

SHANA GRAHAM

Dear Lover / Dear City

*I had a lover / I thought he was mine
Thought I'd always be his valentine
Leaning against the railing of a Lake Charles bridge
Overlooking the river leaning over the edge
He asked me "would you jump into the water with me?"
I told him no way baby that's your own death you see.
—Lucinda Williams, "2 Kool 2 Be 4-Gotten"*

DEAR LOVER,
The last Saturday I spent with you, we drank Manhattans made with bourbon I brought over. We ate thin slabs of goat gouda and Idiazabel, wrapped in delicate white paper, that you'd chosen from the market downtown.

It was early April 2020, the Seattle nights still cold, and we warmed ourselves by the gas fireplace in the home we used to share. The living room now staged with swivel chairs and fluffy rugs. A bowl of fake green apples and a propped-open cookbook on the gleaming kitchen counter. Hand sanitizer and a placard warning potential buyers of COVID home-viewing regulations by the front door. Our little dogs – my Dov Bear and your new Milo – chased and tumbled like siblings across the wide, wooden floor.

Playing house in our own house. You said you liked it this way: no clutter, nothing extra, everything precisely placed. To me, it was both idyllic and eerie – an uncanny valley simulacrum of our lives. So close to real, so close I would have given almost anything to surrender and stay there forever.

I knew it was all wrong. That I had left you, this house, a year prior, for good reason. That we both knew you were lying when you said you'd never hurt me again. When you said we could go home, maybe even find a way to keep this home. When you said you were clean.

But I had decided I needed you. That this encroaching pandemic, this would-be apocalypse, was a sign, my beacon back to where I belonged. And need, perceived or otherwise, is a steadfast soldier for magical thinking.

The night ended badly, of course. An argument about money, work, future, but really *who is to blame for this mess we're in and who is responsible for getting us out?* That familiar feeling when the walls, the floor, the ceiling start to hum and crackle with invisible blue lightning like we're inside a bug zapper. Our plates of take-out lasagna and salad half-eaten on the long, glass dining table. You

grimacing, yelling, I can't remember what, it doesn't matter what, lips flared, teeth bared. Me folding in on myself in the black leather chair, words swallowed deep into my ribs. You storming out to smoke on the back stoop. Me crying in the narrow bathroom downstairs. That mirror framed with sea-green tiles where my face always looks so tragic, so pretty even when it's twisted and streaked. Thinking, with a twinge of nostalgia, about all the months and years of nights I'd ended in that bathroom, ended just like that.

I walked back into the familiar, not-familiar kitchen and stood across from you in a familiar, not-familiar pose and said, "Am I going to have to leave here tonight, because if I am, I should probably go now before I drink more, so I can drive."

I wanted you to say, *No, of course not!* I wanted you to say, *Stay. Please. Let's make this better. Let's sit and have some wine and the tiramisu I bought for dessert.* I wanted you to say, *I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gotten mad like that. Let me hold you and care for you tonight like I intended and let's sleep in our big bed in each other's arms and wake to the sun streaming through those long windows and the clouds sweeping by so very fast and it will be just like the first morning we ever spent here, like the first morning ever, and we will begin, again, begin, again.*

I wanted you to say all of these things, even though I knew they were as false as the apples on the kitchen counter and the staged child's room upstairs with its mini-guitar and stuffed bear and colorful bedspread.

Instead you looked at me, hard. "If I say yes, are you going to get mad at me again because you didn't get what you want?"

I gathered my dog and my booze and my backpack. I walked out the front door, I didn't turn back, fingertips tingling, gulping the cool, dark air like water. Buzzed and steady and glad. My own private cinema: See me climb into my car. See me drive straight and sure down narrow streets, out the silent neighborhood and back to my shuttered city. The streetlights blink from vacant crossings. The bars all battened down and reverent. On a skyscraper in the distance, windows are lit to form a pixel-heart, pulsing bright and dark, bright and dark. I'm the only one in the world on a Saturday night. I am leaving. I am leaving. This time, I'm really leaving.

DEAR CITY,

Confinement. Contraction. Back in April 2020, in the early days of this new pandemic-world, I reveled in your holy lull.

