

# New Poetry from D.A. Gray: “Our Backyard Apocalypse”

We set small bowls of sugar water  
on the garden’s edge. Bees were scarce  
since the freeze which had almost finished  
what the pesticides had started. Still,  
some survived.

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# Poetry from Eric Chandler: “Hetch Hetchy”



THERE’S A DROUGHT / *image by*  
*Amalie Flynn*

## Hetch Hetchy

There are two signs on  
The towel rack.  
One says, “cozy” and explains that  
The towel rack  
Heats your towels.

It’s next to the switch  
That fires up  
The electricity to the towel rack.  
That fires up  
The coal fired power plant.

The power plant

Sends up the gas.  
Is the drought because the power plant  
Sends up the gas?  
Either way, there's a drought.

I looked down through that gas at the  
Hetch Hetchy reservoir.  
White bathtub rings surround the low  
Hetch Hetchy reservoir  
Because of the drought.

The second sign on  
The towel rack  
Says they won't launder what's on  
The towel rack.  
Only what they find on the floor.

All the water in the city comes from  
The Hetch Hetchy.  
They're conserving water from  
The Hetch Hetchy.  
They hope you won't mind.

Enjoy your hot towels.

*"Hetch Hetchy" previously appeared in Eric Chandler's book  
Hugging This Rock*

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**New Poetry from Lisa Stice:**

# “Water Cycle”

No matter where we are, the oceans  
meet us in some form.

I am small

and my daughter (who is only eight) –  
is even smaller

and still, our dog is smaller

yet, then there are those microscopic zoe-  
and phytoplankton

and the not so micro

fish that eat them and so on

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## New Poetry from Ben Weakley: “Beatitudes I,” “Beatitudes II,” “Beatitudes III,” “Beatitudes IV”



THE BROKEN SKIN / *image by Amalie Flynn*

### **Beatitudes I.**

The Lord blessed us with knowledge. Twin curses, good and  
evil.

Why else plant the luscious tree there, where we were bound  
to find the fruit? The purple and shivering flesh never lacks  
in spirit. The ache and growl of our naked bellies are the

price

for the moment's delight. So, we gorge and the juice drips sticky down our chins. Let angels have the eternal heaviness of paradise; ours is the moment. The act, willful and with intent.

Advised of the penalties. Done poorly. Knowing this kingdom cannot last. Looking beyond the gardens for a more convincing view of heaven.

## **Beatitudes II.**

Are we not also blessed, we who praise  
the clear night and its silence?

Betrayed by the absence of stars, we mourn  
a billion-years' light no longer burning.

We whimper at the withered grass burning,  
the breathing forest burning, the one  
great and living ocean boiling and burning.

You who created time, who is before all things, who will  
remain after the ruin,  
will you be waiting for us in the cool garden?

Will we lie down with you in the dew-damp grass?  
Will we be comforted?

## **Beatitudes III.**

Are the meek blessed tonight in their bundled and stinking  
shelters

beneath frozen bridges? Are they blessed with patience in  
their waiting  
for the Lord of compassion? For the Lord that *suffers with?*

They suffer together. Their children will inherit the  
suffering  
of generations,  
the split lip of submission, the broken skin of the earth.

#### **Beatitudes IV.**

*Blessed.* From a word that meant *blood*.

Latin for *praise*. Blood and praise to the hungry; they are  
weak.

Blood and praise for the thirsty. For those who bathe  
in fetid water.

What are words  
to those who hunger in a gluttonous world?  
To those who thirst beside the brackish rivers,  
choking on garbage? We say, wait for righteousness  
to come from above. But they have starved  
in their flesh so that our spirits could be filled.

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**Poetry by Amalie Flynn +  
Images by Pamela Flynn:  
"#150," "#151," "#152,"  
"#153"**



Flow #150

Thick in Louisiana swamps  
Atchafalaya Basin  
Hot cypress shooting out  
Stretching in that bayou  
Where pipelines  
Pumping black gold oil  
Cross across the swamp  
Like spider veins.



Flow #151

## **TRACKS / 151**

How I find tiny cuts  
The skin of my inner  
Thighs outer lip my  
Labia  
Cuts from his finger  
Nails small bloody  
Crescents  
Like beetle tracks.



Flow #152

**SPOIL / 152**

Or deep in a swamp

How oil companies

Create canals

Push earth into piles

Push mud into banks

These spoil banks or

Dams

That block blocking

Water so it cannot

Flow.



Flow #153

**CLAM / 153**

The sky is full of trees

Now after

After he hits me over

The head  
With a pipe metal pipe  
Hard on  
The crown of my skull  
Bone and  
Suture cracking like a  
Clam shell.

*[Pattern of Consumption](#) is a year long project featuring 365 poems by Amalie Flynn and 365 images by Pamela Flynn. The poetry and images focus on the assault on women and water.*

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## **New Fiction from M.C. Armstrong: Excerpt from Novel 'American Delphi'**

*Note: M.C. Armstrong's new novel, 'American Delphi,' will be out October 15, 2022 from Milspeak Books. It has been hailed as "riveting, wise, and wonderful." Please feel free to [pre-order here](#), or purchase wherever books are sold.*

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**From 'American Delphi' by M.C. Armstrong**

“How do you tell the world that your brother is a psychopath?”

“You don’t,” my mom said. “Get away from the screen and journal about it.”

She took this black and white notebook out of her grocery bag and handed it to me like it was supposed to be the answer to all of my problems. So here I sit, notebook and pen in hand, being a good girl while Zach is standing in the kitchen literally jumping up and down about how the world is ending and how America has more cases of the virus than any other country on the planet and how he saw a video of somebody fall off a motor scooter in Indonesia and watched the guy’s face go black before vomiting blood and dying right there by his scooter and you would think, by listening to my brother describe the story, that he was talking about a corgi or some Australian getting playfully punched by a kangaroo on YouTube. But this is somebody dying and for Zach it’s like the best thing that’s ever happened. It’s like it’s confirming all of his theories about apocalypse and totally justifying all of the whips, knives, guns, and fireworks he’s been collecting in the closet of his crazy-ass bedroom upstairs.

“Buck says the virus is the medicine,” Zach said, getting up in my face and breathing his hot breath all over me.

Buck London is Zach’s special friend. Buck’s an old man who just moved into Orchard Chase and smells like mothballs, and I can tell from Zach’s smell that he’s been spending way too much time with Buck.

“Get away from me,” I said. “You’re not practicing social distancing.”

“We are the virus,” Zach said.

“You are the virus,” I said.

“Nobody is the virus,” mom said, tossing a salad with a bunch

of lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, avocado and falafel (feel awful). Mom said we should use the plague as an excuse to go vegan, but there goes Zach behind her back, just standing, smiling at me as he's shoving disks of salami into his mouth. It's like he's proving this psychopathic suicidal point by eating meat while mom is making a salad, and I said: "NINA!" because I call Mom by her name when she won't listen. But by the time Nina turns around, Zach's pretending like he's tying his shoe and I'm taking a picture of this journal just in case he kills someone someday.

