

GABRIELLE BATES

## Eastern Washington Diptych

I

If I write myself into a state, does that make the state false?

In the background of one of the many pictures I take of Patrycja by the feeding ring, two of the horses bite each other.

Without violence, how do I understand my life as meaningful?

As if the only tool I owned for finding truth was a knife.

*Go as far as you can with that tool, says a voice in my head, then bury it and pick up something else.*

There are so many narratives, and each one obscures meaning.

I cut a slit in a sachet of cedar-scented salts while the bath steams.

In the clean white tile on the ceiling, I look like I'm in a coffin designed for someone shorter.

My aunt: Her heart's valve: Replaced and replaced and replaced and replaced.

I carry a wisteria pod from her old house in my backpack, but I can't decide on which scripture to say when I lie down to place the seeds from it over my eyes.

I have been trying to decide for two years.

5 p.m. and already the foothills wear a varnish darker than my fingers.

Time and place are traps.

A gray tongue groping under the lowest wire. Flames leaping through the grate to Vivaldi.

My sole punches a shape in the stiff white grass, and I freeze.

Patrycja takes off her sweatshirt, and the birds in the alders get louder.

My mother texts to ask if I have a minute. My mother, my mother—

How do I grieve the loss of something that's been returned to me?

Forgive me, I am still learning how to know when a human will improve a scene.

Alone in bed, I crop the photo so only the animals show, with their mouths open, as if singing.

II

The card pulled from the deck claims  
you stand at an impasse. Branches overlapping at harsh angles,  
rain of a city on the other side. You bristle at the obvious,  
but sometimes it's helpful.

How can you go toward what you're avoiding?  
Can't connect, or won't?

Back inside, by the fire, the heat desiccates your eyes  
but nourishes the imagery.

*Take*, the Lord said of metaphor. *Take, eat*.

Is *this* the failure at the heart of your method?  
Symbolism?

You often feel the urge to turn here  
to an epiphanic direct address (O \_\_\_\_\_,  
you...).

Orange glow in the corrugation of an ear.  
Oysters on ice in a plastic bag.

One at a time. Blade swiveling,  
severing a shell's hinge to reveal the valve.  
A napkin across your lap,  
catching the brackish water.

What if you were not so careful?