I was newly alone, having left my troubled 13-year marriage a year before, then returned to it, and to our big, strange, staged-for-sale home, on and off through recent months, before finally leaving for good. I was determined to stay gone

this time. Trying to current through those moments of panic that washed in, hours and days unfurling, empty, before me. Relearning, falteringly, how to be alone. Even relearning who I was alone: what I liked to do with my evenings, what I liked to cook for myself, how to relax into the alarming quiet of my own company without escaping into one easy distraction or another.

Almost daily, I walked the same ritual four or five blocks around my building with my pup. The boarded-up restaurants and bars painted with colorful *Stay Home*, *Stay Safe* and *Stand Six Steps Back* and *Promise You Love Me* murals, the city stripped of its usual throngs of visitors and workers down to just us residents with our dogs and strollers and Frisbees. I sat in the sun in Cal Anderson Park as spring bloomed into summer and pretty girls lay on blankets reading books and couples volleyed balls back and forth – the only sign of the virus a smattering of face masks. I listened to the wind shimmer through the grass and ripple Dov Bear’s fur. I breathed in silence. The blanketing quiet, absent that familiar city buzz and grind of construction and traffic and planes and commerce. And I thought: it is good. I remembered, for the first time in decades, those glorious summers of childhood that seemed to last forever, to contain entire lands and lifetimes in a single season because you weren’t coming from or going anywhere. Because your life was still slow and new enough to contain them.

April 2020 felt a little like that. Like a contraction into renewal. I knew it was not all this way, though. I saw the reports filtering in, we all did: make-shift medical tents spilling across parking lots; over a million sick at the beginning of April and three million by April’s end; someone who knew someone who had it; someone who knew someone who’d died; schools and businesses shuttering; millions out of work; panic building on every perimeter.

But for the moment, in the park, a violinist played Chopin, his bow gliding and trilling with a ballerina’s grace, his case open for dollars. A couple paused on their stroll across the grass to embrace and kiss through their face masks. Maybe there was actually hope for us, redemption hidden even in this affliction.

One of those afternoons, on my walk home, I saw two small posters side-by-side, bright pink with black type, plastered to the outside wall of a building:

1. Dear Lover, I need less than I thought I did.
2. Dear City, We need less than we thought we did.

And they felt like the summation of everything.

Then, George Floyd was murdered, and the silence cracked and howled, and the sidewalks burned, and the flash bangs flared like ugly stars, and just after 2 a.m. on June 16th, a bullet arced through the sky and crashed onto my second-floor patio right next to Dov Bear's fake-grass doggy potty.

And I realized nothing is the summation of everything. It was just a moment. A pause. A contraction before the real explosion. Before the whole world started screaming.

DEAR LOVER,

Reasons I didn't leave*:

(*Throughout the months and years. In no particular order.)

Because there's a pandemic razing its way across the globe and everywhere is locking down tight and everyone we know may soon be sick, may soon be dead, oh here it comes, and how can I, we, possibly be expected to weather this alone? Isn't this — times like this — the reason we bind ourselves together in the first place? To not be alone, to survive, when everything else crashes and fails? Look, I've already bought us these tender filets of cod, fresh crusty bread, apples, lettuce, a stockpile of frozen meals and individual melty chocolate cakes and canned goods and toilet paper and hand sanitizer. I've filled all the water bottles with tap water, just in case. I've made the bed, set out the fluffiest pillow for you. Haven't women throughout all of time been making these same, sober calculations, exchanging self for survival? Isn't it a rarified privilege, hubris even, despite all my modern rhetoric, to not believe myself bound, inextricably, to these same calculations? Doesn't this moment call forth its own desperation, its own dark calculus? Take me to your cave. Keep me safe. Make me a warm bed. Make me nothing.

Because it's Monday. I'll wait until the weekend. It'll be easier to leave on the weekend.

Because the last time I took you back it was the eve of Yom Kippur and you came to Kol Nidre with me, the sweet sad melody of that most holy, communal *I'm sorry* wafting over us, the cantor thumping his fist against his chest. I took you home to my bed that night, how could I not, awash with the fervor of forgiveness. In the morning, I held you as you cried over all you'd lost, trailing your tears with my fingertips and pressing my face into your wet, bready cheeks. You whispered, *I want to keep you safe*, and I wrapped myself in those words like a vow, already absolved.

