Red Wheelbarrow

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The Editors:

[Ariel “I Can Handle This” Foy]

[Lena “February Will Eviscerate Me” Rollenhagen]

Believe these pictures speak for themselves.
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Prelude
[Emily Hittner-Cunningham]

It took me until elementary school to learn that my taste in music was very unusual for a child. It was the first time I was at an American school, surrounded by American children. While my classmates listened to pop singers like Britney Spears, I had spent my entire childhood surrounded by and in love with classical music. I use the term broadly, to encompass Baroque before the Classical period, and Romantic after it. Cheap rush tickets to the Lyric Opera in Chicago that came a few times a year were a cause for great excitement, both because it meant spending the fifteen minutes of intermission staring up at the glamorously dressed adults and eating expensive chocolate and also because it was an evening of Mozart or Bizet. More than performances, I loved the CDs that were so often playing in our living room because I did not need to sit still. I cannot understand people who can keep from dancing in their seats while listening to Beethoven.

For symphonies I prefer the drama of Mahler to the almost mathematical feel of Baroque, but for my own instrument, the cello, there can be no competition against Bach. After all, no solo compares to the prelude of the first Bach cello suite. It’s a cliché, of course, played by every cellist who does not give up after the first few years, the piece that you can never drop from your repertoire. If I play cello around friends, they invariably ask if I know it. Until recently, the answer has been “no.” My former cello teacher, a wonderful but entirely insane man, was utterly dedicated to W. H. Squire and only taught me a gigue from the Bach suites. It is a bouncy, light piece, without the melancholic feel of so much of the suites. It’s a very personal undertaking, to learn these suites. They were copied down by Bach’s wife and we don’t have any of the originals. She copied them down without any markings of dynamics or bowings, and so it is up to the person playing to choose what to make of it stylistically, and it’s a wonderful freedom. Every edition published has bowings and
dynamics, but since they are the editor's and not the composers, most feel at perfect liberty to ignore them. I decided this recently once and for all that I should learn them, all of them, and so of course I started at the beginning.

There is a reason why this piece is played by every cello student across the country, why no cellist one ever lets it drop from their repertoire, why it is such a wonderful cliché. It must be played because beauty is infectious and a child standing with a slightly battered case, standing stunned and unnoticed will watch their teacher play this prelude, eyes closed, fingers twisting and flying. It creates a desire to learn, a desire for practice to achieve this height of music. My former teacher, an old man with white hair and a soft accent that I could never place would play music pieces from memory before my lessons, not so much to say "Look at me, look at what I can do" but "Perhaps one day you will do this." He laughed at his students, made fun of them, pushed them harder perhaps than they should have been pushed, but he also instilled in all of us a burning desire to exceed his expectations, to make him proud. He understood the nature of music, understood that it is a thing best taught by osmosis, and so he played for me, played with all his passion and all his joy.

While the opening strains especially sound deceptively simple – repeated notes, open strings – the piece is difficult to play and very, very difficult to make beautiful. The notes are required to soar as they are in no other piece of music for the cello because no other is so well known, so perfectly set in the minds of listeners. You think of this Prelude and you think of Yo-yo Ma, playing, you think of each note perfectly in tune, the lengthened low and high notes made resonant with a delicate vibrato. You think of perfectly controlled bow movements and long slurs. This piece is precise, it is technical, but it is also the kind of music with the power to rob you of breath.

It's so well known that people hardly ever really listen to it anymore. I realized when I started playing it how much I have taken it for granted. It has been stuck in my head because of my practice (the perfect Yo-yo Ma version, of course). There is
something physical about listening to this piece. The perfectly measured bars feel like a lullaby, the even and gentle strokes of practiced hand. Those first measures seem to pull you backward into a thick, comforting darkness, but it seizes up and contorts. The patterns begin to break, the notes reach higher and lower. Ribbons of black muslin wrap around you and squeeze you into nothingness. You feel tossed from side to side, riding on the tilting bow as you go up onto the highest string and fly up the finger board with the cellist’s fingers feeling the mounting excitement to the climax and then a glorious release at those final strains and the ending chord with a vibrato on the two high notes.

But this is the idealized version. This is Yo-yo Ma. This is perfection that sends shivers through your body, from your spine to the tips of your fingers. This is not sitting in a claustrophobic room at night with sticking eyelids and cramped hands. It is not fingers turned tough and red at the tips that feel raw and vulnerable to the strings despite the toughness of the calluses built up over the years. It is not the struggle to make the bowing even on those first notes where the tempo is completely exposed. It is not the notes that won’t come out right no matter how often they are practiced. Sometimes, when I am playing the last line, I look down at my fingers, contorted to hit all the right notes for the string crossings (they must all be placed at the same time because there is no time to move them) and they look ugly, twisted and contorted as though arthritis had come to them years in advance.

Often and often and often I put down my cello a little too forcefully, swearing that nothing beautiful will ever come of it, and I curl up in bed and listen to the CD and then I get up again and practice because this is how you make something, this is how you approach that impossible ideal of the music – by practice. Everyone knows this, but we all tend to forget it a little when it comes time do the work. It is good to remind myself once in a while that everyone who plays it well has spent hours practicing. Yo-yo Ma is also human, though it is easy to forget. He, like all the great cellists, all the great musicians, can seem a little too distant and a
little too god-like to students. If you listen closely to a recording of him playing, you will hear, as you do with any cellist playing, the sound of flesh against wood, a solid yet soft tap. It is a reminder that the sound is real, that it was created by just another human. And so you practice, working so that you can play this piece, always knowing where to put your fingers but forgetting just how it is that the piece is supposed to be played. It is when you have achieved the level that is non thinking instead of unthinking that you are ready. Once you have practiced, once you have put in the time, you go out and you play and you make it look effortless, you make it look like anyone could do it, you make it sound as though you simply picked up the cello and this flowed out. The work is your secret.