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Mom said her biggest fear is that I end up a "twentysomething grandma" like Tanya Purtlebaugh. Mom's entire life seems organized around making sure that I don't end up like Mrs. Purtlebaugh, but I said "seems" because Nicole, Tanya's daughter, did just have a baby at seventeen and Nicole's two years older than I am and her mother is exactly seventeen years older than Tanya which makes her mother thirty-four and that's only three years younger than Mom which, if you do the math (which I do), it's pretty clear: Tanya Purtlebaugh is not a "twentysomething grandma." In other words, Mom's entire mission in life right now (and she's succeeding) is keeping me from having sex so I don't basically have a ME which, if you think about it (and I do), is really sad and it makes sense why she lies and covers up by blaming it all on a "twentysomething grandma" who's not actually a twentysomething grandma.

Mom doesn't want me to see what she calls "the elephant in the room": Her biggest fear is actually another ME. I am the elephant. Mom is afraid she's like the virus and has passed on all her bad decision-making to me and when I told her, in the fall, that I didn't want to play tennis in the spring or take any "private lessons" with Pastor Gary, she flipped out because she basically wanted to ensure that I was constantly quarantined in clubs and sports and stupid boring activities

where I was sweating and bickering with other girls instead of having "idle time" with boys, but look at everything now. What happened to the tennis team? Same thing that happened to track, soccer, drama, ballet, baseball, archery, karate, and everything else—canceled.

Everyone's in their room by themselves except Nicole with her screaming mixed-race baby, but guess who's used to being alone? The elephant in the room, that's who.

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"This is like a taste of being old," Mom said as we drove to the grocery store, Zach riding shotgun, me in the back.

"Nina," Zach said. "Please tell us exactly what you mean because I wasn't listening."

"Okay, Zachary," Mom said. "I mean this is what we've been looking forward to all day, isn't it? Our one chance to get out of the house, where nothing is happening, just so we can listen to some music in the car and see a few people at a store. Think about how many old people don't have soccer practice, piano, or archery."

I'll give Nina credit: she made me see things differently for a second. There was an old black woman covered in a clear plastic bag in the produce section picking through apples really slowly, and I felt bad because the one place where this old woman gets to go is now invaded with danger, and we are the danger, and I wonder how long until she gives up and has some granddaughter teach her over the phone how to have groceries delivered to her front door by a drone?

"Off your phone!" Mom said to Zach as we passed by the meat shelves which were picked totally clean of everything except the meatless meats. So much for America using this crisis to wean itself off fossil fuels and diseased beef.

“Look!” Zach said.

Passing by a little mirror near the cheap sunglasses, I saw my stupid, long witchy nose. I hate my nose.

“Look!” Zach said.

“Look at what?” I said.

I put my palm up to my nose as if to smash it back into my head. We wheeled past the glasses and down the coffee aisle so Mom could get her “medicine” when Zach showed me a picture from MIMI of the socially distanced sleep-slots for the homeless of Las Vegas, a parking lot that had basically been turned into a dystopian slumber party for all these Black Americans who live in this city with a hundred thousand empty hotel rooms. But because we are America, we force the poor people to sleep in a parking lot, and there was this woman in a white hijab or bonnet standing over the homeless like she was some kind of monitor to make sure the poor were keeping their distance. Or who knows? Maybe she was nice and asking them if they were okay, or if they wanted soup. What was not okay was the way psychopath Zach was grinning as he was thrusting the screen in my face.

“Why are you smiling?” I said.

“He’s smiling because he’s alive,” Mom said, sweeping three bags of Ethiopian coffee into our loaded cart, and Mom’s answer would have been totally perfect if it weren’t for one thing: IT’S HER ANSWER. NOT HIS! MY BROTHER IS SICK!!!

\*

I have a wasp in my room because my window won’t seal. But a wasp is just a bee, so his brain is as big as a flea, which means he won’t fly through the crack, and there’s a yellow jacket on the other side of the window, and he’s just a bigger bee, so he’s dumb too. He doesn’t know he just has to fly in

the little slit if he wants to see his friend or fly a little higher to show his friend where the opening is so he'll stop going crazy and bouncing off the walls. Instead, the yellow jacket just hovers and buzzes while the wasp goes nuts and it's actually kind of funny. I think the yellow jacket is pretty much watching TV, and the wasp is his show for the night, and I guess I am, too, and it's like the birds have stopped quarreling and are now laughing like a sitcom audience, like the birds know everything.

What do the trees know?



'American Delphi' by M.C. Armstrong, October 2022. Cover art by Halah Ziad. Milspeak Books.

There goes my brother running through the grass. Wonder where the psychopath is going with his big backpack. It's like a scene from a movie. The psychopath with his backpack loaded with knives and fireworks walking through this totally dystopian, suburban wasteland of saggy porches and American flags towards this half-moon that looks like a lemon wedge while Toast, the Kagels' new corgador, rams up against the invisible fence with his special red cowboy bandanna around his neck, and how can I tell my brother's a psychopath, you might ask? God. Just look at him baiting Toast by charging the invisible fence. You can totally tell Zach loves electrocuting Toast, and you know what they say about boys who are cruel to animals. Zach is totally toasting Toast so I open up my window and scream at him to stop and when I close it back up the wasp is gone.

Mom's right. This is what it must be like to get old. I have to take my sunset walk and "get my steps in." I walked by Aria's house and then the Kagels. I called Toast to the edge but I didn't taunt him like Zach. We just sort of looked at each other, mirroring one another. Toast blinked. I blinked.

Toast tilted his head. I tilted my head. Toast looked right. I looked left. Then I noticed at my feet some magenta letters. Maybe they were mauve. I don't know. The words on the sidewalk were written in this pinkish chalk and it wasn't the first time I'd seen the graffiti. For the last two weeks the parents of all the little kids have been outside drawing pictures of daisies and birds and smiley sunshine faces with their kids, and Zach and I are too old for that, but some of the older kids have been using the chalk to say other things or to mark their times on their bike races since they're being forced to exercise outside for the first time in their lives and they're actually having fun with it, but this graffiti wasn't like that.

This was different:

*Go Vegan.*

I walked a little farther and read in yellow:

*Media Lies.*

A little farther in blue:

*Big Pharma Kills.*

A little farther in red, white, and blue:

*Government Lies.*

And then in white:

*Black Lives Matter.*

And after that it was back to magenta:

*The Truth is a Virus. The Truth Leaks. Spread Truth.*

And I was like, okay. How do you do that?

How do you spread truth?

I kept walking. Now, in purple, but with the same handwriting, they said *We Need Change*. And I'm like, okay. Duh. But then, near the turnoff from Cedar to Byrd—right where you could see this big stack of logs against the side of Buck London's house—there was one more phrase before I turned around and it said: *American Delphi*.

I was pretty much across the street from Buck's, staring at this dark green holly bush he has in front of his house and this stuffed armadillo everyone can see on the chipped paint planks of his porch, but because of the huge prickly holly bush, you can't really see anything else. I couldn't tell if he was sitting on his porch in his underwear smoking a cigar with a one-eyed cat in his lap, or if he was inside on his couch looking at naked pictures of girls. I have no idea why Zach spends so much time with Buck, and I have no idea what *American Delphi* means.

But I am going to find out.

