

As Our Grasses Turn to Sea

By Bisola Sosan

When they pried Oye out of my arms, to take her to a new home, a different home, I was powerless to do much else than spread my lips and attempt the mourning song of mothers. I writhed on the floor, kissed the place her gravel-worn shoes last touched, clawed at the air where she grasped my hands. They took her in the dead of night, when the sky bruised to navy, and only left behind wisps of z-curved hairs and indents of her elbows in my skin. I often pressed a cheek against the space where knee becomes thigh, now inked with two Trout Lilies. The one on the left curved outward and upward as it might during the day. The right lily hung uncurled, protecting tattooed pollen from rain. I mouthed her name as if invoking it into her favorite flower would conjure her spirit.

Other days, I didn't cry, I bellowed. For a while, I feared that I had wept loudly enough for the neighbors to catch its resonant echoes. But, as it happens, the long flat homes on either side of my- our- own were just distant enough to contend with a body contorted, with air cleaved, with fingers plucking brow hairs and lashes, with one too many dishes dropped and split. It was then that I realized where I assumed them devoid of hearing was in fact my own muted voice. For all the tears that stained my clothes and hands and teeth, I was silent. The excess that spilled into my mouth collected in a reservoir bound by my esophagus. Without maintenance, a dam is liable to be breached. It wasn't until eight years later, as I stood under a stream of hot water, that it eroded and burst. Where steam should have billowed, sounds of wailing skimmed the bathroom's yellowed wall tiles and unfolded into the air. My spine relaxed as I stayed doubled over, like it was meant to be curved, taut against my skin. The mourning song finished, water swallowing its residual harmonies, and I opened my eyes to see red droplets falling from the dip of my cupid's bow. I blew my nose, rubbing the bloodied mucus between my fingers before

water chased it down the drain. Somewhere in me, I gathered enough energy to step over the rim and wrap myself in a towel. Without lotioning or dressing, I started to pack.

I never forgot to pack three extra pairs of underwear, an extra lip balm, lotion, hand sanitizer, hair ties, a pencil, two pairs of socks, and a notebook. I kept them in my purse, the deep pocket on the left side closest to my body, in case my luggage got lost, detained, stolen. Next to me, wrapped in thick, loud plastic, lay Oye's new dress, freshly ironed. It was rather modest, though if she had gotten taller it might drape above the knee. Seven others like it hung in my closet; perhaps next year, after I brought another, she would finally be able to receive them. They'd be mementoes, even if they didn't fit. I left my suitcase to light a stick of incense, letting the fire burn and its scent waft through the living room. I set the stone burner on the floor and kneeled behind it, resting my forehead on the spot where I had last seen her. Just like Maame taught me, I whispered prayers of protection, of clarity, and gently blew the thread of smoke so it would snake through the house. It would cleanse the air and help ward off the Walkers and other haunting spirits. Just like the therapist taught me, I took a deep breath and noted the objects around me. A couch, grey, worn but still firm. The rug I hated but bought to cover a dent in the floor; I vacuumed it every week and it never looked much cleaner. Other carpets allowed the satisfactory stripes of clean, dark material, this one remained stiff and faded with sun exposure. I knew I'd never replace it. The bookshelf, empty save for three books on money management and a brass paperweight. Situating the body in reality can help quell impending panic, she reminded me week after week. Finally calm as I could be, I pulled out my phone and keyed in a name.

Samuel picked up on the third ring. He would cover my shift that day and find others for the rest of the week. Ben, my boss, didn't answer. I told their voicemail that I had a family emergency and already called in for covers. I could already hear their responding grunt with no

further questions. A small shop selling cookingware wouldn't miss one person. I hung up and turned back to find a couple dozen smoke figurines dancing around the room. Perhaps it was a ritual keeping the house safe from intrusion. They ignored me and continued moving about until they tired and slowed. I couldn't blink them away, but eventually, they all disappeared, leaving a heavy spice in their wake. A couch, a rug, a bookshelf.

