Florida Omniscient

I take the children to the saltwater pool while my husband visits his father in the rehab center after his fall they tie a pair of pool noodles around the railing of the steps and play fishermen my husband thinks the new fog is delirium his mother is sure it is the start of dementia so this is how it goes: my son throws the cylindrical foam end of a swimming barbell into the still center of the pool as bait and I swim to my death slap the hard foam between my arms with as much *sturm und drang* as I can muster but no one quite believes that before the fall he was walking two miles a day he was driving he was chewing the ends of his after-dinner cigars reading whatever he could get his hands on when they reel me in I thrash and flail and pretend to weep my captors gleeful haul me up the steps where they feast on my shoulders and arms he is yelling and swearing as two of the aides try to move him

amateurs! he whispers about the physical therapists miming the motion of an elliptical machine though he can only lift one leg in bed a novel moment of meanness from one of the kindest men I have ever known together they thrill in their sharing of me they take pictures of their catch with their little hands as makeshift cameras he wants to help with dinner wants to know why he can't go to church with her and she begins to explain you can't walk then ends it there as a mercy together they let me go then draw me near again and again and again— their plump hands browning in the ruthless light of day maroon crescents swelling under their eyes from the salt they chase geckos into the shrubbery all the way home their slick new bodies shining

Uneducation

E, who is in third grade, is writing a five-paragraph essay on the subject of winter. Which body paragraph will hold the shelves of snow, the dark mornings, the icicles as long as golf clubs, the grandiose entry of the most fabled man of all time? (Santa or Jesus, depending on who you are.) How will the essay conclude? And what does one do when winter no longer becomes spring?

After school she finds a baby painter turtle crossing the front walk. She holds it gently in one hand and then the other, as it walks over the edge again and again. “I think a hawk dropped it,” she says later, leading it to water. How hard it must be to be a reptile: to never be able to tremble in terror.

The group thread today is about finding a nursing home versus bringing him home. The end of coverage, a Hoyer lift, the possibility of a twelve-hour in-home aid. I desperately want to contribute something helpful but do not know what to add.

My research on assisted living facilities has proved vexing, useless: *This is the worst place to send your loved one. We showed up and our mother had a black eye no one told us. This place has taken such wonderful care of my WWII veteran father. Highly recommend! He is very happy here.* Every single one shows pictures of palm trees and swimming pools, firepits, a grand piano on the edge of a lounge. You never see a single soul.

Shiva

Everywhere our friends' parents are dying or already gone. Towering, sheltering trees falling in the only forest we have ever known. We send texts. We ask what we can do. We watch their children. We apologize.

The morning of the shiva for a close college friend's father who died suddenly, I wake up with strep. I was planning to go, to bring him two books on grief and a handwritten letter, but all night I tossed and turned, and my throat burned with what felt like battery acid. And I knew I would have to cancel.

In and out of consciousness, aware that my glands were becoming jagged balls of sticky glass, I dreamed the new recurring dream. The new dream is a revision of the old recurring dream, in which M leaves me, citing an inexplicable change of heart—a vague but certain loss of affection that no one can argue with because it is so vague.

In the new recurring dream, my husband *and* my children leave, walking far ahead of me in a very crowded festival, or perhaps a European city, Rome, no, Florence, mobbed at Easter.

I fall behind because I am sick—and as I jump and holler to signal to them to slow down, I lose them. Their heads grow smaller and smaller until they are lost among a sea of heads. I try to use my phone to call them, but when I touch the phone app, there is no number pad, only a settings screen, and then another settings screen, and yet another. Finally, the phone prompts me to set up a new profile page—the silhouette of a round geometric figure reappearing where my photo once was, as if I have become someone it no longer recognizes.

Novel

Many summers when we were visiting my in-laws, I would sit on the couch, working on my laptop. One particular summer before we had kids—my last chance to try to do something so ambitious—I was writing a novel that I have since abandoned. Whenever my father-in-law crossed the room, he would ask how it was going, and I would answer, only half-joking, "*Very* badly. Like pulling teeth."

"Oh?" he'd say, genuinely surprised.

After that, each time he crossed the room he would give me something: a comic he had cut out from the newspaper or a couple of pieces of candy. He started working on a farm when he was only nine. Had never gone to college. His contribution to my struggle was so simple, so sincere. He offered whatever he could.

The Goldfinch

On Memorial Day weekend, I am sitting in the backyard with my friend Molly when a tiny goldfinch lands on the lawn a few feet behind her. I point it out softly so she can turn around without making too much noise. But when she sees it, it doesn't move or fly away. Instead, it comes closer. We notice it is missing tail feathers and looks very roughed up. It flies into our lettuce garden and then as Molly gets nearer, it flies—we can't believe it—right onto her forearm, as if she were Snow White. But now that it is so close to us, we can see it has no eyes, just black slits where its eyes should be and tufts of black feathers. It isn't magic then, more like confusion or need. I find a shoebox and put a dishcloth in it to create a soft nest, put the top on askew. Molly calls every agency she can think of, but it is a holiday and voicemail picks up every time. Finally, we give up, and I open the shoebox, leaving a bowl of water before I go. When I return a little while later, the blind finch is gone.

When I was in my twenties I dated a much older man, A. A had a twin brother C who still lived in the seaside town they had grown up in, and he had kept their childhood home so that he could take care of their mother, their aunt, and their uncle there, and he himself lived nearby with his wife. A and C's mother had Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. Their aunt and uncle had Alzheimer's too. But C, I learned, refused to put them in a home, despite his siblings' reasonable pleas that he put his own life first. Months after A and I started dating, I went to his hometown on the coast and met his twin brother, watched him take care of three elderly people who were no longer who they used to be. The uncle asked who I was, if I had come from Hollywood, to which I politely laughed and said no. It was Easter, the chill of winter still in the air. We had brought food for some semblance of celebration. I remember sitting in a small living room with this family, equally staggered by the sadness and the devotion, as C occasionally wheeled them into different corners of the room, chasing patches of sun as the hours passed like echoes. The shadows shifted, and the day quietly closed its doors, and no one needed anything from me that I could not readily give.

The Bluejay

In a fantasy, I imagine the mind having flown south. The mind as migratory. Some days the mind holds still in the wind. Some days it lands inside a word and surrenders to its new form. I, too, become a word. Today: Aching. Ache. The ache.

There was no text yesterday with the day's report. Late in the morning today my mother-in-law sends a picture of my father-in-law, head curled into his chest, eyes closed, sitting in the wheelchair in the living room. "He is like this all day long," she writes.

I spend the morning cleaning the house for the housecleaners, which always feels both absurd and necessary. Putting the toothbrushes in the medicine chest so they aren't sprayed accidentally by stray toxins. Collecting toys with multiple small parts so that the toy can still be played with. Hanging up my clean clothes slung on the chair, so they are not confused with the dirty.

While in my daughter's room, I have a very distinct memory of writing my first entry in my diary when I was eight, the same age as she is now. I remember the banana yellow pages of my Snoopy diary, the light gray lines floating inside generous margins. I remember writing in pencil of our cat, "Today Mickey killed a bluejay and left it on the doormat." I was breathless with exhilaration, but I remember struggling a long time with the word "gross," erasing and rewriting the second "s" several times before deciding to replace it with an "e." *Grose*. I remember the urgency to record the event—its momentousness, its shock value—and my disappointment that I could not capture the experience more precisely. Because here was death, sitting on my porch, in all its finality and power and purpose, and all I could do was sit inside my inert words, fumbling to keep a feeling alive.