

Development

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There is just the throughline of the road and trees pushing up against it. Most of the time in Maryland, I am not sure if we are going through a town or if we are in the middle of nowhere. The trees could be obscuring anything or nothing. As we get closer to Bel Air, the tapered ends of many tree branches are swaddled by webs, so that the trees remind me of patients, hands wrapped in gauze.

Then we make a left and suddenly the trees are stepping back from evenly spaced driveways and identical faux-colonial townhomes of the Sweet Pond Lane.

“It’s only temporary,” my fiancé, Mike, reminds me. We are new to suburbia. Sweet Pond Lane is like a hotel hallway. He retrieves a key from under a rock, and we let ourselves into the empty townhouse his father has been halfheartedly trying to sell from a distance. I know it’s just until we find a place in Baltimore.

We sleep, and when we wake, the light is bright through the paper shades over the windows. Inside, there are plenty of white walls to stare at. Thin walls. I hear our neighbor’s cupboards opening and closing. The new carpeting hardly gives under your

feet. The wood floors scratch easily. All the rooms are big; the remnants of our Venice Beach one-bedroom wouldn't fill up one of them. We don't even try. We bring in necessities, toiletries, a breakfast table with two stools. Everything else stays in boxes in the garage. At breakfast, Mike and I sit at our small table in a big room.

We have crossed the whole country with a U-Haul to get here. We have crossed the whole country to get here, for me, so I can go back to school.

But I am already ungrateful. I am homesick for my homes.

I miss the open plains of North Dakota, where every threat is a threat you can see coming. I miss the dropped horizon, a horizon that skims your ankles: the sky there is a deep overturned bowl, with rows of clouds hulking off into the distance, behind other clouds, like herds of white bison. I miss California, where I met Mike. I miss Venice Beach when it was overcast and the water was like molten metal, like melted nickel. On those days, no one came; it felt like an abandoned carnival. I miss how the orange lights of the pier puddled in the ocean.

I go for a walk around the neighborhood. The townhouses in this new development are like rows of straightened teeth. Every home has shutters that don't shut, windows pretending to be made of separate panes. Every home has a front door that is eight steep steps up, and through the high windows I can only see our neighbors' ceilings. I notice that all the light fixtures are the same as ours. I have the uncomfortable suspicion that underneath the light fixtures we are living a string of identical lives, connected at identical walls, up and down Sweet Pond Lane, like paper dolls joining hands lovelessly.

I can tell our townhouse apart because it's at the end, across the street from the mailboxes, next to a vacant and sunken lot that Mike informed me is a drained pond. It is an affront to beauty, I think, to build all your houses the same and drain your ponds .

Could you live here? Mike asks.

No.

Neither could I.

It is too hot to go anywhere. It is too hot for weeks; the days are sweaty hands. I dodge them inside. We are trying to move to the city, but we are not trying that hard. We wait for an apartment that feels like it could be ours. We wait in a space that doesn't feel like anybody's. That doesn't remind us of ourselves.

We spend time with Mike's family. They gossip about people I don't know. What would I rather talk about? I forget what I usually talk about. How I usually talk. When I do talk, I feel my own words blurring and stretching. I feel my o's taking on a warm cast, lit by u's and double-u's. I sit awkwardly on the couch and listen, wearing clothes abandoned by one of Mike's cousins because I have no clothes for equatorial weather. I sit like I am uncomfortable; I am having a hard time remembering how I used to sit, used to move. I have a hard time making decisions. I exhaust myself with comparisons. The temperature and architecture, these family members, the ones here and the ones there.

Everything I own is in boxes in the garage. I have forgotten what I have. I think I might have nothing.

After a row of still days attached to each other by still nights, the trees are moving across the street. I have hardly looked at the trees behind the mailbox; now I am looking. These trees are heaped upon with leaves, from their bottoms to the tops, and the leaves are rustling like millions of small wings trying to lift the trees bodily up from the earth; these are trees that have decided it's time for their own assumptions. The bushes, too, are tearing themselves apart, their boughs trying to slither in different directions.

