

ERIN EVANS

Bird Song

They say they hear crackles inside me
when they press the cold flat parts

of their stethoscopes against my back
where they imagine my lungs must be

and tell me to take a deep breath.
But when they used that word for the first time,

when they describe what they hear as a “crackle,”
what I hear is “grackle” and think of Texas,

those noisy blackish-purple birds
that turn trees into black clouds.

Remember how long we stood in line to buy cupcakes
sold from the window of a silver Airstream?

My February skin under Texas sun, burning,
but I couldn't stop watching the grackles gather in a tree

calling each other, us, or no one.
Their chatter that sounds like the rusty old hinge

of a door so heavy it takes years to open.
I took a picture of them perched or perching in that tree

and now it hangs on the south wall of my apartment
reminding me not of those long-tailed birds exactly,

but what patience tastes like if you wait long enough.
Something like red velvet, only sweeter and cooler on your lips.

337 days later I'm here in a hospital, my twelfth day,
where somewhere in the dark secretive caverns of my lungs

I imagine a door with rusty hinges being pushed
ever so slightly with each deep breath I take

and the nurses and doctors and respiratory therapists
listen every few hours, trying to decipher

if the door is being pushed open or slowly shut.
Each time they cock their heads to one side

and seem to be looking through me
I hear it too, the grackles, high in that tree

reciting a language I have yet to learn.

Dear Life

Today when the sun was out
I moved the two succulents
from the table
to the windowsill,
thinking it would save them —

I positioned them just so
so their flesh wouldn't touch
the cold glass,
so their faces were upturned
getting the most out of this day.

Yesterday, alone in a room
in the hospital, I waited
long enough to watch the sun
sneak around a corner
and press itself along the gray wall.

It's always right when I'm about to do the thing
that feels important, right as I am about to touch
that gray wall now warm
that the door opens and the person walks in
to tell me something I'll likely forget.

Driving home from the hospital I wonder
was it the way I reached for the sun
or the words coming out of the doctor's open mouth
that I should have held a little longer
clung to for dear life, hoping they would save me?

Or maybe it's the leaving that needs to be held
so tightly, the forgetting,
the way we put things behind us and move on
only to come back to them over and over again,
asking ourselves, did we want it bad enough?

Just promise me
at the end of whatever this is
you'll pull me to the window
lie to me
tell me we've got more time.

Perennials

Every day, at about 4 o'clock, when the last drip of clear liquid has slid through the plastic tubing, and they've unhooked me from the machines that tether me to this room—for one hour, until the next dose comes, we take a walk, you and I, through the hospital to what is left of winter outside. Past the front desk lady whose frown never wavers, no matter how close it is to the end of her shift, or if it's finally taco day in the cafeteria. Past the short janitor, who's always sweeping, under the fluorescent lights, to the elevators that open and close all day with a soft ding, whether anyone's there to board them or not. Outside the rush of air unfolds like a cool cloth on my fevered skin. You told me once that *this* is your favorite time of year, right before that thing we all know is going to happen happens. Right before the world remembers that it's time to move on and that nothing, and everything, lasts forever. Here, the dirt and trash left over after the snow has melted press into the ground, and the creeping phlox still rests, brown and broken, like tumbleweed, with only the idea of green protruding from its brittle branches.

In Patient

My husband holds the cold stethoscope to my chest—
his brown eyes averted, he listens carefully,
like someone taking directions on the phone
on how to save another life.

My heart is a room full of dispatchers
waiting for those strange-hour, desperate calls,
trained to keep you on the line while help arrives.

But what he says, smiling up at me,
after he's listened awhile is,
"I think I can hear the ocean."

And I know he must be right—

that what he hears is some small part
of the 95% of water on earth
yet to be explored,
that there is still no word for life
that doesn't sound like the hush of the ocean.

Chickadee

From the machine
 a thin sheet of
paper extends itself
 into the room, to the
waiting hands of
 the nurse who looks

down, to examine
 the intricate patterns
I've created just by
 living, and says,
you have a good heart.
 And then later

with a tourniquet
 around my arm,
she asks me
 to make a fist,
and I do. The way
 my brothers

taught me, so
 when you hit
the thing you don't
 break your thumb.
She feels for the ropes
 of blood in my arm,

pressing her fingertips
 into the protruding veins
and watching them
 quickly bounce back.
She chooses a small one
 further under the skin,

not bulging like the others
but the color of blue
that rivers are on maps.
Good veins,
she says, plunging
the needle at it

before it can move away.
You can let go now,
and my hand unfolds
like a flower slowly
blooming, white
to pink. Then later

with her cold stethoscope
the doctor navigates
my rib cage, her head
cocked to one side,
her hand warm
on my back,

steadying me, as if
she's unsure
if I'm strong enough
to be heard like this,
or as if she's afraid
she may push

right through me.
She looks away
slightly, listening
for the song
inside my lungs,
you sound great,

she says finally, returning
to her swivel chair.
Inside this broken
body, a small
black and white bird
beats its wings.

I nod and think
 about science—
all the ways
 to measure a human,
the small gaps,
 the hidden areas,

the loopholes,
 the secrets we hold
inside our cells.
 Maybe it's what
they can't see
 that saves us.

Acceptance

For a while you will struggle to hear it:
The sound of things getting better.
You'll search for it
in the slow strum of a ukulele,
violins as a child.

The voices of all the people you have loved
but will never see again.

You think you can hear it at night
in the bitter cold of the quiet,
in the tapping of bare trees on glass.

You will think, but cannot remember, a winter
so long. Or one that asked so much of you,
unapologetically.

You swear you can sense it in the silence
broken by the shuffling of a newspaper.

But in the end what you'll hear
is your own breathing
through a machine
midday
while your dog watches you like you're crazy,

and you'll think
this is it,
this is what getting better sounds like.