I committed the route to memory. Take the local highway to I-39, then I-74, then I-57 until I reached exit 45. Follow the signs directing toward Shawnee National Forest and I'd hit Lorraine: a small town known for its glass blown animals and grand statues of colonial figures. For most residents, these were both sources of pride, revered as significant parts of their history. I preferred the translucent green coyotes: the way they captured light, as if storing it deep in their bellies for future use. Once I arrived at the faded cream house with a dark brown porch, I'd- do what exactly? Have a tearful reunion? Drop the dress by the front door and leave? Perhaps just sit in my car across the street, watching as my hands tense and release around the steering wheel. I had about six hours before I needed to make a decision, but for now, all my focus remained on the road. The further south I drove, the more plant life appeared in my peripherals, hills and swamps and forests passing as if on a loop, though it was a nice change of pace from flat suburban sidewalk and construction cones. I couldn't help but sneak glances out of the side window.

While stuck in car accident traffic, I looked toward a wide swamp with low grasses littered with trees cut to stumps. They didn't have the clean lines indicating saw-work, but jagged sections of bark as if struck by lightning all at once or felled during tornado season. At the distant front edge of the tree memorials, an animal rose on its hind legs, balanced perfectly on its stump. I squinted, seeing no fur or horns, just an iridescent shift from white to blue. Its front legs

were longer, hanging leaner and straighter than an ape. Each of its three fingers thick as rope, its entire body ridged and leathery. The Walker kept its eyes trained on me, never once breaking to blink or turn as flies circled its head. When the cars behind me blared exasperated horns, I rolled forward, knowing it was shifting its gaze to follow me until I completely left its view. I turned up the music to occupy my head so I wouldn't transfix on it. They usually waited until dusk to begin wandering our world, hence Nightwalkers. As with most creatures, they no longer waited only until the midnight hour to move. It was outdated, predictable. Though some still enjoyed the thrill of a night haunt. Different times of day saw the barriers between worlds bend and shrink, granting easier access to those privy to their locations. I couldn't see the entrances, but I could see them, the ones that came through. As I continued down the road, I slowed to catch sight of three bucks grazing languidly by the highway's edge. A Walker stood by one, resting its head near his tail, remaining still as the buck dipped his head to pull up loose twigs. Its eyes stayed on me, neither judging nor affectionate, but who could know one's intention from that distance. I turned the volume up once more and gripped my thigh, wondering if the lily might protect me too. I tried desperately to keep focus but knew that my vision was slipping.

The highway soon emptied and I turned off my playlist of blues and folk to listen as the wind whistled past my window, searching for any little opening to blow through. I timed my breathing to match its alternating high and low pitched squealing. It helped to calm my nerves, but I already knew that I would continue to slip. And yet, I still pushed myself, murmuring her name and willing the lilies to help keep me intact. My sense of time faded; I never bothered to get the car's clock fixed. Normally I could count the minutes based on each passing song. The last rest stop was five songs ago, that's about twenty minutes; I've been in traffic for only two songs, I thought it was longer. Without these markers and the wind's continued screeching, I

invented new ways of telling time; anything to keep both hands on the wheel and my eyes to my front. Glancing at my phone was too risky, even a second of distraction while my sight wavered could end my trip then and there. Starting at my index finger, I counted to eight: index, middle, ring, pinky, ring, middle, index, thumb. Four cycles-of-eight, ten cycles, fifteen; time reshaped under my grip. I might have been better off grounding myself in the car, naming seatbelt and brake pedal instead of conjuring new systems, but by the time I realized what I should have done, my sight was already lost. By then, an army of brown moths fluttering in three too-straight rows at a too-early hour emerged. They flew sideways and forward with all their undersides pointed at me. After two cycles-of-eight, as if just realizing which world they were in, they scattered, leaving me with the wind and my shallow, ragged breathing out of a too-dry mouth. Even in my youth, I denied being out of control until it was already upon me, placing its palms over my eyes and pressing back. By then, I was midway through a cycle-of-eight, my pinky raised and trembling. In this new time, the count had to continue, otherwise I'd be left suspended and exposed to how fragile this system really was. My own invention turned on me with its palms out, pressing back.