I throw open the windows, and in comes a hot gust of wind, like opening an oven. I keep the windows open until the rain starts and comes in sideways, wetting the floors beneath the windows. Then I look out of the windows separated by plastic muntins into panes, meant to give the appearance of true divided light. I watch with my feet in puddles as fast sheets of rain flap themselves into smoky folds. It rains on the pavement, like static in currents. Whorls form and disappear.

After the rain, I reopen the windows. It is not so hot. I keep the windows open. I hear the shrill see-saw sounds of crickets and frogs coming from across the street. A great collaborative shaking

of wings, like the trees themselves being shaken, leaves clicking against leaves. The sound builds; it gets louder and faster and threatens to get louder and faster again; but by some pact the sound restricts its variation, and every one of these slight rises is followed by a slight fall.

I take a walk around the neighborhood. I go slow. I pause at the fence that confines the crater of the drained pond. I am amazed, now that I am still and looking, at the new wildness sprouting where the pond used to be.

Here is the world in miniature.

A cacophony of grass: short golden dry grass thatches the floor, and sturdy asparagus green grass, and fine hairy patches of startling chartreuse that must be new. Close your eyes to the wood and wire-eyed fence blocking the pond off, and the townhomes with their rears up against the fence, and this could be a meadow from centuries past and oceans over. The clouds are parting and the empty pond is a cupped hand scooping up the light and you could film a movie in this grass. Romantic poets could roll in this grass and look at their lovers with long slow gazes, notice new freckles from the sun, newly brightened strands of hair. The two of them rolling could notice for the first time the golden splotches in each other's irises, make each other gifts of wildflowers.

All around the fence, plants vine and drape, dripping flowers that coil around themselves, striped like a barbershop pole, deep purple outside, light purple inside, lit from within. There is white yarrow gasping out everywhere from ferny roots. Small white daisies reach up with the spirit of much larger daisies. Black-eyed Susans splay open their yellow palms. Cosmos bud and flicker above reedy effusions. New York ironweed sprays its flower purple. Columns of wild blue indigo teeter and tot. Thistle pops up whorled around by starry involucre, dissolves into a wispy thistle-down that attracts yellow birds with black wings that I discover are goldfinches.

I discover cardinals so red they burn your eyes, flown out of some Christmas paradise. They have no patience, though, and as soon as I see them they're gone. There are hosts of sparrows, landing and leaving. But the goldfinches are here all the time, I learn. In this big world they choose this drained pond. In the big world of this drained pond, the two finches choose to be on the same bending stem of blue vervain. One up, one down, each the

mirror of the other.

I dig binoculars out of the box, so over breakfast I can look out the window through my binoculars. When I breathe in, the binoculars lift up past the goldfinches, and when I breathe out, my view lowers, so I try not to breathe. The birds and the wildflowers press up against my view, flattened medievally, so there is no forward and back, just above and below.

I sit on the carpeted floors of my own room—I have my choice of empty rooms—and look at the white walls. Or lie on the carpeted floors and look at the white ceiling. Every now and then, my mind doesn't go forward or back. It stays put in the pause between breaths. I think, it is nice to have nothing, just room to sprawl out in, and nature back to back with me.

I must have misunderstood suburbia. I am in the great outdoors. I am camping in a faux-colonial.

The drained pond is often bebutterflied. I start watching butterflies like I used to watch sailboats. I see one up close where the swamp milkweed fizzes out pink vanilla. A butterfly and a furred honeybee work on the same flower, rounding the curving horizon formed by its blossoms. The butterfly sticks with his grasshopper fingers when the breezes try to snatch him away by his wings. His wings are too big for him but magnificent, like church-hats; yellow mostly, with black shapes like the outlines of feathers, and blue teardrops on the bottom. When the furred bee gets too close to the butterfly, the butterfly slaps his wings together in irritation.

At the northernmost corner of the pond, from a bush hedging the inside of the fence, a witchy black butterfly hangs. He prefers to spend his evenings here, moving little. His wings are tattered, worn through in places. On the edges, they look like they've been bitten. It must be hard for him to fly, but he is gone for hours at a time.

The longer I look, the more conspicuous the creatures become. Maybe because I am spending longer looking. Maybe because the grass is getting longer. I see rabbits, who think if they freeze they are invisible. A portly lowslung groundhog that sniffs around between flowers.

