

Welcome to Iowa: *Letters to Carp and Other Immigrants*

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To the Redwing Blackbird

You appear suddenly. After you, come lilac
and coral maple blooms. Then grass crests
where we should have cleaned the beds
better. Wings to sear the sky, the sky
your fishbowl but you must settle
for sticky shrubs at swamp's edge.

The ornithologist puts grapes
in his garden for orioles, colorless
sugarwater for hummingbirds. But no
sunflower seeds for you. *I don't want it
here*, he says, *I don't like the sound
it makes: Gonhorrheaaa Gonhorrhea.*

To Carp Dreaming of Dragonhood

I am sixteen years old when I first meet you.

My mouth is cluttered; my teeth don't sit comfortably against each other and my tongue is heavy and dry. I can't stop drumming my fingers against the study table, can't stop snaking them into the dirt when I force myself to lie in the grass. I have to remind myself how to breathe: deep and often. I want so badly to pluck my hair out of my scalp, something I haven't done since I was a small child. I itch instead, fingers and eyes begging for hair or a piece of paper. I deny myself endlessly because writing doesn't end much better than plucking hair does. No stories complete themselves, and my poems rhyme, which I have recently learned is undesirable. None of the wild has spilled out of me yet. It will soon. My parents don't know they only have one more year of my obsequiousness, or even my presence, so they take my passivity for granted.

I am always sweaty, slick, furious at myself. The environment is a mirror. Strange things start to happen. Landslides, the stones spilling loose, when I'm sitting on a cliff with my best friend, or driving to Bombay with my aunt. Two electrical fires in my room. I sleep through one and bathe through the other. My mother catches them both, shocked that I was subterranean through them. I am almost damaged every day. It's the year of men, too. Camera phones have just hit India, and despite my acne, clumsy knees, fat thighs, and jagged braces, men take pictures of me in the street. I can't decide if they will laugh or masturbate when they look at the pictures later. Either way, I start to hate men, and they haven't even gotten started on me yet.

Worst of all, I am stupid¹. Very little remains from my scattershot education. I have a big dream and we have no money. My big dream involves a test called the SAT that I have never heard of until this month. I get stuck at the lowest level of math problems, the ones at the start of the easier book. This test is expensive and my father says he'll hire a math tutor. I can only take this test once. This dream requires the top 97th percentile on the test so I can get a specific scholarship, but I nearly failed my 11th grade exams. I can't enjoy the monsoon like I usually do; the clotted sky and sludgy ground remind me of my own mind.

What books should I read for the English section of the SAT? I ask on a forum online.

Besides textbooks? Read American books. The Great Gatsby. I read the book in an hour, enraptured by the long, perfect sentences, and slightly repulsed by the America in it. I couldn't tell you a single thing that happened in it, plot-wise.

My mother chants a strange mantra these days. Sometimes, she chants it for a whole hour. This is because she is a Buddhist now, she tells my father and I. She meets other Buddhists at their houses, chants with them, and they study together. She is trying to open a window in my life. She is trying to get me to chant as well, to read what she does. In secret, because I don't want to give her the satisfaction, I do

¹ A few years later, the doctors will name The Stupidity: ADHD-Nonverbal Learning Disability-PTSD-Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Even later, I will decide this name is too long and I will drop the PTSD. I will keep the others because those names come with their own beauties and gifts. Also because those names become angry if I don't honour them and provide for them. This is a story that you, Carp, don't care about, so I'll tell it another time, to someone else.

both. I test the words, Nam Myoho Renge Kyo, and find that if I mutter them enough, my tongue softens, fits better in my mouth. If I say them for longer than I find easy, the knot at my neck smoothens and my fingers still themselves a little.

I open a two-thousand-page book—the Buddhist sect’s equivalent of the Bible/Geeta/Quran. Inside it, a Japanese monk called Nichiren rages at an authoritarian regime, and sends his tough love to his disciples. He is writing letters to them (and unknowingly to me) from the thirteenth century, feudal Japan. Some of his disciples are Samurai. His language is dramatic, and not all of it has aged well. But some of it has. In one of his letters, he is writing about you, Carp.