When I called Maame, my mother, sobbing, stuck in a ditch on the side of a country road, I told her that I was avoiding an oncoming truck and skimmed too close to the edge. I'm sure she knew I was lying, that my vision was taken again. The last buildings I'd passed were a wooden ranch house six songs and thirty cycles before and corn stalks so high I'd mistaken them for a convenience shop. Rather, I'd turned them into a convenience shop and once again ignored the lapse. My vision was already far gone then; only now, that I stopped moving, could I fill in the gaps. I hadn't realized the road I was traveling was mostly gravel; the shaking car I attributed to a barely-functioning engine. Maame sighed on the other end, telling me that she was right, that I

shouldn't have driven, that I was too grown to be in this situation, though she hadn't yet uttered a word. Finally, she told me that she would call a towing company and cover the cost. I told her that I was sorry. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.* She hung up the phone following an obligated *I love you*, though *I am disappointed by you* is what she meant to say. And so I sat, weeping into my palms and wiping them across my jeans because I had forgotten to put tissues in my purse.

It would take at least two hours for anyone to come to me. Perhaps I would phone Oye; after all, she was the one I was driving to. But, aside from Samuel and Maame, I hadn't spoken to anyone since the night before; my voice was burrowed in my throat and would only reveal itself through cautious coaxing. My hiccups frightened it, buried like a mammal during a storm. A single telephone wire stretched above me. It was a miracle that I managed to get any service at all. Of course, my very thoughts jinxed it. My phone stammered between a single bar and none at all. It would be of no use now, so I shoved it into my back pocket and left the car. It was good that I left home early, the sun was still high in the sky and it was warm, unusually so for an Illinois spring.

An unguarded stretch of prairie lined the ditch. The grasses shrieked, mocking me, beckoning me. At my height, I would be hidden from any stranger who happened across the old Civic. I would see and hear the tow truck once it came. My throat tightened. Strangers rarely came down this way, but sheriffs trailed this road often, looking for troublemaking teens and ways to relieve their simmering aggression. They wouldn't hesitate to question me standing out in the open next to a broken-down car. The red and blue lights would flood the street as they searched my trunk for anything they could hold against me. They'd slam my head into the painted steel, hands pinched behind my back. *Ma'am? Ma'am?* They'd say. I wouldn't say a word, it would be better to stay silent. I'd be left on the gravel, dust settling in my skin. I

couldn't chance it. It would be safer to hide; the grass cried for me and I answered. It parted for me and I found a bare spot, allowing for visibility while keeping me concealed.

When my eyes adjusted, it became clear that this area had been recently burned. Just before the weekend's heavy rain it seemed. Fresh plants had begun to rise from the crisp earth. It was uncomfortable, prickly, but I managed. When I was younger, Maame would slap my hands whenever she caught me picking grass from the garden. She pulled vegetables while the sun lay across her neck and arms. Sometimes she called Popsi to get off of the roof and help her carry the basket in or else he wouldn't be getting no stew tonight. Mint was my favorite to pick. I'd steady my legs and wrap my fingers around the long, dark green stem, making sure to grasp it near the base of the plant, just as Maame instructed. The only sound I heard was the tear of the roots and nodules from its hold on the dark soil. And as I shook away the soil clinging to its pale, thin roots, I'd take a leaf and place it on my tongue, sucking on it until the mild flavor left its veins and I spit it back onto the ground.

