

Rivka Goodman's Deaths and Birth

Margo just happened to be on the internet when the banner announcing Rivka's death tracked left across her screen. It was posted on Facebook by Rivka's subculture of Rune specialists, Tarot readers, general mystics, and therapists.

Margo re-posted it to her subculture of readers, gamers, and writers. She introduced the news with her own perspective: *I am frozen with grief. I am speechless. Rivka Goodman has transitioned from this world.* Next, she included a poem of her own, unpublished as yet, in tribute. She made sure to tag and hashtag every keyword she could think of, knowing that #wizard would draw the most people other than Rivka's name. Margo was, in truth, frozen and speechless.

Losing Rivka was like losing an organ in her body. They hadn't seen each other since Rivka had turned down Margo's yearly invitation to Thanksgiving dinner. Rivka's ex-partner-now-roommate Zadie wanted to celebrate with lesbians, not an eccentric semi-hetero-normative family, and whereas Margo understood this, they'd had a tradition of sorts and she hadn't yet gotten over the rejection. But she still loved Rivka.

She had to admit, the response to her post was surprising. Overwhelming, actually. The largest response she had ever gotten to a post of hers on social media. Ever. People from Greece, from China, from New Zealand, from Far Rockaway, responded, keening and kvelling in brief, grammatically correct outbursts. And they loved her poem.

Margo wondered if there were a way to herd their names somehow, so that this link between them, Rivka, might always be kept as live as a wire, around and around the world until they too were gone. But in the

By
Darrah Cloud

meantime, they would share their work, read each other's books, gain more audience and friends and likes. She sat in glory and astonishment watching the numbers mount over the next few hours, unable to leave her computer.

Around 5 p.m., she thought perhaps enough time had passed that she could now text Zadie, and tell her how badly she felt. How hot the tears, how she had sobbed for hours, which she had, how devastated she was, which she was. Rivka had always been her most surprising friend. A six-foot-three talisman of a woman to walk with through the city, a famous writer whom no one recognized, who could have decked any assailant with one blow. And, as a matter of fact, she had. There had never been anyone like Rivka. Her books were completely original, speculative, thrilling. The loss to the world was immeasurable. Life was so much less now. Margo posted that too.

Around 9pm, Zadie finally texted her back. She heard the chime as it came in, and grabbed her cellphone where it lay on the bedtable: slowly, letter by letter Zadie wrote:

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'R-i-v-k-a-i-s-n-o-t-d-e-d'

Fuck! Margo cried out. She sat up in bed in horror. What in the world would she say to the world now? How would she ever have any credibility again? Letters were forming words again:

'She right here o morphine I red hr yo post.' Margo closed her eyes and waited for what to say. "Did she like it?" she finally texted back.

'She says uhh,' Zadie responded.

Margo didn't think that Rivka sounded alive.

Margo did not wish she were there, with the two of them, in their living room, looking out the picture window at the brambles marking a deep ravine. You went in the side door of their house. You looked out the front window at the back yard. Their kitchen was really the hall to their bedrooms. Margo had never been that far in.

But she went. She put on her green velvet skirt and her red Mexican vest and all her sterling goddess symbols and her sacred purple Birkenstocks with aqua socks, got in her silver Prius, and went. Their house was set down a slope off a loud highway in a rust-belt upstate town, an



unlikely place for a literary icon to live. Zadie welcomed her in, having heard the tires crunching the gravel in the yard. She didn't whisper in respect, she yelled, so loudly Margo jumped:

"Rivka! Margo's here!"

And indeed, there she was, in the living room, lying in a rented hospital bed in front of the picture window to the thorny overgrowth, eyes closed, her hair replaced by a violet cloche, her huge, bony face turned toward the light. Margo sat down in a chair beside her and picked up her large, manicured hand with its red lacquered nails and rings that were all mystical symbols.

Rivka did not open her eyes. But she did seem to nod. Re-runs of *Monk* were playing beyond on the wide-screen TV in the corner of the room.