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## **New Fiction from Andria Williams: “The Attachment Division”**

### 1. The Bureau for the Mitigation of Human Anxiety

They were the survivors, they should have been happy, they should have been fucking thrilled (the President accidentally blurted that on a hot mic few years back, everyone quoted it until it was not even that funny anymore, but that's what

she'd said, throwing up her hands: "I don't get it. They should all be fucking thrilled"), but three decades of daily existential dread had taken its toll. The evidence was everywhere: fish in the rivers poisoned not by dioxin runoff now, but by Prozac, Zoloft, marijuana, ketamine. There were drugs in the groundwater and the creeks and the corn. Birds were constantly getting high, flying into windshields, Lyfts, barbeque grills, outdoor umbrellas, the sides of port-a-potties. The different types of thunks their bodies made, depending on the material they struck, were the subject of late-night talk show jokes.

As for humans, the pills weren't enough, the online therapy, in-person therapy, shock therapy, exposure therapy, clown therapy, none of it. The suicide rate hit twenty percent.

It was Dr. Anton Gorgias—still alive, now, at one hundred eight, and very active on Twitter—who initially proposed, and eventually headed, the Bureau for the Mitigation of Human Anxiety. The leaders of fifty-six nations came together to declare a worldwide mental-health crisis. Ironic, really, because the climate problem had been mostly solved (the U.S. being third-to-last to sign on to the Disaster Accords, just before Saudi Arabia and Equatorial Guinea. Thank God we even did, Steph sometimes marveled. She was twenty-seven; people just ten or twenty years older than she was would often tell her she was lucky to have missed the very first years of the Wars; she'd think, yes, it had all been a real joy, thank you). Nothing could be reversed, but they could buy themselves some time, maybe even a few hundred years. That was in Sweden—of course it was Sweden—and so Minnesota was the first U.S. state to grab the ball and run with it, copying its spiritual motherland with only a smidge less efficiency.

Twelve states had Bureaus now, with more in the queue. But those states all looked to Minnesota, where the successes were measurable: suicide down by seven to nine points, depending on the study; people rating their daily satisfaction at a

respectable 6 out of 10. It had once been two. Remember that, Stephanie's local director had told them in training. We brought it up to six. It used to be two.

Using combinations of genomic scanning, lifestyle analysis, and psychological evaluation, people could pinpoint their main source of anxiety and apply for its corresponding relief branch. The only hitch, at this point, was that each person could apply to only one branch. It was a budget and personnel thing, Steph explained when asked; the Bureau had its limits like anything else. People did not like being told they had to choose, but their complaints made Steph feel a little defensive. What more could people ask of a government agency? "At least we allow you to be informed," she'd pointed out to her parents, her sister, Alex, anyone who took issue. She was cribbing from the Bureau's original slogan, "It's the Most Informed Decision You'll Ever Make."

"Yeah," quipped Alex, in the recent last days before their breakup, when he claimed Steph was getting too sensitive, too cranky, too obsessively hung up on the death of her dad. "We should all be fucking thrilled."

People complained about other aspects, too: registration was a bitch, the waiting period took at least two years and there was mandatory yearlong counseling, but, again—the numbers didn't lie. "It Used to Be Two" was now printed on the sides of bus stops, above the seats on the light rail.

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## 2. Never Laugh in the Presence of the Pre-Deceased

Steph worked for a small subset of Mortality Informance called the Attachment Division. The Attachment Division was tailored to people with anxiety caused by the prospect of loss: that their significant other might pass away before they did. This was what kept them up at night, what woke them with gasping nightmares. They wanted to know that they would die first,

because the opposite horrified them. They could choose to be informed—if indeed they would be first to go—either six months or three months before their partner.

True, plenty of people registered for the program as newlyweds and then rescinded their applications a few years later, submitted them elsewhere. But Stephanie still liked this niche, this branch of the Bureau, for its slightly less self-involved feel, its unabashed sentimentality, the gamble its applicants were willing to make for love. A person had to put aside a bit of their pride to work for the Attachment Division. It was not considered one of the sexy branches. It was the Bureau's equivalent of an oversized, well-worn cardigan sweater.

*I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not sad. Each day I do my job with compassion and, above all, professionalism. I am on time, clean, and comforting, but never resort to intimacy. I remember that a sympathetic nod goes a long way. I do not judge or discriminate based on a Pre-Mortal's appearance, race, creed, economic status, or any other factor. I will never contact a Pre-Mortal on my caseload outside of work for any reason. I remember always that I, too, will die.*

She recalled her classmate Devin, the first day of training, raising his hand and asking how the Attachment Division defined "intimacy." Steph tried to get his attention, jabbing her finger silently at its definition on page four of their brand-new handbooks to spare him the embarrassment of asking something obvious, but he asked anyway. It turned out that "intimacy," for a Mortality Informant, encompassed almost everything, other than 1) helping someone if they collapsed, and 2) the required shoulder squeeze upon first releasing information. They'd practiced The Shoulder Squeeze in the same Estudiante A/Estudiante B setup she remembered from high school Spanish, reaching out a straightened arm, aiming for "the meat of the shoulder." "One, two," the instructor had

called, briskly clapping her hands. "One, two. Fingers should already be prepared to release on the two."

"You could probably squeeze a little harder," said Devin, diligent in his constructive criticism. "But that could just be me. I like a lot of pressure." They practiced with classmates taller, shorter, and the same heights as themselves.

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### 3. Nils Gunderson, Neighbor

Steph settled onto a green metal bench across the street from the address she'd been given, swiped her phone, and logged into her Bureau account to access the file, waiting as it loaded. A long page of text came up. Mortality Informants like herself were required to read their cases' backgrounds first, before viewing the image, to help prevent involuntary first impressions (which, it turned out, were unpreventable).



She jiggled her foot as she scanned, her flat shoes slapping lightly against her heel. Even a year and a half into the job, she was always nervous, right before. She'd been assigned to tell whoever came up on her screen – as professionally as she could, and because this was what they had requested, they had signed up for the program themselves – that in three months they would be dead.

The top line read, in bold, NAME: NILS GUNDERSON.

"Shit," she muttered. It wasn't that this name made anything worse, necessarily, but that it represented, to Steph, something particular. A man named "Nils Gunderson" would be what she thought of as one of the Old Minnesotans. A lot of them had moved out of the Cities the last few decades, but she – perhaps because she was not one, or only partially one (on

her mom's side), her late father having been relocated to Minnesota from Thailand as one of thousands of the state's climate refugees – had a soft spot for the ones who'd braved the rapid change and stayed, the folks who loved their city and weren't freaked out by the people from all over the world who'd come, out of necessity, and often reluctantly, to live in it. She scrolled down: Nils Gunderson was forty-four years old, married to Claire, worked a desk job for the utilities company. Mother, Edna, still alive; father, Gary, dead of a heart attack at fifty. Four sisters, alive also. An adopted brother from Ghana, interesting. Thirteen cousins around the state. A large family, the traditional sort that believed in upward mobility, that had reproduced with diligence, steadily, starting in Sweden or wherever five generations back, and then came here and just kept it up, moving through the world as if it all made sense, as if the world were bound to incrementally improve simply because they believed or had been told it would, naming their children things like Nils Gunderson. (Although it was worth noting that Nils Gunderson, himself, did not have children.)