So here I lay, folded, sucked dry, discarded after use, and I longed to taste the very dirt grinding into my cheek. To scoop it, still loamy despite the fire, and rub it between my fingers before sticking them in my mouth. To roll it around my tongue and spread it across my teeth. To take larger clusters like cake just to feel the grains bury into my molars. When she picked a particularly juicy tomato, Maame would dust it off and hand it to me: *Begye, come and taste. Come now, it won't hurt you.* She was right, it wouldn't hurt me, it couldn't hurt me unless I allowed it to. The ground looked like it would be so sweet on the back of my throat. Instead, saliva dribbled from my lips into the soil and I was helpless to do anything but wait for the visions to take me once more.

Usually, I felt nothing when my mind slipped, just a shake of the eyes and it was all reconstructed. This time, as I trembled over moist dirt, everything shifted slowly. In the process of reformation, the grass grew, forming a gate just tall enough for me to crawl through; it beckoned me. I could barely see the road; paranoia set in but I kept pushing forward. Each time I closed my eyes to ward off the accelerating greens fueling my nausea, visions of red and blue ghosts with crooked teeth and misshapen eyes rushed toward me. The nausea turned to pain, searing hot in my head like I'd been yanked back by my scalp. All I could do was wait for it to pass.

Popsi told me countless times to remember to clip my fingernails, that if they grew too long, I would lose any semblance of femininity I might've had. He clipped mine, and later Oye's nails, just short of bleeding. She whined as she sucked on her raw fingertips. *Just like your mother*, he told her. Maybe he was right to keep them short. I looked beneath my nails to see three small legs wriggling in a clump of dirt. My sinuses burned and my lungs rattled so hard I couldn't even find the energy to scrape the still-living insect from my fingertips. A tongue that so craved darkened earth became dry and bitter; I welcomed even the harsh acid of vomit to satiate the desert in my mouth, but relief did not come. Rather, more Walkers did.

The tops of surrounding prairie grass disappeared in their overpowering light. I blinked through their aura, colored the silver of cheap chrome chipped off elementary school chairs. It was only a matter of time before they approached this close, they never failed to. As always, they arrived, tempted by the scent of desperation. For once, they stood far enough away for me to think that they might have been a mirage. The Nightwalkers wouldn't touch me, they couldn't, lest they risked crossing fully from their side to mine. Sometimes, they got so close that when they flicked their whitened tongues, I could feel their hot breath on my lips. As always, I

couldn't fathom their reasoning for being here, but I closed my eyes, hoping that they would turn around, and the plants would shrink back around me, and the ground would stop shivering so I'd know my sight had returned.

At times, I wished they were truly terrifying creatures. All eyes and arms twisted together with no teeth or lips, just a gaping pit waiting to swallow. They may have frightened me in the beginning, when I came home from a play-date to see one poised over a grazing rabbit. Or when Maame and Popsi stared with horrified eyes as I described what I saw. Maame knew well the small waves in the air that appeared as entrances, but she rarely saw what crossed. I soon realized that the Walkers weren't used to being seen, that I disrupted them. They realized just as much, and so developed our strange, distant companionship. Of me closing my eyes while they stared too closely. The lack of fear didn't mean they couldn't draw out other emotions. There comes a point where you crave the ability to share your deeply personal truths. After a few drinks, it might slip out before you catch yourself and play it off as a joke. And after Oye, I went mad with the desperate need for anyone to also know what I saw if I squinted at the right angle.

Somewhere behind me, an engine roared, the tow truck began to slow; I needed to go back. I was just yards from the same ditch I'd driven into. Forcing myself to a kneeling position and finally standing, I tread back to the car. Maame had migraines often. If she managed to recover before going to bed, she said getting back up felt like floating out of her body. She said she could still feel the lingering migraine lying in wait. I hadn't understood what she meant but I did now. My head filled with air still buzzing as if the visions still had hold over me. But, I managed to get to the car before the tower arrived.

