

The Teac reel-to-reel rode buckled in the back seat because the trunk latch had been broken for years. Elena drove the 101 with the window down on her good side and the wind came in smelling of something between salt and rot, the particular perfume of this coast in November, which she had spent thirty years leaving and never quite forgotten.

Her mother's house had been empty for eight months. Pauline next door had left a jar of Folgers on the counter and a note with an exclamation point that was doing the work of an entire condolence. Elena set the Teac in the living room and did not turn it on.

There was a rust stain on the outdoor spigot, a slow orange catastrophe spreading down the concrete that no one had thought to stop. The late light fell across the porch in a way that made everything look like it was being remembered rather than seen. Upstairs a room still held the smell of her mother's hand lotion, faint now, almost gone, the way a word sits on the tongue after you've forgotten what it means.

She found the letter in the second drawer, where she'd left it in 2004. She knew her own handwriting before she knew what it said. Her e's then had been wide open, wanting. Now they came out closed as held breath. The lines slanted uphill toward the bottom of the page, the way writing does when someone is pressing hard against their own doubt. She read two paragraphs. She put it back.

She hadn't told anyone about the left ear. Not her editor. Not Marcus, who still called sometimes on ordinary Tuesdays as if love, having nowhere left to go, had simply become habit. When the doctor spoke she had nodded with the steadiness of someone in freefall who has not yet looked down.

What she'd told Marcus was that she needed to archive her mother's things. True. Also not the reason.

*You should have someone with you,* he said.

*I have everything I need.*

*That's not what I meant.*

*I know,* she said. Then they talked about other things, carefully, the way you walk through a room in the dark.

In forty years she had recorded glaciers calving in Svalbard, a sound that entered the body before the ears knew what to do with it. Tornado infrasound in Kansas, felt only as

a profound wrongness in the air, a feeling that the bones were made of something that could be revised.

What she had come for was Pauline's screen door.

It had a spring that produced, when the door was released from about 45 degrees, a two-part sound: first a creak with a slight harmonic shiver in it, then a slap against the frame and a rattle that hung in the air a half second longer than you expected. Elena had been hearing it since she was seven years old. It meant morning. It meant this place. It meant something she had no cleaner word for.

She wanted it in both ears while she still could.

She did not ask.

At 5:45 she set the Sennheiser behind the rhododendron in the cold dark and waited. She hadn't asked because explanation would have required Pauline's sympathy, and Pauline's sympathy would have entered the recording somehow. Sound takes in everything alive in the air around it. She had built a career on knowing this.

She told herself this was why.

At 6:31 the door opened. The creak arrived and her right ear received it, clean and whole, and her left ear received the memory of it, the outline, the shape sound leaves behind when it has already passed through. She did not touch the levels. The door slapped shut. The rattle came and dissolved. She heard it, what she could hear of it, which was most of it, which was not all of it, which was enough and also not enough.

The rhododendron leaves trembled with the small pressure change. She stood in the cold and watched the sound move through the gap between the houses like light through water, visible only by what it disturbed.

She drove north the next afternoon with the flash drive in her jacket pocket, pressed against her ribs, warmer than it should have been.

She thought about standing in the dark without asking. She considered what it meant about her and found she could not finish the thought, which was its own kind of answer.

The coast withdrew behind her. The road was wet and the trees came down close on both sides and somewhere in the car was a smell she couldn't locate, cold and faintly

sweet, like the inside of an old book opened only once. She breathed it without trying to name it.

The flash drive held its warmth against her. She drove into the grey interior of the state, holding something the language she knew had not been built to carry, feeling it in the one good ear and deep in the chest, in the place a person keeps what they will never hand to anyone, not because it is too painful, but because some things, given away, would simply cease to be.