CHAPTER 24.

THE SPACE BETWEEN BUTTER AND SALT

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The road to Delphi is paved with flowers. Fountains of Spanish Broom spill yellow blossoms onto the asphalt; oleander in pink, purple, and white grow so close together a fence becomes unnecessary. Fields of red poppy. Stems of hollyhock. Purple bougainvillea, like a flock of florescent fish, school on the walls of houses, stores, and ruins. If we were to stop the car and step out, I imagine the air would smell like my childhood, one spent among the flowers of Oahu. I stumble upon my past often in Greece, mostly in the blossoms that scent the air. Jacaranda, a door.

We don't stop though. We left Athens at five in the morning so that we could be among the first at Delphi when the grounds open. My husband, Michael, drives the tiny white Nissan, while our son, Aidan, navigates from the phone. We pass through towns that gave birth to mythic heroes, places like Thebes, home to Hercules and Oedipus, and beneath mountains that fostered muses and demigods. Even though I have never been to Greece before, the names are familiar.

In his book *The Oracle*, William Broad describes arriving at Delphi as "a revelation" (4). I, however, am unsure we have come to the right spot.

"This can't be it, Aidan," I say, looking at the empty road, the lack of both parking lot and signage, the absence of crowd.

"Look," he says, showing me the phone. Google insists that this rift valley tucked amid the limestone peaks of Mt. Parnassus is, indeed, the home of Pythia. The only car parked on the side of the road, we get out and are met with silence. Not the lack of sound but the fullness of emptiness.

This place asks nothing.

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When my youngest brother died, we had only questions. What day had he died? Had he been in pain? What was the cause? Drugs? Heart attack? A year later, most of these questions remain unanswered. I learned of Bryan's death on a Wednesday, though he could have died any time between then and the Sunday before. It appears he went to bed and never woke up. Based on the mess left by

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his dogs on the bedroom carpet, he most likely died Tuesday, the night of the full moon in June, the strawberry moon. He was 46.

We arrived at his house that Friday, my parents, my other brother, Scott, and my aunt. Bryan was a hoarder, so his double-wide left no surface bare, no room empty, no closet or shelf free. Some of it valuable, much of it not. We each took a black garbage bag and began clearing things away. No matter where you started—kitchen, bathroom, bedroom—you dug through layers of time, arriving, always, at childhood. In the kitchen: the silverware from when we were young, collectable glasses from Burger King, our Tupperware lunch pails. In the office: piles of bills and random receipts that gave way to the newspaper clipping of when he was named "Carrier of the Month" for *The Navy News* as well as the photo buttons my mom used to wear on her straw hat during Little League: That's My Boy. In the bookshelves that housed a pristine collection of *Cycle World* magazine: the book of poetry he wrote in the fourth grade.

Bryan was unable to determine what he could live without, so he never threw anything away. Days after his death, we faced the same dilemma. If Bryan felt all of this was worth saving, how could we determine it was not? Still, we filled bag after bag and hauled them to the roll-off dumpster we had rented, the heat of the Texas sun scalding the backs of our necks as we dragged bloated sacks across scrub grass.

It was the morning of the first day that I saved one of the only things I took from Bryan's house: a grocery list penned on the back of an envelope in handwriting cramped and contorted. I didn't want the Les Paul guitars or the framed puzzles, the Zildjian cymbals, or the collection of pre-production model cars lonely in their unopened boxes. Instead, I took a list from the kitchen counter where it sat amid scores of bills, receipts, pens, keys, matchboxes, essential oils, beer caps, business cards, hundred-dollar bills, and half-empty Coke bottles. I placed the list in my pocket and returned to clearing the shelves of a house I had entered only one other time in my life.

Dr. Pepper
Salt
Butter
Vegtables
Potatoes
Pills?
Pepper?

I am unsure of what I saved.

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The first written record of the Oracle of Delphi comes from Homer in the eighth century BCE, but the site as a place of spiritual power and worship can be dated to a thousand years before that. It was then that the first temple was erected to honor the goddess Gaia, the earth mother whose abode was guarded by a giant python. Only much later did Apollo arrive and make Delphi his home. So when we step from the car and enter the silence, we step onto ground that has been held sacred for thousands of years. When I look from the southern slopes of Mt. Parnassus where we stand and gaze toward the Straits of Corinth, my eyes trace the same fundamental shape of mountain and water that untold numbers sought as refuge, sanctuary, last hope. It is impossible, if you read the histories of Delphi, to overstate its importance not just to the Greeks but to the rise of humanism in the West. As William Broad writes, "Delphi was the spiritual heart." He continues, "No authority was more sought after or more influential, none" (11).

