

## REFUGERE

NINA ADEL

Beneath your soft blanket. Beneath twigs and dirt. On the hardest ground. Just under the skin of a life you are living. Under pine needles fallen in the pines. On the rooftop. With the animals inside your house. Beneath the stage makeup on your skin. Enmeshed in the lining straw of new bird's nests—you can send yourself there, seeking softness. In the corn. Under clouds of fragrance. Under sweat.

Any place a place of refuge.

Any place, as long as it's not the place you've left.

Live anywhere, but always leave the back door open.

Live hidden in the open. Live being open.

Leave. Leave yourself open so you can leave yourself.

[C-PTSD: Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder:  
Constellation of symptoms which result from chronic abuse  
or neglect in childhood. Occurs in the context of being  
reliant on the perpetrators with no viable escape.

Perpetrators: the very people supposed to meet the  
practical, emotional and intellectual needs of the Person,  
or who have authority over the Person. Abuse often only  
superficially discernible, if at all.

The natural, understandable result of repeated prolonged trauma at the hands of trusted caregivers, or those to whom the Person has become entrusted. Or to whom she has entrusted herself.]

Years.

Over and over. Incurable, invisible, permanent. The Thing in your life. The Thing that made it happen. So complex, you cannot tell. Perhaps the Thing wasn't even yours. Perhaps it lay indescribable and camouflaged beneath a falsely tranquil surface, lay there like that for all the years. Perhaps it's that your own surface—sensitive, absorbent, magnetic—collects the kinds of particles that fail to cling, mercilessly, to the surfaces of others.

Others. Everyone but you.

Perhaps it's not a Thing, but a sense, a consciousness, perhaps an awareness that everything is all wrong but mostly it is you.

Your pieces haven't found the mother puzzle; there is no mother puzzle. There are only pieces; you are the only piece.

Create a place of refuge.

[refuge, refugium, refugere: shelter or protection, as from the weather or danger; any place, person or thing that offers or appears to offer, or is perceived to offer protection, help or relief.]

Create it anywhere, any place you are.

Close your eyes and disappear the world; open them and jump away; jump away from clawing hands and into the Awake World, out of reach.

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Push plugs, tiny speakers, into your ears; cover the canals and disappear the voices. Turn up the volume to disappear the voices in the halls and shops and living rooms; replace the talk with chords and melodies, with muted lyrics.

Sing, louder and louder. Belt it out.

Now don't. Don't sing.

Shhh.

[refuge: a hand, a voice, a plug.]

The back of a closet in Milwaukee, the back of the closet of a child—you are the child—behind mismatched smocks and speckled pants and sweaters, tumbled up with shoes and sneakers, shoes with big red dots at the rubber heel, paint a scene in Cray-pas, a landscape to live in.

Make monsters out of harmless school glue and your mother's old lipstick, your sisters' Yardley Slickers mixed in glue, for coloring. Make monsters for your landscape. Sing them to sleep with your own song. Lull them into sleeping. Hold the sleeping monsters. Hold them gently.

Gently.

[refuge: appears to offer, or is perceived to offer shelter or protection, as from the weather, or from danger; a safe space where urgent care may be given; or awaited, for indefinite amounts of time.]

In the sour scent of a crabapple tree, at your father's summer camp in Delafield, you fall from your place. Discovered, limbs intact, you scamper off.

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The abandoned campfire site holds a tree, its long branch extended over Lake Nemahbin, in the woods behind the camp's dirty tennis court. Approach, believing no one knows about this fire site right behind the tennis court, though tennis is an official activity, though campers play their tennis at this court. With the charcoal tip of a fire stick, draw a house on a large, flat stone, a house you see on the hill across the water. Replicate it in September, when you're asked to draw a house. *Shall I draw an exit?* you ask, sweetly, your irony wasted on the school doctor.

Albuquerque, New Mexico. An abandoned bus shelter in front of a warehouse at the end of a one-way street. Under a tree in the absolute dark, beads of juniper and yucca, dew blowing up from the cold night desert, off the mesa, down to the valley where dogs howl and bark from their chains. There you hide, waiting for your ride to come back, come back, come back. Your roommate from Dulce, the girl who dropped you there, speeding off to visit her Jicarilla-born boyfriend at the intertribal technical college up on the West Mesa; who dropped you there in the valley, at the empty house of a friend, a man you thought you liked, not knowing there was no one home. The snarling dogs of the warehouse down the street where you retreated, where you called *come back, come back, come back*. The dogs of residential yards in every direction cannot advance, for the fences and the iron strength of their heavy chains.

