetle for ages. *Cicindela sexguttata…"* The beetle has such a provocative name, and it is an attractive creature: iridescent emerald green shell, narrow waist, elongated body. I don't know the names for insect parts, but I say this beetle's scientific name over and over again under my breath until it morphs into a fairy tale, a romance—cicndela sexguttata, cinderella sex gustoso—sexy, tasty cinderella? I'm no scientist. You can't tame this poet's brain. I can't contain my associative tendencies.

Driftwood beach

It is finally warm enough for a picnic. We bike through clouds of spring midges, pointing out spring blooms along the edge of the path: bloodroot, coltsfoot, and a purple flower whose name we haven't yet learned. We maneuver over a forest of logs which have been swallowed by the lake and spit back up again on the shore—a battlefield of fallen soldiers. I choose the longest, fattest log to perch on, and while you set up the picnic, I take off my boots and socks and stretch my pale winter toes out over the still-frigid water. We have all day, so no need to rush through the meal of sourdough bread, avocado, lemon, goat cheese, and half a bottle of wine from last night's dinner. As you clean the last of the avocado's soft flesh from its skin, I grab your arm and point out a bird a hundred yards south of our log: a loon! Then, another, its partner. They're diving together on a synchronized fishing expedition. A few solitary gulls fly overhead, threatening to steal our bread. Directly west from our perch, silhouetted by the setting sun, an enormous tree, half-submerged, hosts two turtles. We clean the crumbs and crusts from the log and lay on our backs, watching the clouds drift across our theater.

Absurd

The nature of a spectacle is a blend of fear and pleasure, the thin line between discomfort and entertainment. Your ex texts me one day, out of the blue—the first time she has reached out to me, ever—to ask if she and your daughter can have a playdate with my dog. Well, I think, here's a bridge to connect, I'll cross over. I walk the dog over to your old apartment for delivery, and to my surprise, she invites me upstairs. Here I am again in your space, but you're not here, just your former girlfriend and your new girlfriend and her dog and your daughter, all smiles and awkward gestures. I ask what she's whipping up on the stove, and she invites me over to peer into her old cookbook: maple cream pie, with the secret ingredient, black pepper! I feel that she has revealed a deep, intimate bit of knowledge with me, this hidden spice in her favorite pie. A few days later, I hear from you that your daughter tells her mother, your ex, that I will be her new mother from now on. She's four, and she's starting to exercise the power of fiction, to our simultaneous delight and horror.

Toothless

Or, Trying to shake the existential dread while on a walk in the spring sun

Your daughter finds a baby snake in a rotten log. While you hunt for beetles in the log's remains, she plucks the snake out of the spongy wood, no fear in her fingers. The snake appears unresponsive—perhaps it's cold, hibernating in the shadows of the early morning. As the snake begins to thaw in the sun, and wake to its peril, it stares us all in the face, in turns: who is this, and this, and this, what are these fingers clutching my belly, is this the moment of my death? Finally, it opens and closes its jaw to bite, or threaten to bite, and this is when your daughter drops the poor thing in the grass. It coils and bites, unfurls and bites, lunges and bites, but the actions of its jaw are futile; the snake is too young for teeth. I have felt this way all week, a toothless snake: between negotiating the meager pay and benefits of three part-time jobs, anxious trips to the grocery store mid-pandemic, and witnessing the horror of the news unfold daily—snapping my jaw away in defense of attack, to no avail—those more powerful have already snatched me up at my tender middle, dropped me, and I lay half-hidden, biting at air.

Eye of the storm

Warm rain on the aluminum roof. We have the window cracked open, and the humidity seeps into the kitchen, mixing with the odors of our cooking that waft out into the garden. The neighbor's big black dog is curled up in the flower bed, napping through the storm. On the radio: a string quintet in C major by Franz Schubert. You and I tear through a loaf of my rye sourdough bread, with smoked provolone cheese and raspberry jam. We're hungry after a short hike around red rocks hunting for morel mushrooms, but we found only dwarf yellow violets and jack-in-the-pulpit. Can we stay in this hour beyond the limits of the clock? It's a selfish wish—low pressure days make you sleepy, but I'm wide awake—I want to take it all in, slowly.