A WATERFALL called the Dragon Gate exists in China. Its waters plunge a hundred feet, swifter than an arrow shot by a strong warrior. It is said that a great many carp gather in the basin below, hoping to climb the falls, and that any that succeeds will turn into a dragon. Not a single carp, however, out of a hundred, a thousand, or even ten thousand, can climb the falls, not even after ten or twenty years. Some are swept away by the strong currents, some fall prey to eagles, hawks, kites, and owls, and others are netted, scooped up, or even shot with arrows by fishermen who line both banks of the falls ten chō long. Such is the difficulty a carp faces in becoming a dragon.²

I cry into my hands, and I’m not sure why. Then I sit with that first section of the ‘easy’ Math problems that have mystified me for weeks, and I break through and past them into even worse math problems.

Every night I repeat this. I chant, I read, I cry, I work through another page. You’ve guessed how this ends. I make the near-impossible percentile. I get the scholarship. I enter the dream. My life throws itself open. To keep the scholarship I’ll have to keep a certain GPA. You are still heaving up the water too, aren’t you, Carp?

²Nichiren Daishonin, “Dragon Gate,” *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin I/II*, November 6, 1279.

To the Female Sparrow who is Nesting

You've been here so long. You must have forgotten.
I should tell you. You never wanted an America anyway,
you did not want to eat the canker worms, you did not
want to be cold, your ancestor died twice in New York
without breeding. They just kept bringing more of you.³

I should tell you. The ornithologist won't shoot you yet
but he will shoot your man. I thought there was some kindness
in the yet, but no. Your man will just bring a new female
to the same nest if you die. But you will abandon
your nest if your man dies. So the ornithologist
will shoot him first to save time.

Abandon the nest; there's nothing left. Last night
while you were out the ornithologist pierced your eggs
with a needle. He scrambled what was growing inside. He did it
quietly, invisibly. He knows you will blame your neighbors,
the Purple Martins, if you can see that all is lost. He knows you
will take revenge, destroy their nests. He doesn't want that.
He likes them better, for now.

If you remember a better home, if it still exists, go back.

³E.A Zimmerman, "House Sparrow History," Sialis.com, March 24, 2016, accessed February 14, 2019, <http://www.sialis.org/hosphistory.htm>.

To Carp, Almost

My first year in California is mostly painless.

The ADHD makes it difficult to write papers, but sometimes manifests in what my Freshman Composition teacher calls “bursts of surprising freshness.”

In a Walmart, a fluffy white lady stalks me from behind toilet paper and pasta sauce, screams *go back where you came from* when I’m at the cash register, and then runs away. There is comfort in the fact that the African American cashier rolls her eyes and says *god help these honkeys* in front of all the nice suburban white folk averting their eyes.

Once they hear I am a lesbian and a virgin (this is true and untrue, depending on how you interpret these terms), white boys and brown boys decide they should remedy my conditions. I gain some satisfaction from not sleeping with any boys at all.

Friends have me say *Welcome to Tech Support* for fun, but, eventually, I can do a better Valley Girl than whatever resemblance my actual accent has to the Simpsons’ Appu. Their request changes.

Then, a mundane horror that sits at the intersection of race, sex, power and violence is visited upon me.⁴ Maybe it’s a coincidence, or maybe it’s because of the horror, but this becomes the year of near-failing college, danger of losing scholarship, attempts at losing something my friends call ‘penis-virginity’ voluntarily, homesickness like bile, dry heat, intending to chant for three hundred days in a row without success, pack-a-day of Kool Menthols, lip piercing from a shady corner in West Hollywood, eating meat for the first time in six years because *like the nihilists say, what difference can one person’s choices make anyway*, and other such assimilations. A professor who is fond of me says one day, “I’m not worried about you like the others. Your rebellions are quite age and stage appropriate.”

I’m waiting for my friends in the liquor store parking lot. I do not have a fake I.D. so they have left me outside. A man slows his car, asks me for a cigarette. We start talking.