"Someone posted online that you were gone," Margo said to her lovingly. "I brought all the comments to read to you. If that's all right."

She waited and thought she saw an eyelid flutter.

"OK. Well the first one is from someone in Sri Lanka named Anaruke Dissanayaki." Margo cleared her throat. "I met her at the Alpha Institute and will never forget her lecture on the spiritual origins of Goth. She changed my life."

Rivka sighed. Margo took it as a sign and went on.

"This one is from Reverend Cindy, in Ballmer, Tennessee. 'Rivka and I were on a panel of experts on pagan non-binary ritual practices in ancient Knoxville. I will never forget her.' From Paul Augustine Simkins of Moosejaw, Canada: 'Rivka's books were my lifeline as a child. Without them, I would have walked out into the snowfall one night and been found there frozen in the morning by my father who hates me.' Here's one from Chicago: 'That Rivka Goodman's second book, *Legion of Cthorodor*, remains in the annals of academia is a mystery as it was deeply flawed—' Oh, forget that, he's at Yale trying to get tenure. Here's one, with a picture of you: 'Rivka Goodman signing books at the Festival Oculito in Fortaleza, Brazil. I bought three and had them all shrink-wrapped open to her signature and put them on my mantle. Then I stole them from the library so I could read them.'



Margo thought Rivka was choking. She panicked and leapt up, but Zadie pushed her back down in the chair.

"She's laughing, not strangling," she said in her driest, most critical voice, implying that Margo was an idiot. "That's all she can take for today. Come back— no one cares about me in all this!"

Margo looked at Rivka, quiet now, asleep. She left out the side of the house and spun her tires in order to merge into the high-speed traffic above.

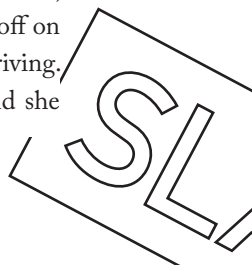
Margo dreamt that night of the archangel Raziel, whom she had never heard of. So young and so exquisitely delicate and beautiful, he was writhing in the grip of monstrous pain and for some reason, she knew, she just knew how to free him from it. And so she shed her clothes and took his body into her arms and then she moved on top of him. She took him inside her and they bucked and bucked until, in ecstasy and union, they came together and mended the world.

Margo was too deeply mortified by her dream to tell Rivka or anyone else about it the next day. Another re-run of Monk was on. She seemed to be watching it. But Margo couldn't help going to the side of the rented hospital bed and interrupting to ask her if she'd ever heard the word "Raziel." Her gaze shifted from the TV to Margo and without a beat she said, "He's the angel closest to God. He's fallen because he preferred earth to heaven and gave magic and wisdom to human beings. The angels condemned him but God forgave him."

Margo kept visiting. Each time, Rivka seemed sunk a little further into the bed, her face a little more hollow, but she roused and greeted her, then fell back to sleep to the voice of Tony Shalhoub solving crimes.

Once, Rivka asked about the shirt Margo was wearing, a Chicago Cubs 2016 World Series Commemorative T, a talisman from her origins. She stared at it as if it held some mystical secret for her. Margo asked if she had a team, and had to bend down to hear her say, "the Mets."

Margo was flying down 9G from Mother Earth's Health Food Store, where she had picked up some detox tea when the text alert went off on her phone: "Come now. Rivka last breath." Yes, she read it while driving. Only then did she slow and pull over into a precarious ditch. Did she



want to see Rivka in this all-time ultimately weakened state? All her illusions about her superhuman strength and ability to see into Margo's soul shattered by hollowed cheeks and labored breath?

She pulled back onto the road and let the car make the decision. It drove to Rivka's house.

Margo took her Birkenstocks off at the door and padded into the living room, where two tarot readers, one all in turquoise, one all in purple, and a hospice nurse in blue jeans and rubber gloves were gathered around the bed. *Monk* was playing on silent on the corner TV. Margo heard Rivka breathing—it sounded like a train going through, like thunder, like the roots of life being torn like an oak upwards from the ground. She stepped up to Rivka's side like the others and did what they were doing—put her silly, useless hands on her leg and tried to believe they had power. They stood like that for what felt like hours until Rivka's breath became heaves, then gasps, then one long inhale, and stopped.