They stepped out of the truck and approached me without giving my dirt-stained clothes a second glance. I assumed I'd feel embarrassed, even practiced my polite apologies a dozen times

over, but exhaustion has a way of dissolving shame. I'm sure they were used to seeing this: some poor driver shaken to their core after an accident. The tower introduced themselves as Zander, I belatedly realized it was printed on their nametag above their pronouns and company name: Carter Towers. They placed a hand on my shoulder and motioned toward the truck. *You can go ahead and get in*, they told me, *There's a blanket too, if you want. It's clean.* Zander continued speaking but their words lost form, instead sounding like air as it circulates my eardrums when I clasp my hands over my ears. I nodded and turned toward the truck. Usually, the company could just send someone for roadside fuel. But potential damage took us toward the nearest gas station with a mechanic. A small blanket lay folded in the passenger's seat along with facial wipes. I looked at myself properly for the first time: grass in my hair, crumbs of dirt spotting my face and clothes. I attempted to straighten myself out and clean my face, but there was no way to look any less disheveled. I settled into the seat and attempted to leave myself. Distance from all of this would do me good, perhaps even give me time to rest as Zander drove to the gas station.

The ride was quiet, Zander quickly realized I wasn't interested in conversation and played low music as I attempted to shrink in the blanket. *We're pretty close*, they said, cutting the silence. *Maybe five minutes out. If you can't sleep, stretching might help. You relax, you know?* They nodded to punctuate the suggestion and returned to drumming against the steering wheel. I rotated my wrists slowly as I realized just how stiff they were. I stretched my arms in front of me. Twisted them a little to the right, to the left. Tipped my ear toward my right shoulder, then the left. Repeated it again. And again, until I could breathe without stutter. I thanked them, *that actually helped a lot.* Zander grinned, wide and genuine, and said it wasn't as nice as sleeping but could still restore some energy. We pulled into the station. Zander swiftly unloaded the car and we pushed it to the closest pump. As I filled the tank, wondering how behind I was, how I

would repay Maame, if my sight would fail again, where to clean up without drawing attention, Zander came back to the car, twists now pulled back in a ponytail. *Look*, they told me. *I really didn't see any damage to the car. Nothing worth keeping you here, anyway.* They handed me their business card, telling me that they could see it, the distracted panic in my face. *If you need help again*, they pointed to the card in my hand. *Alright?* I looked up at them. *Thank you. Really.* I slid into the car and turned the ignition. It pattered and started. Zander stepped to the side and waved me off. I smiled, wide and genuine. It was the first time I'd felt like a person in so long. I never did call them. But I hung onto that feeling tightly. The things you are not often afforded become precious; so becomes humanity for me.

Though I'd lost some time and my head still rang, it was only mid-afternoon and I could reach Lorraine by evening. I stayed in the right lane, shifting my gaze in every direction for signs of anything crossing the barrier. None came. I made it to the rest stop without issue. Brushed my teeth, rinsed my face, changed my clothes, bought food with little more than a pointed stare from a toddler. Moved to the middle lane, picked up speed. Started to get back on track, as if I'd lost no time at all. And after three rotations of my Suggested Songs playlist, arrived just outside Harrisburg. I wouldn't have time to go into Shawnee Forest; it wouldn't have been a good idea, too many spaces for me to be alone and watched. But there was always the next morning. I stopped by the entrance anyway and picked some Lily of the Valley. She would like it. Several stems had missing flowers, likely from passing sprites. Sometimes they liked to take the flowers, gouge out the center, and wear them. When they realized I could see them, they'd often put on a performance. Even past my childhood, it always brought me joy. I only wished that I could still share what I saw. There were none now, but I kept one stalk to later place by an open window, in case they paid a visit.

The sun began its dip below the horizon when I got into Lorraine. Still no disruptions, but I knew that luck wouldn't last. I pulled into a drive-through and ordered chicken nuggets, fries, *no wait, can you make that two orders of nuggets?* I was ravenous, not realizing how so until the car was pungent with hot oil and hand sanitizer while I took a long, heavy drink of lukewarm bottled water. I threw out the bag, stretched with palms against my spine, took deep breaths. It was getting late. When I sat back in the car, I couldn't will myself to move, my breaths growing shaky again. Dashboard, glove compartment, my focus blurred before I could reach a third object.

