

## A REST

*Non si tratta di conservare il passato, ma di realizzare le sue speranze*

As a child, I never understood what a rest was for in music class. I didn't even like the recorder. I think it may have been part of the reason I never picked up an instrument. A rest didn't have song-value, and I also feared the implication that if I were going to rest, then eventually I was going to keep going too.

“Hot Cross Buns” —the classic American nursery elegy. This oddly popular song seems to score many of our first memories of musical instruction. On my last trip with N before making the decision to acknowledge rests, we bought a loaf of bread from a nonna songstress in Palermo who yelled out to the street to the people she loved. A euro was too much to pay for bread, so she gave us change back, saying *oggi e' una bella giornata*.

That was the beginning of the second trip abroad with N, my Bonnie Parker friend and writing partner for *New York Magazine*. Our travels clawed and scraped at my reality: not the plane of existence I perceive as my landscape of dwelling, but the sense that I am a real person who could have original, unflappable authority over how I conducted my life.

## I am Geryon

I am a sweating,  
oozing red creature  
running with the cape of night.

I trust my nose;  
the point is to breathe.  
We nod to each carriage,  
full with tied down balloons,  
wheeled not in but around the mouth.

By some last, squeamish virtue,  
I have miraculously received  
the city's secret wish  
without any power to grant it.  
Speaking in name of silence,  
it vouches for me in a yawn,  
sings me lullabies that begin maniacal and end

with me curled into the earth's mantle.

Underarms searing,  
my wings appear at once  
forged and broken  
in the streetlight.

The kid in mildewy, yellow sneakers,  
who, for five years,  
outran himself,  
never lost the engine,  
nor valiant smiling,  
nor steamed buns in the toy box,  
fresh dirt or the old, glazed star.

His young chaos  
combs my arm hair  
for the path of rare, migratory burning,  
where it is smoothest  
to build a theater.

At this cinema,  
between the arm rests,  
the eleemosynary pouch waits to be untied:  
it holds a miracle spice  
that smells like hands patting the warmth  
left in the ground  
from a momentary fire.

The volcanic clouds  
have rained all they have.  
Now that no one believes,

I can fly.

I stole these wings from the future,  
remember?  
A one hundred percent red rabbit  
bloodied its rope to be the same color,  
A strawberry stem of bloody belly comb jellies  
sunk to the chasm's bedrock, each one floating gently upward.  
A red stored under everyone's skin—  
I wish it were clear  
how it looks when we run.

No, you are the sweetest,  
you, my winged monster.

On our first trip, to Egypt, I swallowed river stones from the Nile. After a week of traveling as a pair in this cloudless country, we joined a convoy of tourists aboard a dahabiya for a weeklong cruise up the ancient river. My first day on the vessel triggered an emotional tempest; some dichotomous view of the passing villages and sands colliding with an internal unrest—I tried to journal it away, out, above, but I only ended up crying when N asked me what was wrong.

“I don’t want to exist.” I swallowed a river stone.

She read me the poem she wrote of me the day after we first met. I got caught around the line where I was “confoundingly, simultaneously, *maddeningly* a tree with weathered climbing branches and a sapling.” At that moment, on the sun deck of the Malouka in the presence of strangers of far-away origins, I felt an interspecies empathy with the trees in the poem. I felt the insurmountable love that travels from the parent to the sapling, as well as the immeasurable loss of that love presiding in the inevitable demise of the older, weathered tree. The sapling (myself) has to go on without a guardian (myself); it keeps going. Somehow.

It was then that I began to feel the magnitude of affection from those I had touched and who molded me into who I was: Mom, Dad, Brother, Soulmate, Soul. That night, I called Natalie and told her the recipe for teardrop tea. It was that night too when the poet N rebuked my love for Natalie and threatened to banish me from Egypt, only to withdraw the threat once I had settled on going (*keep going, keep going*). Nevertheless, she wished some schism on us: for our souls to be torn from each other, as if rupturing what Natalie and I have were possible. This wasn’t the first time N had slandered our relationship, and it also wasn’t the first time she had become verbally and emotionally abusive, chiseling the magnetic alabaster that sits in my diaphragm, peacekeeping with gut punches and solemn breaths. Somehow, and I am ashamed to admit it, I swallowed another stone. In spite of leering omens, I kept going.