The art and science of naming

"Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought."
— Audre Lorde

Our hunt leads us through marshes, fields, hillsides, in wider and wider loops around the Champlain Valley, and finally, to a patch of morels hidden in plain sight at the base of two dead elms by the waterfront. Twelve shriveled brain-blobs, poking up out of the grass. The ecstasy of the quest: the finding, the naming, the eating. We set a few aside to study, toss the rest into a pan, and spread spoonfuls of buttered fungus on toast for dinner, moaning our appreciation. Then we stay up late reading scientific articles about the speciation of *Morchella,* trying to pair our foraged fruits with the correct identification. We think we've found our species: *Morchella ulmaria,* though we haven't ruled out *prava* or *cryptica.* We dissect one of our specimens into quarters, scrape the edge with a double-edged razor blade, smear the spores on a glass slide, and take turns peering through the compound scope—one of four microscopes set up temporarily in this small apartment during the pandemic. This scope resides in the kitchen, next to the dried chiles and your "library" of mezcal, which I accidentally bump with my feet, sending the collection of bottles into a little choir of clinkling glass. Under the scope, the interior surface of the morel glistens, and I feel like a spelunker who has just discovered a cave filled with crystalline minerals. This midnight hour of fevered research is as delicious as the mushrooms themselves—naming and studying is the reward of the hunt.

The nuptial chambers of the water lily beetles

We pause by the Magnolia tree and lean over the fence to take in the subtle scent. We're trespassing, and you even dare to pluck a stolen blossom, but the flowers are provocative and we can't resist. We get to talking about beetle pollinated flowers, and you describe, with a tone of wonder, the Amazon Waterlily *Victoria amazonica.* Two beetles land in the lily, hopefully carrying pollen from another lily somewhere on their bodies, and the lily gently closes its petals around the beetle couple, creating a warm and safe nuptial chamber. The flower itself heats up while the beetles eat pollen and copulate. Then, around sunset, the flower blooms open to release the beetles, and now that the lily has been pollinated, the blossom closes back in on itself, and the plant pulls its flower back underwater. I make mental notes while you describe the hot chambers of this Amazonian lily so that I can write a poem about it, or maybe sometime in the future, devise some elaborate, metaphorical proposal to you through the image of the lily and the beetles.

The season of beetle appreciation

My first social event after the quarantine—in the capital city at the foot of the golden dome with three of my students—only a day without you and I feel the tug to drive back for a hug. It has been so long since I spoke face-to-face with anyone outside of my corona-virus pod for months, beyond the quick sidewalk greetings with acquaintances in town, and we are all turning into unwilling introverts, trained to avoid gatherings for fear of catching or spreading death. Yet, I have grown to enjoy the simplicity and intimacy of spending each day with my closest loves, and it feels like a violation now, to be sitting in a wide circle on the lawn, toasting a glass of champagne to celebrate my students' completion of their MFA degrees. Down the hill, one of the first farmer's market experiments is taking place: masks required, six feet apart, pre-orders only, no dogs allowed. What, then, is the point of the market at all?

I look at the faces of my dear students, now friends after two years of workshops and seminars, and I spot a shining, silver object on Rebecca's blouse. A beetle! I gently pluck it from the silk, with Rebecca's permission, and hold it in my palm for everyone to examine. Iridescent, metallic shell, quite round in shape but larger than a ladybug. We all mutter appreciative noises and words, but I can't quite convey to them the microcosmic bubble of scientific worship that you and I have lived in for the duration of the spring—every day, collecting beetles and fern fronds and water lilies to examine back in your home-grown laboratory. So, I let the beetle fly away, and later on, in your company, we debate its identification: calligrapher beetle, or the tortoise beetle…but it seems that this entomological fever is rather contagious—my students write to me to express their awe at the beauty of the little winged creature we had all witnessed. Perhaps we could all get matching beetle tattoos, they suggest. Later the same week, I spot a woman with the tattoo of a tiger-beetle on her inner arm. I doubt that any of us will actually be inking these beetles anytime soon, but it's amusing to watch this shared interest in bugs flare up as the season coaxes the life out from under the shadows of rocks and logs. We are all coming out of the woodwork together.