I had an orchestra teacher who told me she used to rub the ends of her fingers against the edge of her music stand to work up her calluses. Though I’ve never done that, I often dig my fingernails of my right hand into the fingertips of the left or rub the lump of toughened skin on my forefinger against my lips. I fret over the peeling skin and regret having pulled it off as soon as I begin to practice, feeling clearly the increased rawness. Though all artists understand that beauty is linked to pain, it is dancers and musicians who understand it best. Ballet dancers remove their shoes to reveal bloody toes, constantly being covered with new layers of bandages. It does damage to the spine and to the legs, especially the knees. Hardly anyone dances professionally beyond thirty. Musicians experience the pain of sitting up straight for too long, holding up an instrument. They know the stiffness of fingers after too little or too much practice and of repetitive stress injuries that draw them away from their music, sometimes for life, but the pain is a necessary price to pay. It is a reminder of the cost and of the importance of beauty. If it were easy or painless to create, it would become cheap and common. As it is, the rarity of true art makes it precious.

No amount of pain can ever make me hate this most beautiful of musical stereotypes – the cellist playing Bach, because beyond the petty, selfish frustration
of the practice room, there is the music, music that feels ancient, as if it has existed
from the beginning of time, as if it came about of its own accord in the creation
of the universe but that never ceases to be new. Sometimes at night when there’s no
one but me at home, I turn the music way up so that the music fills up the house and
makes the walls and the floor under me shiver and I stand in the living room in a
kind of delirium. What do you do with music like this? What can you possibly make
of it? When it ends I’ll find myself a little on tiptoe, as though expecting it actually
to pick me up, lift me off the ground.

Behind the steady stream of irrelevant information and other tunes, heard
here and there, stuck in my head, this piece is always on my mind. It plays again and
again in loops and under the desk I play the notes against my right wrist, playing
along to the fantasy version, entirely aware that this is the only time my own playing
sounds like this, but it’s a lovely, lovely illusion. This prelude, for me, is a dream. As
I tap out the notes against my forearm, I can count beats, hearing the perfect math
of it to the point where it can seem like an etude and then I can hear the notes and
lose track of time signature, key signature, accidentals and bowings and fingerings
and simply listen because I can think of nothing: there is no poetry and no prose,
no music and no dance and no art, no snow covered landscape and no sunset and no
lake stretching out against the horizon that comes this close to separating me from
the earth I have loved and longed to leave because I look up and see the sky.
Brown is the color for a wedding day, an old woman once told me, as she wrung out swaths of russet fabric and hung them to dry on tree limbs that poked the jagged red Moroccan sky.

People will argue that white works better because it is clean and fresh without judgment or expectation. There are only the pink stains of roses, or the grains of sand caught in the hemming from a beach ceremony, and then later, yellow from years resting in a box placed high on a closet shelf.

Brown is neglected, she said, with no purpose or occasion to celebrate its rich warmth. Its vitality and power are not appreciated when the dirt anchors rainbows that forge chain links of color across a reflecting sky, sinking bright ribbons back into the ground, when the muddy earth and the strong tree trunks it births are brown with heavy feet and stretch years in wooden rings.

Brown is the color of the world's greatest scribe, she said, for dirt records everything in its broken stone kernels,
writing layers and layers of deaths and weddings and births,
and all of the colors that shade their footsteps.
I believed her because she looked
like she created the color brown herself,
with cacao beans for eyes
and skin made from clay she dredged up
out of the Ounila river to mold her Kasbah,
wrinkled and dry as tree bark
from the heat-deepened summers.
Rule Number 2 excerpt

[McKenzie Lee Will]

Cast of Characters

NURSE MARY early 30s
NURSE ELIZABETH early 40s
SALLI 16
IVAN 16

SETTING
Present day. Libertine Boarding School for the Gifted, a health clinic.

LIGHTS UP.

We notice a poster on the wall behind the opened Plexiglas window, it reads in bold, curly font,
RULES: 1. TEA AND CRUMPETS 2. AVOID LIABILITY 3. TUMS.
NURSE MARY and NURSE ELIZABETH are enjoying a spot of tea on the table behind the window. They behave and look much like the Stepford Wives - mechanical, with a permanent smile on their face, their hair perfectly coiffed, a chime to their perpetual cheerfulness. They are nibbling on crumpets and drinking tea throughout the play.
ELIZABETH. In actuality she had leukemia!
(They laugh.)
MARY. I swear it was just a common cold, but you never know with these students. A flu could be meningitis for all we know.
ELIZABETH. Did you give her Tums?
MARY. Of course I gave her tums -- but don’t blame the Tums, dear.
ELIZABETH. I don’t blame the Tums, of course not.
(SALLI has walked up to the window and is waiting, looking mystified. ELIZABETH and MARY finally notice her once they’ve composed themselves. They are smiling again.)
ELIZABETH. What can I do for you, sweetie?
SALLI. Uhh, I haven’t really been feeling good lately. I actually came in yesterday and
the nurse ... didn’t ... can I see someone?

ELIZABETH. What’s your name? SALLI. Salli Phillips? P-H-I-L-L-I-P-S.

ELIZABETH. I got it, thank you. Come on over to the examination room.

(SALLI and ELIZABETH head over to the examination room. SALLI sits uncomfortably in one of the chairs, looking around.)

ELIZABETH. Tell me what’s been feeling bad.

