

Still Life No. 16

It is June and my knees are green. The sky is medium-dark: the kind of light that comes after four in the afternoon but before seven. There is a gift on my lap. Rectangular. I unwrap it: a journal. What am I supposed to do with it? A water gun would have been more useful.

I do not know much more than the bed cradling my body or the woman holding a book. My dreams are filled with blue hair ribbons and a log cabin nestled in the woods. My favourite word is “big.” I’d like to be big someday, with thick hair long enough to braid, and maybe a gingham dress.

Take a right leaving the main street, toe heel, toe heel, and there is the wharf. I am the real daughter of this town. Ghost yachts fill the harbour, belonging to one rich man or another who I will never meet. They live here in the summer but they do not know the secrets I do.

The swivel chair spins while my mother speaks of ridiculous places. What is a Newfoundland? How do we find one? The news comes quietly, slowly, but not without warning. I crawl up the stairs on my hands and feet, the pink carpet my most loyal friend. I do not understand why people throw parties to say good-bye.

Life has been reduced to a green postcard made for tourists and a toy koala bear. I turn around to see only the growing space between me and the shore and I know that the bear is my final link. I am standing on a boat deck, I am twisting in a car seat, I am lying awake in a hotel; and I never let go of that bear.

They tell me there are three hundred students in the new school and my head starts to spin. I have never had a male teacher before. When he passes back my short story, there is a slip of pale yellow on top; unique amongst the other papers. I can only think: he likes my writing, he likes my writing, he likes my writing.

It is like the slow rewind of a VCR tape as I pull back in time to the little New England state. We drive in reverse. I frown at every bump and swerve in the road; the interstate highway is in need of repaving. My old friends give me an American flag and a sailor’s bracelet. These items are only souvenirs: they find a place at the bottom of my closet back home.

The world is divided between a neon green junior high stairwell and my bedroom. On my birthday, I receive two things: a metallic pink flip-phone, and womanhood. Standing on the stage, valedictorian of my grade six class, I look down at the thirty-something small heads on awkward bodies. I think of guppies in a river.

My time is spent scribbling lyrics in the margins of class notes. *It's a love story, baby, just say yes.* I am old and mature and capable of falling head over heels for a boy, regardless of what adults say. On a cold night in April, a single printed ticket teaches me that I can scream, cry, and laugh all at the same time. On a hot night in July, in a venue seating twenty-thousand bobbing glow-stick people, I learn it again.

I am blind to the face of sadness; I am unable to catch it creeping in at a time of my life when I should be most happy. The darkness follows me to Québec City; sliding under the door of the hotel room, it sleeps with me in the bed. I keep the hotel room key and leave a piece of me behind. The mirror crumbles as I fall apart.

For the first time, my home is the fishbowl room on the ward with shiny aisles. Each day they open the curtains just to watch me count the holes in the ceiling. Time seems to disappear down a white chute built of empty squares, each block representing another night spent watching the hour hand trudge from midnight to six. Nostalgia is a dangerous element: I wade deep in it, sending me to the ward a second time.

I wake up on a morning in June to find the realization written on my palm: the act of living requires an embrace. My eyes have seen the stars during a midnight swim and thousands of bodies dancing beneath fireworks. My name is stamped in red lipstick across plane tickets and boys' hearts and coffee cups. Goodbye is important: to weigh-ins, pressure cuffs, sick-smelling curtains. Teachers and counsellors tell me the world is at my fingertips. Hello. A new journal propped against my legs, I begin to write.