In the end, though I have applied for shorter fellowships, and longer PhD programs, as well as one low residency MFA program, I get an offer I can't refuse from the University of California, Irvine. They offer two years with an optional third for an MFA. A stipend enough to live on. Training on how to be a better teacher. A community. And a whole life that revolves around poetry. And, it must be said, a completely different landscape where nobody knows me. And, I assume, a rental, for which I will be minimally accountable. Though I've never been to California, I say yes.

On the home front, it seems like a magic wand is waved. I get a tenant for the house for the two years I'll be gone. She is, well, odd. She looks a little like Snow White—long dark hair and pale skin. She has been living in a rental in town, in a house legendary in the area for having been the scene of one of the largest pot growing operations (and subsequent pot bust) in state history. The former owner, who, rumor has it, has buried bars of gold on the property, is in prison.

She takes care of horses for a wealthy weekender, and she works at the same newspaper part time.

She moves from the pot house early and spends the summer before I go living in a tent in my back yard, in which she sets up her lacey, swirly canopy bed.

But she knows the town, and wants to live in the house, not the yard.

In a weird presentiment that indicates how much the house and I are already attuned, I write a last minute clause into her lease forbidding her to do anything that will alter the structure of the house, including paint anywhere inside. (She and her boyfriend are free to have a go at the outside, which is still a work in progress.) I also write a clause requiring her to mow the lawn, clean the chimney, rake snow off the roof in the winter, and generally try to keep it from getting damp. More damp.

I'm not even half way to California when I find out that she has torn out the bathroom sink and thrown it away. And she has painted the entire interior—all four rooms—yellow.

She also, I find out much later, rarely mows the lawn. So Crazy Joey does it sometimes on his rider mower. And then she calls him up and yells at him for mowing. She leaves him messages saying she doesn't mow because she doesn't want to kill the frogs and that he is a big fat frog killer.

I live next to a lake. All the frogs live there. What she is seeing is the occasional toad, and they mostly safely hop away from the mower.

It turns out that Joey, in the two years I'm gone, loses his position as the craziest person in the neighborhood. By miles.

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I come back. In two years in California, I wrote the core of two separate books, and buried Doc, my ancient, beloved dog, a month before her 21st birthday. I made friends, the first of my recent life who never knew me as a married person. I became, somehow, more myself than I had been in a very long time, maybe ever.

And a few months after Doc's death, I adopted Hunter, a wild little Boston Terrier who had burned through 4 placements in the hunt for what the rescue people call her forever home. It wasn't love at first sight, but I knew, absolutely, that I would give her a try when I met her, racing like a tiny snub-nosed dervish through her posh LA apartment, bringing me a nearly endless string of toys to throw for her, ignoring all the other humans, including the
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two who, days after adopting her, suddenly developed allergies to dogs—or at least this one. And I knew, again absolutely, that we were together permanently after the first two days.

She seemed to have only two speeds—fast forward and fast asleep. And she came with her own crate, bag of dog food, assorted bowls, collars, leashes, and two bags of toys. All of which spoke to each placement family's good intentions, to the size of their potential love—her goods already outweighed her by many pounds. Now she needed a home to scatter them into. My home, as it turned out, wherever that may be. It was April.

In June, I elected not to stay for a third year and to finish my thesis (a book manuscript) long-distance. So I taught the summer term, gave most of my stuff away, packed the car, gave the tenant notice to vacate, to be gone before I got there, and in early August, the little dog and I set off for Sandisfield.

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Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
ché la diritta via era smarrita.

Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

So opens Dante's Inferno, with the first steps into a dark wood and then into Hell. Lost, assailed by strange beasts, Dante is taken by the poet Virgil through the gates of hell. *Abandon hope*, the gates say, *Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.*

When we talk about our fondness in stories, for making the world mimic the action, I ask my students this: If I say it was a dark and stormy night in the woods, what happens to the blonde? And they laugh, but all agree she is about to die, or very narrowly escape, some horrible, bloody death.

(It should be noted here that I am, especially in summer, a blonde.)

On one side Dante faces the woods, the beasts of the woods, the beasts in the woods. On the other: the gates of Hell. And he chooses hell as somehow the safer, the saner choice.