Because it's winter. I'll wait to leave until it's warmer out. Less rain, less sad. Sunshine and bravery and new beginnings and all that bullshit.

Because I'm afraid to be alone, of course. Terrified of the bombed-out territory in my head. Of what's left if I quit the incessant, miserable, thrilling occupation of tending this minefield of a marriage where the wrong word, wrong glance, wrong shift in the weather blows the whole house to hell.

Because we have a trip planned to the coast, a dinner with friends, a party to attend, a big and beautiful home, the cutest little dog, an expensive painting of a glowing, mechanical rhino that we chose together at a gallery in Laguna Beach, a favorite restaurant where everyone knows us and we huddle in our back booth and share beef bourguignon and drink too much wine, a story that began when we were young and dumb and good and is supposed to end with us gliding through Italy and Spain in some ripe and luxurious visage of old age, it's all so perfect, how lucky we are, see how lucky we are?

Because this wasn't supposed to happen to me, the strong one, the smart one, the lucky one. Everyone knows I would never let this happen to me.

Because my parents are coming to visit next month. I'll wait until they're here to catch me, to give me safe landing.

Because someone hurt you, once. Filled you with this venom that's now my inheritance. Oh, sweet boy with your fists concealing tears, I see you there. I know you don't want to be this way. Let me make it better.

Because maybe you're right about me. Maybe all the things you say about me are true. How can they not be? You know all my secrets. You've seen me splayed and broken, bare. Maybe you know what no one else knows. Maybe you're the only one who can redeem me.

Because you smiled at me in that sweet, twelve-year-old way I love more than anything last night. Not the half-smile you often restrain because you think your grin looks dopey. The real deal— toothy and cheeks bursting and eyes shimmering blue, and told me you loved me. Told me you loved me more than yourself.

Because when you confessed to me, the first time I came back after filing for divorce, the pills and powders and potions that had consumed your secret life for years. Drained our savings, collapsed your law partnership, roiled and seethed and quaked you into something unrecognizable, I thought I'd finally be mad. Should be mad. It all made so much sense. The monster I'd been up against that I couldn't even see, that I'd thought maybe was me. But instead, all I wanted was to take you in my arms.

Because you've never actually struck me, never left visible marks, never drawn blood. Never in all the nights I ran, the nights I hid. The office with its wooden

door kicked to splinters. The damp corner of the patio where I huddled while you loomed over me, bloated shadow, spitting invective like rain. The closet where I lay fetal beneath your newly dry-cleaned suits, sounds of stomping and shattering and slamming downstairs, wondering if this was the night you'd actually harm me. And, sickly, hoping you would. Just a little. Just enough. Will anyone believe me? Do I believe myself?

DEAR CITY,

Summer 2020. Is your memory as wrecked as mine? Fragmented into fever dreams? Fractured days and nights, phantom or real flares and flash-booms?

Let's reassemble:

Home: My little sanctuary, smack in the core of Seattle's Capitol Hill. My tiny cave that I leased when I first left my marriage almost a year ago. 12th Avenue between Pike and Union in a building above a florist, a Mexican restaurant, a Japanese burger place, a dog groomer, all open-and-closed-and-take-out-and-closed as varying COVID safety directives passed through. My would-be home to retreat and recover and reemerge, when the time came, all fire and phoenix into my city's open arms.

East Precinct: A block-and-a-half north of my cave at 12th and Pine. White-washed brick, blue metal rails, lots of sun-sparkling glass that reflects the green foliage of its tree-lined corner. I'll admit, when I moved here, fleeing violence and fearing more—the most dangerous time for a woman is often when she finally leaves—I took some small comfort in the cop-shop's nearness. This despite my longstanding distrust of its broken institution, the vast damage in its wake. But now, just a cry for help away—for me, at least: white, female. I know. I know all the reasons this turns upside down, insideout.

Stand-off: It is two weeks after Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on George Floyd's neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds while Floyd pled for his life and one week after the first Seattle protests raged and scorched their way through downtown's office blocks and department stores and wound up Capitol Hill to 11th and Pine. Peaceful protest turned police-incited flash point. People packed tight and angry into those wide blocks between Cal Anderson Park to the north, the police station to the southeast. Here are the protesters with their signs, their bikes, their children, their water bottles.