"She's gone," said the nurse, rhetorically.

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Zadie wailed. Margo felt like this was unnecessary—it wasn't as if this was a surprise she hadn't prepared for. Then she admonished herself for being judgmental and was glad she had kept it to herself. The hospice nurse packed up her gear immediately, whispered to Zadie, and fled the house.

The tarot gal in turquoise looked shocked: "I have so many questions!" she said.

"What should we do?" asked the one in purple.

Zadie stood frozen. "I'm to call the funeral home people," she said. "But I don't want them to take her away." She began wailing again. "I don't know what to do!"

Margo did not think before she spoke: "Do you think we should wash the body?" She had read about this. It happened in the classics. At Rivka's side, in unison, they all took one step back.

"Has anyone here ever done that?" asked the turquoise gal.

They all shook their heads. Not one of them had ever done such a

thing. A few of them had heard of friends doing it, but not the details.

"Maybe there's something on YouTube?" Margo offered, sensing her possible faux pas.

Everyone agreed that was a good plan. She drew out her phone and immediately, to everyone's surprise, found step-by-step instructions for washing the bodies of the dead. The internet was a lifeline, an umbilical cord, the collective unconscious. The purple gal shook her head in wonder, tears of gratitude in her eyes.

Margo looked for a place to set up the phone. Nowhere seemed right. The television was too far away, the side table full of medicines and water too low. The purple Tarotist finally jerked the phone out of her hand and propped it up against Rivka's cooling jawline, which cradled it perfectly in place. In the meantime, Zadie had gone and fetched a bowl of warm water and some washcloths. She handed one out to each woman. They lined themselves up on either side of Rivka, hands in the air.

"Ready?" Margo said. They nodded. Then Margo pressed the arrow and the lesson began.

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"With warm, soapy water, gently wash the body paying special attention to folds and wrinkles, to places you can't see," came a matronly voice from the phone. "Hold on!" Zadie cried. Margo clicked on pause as Zadie set her washcloth down and hurried back into the kitchen, emerging

seconds later with a bottle of Dawn. She squirted the Dawn into the bowl of water. Looked up to see the faces of her crew, aghast.

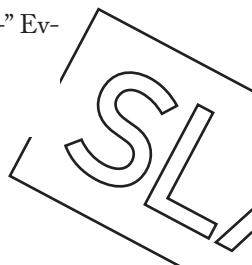
"They use it on seagulls!" she cried. Margo unpaused.

Step-by-step they followed the instructions of the midwife-looking woman on the video, each wiping down the section of Rivka before her.

"Gently!" the YouTube gal admonished. They all jumped a little. "Like a caress!" They each went back to the task, bothered by the admission. Margo felt such sadness as she guided her cloth over Rivka's skin. Why had she never touched her in such a gentle way before? Why only now, when only one of them could feel it?

"If the body is female, make sure you wash under the breasts—" Everyone stopped.

"Gently!"



No one moved. Rivka's breasts were an obvious amalgam of operations, each one to remedy the last, to create a more acceptable shape. Picking them up to wash under them would be tantamount to dusting a trophy, or making it dirtier, not cleaner.

"Don't forget to wipe under the arms."

The hormones Rivka had taken for over forty years had rendered her body hairless.

Margo pressed the pause icon, and they all worked in silence until it became apparent that there were places on the body no one wanted to touch without . . . permission. Margo pressed "play" again—

"between the legs—"

She practically swept the phone into the air as she whacked the pause button again.

No one moved. It wasn't that they were reluctant—it was just that this was a lot to take in, given what they were looking at: a litany of scars, a lifetime of changes, of pain and revision, so much revision. Rivka's neck bore the ravages of multiple surgeries for cancer, and her belly . . . it led to her beautifully crafted 1972 vagina, a gateway no one wanted to cross for fear of sacrilege. And there were her roots to think of, the orthodox Jewish family she'd been born into which her mother had escaped to a job as a librarian in Far Rockaway. Which counted more? What to do? Where, really, to begin this final cleansing?

