

*Wither On the Vine*

I have never wanted anything to end: highways on 183, smoke rings, the summer. When I was in the fifth grade, my brother and I caught a house gecko. It was just before school, and as I swung my backpack over my shoulder, hand gentle against the doorknob, the crystal light from the door window playing on the floor, a scampering movement caught my peripheral vision. The gecko was on the wall next to our upright Yamaha; it was tiny, centimeters shorter than my little finger, smaller than any of the green and dirt-brown, tough-skinned lizards that I had tried to catch in the backyard.

We captured the lizard in a tiny dessert container that once contained small samples of Costco tiramisu, and upon returning from school, I found it relocated to a larger plastic fish bowl (the fish had long died).

I looked at the gecko closely when I came home that afternoon. The world passes through you as a child, the only way it ever really seems to move, but there are things you don't forget about childhood, and this was one of them. I suppose this may well be one of the things I will carry for the rest of my life. The gecko's thin layer of skin looked almost tightly stretched, spots like black paint, its eyes were watery and pleading, but its body had curled into a semi-oval shape, joints pushing its abdomen perpendicular to the floor, lethally wild. In the late spring light, it looked almost livid.

But I had wanted to keep such a beautiful thing. We fed it crickets we had begged our father to buy at the local pet store, dropped beads of water in the plastic cap of a water bottle, put the fish bowl under the sunlight, then under the shade, asking God to keep it alive.

The first time, I felt sorry for the crickets we would put in the fish tank, how they were to die because of their birth, devoured limbs like stiff hairs in a red animal mouth. I asked my brother to pick which ones went into the tank because I was not worthy enough to play the hand of God.

The next day, when I woke up early to check, the crickets were still there, launching themselves at the glass walls of the tiny fish tank, wanting out. Ricochet, ricochet.

Nine days later, our beloved house gecko turned its white belly up. That light blue morning, those starved crickets were still jumping.

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We have gotten a larger, seventy-five-gallon fish tank, from a family friend who died in a way my parents refuse to speak about. A while ago, we had five fish; two tropical, two goldfish, and a tiger barb. I loved the tiger barb most and found it floating on the mirror surface of the water, eyes cloudy. -

I don't think I'll ever marry, and I don't think I'll ever again own another pet. Own even sounds too possessive of a word: to exhibit dominion over a tender animal soul. Why do we always assume less of our animal counterparts? When my first bird died, and I had cried so hard I almost couldn't breathe, my mother said something along the lines of birds being unaware of death to console me. *It spent its entire life in a cage anyway, darling. What would it know?*

On weekends, I pace around trying to think of what to write, but really, all I think of is sorrow. I ask what I love and what I leave to forgive me. I tell of this to God most often; it is the only reason why I have not become a religious dissenter.

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I don't know how it happened, but it must have happened this year. I woke one night, sat up, reached for the water on the nightstand, and the thought of dying entered my mind, uninvited. I have thought about death many times before, starting when I was eight; I sat down, bony knees, on steps of the backyard deck that my father painted in fine scarlet red, looked up at the sky bleeding between blue and bruise purple, and quietly told my mother I was scared of rotting away into the soil and being eaten away by rollie pollies. It was just the two of us under the awning of summer. I don't recall her response precisely, but she said something about time and chocolate cookies in the pantry. That night, I thought of my grandparents. The red and angry bug bites on my grandmother's blemished knees when she stowed away in her backyard garden for hours. My grandfather was the same age as the average life expectancy

in the US.

I sat in the night, the crickets sounding their first calls in the wild, and felt alone, as if time had already collected my family off one by one, like token animals.

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In June, my mother said she was tired. She wanted to go back to China for vacation. *Six months.*

I told her, what about my schooling? *I wouldn't leave if I didn't believe in you, honey.* She had been slaving away at work since she arrived in America. Two decades. *I'm tired.*

*Sweetheart, every one of your friends' parents has the luxury of leaving just when they want to.* I sat at the dinner table and cried because where was my childhood now? The leaves were throwing their oily, oily leaves up in applause. The baby blue sky through the slant of the window looked like a shade that felt soft, like it was sorry for me too.

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I never got another bird after my last one. One day, in the spring, my brother came back from the pet store, clutching a small cardboard box. Inside, a yellow and lime green feathered parakeet flapped its wings.

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July. We spend our evenings under a sky that never seems to be aware of its color, our necks burning or the evening kind enough to braid our hair. Although our family is not one for gossiping, my mother and grandmother spill whatever they want to when we walk around the block.

Today, there are cicadas everywhere. Some of them sound their nightly calls; there are some on the pavement, worshiped by halos of starving ants.

They are talking about the friend who gave us the fish tank. At home, the tank filter runs, the fish grow fat and blind. But my grandmother is talking about her friend before she took too many pills one night.

*Her mother died when she was younger than your brother, maybe about eleven. Sad as it is, I don't think her father put too much effort into raising her. Don't know if she loved him.* I did not know this, her past, unbridled. I feel rather guilty because I know I will remember, and write it down. Is a writer to use others for tragedy?

*She married and didn't know what she was getting into.* And the rest of her life goes on like a cliché. Haughty husband with a stretching smile. A son born, with a name like water, wailing. Years of soccer practice and he left for college. Her body, like a handkerchief, folded away, until the surgery. She sat at the park bench every day, then she met grandmother because old ladies love congregating in public parks for reasons unknown to outsiders. The cicadas sigh, even the dead ones.

I tell my grandmother: *you know, you might have been the kindest person to her.* And to think, that is her whole life too. We don't realize a lifetime, even though we all have it, and are hurtling our bodies toward more, more of it. Several decades compounded together, and an aging, short woman—a stranger—was the best thing that happened to her.

And to think: I am fortunate. To write so terribly about tragedy. I cannot tell you the color of the last scarf she wore, how many years it has been, her favorite chocolates, the last song and person she loved. Perhaps someday I will be better. There are things so powerful that they must hurt if you know them.

*Maybe all we ever are is alone,* Grandmother says. The streetlights light up and a breeze passes by.

And to think: grandma—grandma, how much time do I have now?

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The flash of movement was the same. In the bathroom, the night was cool, the years fanned out. The gecko had lost its tail, left with a nub pink like lamb fat. It was even smaller than the last one, with the same watering eyes. I looked at it for the longest time, then cupped it into my hands.

I went downstairs and opened the garage door. Outside, the teetering bottom edge of summer, the

leaves in motion. I set the gecko into the night and prayed for its survival.