They are parents and anarchists and leaders and librarians. Their umbrellas are raised to the sky in a patchwork of color that resembles, from above, the undulating vibrancy of a butterfly wing. Bright rose, sunny gold, geometric rings of purple and white, whirly-twirl triangles in neon-green and orange and turquoise. Umbrellas that have become the practical and ironic symbol of Seattle's protest: not to shield from rain—no respectable Seattleite wields an umbrella for rain—but from the tear gas and flash bangs and other airborne munitions that have been barraging this growing line of resistance all week. Here are the police, black-armored and stiff and poised to defend their fort. They have all sorts of faces, too, but it's hard to see them behind their bug-eyed gas masks and their glistening, plexiglass shields.

DEAR LOVER,

When I first glimpsed your rage, it shocked me. I'll admit: it also aroused in me a familiar comfort.

An early instance:

We're at my parents' place in upstate New York, a glorified log cabin on acres of green where in the morning crickets buzz and deer prance across the lawn. We're still in our twenties, together several years but not married yet, and it's been an easier kind of love than I've ever experienced. Almost effortless, so that sometimes I wonder at its lack of hairpin twists I'd always associated with passion. The dramas that I remind myself, with what I believe is growing sophistication, are really dysfunction. I step out onto the upper level deck to look for you, and your voice reaches me first, blade from below. You do not see me. You're pacing the grass, slicing your hand this way and that to emphasize words you're blasting into your phone. I've never heard you like this. At first I can't believe it's you. A tirade of epithet — not just anger but abject cruelty. You are attacking someone. You are choosing the most personal and damaging words you can find to cut deep and raw. You seem to be drawing energy from it, fuel that jolts through you across the quiet, blue sky. In your face, I recognize a kind of joy.

Later, I will learn it was your mother on the other end of the phone. I will commiserate with you about your painful history with her. I will wake in the middle of the night, chilled as your voice echoes in my head. Despite my veneer of strength, if anyone ever spoke to me like that, I would fold, crack, break. Of course, you never would, never will turn that wrath on me. And besides, if anyone dared speak to me like that, I'd be gone in an instant.

I'll curl my body against your sleeping one, your gentle snore and warm chest, and know that I am safe. That you will protect me. That you will eviscerate anyone who tries to harm me, to cross us.

Later, you will swerve into parking lots, all manic fury, to berate people who pull in front of us too abruptly on the road. You will make men bleed for talking to me wrong in bars, on street corners, your fists glistening red and spatter blooming on your cheeks, your jaw. You will pummel legal opponents, co-workers, housemates, customer service agents, all with triumphant verbal animus. You will make strangers cry.

I will be horrified. I will feel safe, proud, untouchable. I will be scared. I will feel loved.

For a long time, I am right: you never turn this fury on me. When you finally do, it is like a language I've long studied, long awaited, and I bend to it naturally, folding and cracking and breaking, then stepping up for more like I've been doing it all my life.

DEAR CITY,

June 6, Saturday. Chris and Emily converge from their various local hideaways to visit me and join the protests. We want to help, to learn, to witness, to lend our bodies and voices to this collective reckoning. I take them around my new neighborhood, its COVID-hermitude cracked open into streets bustling with people, sidewalk memorials with photographs of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, votives in white and lemon-yellow, wilted flowers strewn about. There's an easier energy today, calmer, even somewhat festive. We traverse the rainbow-painted crosswalk at Pine and stroll onto the Cal Anderson playing field, soft green turf, the gentle warmth of late-afternoon sun flicking our bare shoulders. Young people are clustered with friends and dogs, drawing new signs on scraps of cardboard with red and black Sharpies. A woman in cargo shorts with ribbons woven into long braids offers us slices of pizza from a box. A man is skipping about, tossing donuts to people, chirping "Not for Cops!"

There's a heady air around of generosity, conviviality, anger and grief channeled now into mass resistance. You can feel it: the rush and hum and palpable excitement of something happening, something real and meaningful and alive. Change afoot, history afoot, the pull of being present for it, part of something larger than ourselves, and especially now, especially after all the inert and dormant, early-pandemic weeks of isolation and dread.