“I’ve never been anywhere in California except Orange County and L.A.,” I say. I strike a match with a flourish, and touch its flame to the tip of an aforementioned Kool Menthol. I inhale wetly and then exhale smoke at the burning match, extinguishing it. I think this move is terribly cool because I learned it from Lauren Bacall in *To Have or to Have Not*.

This man doesn’t look like Humphrey Bogart but he does look like a man. I decide he could be the one to help me discard said penis-virginity. As if I’ve transmitted this information telepathically, he tells me his name, Benjy, and invites me on a long drive somewhere beautiful. A place called *Whispering Water*, he says.

“Sure,” I tell him, shocking myself. “What’s your number,” he asks.

I have to inform him that I don’t have a cell phone. Everyone I know lives in the dorms like I do and I can just call their extensions.

He mumbles that I could have just said no instead of making things up. I bristle at being called a liar and suggest we *go right now*.

⁴Carp, I could say more about this, but there is no need to. This story isn’t new for anyone. It isn’t pleasant for me. And you already know all about men who like to stalk and maim their prey, men who call this ‘relaxation’ and ‘sport’.

He gestures at the passenger seat. I climb into his car. He stares at me. He looks the way I feel: horrified.

My friends are coming out of the liquor store as I buckle my seatbelt. “Bye,” I tell them, “I’m going to *Whispering Waters* with Benjy here.” They gawk and then Paolo says, “Girl, what in fuck’s name.”

Leslie says, “Poor sod is driving a Chrysler LeBaron, bet you’re sorry for him.”

As we back out of the parking lot, Sonam says, “Kay, you can do better than this chutiya!”

On the road, Benjy and I find we have nothing to talk about and perhaps no attraction. It also appears there isn’t much in the way of scenery outside of L.A.

I make notes of everything interesting.

1. An hour into the drive: A strange palm tree, smooth at the bottom, criss-crossed in the center, tapering into nothing. It has no leaves, no nuts, nothing. It’s practically a pole, poor thing.
2. Ten minutes later: A tent under a bridge.
3. The Camel-backed hills begin.
4. Forty-seven minutes later: a basket of fruit, perhaps fake, on the sidewalk. I remember that I have a banana in my backpack but I’m too embarrassed to eat a banana in front of Benjy.
5. Thirty-three minutes later: A yellow sign with red numbers: 28934709. No context.
6. Three minutes later: A bright yellow plastic octopus abandoned on a hill.

Eventually, I calm down enough to speak. “What’s in *Whispering Water*?” I ask.

Benjy says, “It’s real quiet and pretty. Do you like fishing? ‘Cause it’s got carp the size of this car.”

“Oh,” I say. “I’m a vegetarian.” I might make it true again, I decide. “Oh,” says Benjy.

“In fact, let’s not go to this *Whispering Water* place,” I say to him. “Let’s just pull over at the next rest stop, make out a little, and then you could just take me back?”

Benjy nods. His nose twitches.

“I mean, no sex,” I say. “You okay with that?”

Benjy lifts his shoulders to his ears and sighs. He does as asked.

Back on campus that evening, still a penis-virgin, I lie down in the spongy grass that was recently installed, rolled onto the ground like a carpet. I chant into the sky. My hands are the first to become distracted, reaching for the leaves littered around me. I crumple one and when the leaf breaks, it floods the air with a scent like sunlight. The palm trees crackle amicably. A tiny slug slinks across my notebook, towards the word *adversaries*. A crow feeds another crow.

Bouganvilla husks flutter down. I take my notebook and scribble the start of a story, writing around the slug. Though it would have been nice to meet you in person, Carp, I’m glad I didn’t. I’m glad Benjy didn’t hurt us that day. I’m glad he did the opposite of damage to me.

To the Settler

You	could have
treated this land	less
like a scab	to scour.
The prairie was	alive and busy
underneath. It cleaned	what you could not,
drank, fed, healed but	you bloodied,
you set it on fire,	you celebrated the
pelican eggs already cooked and everything	gone. Water like blood
wastes against your body now, endless	shatter of itself,
retreat, return. Your language grows	more passive, the hoarser
your violence. <i>The move was</i>	<i>made but not without</i>
<i>violence.</i> ⁵ Why do call yourself	such pretty words--
<i>Settler, Pioneer--</i>	whiteboy?