She tapped "Open Photo." But when she saw his face she gave a small jump, not because of anything alarming about the image itself, but because, surprisingly, she recognized him. He was the man who walked his cat past her apartment every night. He was someone she, casually but genuinely, liked.

The Bureau tried to prevent matching caseworkers with anyone they knew. Each time a name came in it was scanned against the lists Steph had provided: her mom and brother, extended family, ex-boyfriend Alex (newest name on her list), former bosses. But she hadn't known this man's name, and couldn't list him. And so while it hadn't happened until now, here she was, confronted with the face of a familiar person. Her phone buzzed with the drone update: he was ten minutes out, headed home from work now.

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So now she knew that the man who walked his cat past her apartment in the evenings had three months left to live. It would have been a sad piece of information even if she did not have to deliver it herself.

“Walking the cat” was an energetic phrase for her neighbor’s nightly routine. He and the cat strolled, really, in no hurry, stopping often, Nils Gunderson smoking, following the gray tabby which wore a red halter and leash. Stephanie had seen him just the night before, in fact, as she’d hip-nudged shut the door of her car, a cloth bag of groceries in each arm. He was shy and polite, middle-aged, always slightly ruffled-looking, dressed in the way of a person who was not entirely proud of his body and embarrassed to have to select clothing for it. He wore, usually, an oversized gray t-shirt with the writing worn to nothing, baggy cargo shorts; his white legs slabbed into sandals that were themselves slabs. He had a way of answering her “hello” with a head motion that was both a nod and a duck, replying “How’s it going” so quietly she could hardly hear him—as if he were almost-silently, in a disappearing voice, reading the disappearing words on his shirt— then glancing fondly down at his halter-wearing cat as if glad for the distraction of it. He didn’t carry a phone, which was unusual. Maybe along with the cat and the cigarette that would have been too much. The cat’s name was Thor. Stephanie knew because she’d hear him try to chuck it up like a horse sometimes, a click of his tongue and a little jiggle of the leash: “Let’s go, Thor.”

Thor, who matched his owner with a slight chubbiness, did not go. Thor moved along the sidewalk with excruciating distraction, sniffing every crack in the pavement as he came to it as if solving a delicate mystery, inspecting each tuft of grass or weedkiller-warning flag (“No, no,” the man said with gentle concern, tugging it away, though he must have realized the flag was a joke, pesticides had been banned for two decades). It must take a world’s worth of patience to walk

that cat three blocks, Stephanie thought. Or maybe this was the only opportunity the man had to smoke, and he was relieved not to hurry. Smoking was illegal indoors now, even in your own home, and you needed a license— one pack a week, but of course people still got cigarettes other places.

She hadn't, all this time, known Nils's name. But because she saw him almost daily she also saw him on the worst day of her life: the evening, six months before, when she'd gotten the phone call, at work, that her father had died. Frantic, numb, she'd only just texted Alex to tell him, and she pulled up in front of the apartment and couldn't park her car. The space was too small. In and out and in and out she tried, yanking the wheel, blind with tears, and the man with the cat, walking by, seeing her struggle, paused to direct her into the space. She remembered him in her rearview mirror, wagging his fingers encouragingly, holding up his hand, *Good, Stop*. His supportive, pleased thumbs-up when she finally got the car passably straight. And then she whirled out of the car and rushed toward her apartment, toward the blurry form of Alex who had come out to take her in his arms with the gorgeous, genuine sympathy of some kind of knight – Alex had held her and cried; he had loved her father, too – and she'd almost collided with the man-with-the-cat, who noticed, suddenly, her stricken, tear-streaked face, and said, quietly: *Oh*.

Just "oh." With a slight step back, and so much empathy in his voice, sorrow at having misjudged the apparent triumph of their situation. There was an apology in the *oh*, and she had felt bad later that she hadn't been able to reply, to say something stupid like No worries or even just thank him; she'd jogged forward in her haze of grief, her heart still revving helplessly, her stomach sick, while the man quietly tugged the cat's leash and walked away.

In winter, of course, she saw Nils and his cat far less. The cat would not have wanted to stroll in a driving January rain. But after she got back from her dad's funeral, and started to

readjust to life, slowly, and notice the things she had noticed before, she liked spotting them. There was something endearing about the pair, the cat's refusal to move quickly or in a straight line, the man's attendant humility, his lack of embarrassment (in a neighborhood of joggers, spandexed cyclists, Crossfitters) at being an unathletic forty-something male out walking a cat.

Of course, the smoking, the lack of fitness might have contributed to Nils Gunderson's situation. Because there he was, looking back at her out of his profile photo with an almost hopeful expression, as if he were waiting for her to speak so he could politely respond. She'd never had the opportunity to study him the way she now could, in the picture: gray-blue eyes, a slightly hooked nose, the gentle roll of a whiskered double chin cradled by what looked like the collar of a flannel shirt, a fisherman-style sweater over that. She flicked to her badge screen and held it loosely on her lap, closed her eyes a moment, preparing herself with the first line of the creed on a loop in her mind, because it was the most soothing to her. *I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not sad. I am a Mortality Informant, my work is an honor and a responsibility, it is not*— Her phone buzzed and she opened her eyes, glanced down, saw the newest drone update that he was two miles away, expected home in four minutes. He was driving a gray Honda Civic, and would be alone. *Please activate recording device, the message concluded, and Good Luck.*

The capitalized "Good Luck" always struck her as slightly odd, as if she were about to blast into space. But, glancing back down at Nils Gunderson on her phone screen, imagining him coming home to his wife—Claire, she read, was a librarian, Jesus; *it is not sad*—and his cat, she did feel a sudden drop in her stomach that could have been described as gravitational, or maybe it was just the gravity and density of the information she held, about to pass through poor Nils's

unshielded, unprepared rib cage like molecules of uranium, changing him almost as much as his real death would. His death, according to her notes, would occur on September 8<sup>th</sup>, three months from today.

She pressed her recording button ("for quality control") and took a deep breath. She would be compassionate and professional and punctual and clean and non-intimate. It was the best she could do.

\*

That morning, not for the first time, she had typed a resignation letter, then deleted it. She'd just had to tell a nineteen-year-old that her fiancée would die of a sudden, aggressive leukemia; that an 80-year old woman would lose her husband of 57 years. (Parents were exempted from the program until their children were at least 18, or else the whole world would have gone into chaos.)

"We're not all suited to the job," her friend Erica had said over the phone. "You know all the lifers are on drugs." Erica had quit the main Mortality Informance branch (not the Attachment Division) after eight years; now she had her Master of Fine Arts in creative writing and worked for a chocolate company, writing inspirational quotes for the inner foil wrappers. "Everything is for the best!" she'd write. "Kathy N., Lincoln, NE." Or, "Don't forget to giggle! – Lisa P., Detroit, MI." One night Steph and a very tipsy Erica had amused themselves by brainstorming the least inspirational quotes they could come up with. "Imagine opening your chocolate to find: 'Shut up.' – Jenny, Topeka, KS," Erica had laughed, wiping her eyes. "Or: 'Yes, it's probably infected.' – Marsha, Portland, ME."

"There are jobs out there," Erica had promised her, "that are so easy, you could cry. You don't have to make life so hard on yourself."

And here was his car now.