SALLI. I’ve been throwing up and having intestinal problems since the beginning of the month, and nobody ... I just want some answers. I’m really ... frustrated. I can barely eat anything.

ELIZABETH. I don’t know what to tell you. Have you been to the doctors yet?

SALLI. No, nobody has scheduled anything.

ELIZABETH. Well, let’s see. Have you been out in the sunlight a lot?

SALLI. Not really? Not especially.

ELIZABETH. Sometimes a lot of exposure to sunlight can cause your intestines to get irritated. Might cause some of your symptoms. What about beavers?

SALLI. What ... about beavers?

ELIZABETH. Have you come into contact or been around beavers lately?

SALLI. Um, no. No I have not.

ELIZABETH. Sometimes beaver feces can cause irregular bowel movements. Have you had your period yet this month?

SALLI. No, not yet.

ELIZABETH. Should I touch your breasts?

SALLI. Excuse ... me. What? No I don’t think that’s needed.

ELIZABETH. We’re all girls here.

(several awkward beats)

ELIZABETH. Well let me get you some anti-diarretics.

(ELIZABETH rummages around in a desk drawer, brings out a pill bottle. She pours a couple in KELSEY’s hand.)

SALLI. Um .. are you sure these are the right ones?

ELIZABETH. Yes? What’s wrong?

SALLI. These aren’t pills.

ELIZABETH. Oh, sweetie, you’re right. I must of made a mistake. Silly Nurse Geena with her jelly beans.
(They all share a bit of a giggle, SALLI’s looks a bit annoyed. ELIZABETH hands her different pills.)
ELIZABETH. There you go, should be all good.
SALLI. I just want this all sorted out.
ELIZABETH. Well if you want, dear, if you give us some stool samples we can send them to the lab. Sort everything out.
SALLI. I just want everything to make sense. I want to feel better and be able to eat dinner...
ELIZABETH. Well we don’t have stool samples so we can’t do anything.
SALLI. I’m going to class.
ELIZABETH. Good dear, good.
(Several beats. SALLI goes to leave.)
MARY. Have you been eating well lately, sweety?
SALLI. I haven’t. My stomach has been-

MARY. Of course, of course. I was only wondering. We’re suppose to wonder, you know. Especially when people are looking a little bit (beat) gaunt.
SALLI. Gaunt?
ELIZABETH. Thin. Too thin. Would you like some Tums?
MARY. Bye Salli.
(SALLI exits. ELIZABETH resumes herself at the tea table, lets out of a big sigh, as if she had just done a strenuous amount of work. IVAN enters with hobbling on crutches, his foot is broken, he has trouble opening the door, barely makes it through. ELIZABETH and MARY are in their own little world. He makes it up to the window and knocks on the Plexiglas glass. MARY and ELIZABETH look around a bit, finally ELIZABETH gets up and looks down at IVAN.
IVAN. Hi.
ELIZABETH. Hello.
(Several beats.)
IVAN. I need to be excused from my Ecology class next hour.
ELIZABETH. Hmm, well what seems to be the problem?
IVAN. It’s ecology class and I’m in a cast.
ELIZABETH. I’m sure I don’t understand. Your arms still work alright, don’t they?
IVAN. Yes ...
ELIZABETH. I’ve never taken ecology.
IVAN. Well it’s a field science, and we’re doing work today at the creek, so I need to be excused.
ELIZABETH. Name?
IVAN. Ivan Svensson.
(ELIZABETH finds his file with ease.)
ELIZABETH. Ivan Svensson. Well, that surprising. You haven’t seen a physical therapist?
IVAN. No, that’s right. My regular physician was the one who determined that I needed to be off my knee.
ELIZABETH. Well why didn’t you have him write you a note?
IVAN. He did. You guys should have it on record.
ELIZABETH. Oh. Yes, that’s probably right.
IVAN. Can’t you guys ...
ELIZABETH. Yes?
IVAN. Can’t you just excuse my absence? MARY. Who did you say your teacher was?
IVAN. I didn’t. Dr. Richards.
ELIZABETH. Dr. Richards. Let me ring him up.
IVAN. I just need a note.
ELIZABETH. Would you like some Tums?
(MARY is already on the phone. Smiles are still intact.)
IVAN. I honestly don’t see how Tums are appropriate...
MARY. Yes, hello. Can you redirect me to Dr. Richard’s office. (Beat) Yes, that’s right. (Beat) Thank you. (Several beats) Hello, Dr Richards. Hi. This is Nurse Mary down at the clinic. (Beat) Yeah, hi. I was wondering what your ecology class is doing today, I have one of your students in my office. (Beat) Oh. (Beat) Okay. Really? (Beat) Well that’s very interesting. Thank you. Have a good day. (to IVAN) Your field study was canceled, or rather, wasn’t planned for today at all. You must of made a mistake.
IVAN. I could of sworn ... I guess I should of confirmed with Dr. Richards.
ELIZABETH. Probably before coming in here. (to MARY) We see this a lot, we call it Math Test syndrome. They usually just fake the flu, but this one is extra creative. (to IVAN) Do you have a test today?
IVAN. I don't have the flu. My knee is-
MARY. Or an oral presentation?
IVAN. No.
ELIZABETH. Would be pretty difficult to do an oral presentation sitting down.
MARY. But not impossible.
IVAN. I'm ... thanks. I'm going to go to class now.
ELIZABETH. Good. You sure you don't want some tums?
MARY. See you later Ivan.
(IVAN exits as quickly as possible.)
MARY. Elizabeth I just ... realized ... The. Crumpets. Are. Gone.
ELIZABETH. What?
MARY. I just had the last bite.
ELIZABETH. The last bite? We have more don't we?
MARY. The last bite. No, no I checked. I checked already.
ELIZABETH. Settle down. Okay. Settle down. Let me run to the cafeteria and I'll see if they have any left. Okay?
MARY. What if we get another patient? I don't think I could handle another patient.
ANOTHER PATIENT ELIZABETH.
ELIZABETH. Mary, Mary this has happened before.
MARY. Not to me! Jacob is in the other room for goodness sake and we're out of crumpets. What if he starts screaming or...
losing his mind, or whatever psych people do?
ELIZABETH. Mary ... shh Mary, it's okay.
(ELIZABETH and MARY continue to look around, running their hands through their usually perfect hair, acting completely strange in their crumpet chaos. Finally ELIZABETH seems to procure some crumpets, hidden in the desk.)
ELIZABETH. Mary! Crumpets.
MARY. Crumpets?
ELIZABETH. Crumpets!
MARY. CRUMPETS
(LIGHTS DOWN.)
Je pense donc je suis