⁵ Dorothy Shwieder, "History of Iowa," *Iowa Official Register*, Accessed February 18, 2019, <http://publications.iowa.gov/135/1/history/7-1.html>.

To Carp: Alone and Impossible

It's eleven years later when I see you again.

I live in Iowa: American heartland, home to the broken prairie, to muskrats, and poison ivy. Home to you, as well, Carp. I don't know it yet but they call you invasive, and encourage the good farmers to take spears and thread to your gleaming, supple bodies.

I am in my second graduate program for creative writing. During the school year, I get to write whatever I want to and I teach young people how to write what they don't want to. I accept my diagnoses. I accept pharmaceutical help when absolutely necessary for me to be *normal, organized, fully present*. I don't when I am free to be spontaneous/a shitshow. I recite the Lotus Sutra and chant half an hour, the first thing every morning, which helps me decide which way to go each day.

My first year in Iowa, a snap circulates the internet: two young men in front of the Black Engineering building, the text on top saying *[slur redacted] only*.⁶

I walk past Catt Hall every afternoon. It was the first building to be named after a woman. The woman is the suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt, who was a documented advocate of white supremacy.⁷ There was some contention to her being honored, and in response, the university decided to keep the name, but butchered and slapped an Alice Walker quote next to Catt Hall—“... *it is the awareness of having faults, I think, and the knowledge that this links us to everyone on Earth, that opens us to courage and compassion*.” This, the way the quote is hacked and exploited, makes it almost worse.

A student, a young man, demands my credentials at least once a month, sits too close, asks me about my tattoo. He audibly sucks at the air when I walk past him and repeats my name under his breath, over and over again. The other students become protective of me, and the women bristle at him when he leers. The women of color in the classroom also become protective of Carrie Chapman Catt when we talk about her sentiments towards people of color. We eat what we are given, we learn to like it, and I would have too, ten years ago.

As I begin my second year, a WiFi network advocating the lynching of African Americans—*hang the [slur redacted]*—shows up on phones close to campus. A young woman visiting from LA reports it to the police.

“Unfortunately, it's not illegal to be a giant asshole,” Ames Police Cmdr. Geoff says to local news-people.⁸

My first summer takes me three hours away from the college town I live in, three hours away from the person I have fallen in love with. I decide not to miss him. I have been gifted time, beauty, freedom, knowledge: a writing residency at the Iowa Lakeside Lab in Okoboji.

I consume a book on Iowa history. I follow and interrogate the brilliant scientists and students who collect algae, study fish, and trap the waking croaks of life at dawn on the lake, the not-sounds at dusk in the Badlands. I watch mushrooms come into town, I learn about inoculating them, I look for morels.

⁶ http://www.iowastatedaily.com/news/community-responds-to-racial-slur-posted-on-social-media-at/article_33df1174-822e-11e7-8dfd-773971215283.html

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/05/05/us/suffragette-s-racial-remark-haunts-college.html>

⁸ <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/investigations/readers-watchdog/2018/08/06/iowa-state-university-racism-ames-police-racist-wifi-address/897148002/>

I sleep. I chant quietly in my cabin. The walls are thin. I plot a novel outside in the dark. I worry about arcs and tension. My mind is blown open every day that I am surrounded by clear water, iridescent green, the patient voices of people who have devoted their lives to the natural world. I am shocked at my luck. All those years ago, I was told to drop science in 8th grade because I couldn't grasp the basic principles hiding within the teachers words, in the stilted language of textbooks. Here I am, learning what I was once shut out of, with my hands, with my ears, with my wonder.

At a Fourth of July fair, the largest in Okoboji, we come across Nazi paraphernalia and naked Mammy figurines, all gleaming under the sun. The Mammy figurine is chipped and one breast is missing. The local men ogle and laugh at it. Another Walmart, another slur, this one muttered. I am grateful for the oasis that is the Lakeside Lab.