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Margo felt manic, out of control. She saw her hand move forward and start to trace Rivka's scars and she followed them with her washcloth and then others did the same. They followed the scars over her belly and down.

Some of the scars were ropery, rising from her skin in hard trails. Some were more like ditches, seemingly dug. Often, they ended abruptly, but they formed a kind of interconnected story, a serial journey.

Finally, Zadie sighed. She put her hand under Rivka's right leg and lifted it up, and washed between her legs, a place only Zadie had ever been. In her hands it was not a violation. This is what it had taken for Rivka to become who she was destined to be. They traced the map of her life of scars and in the end, she was clean, so clean, and they stepped



back and covered her with a new sheet Zadie brought out, that smelled like Tide.

All her life Margo had wished for a divine experience in order to believe in something, to feel better about herself, and here it was. But instead of bliss, she was full of loathing and sorrow and terror at having to go on living without Rivka. She so wished she could keen.

Zadie made the call to the funeral home, and they all sat down to wait. It had been back-breaking work. Their arms were heavy. Their backs spasmed. Someone made tea. It smelled like new-mown grass.

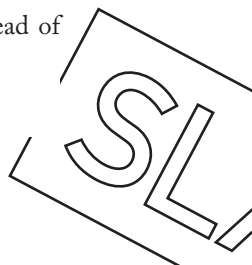
Margo held her cup and let it warm her hands, and looked out the window of Rivka's living room at the gully and the trees just coming to life again. Rivka was going to miss spring.

The threat of rain now felt more like a promise. A hawk swept down from a budding oak and landed in a budding maple. Margo remembered hawks being central to some of Rivka's books, always appearing as witnesses and carrying advice. She reached for Rivka's hand and held it absently, sipping her tea.

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She wished they were driving in her silver Prius up the Taconic, over 90 to 91 then 89, to the small progressive college where tenure was a colonial construct and they'd taught together for years, and Rivka never planned her classes and lectures and keynote addresses but faced them extemporaneously and was brilliant, and everyone loved her.

She wished her Prius were a long silver rocket with huge feathered wings. That the road was a sunbeam and the college located on a forest-covered asteroid that orbited the Earth in safe green bliss, and everyone lived forever there and traveled to the planet only to fix crimes against the LGBTQ, taking only the forms of Viking goddesses with superpowers in a complicated plot left open at the end for a sequel, the only thing old and familiar there the story Rivka always told about the time she was a boy in the stacks of the Far Rockaway Library after school, down the road that led to Gatsby's dock, reading every subject he could reach while his mother worked at the desk, the whole world ahead of him, and he could become anything, anything he wanted to be.



Homecoming, Love Story.

She smoked cigarettes for the look of it, a look I didn't understand. But the tobacco smell was bearable, even in our apartment, and her black cherry perfume softened its blow into a smoky incense. She had a little pear-shaped dish that she used as an ashtray and kept in our bedroom. It wasn't supposed to be an ashtray, and it was ugly—*God*, it was ugly. Bright candy green with little brown cracks running through the ceramic that stained deeper with use. Maybe I would have liked it more if she had used it for what it was supposed to be—for trinkets or jewelry or loose change. In every aspect, it should have been unpleasant. But in our home, with her cigarettes, it was lovely.

By
Molly Stinson

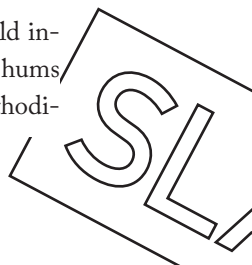
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I didn't like that she smoked, but if there was anyone who could make it look good, it was her, with little crimson lipstick stains on the filter when she pulled away in an exhale. I was never really one for smoking. *Shit runs in the family*, that was my canned excuse when they were offered. In my hands, cigarettes reminded me of my father's browned teeth and rank breath. In her hands, they were pretty. Her hands made things pretty.

