

ASHLEY WILDA

The Night Fox



**FREE
SAMPLER!**

ATTENTION, READER:
PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS IS NOT
A FINISHED BOOK.

An advance readers copy is the first stage of printer's proofs, which has not been corrected by the author, publisher, or printer.

The design, artwork, page length, and format are subject to changes, and typographical errors will be corrected during the course of production.

If you quote from this advance readers copy, please indicate that your review is based on uncorrected text. Thank you.

The Night Fox

ASHLEY WILDA

ISBN: 9780593618929

Trim: 5 1/2" x 8 1/4"

On Sale: October 2023

Ages 12 and up; Grades 7 and up

336 pages

\$18.99 USA / \$25.99 CAN



Rocky Pond Books

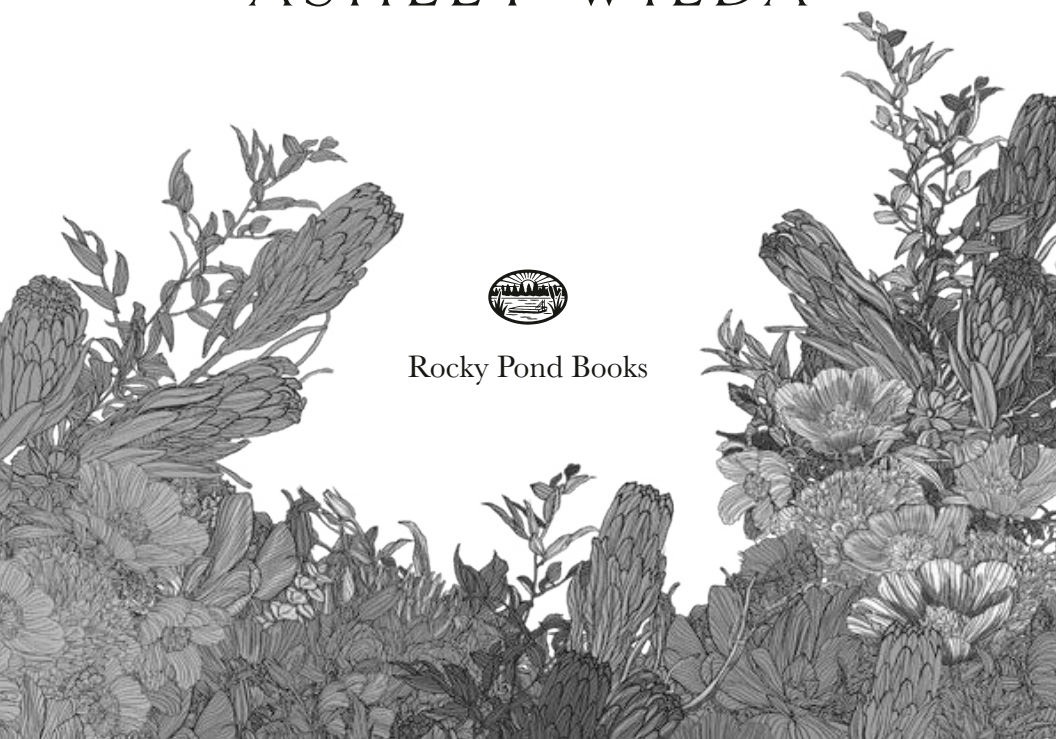


The Night Fox

ASHLEY WILDA



Rocky Pond Books



ROCKY POND BOOKS

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by Rocky Pond Books,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2023
Copyright © 2023 by Ashley Wilda

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

Rocky Pond Books & colophon are trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.
The Penguin colophon is a registered trademark of Penguin Books Limited.

Visit us online at penguinrandomhouse.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.
Printed in the United States of America

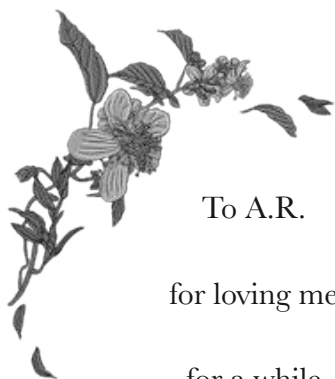
ISBN 9780593618929

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Vendor Origin Code TK

Design by Sylvia Bi
Text set in Baskerville

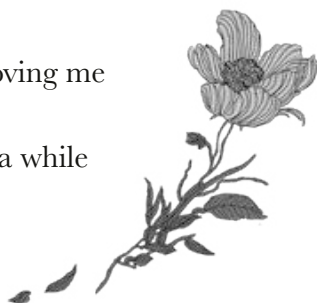
The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for
author or third-party websites or their content.



To A.R.

for loving me

for a while



Content Note:

Please be aware that this book contains depictions of depression, panic attacks, and suicidal thoughts.

I

The fox sleeps by my bed.
Small, with a curled, quiet tail. Smiling.
Its fur is a warm, earthy brown, hints of red.
Smooth under my reverent fingers.
It smells of some faraway spice, and magic, and wood—
for that is what it is made of.
More perfect for its tiny imperfections—the notch by the
head, the ripple on the left side
of the nose—for they tell me it was made by you.
The fox fits in the palm of my hand—
where yours used to rest.
I don't run anymore. Feet bound to hard, barren,
gray earth.
But the fox flies in my dreams,
 always,
 always,
 trying to find
a way home.

It never does.



MORNINGS ARE UNPLEASANT ENOUGH without a suitcase landing on your feet.

Kicking, I shove myself up, clawing at the tangled hair falling into my face. My heart ricochets in my chest from the abrupt awakening.

“Mom, seriously?”

My mother stands there, arms folded across her chest. Her eyes gleam, determination on the surface hiding something more vulnerable underneath. Pity? Concern?

I hate both.

“Pack what you’ll need for the next few weeks. You’re leaving in less than an hour.”

I’ve only been home a few weeks since my senior year at the Carwick Boarding Academy ended. Granted, all I’ve done is sleep, and occasionally eat, same as over winter break, but still—

Bubbles of panic slowly rise in my sleep-numbed brain. “Where are we going?” My stomach lurches with unease.

Mom sighs. “*We* aren’t going anywhere, Liz.” Her gaze softens. There’s sadness too. “Just you.”

The words slam into me. “Wait, what? You can’t do that.” I’m not sure what she’s planning, but I’m positive I don’t want it.

She tucks an errant strand of blond hair behind her ear and turns to go.

I know there's no use in arguing with her. The sooner you stop resisting Ren Maven, the more time you get to live your life. You're fated to agree with her at some point anyway. But this time, what she is asking of me is different.

And I'll never agree.