She was nine again, and we sat in the living room watching *The Great Mercy Maven*. She sat, legs splayed atop a folded blanket on the floor while I braided her hair. Leave-in, shea butter, oil. Even then I loved threes. *Momma*, she said, *can I get an undercut? Please? Pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease?* I hummed in response, told her I would think about it, okay? *And which of your classmates convinced you to get one?* She turned to me, lips downturned in confusion, and told me that none of them mentioned a haircut. But Awusin did. *Awusin said it would look nice if I had my hair like Mercy Maven!* My eyes grew wide, chest tightened. I asked Oye who Awusin was, her Twi wasn't fluent, she wouldn't realize what a name like that might imply. A name too old and brimming with power. *One of the barrier people, Momma*, she told me. I waited for her to continue, to explain, but she kept silent. *Oye, I thought you could only see the sprites. What is Awusin?* She turned around once she felt my fingers halt their braiding. She told me she could still only see small sprites dancing in their flower skirts. *The rest are kinda. Dusty? I dunno. But sometimes we talk. Awusin told me to call Awusin, Awusin.* She peered down at her shins. I turned her back to finish her hair. She could speak with them? I had no idea how rules changed when conversing with these spirits. How long? I had told her a few years before

what I could see, confirmed she couldn't, why keep this from me? Who would understand if not me? And so I left her to watch her show, and then videos of her favorite magicians while I ruminated, considered how I would approach her. After dinner, I sat her on the couch. It was a recent development, within the past three months, starting with the sprites. One day, their light giggles became full language. She told them about school, modeled her own clothes for them, listened as they shared parts of their world and favorite pieces of ours. They must have told others. Soon, she could hear more voices, disembodied voices belonging to the barest impression of a body. Like dust, she said, particles of dust loosely arranged in the air. I told her not to speak with them again. And if they said anything to her unprovoked, to tell me. There could be danger conversing with those from the other side. Even if they're nice. Even if they're small.

They never spoke to her with me around. If a spirit came close while we were together, she said they were silent. But often, while she was at school, she would text me: *They wanna know what a pencil is... can i tell them?* I never let her respond to their questions, regardless of context. I told her why it was unwise to share this side of herself with her classmates or teachers. I picked her up every day, navigated her teachers judging eyes at conferences. I never let her see my fears, never let her notice my vision slipping, or hear the tightness in my voice as I spoke with Maame. I tried. So hard. And still, four months later, she was taken from me. Day after day I sat in the shower, scrubbing at my body until I was numb. I wanted to peel off my flesh, piece by piece until it satisfied the itching under every inch of skin. I felt relief for the first time months later, after a drunken conversation with a concerned friend about what I could see. And soon after, that concerned friend made a call about my- disturbing hallucinations, without consulting me, or Maame, or anyone else. So, they took me away. *It's only two weeks*, she told me over a supervised phone call. I never spoke to her again.

My own clenched jaw shook me back to the present. That was all behind me. Soon enough I'd see her. I continued driving through Lorraine. By then, shops were beginning to close and dog walkers littered the sidewalks. I was lucky enough to be spared from major distraction. It seemed this evening favored small spirits and fluorescent insects. Two lefts and a roundabout later, I pulled in front of the house. Cream with a brown porch. I muttered soft prayers toward my thighs and slipped out of the car. I had long since learned that if I didn't complete a task immediately, I could convince myself of the myriad reasons to avoid it. Like folding laundry. Like stepping out of a car. As I quietly clicked the car door shut, I glanced through the passenger window toward the yard. Like others in the neighborhood, it swelled with lush grasses and indigenous flowers. A small cluster of Walkers and reptilian lake spirits gathered in the tall grass; I quickly turned away. In the time it took to walk from car to door, bags awkwardly balanced in my arms, I ran through a dozen scenarios that might take place. Only one replayed: I use my shoulder to ring the bell, but there is no need, she is already there, waiting. She throws open the door, eyes bright. *Mom*, she says. I hand her the dress. She hesitates but takes it anyway. After? Well that would be up to her. And so I returned, paused at the front door for who knows how long, and lowered my shoulder against the doorbell. Shuffling behind the door. Curtain pulled to the side; I looked to my feet. I took a breath as the door opened. It was silent for so long, save for the songs of night. My lips parted and shut: what could I possibly say? So I held the dress out to her; it trembled pathetically in my hands. As the trembling moved to my shoulders and into my chest, she gathered me in her arms, squeezed her face in my hair, and Maame told me: *I'm so glad you've made it. Come. You're home.*