Pippa Adam [Pipe]
Bristlecone Pine

[Kelly Clare]

How does it feel
to be the oldest tree on earth?
Methuselah, your older brother Prometheus
was cut down thirty years ago, a martyr.
In this valley of ancients, we don’t know
which tree you are, no one will tell us.
They’re afraid you’ll be damaged, that people
will take a piece of your sacred wood.
Do you know you’re alone now
in your memory of tree rings?
You’ve lived for almost five thousand years
in white soil, rocky harsh against your roots.
You’ve been polished by ice crystals and sand,
until parts of you are glassy smooth.
Your heartwood is exposed,
the ends of your branches, dead.
Yet you’re alive, looking out
over a valley of your brothers and sisters,
all breathing, barely.
Is it their whisper we hear,
or just passing grains of sand?
A ribbon of bark remains,
stretching over your gnarled body,
proving you’re still alive.
It feeds a branch that produces
the occasional pine cone.
And you must know this, Methuselah:
we come here to see that, even on
the edges of ending,
something exists.
Our bleachers are in the middle left of the stadium and the afternoon sun has already burnt through my hair, blistering my scalp red. You hand me a sweaty can of beer and play with the hem of my shirt, looping your thumb around the dark fabric and rubbing the white fabric against your forefinger. You are in Rio for Carnaval on the same trip as I am. The night before we went to the parade in masks, drank, attempted to samba from our places, and fell onto the loud Norwegians in front, their noses and chins deep pink from Pinga and peeling from the sun. We squint our eyes, shade our foreheads with our hands to see if the players have jogged onto the field. The sweat pools in the creases of our elbows, armpits, and stomach folds as you explain your home to me. “In Mexico, you see, the cheap beer isn’t this expensive and in Oaxaca, the people are shorter. Short enough to see the game over them.” You are nineteen and speak slowly, your mouth too fast for your words. Across the stadium Botafogo fans pass their team’s flag forward on their fingertips to the front and back up again. The parents on the bleachers below give their two children green and yellow sparklers and light the tips off of their Dad’s lighter, before he uses it for his own cigarette. The two kids, brown from the beach, balance on their toes and twirl rings of smoke into the air.

You’re talking again. Your left hand is in your hair and your right hand comes down in a chop onto your knee to prove that this is serious. “The police” you say “are pendejos wey. Cabrones that caught me for cocaine but didn’t arrest me like real police with respect would.” Whatever language you spoke, you were always speaking Spanish at the same time, words sticking to the sides of your lips. Each language became your own because you could say nothing as well as you could in Spanish. You tell me the police took you to a bar. The kind with couples’ names etched into the stall walls and a sticky film of urine on the tile. There they snorted it off the sink and left you curled up under the counter. The story is over and I know that I shouldn’t try to rationalize or question because this story didn’t need to make sense. You turn to me, smiling, and trace your finger over my collarbone. “But in Mexico, girl, the food is too good. You would like it.” Below, the game has already started, but we drink too much to care about soccer—just the songs, which we switch to support whatever team is winning. The teams, Botafogo and Vasco, are both from Rio
but aren’t good. A group of college girls to our left in halter tops with flags tied around their thighs and arms share a bottle of straight Pinga, shimmying at the players. Your hand snakes around my hip and I close my eyes. My chin drops down and my brain seems to turn over, drunk, until it rights itself and I open my eyes. “You know in Mexico, I go to my friend’s, and I can watch him cut the weed for me. That is how much we want to trust each other. You would like it. I know you would.”
Clarifying butter for hollandaise,
for asparagus, for salmon, in summer.
Carefully ladling out the tiny bobbing eggwhites
with the shutters open and the blues moaning,
we have red meat and red wine and
there’s no other way to say it,
I feel like a stick of butter melting
down the hood of a red Corvette in summer.
I don’t care, I’d eat butter plain in bed
same as with a heel of bread and wine.
In the red-curtained room
the table is a long slab of oak.
The greens glisten with a sauce
which is milk, egg, lemon, pepper, a little fat
and the pale butter in a porcelain bowl to itself
is cream churned over an afternoon
with the shutters open and the blues moaning
in summer. Fat men at the long table
are laughing with brown spittle on their bibs:
the wine tonight has a body like Rita Hayworth,
and the shutters are open front and back
so the house is a wind tunnel and a breeze passes through.
In the gravy dish of hollandaise
sweet white oil bubbles come to surface
and parachute upwards out of the dish
to burst on the ceiling. The wine has come to a boil
but I can’t remember what it’s for. I don’t remember
making all this but on the long table there’s
steak, fish, chops, pasta with chorizo, a bowl of curdled cheese,
and the red curtains are flaring like sails in the wind.
"Sir, I’m sorry to tell you that you have the Illness.” Doctor Radivitch began to slip off one rubber glove, then seemed to think better of it, letting the elastic material snap back into place. He watched the excess caulk puff out at his wrist and was silent.