"Where am I going?" I call after her, a last-ditch attempt at information.

"Don't forget to pack your retainer" is all I get from down the hall.

"Just wonderful!" I holler back.

No response.

Fan. Freaking. Tastic.

I get to spend an indeterminate amount of my summer at an undisclosed location. Me, the girl who doesn't talk to strangers, or friends, or really anyone at all.

Who sleeps and reads and watches Netflix and sleeps again.

Who hides in her room.

Who cries herself to sleep each night.

Yes, this sounds precisely like a recipe for disaster.

My suitcase gapes at my feet, an open mouth. I sit beside it, curl my legs into my chest, wrap my arms around them tightly. I look around the room, trying to decide what to pack while my brain struggles to compute what is happening. I'm leaving. Leaving my room, the only place I feel safe.

The green walls are dusty, except for odd, brighter patches where school photos used to rest, stuck on with tape. They're stacked in a shoebox under my bed now, where the faces of all the people who used to be my friends can't see me, taunting me with their happy eyes. Next

to the box lie rolled poem posters, never put up. My dirty hiking shoes peek out from under my dresser, my stuffed monkey sprawled next to them. The room of a girl who used to be. A girl who used to go to boarding school in the mountains. Used to have friends who made music and played Frisbee and roamed the campus at night. Used to plan movie nights with her mother. Used to be happy she believed in God. Used to be yours.

What would that girl have packed if *she* had to leave? Is there anything that matters to both the girl I was and the girl I am now? I know the answer before I'm done thinking the question.

My gaze lands on the carved wooden fox resting atop the open journal on my nightstand, a reddish-brown figure shorter than my index finger is long. Standing, I close the notebook, covering the poem I wrote the night before. I kiss my two fingers and touch them to the fox's smooth head, like I do every morning. Every night.

"I love you," I say.

They're probably the only true words I'll speak all day.

II

I don't remember meeting you.

We just kind of

f

e

l

l

together,

like two atoms forming a molecule, or stars drawn into
each other's orbits.

By the time you notice, it's too late—you can't go back.

I don't remember falling in love with you.

I mean, I do, but not like in the movies, or the books,
or the fairy tales.

No earth-shattering beginning in which I laid eyes on you and

knew

that I had fallen

hopelessly, tragically, mystically,

helplessly, brilliantly, in love with you.

But I have more memories of that time, that slow,
surreal

f l o a t i n g, than I do of any other
time in my life.

Do you know how much you made me bloom?
Do you know how deeply and irrevocably you scarred me?
I don't remember the moment I first saw you.
But the first moment
I remember you, singularly,
separate from anyone else—

Sitting up in the balcony at a basketball game. End of our
sophomore year. Neither of us very interested, but we had
to go once, right? It was a *thing*. Sitting with our friends,
the group that absorbed us both. Three of us—you caught
between me and a friend of mine—talking about crushes.
About what we found attractive in someone.

I said, Blue eyes. Smile lines in the corners. (Like yours,
which I hadn't noticed yet. Somehow.)

She asked you. You shrugged, shoulders rising like
always when you didn't know what to say—which you
said. We pushed you, teasing.
Finally, you said something like, I don't know, dimples,
I guess. When pressed, you wouldn't say more.
You were unassuming and adorable, and I *remember* you.
The same understatedness that made me not
remember meeting you is the very thing I began to find
endearing. I never found out whether you noticed my
shy dimples or not.
I wish I'd asked.

Here's the thing—love never felt like it was “supposed to.”

But it was perfect,

and obsessive,

and undefinable,

and uncontainable,

as I knew it should be.

You didn't make me feel fiery all over.

You didn't keep me up at night, not at first.

You didn't burn me up wildly from the inside.

You made me feel peaceful. Still.

You made me feel happy. Content.

You were the soft, warm spring wind

and the sun on new grass

through the bright, dappled leaves.

You were entirely unexpected.

You were everything.

You still are.



2

WE RIDE IN SILENCE. It's early for me—eight a.m. I crash early and sleep late these days. Still, at this hour, with such a rushed exit from the house, there's no chance I'll fall asleep. The smooth hum of the engine and Mom's silent, loaded glances, which I do not return, are starting to get to me, so I fiddle with the radio. Country—too happy. Pop—memories push at the edges of my consciousness, and I push back—too romantic. Classical—too snobby. Christian—my shoulders tighten—nope, not that either. Not anymore. I turn off the radio.

Mom's voice cuts through the silence, and I almost jump. "Liz, you aren't even the tiniest bit curious about where you're going? I expected you to ask again once we were on the road." Her eyes hold the same gentle, slightly frustrated concern that they've had for the last few months. I see through the question. She wants me to *want* something, something other than you. She wants me to be excited, or afraid, or angry. Anything but indifferent.

In truth, I am, just maybe, the tiniest, teeniest, ever-so-smidgenest bit curious. But that flutter of interest is buried under the avalanche of all my other crap. I can't admit that to her . . . if I give her the littlest bit of hope today, she'll expect me to be smiling tomorrow. Because that's totally how feelings work.

“What do *you* think?” I say.

She sighs. “We’re going to Raeth.”

Raeth. RAY-eth. Round and unfamiliar and alluring on my tongue, like a smoky whisper. The name sparks something in me, although I’ve never heard it before. Something mysterious. Almost . . . magical. Like the smell of damp earth in spring beneath a full moon. That’s odd. Not the magic part, but the spark part. It flares in my gut, leaps to my chest, and dies quickly—but it was there. Unnerving.

So I say, “Where the hell is that?” knowing it will tick her off.

She doesn’t take the bait. “It’s a special place . . . somewhere you can heal.”

Heal? I gave up on that a while ago.

“Mom, you know that’s not up to you.” In other words, drop it.

“I think a good, long stay there will do you good.”

Good. Long. Stay.

White halls. Cold tile floor. The smell of rubbing alcohol. Forced therapy sessions. I swallow the fear down.

“You’re just going to drop me off somewhere random and expect me to be fine with it?”

All of a sudden, I do care, and the whiplash from nothingness to fury is jarring.

She continues before I can butt in again. “It’s for kids like you. And it’s only for the summer.”

I stare at her, at a complete loss for words, which, believe me, doesn’t happen very often. “The summer,” I say slowly, venom building. “Kids like me.”

She eyes me, and I can tell she knows the storm that’s coming just as well as I do . . . and is just as powerless to stop it.

But somehow, I stuff it down. Push all the emotion down, down,

down, from the top of my head to the bottoms of my feet, shove it into a bottle and cork it.

And there it is again—that terrible, terrible emptiness.

Almost worse than being the saddest or angriest or loneliest girl in the universe.

