

More than Trees

I was walking backwards, facing you. We were moving forward even though I was walking backwards. Your boots made their way to mine, slow and continuous. There was something mellow orange about that moment. The sun was done swimming in the sky and we were planning to go see the redwoods in California. I had spent weeks in New York, walking around. I followed the sun until I found a patch of burnt yellow open to the sky. I told you that I had once been a sun swallower and you accompanied me that evening, said: I'll go where you go.

I wonder why I believed you. The promise of future in your words: I'll go where you go, Come over sometime and I'll cook a meal for us, I'll eat veg when I'm with you.

As we put foot to foot, you told me that you wanted to go to Mexico to visit the largest monarch butterfly preserve. I think you liked the butterflies for their migration. The third or fourth generation might make it back to the place where they first began, all the others lost in limbo. A magic trick of nature. I know I'll never be able to make my way back to you.

Of that day, I only remember the sun chalking the sky, and your eyes—tender brown. Talking about things with wings, and no sense of belonging. The monarch butterflies have brains the size of a grain of salt, and still they own the sky.

You had your dim days. I imagine you sit in a room and float through clean air into a parallel universe of orange and pink and purple, your nights full of destruction and wind: someone is playing a pan flute or a Tibetan sound bowl. The sycamore trees bend to lend you their leaves. You have long hair and a longer beard. The sea in the distance tosses until it breaks. You wait to be healed. You are living with a monk on a mountain and it is cold but you're wearing a flannel shirt. You lost a friend to a car accident. Is that what you need forgiveness for? You hold on to rain-pipes and turn on the porch-light, so moths gather under the tin roof. You are a cloud, heavy with moisture. But you wait for the whole sky to feel this weight. In this dream, there's time for rain. You are holding on to too much when you could have held my hand. Who are you if not a cloud, white with grief?

On Yoko Ono's birthday, you wrote me an email. But let's rewind. I wrote my first email to you on Feb 2nd after a drunken night that we shared. I was in

the midst of getting a new sim card, so I couldn't text you. Instead I wrote you an email with the subject: I'm home. Later, you told me how an email is like a long phone call, one in which we don't hang up. You wait till you hear back and go from there. Not someone who replies instantly, you took time as if we had a forever waiting for us. Then on February 14th, you wrote to me about finding relevant poems.

14th Feb! Of course, I read into this. I didn't know you were someone who'd use ellipses. Yesterday I printed that email and looked at it. Three dots and blank space. Our initials, close but not too close. I'm still holding the phone, waiting for you to return. I believed this was going somewhere. It had to. You promised me the future tense.

Another day we spent walking, took the curve from Washington Square onto a narrow lane lined with sycamore trees. You paused there, your hand on a tree, tending its bark, you told me that you were sad because trees can't move. You went on to say human beings are a lot like trees, that we are a lot like trees. You were so convincing. We stood there for a while like two trees, looking each other in the eye and when we moved, we were holding hands.

Weeks before, I had written a poem about how we were islands and one had to swim to reach us. The image of a tree, immovable and swelling, was filled with more grief than the island. The island is in the company of water, which is what makes it an island. A tree is just a tree, pinned to earth. At that moment, we were vessels that seemed to understand each other. If we were talking right now, I'd show you photographs by Zoe Leonard—trees spilling over, swallowing fences. M, you and I are more than trees.

When your days were dimmer than usual, we didn't meet. We didn't call or text either. I thought about you on those days (even today is full of you but also empty of you). I never told you but I wrote to you — postcards, notes, letters, poems. You were always in my mind: you took to the living room sofa, feet up and shoes on with laces untied. I was lying in your arms, and you were breathing in the scent of my hair. We were looking at the ceiling or the starlit sky or oblivion. It's been too many months and you're still here.

On good days, on our best days, we met and walked. We were golden with sun, wine, and beer. Your beard was amber, and my favorite part of it led to your lips. We ate our meals together. We held hands, you sharing a glove with me. I can't recall the first time we held hands but on those best days your hand held mine. I was too shy to make the first attempt. Then, my hand interlaced in yours, tucked in the glove you were wearing. You brought me a beanie from your workplace and dark chocolate with sea salt and gifted me *Invisible Cities* by Calvino. You said you wanted me to have all your sweaters and books. I loved the sweaters you wore, but what I liked more was your

skin underneath those wool blended sweaters. We'd spend the day orange in the sun, the night at its bluest hour. We walked past many theaters in this city of many theaters, and you told me about the time you worked at the ticket counter of one, the food counter of another. After walking one or two blocks, you said: we'll go for a midnight show. Something about hot popcorn and a couple's seat. We'd get home and after spending all the colors of sky together, we would video call. You were a lot like the Hudson River, your lows and highs unpredictable. I didn't mind. I found more reasons to like you. I like water and you became the largest body of water in my imagination, flooding my heart and trickling down to my feet. I fell for you like an ebullient swimmer diving into the Hudson. Then, I moved a city away and the Hudson was five minutes from where I lived. I moved back to you.

