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HOW TO WRITE IN THE SECOND PERSON

*Until then, Where are you? What is your address?
I am hurting. I am riding the night*

*on a full tank of gas and my headlights
are reaching out for something.*

—Natalie Diaz, “If I Should Come Upon Your
House Lonely in the West Texas Desert”

You drive the mountain road toward Taos to reunite with Jo after ten years, to be her student again for just one day at a writing workshop on second-person narration. It's close, you tell yourself, only ninety minutes from your small town. It means nothing, you tell yourself, trying to stymie your hopes, to suppress the giddy thrum in your stomach. You wonder what you still have in common, besides the memory of her writing seminars a decade ago, where you sat nearest the head of the table, where you stumbled over your words because she was listening, where you reveled in walking with her after class across the library quad, continuing the discussions that three hours could never quite contain. You've missed her voice, low and hypnotic, the way she chose the perfect words effortlessly.

It's the first time you've done this winding drive since wildfires ravaged northern New Mexico two months ago. Above, in the mountains, swaths of pine and juniper are scarred brown, the forest needle-beds blackened, unable to

drink the abundance of late-summer rains. Now, floods have descended. In the small towns you pass through, sandbags line the sidewalks and water spills down the streets, seeking level ground. The picnic areas and campsites of Carson National Forest are blocked with caution tape and barricades, signs warning of falling trees and residual embers.

You walk from your hotel to Jo's workshop to find her arriving at the same time, from the opposite direction. You'd recognize her from afar, anywhere: her tall, lithe stature, confident shoulders, long brown hair that turns amber in slanted sunlight. The caramel-colored blazer she wears is one you remember from when she taught back in Missouri. She sees you, too, must know you from your athletic gait and the giant handbag you've carried for years, though your hair has been cut from flowing curls to a close-cropped pixie. She gives you a hug and, pulling back as if to assess you, compliments your hair; you relish the momentary thrill of her approval. She holds the door then leads you through the sun-saturated bookstore to a small classroom, where you wait for the other attendees. Today, you sit at the back of the table, not begging attention. You have, in the past ten years, learned a practiced nonchalance that betrays no hint of desire.

During this class, you debate the way that "you" works—the difference between writing about yourself in the second person and writing a missive to someone else. You enjoy this literary discourse for old times' sake, even if it signals a rift in your sensibilities. Her voice, rife with comfort, has not changed. Then, without warning, the sky turns from sunny to gray, and through an open door in the classroom, you hear the rumble of thunder, the susurrus of afternoon monsoons falling upon this mountain town. The air dampens. Mist wrinkles the papers blanketing the table. The mid-Missouri storms you remember seem to have followed you both to the high desert, an attempt at reminding you of something you once shared.

By evening, after the workshop and Jo's public reading, the bookstore is dense with people, post-rain humidity, and hot, bright lights. Jo confides in you that she feels woozy—maybe from the margarita at dinner, maybe the stuffy room, maybe the crowd or the altitude. You wither in this moment of trust, in what feels like a gift. You ask whether she'd like to go outside, get some air, and the two of you, in a movement that feels surreptitious, clandestine, exit through a side door. You feel a certain protectiveness, a desire to secret her away.

You sit down together on the edge of a flowerbed, railroad ties kept dry by an overhang. As people trickle out, they stop to talk, to ask Jo to sign copies of her books. You know never to expect anyone's undivided attention, especially someone with such illustrious elegance. You notice, though, how she sits close to you, her shoulder brushing yours. How she has not urged you to leave, which she would, gently—in the perfect words—if she wanted you to. Now, as in the past, you aren't the only moth drawn to her light, but you are the one that clings to it the longest, fluttering and pressing to get inside.

Jo offers to walk you to your hotel, just a few blocks away. You wish it were farther, wish for the broad expanse of the Missouri campus. You find yourself breathless, strolling next to her, but maybe it's the thin air, Taos at 8,000 feet. You tell her about the ex-girlfriend who betrayed you. You tell her you would go back to that woman in a moment, would she have you. "I tried so many times to go back," she says, referring to an ex of her own. Another gift. Outside your hotel, the two of you linger on a street corner, your conversation lasting through cycle after cycle of a stoplight.

You cradle the copy of her novel that she has inscribed for you, not allowed you to pay for. What has not changed is her generosity. You recall her copious comments in your

manuscript margins, her typed response letters, the way she fostered gentle but rigorous discussion among a group of students. You recall muggy Missouri nights, after those evening workshops, when you lay in bed reading her memoir and short stories, trying to see through the words to *her*, trying to find moments of transparency, as if you could come to know her through her prose. Yet nothing, ever, was certain. You struggled, in her fiction, to discern what was her own life and what was embellished, what was made up entirely. You wanted certainty, though she had already warned you against that desire. In her words, “If we insist on certainty, on an absence of doubt, we too may lose what we best love.”

At the time, you couldn't have said that your feelings were romantic, that they extended beyond emulation of her writing and intellect. But certainly you noticed her eyes, sometimes green, sometimes brown, her graceful hands, her body language, both poised and sincere. Now, you give yourself permission to entertain your attraction, though not out loud. You wonder whether she saw it ten years ago, when you didn't. You wonder whether she sees it now. If she does, she makes no gesture in return.

As you linger in the light of your hotel's neon signs, you suppress a certain hunger: to know about her life now, about the man she married and their daughter, about a life that must be vastly different from what she had fathomed. “VACANCY,” the hotel says. You are afraid to ask about the personal, about what would have been forbidden territory a decade ago and what might be even more forbidden now, in the wake of all that's changed. The stoplight cycles again to red. Instead of asking what you want to know, you ask whether you can walk her back to her car. Another few blocks of conversation is all you allow yourself to be hungry for.

You turn around together and retrace the same route, back to the bookstore. She opens up unprompted. You learn that in the intervening decade since you've seen her, since she left the Missouri university where she was briefly your dissertation advisor, she has settled in the West and quit teaching to write full time. She calls herself, now, a lesbian who fell in love with a man. When you knew her, you were married to a man and ignoring all the signs that you were a lesbian. It feels in some way that she sees you as an equal because you've come out, or because you're now a professor, though what you really desire is to sustain your covert admiration for her, your unrequited attraction, your lack of certainty, your yearning that won't be fulfilled. You savor the ache of what you'll never know.

As you near her car, a streetlamp turns on, then off, then on, as if trying to decide whether to stay lit or die. Your imagination turns this scene into something out of old London, an Oscar Wilde novel or a T.S. Eliot poem, the city behind a scrim of fog. It's a sensibility reminiscent of her writing, how night concedes to a momentary light—though she would say it better. Now, you've added the memory of woodsmoke, even though there couldn't have been any in late July.

If this were fiction, if you were allowed latitude with the truth, if you could have the ending you had imagined, Jo would invite you into her car. You would stop pacing the same few blocks and drive to her house, a Taos cabin with wool rugs and taper candles, stately furniture and Mahler on the stereo—all things the opposite of your hotel's late-night revelry. Bound by the truth, you can only speculate, knowing all the while that longing remains just that—the perfect word for what is desired from afar. Nor would you pursue such a departure from reality, knowing what now has changed. But this is not fiction. It is a cautionary tale, written to past you by present you, a missive warning against hope.

The truth is that you return alone to your hotel, the lobby bar ringing with a Beach Boys cover band, the night just getting started there, but over for you. You feel, already, the loss of what you cannot bring back, the loss of a memory that will continue to become hazy with time, fogged by age, by another decade. The truth is that what you've learned from Jo, more than how to write in the second person, is how to lose what you never had.