“The Illness?” Herman said. His voice cracked and he cleared his throat. Doctor Radivitch nodded. “Hmm...” Herman cocked his head to one side. He’d thought this part of his life was over, waiting in blindingly sterile doctor’s office, composing his face in a mask of subdued contemplation when the diagnosis was delivered. He’d never cried in a doctor’s office. Not even as a child. He thought of Angela and felt sick to his stomach. “Is it contagious?” he asked.

“Recent studies say no.”

“Do they know for sure?”

“The studies are very recent,” Doctor Radivitch said, clearly using his most compassionate voice.

“Okay,” Herman said. He stood up and reached out a hand to shake but Dr. Radivitch recoiled, sucking his underlip behind his rabbity teeth.

“I’d rather not if you don’t mind,” he said. “Superstitious.” He shrugged in apology.

“Oh...I understand.” Herman dusted his hands off on his pants. This was a movement he associated with his youth, when he used to climb out of the sandbox at the end of recess. Looking back on it, he was fairly certain he hadn’t made the motion in years.

“Goodbye,” he said. He stepped out the door of the office to find Ramona, Dr. Radivitch’s receptionist, bug-eyed and clearly eavesdropping. “Good evening Ramona.”

“Mr. Bunter! How nice to see you!” she said. Underneath her control-top pantyhose the blood in her varicose veins ran cold.

“So, I suppose you’ve heard.”

“...about what?” she asked, as if some other great revelation might have unfolded during the meeting that she missed, an infected bunion perhaps, or an absorbed Siamese twin.

“I have the Illness,” Herman said.
“Oh Herman,” she said, her voice chastising. As though he’d placed some heavy burden on her that she didn’t want to deal with. As though he’d asked for this terminal sickness.

“It’s true,” Herman said. He held his hands out, palms up to say I’ve made my peace with this, I will soldier on bravely now. Ramona reached out one arthritic hand to pat Herman on the shoulder. He could smell the liverwurst sandwich she’d eaten for lunch on her fingers.

“There there,” she cooed. “There there.”

***

Herman scrabbled up the incline after his father, Paul, panting fast and hard. It was early enough that his breath hung in the air for several moments before it dissipated and secluded enough that the only sound was Herman’s labored breathing and somewhere, much too far away, the pure trickling of a creek.

“You doin’ okay back there Fatso?” called Paul without looking backwards. He too was out of breath, but in the way that one gets after prolonged laughter, not the morbid wheeze that Herman couldn’t control the volume of. “We’re getting to the really steep part. So start digging down for strength.” He chuckled low.

“Stop... I need to stop,” Herman gasped. He slowed and crouched, put his hands on his knees and his head between them. He grimaced at the stretch of muscles in his behind.

“Jesus,” Paul said. He took lengthy strides down to Herman’s side. “Drink some water.” He pulled a dented canteen out of his backpack, helped Herman take a sip of the water. It tasted like a handful of wet change. “Yeah, there you go.” He let go of the canteen, watched a dribble of water sluice down Herman’s chins and shook his head quickly, just once. He reached in his back pocket, pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a light. He lit one and took a deep drag.

Herman stared at the cigarette with resentment. All his dad did was drink and smoke. It seemed impossible that he was able to move so much quicker than him. But Herman had been sick as a child, sick his whole life really. He’d had colic as a baby, chicken pox when he was three, had asthma and was lactose intolerant and allergic to almost everything. He’d never played much outside because he was naturally clumsy and his cuts never healed quickly. He’d never been out in nature like this, never been asked to prove himself to his father, whom he’d always assumed was, deep down, just as inept as himself. Herman was overheated, reached for the hem of his t-shirt to pull it off, get some air, but before he got the fabric over the pudge of his stomach he felt his father’s eyes on him and looked over to see him grimacing.
His face was veiled in diaphanous smoke, but Herman could see enough to make out the skin pulled tight around his mouth, the look of disgust on his lips. Herman released the edge of the shirt, handed the canteen back to his father who put it back in his pack. Herman knew he had another canteen in there full of liquor, a thick umber liquid he made himself in the tool shed. He'd once taken a sip of it when his father wasn't looking, choked on the taste of ripeness and astringent.

"You need to get in shape," Paul said, picking a stray leaf from his tongue.

"The doctor said I would slim down once I hit puberty."

"Doctors don't know shit." He blew smoke from his nose. "All they do is make you dependent on them so you don't know which way is up. I told your mother not to take you to the doctors when you were younger but she did. Look what happened. The doctors said I would die from drinking too much and here I am, running faster than my fat-ass son." He ground the cigarette out on the bottom of his hiking boot.

"Why are we here dad?"

"What are you ten—twelve years old?"

"Eleven."

"Then we're out here to be men. To know our own minds. To stop and listen for a little bit." He bent his ear to the earth as though it called to him, as if it knew his name.

***

Herman made his way out of Dr. Radivitch's office, careful to stand aside from the others in the elevators. He knew it was ridiculous for him to assume that others knew of his condition but he couldn't help it. He remembered the first outbreak of the Illness. It had appeared first, as these things always seem to, in some small mud village in Africa. He remembered the headlines, the body count, seeing piles of distended bellies piled up in montages on the news. It had seemed so far away at the time. He and Angela had been going through a rough patch, his father had fallen off the wagon and gone missing again and he remembered thinking that everything in the world was going to shit.