Once, on video, I showed you my room with its minimal furniture — a bed frame, mattress, a mahogany desk, and a window that opened to endless birdsong. The horizontal mirror where I practiced my feet positions. You were amazed by the neatness of my room. Then you showed me yours. A room full of musical instruments — of names that I didn't know, shapes I wanted to touch. You had a thin, colored rug with stripes on which these instruments rested. You didn't say much and my ears were flooded with music.

I am looking at videos of monarch butterflies resting in the ripe part of the forest in Mexico. Last year there were around 140 million of them. Clustering on tree trunks and leaves, their quiet wings making the trees look like pinecones. I wonder if you would like to go there to witness those oceans of monarchs. It starts like a trickle and when the sun is bright, they fall and/or fly off the trees sounding like a waterfall.

If you could be a monarch butterfly — who'll die weeks after giving birth — or the tree — grounded in soil — on which thousands of butterflies rest until the sun warms their wings, which would you choose to be? When your friend died, you had to go travel south for his funeral. You wrapped your arms around me for longer than usual, and I said I wished I could come with you. I asked you if you'd text and tell me how you were doing that week, but when you texted, you told me about walking on big pine cones. You were with your sister and both of you liked to roll your feet over pine cones so much that it became a competition. She beat you. You felt jealous and said: she needed to win more than I did. I still don't know what that meant. Later, you told me that your friend had killed himself near a tree. Every story of yours had layers and I would learn another layer only with time.

I've been dreaming about you because you left with no answers. Today we are in my bed, and you're asleep. The sun has woken me up and I keep

looking at how your eyelids fold, keeping every ounce of sun from reaching your eyes. Your eyelashes are thin and short, eyelids soft. I could kiss you but I don't. I don't want to wake you up. I gaze at your face for details, I want to memorize every freckle and scar, I want to remember the length and curvature of your nose. We are folded together on this bed and this apartment is folded into a building on a corner of the street. Your pale green towel is folded and put away and my heart has folded itself and is resting on your chest. I fold and move in bed. You pull me closer and rub your beard to tickle my cheek. You've been awake all this while. I feel my face burst into a smile and you kiss me like you know, you know when I'm smiling without even looking at me. I dream this dream many times and I want to pull you out of it and share a bed, in real time. I wonder if we were to lie side by side for hours and hours, whether you'd finally tell me for once what went wrong and how we got here, to not talking.

In one of these dream sequences, we wake up, get dressed, and are in a forest planting milkweed. Monarchs feed on milkweed. It takes a single night of frost to kill a generation of them.

Remember, you were supposed to come home for lunch. I was planning an exultant menu of Indian specialties, each exactly the right texture and flavor. I wanted you to smell the cardamom, bay leaf, and ghee tadka. I wanted you to relish the food I cook. Over the phone, you were eating or sipping on something. I asked you about it. You were having soup you said, and quickly switched to icicles. I was perplexed at the combination and you said that you ate for sensation. How it feels on the tongue is what mattered, not taste, smell or texture. One day we will have that lunch, won't we?

While chopping tomatoes, I found one that spilled juice and green seeds. I called you immediately. I was so hungry, I couldn't waste a minute. I asked you if green seeds meant that the tomato is spoiled and whether I should keep the chopped, green seeded tomato in a separate bowl, and use it for something else. You said: Oh no, don't do that. The tomato is good and keep it chopped with the other ones or it'll feel lonely. All I could think about were the trees. A tree growing beside another tree for company.

Another day, we were walking around Union Square. We were about to cross the street and I was telling you about how attracted I am to death, that I want to die by the age of fifty or sixty. And you put on a calm face and said that you wanted to live a hundred years. Or longer. You wanted to keep living. You felt that there would be time for everything, that a forever exists, as if the clock would never run out. If this was your version of our story, you'd say that time is an illusion or a social construct. Between the two of us, I'm less ambiguous. I think of life as a delayed death. When you wrote to me, you

signed off with the words: Ever, M. Time is not as important as timing. The first poem I wrote about you is titled: bad timing. You read it and said that it was a favorite. You said that you were partial to it because it was about you. But I carried the weight of that title. You were busy elsewhere.

There are a number of ways in which you could've been busy — playing an instrument, composing a song, walking into the basement shop that had so many instruments that they looked like tools for the house. Working at the bar, walking over pinecones, cooking pot rice with leftovers, feeding your cats, buying more cat food and fewer groceries, reading a book, listening to David Wojnarowicz's tapes. Drinking alcohol, watering your plants — I don't know for sure if you watered them but they were green and alive the whole time I was seeing you. Being in a tiff with your co-worker at the bar, talking to Thomas who was your best friend in Chicago. Stepping outside the house to smoke a cigarette, writing a poem and struggling with it — you wanted to pull its hairs out or abandon it — that was the kind of mood that you were in those days, and with me.