I'm able to make it to the store after work for the first time this week. Some things had taken longer than I thought they would and made it so that something I want to savor, something that should have its own day, has to be rushed.

It was childish, but I just want to be home before sunset.

I choose a red background for the tag through the machine's old interface and watch through the scratched plexiglass as the machine hums to old life. The piece of metal clicks into place and lasers begin methodi-



cally sliding over the tag's surface, spelling out the name I had chosen in all capital letters. When the little thing falls from the receptor and into the palm of my hand, it's still slightly warm.

I buy a polka-dotted collar at the counter.

When I wasn't working, I was with her and her friends and her friends' friends until I couldn't remember it any other way. Late nights under lamplight, card games and too many drinks. I had fallen in love with everyone she kept around her, every piece of her.

I had liked Emmett from the beginning. He was tall and lanky and sloppy, too much hair and untied shoelaces. He wasn't around much, but I liked it when he was. They were childhood friends, inseparable in Halloween photos and Christmases. She would tell me the things he had her keep secret, things you only know about someone from sharing a lifetime with them, but she allowed *me* to know them, too. At parties he would lean into corners while we talked and pretend to be cool in the way we all do, and I would interlace my fingers in hers and take comfort in our secrets, how *I* knew that he was so in love with this girl in middle school that when she rejected him he cried openly in the hallway. How he wore glasses, Coke-bottle lenses, but was so embarrassed about them he would rather go through the world blind than look like a nerd—his words. She shared things about lives that I never had to be a part of.

Some people keep their childhoods locked away, wallowing in the loss of a prettier time that wastes away with every paycheck. There's a sick savor in the misery of knowing that one day, even your nostalgia will die off, but instead she told me that the two of them would play hide-and-seek and once he got stuck behind a clothes rod in her mother's closet and had to call out for help when no one could find him.

She shared this with me, even this.

These were the parties where she would extricate herself from my arms to slip out for a smoke and her friends would lean in with a smile and tell me

I've never seen her as happy as she is with you.

You both look so good together.

Of course we looked good together. She made everything so beautiful.

I had moved to the city only a couple of years prior, and the atmosphere was so different from my Middle America that knew me at eighteen and seventeen and sixteen and frankly that was something I was eager to get away from and now I was in a city, where I could go through a day without ever being talked to at all. It's a forced loneliness how people here remain perpetual strangers, refusing to acknowledge from some sort of senseless social construct that you pass the same people every day. But she had lived here so long that she had become a part of the city's microcosm, and had friends who had friends who had friends that she allowed to be mine through her. Coming from a place where *hello* was the start of the conversation instead of the end, everyone in the city felt like a missed opportunity, a failure on my behalf. She was my one accomplishment.

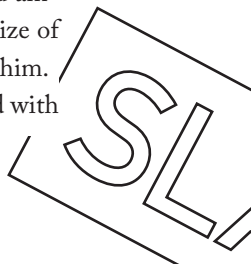
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The animal shelter has nailed a little golden bell on a string to the top of the entry door, and it lets out a pathetic ring as I enter, alerting a woman at the desk. "Hi, I'm Sarah, I think we talked over the phone."

She springs into action once she recognizes my voice. I take the papers and pen from her hands and begin filling out my information. "We just bathed him, so he's all fresh and clean for his new home! I'll be right back, let me go get him." She disappears down a hallway and a few minutes pass before I hear the kennel unlock and tiny claws click across the linoleum, a thousand excited taps scampering toward me. I kneel down in anticipation, the door opens, and the mutt barrels towards me in fearless excitement. He buries his muzzle in my hands, licking, barking, nipping, excited to see me like he knew I was coming.

All earlier frustration and tension dissolves in my chest when I look at him. It didn't matter to me what breed he was, but he's soft and amber-colored and when he curls into my lap in the car, he was the size of the baseball cap I wore back in high school. She would have loved him.