Then an outbreak had hit Italy, Portugal, Spain, the U.K, slowly crawled its way across the continent then across the Atlantic and Pacific simultaneously, ending up in the United States where it lodged itself in the deep south and Australia where it knocked out two aboriginal tribes.
The accusations had run wild—at first it was thought to be a close cousin of AIDs. Then it turned out that either the strain evolved or the scientists were wrong. It was something viral, something easy to catch. They didn’t know how it was transmitted. There was no cure. It was terminal. It could be treated, managed but would never go away.

Death was normally quick, five months, a year tops. The Amish shunned their members who got it. The first sufferers were quarantined then told they weren’t a harm to society. Still, people picketed Washington, asking why and how, sensing conspiracy. It was one of those things, everyone said. Like the West Nile breakout twenty-five years before. It was the new foot and mouth, the new mad cow, it was en vogue. Some fashion house had released a limited edition t-shirt line, each flimsy white cotton top smearily printed with the word “Ill.”

Herman had seen a girl wearing the t-shirt. A willowy blond who’d smiled at him as he walked by. He had felt instantly nauseated, remembered lying in bed with fever for one third of his first grade year, sweating out some malady that came as quickly as it went or drinking a glass of milk and feeling his tongue swell beyond the confines of his mouth. He’d managed to calm himself down, to remind himself that he was no longer the weedy child he’d been, that he was healthy and had been for years. Still, the Illness had found him.

He walked to the subway station, shivering in his wool coat. This time of year the hobos shuffled around all night long, driven to walk if only to survive. It was cold and dark in the seemingly endless way that dusk is in winter. “Stupid cold” his father had called it, as if the temperature was what caused him to drink every night, to intermittently walk out on his family. Herman stood on the platform, thought of the advice his father had given on that first, and final, camping trip: keep your arms close to your chest, dream of breathing fire.

He did this now, breathed heavily, watched the streams of his breath hanging in the cold air as it left his nostrils. He did this sometimes, found himself imitating the way his father smoked.

“You got a cigarette?” came a voice from his left. He peered into an alleyway and saw a hobo, dressed in layers of grimy olive and cream wool.

“No, sorry.” Herman said.

“You sure about that?” asked the hobo. Herman took a step closer, tried to imagine the man without his beard and matted hair. He didn’t recognize his face, but then again, he hadn’t recognized his father the last time he’d seen him.
"I’m sure," Herman said, he reached in his back pocket for his wallet and pulled out a $20 bill. He held it folded between two fingers and leaned in towards the man. "Do you know a guy named Paul Bunter?" he asked. The hobo made a grab for the money but he jerked his hand away. "Do you know Paul?" he asked again. The hobo grumbled and shifted his weight.

"It’s getting to the point where I don’t know nobody," he said to Herman. He eyed the money.

"Could you maybe know someone for $50?" There was a silence. "Paul Bunter. He’s my dad."

"Shit. Look, I don’t know where your dad is. I can’t take your money for that. But I can take it for some advice. If he’s out here, you don’t wanna find him."

Herman handed the man the money and walked away. It had been almost a year since he’d last seen his dad. It had been a night like this, stupid cold, and Paul had swaggered up to Herman. He was homeless but he was homeless with panache. He had khakis and a clean blue sweater on, a puffy, black North Face jacket that was three sizes too big. He’d been stupid drunk too, his eyes bleary. He’d been charming but belligerent. When Herman refused him money, tried to make him understand that he was his son, Paul had come closer, assessed him. He didn’t look as good close up. He had a thick, thatched beard that Herman could see was caked with food and vomit.

"You’re not my son," he’d said after a period of contemplative silence. He swayed slightly in his boots, his hiking boots, the same ones they’d worn on their camping trip. "My son is a fatso. My son wishes he could look like guys like us."

Herman was not surprised that his father didn’t recognize him if he was living in the past. Herman had gone through a stage of reinvention over two years, lost his puppy fat, gained a foot and twenty pounds of muscle. His father had been drunk for the past five years, probably couldn’t remember anything the chubby kid he used to chastise, probably couldn’t remember his own name. Herman had left then, walked away without giving his father money, without saying another word. Now he was making his way to the subway. He needed to get home to Angela. He was afraid that she would not forgive him another flaw, would not forgive him for not being a full man for her. He already felt bad for his physical flaws.

Herman suffered from pectus excavatum, a bowl in the chest. He’d had it corrected at age eighteen, endured a surgery in which a metal pole had been inserted underneath his chest plate, taught his flesh how to be the ribs he was born without.
Still, he had woken up six months ago to a rippling a third of the way between his left nipple and his right and it had not taken long for his flesh to sink back in, for him to look like he’d been served a punch from which he could never quite recover. He’d shown Angela three weeks after the cave-in stopped, the density of skin stretched over the cavern, a faint purple color emanating from within, the color of sick organs, the color of thick blood. Angela reacted well. That night she’d held him in bed, one hand carefully paced on his collarbone, the other on his belly, neither ever straying towards the sinkhole in between.