Any place a place of refuge.

Any place, but not the place you've left.

Live anywhere but always leave the back door open.

México, D.F., Distrito Federal, up on the *azotea*, the flat rooftop of your sister's building drinking the soda Señorial Sangría with Viki from a

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shantytown outside of Acapulco. Sixteen and soda-drunk with Viki, your friend Viki, an *old maid* now at twenty-seven, keeping house for her brothers and sisters, the older and the younger, all seven of them students, living in the two-bedroom apartment above your sister's. Viki and the Seven Dwarfs. Up on the *azotea*, the flat rooftop overlooking *Colonia Guerrero*, the neighborhood, overlooking Camelia Street towards the plaza of Tepito.

Tepito, District of the Thieves. Even the world's thieves have a district, a neighborhood, city squares where they belong, together. In Lisbon, the *Feira do Ladrao*. In New York, Times Square.

Any place a place of refuge.

Hide somewhere you don't belong. Down the street in the little food stand where Haydée makes quesadillas on the big *comal* for *Colonia Guerrero* residents coming home, home after their work. You sit for hours into the blooming darkness with Haydée who gave you your first bite of the *epazote* herb, green and wilted into the rich white cheese that is melting into corn flour, melting together there on her commercial stainless steel *comal*. Haydée, with a leg as withered as the warmed *epazote*, cannot walk away, but you can.

You can. The flames shoot up from underneath the hot *comal* sending flocks of sparks up into the city sky.

You can.

There is space inside an embroidered *huipil*, the voluminous *Oaxaqueño* dress from the market alongside your sister's home near Tepito. The dress, you could pack it inside your suitcase on the slow bus home overnight across the border, wear it sneaking back into your one-room Albuquerque cottage. Lost inside the big *huipil*, you disappear until the start of school. In school you disappear until the end of school. And then

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you disappear, in your *huipil*, into a plane, and then you disappear into New York.

Any place a place of refuge.

But not the place you left.

Live anywhere but always leave the back door open.

[Inexplicably anxious as the fight/flight/freeze/fawn instincts are aroused via activation of the sympathetic nervous system.]

A garden on the wealthy southern outskirts of Tokyo. You find the persimmon behind the garden gate in winter, the season's last. Bite the fruit and follow your teeth until you disappear. Your creamy skin into the dark orange flesh of the last persimmon. Keep following till you can't be seen outside the fruit.

[a tendency towards isolation and withdrawal]

The year you uproot your children. A cornfield at the base of the Catskill Mountains. Bring them to follow their father north, 962 miles from their Tennessee birthplace, past the New Market Battlefield, past Foamhenge, past Amish barns with bold, plain symbols, past chocolate clouds. Past foothills into the mountains to his hometown; to rest his fractured core amongst old friends, in his picturesque New York town, the enclave of Woodstock. But then he disappears on the road, contact cut, unreachable by phone. You and your children arrive first, when the cornfield's just been replanted. Plowed down, right after the harvest; replanted just in time. For you. For refuge.

He shows up later, shedding teeth, bits of kneecap, shards of elbow all along I-40 to I-81, along the New York State Thruway, on the path to the doorstep. Shows up later, vacant-eyed and lying:

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*I've been on the way this whole time, driving.*

*I stopped to rest in the moving truck.*

*Slept for two days.*

*Two days in a hotel, with my sugars low.*

*My phone was off.*

He shows up with a quiet crazed intentionality, with secrets in his shoulder-bag. Leaving fragments everywhere, things you'd never seen, never seen before—block the children.

Veins and blood exposed. Who is the body that's driven here, that's arrived in this truck? What is underneath, unseen?

Collapsed but working organs, a savage pumping heart, a thinned cerebral cortex. The blood, the minerals, his cleansing, rushing fluid. The lungs contracting, his breath withheld. The cortex, place of language, of touch, of empathy. His cortex, thinned. A sign of what he is.

Head for the cornfield. The cornfield in the foothills, near the mountain creek.

Head for the cornfield—seedlings reaching upward in premeditated rows, into adolescent stalks tall enough for cover.

Spend the year in hiding, till the harvesters arrive, threatening in their coveralls, riding harvesting machines.