She set out her nice soaps and good towels for me, left me be while I sang, wailed, sputtered into the water. When I came back down to the kitchen I found two cups of tea steaming

on the table and a pot of stew bubbling on the stove. Maame came in with Oye's dress in hand, out of its bag and freshly ironed. She laid it gently on the table and sat across from me. *Go and get some meat*, she told me. I nodded and went to the cabinet to pull out two small plates. I switched off the burner and scooped chicken onto each plate before returning to my seat. We recited grace. We devoured the meat and sucked out the marrow. We sipped from our mugs. She watched me avoid conversation. I thanked her. I told her the tea was nice. She nodded, waiting for me to continue. *I would like to see her*, I said. *Just. A lot happened today. The Walkers. Even in the middle of the day.* She asked if I needed any charms or protective scarves. I declined, and instead cleared our plates, took the dress, and went back out the front door.

The porch lights were still off, but I walked right to the only patch in the yard kept short: a circle of cropped grass with enough room to lay on. I folded the dress and laid it in front of a small stone marker. I curled around it and grazed a thumb across the stone as I wept into my other arm. *I'm sorry*, I said. *I'm sorry*. I repeated it until my throat ran dry and continued still. I was reciting when I felt that shake of the eyes. The grass around me began to shift into water, and while my small patch remained dry, I knew that I was drowning. The grass, now undulating waves, washed voices in and out. Momma, momma, Maame, my daughter, my daughter, how I cry for you. I slowly came to, grass appearing as itself again, but of course, through blurry eyes, I saw a lone Walker bent over the stone, breathing into the dress. I reached out a hand, not knowing what would really happen should our skin connect. I might enter their world, they may tear me open, it's said it could open the barrier, leaving fully realized spirits to descend upon the living. I drew back. *I'm sorry*, I said. *I love you. So much. My sweet girl, my daughter, my daughter, my Oye.* She was no longer mine. Yet, here she was, staring at me as if she always knew, was always there. For a moment, she stretched two fingers and pointed toward my knees.

Once I blinked, her hand had returned to her side. We stayed like that, me softly chanting and turning the soil beneath me to mud. I never took my eyes off her. Eventually, she took a step back. I reached out again. *Don't*, I said. *Please. It's too soon. You can't.* She stepped back again. *Please*, I said. *Please.* But she kept moving away, gaze never leaving mine. I pleaded until my body shook, until Maame came out and held me still, seeing not Oye, but the light of a barrier opening and closing. Even the night breeze was too loud in her absence.

Only when I finally turned away did I allow the tremors to bubble and collapse. Maame gathered me in her lap and performed the swaying dance of one who has lost a child. I wasn't sure when we finished, when our eyes dried and our breaths heaved. I was the first to stand, pulling Maame with me back into the house. We rinsed our faces in the dark bathroom, not wanting to confront this version of ourselves. We sat on the couch, wrapped in blankets. *The barrier*, she said, *it's opened in that spot every night. She waits, then leaves. Every night.* Her voice cracked. *But I can never see her. Never.* And she said nothing more. The rest of the night, we each closed our eyes, pretending to sleep, knowing that our breathing was too shallow to be convincing. And in the morning, we ate bread, too tired to even fry eggs or pour milk. We sat on the front steps, sun on our skin, and watched the wind turn the yard into sea.