Which I am.

“Liz?” Her tone is hesitant, probing. Almost apologetic.

I shake my head. I don’t even look at her. I can’t. “You don’t get to talk to me right now.” My voice sounds flat, dead. Unfamiliar, like it’s not even mine. I close my eyes. Lean my forehead against the cool window.

She’s sending me away.

If my father were here, would he be handling this differently? Handling me, my love for you, differently? No use wondering. The dead can’t answer questions.

I tug my journal free from my canvas backpack. The grief pounds under my skin, desperate for release. Only on the page do I feel understood. Only in ink does my story make any sense, even to myself.

The emptiness laps at my consciousness as I put pen to paper, threatening to pull me into the infinite darkness of myself, where I know I could fall forever and never be found.

But under it all, lives this pulsing truth.

No one understands the way I love. Not even my mother. It’s fiercer and deeper and faster than the blood in my own veins. Stronger and more savage and more stubborn than time. My love is different.

I should’ve known that no one would understand my grief either.
Not even God.

III

Here's the thing—

before we got oh-so-serious

before all was love and grief

we were just two kids figuring out

the many ways two people

could fit together.

The trip that started it all was

by all accounts

an epic disaster.

Young, inexperienced, bumbling fools—

I being the greatest, to be sure.

The car got stuck, muddy tires spinning,

I pushed it,

you broke it free.

The water jug leaked, flooding the trunk,

you were the one who laughed,

not me.

The rock was high and exposed,

water glistening beneath,

you were the one who jumped off first.

Who was the one to collapse the tent,

waking you up at three a.m.?

Ah yes, that was Definitely

Certainly

Undoubtedly

Me.

Yet even as I fretted and fumed

worrying you'd see me as such a fool

rather than brave, capable, interesting,

a friend,

I couldn't help but notice how different it seemed

sleeping in a tent with you next to me

the warmest summer night

the eve of our senior year.

Not alone, surrounded by sleeping bags like

giant caterpillars

and not even touching,

inches between your sleeping pad

and mine—

simply hearing your breath

pull in

whisper out

repeat,

the intimacy of knowing

your face at rest

innocent

like a secret I shouldn't

know,

too holy for me.

I shook off the feeling

thought it all just a fluke

not understanding my own fascination
not knowing one day you'd see me
as brave
and I'd see you
as beautiful
lying under the stars beneath
a fall crescent moon.



THE DRIVE SEEMS ENDLESS.

My thoughts pinwheel from desperate plan to even more desperate plan, pinging faster and faster until I can barely distinguish one from the other. I could pop a tire at the gas station. Or call someone to come pick me up. Or fake being fine once I get there so they *have* to send me home. At this point, I'd even consider calling God with a banana phone, the way my mother convinced me I could as a child.

In my mind's eye, white walls close in on me. Blank. Sterile.

If she is sending me to a place like that—I know I'd rather die.

I rub my temples, hard, with my fingertips, as if the pressure can make the car stop moving. The ideas blend together until they're an indecipherable, blurred tornado, and I have to stop thinking just to keep myself from losing my last shred of sanity.

Despite my anxiety, I feel myself slipping into sleep as the sun flashes behind the trees. Mom has driven silently since I ended our last conversation, radio turned low to classical music I can barely hear. Maybe it's the incessant violins, or the monotonous reel of shadow on asphalt, but sleep grabs me and pulls me under.

I often see your face in my dreams. Sometimes it's wrong—you,

but not you. Sometimes right. Sometimes smiling, that oh-so-familiar, soul-stilling smile, and other times looking sad. Bone-deep sad.

A fox winds its way through a dark forest. Its fiery, white-tipped tail the only flame in the shadow. I'm desperate to keep up, but it slips out of reach. Leaving me aching. Grasping.

I sink in and out of sleep, never fully waking, riding on a bumpy carpet of dream and nightmare.

When I wake fully, late afternoon light is spilling through the window, and the scenery has changed—we're now driving on a gravel road winding into a horizon of hazy purple-blue mountains. They loom. Stepping up and up until they kiss thunderheads the color of a day-old bruise.

"Where the heck are we?" I mumble. My tongue feels thick and dry in my mouth.

"Almost there" is all Mom says. The road lurches up . . . into the side of a foothill. I follow the snaking white line as it winds onward and upward . . . foothill to small mountain . . . small mountain to medium mountain . . . medium mountain to *big* mountain. Dipping and disappearing, materializing only to spiral upward once more. To the sky. To nowhere.

"Crap," I mutter.

Not only am I spending the summer at a psych camp for wrecked kids, but it's also located in an impenetrable mountain fortress. My feebly hatched plans to hop on a bus or hitchhike out of here might need to be rethought.

I grip the armrest. Shut my eyes. Feel the front of the car tilt up and up and up. Listen to the occasional stray rock rattling in the wheel well. Work to quell the irrational fear that we are going to climb up

into the sky and then fall off the face of the earth into endless, awful nothing. The granola bar I forced down earlier threatens to make a reappearance.

“How do you know the way?” The sentence comes out breathless. She’s not using directions.

My mother just purses her lips tighter, a thin, determined line. Ren Maven wants up this mountain? Well then, by golly, we’re getting up it. Sometimes I don’t understand how she can be so amazed by my stubbornness, when I clearly get it from her.

Then, all at once, we are there—atop the ridge. At first, all I can see is green. Lush, deep, vibrant, layered green, of all shades, splashing up the sides of the valley and bleeding into the mountain slopes.

The question *why* swells in my mind again, looking at all that beauty spread out before me. Why would God give this to the world, to anyone who chances upon it, when He won’t pay any attention to me? No use even thinking about it. The response is always the same—no answer at all.

Mom has visibly relaxed now, shoulders slumped after the long drive. Her eyes are soft, looking far into the past, or future, or both. Looking down into the valley.

I follow her gaze. At the very center of the valley, at the end of the winding, brown road—

is a little white house.

Raeth.

IV

Even in the beginning
we were always tied together by grief.
The news of my dog's death
reached my phone, buzzing
in the middle of class, a chilling October afternoon
of senior year
and I knew—
I only wanted to be with you with such sadness.
Safety wafted
around you like the clean, bright scent of clothes
fresh from the dryer.
I wanted to surround myself with it
that broad smile
daring me to speak
to let the words pour out of me, unchecked.
We sat beneath the fading trees
on the brown lawn,
stiff grass tickling my thighs.
Silence with you felt like
a cocoon, a connection that didn't
need words in order
to be heard.
The sound of pen on paper

the occasional remark about assignments
and weird teachers
the knowledge that I could talk about it,
the grief,
if I wanted to, and if I didn't
that was okay too—
you were here for it
all of it
all of me.
I wanted to tell you then—
I didn't want to lose you too.
Didn't want to lose you because
I loved you.
I didn't know how yet
 didn't know what kind
 didn't have words for the quiet
honeysuckle-scented growing like
petals unfurling but
I knew love when I saw it.
It looked like you.
It would have been the start
of a string of endless
beautiful, shocking
things we would say to each other
that we would be hearing for the first
time in our lives.
Instead, we stared at homework scribbles
picking Skittles from the bag.