The connection was obvious now. The surgery had not failed him, the Illness had. He imagined it eroding the metal pole, wearing it away over time. For months he’d had nightmares of lying in bed, unable to move, of blankness and endless dark pathways. He should have known six months ago this was coming, he should have been prepared for the Illness.
I.
India let my hair grow long
to my waist
like my mother's.
Bathed my hair and skin
in coconut oil, wrapped my arms
into pink and orange silks.
I stayed with an old school friend
for the celebration of her wedding.
The older women hid me
From their grandsons.
When I passed through
the open room of the kitchen,
they would whisper in singsong
words to each other; the American.
In the backyard, the grandsons
taught me how to peel a mango
with my teeth; to enjoy a sweet
guava in the night heat.
Let the bitter sweet taste
linger in the back of my tongue
like a sloppy kiss.
At the dinner table,
brown skin and black hair pressed
together side by side.
The bride gave me a smile
and sympathetic nod;
the old ladies kept watch
over their grandsons.
The day I left, the eldest
grandmother smiled and said
something in Hindi I did not understand.
I bowed my head and paid my respects
because she was the matriarch,
because my tongue did not move to thank her.

III.
Somewhere along the way
I took a wrong turn in Buenos Aires.
I walked into what reminded me of the
Old abasto down the street from
Trina’s house; my mother’s mother.
There, I ask for directions to Mar de Plata.
The old man laughed and he handed me a beer.
Mar de Plata was a few hours south, he explained.
I looked up at the old man,
Remembered something
my brothers told me before I left.
Don’t trust men, especially the ones
Who think you’re pretty.
The men here spoke with a kind of
accent that made the tongue roll
back into perfect blue waves.
A kind of siren sung to young,
Wide-eyed American girls.
A few months in Argentina
and I was able to pry the
language from the old
storage places of the mouth.
I listened for the sweet tongued
men and stepped back.
Their accent had turned to
sour milk with time.
IV.
I walked through the stench
Of the dock in Mar de Plata;
stayed with a family
close to my father.
To them, I was the Morena
Americana; The Dark American.
To my left a man stood
Gutting a fish with scales of the rainbow;
I thought what a pity.
Still, fish was fresh, cheap,
and best with lime and salt
in the oven. The father of the household
was a professor from Chile named Ricardo.
Every afternoon he drank
Black coffee, fresh bread with cheese,
and read Neruda out loud in the small living space.
"Te amo sin saber cómo, ni cuándo, ni de dónde"
The words seemed suited for the mouth
of the Chilean man, than in the mouth
of my English teacher freshman year.
After everyone falls a sleep,
He takes his favorite book from the small shelf,
And reads chapters of Fuentes.
I listed as if I was learning a new language
And he started to call me Neftali
Out of endearment.
My last night with them,
Ricardo asked me to recite
Neruda's seventeenth sonnet; his favorite.
I went to other room, and looked over the words.
I made sure they embedded into muscle memory;
That each word of the language felt right
on my tongue.
The other day you asked why we uprooted you from your home in Rome to drag you around the world. It’s clear from what you said that you see the negative aspects of this. I’m not an intellectual—nor a poet—and I probably don’t have adequate words to describe our reasons in making this decision. But there were reasons, even if I can’t explain them as eloquently as I wish.

Pampaida, Nigeria: 2006

The village is on the equator and the humidity gets to you. The dry season is harsh, but short, and eventually spring does come, though in recent years, later than it should. When it does, it gives no warning. One day you are pulling up plants from the ground, hoping for a few drops of water that the roots refuse to give you, the next day you pull out a canoe from the garage and ride down the flooded streets. This is nothing strange here.

You have always been afraid of thunder, ever since you were a child, and in Pampaida the rains are even louder than the thunder: coming down hard on the tin roofs. You know it is quieter outside, where the craving earth is the only thing that comes in contact with the rain. So when you hear the thunder, before the first drops of water even touch the ground, you run out from the village until you can’t see any lights, keep running until the rain starts to pour. It is never soft, slowly growing harder. It’s fifteen minutes of torrential downpour interspersed with brief returns to 90-degree weather. This is the way you love it: hard and warm and showering, and that’s part of it: the feeling of the earth being washed by the sky and you along with it.

You love it most at night, thought it is never really dark. The moon shines bright but it isn’t even that, it’s the lightning. There is something scary about being the tallest thing in the field, but you are never really afraid, because in Pampaida the lightning lights the sky horizontally, reaching both ends of the earth and you, you are somewhere in the middle. From where you stand you believe it stretches all around the world and you think to yourself, this is how rings around planets are made.
Now, looking back, you probably suffer from a bit of an identity crisis. I understand that—and I feel for you. We certainly didn’t drag you around from place to place to see you suffer. But rather than look back at what you’ve lost, I prefer to look at what you’ve gained.

Kampala, Uganda: 2009

Uganda mornings are always cold. The air is always fresh—maybe not in the city, but on the outskirts, where they live, the air makes lungs feel new. Mom and Dad only like the mornings, before the sun wakes up evaporating any dew left from the previous night’s rain. The afternoons become so hot that sweat evaporates from skin, and night falls over the city with a thick layer of humidity. They only like the mornings, when the birds sing them awake (and they don’t mind). They only like the mornings, eating fruit salad out in their garden, watching ducks tip in Lake Victoria. Uganda is all about the birds; Dad knows most of the calls. He knows if it is a red bird, a bittern, or a grebe. Uganda is all about the birds and Dad is all about the birds and they both love the morning, so do the birds.