Pursuit

Today, on the hottest day of the year so far, I dragged myself up Mount Elmore to the firetower, just to get out of the house. I had spent too long curled in the same position at the kitchen counter reading, reading, reading. I needed to gain some perspective, and the old firetower could offer a new view. I stepped slowly through the muggy swarms of mosquitoes, wiping salt and sweat from my brow at every turn. My dog scampered at half her usual pace, and she stopped at a little stream to drink and cool her belly. As we neared the peak, a metallic green projectile cut across my view of the path—a six-spotted tiger beetle! With no net handy, I took off my shirt and threw it onto the beetle. Each time, the insect escaped just in the nick of time. I repeated this circus act three times, and luckily not another human being was around to witness my charade: a topless woman throwing her shirt onto the dirt trail over, and over, and over again, and crying out with anguish after each toss, “No! So close! Wait! Damn!”

Agonum

"I am the cinnamon peeler's wife. Smell me."
—Michael Ondaatje

I am the beetle-hunter's lover, smell me.

The scent of your scientific hobbies have transferred from your fingers to my skin. They're not always pleasant, these perfumes: ethanol from your insect-collecting bottles, the bread-like, baked earth odor of dried moss, and most recently, to my dismay, you pulled me in for a hug with your hands reeking of sharp, metallic creosote—the defensive gas of the agonum beetle, which you proudly collected this afternoon, on the beach where the Winooski river meets the lake.
I could grow into this perfume, with time.

Nerd origin story

We spend a few nights out in the country between Middlesex and Worcester, and, sitting around a campfire waiting for the coals to break down so that we can cook a steak, you tell me stories of your youth. Perhaps it's the setting of the fire, the mosquitos, the thin sliver of moon rising up over the treeline, all these visual and sensual signals that provoke your nostalgia about "Camp Pemigewassett for boys"—a sleep away camp in New Hampshire which you attended four years in a row. As you dig into the meat of your story, the voices of the peeper frogs rise from the ditch, and a lone tree frog chirps overhead,

"Camp Pemi, as we called it, is where I first learned how to identify flora and fauna. It must have been my final year there, I was maybe thirteen or fourteen. Our counselor Larry Davis took us caving—his sister Emily was an expert spelunker, a member of the National Speleological Society, and once she famously broke her leg a thousand feet underground, in a cave in New Mexico—anywho, Larry was the best counselor, we loved him. But there was also a camper who returned to Camp Pemi as a young man—I forget his name, but as a boy he had won the 'nature award,' given to the most promising young naturalist at camp, and he went on to travel to Papua New Guinea to study plants. He returned many years later to camp to share with us what he had seen, and he's the first person to encourage me to learn the scientific names of plants. That year, I won the nature award, which at the time seemed like quite a challenge, you had to learn all sorts of trees and birds, I had been too busy having fun making fires and caving before. I had a net for catching butterflies, and I remember catching a beetle, and I was afraid at first to grab it with my hands. Well, this former camper brought with him a friend from New Guinea, a native man, who led us on all sorts of wild adventures in the woods of New England. He taught us how to make traps out of twigs to catch rodents, and at night, around the campfire, he would beat on an enormous drum that he had built himself, and chant songs in a language we had never heard, while the counselors sang old camp songs and football chants and whatever else came to mind. Wild!"

Phantom smell

You ask, “Do you smell that? Roasted coffee, baked bread?”

“Not at all,” I respond.

“I smell them everywhere, every day, whether I’m in the woods, or in an office, or in the bedroom—always those two aromas: coffee and bread. It’s not unpleasant, but it is strange…”

You spend all month fretting that these hallucinations may indicate brain tumors. You brush it off like it's a joke, and I respond like the nag that I am, “Go get it checked out, soon, please.” like a mantra. It’s odd how potential loss enhances one’s attachment—it’s sort of like how most humans only pay attention to a certain species when it’s nearly extinct, or how much more precious the last piece of pie is than that first. My imagination leaps forward several years, to when I’m mourning your death by brain tumor. What can I possibly say to your daughter? I can’t tell her all of the details, about my desire, about our passion, but I can show her drafts of the book we started writing together. “A labor of love,” I’ll say.