The attendant continues chattering as she sets a small crate filled with



toys and a bone-patterned blanket beside me in the passenger seat, but hesitates when she sees the center console open between us.

"I hope you'll smoke outside. Cigarettes are very harmful for dogs' lungs."

Her wrinkled nose and frown echo the same distaste I feel for the thing. I follow her eyes to the small cardboard box, wrapped in plastic, resting on its side. I place a hand over it.

"I don't smoke."

We didn't really have bad days, the two of us. There were the quiet days, where she and I would both lie in bed and watch the ceiling fan spiral and sway. Our bedroom had become a mini museum of her life. She opted to collect things instead of buying decorations, and so the ivory walls were covered in stickers from fast food orders, ripped subway posters, and concert ticket stubs. Poems had been scratched with terrible handwriting on paper napkins. Dried flowers were suspended on dental floss and hung from the ceiling like a mobile, turning softly in the man-made breeze. She laid her shoes next to mine, her Converse that were so worn through that when she wore them, her polka-dotted socks poked through little holes in the front of the rubber. There was one massive window in the apartment and the panes of glass stretched almost from floor to ceiling. It faced west, and when the sun set behind the silhouette of the neighboring building, rays of light would hit the glass suncatcher that I had bought for her when we first met and send a scatter of Technicolor across us.

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There, on my back, with her next to me, was the closest to heaven I've ever gotten. She shines like an old film star through the lens of my memories, hazy and soft in old conversations.

Some memories have sharpened with hindsight.

Mid-December, when she rolled over into me for warmth. She always ran a little colder.

Hey, she had murmured into the crook of my neck.

Mmm? I was almost asleep, but she pulled her head from me, mussing

her hair against the fabric of the pillow. Her mouth broke into a small smile as sleepy eyes met sleepy eyes.

Emmett's girlfriend made him watch another shitty movie.

Oh, yeah?

Yeah. She laughed. *He said it was this old noir film. A detective chased this girl across the world to protect her and fell in love with her, only to discover that she was the mastermind behind the crime he was supposed to be protecting her from.*

Spoilers, much?

She giggled, nodded, and let out a wide yawn, her mouth opening into a languid, red O. *Do you think we could watch it together sometime?*

I ran my fingers through the tangle of her hair. Yeah.

She would talk about anything and everything in her past, but she never asked about mine, and for that, I was grateful. It gave me an excuse not to talk about the buckshot road signs and every Sunday morning I was ashamed of.

180 Instead, I would talk about the future. What we were going to have for dinner. *Let's have everyone come here this weekend. We can host, I'll cook.* Us, our future. *I think we should get a dog, a little one, for our little apartment.* I brought up marriage once—only once—and I learned from my mistake.

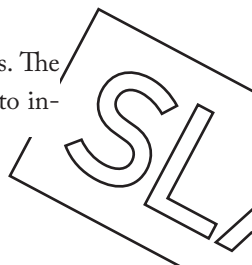
Why would you change something so good, why do we need another label? She wasn't interested. *Marriage is a jinx.* Her responses were as canned as my refusal of cigarettes.

I didn't mind. I knew you loved me.

But the quiet days were the ones I liked the most. After work, to lie beside her and watch the sunset. I preferred to be quiet, to let her presence, let *us* seep into me. To feel like *I* was something special, just by nature of being with her. I imagine that if there is a heaven up somewhere, the clouds would look like the ones that came from her lips.

But my god doesn't lie and angels don't hide text messages.

I've always hated being in my car, my padded gray cell on wheels. The static from the radio makes me nauseous and I never got around to in-



stalling Bluetooth because it felt gross to listen to our music in my father's car.

I drive a 1999 Mercury Tracer in toreador red, bullfighting red. It was new when I was little, and took me to church and school and birthday parties, but it's beyond old now. My father gave it to me after it crapped out on his commute to work—the first of many times it would fail—and he decided that it wasn't good enough for him, but still good enough for me. It drives short distances well enough, which was all I needed, and was too expensive to replace and too necessary to get rid of. Besides the face in the mirror, it is the only thing that I've kept from my childhood, although if I had a choice, I wouldn't have kept either. It was only a tool, but still, it always feels like my childhood shuttles me from place to place, new town to new job to new town. But I'm done moving now. I've found something to stay for.