I said you had good handwriting
and you laughed, saying no one
had every told you this before.

I placed the hated green Skittles
on the blanket between us, and you
ate every last one of them.



THUNDERHEADS DESCEND ON US with a vengeance as our car bumps down the steep hill. Water pellets splat hard against the windshield, hitting like bullets. I close my eyes and imagine what it would be like to fall from such a great height. The whoosh of air past my sides . . . ground coming up oh so fast . . . SPLAT.

The relief I feel imagining that freefall scares me. I open my eyes.

The rain comes harder and harder, and within a minute the sky is full-on assaulting our vehicle. Mom is leaning forward again, squinting past the frantic windshield wipers that just can't keep up. All I can think is *get there, get there, get there*, not really caring where *there* is. There are many ways I wouldn't mind dying, but crashing in a storm is not one of them. The tires slide and jerk.

After our umpteenth slide and trillionth bump, the rain stops. All at once, as if God drew back the curtain, saying *hush*. The car rolls to a slow stop, coming to a halt right beside the little white house.

Faded, whitewashed brick. A slanted roof of weathered gray shingles, ridgeline backbone straight, with a round turret on the left. Clawing ivy with bursts of tiny purple petals climbs to the turret's cone roof. Beneath it gleams a perfectly round window of old glass, the kind with ripples in it; I can tell even from down here. I think I glimpse movement

behind the glass, a whisper of a silhouette. I blink, and it's gone. The hairs on my forearms prickle—I feel that I'm being watched.

Three peaked windows march across the middle of the house above the sparse, wild garden, and on the right, two giant double doors with rounded tops stand sentinel. The house sits aloof, lopsided . . . awake? Like it holds secrets. Adding to the feeling is the mist surrounding the whole place, as far as I can see. Mist twining itself through the tall, pale grass and out into a depth of smoky white—not a hint of green now. A shiver wriggles its way down my spine. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but it certainly wasn't . . . this. I hover somewhere between panic and relief, unable to land on either conclusion, wavering like the mist.

"Liz, you're going to do just fine here." My mother's voice makes me jump. She's looking at me that way again.

"Mom, I never *asked* to be taken here. I don't *want* to stay here. It won't make a difference." The heat stokes in my chest again.

"You need it, honey." She cups my cheek with a warm hand, eyes soft. "It's been months. You barely speak, you don't eat—"

I push her hand away. "Mom. You're not *hearing* me." Frustration wells in me, along with the deep, black sadness. Tears prick at the back of my eyes. I will *not* cry. "I can't—I can't do what you ask. I can't let go." You're too important to me. Heck, you're *part* of me now. There is no me without you—she might as well ask me to stop existing.

"I hear you." She gives me a look that's meant to be sympathetic.

No, you don't. If you did, I wouldn't be here. I bite my tongue to keep from saying it aloud.

"It's not your fault, you know," she says. "That he didn't believe. A person's faith . . . well, that's not something you can choose for them."

For a second, I can't breathe. I force my mind blank. "I never said it

was.” I say the words with as much bite as I can muster. I hold her eyes, summoning all the steel I possess.

It’s all the venom I have. I feel the familiar heaviness begin to spread from my chest to my limbs, spent.

“I better go,” I say. Emotionless. Brief.

Her mouth tightens, but she simply nods. I grab my backpack from the back seat—in a small act of defiance, I packed it instead of the suitcase she gave me. Yes, I know it’s petty. And no, I don’t care.

I open my door. Warm air heavy with rain swirls in like a living thing. It smells of earth and green. I step one foot onto the grass, dirt squelching under my sneakers.

“Sooo . . . do I just, walk in? Do you come with me, introduce me to someone?” The lack of details is really starting to creep me out.

She shakes her head. “I can’t, love. It’s one of the rules. Just you.”

I stare at her. Rules? Since when does my mother, my stubborn-as-heck, bow-to-no-one-save-Jesus mother, follow the rules? Especially when it comes to leaving her child on a doorstep? I don’t have the energy to ask.

“Bye, Mom.” There’s a heavy stone in my chest, dragging me down, fighting to reach the center of the earth. Tired. Oh so tired. Too tired to walk. Too tired to breathe.

As I move to leave the car, she snags my wrist. “Liz, wait.”

I look back. Her eyes are intense again, almost a little . . . afraid.

“Promise me,” she says. “Promise you won’t go out at night. Ever. It’s . . . dangerous. Especially for you.”

She *is* scared. But let’s be real here. These days, I’m asleep by nine anyway.

“Fine, Mom. Got it.”

I offer a mock salute. Have I mentioned that I’m petty yet?

She just sighs. “Thanks, honey.” She almost looks relieved, leaving me here. Like she can’t wait until I’m not her responsibility anymore. “I’ll be praying for you, day and night. I love you.”

Praying The word stings, a pang deep in my center. *I tried that, Mom. I freaking tried that. And where did it get me?*

“Love you too, Mom.”

Before I can close the door, she yanks me into an awkward one-armed hug, choking me with the smell of her too-sweet rose shampoo. I don’t squeeze back. After a moment she releases me. I exit the car and shove the door closed.

The car lurches forward, then stops. The window rolls down and Mom leans over. “Liz . . . I just want you to know—” She stops and shakes her head, giving me a weak smile. “Never mind. Trust Gale. Trust Raeth. You’ll be okay.”

And just like that, she’s gone, the quiet *whishhh* of tires on wet dirt the only sign of her leaving, the swirling mist in her wake.

Silence.

I just want you to know . . . The words float around in my head, no place to land. Circling.

I am entirely empty. A hollow girl. The mist seems to push in closer around me. The dirt road is just a small line of tire tracks disappearing abruptly into the shifting white veil. I am a lone figure standing with a backpack in front of a strange house in a sea of nothing.

I know from experience. The longer it takes to do something, the more it will hurt.

So I force my legs to move, footsteps loud on the three wet stepping stones leading to the looming doors. A shadow flickers again in the corner of my eye, but I don’t look.

I twist the knob and walk inside.

V

Under the stars and that sliver
moon, you asked me if I thought
you were going to hell.