This both is and is not a metaphor. And this, it seems, is also my story:

> Midway upon the journey of my life
> I found myself in a dark forest

Which is to say in one week in late June in my 40th year, my divorce became final, my 14th wedding anniversary passed, and the bank and I became the owners of a tiny wreck of a house in a forest in a remote and sparsely populated town in rural western Massachusetts. I lost (there is that word again) half my family, my previous house, and most of my worldly possessions. And rather than needing a poet as guide, I want to be a poet and name instead the thing, the craft, as guide. Poetry, I know, will not save me, but it might, if I practice it truly, lead me on wherever or whatever the way forward is.

Driving back to the house one day, I hear someone on the radio refer to "the blonde divorcee around the corner." The reference is lascivious—she embodies temptation, risk, jeopardy. And I pull the car to the verge and laugh until I cry. Because one of the ways of

thinking about my life right now is that I am indeed the blonde divorcee around the corner. Though I am around the corner from one and only one neighbor, and he too is single. His name is Joey, and he has lived in his shack without running water for 20 years. He is a woodcutter. And every bar in the region has a photo hanging on a wall of him feeding Pop Tarts, by hand, to a wild black bear he calls Emily.

When he finds out I was born in Germany, he calls me his Kraut neighbor. And very early in our acquaintance he explains that should he show up at my door after, say, 5 p.m., it would be wise to simply not answer. He drinks, he says. Best pretend you are not there.

He drinks. Many in town call him Crazy Joey, and he got that nickname long before he met Emily. For most of my tenure at the house, he is my only neighbor.

But am I lost? Or was I lost and now am found? Or have I slipped sideways, via divorce, dissolution, California, the road I never meant to take, into some strange old folk tale of dark forests, creatures, woodcutters, cottages?

And when will I figure out which? Must I grow old and theoretically wise before I get to say this moment on the side of the road is where I am or am not supposed to be? When will I know or understand that the end of my marriage—what felt for months like a slow motion train wreck—the engine derailing, plowing through buildings, families, gardens—a blunt carving, cleaving in two— was the moment when my life righted itself or the moment when I was, profoundly, lost?

I am living in the wake of a terrible storm, a wreck, a personal disaster. Am I even supposed to know how to think about it? Most days I wake alone in a strange small house into a silence so complete it scares people. Most days I walk though the day intensely, profoundly grateful simply that the wreck is over, and I have survived to walk away.

Or can it be simply that the path I am on is the path I am on? Whether or not it goes where I might wish. I cannot make the path into other than what it is. I can travel it. I can choose, and way will indeed lead on to way, and difference is always the result. So I say:

> In the middle of my life
> I found myself in a forest.
> For the straight way had been lost.

Not dark.

To be lost is also to be on the threshold of discovery; to be lost is to be liminal. Anthropologists use the word liminal to describe that point in a ritual when who or what you had been falls away and who or what you are becoming is not yet manifest. An example: standing before the minister, before you both say I do. That is a liminal state, a moment of being lost.

So, as it turns out, is the illogical conclusion of that moment, when you find yourself both laughing and crying on the side of a road in Sandisfield, Massachusetts. When you wipe your face, put the car in gear, shut the damned radio off, and drive to the house you own and live in, again, but still sometimes have difficulty finding.

Chapter 5

It was, it turned out, a really hideous shade of yellow. Bilious. A little like the color I'd always imagined giant's pus to be. (Okay, I don't spend *a lot* of time thinking about infected giants, but still, it was a nasty, vile shade of yellow.) And everywhere. She even tacked matching curtains on my bookcases and used them as a pantry, which means, among other things, that the people who color paint and the people who color fabric are occasionally deeply wrong in exactly the same way.

There was, of course, a hole where the bathroom sink used to be. All that remained was a sawn-off drain pipe and capped water lines. At least she stuffed a rag down the drain pipe, to keep septic gasses from wafting back up into the house. I hope it took her a while to figure out.

A couple of months after getting back, I was whining to my mother about my lack of both funds and stuff. I had, for instance, no bed. I left my bed, microwave and toaster oven in California. I was sleeping on a used sleeper-sofa I bought for $200 before I left—my first piece of real furniture for the house.