The rest of the trip I committed myself to N; not anyone who I saw in those weathered tree branches, but the gatekeeper of word-smite herself. I dismissed my guard, the one whose mission is to protect the truth of the inner voice. N and I slept together; we pretended to be married; we fought more—her for me and me for a less capricious voyage. I sang “What a Wonderful World” in front of all the passengers on karaoke night, but on the last day walking through the Temple of Kom Ombo, I hummed “Yesterday” quietly to myself. I had been corrupted, not by sex but by my compliance to have sexual experiences that made me feel uneasy, with someone who made me feel uneasy, who could, at any moment, execute another one of my feelings because they

did not correspond to her own. She had to assuage my pensiveness after each time, telling me *Don't overthink it*. I followed suit in my journal, writing in every language I knew *Everything will be okay*. One night, N insisted I look at myself in the mirror while she gave me a blowjob. She wanted me to see how beautiful I was—and maybe I was—but what I saw was a boy petrified, made up of too much stone and not enough lavender.

Please believe me when I say I thought we really could “weave all things together and be alright.”

After Egypt, I returned to Lyon and Annecy in France, towns I had known at the 20 year-old peak I had always gazed up at longingly since my days of unfettered vagabondism. I repeated my journey without repeating a single feeling. The farmer's market was no less animated; it was I who had lost some animation. Roc de Chère didn't bestow me any more rare beans to sprout into epics. I cried walking out of that forest. I didn't jump in the lake. It felt like the boy from three years before was disappointed by the man I had become, and there's no worse feeling than betraying my younger self. He knew me better, and I—I had forgotten.

I reunited with Natalie and her childhood best friend Mia on the Paris leg of their own European adventure. I struggled to hold composure in face of Natalie and her emanating heartfulness, irreducible by any vicissitude, especially mine. It was she who could discern the outline of a masterpiece in my basalt disaster. Natalie and Mia witnessed me shudder, tremble and cry—mostly out of disdain for myself. I told Natalie everything I could muster telling. I told her how deeply afraid I was of N and my inability to revolt. I cried out of shame for what I withstood and how I played along, forgetting the darling Natalie is to me.

That week in Paris was soft-shelled. We watched *Ratatouille* in a micro-apartment, snacking on le Petit Écolier chocolate biscuits and Pokémon-shaped sour gummies. We watched the Eiffel Tower light up at midnight *and* at 1AM, when it shimmers with the beams of a UFO. We ate succulent cheeses at the border of the Seine and shopped for books at Shakespeare & Co. to prologue what's next. Scuttling around the stacks, unable to decide, I bit my tongue and bought Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, a novel in verse.

On our last night, Natalie stayed up with me and talked through anything I still needed to process before returning to NYC. I think I knew then what I had to do, but I was also changephobic and lacked courage. To stop playing and allow the rests to carry what they may.

Natalie and Mia left, and I had one more afternoon in Paris. I cozied into the teahouse whose madame we'd befriended and waited for the anxiety to fizzle. I was so depleted, swept underneath a boulder. I couldn't reach my brother. I got up and took a VISA photo for my upcoming journey to Switzerland, *alone*. Even in my restless, mindfucked state, I still had the wherewithal to carry out the bureaucratic procedures required of those seeking employment abroad. Priorities piping up.

I came back to NYC and met N at Belvedere Castle in Central Park for a make-it-or-break-it conversation. We sat beneath a tree on some grass and I told her how suffocated I felt. *Spaciousness* was the word I kept using in my journals and speech, as if simply by saying it I could summon it to me. She nodded and understood, empathetic to the turmoil we had both experienced as a consequence of our brooding voyage. I decided to keep going, hoping the stones would become lighter with time. And space.

The next two months abroad were very convincing, and by "abroad" I do mean *away*. I got hired to be a camp counselor for the summer program at The American School In Switzerland (TASIS) in Lugano, and it was there that I celebrated my golden birthday. It was there that I met people who would come to my rescue when the Jenga towers of my life came crashing. It was there that I was moved to tears by a dance number performed by middle schoolers, composed, choreographed and directed from a letter I had written for the school play *Every Inch a Lord*.