Entering the temple grounds that morning, I carry no petition. We begin below the Temple of Apollo, the main temple where seekers would hear the council of Pythia, the oracle. Walking up the slope, we follow what's called the Sacred Way, stepping on the stones that thousands of others walked, passing alongside walls that still bear the names of the slaves who worked on the temple and then, because Pythia declared it so, were emancipated for their service to her. The site sits in a cleft in the mountain, and limestone cliffs guard the temple on three sides. Olive trees, fir, and juniper grow amid the ruins. Birds sing from their branches.

Before long, we stand in front of the omphalos, an ovoid-shaped rock absent of marking or decoration, humble on the bare red dirt. Weeds grow between the stones placed around the navel of the world. Given the power of the oracle—in its thousand years of active use it foretold the Trojan War, revealed to Oedipus that he would kill his father and marry his mother, declared Alexander the Great invincible, helped establish the democratic laws of Athens and Sparta—it is no surprise that it was considered the earth's umbilicus, the point at which spirit becomes manifest. Had the sign not alerted me, I would have walked right past the stone. It looked like much of the rubble around me.

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In his cultural history, *Speculation*, Gayle Rogers begins by saying, "The world gives us imperfect and incomplete information for forecasting the future. We look for signs, we read everything around us, but we can never know with certainty what tomorrow will bring" (1). And yet, whether through augury or hard evidence, we

have been trying to determine the future for almost as long as we have been around as a species. Both gifted and limited by the fact that our eyes are at the front of our heads, we tend to believe what can be seen, even as we know, on a deeper level, that there must be more that we are missing. Rogers tells us that it is during times of scientific advancement that our technologies for speculation and divination become more elaborate, not less. The more we know, the more we recognize exists outside the known. Our modern understanding of the word "speculative" derives from two roots, the first Latin, *speculum*, a mirror. Rogers points to St. Augustine, in commenting on Paul's well-known passage in Corinthians, as one of the first to attend to the importance of *speculum*. In this case, Augustine translates Paul's "beholding as in a glass" (*speculum*, mirror) as instructions to see the created world as a reflection of God. This idea was central to early Christianity and in line with Greek philosophy: though imperfect the present world is a mirror of the divine. As Christianity developed and spread, the ability to see the reflection, read it, rested increasingly on the purity of your faith. To the devout, God's signature was found in the grasses, the trees, the flight of birds.

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In saving this particular grocery list, I threw hundreds of other pieces of writing away, including letters half written, journal-like rants on pages creased and bent, papers from grade school and college. I don't know why I chose a piece of paper that contains more space than word. The envelope is white with two cellophane windows for address and return address. Postage has been paid. The list could be months or years old, or it could have been written the night he went to bed and never woke up. Time does not seem to mark the paper in any way. The handwriting is unruly, almost like that of a child still learning to shape their letters, but I know the hand as my brother's.

It's a strange sort of list, though maybe all grocery lists are strange to those who have not made them. Bryan wasn't one to cook, so I can't see him gathering ingredients for a meal. It's the staples that stop me: butter, salt, and pepper. Three basic and essential items. How often do you buy salt? How odd that you would need pepper at the very same time. But maybe he doesn't. Pepper ends with a question mark. Pepper? Who will answer that question and how? Or is the pepper a bell pepper instead? The list is a conversation he is having with himself, what is gone, what is needed, what remains uncertain. He is asking and will answer, and I, as the reader, remain outside.

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Leaving the omphalos behind, we arrive at the Athenian Treasury where gold and jewels were kept, sent by kings from far-flung lands in gratitude for Pythia's

guidance. Birds replace the metopes in the marble walls and call to us from holes made into homes. In the quiet morning, you would not know that Delphi has experienced several renovations and rebirths. For hundreds of years, it lay buried beneath a town after an earthquake razed the buildings. At one point, the complex stretched across the entire slope of the mountain; now you visit it in sections, never really experiencing the grounds united.