\*

Nils Gunderson parallel-parked, smoothly, a quarter of a block away, fumbled with something in the passenger seat for a long time—a backpack, Stephanie saw as he stepped from the car, hoisting it over one shoulder—and finally made his way in her direction up the sidewalk. He was slightly duck-footed; maybe this was more pronounced in his work khakis and brown shoes. There were light creases of sweat across the top of each khakied thigh.

Stephanie stood, patted her dark bun, smoothed her skirt, gathered her small shoulder bag and phone. She wore a butter-yellow shirt because she thought it a comforting color. The skirt, pale brown and A-line, was “sexy as a paper bag,” Alex had said: joking, she knew, but screw him anyway, she wasn’t supposed to look sexy at her job. He acted as if she should go out the door in a black leather miniskirt and stilettos, like some dominatrix angel of death.

Halfway across the street she was interrupted by a group of college-age kids, sprinting, shouting a breathless “Move!” and waving her out of the way. She knew what they were doing, playing a new game everyone was obsessed with, where they scanned their locations into their phones at surprise moments, and then their friends had ten minutes to get there and catch them. She heard people talking about it everywhere she went. They’d win virtual cash which they spent on an imaginary planet that they’d build, meticulously, from the first atom up. People spent months on their planets and were devastated when they lost; a guy had been shot over it in Brainerd the week before, and the game itself was causing traffic problems, accidental hit-and-runs, a lady’s small dog had been clipped right off the end of its leash by a speeding Segway. Steph jumped back as the three men plowed forward, one, at least, calling “Sorry” over his shoulder. “Hope your imaginary planet

is awesome," she snipped. Alex had been getting into this game; sometimes his phone went off at three a.m. and he'd dash out the door almost desperately. He had started to sleep fully dressed, even wearing his shoes. If she slowed him down by talking as he made for the door, he'd get crabby, in this weird, saccharine tone where she could tell he was trying to moderate his voice because he knew it was, at heart, an absurd thing to get irritable over. He was aware of that at least. So she'd started pretending to stay asleep. Then, once he left, she'd toss and turn angrily, obscurely resentful of this idiotic game. She was glad all that was over now, Alex and his dumb game, even though he had named his planet after her, which was sweet. And last night she'd been tossing and turning anyway, but because he *wasn't* there, and she'd ended up fishing his basketball sweatshirt with the cutoff sleeves out of the back of her closet and wearing it to sleep—sweet Jesus. Was there no middle ground?

She had to catch up to Nils Gunderson. He was almost at the front door. "Mr. Gunderson," she called, trotting the last few steps in her flat, unsexy shoes. He turned, a quizzical smile crossing his face—not one of recognition, in the first instant, but because she was a small, non-threatening female person calling after him—and then growing slightly more puzzled as he placed her.

"Mr. Gunderson, may I speak to you for a moment?"

"I – sure," he said. "Wait. You – you live a few blocks that way." He pointed.

"I do. Please come over here, if you would." She gestured to the grassy strip alongside his building, wishing there were a bench closer by. It was good to have a place where people could sit down, but she didn't want to lead him all the way back across the street.

He followed her a few steps, as she asked him to verify his

name, address, date of birth. He answered so trustingly, his grayish-blue eyes patient, politely curious, that she could hardly stand to see (as she flashed her badge) the dim knowledge gathering around their edges and then intensifying. She told him, in the plain language she'd practiced hundreds of times, that she was a Mortality Informant, reminding him gently that he had signed up for this program, had requested notification three months before his death, that he would pass away long before his wife, and that was why an Informant had been sent. No, she could not tell him when his wife would die, but it was far into the future. He paled before her eyes, she could see it happen, his mortality crashing in on him like the YMCA wave pool he'd later tell her he'd loved as a child, arms outstretched, staggering backwards, chlorine, briefly, in his nose and throat—the exhilaration of having cheated death, which he was not cheating now. Steph placed one hand on his thick shoulder and gave it a squeeze, one, two. She was prepared for him to cry, to ask why so soon, so young, even his dad had made it to fifty; to tell her in shock to go away, fuck her, fuck the program, he wished he'd never heard of it: some people got very upset. They wanted this information in the abstract, but not the real, or they didn't want the moment of receiving it. Several mortality informants had been punched or kicked. Devin had once been chased three blocks. Now they had an emergency button on their phones that could call for backup.

But he surprised her. "Thank God," he said, his voice choked, overwhelmed. "Oh, thank God, thank God."

\*

It was close to eleven p.m. when she heard him. Windows cracked, crickets singing through the warm St. Paul night, and then suddenly a wail from street-level that sounded agonized, almost otherworldly. Somehow Steph suspected it was him even before she went to peek. From her second-story brick apartment she saw Nils Gunderson's large figure hunched on the bench

below, the cat sniffing thoughtfully at a crushed cup.

*I will never contact a Pre-Mortal on my caseload outside of work for any reason.*

The wail was followed by distinct, repetitive sobs; someone cycling down the street glanced over, pedaled on.

*I remember always that I, too, will die.*

“Fuck,” she muttered. She yanked off Alex’s old basketball sweatshirt with the cutoff sleeves and threw it onto the couch. Strode out the door and down the wooden stairs in her baggy, checked pajama pants and ribbed tank top.

When she stood next to him, he looked up, his face swollen, tear-streaked, awful.

“You can’t do this,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest, self-conscious of her braless state. “I’m not supposed to talk to you.”

“I’m not doing *anything*,” he said. “I come to this bench every night.” She glared at him and he added, automatically, “I’m sorry.”

For a moment they both stood, staring at the black, puddled street. There’d been a late afternoon rain. Four young men raced by on bikes, whooping, phones in their hands, the thin tires splitting the puddles in two like bird-wings.

“That is the dumbest game,” Nils Gunderson said, and before she could stop herself Stephanie let out a dry chuckle. He looked at her gratefully. Tapped his shirt pocket. “Smoke?”

She hesitated. The first week of training they’d had to swear off cigarettes, alcohol, weed, opiates, anything that might dull or heighten their sensitivity to other people. The database bounced them from liquor stores and dispensaries. Their mornings began with fifteen minutes of guided meditation

on their phones, setting their intentions for the day. Their intentions, it turned out, were always to be compassionate, professional, punctual, clean, and non-intimate. Meditation annoyed her. She recalled Alex coming out of the shower one morning, a towel around his waist, and spotting her meditating (she'd cracked one eye just a sliver when she heard the door); grinning, tackling her, teasing her until she turned the phone face-down and just let it drone on. That had been a fun morning.

Nils held out a cigarette.

"Yes, please," she said.

He scooted over and she sat down beside him. He lit her cigarette. The nicotine wrapped her brain in the most welcome hug, tight, tighter, like a snail in a shell. God, now she craved a drink.

Nils talked. He was worried about his wife. The librarian, Claire. "She'll be so lonely," he said.

"When you signed up for this program," Steph said, rallying her work-voice though she felt worn out, "there was an unselfishness to your act. Remember that."

"Okay," he said. "That makes me feel better. Talk about that a little more. I mean, if you don't mind."