My mother asked what the basics were and I reeled off a bunch of stuff, including a mailbox.

If you live on a rural route, putting up a mailbox is not easy. First, the post should be set in concrete, must be a specified distance back from the paved part of the road, so the driver can pull safely out of the travel lane, if not entirely off the road, and when assembled, the box should be at a very specific height. It is all complicated and one guy I asked said he'd do it for $100 plus the cost of the box, post, and all materials. So I'd never had one, relying on a PO box in Great Barrington instead.

The thing is, I love the postal service. I love that you can hand them a letter and say, "hey would you bring this to North Dakota for me. Oh yeah, here's 39 cents for your trouble." I love getting mail. I wanted to get mail at home like a real grown-up. I wanted a lot of things.

The next time I visited the parents, they said, "Go look in the spare room."

I did, and piled up on the bed were my grandmother's small microwave (she moved to a nursing home while I was in California), a new toaster oven, vacuum, mailbox, mailbox post kit, and an air conditioner.

The post kit was much easier than the ones I'd seen. All I had to do was pound a stake into the ground with a sledgehammer, then slide the post down over the top. I was dimly aware that it was a town sort of post—vinyl and hollow and looking like a good whack would send the box flying and splinter the post. It belonged near a picket fence, a house with Victorian gingerbread, or a polite Cape Cod.

But it meant I could install it by myself. And I could get mail.

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Hunter

My dog is freakishly smart. She studies wind currents. She is a tool user. She can distinguish the contents of identical jars and is uninterested in the one holding candles, but not the one holding treats. She taught herself to swim at the exact moment she figured out

that the shortest distance to another dog was across the lake, not around the shore. I watched her throw a stick in the water from the point, then run into the cove and wait for the lake to retrieve it for her. She does the same thing in the rivulets along the road during storm run-off—drops something in the water, runs downstream, plucks it out again. This is one of her most excellent games. I've watched her wait for a feather floating on the lake to come closest to shore and just before it was headed back out of reach, she swam out, lifted a paw out of the water and slapped it down.

For Christmas she has asked for opposable thumbs. I'm going to give her a set of blocks and a couple of balls so she can finish a grand unified theory of the universe. Then we'll see about the thumbs.

She is also really, really cute. Most Boston Terriers are. They look like puppies (blunt nosed, big eyed, bat eared) all their lives. Psychologists say that that look— like human infants (blunt nosed, big eyed, bat eared) —is why we want to love and protect puppies (and infant humans, though I'd far sooner believe it of puppies.) She has the classic Boston black hair with a white tuxedo. And an apple-shaped head and slightly bugged eyes and ears like sails. Bostons' jaws are wide and short, and so they accommodate a huge tongue in relation to the size of the dog. Sometimes she seems like all tongue and ears. And she is delighted to give wet, gooey kisses with that ginormous tongue.

That she is adorable and really, really smart is an odd combination. It is a little like cooing at a Nobel laureate. Probably that doesn't happen much. But then again, I doubt Nobel laureates chase grasshoppers and drag 20-foot tarps around the yard. It is pretty funny to see a 17-pound dog drag a 10x20 foot tarp all over the yard, shaking her head to kill it and prancing when she sees just how big a thing she is dragging. She loves the crinkly noise the tarp makes. It reminds her of the empty soda bottles she steals and kills. They make a lovely crinkly crunch too. She used to steal bottles at the beach in California, where the supply was nearly infinite—just snatch them off stranger's blankets. Here, the supply is far more limited. I may never get another bottle deposit back.

Today I got her licensed and bought my dump sticker. Despite in being September, and there being only three more months in the year, she is dog number 225. That is how small the town is. I'm actually surprised at how high a tag number she got. It means practically everyone in town has a dog. And way more people have dogs than use the dump, because I'm dump sticker number 172. (That isn't at all alarming.) The town clerk, whose name is Dolores (and whose vacation last week shut the entire town down), takes a Sharpie and writes the assigned number on the dump sticker, and then records it by hand in a little ledger book. She hand-writes each dog license in duplicate—one for her records and one for mine.