I said yes.

Mortality was already on my mind
my dog finally being laid to rest—
a small mound of too-smooth dirt
under the dying apple tree—fresh
mere hours earlier.

We leaned against the trunk of a pine
and I could feel you
breathing
beside me.

We sat so close, our legs pressed
together, to ward off the cold, we said—
but truthfully my soul wanted to get close
to the warmth of you
to simply soak in
the nearness of you.

You didn't mind.

Even then, I loved you.

Loved you in a way I'd
never expected.

A way I
shouldn't love you.
Even then, I denied it.
The grass pricked at exposed
skin and somehow we cycled through
God and heaven and sin and high school and
friendships that never happened and all the
things we found so impossible to tell
anyone else.
I told you how my best friend
shunned me when she turned thirteen.
You told me how a kid
pushed you off your seat at lunch
when you were in eighth grade.
I told you about the way it felt to be
surrounded by forest, rock and fern and
water and wind, to feel small and somehow
swept up in the beauty of belonging to it all.
You told me how your camp director
explained your value, all the strengths
he saw in how you acted and spoke,
how it didn't matter that you were quiet.
How you felt like you were something and
meant something—seen.
Childhood hurts and joys, turned older
wounds and blooms.
We passed memories, secrets like
pebbles pressed into palms,

and it wasn't about the seat, or the friend.
It was about being left behind,
about feeling invisible.
It wasn't about the forest, or the mentor.
It was about feeling you *were* something,
and were becoming something,
and someone saw it,
saw you.
Like you were part of something greater.
I saw you.
And you saw me.
You asked if I could ever be with someone
who didn't believe in God.
You didn't say—someone like you.
But we both knew.
I didn't know how to tell you that
this was impossible—
this fragile thing blooming between us.
I just want
more time with you,
you said as if reading my mind.
How could I say no
to that?
How can two souls destined
for two different afters ever be entwined
as one?
How could two people live one life
when they could never truly
fit together?

How could I let myself fall
for a boy who did not believe in my God
or in any God?

It was easier to believe I wasn't
falling

at all,
and then believe

you'd be there
to catch me.



"HELLO?"

My voice echoes inside the wood-paneled entryway half lit with golden-hour light. The walls are a vibrant new-green, flecked with occasional specks and swipes of sunshine-yellow paint, like someone got bored partway through and decided to flail around wildly in a primal dance, flinging paint. The hallway smells like the pages of old books and lemony wood polish. Dust motes float in the light. The hairs on the back of my forearms prickle again.

"One sec," someone calls from a room I can't see. A guy's voice. Low but not too deep.

I hear something being set down, perhaps a mug on a countertop, and then the rounded doorway at the end of the hall is filled with the speaker's silhouette, backlit by the sun pouring through the windows. I squint at him. Wasn't it raining outside just a second ago? Too overcast for sunlight like this—

"I'm Gale. Welcome to Raeth."

Gale. The name registers as the one my mother mentioned as he steps forward, extending his hand. Now I can see him clearly. Crisp green eyes that seem to strike me to my center, causing me to shift my weight uncomfortably. Strands of black hair that fall unevenly to almost

shoulder length. White, lightly tanned skin. On the shorter side, but not too stocky. Strong shoulders in indigo T-shirt sleeves. Close to my age. I shake his hand firmly, businesslike. It's calloused, with thick fingers. I keep it brief, but his fingers resist slightly when I pull away.

The touch shakes me. I don't voluntarily offer physical attention to others, and expect to be left alone in return, but there's no polite way to avoid a handshake—and this simple touch has me feeling as if my personal bubble has been breached. There's something about him, something about the rooted way he stands, or that almost-smile, that draws me in. But the thing in my chest recoils—*no, too close!*—and I take a step back. That's better. He doesn't seem to notice, just turns and gestures for me to follow.

We take a left before reaching the rounded doorway. Four narrow stairs tunnel downward, creaking under Gale's heavy boots. There's dried mud crusted on the boots' edges, a few pieces crumbling off as he descends, but he doesn't seem to notice or care.

"What kind of name is Gale, anyway?"

The words leap out of my mouth before I can cork it. The boy has unnerved me, and the savage part of me protecting the mess inside wants to poke him back. To prove I'm in control, even though I'm not.

"It's spelled *G-a-l-e*, like the storm," he says pleasantly, not at all fazed. "My mother liked storms."

Liked, past tense. I'm disappointed my jab didn't elicit a reaction, but at least I have this tidbit of information about him. I file it away for later.

"So, Gale, what kind of crazy camp is this?"

"Crazy camp?" He turns to me at the bottom of the stairs, looking honestly puzzled, brow furrowed. "Is that what your mother told you? She's been here, so she should know better."

Been here? “My mother stayed here?” I blurt out, my need for answers getting the best of me.

Gale sighs shortly. “Whoops. Probably shouldn’t have said that. Confidentiality and all.” He waves his hand as he turns away, as if to say *blah-blah*, and I kind of like him just a little bit, despite myself. “You’ll have to ask *her* about that. Not my story to tell.”

My *mother*, my steel-boned freight train of a mother, stayed *here*? But then again, I’m still not sure what *here* is.

“So what is this place, if it’s not a house for screwed-up kids?” I ask.

He laughs, a quick, low chuckle. “Now, I didn’t say it wasn’t, did I? It’s Raeth. You’ll figure it out.”

I release a frustrated breath. Fine. I’ll just have to puzzle out this place’s particular variety of BS on my own, and then figure out the best way to get out of here . . . if that’s even possible. The memory of those mountains makes me pause.

“Bathroom and shower are here on the left. And this is where everyone sleeps,” he says, gesturing down the hall. The burnt-red-orange walls are lined with those peaked windows on the left, a cushioned window seat stretching underneath, and on the right, gently peeling doors in a burst of colors—tangerine, crimson, electric yellow, night-sky blue, eccentric, almost manic—each facing its own window. I count seven in all.

“Actually, not quite everyone,” he continues. “My room is above the kitchen. There’s only four of you right now.”

He hands me an old-fashioned key, long and heavy, reminiscent of haunted Victorian houses and dank dungeons, and gestures to the blue door. “After you.”

I step up to the door, the third one in. What will the room behind the door be like? Sparse? Prison-like? Nothing about this house has

conformed to my expectations, as little-informed as they are, and I'm trying to find something concrete to stand on, something to tell me what will be expected of me here. I fit my key into the lock beneath the tarnished knob. It takes both hands to turn it, but it scrapes to the left with a click and I push the door open.