Steph took a drag, exhaled. If she could just smoke all the time her job would be a lot easier. "We'll have a team of grief counselors, a doctor, and after-care staff at your home within minutes of your passing. Claire won't be left alone until her family can get there. The best thing you can do when you feel it happening is to quietly go lie down. It's less upsetting for everyone." Steph looked at him, his bleak expression heavying his face. She could see him imagining his own, undignified death, gurgling facedown in a cereal bowl, slumped in the shower while water coursed over his beached

form. She repeated, "Remember that, just go to the bedroom and lie down."

"She has a sister in Sheboygan," Nils began.

"We know. We have it all on file."

"Will you be one of the people there with her?" He'd suddenly developed the ability to cry silently and abundantly, like a beautiful woman in a film. Tears ran down his cheeks. He picked at his bitten thumbnails, weeping.

Steph shook her head. "It's a separate team. My job was only to inform you."

"I won't be able to sleep tonight."

"I can put in a request for something to help you sleep, but only for the next few nights. We don't want you sleeping away the last three months of your life. Try to enjoy yourself, Nils. Go on a vacation. Sit outside. Re-watch your favorite movies, go to restaurants." She thought of her friend Erica and her chocolate-wrapper slogans. "Remember to giggle. Watch the sunrise. Have a lot of sex." That was not from a chocolate wrapper; that was what happened when she winged it. She should never wing it. "If you can. I mean, maybe not tonight. Give it a week or so."

He glanced at her, tear-streaked. "Have sex with Claire, you mean."

"Well, of course. That's what I meant."

"Just checking. I don't know what kind of advice you guys give. You're all so smug," he added after a moment, but in a sad voice, almost to himself, and it would turn out this was as insulting as he got.

"We're really not," Steph said.

“Should I tell her?”

“I can’t make that decision for you.”

They sat for a while; Steph accepted another cigarette. The cat rubbed against her pajama pants, his back arched, tail upright and quivering. She reached down to pet him. His fur was slick and soft as a seal’s.

“That one time I helped you park,” Nils began.

Steph looked at him.

“You were crying,” he said. “I felt terrible. I didn’t even notice until after you got out of the car.”

“It’s not your fault. I mean, I was in a car. You probably couldn’t see my face clearly. You were being nice by helping me out.”

“I just remember giving you this really stupid thumbs-up, and I was still holding it when you almost ran into me. Just grinning with my thumbs up, like a fucking idiot.”

“It was a really tight parking spot.”

“What were you crying about?”

Now her own eyes were stinging. “My dad,” she said after a minute. “I’d just found out he died.”

“Oh.” There it was again, Nils Gunderson’s *oh*. Steph’s vision swarmed. Nils said, “I’m really sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah,” said Steph, an edge of bitterness to her voice. “Car accident. Can’t really be prepared for something like that.”

“He wasn’t in – in the program? Like I am?”

She smiled bleakly. “He didn’t believe in it.”

Nils nodded, looked out at the street again. “I’m wondering if

it was a mistake. For me, I mean.”

Steph hesitated. “Everything always works out for the best,” she said, and then stopped. “No, that’s bullshit. It’s total bullshit. Sometimes things just don’t work out at all. Sometimes people die and it’s just fucking sad.” His mouth dropped slightly and she sped up: “But I don’t think that’s the case with you and Claire. I mean, that any part of this is bullshit. I think – I think you’ve had a wonderful life together and you’ve done right by her. And that signing up for this program was the right thing to do.” She rallied: “It was the most informed decision you could have made. I believe that. I do, Nils.”

“Thank you.” He wiped his face on both arms. Droplets glittered on the hair. “That was really nice of you to say. Will you meet me here tomorrow night?”

She tossed her cigarette onto the pavement – also illegal, she didn’t care right now – and Nils ground it out with his shoe. “I can’t,” she said.

As she got up, scuffing back toward her apartment in flip-flops, he called: “What department did you sign up for, anyway? For yourself?”

She was honest: “I didn’t sign up for any.”

\*

#### 4. The Confession

But he was back out by the bench the next evening, a large, forlorn form in the dark, this time standing and looking directly up at her building. He was holding something in his hands. Steph waited him out, tried to do the crossword puzzle in the Strib, made a cup of tea, dumped it in the sink. If this kept up, she would certainly lose her job before she could make any decisions herself about it. “Jesus fuck,” she

said finally, flip-flopping downstairs.

He immediately apologized in a voice so hoarse she could barely hear him. "I'm sorry, but I need your help. I made something. I was wondering if you would listen to it for me, tell me if it's okay." He added ominously, "It's the most important thing I've ever made." He thrust the package toward her. It was wrapped in newspaper and he had triangled the corners, taped them. If he'd had a bow he probably would have put one on. "What are you *wearing*?" he blurted. "Do you play basketball?"

Steph's cheeks flared as she fingered the edge of the sweatshirt, which went down to her knees. "Oh. It was my boyfriend's. Ex-boyfriend's. I shouldn't be – I shouldn't be wearing it."

Nils's eyes widened, wet. "Did he die?"

"God, no. It's not like I – *make* people die," Steph said, and then she started to laugh, an odd, cathartic laugh, one hand over her eyes. She realized she hadn't laughed all day. She wheezed until she half-bent over, holding her waist with the other arm. The thought of herself as some cursed being, walking around while people dropped away like playing cards – it was too much. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said, waving her hand, getting control of herself. She was not supposed to laugh in the presence of the pre-deceased.

But he was chuckling, too, tears blinking on the edges of his eyelids. He was laughing simply because she was laughing, out of some empathetic impulse. For a split second she wanted to hug him. She could probably get away with a shoulder squeeze. Lord knew she was royally fucking this up already. Instead she pinched her nose, took a deep breath, looked down at the item as he handed it to her. "What is it?" she asked.

"It's just – things I wanted to tell Claire. Things I want her to know about me. I feel like, after all this time, she should

know everything about me. Before we're parted forever."

"Maybe not forever," Steph tried, regretting it the moment it came out.

He brightened. "You think so?" Whispered: "Do they teach you something in school the rest of us don't know?"

"No," Steph said. "I'm sorry. Why are you asking me for advice on your – your recording? I'm not, like, a writer or artist or anything."

"But you're honest. I can tell. And I want you to be honest with me, tell me if you think it's any good. Promise me you'll listen to it," he said.

"There's a chance people shouldn't know everything about somebody else," she cautioned.

He shook his head. It was the most emphatic thing she'd seen him do. "That's not true," he said, nearly defiant. "This is me and Claire we're talking about here."

\*

Back upstairs, she tugged open the newspaper to reveal a memory stick tucked up against a pack of Marlboro Reds. She smiled in spite of herself, cracked the window.

The file was enormous. He had talked for twelve hours straight: indoors, perhaps while Claire was at work; outside, voices in the background, cars swishing past. Initially, he was quite poetic. He must have been a reader, Steph thought, to marry a librarian.

He talked with a low urgency, but slowly, clearly, his voice growing drier by the hour. Steph, sitting with a notepad and pen, initially tried to jot helpful notes.

"My first memory," Nils was saying, his voice strong at this

point, "is of my own foot. I must have been six or seven months old. I remember looking at it in my crib, grabbing it, marveling. I think I found my foot beautiful. The toes were lined up in descending order like small pearls, the nails pink as areolas."

Steph frowned. "Shifting point of view," she scribbled. "A baby wouldn't be able to make these comparisons." Then she crossed it out. "Which foot?" she wrote. She crossed that out, too.