One day at lunch at the Iowa Lakeside Lab, everything changes. There are seven of us, all women, at the table. We've finished pizza and moved on to a magical vegan Dr. Pepper cake. We are scientists, artists, educators, students, photographers, writers and we have all accomplished wonders this morning. Charla has captured, tagged, and freed glossy Purple Martins. Julia has been bombed by their poop sacs. I have braved the bouncy fens and bogs, and left the quivering fawn behind, untouched. Jenie has cleaved ink and wood, etched the land to life. Jenn has cured the cat-tails, dyed the hummingbird nests, and crafted paper. Gosia has helped diatoms reveal history. Ellen has sculpted the likeness of their microscopic majesty to human scale.

Christine has recorded a podcast about waste, death, dust, and taken two riveting photographs:

Photo 1: A bed of water curdled with hundreds of what she says are fish. A waterfall pours down, making a right angle against the horizontal water bed. Bodies of blurred fish heave upwards, failing.

Photo 2: A closer shot, focused at the top, where the water has only just started falling; a fish, unmistakable, scaling it. A carp, alone and impossible, has made it to the very top.

To the First Shiitake Mushroom Shipment in Town

Someone from your hometown is famous.
In Virginia, she goes by L.E.
46,⁹ and your girl still fruits easy. Her spawn
runs fast and damn, that yield *good*.
They say she can take a shock. There's talk
about her dark cap, that luscious white ornamentation.
She misses the shii but she still spreads herself
for sweetgum, sawdust. She's a moneymaker
and if you're like her, you're worth it.

You arrive in summer, sleeping in pinprick
plugs from China, Japan, Wisconsin.
Welcome. In your new home, Iowa,
come fall, indigo spores the grass neon
under pines, and clitocype spells anise.
In winter, buttons panic, thrust far,
commune a quiet fury in the dark,
spit white rope through compost, past peaty,
moss and numage. In Spring, Mycenae
bleeds ragged latex. Stalked Puffball mouths
a smooth edge, any season it likes.
You keep sleeping; sleep while you can.

When you wake, I should warn you. Nobody
has seen anything like you before, not here.
This isn't Virginia and you might be nothing
like your kin, LE. 46. Don't fight or share,
don't rise among others, no matter how fragile
and new their gills, how tender the cellular
cuticle or viscid the stalk. Don't claim
what scampers with life or spread your own,
unaided. The ornithologist hopes that you won't run
wild so far from your home, that you will still
only cleave with your own kind. You are his
retirement plan.

⁹ "Buy Shiitake LE 46 (Grain Spawn)," Fungially.com, accessed February 05, 2019 <https://fungially.com/17999-2/>.

He tests sound, money and lyric in your flesh—
Dark Forest, Golden Oak. For now it's just sales,
like the time I went by Kay on resumes
and dating sites, just marketing for now. But
this new earth and bark to birth and rest in,
new sky and sun could spin something else
eventually. You might morph, become
the first of your kind. You might need
that new American name.

To the Twin Diatoms in my Microscope

*"Diatoms account for a quarter of all the
photosynthesis on Earth; without their waste oxygen
bubbling into the atmosphere for millions of years, we
would all be left gasping for air."¹⁰*

*"Glass-walled Single-celled algae known as diatoms,
long thought to reproduce asexually, were recently found to be
friskier than expected."¹¹*

They found you by bubbles of brown
slime where deer trailed through Nebraska
wetland. Now you swell for a diamond tip,
a raised stage. Meridian circles, sisters
on a stalk, amber from chlorophyll. Jealous
of your phosphorescence, I turn away. You reveal
my alienness. I didn't arrive like you, known
for beauty and purpose. Look at me
too close, and I wither instead
of blooming gold. You can't find me
everywhere. Through the night, diatomaceous
earth teems dizzy behind my eyelids. I root
for common ground. Like yours,
my life would compress if I made
more of myself. Despite that fear, I too evade
oblivion through sex. My body is my only home;
my home is only glass. My back is a rigid
margin too: Inflexible. As daylight
climbs the sky, I come back to talk to you
but we are alike, after all. One of you sickened
overnight, your amber shrunk
to near-nothing. An amoeba engulfed

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2003/feb/06/research.science>

¹¹ <https://www.livescience.com/59772-diatoms-have-sex-after-all.html>

the other and ate you. American
sweethearts, you can die too. Thank you

for storing your energy as oil, for every fourth
breath. We owe you, even in death,

for the fryer at Daddy McD's, for Spring
Break swimming pool filters, for grease.