A recessed bay window looks out onto swirling mist and tan grass backlit by the setting sun. The mountains undulate in the distance, turning dusky purple and sleepy blue in the last golden light. The sun nestles between the highest two like a jewel in a crown. Bright cushions sprawl on the window seat, framed by walls the color of a golden moon. The headboard of a simple wooden bed backs against the left wall, and opposite its foot lies a giant sea chest topped with books propped up by piles of rocks. A quilt in the pattern of a star-filled sky is tucked around the mattress, and a woven rag rug curls on the floor beside it. The narrow shelf above the bed holds everything needed for an overnight stay: a toothbrush and toothpaste in a mason jar, a faded yellow towel, a teddy bear.

My mind captures all the details like it used to, as if I'm still the girl I used to be, obsessed with color and texture. I walk into the room, feet moving slowly. I cross to the window seat, fondle the luxuriously fuzzy coral blanket draped across the old wood. Tears begin to pool in my eyes without my noticing until it's too late. I push down the feeling, shove that girl back into the box where she belongs, and bury that box deep inside me, somewhere I can't find it. I'm not her, not anymore. If I'm going to survive, I can't be. She was a girl without walls. Without protection.

"Why here?"

I'm not sure what I'm asking. There are a million *why*'s multiplying in my chest, growing by the minute. This room, this house, this valley.

Why Raeth? I don't know what I was expecting, but this certainly isn't it.

"Raeth wants you here," Gale says simply.

Just like that, my guard is up again. I take a slow breath, my shoulders tightening in anger. I see how it is—troubled kid gets sent to treatment center in the middle of nowhere, probably hostile and uncooperative, and what better way to win her over than by making her feel like a guest and not a prisoner?

"Seriously? You expect me to believe that? I—" I close my mouth and swipe at my eyes. Emotion is weakness, which I can't afford. I need to give this place, and my mother, what they want, and a breakdown isn't it. I risk a glance up. Gale seems unbothered by my whiplash emotions.

He shrugs. "Well, it usually is as simple as that."

I squint at him. "The *house*," I say. "The house wants me here." Maybe I'm not the only one who's crazy.

He shakes his head, laughs as if I asked something ridiculous. "No. Out *there* is Raeth." He points out the window. "The house is just a house." He pauses. "Although I am very fond of it."

"Fond?" I repeat. What teenage boy uses the word *fond*?

He shrugs, looking bashful for the first time. "I read a lot of books," he says. "Not much company out here. You'll see."

I shake my head as if to clear out all the confusing bits of information whirling around in there. "So, what do I do now? Like, what's the schedule, or whatever it is I'm supposed to be doing here?" I've about reached my limit with this innocent, "mysterious boy" act.

Gale grins, as if he enjoys this part. "There are only five rules to living here. First of all, you have to pick a name."

Seriously? How hippie is this place going to get? I open my mouth to state the obvious. "But I already have a—"

"Ah-ah." He lifts up a finger to shush me, and I close my mouth

abruptly. “Either pick a new name, or I’ll pick one for you.” The gleam in his eyes gives me the feeling that perhaps it would be better to concede this once.

“Fine.” I close my eyes, rub the back of my neck. My name: Elizabeth. Eli-za-beth. Beth or Ellie—no, too soft. Liz—that’s what most people call me already. Z—too edgy, too brazen . . .

“Eli,” I say, confident all of a sudden. Hard on the *e* like the boy’s name. I kind of like the sound of it—firm without being too masculine. “Eli.”

He nods, approving. “What kind of name is Eli?” he teases, throwing my own words back at me, and I duck my head a little. He’s got me there.

“Okay, moving on,” he says. “Rule two: Don’t go out at night. Just don’t, and don’t ask me why. That’s not part of the rule, but I’m not going to explain. You don’t need to know, trust me.”

I smirk. I’m going to go out at night if I feel like it, no matter what my mother and this—this boy say. What is Gale, anyway? He’s too young to be in charge. Some kind of volunteer or caretaker or something? But if that’s true, where are the adults? The people who can actually tell me what to do, and dole out consequences when I don’t?

He points at me. “Seriously, don’t make trouble for me.”

I shrug, feign innocence, and he moves on.

“Rule three: Take what you need, no less.”

“Don’t you mean ‘no more’?” I point out.

“Stop interrupting,” he fires back, not unkindly. “And no, I meant no less. Rule four: Go outside at least once a day. It’s good for you.”

Aaand the hippie vibes just went through the roof. I frown at his boots, mind churning. I used to love being outside, don’t get me wrong, but prescribed as therapy? A little fresh air isn’t going to cure me. How

alternative is the treatment here? What kind of center is this? And why would my no-nonsense, ever-practical mother send me here of all places?

“And rule five: Don’t apologize.”

What kind of rule is that? “For what?”

“For anything.” His face is as serious as I’ve yet seen it. “Do you agree? In order to stay here, you must swear to follow the five rules.”

I almost roll my eyes. “And if I don’t, then I get to go home?” I smile archly.

He tilts his head, gives me a look, like, *seriously*? “You know the answer to that.”

A chill streaks through me. Yes, I would get to go home. Home to whatever worse, half-baked idea my mother comes up with next. White walls. Fluorescent lights. The smell of rubbing alcohol . . .

“Whatever, I swear.” I ignore the tightening in my throat.

“Are you being serious?”

I throw my hands up. “Yes, I swear already, jeez.”

“Fine, I just had to be sure.” He turns to go. “Let me know if you need anything; I’m around most of the day. Take your time getting settled in, food’s in the kitchen if you want any.” He pauses with a hand on the doorframe, looks back at me with a smile. “Glad you’re here, Eli.”

Despite myself, I want to believe that he means it.

He closes the door quietly behind him. I stand there for a moment, and the silence consumes me.

Suddenly, I remember my last question, rush to the door, and stick my head into the already empty hall. “When can I go home?” I call after him. Please tell me one week, or two at the most . . .

“When you’re ready,” he shouts back.

When I’m ready—that’s funny. I’m ready *now*. But I don’t think that’s what he means. I close the door. I consider the keyhole for a sec-

ond, and then lock it from the inside. Couldn't hurt. Who knows the other three types of crazy who could be staying in the rooms beside me? Even Gale—I don't know anything about him. He could be a serial killer for all I know.

“Urgh.” I let my head fall back, stare up at the ceiling with its plaster and old beams. So many questions, and the answers I've been able to gather only birth more questions. Is everything spoken in riddles here?

I sit on the edge of the bed, and the mattress sags beneath me. Peeling off my shoes, I wiggle my toes into the weave of the rug, the cotton soft against my sweaty skin. The teddy bear's shiny black eyes watch me. I turn it to face the wall, feeling childish for it. I close my eyes and try to breathe deeply, down, down, down to the tips of my toes. But the weight is settling back on my chest.