The cornfield walls will fall. Time for flight. Take your children home, back to their birthplace. Tennessee. Any place a place of refuge.

[Repeated failures of self-protection. Vulnerability to predators. Alterations in perception of the perpetrators; unrealistic attributions of power to the perpetrator.]

Later, he will come, too, hastily mended; scabbed, falsely docile. He follows you back, you and the children. Docile. Vacant. Terrifying.

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You don't recognize him, don't know him, don't understand. There is nothing in his steel grey eyes.

[Impairments: At this end of the spectrum, we find ( ) a deficit of the ability to empathize. Using magnetic resonance imaging, scientists measure the thickness of the cerebral cortex. Those subjects suffering from ( ) exhibit structural abnormalities in precisely that region of the brain which is involved in the processing and generation of compassion. For patients with ( ), this region of the cerebral cortex is markedly reduced in thickness.]

Or maybe it's just that your own surface is sensitive, magnetic, defectively absorbent, collecting the kinds of particles that fail to cling, fail mercilessly, to the surfaces of others.

[The Person is fundamentally without backing. There is no place of refuge to return to in order to consolidate experiences in the world. They may withdraw and isolate.]

A year or two dissolve in a fog. Beneath it, there was your neighborhood in Tennessee, there was your home, your work, your school, a place to put your feet each morning. Now it has dissolved and there is nothing. So now it is Oak Park. Oak Park, whose southern edge brushes up against Chicago. Chicago, whose torso lies exposed along Lake Michigan, the lake that is also your lake, the lake of your childhood, the lake you never entered. The southern end, the end that's pointing south. Oak Park, another sister's home.

In times of deep distress, you are supposed to go to family. Whoever is your family. Oak Park, where an architect once lined the streets with famous houses in clean, specific angles. You are supposed to have a family. Whatever is your family.

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Go there.

Any place a place of refuge.

[The family is the collective; self-expression is the costume worn by work in the service of the collective.]

[The human brain evolved during hunter-gatherer times. Beasts of prey needed only seconds to snatch away the unprotected.]

Go there.

Frank Lloyd Wright houses are everywhere, but not your sister's block. Her house stands on the cheaper side of Lake Street. The narrow second-floor windows of the Frank Lloyd Wright houses, mere slits, stare snake-eyed. Leaded glass. The Frank Lloyd Wright houses and your sister. With narrow slits for windows you have never understood. They watch you, snake-eyed.

Always leave the back door open.

On the first day, drive your children to their unfamiliar schools. When the doors ease slowly to a close behind them, drive away fast; fast, before you feel the gut punch, lose your wind, before you melt away into your own salted river; before you can contort, sobbing, in full view of all the other mothers.

But that's not right. It's you who is the *other mother*.

Get out of there before they see you, the *other mother*, as they drive back home to their husbands and their snake-eyed Frank Lloyd Wright houses.

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[A fundamental stigma. A feeling of being inherently different from others. A tendency towards isolation and withdrawal.]

[A sense of hypervigilance or anxiety. Over time, every day, your rate of breath, the size of your pupils, the pressure of your blood.]

Drive to certain city streets, avoid your sister's house. Drive and stop when you can tolerate the street you're driving on, whatever street, when you can take in air again, when you can exhale in one, long, reconstituting stream. Pull over.

Wait. Hold perfectly still for seven minutes, only breathing. Pick up the pen from the passenger seat strewn with things to last the day, the week, the episode. Hold it steady, steady over a notebook. Hold it there forever, writing nothing.

Wait till you can drive again, or wait until the school day is over.

Wait till you can lift your eyes up from your knees, up over the steering wheel, up over the early autumn trees in front of the famous houses, up over the suburbs of Chicago, up over the city shores of Lake Michigan, up over the state of Illinois. Look down again, and see yourself.

Look down at your damp hands on the steering wheel and drive.

[The sympathetic nervous system, set by the force of nature to prepare your body, the system that makes your heart beat faster and stronger, speeds your rate of breath, widens the size of your pupils; the system that opens your airways, increases the pressure of the blood within the veins.]

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Within the veins, your veins, the narrowing vessels that contain every drop of your life-bearing blood; that form the refuge of your minerals; it is not your fault.

It is not your fault, your fault, not your fault, it is not your fault.

[It is not your fault. It is just a system.]