Sometime in the middle of breakfast Dad hears a call, a wail, maybe a tremolo, and he sets down his fruit bowl and stands up to look into the trees. Sit down, finish your breakfast, Mom says but no, Dad is all about the birds. He sees a ruffle in the leaves, then something red flies out of the tree down to the bottom of the hill and he swiftly follows it, having been a while since he has seen a bright red bird, those are his favorite. There it is, at the bottom of the hill: Ross’s Turaco. Fifty centimeters or so, a red erectile crest, yellow lores, yellow beak stretching posteriorly to a forehead shield and Dad thinks, how wonderful this would be for Mom to paint. She is a painter, a painter of scenes and animals and people and anything she finds beautiful, really. This, this, she would love to paint so Dad calls up the hill to her, Donata! Vieni, pronto! Non puoi mancare quest’occhio! She yells something back but it is muffled and he isn’t even listening. He slowly lowers himself to the ground like a sand hill crane, breathing in the morning. Hurry! He calls back in a whisper, as to not scare away the bird. She hurries as fast as she can, making her way down the hill with her walking stick. The osteoporosis has gone on for over two years now and her bones are getting weak. She is old and frail, the realization that she is not immortal is surfacing, but still she makes her way to the bottom of the hill, just in time to see a bird—wings beating hard and fast—fly away.
I'm not philosophically inclined. I like to read about ideas—but I'm not a deep thinker. I'm much more a pragmatic person—I do what I think is right at the moment, without analyzing the deeper meaning. So, as I didn't have the ties to a physical place, I opted to tie us to a lifestyle that I thought would compensate for the things I thought I couldn't give you myself. I thought this lifestyle would give you an appreciation of cultures, of language, of humanity. Also, in a narrow-minded way, I probably thought that you would grow up with people with similar ideas—people interested in bettering themselves and the world around them.


After moving to boarding school and trudging through four winters, I have learned that Northern Michigan is all about small gods. I find them everywhere, and they whisper the same thing. In a summer day they speak to the sunflowers and say, yes, turn your heads to the left, just a little bit more, a little bit upwards. In a summer day they hide in the goldenrod and under the feathers of an American bittern who I hear but never see while riding a river down to a new lake. In autumn, they tell me to wait for the green pointed leaves of a sugar maple to fade a little, turn yellow, and fall to brown. I hear them breathe, their whispers, yes, they are the rustle in dry leaves. When the fields are covered in frost, they say wait for the rain. They are the reason some flakes fall towards the sky. I can see them, looking out my window, under the light of a lamp post.

They are gods, and they say, yes, and home is this sphere, rolling around on their shelf. They say wait for the rain, for the rain and for the first ferns to unfurl, and I know that's where I'll find them. So I wait for the spring fleas to spot the snow with dots and for the ice to sink out of sight. I wait for the freckles to return to my face, and when the mayflies arrive I go out and search for the gods, for the whispers. They are there: they are the smell of rotten oaks and broken birch bark, they are the early days of aspen seeds. They are there, but I can't see them, and I want to ask them why! But I already know why. Because yes, they whisper while I try to fall asleep, you planted the daffodils too late and yes, it was too cold, and no, they won't show their face this spring. The mayflies drop and blow away with the wind, and the whispers are the whistle carrying them away. I'm left with the "who cooks for you" of the barred owl, somewhere outside my window before I fall asleep. This tells me it is and I am home, waiting for the leaves to change to red again.
Am I sorry we made this choice? If I said I was, I'd be lying. I'm happy to be doing the work and living the lifestyle I do. I'm sorry at times for mom, not having friends around, and for you, not having a solid home base. But I tend to ignore the negative side of things, and concentrate on what I see as positives. Maybe I'm just sticking my head in the ground, hoping (wrongly?) that things will work out for the best. But that, too, is me. I hope you can understand me, and my motives. And forgive me. I may well have been wrong—but it wasn’t for the wrong motives. I’ve always wanted the best for you in everything.

Love, Dad

Tuscany, Italy: Always

There is a house in La Verna, and it is hidden in the clouds. There is a house at the top of a hill, not too far from the monastery where St. Francis is said to have spent his nights in cave. At night the monastery is lit up so bright from far away you’d think a star is resting on the hill. There is a house at the top of the hill, and that’s something we will always have.

We have not yet finished travelling, and with each move, we ship our favorite art back to this house, which has become a museum. There are masks all along the stairway from every place we’ve called home. The faces whisper to you, answer any questions you may have. In the corners there sculptures and on covering the walls: cloth paintings, batiks, things that are too beautiful for us to let go. It’s all there, hidden inside the house, and the house is hidden too, way up on a hill, way up in the clouds. But it’s there: brick walls and a fireplace, kitchen overlooking the valleys—and in the autumn you can’t tell the difference between the window and a painting.

The house is at the top of a hill and the hill is so bright with red and orange: a forest fire of leaves, and that’s something we will always have to return to; a real fire in the winter; poppies in the spring. In the summer: family that we have not seen in years, sitting around a round glass table eating cherries picked earlier from our own trees, and drinking wine... Wine we found in the cellar, wine that grandfather made when he built the house.

Even though the summers don’t last long, the winters are cold, and we aren’t always in the midst of the autumn fire, we have the burning sunsets etched into our eyelids. We see the sunsets each night when we close our eyes, no matter where we are. We’ll see the sunsets each night, wherever we go.
Lunch in Summer

[Mishka Hoosen]

Lunch in summer
Forced outside by the juice dripping everywhere,
I lean out into the rain, my bare feet on the porch,
eating a nectarine stolen by my grandfather from my aunt,
just for me.
It’s almost past its prime, soft in spots
as a girl’s cheek, and blushing.
The juice runs down my hand
into the spaces in the carving on my ring.
And life is a sweet, sure thing to hold in the hand
on a day like this.
The other houses in the neighbourhood
are hidden in the mist, and the sea
feels close, its breathing on the air.
And I eat the summer, its sunset skin
disappearing as I devour the fruit
till all that’s left is the pit, a heart
sure and slick in my palm.
I throw it away, into the grass, unthinking,
like a teenager falling in love.
so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

— W. C. Williams