The puppy rearranges his legs in my lap, snuffling against my jeans, and I run a hand over the soft fur behind his ears.

We'll be home soon.

He's tired. So am I.

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You can imagine how I felt back then when I came home early to see his sneakers on the floor in front of our bedroom, left like an offering. You can imagine how I felt to see his coke-bottle glasses on our nightstand, the one she had bought in a flea market on vacation. You can imagine how I felt when I opened the door and I saw her, bare and secret all at the same time, and him, long limbs and wild hair.

She had seen me at the same time I had seen her, and had tried to chase me down, naked and slipping on the hardwood. All the crying and *sorrys* and *sorrys* and *I'm so, so sorry* because there's nothing else you can really say, is there, when you've been cornered like an animal and you're begging for your life back as the scene unfolded in front of me and translated all of our memories into a language I didn't understand, in my home, in our home.

I really was so sorry.

AB

But what was sicker was just how careless she was. In my home, they had left his shoes out for me to see, bragging. They had left two half-eaten apples on the counter and someone had started to cut one and gave up part way through and left the knife beside it, too lazy to hide their greed. They didn't care at all.

But I can see now that I was lucky that everything died the way that it did. Since then, I've been able to pull it all apart in my mind, dissect the betrayal, and find some solution to it that didn't have me hating you, because I couldn't hate you, but don't worry.

I don't hate you. I understand now.

She would try to find someone else who would put up with her shit, her lying and whoring and infidelity. She might have tried to find it in him. She would have stolen away all of your things in our apartment and left me alone with the walls and my festering and my rot.

But I was lucky, because I had never been in love with the person that I saw that day, fetal position on the floor at my feet, every bone of her spine bared to me in apology. An apology for being caught. An apology for being sloppy.

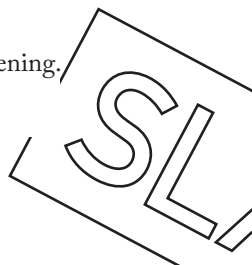
I was lucky, because you would never have done that to me.

The flowers, the cigarettes, they would never have done that to me. I know that.

You would never have fucked him in our bed, the pear ashtray, the polka-dotted socks, the red lipstick, *you* would never have fucked him. Not you, broken-in Converse and black cherry perfumes and hands that made me pretty when you touched me. You, the flowers and you, the poetry that touched me.

She tried to take it all from me, move out in two days, because *she* already had a place ready. She tried to rip my life from me and leave little pieces of tape and thumbtacks in our walls, *our* walls, after she tore down everything we had made. She refused to talk to me when I tried to put us back together over and over again and lie and tell me that *it wasn't worth it*, and that *there was nothing left worth saving between us*.

She brought cardboard moving boxes into the house the same evening. You were



the one who left our suncatcher hanging.
She was rash and ignorant and destructive.
You left the knife on the counter.

My key slides easily into the lock it was made for, and from behind me, our new dog scampers through the doorway, into his new home. I'm juggling too much so I drop the crate as soon as I can and place the key into the pear dish that I've kept beside the door, a shrine to you, on a small entryway table. I've scrubbed it and soaked it and scrubbed it and it still smells like smoke but I put my keys and some change in it.

"Come here," and the little animal *huffs* at me as it runs back, overwhelmed with the new space and all the smells, but he's obedient as I fasten the plastic buckle behind his neck. The little tag glimmers in the light. The capital letters bother me, though. It's aggressive looking, yelling itself at me. It's uncharacteristic. He was never aggressive, even in the end.

I slip off my shoes at the door and leave them there, and as I make my way across the apartment towards our bedroom, the sun begins to set on the cliff's edge of the neighboring building, drenching the rooms with a liquid gold light that I can feel in the bare skin of my feet, my arms, my chest. I slip out of my dirty clothes and gather them neatly. I fold them, smooth them, set them down onto the bench at the foot of our bed.