### Higgins' Letter

To the Earl of Dorincourt,  
for whom it may concern,

From the town beneath your royal crest,  
my hand is frail, our hope you spurn.  
To write of woe, I do my best:

Hunger and thirst, bestowed by flood and drought  
takes two days plow as remedy  
and heals only half as fast.

Yet you harvest our harvest;  
we are left without.  
Our courage twists to perfidy,  
Our virility keeps not vast.

Fire and lightning strike our towers;

wilt and wallow, will-less flowers.  
Deaths are plenty and births are few;  
of plague and frost I wish you knew.

Pillaged by bandits, or worse, the state,  
the appetite for vice can never be sate.  
Empty of food, heart and corporeal heat  
As is, a generation whose destiny shall not repeat

Our skin, numb, no longer feels the sun;  
for every morrow body a mourning for night down.  
Blood gone unbandaged, thin and thin to run;  
This, the wreck and ravage of our hapless town.

Yours truly,  
Higgins

It was there that I met Peter of Boulder and Lucía of Guadalajara who became my TESIS family. With Peter, I sang songs and performed for audiences of hundreds. With Lucía, I played tag in Finzi Pasca style, drank tea and nibbled on anzac cookies. Some mornings I suffered from anxiety attacks thinking about returning to NYC, but I was also convinced that, no matter what happened, I would be seen by those I had grown so close to, over the summer or over many lifetimes, 13 years old or 13,000. I read a poem on the last night before the staff departure, originally titled "When a summer passes."

### Counselor

On the last sundown  
We played *Chicken Little*.  
2005 was a year of antiquity.

Watching a movie has become ironic:  
everyone screened at all times;  
no one moves;  
two months evaporate and  
we ask the palimpsests of chalk art  
*who drew you?*

Oh, the missteps of being a boy,  
any boy with a technopathic mind.

We can hear the full, lovesick cry

of the swan in the cygnet,  
the white feathers rustling under the gray.

We are not members of the audience  
but the occasional bearers of god-smelt staffs  
we pass to each other in the hushed glow of the theater.

Some may say we've gone too deep into the glow,  
not to where it's brighter but  
to where its dull illumination is its most poignant and distended.

Divine oil slicks our hair when we sweat for you—  
the godlike hand you held is just the one that shapes the rice ball.

We all laugh at the animals of Oakey Oaks (me, just me),  
but there are surreal observers  
who laugh at us in our dimness;  
now, there is enough artificial light to question the services of day.

*How dare you not keep me warm enough,*  
one of the kids mimes into their phone.

How dare I forget  
the tattoos of the mud bath,  
and why their bodies bleed and then are revealed unharmed,  
like mannequins who diligently pardon the tomato from their BLTs  
while a spear rests impaled in their bubbling abdomen.

Who among you will tie the pelting ice  
to the memory of hail  
when we are each 10 years older?  
The memory 10 times around the sun,  
there is bound to be some radiance emit  
from the decay  
of the present cleaving the feeling of cold  
to our scrolls.

There is no proper denouement to this world.  
Only those moments that begin or end  
galaxies with their timbre of knowing that this is life  
which we must release with our hands like tadpoles  
to scurry under the reflections in the lake shades  
between deep and shallow.

We bless you.  
Without any fleece, firmament, or ferocity,

we bless you.

Our goodnight is whispered from ant to ant  
until it's in your ear,  
and the lights are off for good,  
and the rain murmurs to you all night  
telling you everything has been touched.

I came back to the city for one week—more or less. Some items of note:

- a) I chop my hand with an ax during a pig roast and have to go to the emergency room in the middle of a party (when I came back to the scene of the accident, I actually enjoyed the merrymaking more than before).
- b) I take a horrifically timed swing class with N where she can't bear to look at me because she's about to erupt any second with a slew of grievances, criticisms and heretical stories resuscitated by the trigger word "treehouse."
- c) Natalie arrives in NYC and we climb up to the roof of our friends' apartment where we watch the sunset over the remains of an enchanted red jewel.
- d) My friend Bri and I go see Sharon Van Etten in concert at Central Park and we rejoice in dance and herbal smokes, bellies full of Thai food.
- e) I leave for Italy with N, our psyches clammy with unignorable misgivings.
- f) Buon viaggio!