Continuing up the mountain, we come to Apollo's massive altar, a giant slab of bluish stone that stands at the entrance to the Temple of Apollo, the place where Pythia arrived after bathing in the enchanted Castilian springs. Originally, Pythia spoke for Apollo only once a month, on the seventh, Apollo's day. But as the oracle grew in importance, Pythia began speaking more often. A petitioner would sacrifice a goat or ram on the altar before the temple to determine if Apollo was present that day. A priest would read the behavior of the goat as well as its entrails to know whether the petitioner should proceed inside. If the goat trembled in the leg, Apollo was nearby, a decision made by the priest. Pythia, though, needed no such interpretation, for she channeled Apollo directly. At a time when women weren't allowed to petition the oracle, were, for the most part, kept at home, Pythia's voice carried across oceans and continents.

Once we move beyond the altar, we stand above Apollo's Temple, which of course is a ruin, so we stand above fallen rocks and fallen walls high on a landscape familiar with falling earth. From the adyton, an orange cat emerges: Pythia.

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I was not close to my brother. I do not know how he spent his days. Years could pass before I would see him, and then only if I traveled to Texas. A year after Bryan's death, his dogs will visit my house in Utah, though he never did. Bryan never saw a single place that I have lived. I knew he slept late, so I would only call after noon. The conversations were unpleasant, even though hearing his soft voice always made me smile at first. Bryan was full of anger and would turn the discussion red with rage. I have seen him kick his dogs, punch walls, storm from houses and then shriek away on his Ducati. My two children, teenagers now, didn't like to be around him, fearing what he might say or do. Yet, the single time I knew him to fly on an airplane, it was to join our family on Christmas Day in Tucson. Bryan wore all the clothes he would need—three pairs of underwear, two shirts, three pairs of socks—so that the Lego set he brought for Aidan and Kellen would count as his single carry-on.

Sometimes I feel guilty for not grieving Bryan's death more. I think of him every day, but when I do it is the Bryan of childhood I remember, the one who would let me put barrettes in his hair like a doll. Maybe I chose to save the grocery list because of its apparent neutrality. Basic. Butter and salt. It appears just
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as it is, a reminder of what not to forget. It does not kick or rage or leave my mother in tears.

But even that is not true, for in the misspelling of vegetables, I read my brother's struggles in school, his undiagnosed dyslexia, the teacher who hit him with a book, the teacher who dumped the contents of his desk on the floor and screamed at him to clean it up, the moment, every day, when he was pulled from class and taken down to "LD," the learning disabled room. In the anxiety over correctness in his own grocery list on the spelling of potatoes, I read a child who was told at a very young age that he was stupid, unruly, and a failure.

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A speculum allows one to read what cannot be read. Originally a mirror used by doctors to see behind, the modern-day speculum gives access to orifices in the body hidden from view. The idea of seeing behind or around, seeing what cannot be seen, is central to the word "speculative" as we use it today, but equally important is the second etymological root, the Greek root of *specula* as watchtower. According to Rogers, both the Greek and Latin roots inform our understanding of why and how we try to fill the gaps of what we cannot know. While a *speculum* encouraged one to reflect/see inward, a *specula* encouraged one to look out. These watchtowers dotted both Greece and Rome, giving soldiers views and advantage. Our desire to speculate is tied to soldiers who climbed the specula in search of a new perspective. Rogers points out how *specula* and *speculum* come together to form "a route toward the divine that escapes and surpasses the very material world that it first ponders" (20). Another way to think about that desire to see beyond what is right before us is hope. Hope, by definition, extends to the future, one we cannot access if we keep our feet on the ground, limiting knowledge to the known. We must climb the watchtower.

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When Apollo arrives in Delphi to build his temple, around 1000 BCE, he first must destroy Python, who guards Gaia. The battle is fierce, but Apollo succeeds and the giant snake is cut into pieces. Pythia, whose name shares the root with the python he slayed, is born. Pyth means rot; goddess risen from ruin.

In later years, Pythia was always a woman over the age of fifty, a crone, and therefore wise with the knowledge that decades of inhabiting a body provides. Originally, researchers thought Pythia consumed mystic pneuma, a hallucinogenic vapor that rose from cracks running the fault line under Delphi, and then spoke in trancelike hysteria, while the male priests translated. More recently, researchers have suggested that Pythia spoke on her own, without translation, mediation, or men.

