

The Hornets' Nest: A Meditation on Death, Running, and Writing

When I died—almost—
We go to these near-death experiences hoping to learn
what is on the other side.

Three summers ago, I was stung by a bald-nosed hornet, having bent down to see how my hollyhocks fared, little seedlings, then standing up quickly when my son called from the swing. I caught it inside my hand—the thing that did the stinging—brought it inside, and sat at the kitchen table. I remember the light from the window on the worn wood as my fingers uncurled, the hornet lying against the deep line. Then my head was on the table and the light on the wood shimmered as my breath snagged, then faded, shot through with silver static.

Anaphylactic shock can kill someone in less than ten minutes, and the onset is faster and more severe the second time. This was my second time.

I remember mostly the moments of coming back. My husband's hands slapping my cheeks. His eyes hazing into focus. I could see the dark gray line around his green iris, the red veins radiating and throbbing. "Why are you yelling at me?" I whispered. Later, coming to with my body slumped partway inside the car, the door open. His arms lifting my slack legs roughly. I said before I slid under, "I won't make it. Call—" And then he was holding me upright on the toilet, my head having fallen against the wall, the shivering shape of my son in the door. I began gasping then to keep the threads, panting, "when, when?" and then my back was on the linoleum in the front hall and people were bending over me and a needle went in.

Those are the moments of consciousness. But there were other moments. I can only recall where the edges blued, blurred. I think of the warming space between the seeds and the air, where the dew first begins to take form. I try to call that pre-condensation back.

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Running, I slow where the slight hill rises. A long purple stalk bends over the trail, breast-high. Among its close-set seeds, a strand of sun-laced spider silk curves, bearded with seven tiny beads of dew. The line continues, strung up to one stiff, hair-thin bristle. Many such hairs stick out from the close-set seeds, each with six or seven or more beads, like strands of pearls, each globe of caught water touching but not breaking the surface of the next. The whole seeded head is covered with thousands of beads of varying sizes, gathered in a lovely asymmetry. The skin of the grass beneath is a dusky grained purple, touched with sienna and indigo, rose and ochre, moments of verdigris; and the tight-set seeds are elongated, close-seamed scales. The accumulated weight of each watery bead has bent the head gracefully, and at the tip, one large drop holds, upside down, the curve of hill and sky, each stalk in the meadow, each seeded, dew-beaded head.

I look up. The next seeded grass is also a necklace of distinct artistry. And the next, and the next. The whole field is on fire! Millions of miniscule, perfectly clear spheres reflecting back the sun and sky and field, and inside each clear sphere, a meadow of ten thousand stalks, millions of ever more miniscule fields and seeds and clear spheres, where infinite gods lie down.

When I come around the second time, the water has begun to slump and run. In an hour, maybe less, the water will have warmed enough to return, invisible, to air. Will remain there until the shadows grow long and the grasses—big bluestem, Indian grass, switchgrass—exhale their heat. Then, somehow, the distinct clear planets will again take shape, become bodies grouped in new constellations along each seed, reflecting the world at itself.

At the fringe between seen and unseen, something takes place: heat exhaled from the physical leaf, seed, body, touches invisible molecules until they gather and take shape, become—for us—visible, oozed up from the warmth.

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At the harvest table where I write, the light rests on a note from my ninety-three-year-old grandmother. It is the Prayer to Our Father in the original Aramaic, its first line: *Abwûn* O cosmic Birther, from whom the breath of life comes. *Ela patzân min bischa* let us be freed from that what keeps us off from our true purpose.

On my table, also, is a little notebook. I open it to see its gathering of scratched lines and curves. My son's first written words hold no letters, just gesture, intent. I wrote his translations alongside: *please don't fuss little fuss—*

Others remain, forever untranslated.

What draws me close to the home of what could, conceivably, kill me? I stand before the nest. I must have passed under it many times without noticing. Bald-faced hornets build beautiful chewed-paper nests from which they fly in search of meat to feed their squirmy little young. Hundreds can live in a nest. Their smooth stingers can go in and come out again and again.