You remain where I left you.

The suncatcher flicks an iridescence over the skin of your face, moving across the perfect arch of your brow, the perfect bridge of your nose. Your lips. I'm not as good at applying lipstick as you were, but I'm getting better. I can follow your outlines.

You still smell like black cherries as I crawl into you, soft and lovely beneath the covers. You're cold, but you always were, and it's indescribably good to be able to warm you and I wrap you around me and your hands absolve the sins of mine. Your skin on my skin and so close, so carnal, and it's wet and we're indistinguishable and I *sigh* because we're beautiful again.

They'll find him eventually. I'm not sure how much time we have,



Molly Stinson

he was over six feet of skin and bone and shit. One dog can only eat so much. But I forgave him for that betrayal and I'll forgive him for this one, too.

Because when they find us, they'll find us together, and they'll love us. They'll see all the things I see in you, and they'll love me, too. They'll smile and say all the things like

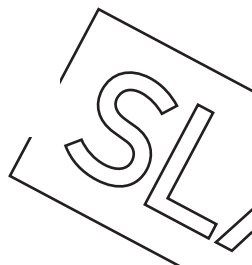
you look so good together and

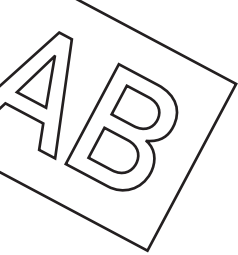
I've known her forever and honestly I'm just so glad she's found you and

I can't imagine you two apart and

all the things that I know and they see about us but for now, it can be just us, my hair in your hair, my hands in your hands, my body in your body, inseparable, like I know you would have wanted.

We let EMMETT find his own remains.





Words

I keep finding words in my hair, my teeth
—*exquisite, bicycle, tightrope*—
in the corners of my rooms,
in the cupboards and between the cushions
—*affogato, gaslight, appalling*.

Even in the forest,
a word will float to the crunchy floor
in its best imitation of a leaf
—*encyclopedia*—
and the ants and chipmunks
are soon stepping on it.

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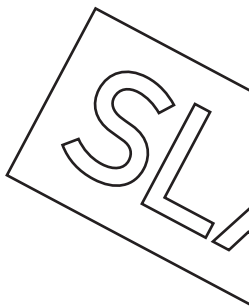
In a book, of course,
there are all the expected words
but also the ones that skitter out of sight and
off the page too fast for me to read
—*barman, flicker, auditor, grist*.

At a concert I attended there were words on the chairs
—*Tudor, plastic*—
and circling above the singer's head
like pilots waiting for instructions to land
—*quantum, activist, whipped cream*.

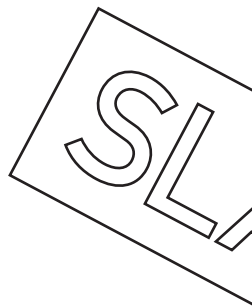
Once I found a word embedded in ice,

no, not in a stream or a lake
but the motel ice machine—*exultant*—
and when I returned to my room,
more words were draped on the spread.

I tried to peel thank you from my cheek
but hooked *bowl* and *chatter*,
dug in my pockets until I found *twenty*
and left it on the dresser.



Part of My Life Breaks Away at 40mph



By tile shop where I once sought a 1950s green,
I feel a quantum bump, cross an unsewn seam.
In rearview blue glare of her fridge, doctors

repeating *nothing wrong*.

All that caretaking, ten years—gone. How to match
an antique tile with something lodged unwept
in my lower lid? Perplexed clerk,

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flipping pages, *no, no, no*.

This new world I enter deceptively known.
Traffic arrow at Ardsley Road, called
Breakneck Hill for equine fates a century ago—

blinking, I agree *no, no, no*.

What must be left ungrieved. Sometimes
a glossy fruit requires a tender squeeze.
Salesman looks up and we say it. *Avocado*.

{ Ann
Cefola