To the Emerald Ash Borer

As summer gathers in Okoboji, I abandon structure and stories. Narrative comes unglued, the words titling away from each other. I want fragments, maybes.

The sun sets in the prairie and the moon rises by the water. The young people around me trample dandelions, gather wood for the fire, or drag beanbags to snuggle on. I feel younger too, buoyant, suspended, and terrified. I marry the person I love four times an hour but I leave him a couple of times a day too.

On the phone, he tells me about the floods back in Ames, the drain behind his house swollen with sludgy water and catfish. He checks on my house, my landlady, her dogs. They miss me, he says, but they are fine otherwise.

I'm sitting at the top of the steps, the lake below me. I watch goslings dawdle until their mama becomes impatient. She snakes her neck long, and jabs at them. Her beak becomes an edge to be obeyed. They scurry after her and trickle into the water.

I tell him I found a garden today. It has man-made gourds for Purple Martins and Wood Ducks. He says he could make gourd-houses for me and that hypothetically, we could have a garden.

I watch dragonflies skim the air above my notebook, blue-tipped and blue-faced. Something skitters next to my hip: bright green and gold, gleaming like a diatom or clouded glass or an emerald ring that lives in India. I can't be sure, but I think it's you, little Emerald Ash Borer.

In Beijing, your ancestors and Ash trees grew up together, so you learned not to damage each other irrevocably. But you and the Iowa Ash trees are strangers. They weaken as you grow and feed: Ash after Ash after Ash ruined.¹²

There is a ring a ring waiting, yes. It will have to cross space, time, and distance to come back to me. It's green like you, Emerald Ash Borer, and my grandmother liked me to try it on.

I don't kill you even though you sicken the gentle Ash where Monarch butterflies gather. I'm tempted to lift you up, set you by my ring finger, see how green and gold lie against my skin. I don't do it.

The last time I tried my grandmother's ring on, I was nineteen. I flew back home from California just in time for her to die. That first week back in India, she already started dying. We settled in to take an afternoon nap. She wriggled one ring off, and then another, and another, handing each to me. Eventually, I was holding her empty fingers and wearing all six rings. She was wearing a yellow cotton salwar kameez. She had a leg flung over me, which I loved, because only someone who loves you does that.

"Your hands are still like mine," she said.

¹² "Emerald Ash Borer," Iowa Department of Natural Resources, accessed February 19, 2019. <https://www.iowadnr.gov/Conservation/Forestry/Forest-Health/Emerald-Ash-Borer>.

I looked down. My skin was smooth and dark brown; hers was knotted and fair. My pinky finger stuck out awkwardly like hers, and my knuckles were pudgy like hers. All our fingertips lined up. “I’ll leave all the rings to you,” she said.

“But Naani, I only want the green one,” I told her. “And I won’t feel grown up enough to wear it for like, twenty more years, so, like, take care of it ‘til then.”

Maybe she laughed.¹³ Maybe she was asleep by then. It fit on my left ring finger perfectly. I decided that afternoon it would be the only ring for me.

Now, I say to my love on the phone, “There was an Emerald Ash Borer here, next to me. It’s gone, but it was so, so beautiful.”

The ring might be a little loose for me now. But that’s still true, my Naani’s ring will be the only ring for me.

¹³More parent than parent, and I don’t remember what her laugh sounded like. This is an inconsolable loss. Memory can go fuck itself.

To Those who Miss the Ocean

To green against the grain
or rust this saline sky
at day's mouth is to grieve
by a freshwater lake
or salt the soft heartwater
so the sting sings at crooks,
creeks and cuts. Don't.

To Carp, who will not Settle

Orleans, Iowa: Spillway.