When first I found it, I would not run under the nest. Instead, I'd make a C, doubling back when I reached the skinny cottonwood's yellowing leaves, then back around until, on the other side, I passed the segmented spears of snake-grass. But today, lost in thought, I went too far. What I was trying to hold in thought as I ran was how this C made a sacred space I dared not enter, and I was remembering a small island off a peninsula in Lake Superior—the island marked off-limits, protected for only the wild to live, undisturbed year after year.

The beach of the peninsula was made of granite stones smooth and round as eggs, which moved under the waves' white fingers as if a bird shifted them beneath her body. The sound a boiling of small thunder, a chant that grew like the chant I heard ten years later, sitting barefoot on the cool marble steps of the fifth floor of the Dharma Drum Buddhist monastery in Taiwan, listening outside the glass door, too shy to know how or if to go in, with little Mandarin at my command. Subtropic heat seeping from the skin of my breasts as the voices rose and the drum beats rose and my own breath and blood surged simultaneously, crescendoing. As if my own body were mere simulacrum of something bigger. Sound for which there is no name, water turning stones over.

It was like the sound that rocked me from my body the first time I was stung. Something through which a last breath could slip. That was on Lake Huron, five years after the beach with the egg stones and the island. Seven years before the steps of the monastery. On the island, the drowned body of a spotted fawn moved in the waves. Bones, pale spots, thickened liquid of an eye. The rib cage rocked in rhythm against the

rocks as waves came in under the flap of skin, as if breath still filled that cavity, as if given other breath.

When I died—almost—I was not afraid in the moment of passing. I was comforted at the entering. Bells and wind. I could have happily gone out.

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Days later, I run again, thinking of the relationship, for the artist, between comfort and struggle, between succor and Lorca's *duende*. I edge close to the nest hidden in the still, green leaves, the nest that has bent the beech sapling over the trail so it rests, on the other side, against the smooth white bark of a birch. The nest, that miracle of chewed substances spit back out into a form that holds the living, the future living. I stand quietly and watch one form fly into the entrance, a round hole like a mouth.

After I almost died the first time, I moved through the world for years on a kind of grateful, colorful cloud. *Well, I could be dead!* I'd say nonchalantly, as if that gave me reprieve from small cares. As if I could trust that death would come when it came.

The second time—six years later—is when the panic began. That quick and slippery pathway in the brain. That roller coaster that ratchets your small car up the first terrible hill, then turns you loose. You ride until you come out the other side, panting and unsteady on previously steady ground.

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Then I am kneeling, pressing my head to the dirt. To the grains of sand in each creased leaf of late clover. But before that, I ran two rounds seeing nothing, hearing nothing but the *slow isolate faults that kill, that kill, that kill*. Poison: name yours. Unkind, unkind, unkind.

“What did I say? Why can't you listen?”

“Impossible for me if you—”

“No. No. No.”

Inside the tree, the heartwood draws the toxins. Stores them. Away from new growth. At the split, I stop to catch my breath and hear, unmistakable, the calls of sandhill cranes. Trills in November. Muffled among the clouds, a wide and simple V moving quickly east. Two birds,

bottom right, break formation, wing together inside the letter, flying side by side. A minute later, they return to the line.

At the far range of my C, I push myself on small steps. I cannot seem to stop myself. My shoe in the mud. My other shoe in the mud. And then, the vague shape difficult to distinguish in the yellowing, browning leaves. There, the smoothed and lighter paper around the black hole. The hole, a round mouth from which my beloved nemeses flow. I cannot yet give name to this—but I would that they remain. Gatekeepers of the holy. Holy unknown, remain unknown; remain thus holy.

Lorca says the ways to god are known and, when sought, will be found. The angels frightened Rilke with their great distances, their deep emotional landscapes and inquiet solitude, needing from him praise of little things. And the great multitudes of Yeats hold their indifferent beautiful harmonies like crystal bells touching the very edges of ice.