Once we made it to Palermo, N and I visited an Italian couple we had met on the Nile at their house on the volcanic island of Alicudi. We were only there for three days, but those three days were some of the hardest days I've ever had to endure. *Trouble in paradise*, my roommate Sophie would always say about N and my squabbles.

One evening, we all took some mushroom chocolate before a dinner party at Bianca's house. We disembarked the motoscafo and climbed the cobblestone stairs. By the time we arrived at the villa, full with bright, gentle, merciful Italians, we were high. The psilocybin, however, dove very, very low. I should have known better than to take mushrooms while in a cage (Cristina and Carlo, the congenial couple who hosted us, thought N and I were in love—and as it turns out, so did everyone else who had known us).

At one point, N led me to a bedroom lit blue by bed veils. We swayed in the moonlight and she started to kiss my body. I wanted her to stop, but I feared either reprisal or a reprise of her objections to my boundaries. The dinner bell rang before she could finish, and, in those scarce moments I had to myself—a few of few during the two weeks we traveled together—I started to lose it. *Lose what?* I always wonder, but now I know. I was trapped in a reality that felt sick to me, where the perceptions and presumptions of



every person around me, including N, overtook my gut trying to tell me something. If I lifted my own gut feelings to the light, my wordless truth would be there: I did not love this person; I *feared* her. By many counts I was in an idyll, and yet, I was suffering inside. I paced around the room and tried to reach my brother through a kind of prayer (I mistakenly believed he could keep me safe). I took a glass from the bedside table and cried into it, telling my soul to flee, that this was not a safe place. Then I got up off the floor, walked through the beads hanging from the doorway, and masqueraded as “myself” for the rest of the journey, soullessly. That’s what you lose.

The first time I went to Rome, I thought it was forever a city of ruin. When I came back, it was the reverse; Rome was youthful, and I had become rubble. I had to have my stitches removed because my hand was feeling tugged on, and while I sat in a room of doctors picking at my thread “hairs,” I also had to sit with N’s accusations from that morning after I mentioned going to London after our trip was full and over. Suddenly, in the hospital’s courtyard, my hand peeling and colorless, N was grooming my beard in the sunlight with the new shears I purchased. At this point, I can hardly remember the arguments—just that the stakes were always high, and for a moment I felt like truly giving up.

Another day in Rome, Cristina took N and I to a peculiar old world wares store called Polvere di Tempo, or “hourglass.” Once I knew what kind of place I had entered, I immediately began looking for a compass. In the display cases there were many compasses of different styles and weights, but the one I ended up choosing was a Stanley London: black saucer and green cardinals with an insectile, radiowave sheen to them; the color of the subway station light posts in NYC. This would be my one, dear souvenir.

### **Distance**

What keeps one wing counting on the other  
What brings the echo back around to your ears  
What congratulates the virtuous stars for orienting seafarers in the cloak of night  
What holds our planet in place between light and shadow  
What allows our eyes to touch  
What guides each couple on the floor of a milonga club  
What shatters photons from the nearest star in my cup of orange juice  
What makes running take me somewhere I can catapult my own secrets over a rock  
What is inevitable and blue and lost  
What fills every chamber of a home and a heart with at least three dimensions  
What breaks all the promises I had vowed to keep  
What gives mirrors their aloe gleam and the smolder I can never replicate  
What strips words of their origins and canonizes them as short stories  
What God travels when he accompanies me in charred cuffs to the gallows

What brothers cross to mend each other's childhood  
What deters each musical note from rushing together to make the sound of a blot  
What suspends the tire seat in midair above the tree's fulcrum  
What whittles the lock down so the mysterious key opens at last the chest holding all the teachings from youth  
What permits you and I to go on, without knowing how many steps there are to take.

I'm not afraid of what it is.