All of this means that I will shortly (the dump is only open two days a week) be less over-run with empty cardboard boxes and trash bags full of moving stuff. It also means that the rest of the dogs in town should be put on notice—'cause that number 225—she's one adorable little rocket scientist.

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A Country Song

I feel like the punch line of that joke about what you get when you play a country song backwards. Because I've got my old job back, my house back, my yard back, my lake back. Not, however, thank god, my spouse back.

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We have to visit the ex. While I was in California, he discovered some of my stuff in the attic. His house, which used to be our house, is in the town of Adams (population about 8500, or about 14 times the population of Sandisfield. By contrast, Adams is about 23 square miles to Sandisfield's 53—so we're almost twice as large with one fourteenth the population.). It is in the northern part of the county, is full of old mills, mostly fabric and paper related, and nestles in the valley below my beloved mountain, Mt. Greylock.

When we were looking for a house and he discovered this one, he came home so excited. I think he loved it instantly. He continued to love it for every day I knew him. I never felt like I owned the place; it was always his baby. My guess is this is the last house he'll ever own.

It was a basic one-bedroom ranch built partially of stone. The living room was knotty pine. It was small and dark, and I never much liked it.

I did love the landscape, though. And driving up there, the first trip up since California, I saw Mt. Greylock rising into the sky and I felt my chest fly open with joy. Those woods, that mountain. My solace, my comfort, my happiness.

Alas, Hunter is still a California dog and not sure about long hikes in the woods. And today we don't have time anyway.

Hunter goes wild when she meets new people. She literally gets so happycrazy she races around like a nutjob, doesn't know what to do with her energy and joy and even spins in place for minutes at a time. I think she invented the zooms and is the lone black-belt, ninth dan ninja master of zoomies. She wants to bring new people toys to show them how much she loves them. She wants to play with them and fetch and play and fetch—endlessly. And Nick's sister Pam is there, so there are two people—double zooms. Suddenly she stops zooming in circles and takes off down the hill. Uh oh. The neighbors' daughter has just gotten a Jack Russell puppy, and they're outside.

By the time we have loaded my stuff in the car, Hunter has brought the puppy to tongue-lolling exhaustion. I have to corral her and lock her in the car, as I am literally afraid, on this warm day, that she'll kill the puppy with heat and exercise. When we leave, the puppy is sprawled in the shade with the neighbor hovering anxiously by its heaving side, alternately wetting it down and trying to get it to drink cool water. Hunter, unrepentant and not even a little tired, plants her feet on the armrest on the car door, sticks her head out the window, curls her enormous tongue up, and puts this day in the best days ever column.

Pam, as we're leaving, in wonder and astonishment at seeing the little dervish careen all over the place for a couple of hours straight without once slowing to a walk, says, "how can you live with that?" And I laugh. And I think of the moment I knew we were going to belong to each other. She'd been on a walk, had a day of meeting people, had some zooms in my beach apartment, wrecked a couple of toys, stolen a half-full water bottle from some beach people, chewed it to bits, shaking her head and spraying water everywhere, and come back to the apartment. I was sitting on the bed reading. She jumped up on the foot of the bed, then army-crawled up, used her blunt, apple-head to nudge my arm away from my body, crawled between the two, settled her chin in my arm pit, and gave three little piggy grunts of contentment, *unh unh unh,* and fell asleep.

Her joy? Not hard to live with at all. I loved Doc more than I've ever loved most people, and for more years. She was a nine month old puppy when I found her at the pound. She and I grew up together, survived the marriage together, moved to Baltimore and the house and California together. I will miss her all the days of my life. But she was almost 21 when

she died, and she had been an old dog for a long time. She was silly and loving and smart and sweet, but she was never this joyful, never this wild.

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September 25—Consider the day

Siezed.

I seem to have days of massive accomplishment and days when I get nothing done. I spent the day reading poems I didn't especially like, cleaning the chimney and weed whacking in my yard. I am bruised, scratched, filthy, sore and tired. Laying waste to the weeds in the yard is really satisfying. I've got two years worth of undergrowth to hack away, plus I'm weed-whacking the entire overgrown lawn inch by inch because I came back to a note from the tenant saying the lawnmower was broken.

I can't think why. Maybe it expired from boredom.