

AN INCOMPLETE LIST OF SAD BEAUTIFUL THINGS THAT ALMOST BUT DON'T QUITE MANAGE TO MAKE CLEAR TO ME HOW ANYONE CONTINUES TO LOVE ANYTHING KNOWING SOMEDAY IT WILL ALL BE GONE

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My god, I just remembered that we die. –Clarice Lispector

But hopeful dear us, we forget. –George Saunders

I.

England, War of the Roses, the Sweat—an illness fast and fatal, disappearing the afflicted in less than eighteen hours. Symptoms include cold shakes, dizziness, delirium, “a sense of apprehension.” Those who survive the first day usually make full recovery. Catherine of Aragon and her first husband both wither under the Sweat. Arthur dies. Catherine doesn’t, marries Henry VIII, who later leaves her for Anne Boleyn. Anne too survives the Sweat but doesn’t survive Henry VIII. Thousands perish quickly: *Merry at dinner*, it is said, *dead at supper*, and yet Cardinal Wolsey wilts and revives. Twice. This is senseless. Less than seventy years later, the life only of an average human, the Sweat disappears forever. For no reason at all it came. For no reason at all it left.

II.

The smell, raw and wet, of uncooked fish—inhale and I am five years old, knife in hand, thumb in gaping crappie mouth. My papaw teaches me to scale a fish so fresh I worry it’s still alive; my dad watches beside a bucket of bluegill. A screened-in porch in a trailer park in the Everglades, a song about heaven on the radio. The sun is shining but I shiver along my shoulders; my hands shake. Papaw puts his thumb over mine on the blade, says, *Slow round the fins, Sissy, you’re doing just fine*. Dad catches the guts and bits between his knees. Papaw tells me the magic he put on my hook earlier worked: *Look at the size of that fish*. It’s

been over eight years since Papaw died, more since I was in Florida—the trailer worn away by time and bulldozer—but a whiff of fish and it stands again.

III.

Clinic waiting rooms, bright but not cheerful, badly patterned in too much vinyl—like the one I visit three times a week to donate plasma for money, and also I guess to save lives. A space full of people, hoping for miracles or else in for a routine checkup. I can’t stop wondering if anyone in the room might have any rare but not impossible disorders, like fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva, which replaces muscle with bone. Any trauma to the body—fall, bump, bruise—makes muscle ossify. What I’m saying is, when anything in a person like that breaks, it mends harder, stronger, but not better. During my examination, the nurse asks me how I feel: *strong and stable*? I think about how, for some viruses, a sense of apprehension is a symptom. They check my iron levels, needle my finger and squeeze. Blood spills from my fingertip quickly (*my god, I just remembered that we die*) but this is a good sign, means adequate hydration. I once read of seven different medical cases involving chest cavity fires, like a flash flood but with flame, and inside a body. A combination of increased oxygen, dry towels, sometimes spark-emitting electrical equipment can result in hearts spontaneously catching fire. All seven patients this happened to survive even this (*we forget*). After

the vial of my blood is full, the nurse tells me I bled well. I thank her. If there is one thing I know how to do, it is bleed.

IV.

Running late, I-75 South to Cincinnati—a traffic jam I'm happy to be in. Someone else driving, my cat in my lap, mostly bone by now. I'm not thinking at all about the animal in my arms; instead, what flashes through my memory is a commercial, for car insurance maybe, Washington crossing the Delaware Pike on a boat, so slow cars start honking. Someone in the commercial shouts, *We all have places to*

I think I know too much to ever enjoy anything beautiful again.

be! I have somewhere to be, a vet appointment to say goodbye. Everyone always seems to be in such a hurry. Not me. I (*slow round the fins*) relish roadblocks, delay, extra seconds to palm my cat's soft fur, feel the light rise and fall of breath. I never want this construction-heavy car-honking goddammit-get-out-of-my-way traffic to end. This was a year ago. Six months later, different vet, this time my childhood terrier. I'm late to the vet the way I am late to everything, because I hold on to time until it makes me tardy, like it does the summer my lovebird flies into a sour apple tree at my parents' house, too scared by the garage door to whistle home. I chase him through the neighborhood, looking for the color blue that is not sky, not berry or jay, but darker, brighter, blue that only reminds me of itself, of feathers between leaves. *Say something, chicken*, I call, and he answers: small chirps that mean *here, here*. Six hours and ten trees later, I stand on the Do Not Stand step of my dad's tallest ladder, stretch my hand, my bird bicycles the trunk and lands in the center of my sweat-soaked palm. Two years later, he's dead too. I find him in his cardboard house. My house, too quiet without him. Birds outside chirp, cackle, trill, but none of the calls are the right sound for *here*.

V.

Seeds felled from bird feeders growing corn and sunflower sprouts between the boards of a second-floor balcony, flowers that bloom in rock cracks, trees growing at ninety-degree angles out of cliff-faces—I am moved in their presence to be brave, a little foolhardy. Like the dream I once had about someone I didn't know,

the face of a stranger on a bus, in a show, at a store. I put my hands, tender and affectionate, in his hair, tangled and dark. Maybe he reaches for me and plays with my fingers, secret, like under the table. I fall in love with a person who also falls in love with me. I wake hungry. Still, the sweat feathers my skin so I shake cold, even on sticky July days when I find new beings to love, a loud-purring—*here, here*—FIV-positive cat—*it's not a death sentence*, the vet assures me, but everything is—or a lamb born blind, rejected by mother, tail infected, destined if I didn't do something to die. I drive her five rainy hours to a sanctuary. She's showered with milk, antibiotics, a prediction to live. Which she does, five long hot months, cuddled and carried, nursed on a bottle. One day she doesn't wake up, even though her tail healed and she learned to walk without seeing. Saving her once hadn't mattered after all. But of course it did.

VI.

My second pack of cigarettes in four hours—I'm surrounded by friends who have no idea what time it is. Briefly, it feels like *merry at dinner* and *slow round the fins*, *Sissy, you're doing just fine*. But underneath (*my god*), the sweat. All seven patients who survived their burning hearts die anyway, another day, of something else. For a moment, when I hold kittens small enough to fit on a single sheet of paper, or when I cry in the sleepy soft black of my perfectly healthy dalmatian's ears, or when on nights muggy and eternal (*hopeful dear us*) I miss my cigarette before I've even asked it, I think I know too much to ever enjoy anything beautiful again. ●