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Ice

INEVITABLY, WHEN MARRIAGE has just been legalized for you and your comrades, and you're a bachelor, you think about bodies in orbit, especially your favorite moon. Enceladus, encased in ice, is mine. Its diameter is about the distance between Waycross, Georgia, and Frostproof, Florida. I love that mythic name—the stress of the *sell*, the final syllable a gust of sea breeze. In third grade, for a presentation on Saturn, that moon was a white pinhead pricking my model's Styrofoam ring system. But I said nothing about the Enceladan saltwater ocean because NASA hadn't discovered it yet under miles of surface ice. From warm, dark fissures, geysers shoot that brine up into space, creating Saturn's E ring. When Rosa Parks pressed her left thumb into the police ink pad, those cryovolcanoes were erupting. When a tarred and feathered Walt Whitman was run out of a Long Island village. When your great-grandmother's fetal heart started and your pug's stopped, and Halley's comet burned in an Etruscan sky, causing panic and awe—*Gugga gugga boom whoosh!*

And they were ejecting ice when I was recently looking through the wedding album of two male friends, Nico and Billy, and I thought to myself: I want that, too; I didn't know I wanted a husband—growing up in the Deep South, I didn't know I *could* want one—but now I think I do; well, I would at least like the option, beyond the hamster wheel of Internet dating and, ahem, “dating.” I looked up at them still playfully bantering and smiling after a decade together, like two Galápagos albatrosses at their nest. Then I looked at our friend N— on the opposite sofa—a guy I grew up with, his lymphoma in remission, also partnered to a man. As children, he and I would wake to the same coffee smell from the Maxwell House factory across the river. We competed in potato sack races on our school baseball diamond. We were both closeted in Duval County Public Schools until we weren't anymore, and then Matthew Shepard was left to die on a fence. Many moons ago I liked N—, but he didn't like me back.

When I feel frozen and scared in my bachelorhood, I think of Enceladus. And hear poet Elizabeth Bishop, in a state of suspended animation, imagining a weed

growing from her frigid heart. Eventually “it split apart / and from it broke a flood of water.” Some of the water gets in her eyes. She asks the damn weed why it’s rooted there. It replies, “[T]o divide your heart again.” In Nico and Billy’s basement living room, my eyes shook. The center of my chest quivered.

Seventeen years ago, my father was diagnosed with a terminal illness and my parents divorced. Numbness turned into grief-stricken restlessness; I wanted to bawl, but my college dorm room had thin pillows and thin walls. So I took a bus alone to a yoga center in the Berkshires for a spiritual snowshoeing workshop. I thought I would shuffle out of earshot, up some snowy hill, and from the cold summit my pain would be sobbed out of me, out into the wild ether.

By the end of the weekend, I hadn’t gotten much alone time and I hated snowshoes. I certainly wasn’t healed. But over a breakfast of various seeds and quinoa, I did meet Priscilla, who came to the center after divorcing a man she called her “was-band.” She had my mother’s unusual name and bright blue eyes. We walked to the frozen lake nearby, chatting about our problems, and stood on the windy shore. She unwrapped a peppermint. Suddenly the lake made a noise, like a depth charge in a submarine movie but higher pitched, like a thin, long saw that wurbles and blurbles when shaken. The lake, a big pond really, cracked. It cracked, it crazed, and it hushed. What was once solid was splitting, melting in the February sun, setting off a brief chain reaction of noise. (Thoreau heard it too at Flint’s Pond, asking, “Who would have suspected so large and cold and thick-skinned a thing to be so sensitive?”) Priscilla and I looked at one another, astonished at the sound’s unearthliness. For a moment beside our flat, groaning idol, she and I stopped feeling as though we were distinctly separate beings. We walked the shore, circumambulating what we would later call a symbol for a closed heart beginning to open.

But the heart needs its defenses, doesn’t it? And it can be a faulty instrument—I have opened my heart to people and been totally wrong, humiliated. These days it’s less a noun and more a kitschy verb, as in, “I heart you and your thigh gap on Instagram.” So I shouldn’t have been surprised when my former poetry teacher, who thought herself avant-garde, warned me never to use that word in my poems. *Grandmother* was also verboten. It was a fitting admonition for a woman who, after we began to get quite close, abruptly, inexplicably rejected me. One day I called her to chat, and she simply said, “I’m busy,” and hung up. I haven’t heard from her since. Several years before, her adult child had passed away, so could she have needed the controlled loss of another child, me, suicidal in my own covert,

slow-motion ways? I don't know. I do know that behind erasure is the desire to not feel pain.

Today I wish that she and I could go to the Whitney Museum of American Art and stand in front of Alice Neel's portrait of Andy Warhol. He's wigless, shirtless; his concave, deeply scarred chest is exposed to unflattering light. Stripped of his silly badass pretense, it's an emblem for vulnerability, the open heart. I need a single word for it, I want to tell my teacher, one that doesn't elicit eye rolling and lead us to cold, postmodern word games. *Soul* suggests to me the detachment of a psychologist looking at a child through a one-way mirror and filling out a diagnostic form. *Anahata chakra*? A mouthful of patchouli-spritzed half rhymes from the ashram, cut off from its genuine Hindu roots, glowing green in an ersatz Tibetan store. *Chitta*? A word used in Buddhist sutras, conflating mind and heart. It sounds too much like the Italian word for *city*—but maybe someday it could stick, since it marries reason and emotion.

Even if defining it is difficult, *heart*, for now, will have to do. Or call it a wound and feel its thick scab get flicked off too soon, form again too quickly. Declare it a frozen world warming in places, cracking open. The heart opens and closes unbidden as the pupil of an eye.

Enceladus, I'm alone. Would you shine in my dark room tonight? Tell me why there is something instead of nothing. Why matter and moons change phase. Why a marigold blooms, withers. You have no flowers. Tugging on you, dividing the ice of your south pole, stretching you, squashing you, over and over and over, generating heat, melting some of your ice deep down, keeping it liquid with the gigawatts of twenty power stations, your weed like Bishop's is invisible, it is gravity itself, that of Saturn. Elliptical orbit, tidal heating—injury, relief, injury—it all just happens. You didn't ask to live with huge, uncontrollable forces. (*Don't try to make things turn out your way*, the Burmese monk told me at his noisy monastery, *know what is happening as it is*.) When you're closest to the planet, your cracks, your dark clefts called tiger stripes, are at their narrowest. As you speed away from Saturn, they begin to open up, like giant clams slowly revealing their insides again after a goggled hunter swims away. Your geysers intensify at your south pole—more and more it's spray and sno-cone grit and crystallizing cloud, which I can see backlit by the run-of-the-mill star almost a billion miles away.

Enceladus, your ice is blinding—please dim for me slightly. So, without squinting, I can fly above Hassan and Samad and Julnar and craters not yet named, land

softly, and walk about. So I can send and receive the needed telemetry. I don't care if I die trying to reach your center.

I've landed, I'm walking Dunyazad's snowy rim. Now I'm skidding across the finer-than-talcum Sarandib Planitia, now I'm looking up at Earth, home of peacock mantis shrimp and my father's tackle box, from the bottom of Daryabar Fossa. I leap into a temperate fracture, a chasm in the ice, Damascus Sulcus or Alexandria Sulcus, I'm not sure which, falling for miles through flurries until I hit water, swimming down, jetting down to the bottom, where your silicate core begins and dissolves. My torch switches on: Is that coral? It turns off. Pale blue dots glow off and on. My instruments are sure: There are amino acids. Heartbeats. Beneath your ice is life!