One morning, a baby coyote lopes in through the drained pond, alone but unconcerned, bounding at butterflies, looking this way and that, very thin, pup mixed with fawn. Big-footed, big-eared, his ropy tail down. I watch him from the window until he disappears in the grass.

That night, Mike and I walk together. I allow myself belated appreciations. I am grateful for the absence of suffocating heat. I am grateful for the absence of homesickness. I am grateful for Mike's presence. We relax our side-by-side stride; he moves forward, I move back.

He looks back. I hold up wildflowers.

It is getting late; the sky dims, then blackens. By the time we are almost home, and again alongside the drained pond, I can't see my feet. I am darkness walking through darkness. Flaring along our route are fireflies, at the height of my knee, lit golden and then gone, like sparks coming off me.

The sky pulses with lightning.

We beat the storm back. There is a toad huddling in the corner by our door, like a small and timid gargoyle. When we come close he tucks his whole head down fast, hoping to be mistaken for a rock.

Outside, it pours. Inside, Mike is looking at a new coppery stain on the ceiling of the walk-in closet.

The place needs work. If we lived here...He catches himself, looks at me.

Could you live here? I ask.

I could, he says.

Me too.

I could stay here; I could be happy in this development. All this subduing and ordering proves that there's something unpredictable and strong that needs to be subdued and ordered. All this crushing proves there's spirit.

Here, you have to look closely for what is wild; and uniformity and deprivation will keep you hungry and looking; and when you

find a patch of it, it will burn your eyes, or it will be a softness your eyes rest against. The order you have grown used to will make any wildness seem more striking and more improbable and more resilient. Here the spirit will not be common; it will be rare; it will be at the edges, and peering through the panes from within; it will be where the pond was, the pond that on a drive past looks like a vacant and sunken lot.

This wild pond is enough to sustain me. I watch the butterflies land and the coyotes trot through the long grass with a great relief. I marvel at what has managed to exist. There are still butterflies, still coyotes, despite our efforts. And these creatures move like they were meant to move, like they've always moved. They don't seem scared.

The wildness is getting in. This house is not well-sealed. It is, after all, penetrable. The closet ceiling drips. Green beetles and crickets make their way into this home. I look up before bed and ladybugs punctuate the ceiling. My love gets up and stands on the bed with a cup and a slip of paper. He captures the ladybugs and delivers them outside. He comes back happy. I thank him. Our temporary home is so temporary it is being reclaimed even as we lie here, falling asleep.

We sleep. The wild moves with us: we are two sleeping bodies together on the earth, and as we sleep, she changes her embrace of us. As we shift in the grass, she shifts; so that the body that is wild is always just touching the body that is ours. She fits around us in the long grass.

Early Monday morning four men come out of a blue van with weedwackers to mow the drained pond. The collective sound they make is a sawing and grinding that sticks and then stops in places. Each time it stops, I think it might be over, that they might have left some of the bushes around the fence, some of plants that dripped down the fence. They might have left some tall grass, some of the milkweed the butterflies liked; but then a rock is moved, the machines catch their breath, and the noise starts again. The sound pulls fistfuls of long hair out of my heart by the roots.

At lunch, the men sit in the shade, backs against the side of our house. At the end of the day, they take off their gloves and load their equipment into the blue van, their “Whatever it Takes” T-shirts grubby. It takes four men four days to mow the eyesores down, to reveal the empty socket of the empty pond. By the end of the fourth day, the grass is short as turf and nothing is moving. I think, it must be over. I think, it will grow back.

The fifth day, the van pulls up again. Two men roll hay over the slopes to tamp down regrowth. Then the gate swings open, and a pickup truck with a coil of hose in the back rumbles down into the belly of the pond. A man comes out of the passenger side; he uncoils the hose and drapes it over his shoulder. When he walks in front of the truck, it looks as if he is pulling the truck by the hose. Every few feet, he stops and aims the nozzle on his shoulder. Out sprays a blue mist. It inks the earth and the hay a blue like the blue of rocks at the bottom of an aquarium. Before they’ve finished spraying, tentative sparrows come back; they bury their beaks in aquarium blue.

The following week, we move to the city.