I tell my friends with some relief that things have been calmer these last 24 hours since the city announced a moratorium on tear gas. That earlier this week,

this very park where we stood was the scene of warzone-like pandemonium. Hordes armed with little but water bottles and umbrellas scrambling from police-fired flash-grenades, trapped and crushed against the metal-grate fencing that encloses the playing field. Barricades built out of dumpsters, friends evacuating their children in the middle of the night because gas was seeping in through their windows and choking them with chemical tears. But now, look now, this was a model of what peaceful protest, meaningful dissent, could be. For a moment, we allow ourselves to believe this and we revel in our afternoon, our opportunity to stand, united with so many, on the right side of history.

Then the air tingles, you can feel it, juiced and jacked, seconds before it happens, that animal sense for weather and danger deep in our cells. Something rising, dense and charged like a thousand bees humming at once. The first boom, blasting from the police stand and splintering against blue sky. Slow-motion after that. A scream that unfolds from all corners at once. The front line of protesters that packs an entire city block ripples and bends and folds in on itself like a wounded mammal. Another lightning flash, thunder crack. Sky splitting, hissing, pavement smoking, busting, people running, and we are running, too, even though someone is yelling, “Don’t run! Don’t panic! Walk calmly!” But it’s too late.

DEAR LOVER,

Reasons I left:

Because at some point that animal sense for danger and weather kicks in. Cold sparks along the back of my neck, my fingertips. The dizzying and sober recognition that this is about survival. This is not hyperbole. No one else is going to save me.

I’ll leave myself little breadcrumb trails, tiny Mayday signals.

Scratched on a receipt, tucked in a book: *Save yourself. It’s almost too late!*

Typed on my phone at 3 a.m. while crouched on the furnace stoop in the muddy slit of grass between our house and the next: *It’s now or never, person. Everyone knows that, including you. This is not your death. This is not your dark. Choose to live.*

Scrawled in black Sharpie, all caps, on the back page of a notebook: *HELP! HELP!! Please! DO IT!*

Even then, it will take months, years.

Begin, again: Morning, wake. Sun streaming, clouds sweeping. Slip silent from the corner of the California King. Be ready downstairs with his peanut butter toast and hard-boiled egg, coffee. Set them out just so and wait for him

to descend the stairs before touching your own simple breakfast. Scan his eyes, his gait, the way he twists his lips and how he greets the dog for marks of mood. Portents to your own navigation. Smile and grip the cool white countertop, raft upon the looming menace of new day. Say no wrong words. Broach no tainted topics. Avert all the little flares that can burn a day to slabs and bones before it ever has a chance. Smile. Smile and forget. Smile and hold on tight.

Begin, again: Morning, wake. Sun streaming, clouds sweeping...

DEAR CITY,

June 7, Sunday. Chris, Emily, and I have spent all night hiding in my little cave and stealing some levity. Getting high and dressing in costumes and fake furs and leg warmers and superhero capes. Flying and buzzing and laughing and fucking like it's the end of the world.

Now we three set out for a walk, again, along with Dov Bear. The streets are misty and damp today, everything shrouded in a dreamy slate, our heads tender and cloudy from lack of sleep. Our shoes make gentle, slapping sounds on the pavement as we stroll through the much smaller flock of protesters, still holding tired, sacred court at 11th and Pine. We join them for a bit, then head west and west some more, down toward the skyscrapers and cranes and gleam of Seattle's waterfront.

I haven't walked this far west since the pandemic shutdowns began nearly three months ago. Haven't crossed the threshold between Capitol Hill and downtown, even though it's only a ten-minute walk from my cave. As we arrive at this border, the streets gape, wide and empty and windswept, and we hush. This once bustling shopping and office district, Nordstrom, Old Navy, Forever 21, P.F. Chang's, already closed for COVID, and now all the glass display windows busted in and patched over with crude plywood, shards strewn across sidewalks, slashes of graffiti and scars from last weekend's protests and fires. Through a small gap in the boards nailed over Macy's storefront, I glimpse what at first, alarmingly, appears to be a body lying supine in a pool of smashed glass, one arm contorted at the wrong angle above its head. A mannequin, fallen and stripped. A billboard painted on the side of a brick building shows a stylish, slick-haired woman holding a cell phone to her ear, black sunglasses, black pants suit, black face mask.