What Pythia offered, though, in either version, was far from clear. The oracle spoke in riddles, verses that appeared incomplete and full of holes. She left it to the petitioner to decode. If the result did not seem to align with what Pythia had said, the fault was never hers. Rather, the petitioner had misunderstood, failed to read between the lines. The most famous case of the inability to interpret correctly comes from King Croesus, who asked Pythia if he should wage war against Persia. Pythia responded that if he did, a great empire would be destroyed. Croesus assumed that meant the enemy and began the war. Of course, it was his own great empire that met its end.

That morning, I cannot enter the temple but can only call to the orange cat below. She ignores me, stretches in the sun, shows me her tail. The walls are long gone, but if they were still standing, I would read a carved notice at the entrance: "Know thyself." It is difficult from our standpoint today to understand how radical this advice would have been in the ancient world. A platitude now, then, it was revolutionary. One of the most astounding roles of Pythia was her insistence on introspection. The oracles at Delphi shaped not only the outcome of history but helped refine Western morality and the sense of an individual conscience. Until Pythia's council, blood killings were common, but Pythia, through her prophecies, taught respect for human life as well as nuance and empathy. Broad argues that her "oracular vagueness" led to the establishment of democracy as the rulers learned to bring her prophecies into conversation and to weigh various options with one another (54). It was her insistence on incomplete messages that nudged the Western world toward reflection, contemplation, and individual moral reckoning.

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When Brenda Miller writes about the gaps created by writers on the page, she begins with the reader. Unlike the adyton at Delphi, the hole in the ground that no one but the oracle could enter, the hole on the written page asks the reader to step inside. While a linear essay often offers narrative completion, an essay that delights in fragmentation relies on the reader to complete the meaning. More exists, the writer implies, than what can be said on the page. In jumping the chasm of white space between sections, the reader is acknowledging their willingness to explore, in Miller's words, "what is unknown rather than the already articulated" (16). A gap in a text has an almost divinatory power. It signals that what is already known, what could be narrated, is limited, and the only way to access the unknown, to climb the watchtower or look through the mirror, is by creating a space of speculation, one that Miller says can trip the reader, cause them to stumble and sprawl. In their inaccessibility, their vagueness, their refusal to yield, the gaps become, Miller writes, "the most honest moments in the essay" (18).
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Bryan's list is more hole than whole. Never meant to tell a story, the list is complete on its own, what Anne Ruggles Gere in her ongoing examination of personal writing might call an "incomplete completeness" (212). At the same time, the list points to the holes in the pantry. The question is what to do with list and ruin. The temptation, the tug, is toward narrative, toward reconstruction, yet it is the gaps themselves that make list and ruin what they are: partial. Both force me into a space of speculation where I stand in front of Apollo's Temple and try to pull columns from the ground, erect a ceiling made of timber, reforge the bronze bowl that sat upon a column of snake. In the same way I try to imagine the night my brother went to bed for the last time, the poker hands he played that night, the last thing he said to his dogs, the moment that his heart arrested, the possibility that he was scared and in pain. At some point, my brother needed butter and salt. It may have been a day that he made my mother cry or it may have been a day that he taped another picture of Aidan and Kellen to his walls. He may or may not have bought the salt. List, ruin, and essay don't simply invite speculation; they exist in the speculative. Their completion is their partiality; their perfection is their inscrutability. And imperfection is the only place from which hope can arise. The perfect, the read, the built has no need for new ways of seeing.

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As busloads of tourists start arriving at Delphi, we return to the car. We would prefer not to share Delphi, especially with those who do not see Pythia as cat. Aidan and Michael make their way back down, but I look for a bench in the shade. I have long planned to read my cards at the home of oracle itself, and my Tarot deck nestles in my bag, carefully wrapped in scarves. Sifting through the cards, I gaze across the valley. I wait to feel the moment in the shuffling when I know to pause, a kind of gap that opens and a card steps forward. The question I ask is one I often ask in my own readings: what am I not seeing?

In ancient times, when Pythia was not available, petitioners could come to Delphi bearing two dried beans of different colors. Holding both in hands behind their back, they could ask the oracle a yes/no question and then see which bean was revealed. I had thought about bringing dried beans with me, but I realized there was no question I was willing to ask Pythia with such a direct response. Is Bryan okay? Did he feel pain at the end? Is he at peace? Such questions felt too weighty to be answered by a single word. I wanted the room speculation provides, the portal to a place that is both familiar and unfamiliar, known and unknown, virgin and trod. I wanted to travel the route to the

unmanifest that can only be followed by contemplating what is right in front of you. I brought my cards to Pythia. In the cleft of mountains that birthed the muses, fifty feet from where Pythia encouraged seeker after seeker to look inside, I pulled the Knight of Cups.