The first tiger

You teach me how to hunt, catch, pin, and identify beetles, and I start my own collection. We snag a few treasures on the cobblestones of the Huntington river: the Gazelle beetle, *Nebria brevicollis*, slow-moving from sitting in the cold shadows of logs. On a solo walk around Colchester pond, I catch a few iridescent green beetles, and we both struggle with the identification. I worry that this may be the widely feared Emerald Ash Borer, the beetle threatening to wipe out Ash trees across New England by boring holes in the wood until the trees die, but this specimen is too small. Perhaps it's the Honeysuckle Flathead Borer; less ominous for Vermont forests. On the longest day of the year, we travel out to Duxbury dam, and downriver from the dam, we strip down for a skinny-dip in a secluded cove, and chase beetles around the hot sand with long-handled nets. I catch my first tiger beetle, a genus notoriously difficult to catch. They're fierce and infuriatingly quick. I leap, dive, and trap one with my net: *Cicindela repanda*. It's bronze, with lighter decorative curlicue patterns on its shell. It has impressively arched horns and long, bulky legs for hopping into the air and trapping its prey. You help me place my trophy in a glass vial, celebrating the completion of my first month as beetle-hunter.

Summer solstice hunt

In the season of thunderstorms, we sneak away in a narrow window of cloudless sun for a swim. The weathermen warned us of an evening storm, and we recognize the ominous blue forming along the horizon, but it's too hot to sit and write or read or kiss or cook, so we take the risk. I know a secret bend in the Huntington river, upstream from the hordes of families and teenagers and men with coolers of spiked seltzer, and downstream from the Audubon wilderness trails. We have to slide down a steep bank of loose dirt and last-year's fall foliage to get to the water's edge. We arrive a bit scraped and scuffed, and we immediately strip down and splash into the shallow river.

This is not exactly a swimming 'hole'—more like a fat boulder in a streambed of cobblestones, around which the water carves two narrow beds of knee-deep water. We take turns flopping like river trout in these natural tubs, then dry off on the sunny bank. I came equipped with a hearty picnic, and you came prepared to properly study this tiny ecosystem with your usual naturalist's toolkit: glass vials of various sizes, a hand lens for examining the details of mosses and bugs' legs, a rubber tube for siphoning the tiny critters into a bottle, a few cloth nets for catching the beetles in-flight, and a fancy camera lens for photographing our treasures in scene.

We set off, still naked, for our collecting adventure. Across the bank I spy a nearly imperceptible flash of green—the six-spotted tiger! *Cicindela sexguttata*, my ultimate summer goal, flying just out of sight and reach. I wait for the beetle to jump again, and it obeys my wish, buzzing across my field of vision and disappearing under a rock. I motion to you to follow close behind with your net, and together we crouch on either side of the rock. I see the beetle, perched in a narrow crevice in the shadows, and I coax it to crawl forward millimeter by millimeter with a twig from below. It complies, and then without warning, launches into the air. Luckily, you have your net ready, and the beetle flies right into the cloth. It is a beautiful specimen. We both dance little jigs in the mud. In the distance, thunder acts as a sort of applause or celebratory choir. We gather our things and scramble back up to our car to race the storm home.

All in a day's work

I think it started with a dream, whether it was a daydream or night dream, I can't remember; we lived in a house together, where we finally had a place for all our books, art, specimens, and cookware. I then turned the dream into a sketch, just like the drawings I used to make as a young child—blueprints of my future home—trampoline here, indoor movie theater there. My dream home has changed, of course. No more ice cream parlors, rather, lots of bookshelves and windows. In my new blueprint sketch, I try to make space for dancing. A few months after the dream and the drawing, I make an offer on a house, with you in mind. A house with a bedroom for your daughter, and lots of space for your microscopes and my books. A house next to an elementary school and a park. A few hours later, the realtor calls to tell me that my offer has been accepted. It's surreal and all too sudden, but it also feels familiar, like a life I'm stepping into, or that I've already rehearsed or experienced. The day that my offer is accepted, you and I hop in a car with your daughter and drive to Woodstock, where I will meet your parents, brother, and nephews for the first time. That night, in the two-bed hotel room, your daughter asks if she can sleep with me in my bed. She snuggles up in my armpit and quickly falls asleep. In the middle of the night she talks to herself, giggles in her sleep, and calls my name out into the dark. How did all of this happen so fast?

