

A faint, distant call awakens me at six a.m., lifting up and over the greenbelt outside my bedroom window. It sounds like a lone desert bird, or like a homeless man calling out from the main road. The noise is muted but steady; it repeats every ten seconds or so, like the soft, insistent honking of a horn.

Then, a moment of recognition: my elderly next-door neighbor is calling out for help. His voice seeps through the concrete wall between our condominiums.

*The body wants to live. It stakes its claim to the earth, states its intention to remain as long as possible. It will find a way to report its distress, to reach out for assistance no matter the effort, no matter the cost.*

The calls become louder as I near his back door. I respond from the backyard, calling his name, letting him know I'm on my way. Once he knows he has been heard, I can sense relief in his voice. I listen to him call out instructions: *There's a key in the birdcage. In a little blue box. Come in through the glass slider.*

I move through the dust and dirt of the cluttered back patio, past the abandoned bird cage. When I finally enter, he is lying face up, on the floor, in the hall, his cane thrown akimbo. A bowl of half-eaten plums on the kitchen counter, flies swarming over the half-eaten flesh of the fruit, ashtrays overflowing on the dining room table—signs of the neglect that seems to constitute his life.

The air in the apartment is thick with the smell of cat piss and cigarette smoke. A television blares in the bedroom. Looking up at me, my neighbor's face is bland and unlined as the face of a child. I kneel down, take his hand. Twice, he's greeted me when he's shuffled out to get his mail, and once, he waved from his worn-out patio glider. But to him, at that moment, I am a stranger.

*Did you hit your head?* I ask, and he mumbles something I can't understand. I slip a thin couch pillow under his head.

*The body declares its intent to live. It claims its right to water, to air. The body calls out from the river bed, from the floor of the volcano, the limb of the tree, from wherever it has been hurled or hung or left stranded and alone.*

For nearly four years, I've lived next door. Until now, I've never heard his television, smelled his cigarette smoke, never had any idea that a small, semi-feral cat lives right next door. Now, from the hallway, I see a flash of black dart under the bed.

My neighbor asks for water. I scan the room for a plastic bottle. *No, no*, he says, *the faucet, a glass*. I feel foolish and a little spoiled; I never drink water straight from the tap. *A straw*, he says, *I need a straw*, and points to the pantry.

I lift his head to the straw. The paramedics must be called—my cell is at home on the bedside table. I find his phone with its large, square keys. Awkwardly, I place the call, and then, there is little more to be said and nothing to do except to make him as comfortable as I can, to offer some comfort through my touch.

But the truth is, I want to get out of there, to be rid of him, to be simply *away*. My skin is crawling, as if I'm covered with a film of dirt I won't be able to wash off.

*The body fights to live. It knows its own fragility as well as its resilience. It shuts down non-essential systems in order to preserve what is vital. In exigency, the body finds strength it could never otherwise muster.*

Three paramedics enter, two diffident men and one efficient young woman. They administer their aid, ask the requisite questions of both me and my neighbor, and share their muttered assessments, just out of earshot. When they have loaded him safely into the ambulance, locked his front door and driven slowly away, I walk outside and scan the neighborhood.

*The body wants to live and to go on living for as long as it can. Listen, for eventually it will declare itself—now chiming through the clear spring air like church bells, now moaning like winter*

*wind through a mountain pass. Now silent, simply holding on for its own dear life.*

The desert sun illuminates the late spring morning. There's not a soul to be seen. Only the sparrows slicing the air with their plain brown wings, and the crows, black marauders, pecking at trash by the side of the road.