In Greece, N and I were guests at a wedding on the isle of Paros. We met the bride and groom at a bar called Barbès in Park Slope, whereupon they invited us to their wedding with a blue slip of paper informing us of our role: CHANCE, LUCK, FATE, COINCIDENCE. *Interpret this role as you wish.* For days we celebrated Sara of the Rose Valley and Matt the Weaver, and for days N and I fought over sex and love. The night of the wedding ceremony, N asked me if I would still donate my sperm so she could raise a child (one who shared, in some part, my innateness). After withstanding what I had with her, I was wary of giving her anything too meaningful, e.g. my progeny.

After that, the night turned into something else not about the wedding but about us and our inability to identify a common ancestor to our misunderstandings. We sat in the seafront garden at Villa Salvia and talked listlessly through the DJ's throwback set, and whatever awful feeling I had made her feel when I told her *No, I don't feel comfortable giving you my sperm* lingered in the scent of the island's irrepressible winds for days.

One of the following mornings, my brother offered to call us. Not just me, but *us*. N thought it was a good idea, and I thought I might be sick. My brain was ringing the alarm for fight or flight, as if the combo of N and my brother presented a kind of predation. From what I gathered about N and my brother, their perceptions of our predicament were more similar to each other's point of view than either of theirs to mine. My body had cause for not trusting whatever N and Ollie had to say, and what my brother did say and end up saying weeks later makes me mad. That he listened so much closer to what N expressed and gave her solace and comfort, even making sex jokes to fit between all the updates of our travels—while my concerns were mocked or ignored—that fucking hurt.

The call was not a bloodbath. My brother is not the keeper of my soul.

**Your Role**

Chance,  
that house whose doors randomly  
open and close and  
do both at once,  
unappealing to those seeking any material  
crossing of the threshold.  
It is Mother's house,  
not she from the past,  
but younger, who reads,  
lives there.  
She saw you in the fig trees,  
her changeling child,  
climbing up their branches,  
chance you are born with that desire  
to see from above  
what Mother made for you.

From there it seems like coincidence  
that the highest figs you can reach  
grow outside your bedroom window.  
How it was there that  
Mother and Father,  
the sun, the moon, and any other objects,  
celestial or otherwise,  
fought for your light,  
consequence of whose doing  
no one knows,  
not even the fibers holding the air taut.  
They wished to give you what you already had  
to see if you knew you did or not.  
The window, open and closed and doing both,  
passes it on.

Luckily, when that branch broke  
and you tumbled to the ground,  
Yiayia came with her palm full of birdseed.  
First, you screamed against the air,  
and then,  
paddling with it to the surface,  
altogether you hit the bell  
in your chest  
that came at the cost of our tails.  
Eventually Mother came down the stairs  
with a candle, looking  
out for your silence, scaring

away the wickedness hiding in the exposed roots  
that broke your fall.

Fate would have it that,  
buried behind the house's cucumber patch,  
were the games Mother and Father used to play,  
the obscure and alluring objects they collected:  
meteorites, compasses, periscopes and hourglasses—  
timepieces and spacepieces that hint  
that something tacit and divine may exist  
but ultimately cannot prove we were meant to be.  
What you learn is that their libraries  
and your brain are not  
dissimilar, no utopia or dystopia  
but a thatch of common legends  
to spy in the mess of their lives.

Dear originators,  
tell me the stories of how you danced,  
of how you wrote,  
of how you made them all match up.

We flew from Rhodes to Berlin to NYC. Once again, the feeling of coming back was more harrowing than heartwarming. We watched a silly movie on the plane starring JLO and Owen Wilson. I remember JLO saying "if you want something different, you have to do something different." I had thought of what I could have done differently during the trip, but I was torn: the stubborn agents of holism thought everyone had something worthwhile to pledge to my life and I couldn't let anyone go, while a great many other thoughts escaped me with the very notion of fleeing. Despite everything that had transpired—grueling charades enshrouding Decrypto; lullabies of animosity to jerk me to sleep; shaming me for not wanting her touch, her sex; twisting my loved ones' words against me; blaming me for not giving her a child, etc. —I had rebelled against my own good, forcing make-believe that I was capable of the challenges that came with this friendship.