The rain starts up, a gentle patter. We trudge slow and solemn through our wrecked city, our post-something city — not post-war or post-apocalypse, but what else, what other memory or terminology do we have by which to contemplate this particular desolation? Post-what and pre-what? Nothing

is over. Nothing has begun. No one else around except a few homeless folks dragging along or sleeping, crumpled, on narrow, metal benches. Empty city. Burned city. Scarred city on a Sunday summer afternoon.

We descend into Pike Place Market, that quintessential Seattle hub, and all of a sudden there are people. A few families with kids, cameras, fanny-packs, face masks, snapping photos of each other in front of the original Starbucks. Tourists! The strangest incongruity, to find them here, now, still.

The Beecher's cheese shop is open. Chris ducks in and buys a little cardboard bowl of mac & cheese, and we pass plastic forks and scoop heaping mouthfuls as we drift toward the Sound, the noodles rich and warm and soothing, the rain coming harder now.

That evening, after Chris and Emily depart, I'll head out to join the protests and arrive at 11th and Pike just minutes after a man slams his car through barricades and onto a street jammed with people, then shoots a protester who tries to stop him. I'll spend the night on crazed alert, booms and bangs and whirs and screams – who knows anymore if they're real or in my head. I'll try to coax myself to sleep with bourbon. Licorice tea. Massage my own temples, neck, shoulders. Pace my small cave from bedroom to bathroom to couch and back, again. Lay on the floor and slide on my sleep mask, the cool dark, Dov Bear tucked in the nook of my knees, and... what's that sound? Crackle and hiss. Is the East Precinct burning? Is the whole neighborhood going up? My building engulfed? Why did I never plan a way out? I'll press my fingers to my neck and feel my machine-gun pulse, heart thrashing. *Try to breathe, slowly, breathe, girl, breathe.* It's 4 a.m., now it's 4:21, now 4:55, 5:03, 5:05. *Shhhhh... breathe.*

Finally, the sun will glint through my narrow alley and I'll climb up to my building's rooftop deck. Lift my chin to feel the new air on my cheeks, my lips. Begin, again. Begin, again.

DEAR LOVER,

I'm sitting on a cold, metal chair on the rooftop deck of my building, my back corner perch above the swirl and clamor of the neighborhood. Blur of the downtown skyline at dusk, sooty oranges, smeared greys, the smell of something burning. Clack-whir of a helicopter in the distance — a constant these past weeks. Someone told me helicopter noise is used tactically in war zones or areas under siege, its unrelenting whir known to produce anxiety and even psychosis in those who cannot escape it.

I pull your wedding band from my purse, where I've kept it these past months since you hurled it at me in rage the night before I filed for divorce. Shameful talisman. Why does it still feel like shelter?

I massage it in my palm until the metal warms. Drop its soft weight over my thumb, even though it's too big. Spin it in rhythmic turns. Take a photo of my hand against the city backdrop, fingers curled over ringed thumb in a kind of caress. In the foreground, on the geometric, composite-slat floor of the roof, someone has arranged a set of Jenga blocks to spell "ONE <3."

How many times these past months have I come here with your ring? Come alone to drink, to smoke, to perform on myself the tiny violences that make me feel close to you? I gulp bourbon from a pink plastic sippy cup and feel the burn flare my throat, my chest. *Yes, just like that.* I imagine drinking enough that I'll actually do it. Let the ring be my magnet. Follow it down to the street in a wobbly trance, no decisions now, no need to be strong or brave. South along the soggy city sidewalks, Dov Bear dragging her nose in the wet grass, dirt, cigarette butts, greasy paper plates, someone's puke from last night. Everything a beautiful blur until suddenly I'm there, just a mile away, at the steps to our big house. I let myself in. I still have my key. I float up the stairs.

Now it's morning and sun is everywhere, shooting thick streams through windows and glass doors and skylights. I'm in our bed. You walk in and find me...

What are these lacerations, these burns that get mutated, coded as safety, even as pleasure? What is it about your violence that makes me feel loved? That still sirens me home?