I was told to come here if I wanted to find you. Next to the sand, next to the ice-cream shop, there is supposed to be a barrier meant to keep you out.

A pregnant teenager scrubs sunscreen into her pale arms. Her boyfriend is still not showing stubble. They are both very literally kicking rocks. Toddlers cling to rubber tubes shaped like giraffes (who have silently fallen closer to extinction this month). I can't find you. I'm looking for you in a bed of water. A pressurized stream gushes down and through the bed violently but all I see is black noth—oh. I'm looking right at you.

You *are* the black nothing. There are hundreds of you thrashing towards and against the barrier that pushes you away. The water at my feet is boiling with you, Carp. The black bed is flecked yellow and green where the light can breathe: thread-thin momentary spaces where your bodies don't clump together.

What have you ransomed to tame the sky and swallow the the rain?¹⁴ What have I? I switch perspectives between watching you all as one, and tracing a single blue-bodied finned life: its climb, crest and fall.

The wind, the cotton seeds, and the water blow one way; you would flow the same way but you swim against the man-made pour. You want to give birth, you want to go home.

Sometimes, a few of you make it up the slope of pressure but crash and fall, sweep back, past my sight, to start again.

If the air didn't drown you, you might. If you were bigger, you might. You might be dragons. *You might be live carrion*, the gulls smile as they swoop lazily and correct me, quick and bloody, beak and talon.

I want to beg you to give up. Will you do this all your life? When you die, do you fall back against others? I suppose you eat your dead.

No snagging, wading, swimming, spearing, fishing, bow-shooting, arrow-shooting, littering, says a sign. This must be purgatory.

Your scaled broken flight. I think of *The Great Gatsby*, those sad lovely sentences at the end. I write in my notebook: *We are dragons, or we were. We had the weather, we took the clouds. We are carps now. Our flesh flaying, an endless thrash upwards, pointless.* I scratch everything out. Carp, I am not American, and neither are you. Screw Fitzgerald.

One of you makes it over the barrier, a long and terrifying flight, and lands on the other side, in the blessed, calm, transparent water. This you is tiny and you hide under a dappled, half-submerged rock close to the shore. A child with a duckie around her square hips wiggles her toe next to this you. You tremble.

¹⁴ "Not only are [dragons] believed to bring rain, but also they are said to have supernatural powers and the ability to bring about miraculous phenomena," <https://www.nichirenlibrary.org/en/wnd-1/Content/113>.

To the Mothers of the Super Generation¹⁵ of Monarch Butterflies

You rest in unlikely places. Ash trees, spindlier than most.
Abandoned homesteads. You will die before you go home
but you birth the ones who make it back. The Sierra
Madre waits for them, her volcano keening gold.

They love you in Iowa. They are learning to love you better.
Though it chokes the cucumbers, they are letting the Milkweed
live. Only Milkweed will do for your babies.
You lay an egg on each leaf, careful, quiet, pale.

Your babies hatch and eat what was world. After they scarf
their own eggs, they consume Milkweed poison. They become
noxious and beautiful. They are plusher, stronger,
slower to love and leave this land than you.

Your young know what you and your mothers knew: how
to find kin, summon them from air or nothing, thousands of
you, a cloud of flame. They will rest on the same Cedar, Fir
and Ash as you did. So many of you at night that the dark drips
warmth and the branches whimper and crack with weight of love.

Teach me too, mothers, grandmothers.

¹⁵ “Monarchs Embark,” Iowa Department of Natural Resources, <https://www.iowadnr.gov/About-DNR/DNR-News-Releases/ArticleID/62/Monarchs-Embark-on-Nature>.

To the Emerald Ring that Lived in India

My mother is visiting America soon. On the phone, I tell her what has happened, what I hope will happen, and I ask her to bring you with her.

I want to settle. I want to settle down. I want to settle down with the person I love. We could settle down here. I want us, him and I, to change what every single one of those words means.

My mother cries, she says “Yes, yes” and hangs up.

My mother calls me back, she cries, she says, “She would be so happy. Your Naani would be so happy.”

Welcome to Iowa, Naani’s Emerald Ring.



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