Nils roamed on, through his toddler years, a dog bite, falling off a tall piece of playground equipment, the disappointment of the local pool shutting down for water conservation (Steph didn't even remember public pools – a startling idea, to have your body in the same water as a bunch of strangers'), accidentally wetting his pants in first grade, his first memorable, puzzling erection a year or so later, and how his mom had spanked him afterward. He didn't think the two were related, but he couldn't be sure. "Maybe more positive memories," Steph suggested.

"Dad used to tell me I was a quitter," Nils was saying, two hours later. "I quit four jobs in high school. I quit the football team because half the guys were assholes. I quit lunchtime Spanish club. There are forty-six books in our house I've never read, Claire. Forty-six. You've read all of them. I didn't make it to Grandma Clark's funeral. I'm a failure in so many ways. I feel like I've never stuck with anything except you, Claire. You're the only thing worth sticking by."

Steph noted the time and wrote, "Sweet."

"And Thor," Nils amended. "I've stuck by Thor." He went on a brief tangent of memories about the cat, charming particularities of its behavior. "Good!" wrote Steph. Smiley-face.

"But," the recording went on, "I'm still ashamed. If I'm being

really honest, Claire, I'm ashamed. Because I've had so many secret thoughts in my head. Do you ever wish we could know each other's thoughts, Claire? What would happen to the world if we could all be inside each other's heads?"

Steph yawned, a cigarette dangling from her left hand. It was the middle of the night but she couldn't seem to stop listening. Outside, crickets sang.

"The thing is, Claire," Nils went on, "you're so good. I've realized I'm not as good and I wish I could find a way to make it up to you. I know you don't sit there at the library checking out every guy who walks in but I look at girls all the time. I mean like all kinds of girls and women. I can't help it. Teenage girls, older women. I can't help but notice their bodies in their clothes. Sometimes I think about them later. And I know that's so hypocritical because I'm no Ricardo Lee myself [an action-movie star]. I've never even taken very good care of my feet. I should have made my feet look better for you. I should have lost weight for you, Claire. Sometimes I thought about it but I could only stick to a diet for, like, three hours. I have no self-control."

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Steph wrote.

"Sometimes, when we'd make love, Claire, I'd picture someone else. Rhonda Jones [a prominent Black actress]. Remember that movie where she had sex with Ricardo Lee? I would think about that a lot when we'd make love. Just the way her breasts bounced. I would picture them and it would help me, you know, get there." Steph felt her nose crinkle. "And sometimes I would picture your sister. Not Marla: Kate. When we went on that beach vacation to Ocean City I felt terrible because that was some of the best sex of our lives and I was picturing Kate in her orange bikini most of the time. You were always so self-conscious about your small chest but it never really bothered me. The only thing I really should have been feeling, every day with you, was gratitude. You know?" Nils was crying

now and Steph, at a loss, had turned to doodling swirls in the margins of her notepad. "That's the part that just kills me. Why did I waste any of you, Claire? You're precious to me. The only thing I ever should have felt was gratitude."

Steph clicked on the screen: there were still five hours remaining. She closed the computer. It was nearly time for her to go to work. She was going to be a mess. She had only four cigarettes left and she felt too sick even for coffee. She turned the shower as hot as she could, briefly pondered her own smallish breasts, washed her hair three times to get the smoke out, braided it down her back, changed into fresh clothes, and drove to work.

\*

## 5. Feedback

Nils waited two evenings, respectfully, before returning to the bench. "I didn't want to rush you," he said. He was composed, even a little eager, but slightly puffy through the face. He had freshly showered and shaved and was wearing a polo shirt, and the overall impression was that he had been sort of scraped, steamed, and stuffed. It made him look both less tired and more so at the same time. "I'm trying to look better for Claire," he explained. "I even brushed Thor." The cat did look sleek.

"Have you told her yet?" Steph asked.

"No. I'm waiting a little longer."

"That must be hard," she said, as if it were the only hard thing about the situation. When his eyes began to water she changed the subject. "Your recording," she said.

He brightened. "What did you think? I decided to call it The Confession. Because that's what it is. The truest thing I've ever told anyone."

“Yeah,” said Steph. “I think—I think you should definitely not give it to Claire.”

Nils’s face changed utterly with confusion. “What?”

“It’s just – I think you want to leave her with the best possible memories of you. With – with this,” she said, indicating his hair, his shirt. “These are the last memories of you she’s going to have for her entire life. I think you want them to be positive, you know?”

“But it’s the truth,” he said.

Steph made a small irritated sound. “Lots of things are the truth,” she said. “Think about Claire—”

“All I ever think about is Claire.”

“Apparently not,” said Steph, and then apologized. “You shouldn’t give someone a confession they can’t respond to. It’s – unethical. She’d be stuck with just your words here, and who knows exactly how she’d interpret them? Which ones she’d focus on? What if she doesn’t hear all the times you’re telling her you love her, and just thinks endlessly about the other stuff? Why do you need to confess, anyway? I hate to break it to you, but nothing on this recording is that bad. It’s just – it’s just kind of inappropriate. You know?”

“But it’s the truth.”

“Yes, you keep saying that, but this is your marriage and your life, Nils. Do you really want it to be some kind of social experiment, or do you want it to be warm and loving and meaningful? Don’t shoot yourself in the foot here. You want – you want Claire to feel like she made a good decision with her own life,” Steph blurted helplessly. “That she made the best possible decision.”

Nils stood quietly a moment, seeming to shrink slightly into himself. “And you think she didn’t,” he said.

Steph felt a wash of shame. "That's not what I meant to say."

"No, I understand," he said, not accusingly, but as if reeling with the thought. He spoke slowly, almost as if in wonder. "When I expressed my truth, it became clear to you that I was not Claire's best decision."

How many ways, Steph wondered, am I going to be forced to hurt this man? "I think giving her this recording is not the best decision," she said. "I think *you* were probably a great decision."

He nodded to himself, his eyes brimming again. "Well, thank you for listening to it," he said. "And for your time. I know I took a lot of your time and energy. I feel bad about that. I took a lot of your emotional energy."

"Don't feel bad," said Steph, exhausted.

"It was really helpful to talk to you," Nils said. He began to shuffle down the street, looking defeated. Thor, gleaming like a tiny streetlight, followed. Then Thor stopped, and Nils stood two feet from Steph making encouraging kissy sounds, and the cat started up again. And then stopped. And then started, and then stopped. Nils tried to gaze up at a tree. I am going to actually die right now, Steph thought.

But she wasn't. Or, at least she didn't think she was.

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## 6. The Game

For the next few weeks, Steph was careful not to encounter Nils. She grocery-shopped on Saturday mornings, instead of after work, and she did not go outside during his walking hours. It helped that there were weeks of heavy rain, shining in intermittent sunlight, the gutters constantly steaming as if they breathed. It was not ideal weather for Thor to stroll in.

When her termination notice came, she was not surprised. She wondered, briefly, if Nils might have reported her, but her supervisor produced drone images: she and Nils smoking on the bench. There had been a brief investigation, agents sent to Nils's apartment. Loyally, unaware of the photos, Nils claimed that Steph had refused to speak to him outside of work and never had; Steph smirked at his sporadic attachment to truth. Her supervisor, noting her smirk, reminded her that there was nothing funny about being a Mortality Informant, and that was why it was necessary that she now seek another career.