The day before you left for the funeral, I made you a greeting card. I had drawn leaves or trees or both. Or maybe I drew a plant with many leaves, all in black ink, thin nib, neat strokes. I also wrote something under that drawing that I have now forgotten. Something about hope or courage to make it through your friend's funeral. I have many postcards that I didn't give you, letters I kept to myself. I knew that you wouldn't give me a reaction, you wouldn't tell me what you felt if you felt anything at all. I know I make this sound like a barter system but I was full of emotion for you and I felt like a waterfall most of the time. Then I stopped writing. You liked the way I wrote I in my postcards to you. It was cursive, something like a relaxed J. Months passed like leaves blown away. This past weekend, I wrote to you again. I wrote a letter in Hindi. Devanagari script, because it would be impossible for you to read.

Our favorite Hindi word was baarish. Baarish means rain when it's pouring. It's not a noun but the movement of rain, its falling. While walking out of a bookstore, it started drizzling and I exclaimed — baarish. We spent the streets walking in the rain and saying baarish to each other. Do you remember this now when it rains outside your Brooklyn apartment? I made you a list of Hindi movies that you should watch, another list of Hindi words with English pronunciations and English meanings. On my reading mornings, I sent you voice notes that were excerpts from Gulzar's poems and provided their English meanings. You said that you could listen to me talk all day.

I often visited the Hudson waterfront in Manhattan, those days. The geese

and their goslings disappeared every evening after the sun had leaked away. I thought about you being like the geese — I didn't know where you went. Now when I visit, I keep finding the Hudson full with geese. They honk and float and stay.

I know amaltas and banyan trees, but on our walks around the city we stopped to touch the bark of sycamore trees. You told me how to spot a sycamore. Ever since, I walk around looking at trees thinking that I might find you taking shelter or coaxing a bark at some point. Once you got so drunk, you called me while hugging a tree. I don't know if it was a sycamore. You were too tired to walk home but I was on the phone so eventually you did. When you woke up the next morning, you found shavings from the tree in your pockets. You texted me and said that you wanted me to have them. They're still here, in a pouch by my writing desk. A part of you, a part of us from that night. A sycamore lives for anywhere from two hundred to six hundred years.

I haven't spoken about how we met. And how things ended. Partly because you have more power over the ending — you had a reason that you didn't tell me about — and I have more of a hold on the beginning. So I'm going to leave both out, because it doesn't feel that we're equally together in those parts. I have worked so hard to let you go. It's like digging a grave and filling it back up with mud and grain. You made a list of movies and documentaries that you thought we should watch together. It had the country's name, director's name, genre, etc. You wrote a note after that long list about not knowing if I'd like these movies but that they need to be seen, that they have something to offer. I can't quote you because I burned the list. I used to trace the letterforms you wrote on that paper, think about the pen you used, the thinness of its nib. You wrote with a ballpoint. But you had spoken about liking gel pens that are thick and blot the paper. You spoke about the weight of emotion in ink. But in that list, you had used a ballpoint. I was so eager to heal from the grief I had, I thought burning those papers would help. Maybe the only things that help us are what we believe in.

I'm thinking about the super generation of monarch butterflies. They live eight times longer than a monarch of the first generation and travel ten times faster. We spent a very short time together, earlier this year. It is similar to the lifespan of a monarch butterfly in its first generation. But my memory is so damp with what we had that it feels like we knew each other for much longer. We could've made it like the super generation monarchs. Once, you showed me a photograph of you beside a Zen monk, somewhere on the mountains. It was probably Japan — the time you spent in Fukushima prefecture. You

looked different, as if the person in the photo was a clone and not you. Maybe you become someone else when you travel.

We were walking in the East Village, you were going to drop me home. We had attended an open mic event close by. Your body was running on alcohol that day and most of those days. When we met, I asked you if you were always drunk, because I didn't want you to forget any of this. But to forget, you would have to know that it happened once. We leaned against a closed store and you counted the days you weren't drunk around me. I knew then that spending time mattered to you. Our noses were less than an inch apart and it was freezing cold. I'm sure my nose was cherry red. And that moment felt right, drunk on love not alcohol.

I took the ferry to Long Island. A friend told me that it wasn't Long Island. But it did say: Welcome to Long Island City. The sky was bleeding and I was on my hunt for the sun. I walked the bridge from Queens and ended up in Brooklyn, following the sun. The next day that I told you about it, you were so impressed with how I go walking by myself whenever I feel like it. I have a screenshot of the first email that you sent to me. You asked me if I had lost my phone, if I was okay, and you were confused because I hadn't texted back. You wrote, "Please tell me you're ok."

You change your phone number every five years, and have at least seven email addresses. I think it's you who has lost your phone. How can I make sure you're ok? I will forever be confused by your no texts. — Please tell me you're ok, A.