Find me here exactly where you left me, where you always knew I'd return. Sneer at my weakness. Curse me while I crawl across the bedroom floor, prostrate, my face wet against the rough carpet. Tell me I'm a baby, a fucking child. Let me lock myself in the huge closet and cry while I make myself cum. Let me lock myself in the downstairs bathroom with the pretty green tiles, again, again, and howl at myself in the mirror, my mouth, my cheeks all fun-house contorted. I love the way you lie. I love the way you make me feel alive.

DEAR CITY,

Surrender?: I watch them roll out, a funereal procession of black armored vehicles gliding ghost-quiet from their battered fortress, stuffed with office equipment, case files, duffels of guns, anything of value. After more than a week of standoff, 24/7 protests, the Seattle Police Department is abandoning the East Precinct. We didn't expect this. Even Seattle's police chief claims she was unaware of the plan. I hear they fear the place might burn that night.

Seattle People's Department: Instead, within hours, the corner is flocked with citizens of all ages and races, speeches, teach-ins, a screening of Ava DuVernay's *13th*. The most peaceful night in weeks. When I take Dov for her walk the next morning, someone has spray painted "Seattle People's Department" over the Seattle Police Department sign, someone is building a free food and supplies "No Cop Co-op" on the sun-soaked pavement, Seattle's fire chief is chatting congenially with a protester by the bagel shop across the street, and CHOP, the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest, is born.

CHOP: At first CHOP is a relief. A living monument to the trauma of weeks past, an organic experiment in channeling all that darkness into collective action. Artists paint a massive BLACK LIVES MATTER mural down the middle of Pine Street, swirling the interiors of the letters with vibrant yellows, aquas, and pinks. Visitors snap photos and stop by the education booth to pick up photocopied pamphlets on systemic racism and defunding the police. Tents crowd Cal Anderson Park and campers till soil, plant vegetables and herbs, stock community kitchens. At a tent outside Rancho Bravo Tacos, volunteer medics in black jeans and ear gauges treat injuries and offer bottled water and face masks.

Leadership: Trump tweets to Seattle's leaders: *take back your city NOW. If you don't do it, I will. This is not a game. These ugly Anarchists must be stooped [sic] IMMEDIATELY.* Seattle's Mayor, Jenny Durkan, tells CNN, *We could have the summer of love.*

DEAR LOVER,

It's getting darker. The wind is coming, skimming in little gusts across my rooftop, and I hug my knees to my chest. Sounds waft and whisper, disembodied from their sources: chanting (somewhere in CHOP?), crackle (a megaphone?), hiss (fire?), and that unrelenting thwack-thwack-thwack-thwack (helicopters? yes, helicopters...) that I always hear now.

I dump the rest of my bourbon over the side of the building. Descend to my cave, lock the door, prop the alarm against the knob so it will shrill if you come. You've been agitated these past days. Texting me rants that spin out over hours and seem to get tangled in their own foamy furor, dissociate from meaning or object.

I'm alert to tiny noises all night that have no discernable source. When I close my eyes, I imagine all of them are you. You've breached the entry. You're

scaling the walls into my alley. You're outside my window. You're standing over my bed, high and venom-eyed, that combination of frenzy and absence that scares me more than anything.

I check the locks. I shut the window, even though it's too hot inside. I lie wide-eyed in the dark, listening, waiting.

DEAR CITY,

Juneteenth Eve, I'm battened in my cave. So many booms outside. Boom and every heart in the neighborhood hammers at once, attuned to weeks of flash bangs, even though we know it's been fireworks all night for CHOP's Juneteenth celebrations and protests. Boom, my laptop open to Twitter #seattleprotests and Twitch where people are broadcasting 1st-person POV, wargame-video-style live-streams of the streets just outside my walls. Boom and hundreds huddled in our stacked apartments check Omari Salisbury's Twitter feed, that saint of Seattle citizen journalists who's been covering all of this from the start and is now reading those booms like weather: Potentially fireworks but cannot confirm. Hold. A minute later: Confirming fireworks, to the gratitude, hundreds of twitter-hearts, and communal exhale of the neighborhood.