Night visitor

We are both at the kitchen counter, where we have our temporary pandemic work stations set up—I'm crafting syllabi for my fall courses and you're writing a paper about fern fossils. In the middle of this quiet, monotonous clickety-clacking of our computers, a large object collides with the window screen inches from my face. You leap up in alarm and excitement, and half-shout, "We're so lucky! I think that was the *Pelidnota punctata* beetle! See? There it is, trying to get in the corner of the window. Oh, I've been wanting to see this, and it came to me! What a good omen." You dismantle the screen with much ado and snatch the enormous beetle in your palm. It is impressive—about the width of my thumb, and golden-armored like its cousin, the prolific Junebug, but this one has black spots around the edge of its shell. "This is the Grapevine Chafer, and like clockwork, it shows up on the hottest night of July each year. I should have anticipated his arrival since it's been oppressively hot today. Here, hold him while I put the screen back on." He tosses the beetle at me as casually as tossing car keys but I flinch, instinctively, and the beetle misses my hand, launches into the air, and buzzes up and behind the fridge. I look at you with bemused horror. Now the window is in shambles and there's a giant beetle stuck behind the fridge. The expression on your face is still victorious.

Meta

Late one Sunday night, we're sitting on the couch with our feet propped up on a massive pile of cardboard, which is leftover from a few cheap Ikea cabinets you set up in your daughter's bedroom, but it makes me feel like we're living in a puppet-maker's apartment, or like we're on the set of *Synecdoche, New York*—a film by Charlie Kaufman about a down-and-out theater director who builds a model of the titular. We're watching a film, not the aforementioned film, but *American Splendor*, a similarly experimental indie art film about a cynical cartoonist named Harvey Pekar who works as a filing clerk, hordes vinyl record, and lives in a dumpy apartment, which only enhances my amusement at the mountain of cardboard in your living room. You turn to me out of the blue, and as if you're speaking out of the script of this comedy we find ourselves living in, you ask,

"Let's get an ant farm!"

"You don't want to get a cat or something?"

"Ants! And also sea monkeys."

I lean back into our cardboard castle. With you, I will never be bored.

The dogbane beetle mystery

I find this wayward creature far from its preferred habitat or food source. He's been washed up on a lip of sand at the edge of Lake Champlain, crawling up towards the top of the miniature cliff and falling back into the cool, wet sand beneath. I send you a photo, and you text back, "That's your beetle! *Chrysochus auratus,* that's the one I've been wanting to show you, the dogbane beetle, it only feeds on the leaves of dogbane. Good find!" The beetle's iridescent shell flashes in the bright afternoon sun—it's almost 100 degrees out—green-blue head, green thorax, and wing casings transitioning from red to gold to green. There are little bright, white spots on the edge, similar to those of the six-spotted tiger beetle. When I see you in person later that night, I bring the beetle as an offering. We put it under the microscope and I'm bewildered to find that the white polka-dots have completely disappeared. We compare the photo to the physical specimen, and indeed—the spots which were very distinct at four-o-clock earlier today are absent now at eight-o-clock. Perhaps they were grains of sand from the beach? No, they're perfectly symmetrical in the photo, three on each side. The case of the dogbane beetle's missing polka-dots remains unsolved.