"Maybe there's sometimes something funny about it," Steph said.

Her supervisor told her to pack up her desk.

\*

September 8<sup>th</sup> nagged at Steph on her wall calendar; her eye flicked to it again and again. When the morning came, hot and bright, she found herself unable to sit still. She circled want ads in the paper – low-paying jobs working with the disabled, or small children – and finally went for a run. She passed Nils's street but could discern nothing out of the ordinary; cars lined both sides, as always, and there didn't seem to be any more or less than usual. She found herself running faster and faster, the steamy air filling her lungs, her heart pounding frantically and ecstatically until it seemed to fill her whole chest and body and vision and mind. She reached a bench at a park half a mile away and bent over, gripping its metal back, nearly hyperventilating. Her mind was filled with an enormous, pulsing red. It bloomed and bloomed as if trying to push her eyeballs out. Steph dropped to her knees. The ground was muddy and gritty beneath them, pungent, slightly cool. The tiny rocks in it hurt. She tried to spit on the ground, but hit her own thigh.

"Miss?" an unfamiliar male voice asked. "Are you alright?"

She looked up.

“Are you part of The Game?” he asked. “Are you looking for John?”

It took her a moment to parse this. “No,” she said. “I’m not. I was just jogging. Just a little out of shape.” She added, with manufactured effort to pass the nausea, “Good luck with your Game!”

She wasn’t really out of shape, but the man took her word for it and politely moved on. Besides, he was looking for John. When Steph’s vision had cleared, she walked slowly toward home, hand on her cramping ribcage, small spots still dancing around the corner of her eyes. Just go lie down, Nils, she thought, as if she could send him a message with her mind. Just go lie down.

When she got home, she staggered, exhausted, into her tiny bedroom, laid on her back the bed, and balled her fists into her eyes. She was soaked with sweat, small pebbles spattering her knees like buckshot. She no longer had access to her work files, of course, but she imagined the notification that would have popped up: CASE CLOSED. Her chest tightened again and she rolled onto her side, reaching back to yank hard on her ponytail, a habit she had in moments of grief. It was almost enough to shock her out of any emotion, that pull, hard and fast.

She must have fallen asleep, because when she opened her eyes again the sunlight was slanted, descending. She sat up, clammy, rubbed the pebbles from her knees. Wiped her eyes. She would find a new job, buy groceries, call her mom. When she stood, she let out a small sigh, which sounded like *oh*.

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# New Nonfiction from Sari Fordham: “Mending”

Our pre-WWII house has two small bedrooms, a tiny closet in each. I feel virtuous when I fit my clothing into one, leaving my husband Bryan’s clothes to migrate between our daughter Kai’s closet and the hall’s. Once upon a time, an American family fit easily into this house. Perhaps they even kept a car in the garage.

I buy *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* by Marie Kondo with the intention of paring down my belongings to their essential. I donate and donate. I learn to fold my clothes into origami shapes, but the deeper lesson, to accumulate less, is a harder one to master. Never before in human history have so many beautiful things cost so little. We can’t seem to resist. When the poppies bloom, Kai runs out to pick the prettiest ones. She’s indifferent to their fates—a swift wilting in jam jars of water—because it is the acquisition that fills her heart with joy. I feel the same thrill when the dress I ordered arrives in the mail.

The actual cost is in Bangladesh, where the dress is sewn by women earning too little. Count also the water used to grow the cotton, the pesticides sprayed onto the plants, the insects killed by the pesticides, the dyes thrown into a river, the coal or gas powering the factory, the energy spent on transportation, the plastic the dress is wrapped in, the box used to mail it to me, the tree the box came from. The clothing industry accounts for eight percent of greenhouse

gases.

When my favorite pair of jeans gets a hole, I fold them into an origami rectangle and perch them in the back of the drawer. Jeans are the staple of my teaching wardrobe, but I draw the line at worn out knees. One must have standards. I would toss them, but they have been kind to my post-baby body.

Enter mending and Sashiko stitching. Without the stunning picture—white circles stitched onto navy fabric—I wouldn't have clicked on the how-to article. In the *Little House* books, Mary mended, while Laura explored the prairie. I never wanted to be Mary. Yet here I am, intrigued by the artistry and simplicity of fixing your own clothes.

I borrow a book on visible mending from the library, and Bryan volunteers a pair of his old jeans for the patch. When I invite friends to a mending party, they're enthusiastic. Mending! How quaint! They do not, however, bring clothes to fix—because who mends anymore?—but they bring other tasks and we talk and laugh and when everyone leaves, I'm still mending. I'm enchanted with my progress, which is slow. When the patch is finally finished, the jeans look better than they did when they were new. The stitches travel boldly across one leg and are visually interesting. The reward circuit of my brain, the one activated by pretty things, is pleased with this outcome. More pleased, even, than when buying something new.



Mended socks, by Sari Fordham

I become the house mender, a position I hadn't realized our family needed. I fix the hole in Kai's sweater and then embroider a heart on it. When the dog chews our couch cushion, I announce that I can mend it. The couch is brown, and I first sew as much of the tear together as I can with matching thread. Then I use red fabric for the patch, and red thread to sew it into place. I am satisfied with my choices, which is

fortunate since the dog chews another hole in the couch. He does this five times before we wise up and buy bitter tasting spray. Then, I mend the hole the dog chews in Kai's bedspread. I mend Kai's stuffed snail. I mend Bryan's shirt. I mend a second pair of my jeans. I mend my sweatpants. And then, I get serious: I start darning socks.

I have purchased a vintage Speedweaver on eBay and wonder aloud if mending is just another excuse to buy things. "If you use it, it's not," Bryan says. The 1950s Speedweaver is a tiny loom that makes darning faster and more aesthetically appealing. Though measuring quickness is relative. "I don't know why it's called speedy," Kai says. "If it were really speedy, it would work like this," and she makes gestures that remind me of an electronic typewriter.

"It's okay to be slow," I tell her.

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I'm darning at a time when humanity has both slowed down and gotten busier. The pandemic has arrived in the United States. Everyone I know is baking bread. I repair socks. I have a pile with holes. In the evening, hands busy with darning, I call my friend Youngshil in South Korea and we first gossip about old friends and then we sit with our fears. What do you say? Well, we say a lot. We compare our worries and the responses of our respective countries. "After this is over," she says.

"Yeah," I say. "You've got to come visit."

When I hang up, I feel hopeful, grounded by a web of connections. It's the same web that makes things like viruses spread faster and the planet heat up. Connectivity is vice and salvation. Bryan and I have joined our local branch of 350.org. We're learning the granular details of legislative bills, making phone calls, writing letters, meeting representatives, and amplifying the efforts of environmentalists in other places. If the Earth is to avert

disaster, systems must transform. Climate change is a global problem and we can only fix it together.

I repair a hole in the heel of my sock and understand how trivial my efforts are. Okay, do this because it feeds your creativity. Do this to remember the nobility of small things. I thread the needle again, and pull the thread through the colorful fabric of my sock. I tell Bryan that I'm preparing for the apocalypse, and without irony, he nods.