When I hear several quick boom-booms in rapid succession just after climbing into bed and shutting the lights around 2 a.m., I whisper, "Fireworks."

Moments later, a bigger boom. No, a crash like someone's dropped a piece of furniture or a small animal on the deck just outside my bedroom window. I startle upright, shout, "What the fuck was that?" No answer. I peer into the black but can't see a thing. I'm afraid to investigate further, uncertain what I might find or what might still be coming. Somehow, I sleep.

When I survey my deck the next morning, nothing has changed. I look everywhere, inspect patio table and chairs, inside planters. Nothing. I know I didn't imagine it. I know it was real. Right?

Then I see it, a small, rocket-nosed, copper bit, resting just beside Dov's doggy potty. I reach for it, heart racing. Pluck it up and weigh its cool heft. Cradle the bullet in my palm.

DEAR LOVER,

I lied. I came back one more time. April 2020, the very next day, Sunday.

Morning, wake. Alone in my cave where I retreated, stowed away, last night. Nest of blankets, velvety sky-blue comforter and too many pillows and golden

light seeping through my alley window. Dov nestled in my knees. Do not slip out of bed. Breathe in this calm, the day quiet, untouched, unconcerned.

The day doesn't even seem to know I'm there. This hush, this lull, what is this element stillness? No thwack, blasts, minefield. I think: it is good?

When you text me, ask if I want to walk in the park together, I almost don't reply.

But then I do, of course. That dogged soldier, need. That story, *home, safety*, threadbare and mangled and somehow I ache for it more than ever as it disappears from reach. How quickly I imagine us walking in the sunshine with the dogs, you apologizing for last night, *I never should have let you leave*, a make-up dinner, a Sunday night cozy in our big bed. Begin, again, begin, again...

When we meet up and try to walk, you are shivery and pallid, bone-tired, sick to your stomach and foul of mood. You tell me it's because you ate all the tiramisu, drank too much bourbon, after I left, and I nod, sympathize, even as I know it's a lie. I try to come up with things for us to do, to say, to fill the afternoon and evening. I grasp for my vanishing story: a game of backgammon, a glass of wine, take-out from the Vietnamese place down the street. Finally we are lying on either side of our wide bed watching episodes of *The Tiger King*, both pups tucked into various limbs. This Sunday evening repose, but I can feel it caving and sinking even as we laugh at the right times to the dumb show. Even as the light outside fades crimson, pink, flint and pearl just like any perfect night, and I want to watch one more episode, and you want me to leave because you're not feeling well, and I know it's because you need another fix to feel better, and I don't want to leave because I know if I do, I'll never come back.

Then, for the first time all night, you touch me. You reach over and place your hand on my arm. And I yield, mercy, I melt, this awful tenderness. I fold toward you, oh surrender, lay my cheek against your chest. Flushed, soft, a little damp and sour-sweet. Home? I start to cry. I can't fucking help it, I start to cry.

"Why are you crying?" you ask.

"I want to be home," I say, reaching, teary, pathetic. "I need to be here, in our bed, safe, home."

Before it was me who was leaving and now, somehow, even as I know it's all wrong, even as this bed, this house, turn sinkhole before me, it's me grasping, begging. Even as I know that walking back into this crumbling story means relinquishing my own, for good. Submerging. Stopping.

You look pensive for a moment, and I think you might actually ask me to stay. Then you shake your head in frustration, look at me hard. You see the look on my face, the crack beginning. "What?" you say, "Now you're going to get mad

at me, again? You don't need to be here. You want to be here. And you can't get mad anytime you don't get exactly what you want."

"I'm not mad," I protest, crying harder now as I gather my backpack, my dog. "I'm sad. Not mad. Sad!"

And I *am* sad. And also, I know you're right. I don't need to be there. I don't even want to be there. You're right.

Then I'm outside, again. Sitting on the front steps of our house with Dov, again. Cool air. Silent neighborhood. Again. Again. Through the wide window of our bedroom, above, the murmur and glow, flush of multi-colored lights, of the TV show you're already watching. And through the lower sliding door, the dim mausoleum of our staged living room. I take a photo, so I'll remember. I sit until my fingertips are numb, my cheeks dry. I sit until I know, for sure. Then I leave. I leave and, finally, I never go back.

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