Show and tell

Your daughter buzzes around the apartment like a hornet trapped in a window screen—too much energy for this claustrophobic, hot, tiny space. She's red-in-the-face from our pillow fight, and you and I are panting, sweating, trying to find excuses to lean against the furniture to take breaks from the whirlwind of activity. It's bedtime, but she wants to show me every detail of her bedroom: the Lego village, the penny collection, "did you know that there's a little Abraham Lincoln inside this building on pennies? He's so tiny you need a magnifying glass," she informs me as she hands me a penny and a lens. She also wants to show me her beetle collection, and she requests that you and I both sit on the floor while she retrieves her cardboard-box-museum of insects. As she lifts the lid, she says modestly, "it isn't much, yet, it's just a start." The box contains a mess of wings and a few half-intact beetles. She points to each as she names the species, "this one's a click beetle, it goes 'click' when it's scared. This one is a ladybug, I have lots of those. This is a junebug. And this one is… what is this one daddy?" She turns to you and I can see proud tears forming at the edge of your eye, "a milkweed beetle," you say, and she nods, as though she knew it all along, she just wanted to give you a chance to participate.

Bathtime

Certain phrases I hear while your daughter takes a bath feel either profound or hilarious enough to write down, which I do:

"What a dream, to fill up a bucket."
"Dad, I actually don't need you." (She says this to herself, out of your earshot.)
"Frances, I think you can be my new mom. And Tintin can be my dog until I get a human baby of my own."

After her bath, she curls up in my lap, asks for a kiss, and says, "Frances, I love you more than anyone else in the world." This is not a scene that I imagined for myself, but I couldn't be more pleased. Hopefully it's not just a phase she's going through; a phase of hyperbolic affection. I wonder what's going through your mind—are you relieved that your daughter likes me? Are you worried that it all happened too quickly for her to comprehend: your separation, your move, your new partner, her mother's new partner? I don't ask you what you're thinking, for fear of spoiling a good and simple moment.

Chanterelle anniversary

One year ago, I found a single, thumb-sized chanterelle nestled in the moss at the edge between the woods and the cemetery in Middlesex. On a bold whim, I broke several years of silence between us by sending you a photo of the little mushroom. My heart raced as I waited for a reply, and it didn't take long—you responded within the hour with an invite for a mushroom foraging hike with you and your daughter, our first "date," which quickly melted into a continuous year of companionship. To celebrate the year and the return of the season of mushrooms, we set out to explore an unfamiliar wilderness: Silver Lake, where we set up camp by the water's edge and scoured the woods for fungal fruit, with great success. Here we are again, I think, or maybe I say it out loud while we crouch around a cluster of young chanterelles. The dog has long since disappeared into the bushes to hunt chipmunks, which leaves both of my hands free to hold the specimens that we collect. I find a very unusual mushroom: all alone, it stands erect from the soil, but the tip is two-pronged, like the forked tongue of a snake. It's orange, porous, and smaller than a paperclip. "Maybe… cordyceps? I read about this mushroom in a book years ago, I think this is the one which sprouts out of the heads of ants when they die," I tell you as you carefully dig around the base of the mushroom to find the body of the dead insect which this fungus has parasitized. "I think you're right," you say as you dig, and it feels good to finally be the first to identify a specimen. Indeed, the fruit of the mushroom is attached to the rotten carcass of a large beetle of some sort; an uncanny treasure to celebrate our anniversary.

Catalogue of earthly delights

We return to the same trail where we first forayed together. A mushroom foray, that is, back when we both foraged with our small town's amateur mycology club. I remember every detail of that hike—all the years that have passed haven't dimmed the violet hue of the webbed *Cortinarius purpurascens*, or the image of six adult nerds arranging our bounty in a patch of grass: baskets of mushroom fruits, guidebooks, special knives and dirt brushes, paper bags for preserving specimens—here we are again, at the ghost brook reservoir, in prime conditions: late August, after a week of rain and several warm, humid days. The woods are rich with life: mycelium webs stretch across logs and underfoot, toads leap off the trail as we pass, tree frogs and cicadas chirp overhead, and a barred owl stares us down as we descend towards the marsh. There, leopard frogs and salamanders populate the shallow water, and the semi-translucent ghost pipe stands in clusters at the bases of trees. There are so many species of mushrooms that I quickly lose track, but fortunately you're quick to catalogue your specimens, and you keep each little lobe or head preserved in its own cup in a paper egg carton. Later, when we're home and drowsy from spending so many hours bush-whacking through the woods and mud hunting for edible or interesting creatures, I get out a piece of paper and ask you to help me craft a list of all of the mushrooms that we found,