If I were the girl I was before, I would pray. Ask for peace, or answers, or something like that. But I'm not. So I don't. The thought just makes me feel . . . empty. Alone. Still, the room smells comforting, like old books and stored quilts. My emotions war within me, dread pitted against the desire to be safe. To let go.

Raeth wants you here.

Gale's words echo in my head.

Out there is Raeth.

I look out at the sun, which has almost entirely slipped behind the peaks, casting a blue-gray shadow over the grass and the mist. I walk over to the window, force the sticking handle latch, push open the thick, warped glass. The humid smell of post-rain wind slips in. And something else, something I've never smelled before . . . like starlight mixed with shadow. The mist.

The tightness in my chest stirs. Stretches. Aches. Just for a moment,

I let myself feel. *Home. Home. I want to go home.*

Home. The smell of your clothes, subtle and clean, almost like soap. Home. The warmth of your long arms encircling my back. Home. The way your smile quirks to one side, the way your laugh—

Stop. I cut off the memory abruptly, will my mind blank. Shove the ache back into the deepest, darkest corner of myself. Press the heel of my hand into the center of my chest. A tendril of mist, which began reaching toward me like a long, ghostly arm, jerks back as if I've just sliced at it with a knife. A shiver grabs me. I blink, and the tendril is gone. I slam the window shut and lock it.

Desperate to free the memories swelling in my throat, I reach for my journal, the changing mist somehow reminding me of another shift, what feels like long ago. But I can't stop wondering.

What *is* out there, in that mist? And do I want to find out?

I have a feeling I don't have a choice.

VI

Something shifted between us
the night we made macaroons
shifted like the comfortable friction of two gears
sliding into place

Our version of fun was hunting for coconuts
in Walmart with our friends, ducking in and out
of aisles and settling
for the shredded stuff instead

I sat in the rolling chair and you
spun me, spun and spun, faster and
faster, the world weaving into a blur
of color and sound, your eyes smiling at
my uncontrollable laughter cascading
encircling us, and all

I could feel was
your hands, warm, on my shoulders
landing, pushing, rising, again
and again and
again

somehow the best part of it all
your hands

I sneaked pictures of you when you weren't
looking, camera clicking softly

loved the way your mouth quirked when
you focused, deciphering the recipe
the way you smiled at me like
I was the only person there, a shy
look, glimmering and gone, reappearing
just for me
Passing me the wooden spoon you brushed
your thumb over the back of my hand
feather light, ribbon smooth
the first time you touched me
as anything more than just a friend
My breath caught in my lungs and I'm not
sure it ever left
Suddenly the most important
parts of me
became the ones you had touched



6

I SLEEP FITFULLY. BY the time dawn's fingers crawl across the floor, I'm grateful to leave the undertow of dream and nightmare behind. This morning, the mist seems calmer. Last night, it leaped erratically and cast strange shapes that tugged on the edges of the familiar. Before I crawled under the covers, I set my leather journal on the stool that serves as a nightstand, placing the fox atop it. I tried to write but was too scattered to coherently form words beyond the first page. A string of questions can't count as poetry, can it?

The air is chilly—is there no heating in this old house? I wrap the blanket around my shoulders, stepping over the teddy bear that somehow fell off the shelf in the night, and try to open the door. It won't budge. I grab at the knob with both hands, yanking, twisting. The blanket slips from my shoulders and falls to the floor. My heart thumps in my throat. Could Gale have locked me in? Or one of the other kids on the hall? But why would they have a key . . .

Then it hits me—I locked myself in the night before. My forehead slams against the door. I am such an idiot. The world is not out to get me. I have myself for that. I retrieve the key from the stool, open the door, and peek out into the hall, scanning up and down.

No one there.

I hold my breath. Not even a sound.

I step outside the room and wince as the floorboards creak under my bare feet. The whole house is quiet. I feel my shoulders relax just a bit. I'm probably the first one up. I'm glad—I don't want to meet anyone just yet. After stepping back in to press a kiss to the fox's small head, I force myself to turn around, locking the door behind me. I pad down the hall, barely lit through the west-facing windows. Creeping up the stairs, I take a left into the entryway and step into the kitchen.

The walls glow a pale lavender in the light coming through the floor-to-ceiling windows. I turn my back on the mountain sunrise and rifle through the cabinets, each painted a different color. Gale certainly isn't the most organized person if the shelves have anything to say about it, the honey sitting next to the cans of beans next to the Froot Loops. I can't help but rearrange things, placing the beans next to the rice, a much more logical placement.

I find a chipped earthenware mug and a satchel of mint tea, set the electric kettle to boiling—relieved to find there's electricity here—and squeeze honey into the bottom of my mug. I haven't eaten since the granola bar yesterday, but I'm just—not hungry. No one told me sadness fills the belly, leaving no room for anything else. I grab the cereal anyway and sit at the round wooden table. One window is open slightly, and the barest of breezes slips in and wafts the linen curtain like the skirt of a dancer. I wrap my hands around the hot mug, watching the steam curl into the air . . . until it reminds me of the mist, and I drink instead, jerking back when I almost burn my tongue.

I had almost forgotten the peace, the anonymity, of being the only one awake. I don't stay up late enough or rise early enough to enjoy it at home anymore. And yet, now when I should be happy, with a warm mug of tea in my hands and the sunrise awakening the mountains, I

can barely feel anything at all. Mornings and nights are my most vulnerable times—the fuzzy edges of consciousness, when I am still soft and wall-less and cannot protect myself from my mind.

The missing. Oh, the missing—

I shake my head, take another sip of scalding tea, not caring that my tongue suffers for it. I need to think of today. I can probably get away with hiding in my room—there are books and I could start reading one, and maybe watch a movie . . .

Internet. Service. I scramble for my phone. I forgot to look last night amidst the onslaught of new information. I turn it on and scan for bars.

Nary a one. Not even searching. There's nothing out here—nothing but this house, apparently.

What about Wi-Fi? Where do people usually post Wi-Fi passwords? I look to the fridge. *No Internet, you'll thank me later :)* reads the sticky note scrawled in thick, loopy handwriting.

I want to flip off that ridiculous smiley. I rest my forehead on the table and squeeze my eyes shut until I see stars. Panic tightens my throat.

No service means I can't reach out. Can't choose to break this silence.

No service means not knowing if you change your mind. Decide to start searching again.

No service means if you decide to talk to me, I'll miss it.

No matter how unlikely that is, I *need* to have that possibility. The hope. Sometimes the love that kills you is also the only thing getting you up in the morning.