Your nest will not last another month. The queen, the male workers, last larva, all will die in the hard freeze. Other daughters, already mated, have flown off, have found their quiet places underground. Nemesis, original mother with both hands in the earth, who makes a nest of her spit. Of you, the consort, of you, the double-yolked egg. Daughter of night and night. Of night and the ancient ocean. Bearer of conscience, bearer of the knowledge of bounds beyond which humans cannot proceed. Bearer of humility. In your left hand, a branch of the apple tree. In your right, a shallow bowl for offerings.

One, then two leaves shift from the beech. On the edge of the trail, late raspberries still wet, and shafts of sun. My breath smokes against the damp. The light, rutted, white-ankled. One hornet returns. Another. No more emerge. No more return.

Of prose, Rilke writes, “But to write rhythmic prose one must go deep into oneself and find the anonymous and multiple rhythm of the blood. Prose needs to be built like a cathedral; there one is truly without a name, without ambition, without help: on scaffoldings, alone with one’s consciousness.”

This morning, I have not run. I am all lists of doing, yet not doing. Half-starts and half-stops made in haste, the demands of the day having erased that sacred patience out of which true work will arise.

What great fields you wandered in Skåne, Rilke, and how I envy you those pastures set aside for rest, their deep Aeolian soils dark and wet beneath recent rain. How I envy you the meals set down before you on the great table, strawberries and flanks of veal. Lovage and sweet radish. How I envy you your letters to a far wife with her hands in the clay of Rome. And your rambles along the chestnut borders, the small green fruits just forming. How already I am there with you, on the stone warm in the late afternoon, where you watch the white foal move on awkward large knees to where the gray mother bends, her breath wetting the white neck. I am an awkward sister, Rilke, in your solitude, and would not disturb it. I see, already, your rebuke—a kind of terror in your eyes from long use. I will turn, then, from you, brother, and walk down the rough path where orange poppies grow among the rye. I have five minutes left in our timeless retreat, and you have twenty years—and one more—before your and Marina Tsvetaeva's letters meet.

I can feel at my back, your eyes. The terror now gone. Curiosity like a cool and not unwelcome hand on the cloth below my shoulder blades. Orange like the poppies. (Soul, turn orange-colored! Soul, turn the color of love! Lorca whispers.) Not so rough as linen, nor so light as silk. A peasant girl, my hands have hauled the water from the well, have turned the turnip, have dug down in the dirt. What do you see, Rilke, when I turn my face toward the distance? Your white fingers on the pink granite, slender, knobbed as the knees of the foal. The neck, bent sideways, listening as poppies yield their pollen to the invisible cathedrals of air.

And now, that Russian poet, Marina Tsvetaeva, for whom I find I have to stop as I run, to sit on the bench at the edge of the oak grove, pushing the palms of my hands into my eyes. I am there with her in those last moments when she holds the rope in her hands. I am holding out to her something beautiful on which to rest: a blue morning glory's open throat, the inside butter-yellow as a baby's first smile. I am, for a strange moment, her daughter—not the one living in a labor camp at the time of her death, but the other one. The one who died of hunger in an orphanage at three, of whose death Marina learned on the street “from a strange person,” and whose name she could not speak for three months. I am that daughter, and I am watching now—her death at her own hand.

I return to my writing desk of buckled oak. Read, again, Tsvetaeva's poem to Rilke: "Go to the ladder—bring poems—."

Along the trail, where someone has stripped the birch in a ring three inches tall, rough, dark bark has grown, fissured with vertical cracks. I run my fingers over and in. I don't know what to make of it—that the fragile strips of paper do not grow back, that they are replaced by a growth so different.

Eye-high, I see, too, foreign marks like letters written in a different season, pale as a poor carbon copy, tinged orange from the night rain. I make out a few: an S; a small e; and another, maybe an r; and a v. The mind, that machine of meaning, grasps and shapes possibilities: sever. Or verse. Perhaps, serve.