The morning after I return to the big oyster, I walk to Natalie's apartment in Bed-Stuy. It takes me nearly a half hour and my unease builds with each step—not because I don't want to see her, but because I know that seeing her will agitate my younger self who was so *sure*. It's my first time seeing her place, and also the last time I'm able to hold it together in front of the person who can see the dead in the green. She tells me about her life and where it feels good. I tell her about mine and where I can't bear to feel it anymore. I recount as much as I can and cry in her bedroom, the room I'll sleep in for days before and after I decide to "do something different."

Three days go by, during which I untie the restraints and reacclimate to sharing truths I don't want to share. Natalie told me of a Buddhist allegory where, at the center of ourselves, there exists a soft, quiet voice who knows the truth of the soul, but it's drowned out by a ring of trumpeters playing loudly over it. If we can become soft and quiet ourselves, we can hear that voice, and it sounds like us, and I mean *us*, not the facsimile we use as a signifier.

Lucía calls me on one of those days, and this time I pick up. While in Italy and Greece, N's hostility would refire whenever Lucía came up. I had wanted to visit her and Peter in London after the wedding, but as it turned out I was back in the red room, peeling away at my skin.

"Hola Joe." She isn't happy and neither am I. I try to explain to her what's going on, but my attempt is half-hearted at best, because that was my best at the time.

"De qué tienes miedo?"

There was pain in her wanting to help me, and me not wanting to let her down. I told her that what I was most afraid of was in a state of metamorphosis.

"Ahora, es perder todos mis amados por causa de uno muy injusto. Lo siento, Lucía."

"Quiero ayudarte, pero creo que nadie pueda ayudar. Tienes que tocar el fondo tú mismo."

I trembled and cried, and eventually hung up.

Natalie spoke up afterward and said that what I was going through right now was really horrible and serious. When your soulmate tells you the gravity, to your face, it starts to pucker around your eyes, and that's where the river begins. The recipe for teardrop tea.

"It doesn't matter how you get out; all that matters is that you do."

On the fourth day I commit: I'm going to end this era of my life.

That Friday morning, Natalie and her roommate Cain and I all ate oatmeal together. Natalie's wearing a yellow smock the color of medieval sun, and Cain's in a purple tunic the color of medieval moon.

Natalie accompanies me to meet N at Belvedere Castle in Central Park. We pass a jester as we enter, and somehow, when N and I greet each other and walk over to the spot now rid of a tree, she misses Natalie's presence entirely, looking over us at the foot of the stairs.

N brought me a hotdog I take and hold but do not eat. I brought her the tote she purchased at Il Giardino della Minerva, one of my favorite places in Salerno, town of my younger self. I hope he's proud of me. Maybe—maybe bravery from the future can come back and encourage the present, or, flipping the hourglass, past triumphs can bear the brunt of present blows.

"I haven't been well," I began. I told N what I'd decided: I wasn't going to be her writing partner anymore, nor could I continue to be her friend. She couldn't believe it, and begged me to reconsider.

"I don't have any hope for this friendship," I confessed.

"Well, I do," she replied, but she alone cannot keep a bridge from falling.

"This relationship is too important to me to give it up," she continued.

"My selfhood and my relationships with those I love are too important for me not to," I returned.

There were a few beats during that half hour we spoke when my words became dragon's breath. So much of my time in the first half of the year was spent tending to wounds and making bouquets of reassurances for a faltering friendship. How it sapped me of so many resources that could have powered me instead.

"You're like heroin to me," she admitted. An utterance that did it: recast our knowing each other in the light it's been waning in for months; reflect the lunacy lurking in the garden pools.

Once I had finished, to the best of my ability, the telling of my truth, I got up and left; the trumpets sounded. She pleaded for me to stay.

"You can't leave! What about all our history?"

"I'm sorry."

I walked off, toward Natalie, and she gave me her hand. I grabbed it and we ran like kids into the Belvedere woods. I discarded the hotdog I was still clutching in my palm and Natalie bought me a new one. Together, we made our way to the Rose Reading Room at the New York Public Library at Bryant Park. We scrawled notes to each other:

—We can pass notes here

—FUNNNN

—I can't believe I did that. I hope this is the new beginning I need. I'm coming back to you!