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The gaps in an essay require, Miller tells us, a more active reader. The reader is the one who charts their course across the blank space; readings become multiplied. Those readings are not externally determined but internally born. In Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir *Persepolis*, she describes the trauma of an adolescence spent in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. The drawings are simple and stunning, and we follow young Marjane as she tries to navigate an increasingly unstable landscape. In the middle of the book, Satrapi's neighborhood is bombed. Satrapi is not home at the time but returns to her street as soon as she hears of the destruction. Her family is safe, but her friend's family is not. She learns that her childhood friend has been buried in rubble. That moment is rendered by Satrapi as an entirely black cell.

As a reader, we are felled by her grief.

The empty cell, the hole on the page, is left by Satrapi for her reader to fill. We might begin by imagining her horror, but we quickly realize that we can't. We then fill it with our own sorrow. The hole on the page acts as a mirror and throws the reader inward to contemplate, reflect, grapple. A portal opens.

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I imagine other lists sat on the kitchen counter the morning I arrived at my dead brother's house. Lists for car parts. Lists of dog medicines. Lists of jobs that needed to be done around the house. I saved the list of food, a fundamental need. When we were younger, too small to remain at home alone, my brothers and I often accompanied my mother to the military commissary. Walking across the parking lot, two of us would hold a hand, while the third grabbed her macramé purse, pulled like a kite along the asphalt. Even though my mother is far from tall, her pace was furious, and we stumbled to keep up.

Almost every building in the military is built for purpose rather than beauty, and the commissary was no exception. We would leave the Hawaiian sun and be consumed by a sea of tiled flooring and metal shelves. The commissary was enormous, with fathoms of hard, cold air and strident fluorescent lighting. You did not enter; you surrendered.

My mother's lists matched the enormity of the store, often written on the back on a business envelope in black military-issue ballpoint pens. Because she hated going to the commissary and couldn't face the lines more than twice a

month, she always grabbed two carts. As the baby, even when he was no longer a baby, Bryan rode in one of the carts, bracing himself against the metal sides. Scott pushed one cart, while I maneuvered the other; my mother warned us not to crash into her bare legs. Up and down every aisle: my mother, list in hand, one cart, a second cart, Bryan reaching for anything that looked like candy on the shelves. Boxes of Tide, gallons of milk, trays of hamburger meat, cereal, cereal, cereal. We never lingered. My mother knew the store like she knew our house, down to the baseboards.

All along the way, my mother might complain about the poor quality of produce, or the stale meats and cheeses, the lack of variety, but we never shopped anywhere else. The chill of the meat counter remains with me, frost cresting like waves at the edges of the horizontal freezers, raised goose bumps on sun-browned arms, blood seeping beneath the plastic wrap. But also, summer days spent with my mother and two brothers, the satisfaction found in completing the list, filling the van with crisp brown-paper bags, doubled for milk, stiff as soldiers, the promise of a box of animal crackers at the end. Part of me yearns for the days when I was led, before choices were made, paths set. I want to climb into the cart with Bryan, hold his sticky hand, tell him that he doesn't have to worry, food will be provided, meals made, the pantry always filled.

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I don't know what the Knight of Cups holds in his chalice. He sits astride his horse, headed for a river, bearing a cup rather than a sword. Traditionally the cup is filled with water or wine and symbolizes love, but maybe his cup is empty and the knight quests for nothing, cares not for winning, defines reward in absence. When I draw the Knight of Cups at Delphi, I am surprised. Surrounded by so much feminine energy, I had thought I would pull the High Priestess or the Queen of Wands, but that is what I love about Tarot: you draw what you need. I will never know if my brother was happy. I will never know if his heart attack could have been prevented by medication or diet. He cannot tell me what we should have saved from his house or what we failed to see.

What fills the knight's cup will never be known to me, but that also means I can fill it again and again and again. The gaps in between are the doors to possibility. Delphi may be a ruin or it may be home for Pythia as cat to roam. Nothing needs to be rebuilt, the spaces between the rocks sing even if we mistake it for birdsong. I want to imagine that Bryan chose to die that night because he could not face the death of another one of his dogs, could not watch our aging parents fade any further. He didn't want to confront the hole that we, as his family, now gather around. I don't blame him, but I am also aware that holes are not places of absence but rather hope's only home.
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