When I look up, there—not fifteen feet down the trail—is a different hornets' nest I haven't seen in all this time. It's high in a beech divested now entirely of leaves. More enormous by far than the other; I could hold it in my arms like a toddler. So high I can't make out the mouth. For some reason, I think *motherboard*. Then I think *Sibyl*. Many-mouthed. Your voice through the holes in the nests, through the holes in the caves, a kind of non-sense from which we must make our meaning. Sever, serve, verse. Chthonic love that calls us back to our senses: Emily's tree: eternity.

Coming out, running, I startle a woman. She whispers, *I thought you were a deer*.

Was it Blake who said, *Who's to say a deer does not also think itself a human?*

The first hornets' nest is gone. I search on all three of my rounds, scouring every thin alder, beech sapling. Not even a trace. Someone must have cut the branch to take it. I am sad. I had wanted my husband to gather it after many hard frosts. To place it safely in our garage until the last survivors either died or crawled out. And then to display it proudly,

like a trophy. Or, to strip away some of the outside wall to show my son the cells inside, the chewed paper layers.

The other, larger one remains. I have to crane my neck to look. Forty feet up, I'd say. I can't see any movement coming or going. Forty-three degrees this morning, though the nest is in the sun. I am happy to see it, now that the other is gone. This reminder of the space that held my fear. And holds, now, something still unnamed.

Sunday afternoon. Apples peeled and cored and boiling on the stove. The five-gallon white bucket dumped into the hole dug by the strawberries; the oversweet stink of half-rot rises as yellow jackets land on parings, old corn husks, tomatoes turned to soup. I quickly cover the compost with dirt, rinse the bucket, come inside to stir the boiling apple butter. Upstairs, the dryer turns. Outside, the wind moves the yellow willows so the leaves touch the trunk. In the sun-porch, the loom is pushed into a corner of the torn-up floor.

All morning at the kitchen table, I wrote of another world, looking for the door. *Who, who, who* the riddled chant seemed to repeat. An image here, an image there, as if I could place them into some kind of story, some order. Two-pronged, the seeds stick to my unraveled fibers, like the seeds that clung to my pant legs after walking the dogs among the brown weeds at the river's edge. Lady disfigured, Lady moving. A basket of autumn apples. A girl on the slopes with the goats. Whose gray dog asleep on the warm stone? A braided thing, unbraided. What beads I've gathered, a kind of magpie with my bright baubles: star and bone.

When I run later, I listen—try—for a string. At the nest, I crane my neck, having to bend slightly backward. An uncomfortable stance, this odd worship. A whisper of something I erase as soon as I receive it, my breath and blood beating the same quick rhythm of the run and my mind, that ungainly pet, roving its usual borders. Today, taken up for a good mile with thoughts on how to make a table from the three beech planks my father hewed. In my mind, I am already making the frame. I am pushing in the screws. I am hand-planing the planks and sanding with great sweeps of my arms. I am carving, in the center, words from the Aramaic hymn to hold us to the path of praise and silence. I am rubbing the oil in. Sun, sun, cover my table. Touch the plates laid thereon. The tureen of palest porcelain. Steam rising from apricot sauces, from the spread legs of small birds, their nakedness anointed with sprigs of lemon thyme and rosemary.

When I pass again under the thin maples, the starlings startle me with their odd cacophony. My collapsed cosmos! In my mind, I see sheet metal, shears, holes drilled to let light through. Solder in the seams. The pond gleams between the trees. Two summers ago, I saw first one, then two, then five, then twelve white egrets rise up from this pond as I drew near, their great wings working the air as they rose and settled in the reeds on the far shore. At the time, I was working on a play in which a white egret opened and closed the movements. Some watching form under whose gaze the drama of mortality unfolds.

Yeats, what help is this: “understanding, as I think, that the imagination which remembers the proportions of life is but a long wooing, and that it has to forget them before it becomes the torch and the marriage bed.”