—I can believe it. You can do anything. You were never not back. Just remembering how again. Sitara says she loves you!

—If there's anyone who believes, it's you. I can do it. I'm going to remember even more than I ever forgot. I miss Sitara so much. I love her! I'm coming back to that binch too. Natalie, if there were ever the occasion to use this word at full meaning—THANK YOU. You were there for me. You are here for me too. The life I want is our life.

—Okay, take me out to dinner first. YOU'RE WELCOME—full meaning. Let's just get boba every day in WH. I win! Lucky me—just kidding. I'm so proud of you. Our life is gonna be amazing cuz it already is.

—Even your writing sounds just like you. I will take you out to dinner—name the place! I'll go anywhere...♪ YES, it already is. i love you forever

—I HATE YOU

—best adoo song

—♡adoo → autograph

—I'll keep this for the fbf anthology. Okay, let's go!

We got back to Natalie's apartment and there on the stoop was a black mug with the Chinese character for "double happiness" on its face. I picked it up, because it's mine now.

In many ways, it was the beginning of the end for me. I received emails, WhatsApp messages, texts, and even a handwritten note from N and her friends in response to my choice and my way of choosing it. My *unkindness*.

Unkindness: It's a word I began to integrate into my shadow during therapy. On that very day and once a week thereafter, I spoke over the phone with Waynelle on the fifth floor of an empty apartment across from my friend Kelly's place. She helped me understand that—while not a piece of my primary identity—unkindness is at times a necessary weapon to fend for oneself. "Sometimes I'm a Taoist; sometimes I'm an alley

fighter,” Waynelle told me, not a hint of malintent in her weathered vocal chords. I had become a sapling again, and these words became my new leaves.

In many ways more, it was the beginning of a beginning. NYC has been undergoing a ritual purification as per the Shinto.

One of my friends from college met me for dinner at Al Pastor Taquería in Bushwick before leaving for Hong Kong the next day. I had at one point been infatuated with him, but our friendship since those feelings expired has never been too close. That night, he opened up to me about his sexual assault, and I had never before related so much to what he was saying. Of all people to feel mirrored by, I didn’t expect him to be able to pick the lock of compassion. In the end, he thanked me for being his friend over the years and hoped someday we’ll meet again.

Exactly one month post- “the end”, friends I had missed for years came together to celebrate autumn in Sleepy Hollow. We composed an ambrosial charcuterie board as a family—Kaelan, Girnar (my brothers from Topanga) Maddy, Ona, Sam, and of course the languorous American bulldog Chata. We drank homemade cider and watched *Over the Garden Wall*, preserving and elevating a tradition already in place for years while I was not there.

At the end of the night, I gave Girnar a totem from my little sack of treasures. The gift was a half-nut, open owl-faced with night vision eyes and a heart-shaped skull. It’s an object I collected from the forest floor at Troutbeck for a mezcal dinner N and I had been invited to upstate. I told him it had powers of remembering where strength comes from when you forget your true presence. It’s in those moments when I think I’ve lost the tempo that the melody changes so I can find it again.

He told me that he carries small trinkets himself and pulled out a handheld compass from his backpack. I laid mine next to his, and I gazed at them by candlelight.

As we were cleaning up, and the Original Feeling of Friendship compounded over the years started to flow over, I overheard Sam say “I feel like I’ve been injected with heroin.”

How lovely, that in nature love can be repossessed. Not a recorder out of tune. And when the rests come, my inner voice hums with what no one else will ever hear.

**Greenleaf**



The universe is flooding, they say,  
and only the nobles of the plant kingdom know it's happening.  
All others: we're convinced this bathtub is even.  
Me, who has only shared it with his mother.

Would a plant really never take more than it needs?

I watch him, the barefoot boy in the immortal green t-shirt  
chomping his chosen bell pepper.  
He's befriended the plants,  
nods with the knowing few at the charcuterie board  
rotting on the dining room table.  
I tell him I'm afraid  
of how much more of my love will be transformed into hate.  
He believes me  
and holds my dense, unbreaking bravery.  
*It's pointing this way, he says,*  
and hoists me over the garden wall.  
*Don't worry, he tells me,*  
*in the middle between white and black is green.*