"Well, of course, let's start with the most exciting finds. The chanterelles, four different specie: *Cantharellus flavus,* those big, white chalky ones, *Cantharellus minor*, those tiny chanterelles, and think we have the *Craterellus tubaeformis,* known as the yellowfoot trumpet or the funnel chanterelle…"

"Oh yeah, and the black trumpets! The 'trompettes de la mort,' or trumpets of death,"

"Yes, that's *Craterellus cornucopioides,* I think. Let's eat those tonight."

"But we also have the hedgehogs, which I'd love to eat. I haven't found those for years, maybe since I was little, and foraged with my dad in Utah. I remember that they're delicious and pretty safe."

"Right, because there aren't really dangerous lookalikes, their teeth are unmistakable."

"We have both the brown hedgehogs and the white ones."

"Yes, *Hydnum repandum* and *Hydnum albidum,* let's save a few of each to sequence at the lab. And each of the chanterelles, of course, and the jelly babies."

"We only found one type of jelly babies, right? The yellow ones?

"Yeah, yellow-grey, *Leotia lubrica* but they might be hybrids, remember? I can't wait to find out."

"Ok, what else? Puffballs…"

"Yes, both the *lycoperdon* and *scleroderma*."

"Yup. And the destroying angel."

"And angel's wings."

"There's that one that looks like a yellow finger, what's that one called?"

"Oh yeah, maybe fairy tongue? It's not a true earth tongue. Or yellow coral, not sure."

"Red eyelash fungus."

"Yes! The one with the little black eyelashes. I used to call those 'Lady Macbeth's Spots,' because they look like little drops of blood, and she says, 'out damn spot, out."

"You literature nerd."

"You science nerd."

"Oooh, don't forget the elfin saddle, *Helvella*."

"Ew, yeah, and that penis-looking mushroom, the parisitized amanita."

"Amanita mold."

"There was that white bolete,"

"Growing out of a rock with a grey top?"

"Yes. *Leccinum albellem*."

"There were the boring ones, the little-browns and the red *Russulas* and yellow *Amanitas*."

"Boring but lovely."

"Of course, I just meant common."

"I found a lobster, *Hypomyces lactifluorum.*"

"And you didn't tell me?"

"There were so many mushrooms, and so little time!"

"Ok, ok. Coral."

"Yes, and false coral, *Tremellodendron schweinitzii."*

"Oh, what about that little jelly parasite catching a ride on top of another mushroom cap?"

"*Syzygophora mycetophila* occurring only on *Gymnopus dryophilus!*"

"Was that whole name really just on the tip of your tongue?"

"Well, yes, but I just looked it up a few minutes ago, fresh on my mind."

"Freaky genius."

"No, just good short term memory."

"What about the dyer's polypore?"

"*Phaeolus schweinitzii.*"

"That Schweinitz, what a guy."

"Yeah, his name was all over those woods."

"There was that cup fungus, the wrinkled brown one…"

"Yeah, not sure what that was called. Don't forget the field mushroom, the *Agaracus,* growing in cow dung."

"Glamorous."

"Should we make dinner?"

"Speaking of cow dung got you hungry?"

"No, but I could go for some hedgehog and chicken!"

"Chicken or chicken-of-the-woods?"

“Chicken-of-the-woods. Add it to your list, we got a little specimen today that we can eat.”

I set this scrap of paper aside, this comprehensive list of a single afternoon’s cornucopia, this catalogue of our findings at ghost brook, so that we can get to work chopping up a meal of the golden fungus we pulled from the earth.

The fiery searcher

As fall semester of teaching begins to creep in on our summer freedom, we escape for one last hurrah in the wilderness—a three-day camping trip on Knight Island. Somehow, I wrangle my little dog between my legs and hold her with my knees so that she doesn't jump out while we're paddling, and we're off, carving a slow path through surprisingly choppy waves. It's a windy day, and the effect of the seagulls and terns overhead and the raucous waters beneath gives me the continual impression that we're canoeing across a marine channel. We also spy several cormorants flying sideways like the black shadows of witches—oblong, dark, strangely shaped. Even more strange is the loping, ancient form of the great blue heron. They always remind me of pterodactyls with their broad wingspans, stretched-out necks, and long beaks.