I turn from my words—back to “the proportions of life”—to whip the simmering apples until the last big chunks break down. I lick the wooden spoon, turn off the Irish ballads playing on the radio, glance out at the river. So clear and low. Time soon to switch the dogs.

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Nearing the hornets’ nest in the tall beech, I see, through it, light. I slow to a walk. Yes, sky coming through. On the other side, the walls have sheared clear off. I check around the tree. There, at the base, lies a round nest section the size of my palm with a small protrusion that must have once secured it to a branch. I turn it over. Honeycombed cells lined with delicate, nearly transparent white paper in which the larvae slept and formed. They tore the white paper when they emerged. Of the sixty-one cells, two are still covered—one fully; the other with a slit near the edge. My assumption is that the larvae inside, too cold, are dead.

I search farther from the tree, find a second piece. This one is bigger by another half, and of the same making—the bumped brown outer shell, rumpied like a thick-knit sweater, and on the inside, cells. All but three open. I hold it to my nose and am surprised how it smells. Sweet like hay or a meadow in the sun, but a little more woody, a little more cloying.

Back at home, I put them on the kitchen table. I pick up the smaller one, then pull from an edge cell the white paper lining. At the bottom, something black and thick and sticky. I peel it out with a stalk of grass.

It's the source of the cloying scent. Was it food for the larvae before they emerged? Or their waste afterward? How long did they stay, being fed, before they could fly away?

Then, movement. Under the cover, near a small tear, thin, tan, lightly furred, and sectioned legs push out, then bend toward where the shell of the white snout splits, to touch there—a tongue? The short, flat, forked thing moves up and down like a baby's tongue, expecting that what is necessary will come.

I put the remains of the nest inside a clear plastic container. The next day, the hornet has emerged, face pressed against the fogged plastic. When I tilt the container, she falls to the bottom on her back, her legs twitching. I open the blue top to see more clearly. The bottom of her abdomen, white, moves in rhythm with her twitching, a kind of throbbing pulse. Her top legs are folded below her face and touch each other when they shiver. Her middle legs bend as they rake the air. When I lower a pen, she grabs, pulls herself upright. I see no wings, just a brush of white fuzz where her thorax and abdomen separate. Still, I drop the pen inside the container. She settles for a moment, then crawls away from the pen, over the cells, falling inside a few and pulling herself free until she rests on her side on a cluster of still-covered cells, holding the edge of white paper with her middle right leg, her other legs twitching. Then she crawls underneath, clinging, upside down, to the rumbled shell of the nest before she is again moving, moving, moving. I put the lid back on. She climbs the plastic, stops in the seam between wall and lid before she falls back to the floor, where she remains for long moments until I blow gently to see if she is still alive.

The Buddhists say that we should treat all sentient beings compassionately, for we ourselves may someday be—or have been—a hornet, a toad, a tree, a deer. I cannot feed this hornet, so I will have to set her free. But it is cold outside, and she, too young, will likely not find useable food (or may become food); still, to freeze against the breast of the earth is better than starving inside a plastic container.

Outside, between two locust roots, I dump her out. The small hairs on her thorax shiver in the small wind, lit silver by the sun. Then she crawls along a leaf of grass, grasps the flat of it in the length of her arms, and puts the green edge between her white mandibles. Beneath her, small ants crawl among the dry locust leaves. She moves from the grass to a jagged spear of late dandelion. Pulling herself upright along the stalk, she stays. My face not three inches from hers, I watch the white mandibles open almost imperceptibly. I watch the large black almonds

of her eyes—opaque—and just above them, the antennae gently touching the air like fingers feeling for a note. It is a beautiful, graceful face. I think of what we've been taught to love and what we've been taught not to love.

Later, my son and I bend over the roots. He finds her in a crack of bark.

