

Holes in the Skein
Molly Murn

Spring came late that year, and late, too, came the news that you were dying. We lit fires right through September, but in October when the air turned blood-warm, the fire in your bones never went out. Bone cancer, they said, and I could think only of termites gnawing through wood. Making you hollow. Like all good warriors you stared down your fate. While they radiated your bones, I fed you wheatgrass and quark, royal jelly and whole garlic cloves; we tried meditation, macrobiotics, spirulina, yoga, tantra and high dose vitamin C; we made love when we could and the more you disappeared the more I knew the shape of your bones. We planned your resistance down to the last organic vegetable, but you were already going. The news came too late – you were dying.

And my sister gave birth on the other side of the world. I was listening for the whispers of the universe, watching for holes in its skein that would swallow you whole. I was listening and I thought I heard my sister's wild moan, thought I saw life slipping through the weave. It turns out I was more than two days wrong. Her baby came, slippery and perfect and I hadn't heard. The moan was yours, though you made no sound. It came from your bones. I was listening for your going as I used to hear your body singing with mine. I was trying to prepare, but your hand lay warm on my chest, as if it would always be there.

– You didn't prepare me, my sister said. It hurt so much I thought I was bursting. I thought I was dying.

I imagined the tiny hand of my sister's child, skittering along her breast – a small bird dancing.

– How could I tell you, I said. It's beyond words.

There's no way to prepare. Beyond words, like the rhythm of your dying. I wasn't prepared.

The sound of our days began to resonate at a lower, softer register. When I was with you, I moved slowly as if underwater. We spoke in murmurs, to soften the indignity. In between times, when food needed to be bought, and bills needed to be paid, it was as if I was too slow for the world. I was reminded of the moment years before, going to the supermarket, just days after giving birth. I stood in the aisles, staring at coconut milk and pappadams and couldn't remember why I had come. Unmoored. It was the same with your dying. There were days I needed a sign to explain why I was adrift. I wanted to scream at a parking inspector, tweak his ridiculous caterpillar moustache and tear up the ticket, shouting – but don't you know that he is dying? I didn't. I even smiled and took the fine from him, slowly, treading water.

We came too late to this love. You were new to me still. Yet familiar as the smell of earth – rain-soaked. I remember the beginning. Elemental. There was no going back.

'Holes in the Skein.' Molly Murn.

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You washed my hair outside, cradling my head in your hands. I was ginger with you, like getting into a too hot bath. You could have burned me up, so I gave a little at a time. Enough to stoke the fire, while you prepared the water to pour for my hair and dissolve me in longing. It was late in the spring. Now, I wash you as if my slow strokes could make you well, fill in the outline you have become, and, still, your body is tuned to mine. There is nothing louder than this. And nothing quieter. I remember the beginning of us, and now, it seems, I will have to remember the end.

I went to visit my sister in Vienna. We walked along the Ringstrasse, and I carried the baby, shielding her from wind, her velvet head tucked under my chin. She was the exact size and weight of my grief. But more perfect. It was late in the spring. We stood beneath the Pallas-Athene-Brunnen, and I was reminded of owls. Once, I told you a dream: I was trying to write, but owls were wheeling and swooning and pecking me on the head. You said that it meant I knew things. Well I know of nothing, except surrender – the tender surrender of our coming and going. To give birth, we buck against pain until there is nothing more to do but yield. And dying was your bravest act. Under the stony gaze of Athena, my sister turned to me and whispered – you don't have to let go, you can carry him always – and her baby's downy crown caught my unruly tears. I won't let go, but I will surrender. Because watching you die was my bravest act.

– We came too late to love, I said to Athena.

And too late came the news you were dying. And then came the rain and the rain and the rain. Everywhere, the smell of you. My niece nuzzled warm at my heart and I remembered e.e cummings: *here is the deepest secret nobody knows*. The holes in the skein. We ran for shelter, sloshing through puddles, with my rain-soaked feet and the sluice of water down my back and my tears and my niece jiggling against me and the street washed clean and my perfect sorrow: I shouted your name and hoped you'd hear.