When we finally land our boat on the rocky northeastern shore, the dog leaps out and disappears into the woods, and we set off on the trail around the island to shake our 'sea-legs' out. Right away it becomes clear that this will be a very fruitful weekend for mushroom foraging. In the first hour, we find a robustly yellow *Amanita caesarea*, popping up out of it's white egg-like sac, and half a dozen species of *Boletus*, including one specimen which could be the delicious "King" bolete, but for all of the worm holes in its cap.

Over the next three days, we walk, swim, sit around the fire, stargaze, and point out all of the island's beautiful features to one another, "Look at that huge cottonwood tree, it's a monster, it must be the oldest I've seen!" And "I can't believe how many field hornbeams there are here, they're all gnarly and twisted with age." We spy my favorite bird, the kingfisher, slicing through the air over the water. We examine the boulders on the beach for fossils and quartz. We come upon what feels like a secret cliffside meadow, not another soul in sight, where we spend an entire afternoon in silence, gazing out across the expanse of the lake. You call this meadow a "lakeside sedge woodland," and I call it a "windy cliff hanging meadow."

On our second day, during our walk back to the campsite to cook up a simple dinner of potatoes and mushrooms, you gasp, grab my arm in your characteristic signal of enthusiasm, and rush over to examine the bark of a tree, which is covered with a dozen or so shiny, brown-black objects and a bunch of fuzzy slime. "Gypsy moth cocoons! Actually, we have a whole diorama of the life stages of the moth, right here: The egg sacs, the cocoons, and a dead moth clinging to the bark." We find that many of the trees on our walk back are decorated with a similar display, and you tell me, still glowing from your discovery, about the carabid beetle called the "fiery searcher," who feasts on the larvae of gypsy moths. I nod along, thinking, "can we both quit our jobs and live off of moth larvae and mushrooms and fish and never leave this island?"

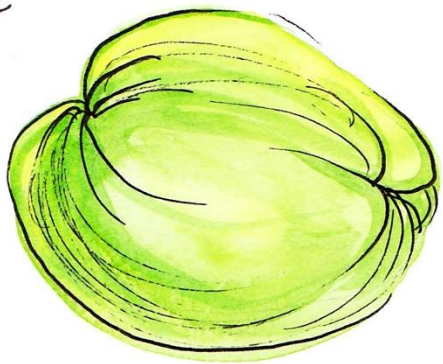
Everything is a leaf

You propose that we write a book about Goethe. Apparently, that famed poet-botanist-philosopher of yore wrote that “alles ist blatt,” or “everything is a leaf,” and you think that we should write a book expounding on this concept: plant anatomy—how every part of the plant could be considered a different stage of the leaf, from the bud scale to the inflorescence. You’ll write the outline and I will illustrate it. Once the idea has been spoken aloud, it infects all of our conversations. During every walk we take in the woods or even around town, you grab my arm enthusiastically and point out the various parts of plants. We examine the leaves of elderberry bushes, russian olives, lamb’s quarters, artemisia, hasta flowers—no leaf is left unturned. It doesn’t matter if we ever actually sit down to write this book, or any others—it’s these shared moments of research and learning that I treasure, this mutual celebration of knowledge.

The season of leaves passes, and our fevered leaf-peeping, sketching, and botanical diagramming slows to a drip. One night midwinter, you pull me in close before I’ve had a chance to peel off the thousand layer puzzle of my winter outfit, and say, “maybe instead of the Goethe book, or after we finish that project, we should write a book about all of the things we love: botany, history, literature, cooking.” I blush, and not only from the heat of wearing my knit cap indoors, but because I don’t know how to break it to you that I’m already writing this book, I beat you to it—a love letter in fragments about you and everything we do together, about ferns and mushrooms and mezcal and smoked meat and snow and stars and dirt.

Here, this is for you.

Chayote
Sechium edule



Gingembre