"She has no wings," I tell him. He was there the second time, when the breath stilled. After the ambulance and the tubes, after my legs stopped shaking from the epinephrine, after my husband washed the shit from my hands and pulled off my soiled clothes. My son, at the foot of the hospital bed, would not come near me. He whispered, "You pooped your pants like a baby." He was just about to turn four.

"No stinger, either," I add, though I'm not sure it's true. I do know that only the females have stingers, the old egg tubes on their abdomens put, by evolution, to new use.

He kneels in front of the hornet, bending his head close. He knows not to touch.

"Oh, you're a pretty little one," he says.

This the last, Marina: in my poetry class, I teach students how to place themselves in another's body. Waiting for pens to still, I too write:

There are actions which must be done—a chair,
a place to tie the rope, a knot, another knot.
The checking of knots. And the last memory—
God doesn't accept bills and bits. A starving boy—
my boy, and no food to hold. Today. This my final line—
maybe—the sea

Margaret Atwood proposes that we write because we die. Because we are unsure of death. Because we do not want to die. Our voice, written, sings on beyond the body.

Small drizzle on the trail, setting out. Then a stillness in the north; not a leaf stirs among the silver maples, the last so red they hurt me. It is cold

so I wear gloves, a coat, a pink hat sent by my mother. In the south, the wind grows as I stand beneath the disintegrating nest. The wind rushes harder and harder through the dry leaves, and beyond the rush of it, a chainsaw and an ambulance, rising. The white-headed grasses bend low again and again, unbroken but whipped about. Their roots go six feet deep and more. Fine-furred fingers that anchor and feed. Is the underworld a place of the spirit, or is it merely (as if this mystery—though known—were mere) the earth of the earth? In the darkness of the soil, the riches of decay. Unglued from their temporary forms, the minute constituents become—again—food. Become new forms. Grasses that bend low, bald-faced queen arising from her sleep in the hollow tree.

At my desk, I pick up *Paradise Lost*, open to lines underlined years ago: *with ceaseless praise his works behold / both day and night*. Underlined, likely, with my son squirming at my breast until milk seeped from the rumpled skin of the nipple—and then that look that never comes again, once weaned. Eyes dilated. Hands in a loose curl. The way the body softens when there is no want inside. No desire that has not been fulfilled. Perhaps this is the look that settles on a face in the last moments, returning to the breast of the earth. The long separation at last cupped.

The leaves from the maple have begun their slow fall. The locusts, nearly bare. Across the river, the stark beech surprise me. *How did we come to this again so soon?* I call out. The willows, as if in answer, trail their fingers against my face. When the sun breaks, they burn still with such green, I could believe. What leaves will not return, come sleep, come spring? These are perhaps easy answers, set against Rilke's great yawning questions. Yet a rumpled nipple wet with milk. My body torn open—before.

All these I have gathered, for love: milkweed seeds piled on the writing desk, granite stone smoothed round by the great lake's waves. And the face of the boy that shines with happiness in the drawing he has made.

I have strung red peppers across the window. I have watered the wedding geranium with its pink flowers. I have turned on the small kettle and opened the door to the guest room where sun lies on the white rug. All these I have done for love.

Epilogue

The shaping of words soothes. Bare, the earth; we wait for snow. Beside the damp planks, something snags. I think fallen nest and turn back. Everywhere now you see their rags in the blank trees. But no, just a cluster of oak leaves, mottled gray like the hornets' nests. I pick it up, turn it in my hand. The leaves curl inward, around each other. I lay it back on the ground among the many other leaves that have fallen.

We go into darkness early, and I, lighting the lamp, stay up late reading of Dostoevsky's *Father Zosima*, and the next night of Twain's *Mysterious Stranger*. One story raises me to hope and beauty; the other brings me to dejection and deep unanchoring.

I think of laughter, and what it is made of. Gross incongruities, Twain says. But I find my delight in water and light—these small frozen bits that fly from the hand of the sky, and land. I only glimpse the edges of their infinitely varied patterns before—warmed by the blood under my skin—they turn transparent and round.