You may not be speaking to me. You won't even look at me. Maybe it'll always hurt too much. Maybe I'll never be worth it to you, never be enough. Not enough to make the impossible possible, as you say. But if you want to try, I need to be there. To respond. And for that, I need to get out of here, and fast.

I take a breath and puff out my cheeks before blowing it out slowly. Okay. Where was I? Today. Yes, today. And . . . the rules. Five of them. What were they again?

New name—Eli.

Don't go out at night—so far so good.

Take what you need, no less—still don't understand the whole “no less” thing, but I've raided the pantry, so that's good enough for now.

Don't apologize—haven't done anything I need to apologize for, not yet. At least, not to Gale.

Go outside once a day.

My brain latches on to that last rule, something to do, something that might help explain what the heck is so special about Raeth, and what Gale meant when he said it wants me here. If the house is just a house, and Raeth is actually out there, then the key to discovering what I need to do to get home as quickly as possible is out there too.

I rub my temples and try to breathe normally. In . . . out. In . . . out. I only succeed in becoming mildly lightheaded. If I can pretend to be fine, convince Gale that Raeth has worked its “magic,” then I can go home. And in order to convince him, I have to figure out how this place operates. Find out why Raeth is so special. Why this valley, this house?

Outside it is.

I stand up, down the rest of my tea, shove a handful of stale cereal into my mouth, and head back to my room, where I pull on jeans, a T-shirt and flannel, and my Converse and slip through the still-quiet hall and out the kitchen door.

The air is cold and sweet, smelling like dirt and rain but also a little like a campfire. The mist has left a small clearing around the house but comes to greet me, tendrils swirling around my ankles. I blink, and it drifts away, like well-behaved mist is supposed to.

Which direction should I walk in? Everything looks the same—mountain, mist, mountain, mist. I close my eyes, spin around a couple times, and open my eyes again. I'm facing northwest-ish, angling out from the back of the house. I start walking, stepping from close-trimmed lawn into waist-high grass. It sticks to my clothes and grabs at my hands, itchy and wet. I fight through it, lifting my knees high. After a few feet, I look up.

I am engulfed in a cloud of silver white.

My breathing sounds loud and harsh in my own ears. My heart beats in my throat, tap-tap, tap-tap. The wind flicks my hair into my face and the mist crowds in so close that even my feet seem blurry and distant. I suddenly recognize the scent from my open window last night—starlight and shadow. It's all around me, mystical and wild.

"It's just mist," I say aloud. "Just mist. Only silly little mist. Just mist."

I force my feet to keep moving. My sneakers are soaked in seconds, and I wish I'd worn my boots. I push forward, fighting the grass. Step step step. Shake the mud from my shoes. Step step step.

The tone of the wind in the grass begins to change, deepening. The grass becomes interspersed with cattails, more and more of them, until the pale stalks give way completely to stands of the marshmallows-on-a-stick and green, floppy grass. The mist is thinner here. I have room to breathe again.

And then it is gone completely.

I take a few more steps and look behind me at the mass of it. It looks ordinary from here, billowy and soft. I can't believe I thought it reached out to grab me.

I almost laugh out loud. The sun is bright here, glinting in dew-drops on the vegetation. A few more steps reveal a wide creek, blue and

clear, flowing lazily over multicolored pebbles. I find a big rock on the bank, and perch on it. Stripping off my damp flannel and my sopping shoes and socks, I draw my knees to my chest and just listen.

The creek's song is a lullaby, water burbling along, carrying tiny orange fish. A blue heron steps with his stately long legs a few yards downstream, orange beak tilted as he considers his options. His stabs come up empty, but he doesn't seem to mind. Spreading his wings, he floats away in search of better luck. I follow him with my eyes, listening to the soft *whush-whush* of his wingbeats, until he disappears.

There is no one here. No one to tell me what to do. How to feel. No one to tell me what is possible. No one to pity me or give me tough love. To tell me I am wrong, or not enough.

There is a breaking, deep inside me. My ocean of grief is cracking, and I can almost hear it.

The ocean howls. Demands release.

I let it free.

I curl into a ball on the rock and sob. I weep and I weep and I let my voice say all the things it tries to hide, but here I let it rage and wail and moan. I stop telling myself how I should and should not feel and just *let* myself feel.

Why? Why, God? Just . . . why?

No answers. Never any answers.

The sadness sweeps over me.

And when the onslaught passes, when the ocean stops its maelstrom—

I am still here.

I shut my eyes. Feel the sun on my toes. Listen to the water ripple by.

I can feel the ocean still inside me. I have not diminished it. It refuses to be bottled, just like it refuses to be drained. But now it will let me rest.

For a while, at least.

For a few hours.

For now.

When the pressure returns, I know it'll come with a vengeance.

What will I do then?

VII

you asked me to walk with you and I said yes
our first non-date alone in the city at night
walking in silence
 leaving the hushed campus behind
 shoes dangling from our fingertips
 cold sidewalk slapping against
 bare toes while the wind teased at
 my hair and caressed the bare
 skin of our wrists.
we followed the headlights of passing cars
blinded by the brilliance of each other's
 quiet voices
 trailing murmuring couples
 pretending we weren't
 just like them
 while hoping we were.
the quiet lilt of a French horn
lured us beneath an awning
smelling of coffee and copper pennies
fondled too long in linty pockets.
the streetlight glinted off the burnished
instrument and illuminated swift hands
the notes piling

one after the other, conspiring
to push us together
closer
closer
until our arms were touching
passing warmth from one body
to the other.

we listened and I watched the way
you held your breath in your chest
like the music was too sacred
to interrupt.

I watched your face, watched
with the forbidden joy
of getting away with something.
as even the late-night wanderers dwindled
finding their way to beds and dreaming
your voice found me in the dark—
if things were different, would we
be together?

yes, I said.

yes

yes we would.

the silence bound us together.

if things

were different . . .

if you look for Him

He will find you,

I told you

and I believed it because
it was written
“ask and it will be given to you”
“seek and you will find”
“knock and the door will be opened to you”
despite knowing it was an invitation
you may never accept.

I told you
it was like the music we had just
heard, the French horn beneath
the awning, just as real as
the smell of coffee
and copper pennies
notes
falling
a call

and response
a beautiful letting go
an answering of all the questions
you’ve ever had
a coming home.
what I didn’t say was that
it felt a lot like
being with you.

I told my heart to quiet
but it didn’t listen, while my mind
shouted questions
I hushed with your smile.

when we tried to find our way back
to the faraway dark campus
I found that even
 with that glistening map of streetlights
 I was lost without you
 to guide me home.