



seeking refuge inside of the echo

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Blaze orange is the color of my mother's breast cancer diagnosis.

It is late September 2020. It is her birthday. The call comes during the season when men and children hunt small game and deer with bows. The year prior, she and my father had moved to this Pine Barrens retirement village, nestled up against a wildlife management area and in shouting distance of an artillery range.

There are sandy trails.

There are men wrapped in leaf-litter camo.

At night, my parents hear ATVs roaring into darkness, a trail of shimmering glass left gleaming in their wake.

When mom gets the news that rogue cells have coalesced where she once had a lumpectomy. "There is a kind of blankness around it," she says.

Autumn scarlet is the color of my colon cancer diagnosis.

It is late October 2024. It is the day after my wedding anniversary. The report comes via a ding on my phone as men rebuild the roof next door. Two years prior, my husband and I moved to this historic crossroads community, nestled against a municipal golf course and a scatterplot of homes that cross classes and eras.

There are people pushing shopping carts down the road alongside creaky Victorians and candied bungalows.

There are men wearing neon, wielding pneumatic guns.

At night, we hear the boom cars in Philly, deep bass pushing through my bedroom walls and lulling me to sleep.

When I get the news that rogue cells have coalesced within my digestive system, I feel a kind of blankness around it, too.

*I take a picture and see
a green orb hovering
near the shoreline. I
name her "Lady in the
Lake," and place my
grief there.*

Mom's surgery takes place in October 2020.

As the world continues to shut down in the weeks that follow, I drive Mom to appointments and walk her cattle dog pup. I fall in love with their tangle of woods, with its looming vultures and gossiping mourning doves.

On the electric stove, as she rests, I make her grilled cheese.

My surgery takes place in October 2024.

As the light changes in the weeks that follow, Mom and I take tentative walks around the block with the cattle dog, who now lives with me. I feel the maples running scarlet as parched grasses sing for rain.

On the gas stove, as I rest, Mom makes me grilled cheese.

When Mom begins chemo, I do what I can to help. I do what I can to stay whole.

I begin to learn the woods that stretch between Mom's house and the remnants of the Heritage Minerals mining site. I get lost when the sandy trails have too many branches. A few miles in, a blue lake carries scars—a Caribbean Sea nestled within the Pines. *No entry*, the sign says.

Still, people drown in the icy expanse every year.

At the lake, which is really a slow stream, I take a picture and see a green orb hovering near the shoreline. I name her "Lady in the Lake," and place my grief there. Peering into the canopy, I gather secrets from blackjack oak and sassafras. Sometimes, I remember to look up. November sunlight paints the kinked canopy of pitch pine, while the dog bark sings and digs holes. Such happy songs.

When I approach the house, sun turning slant, I see her through the window: Mom asleep in her white armchair.

When I begin chemo, Mom does what she can to help. She does what she can to stay whole.

She begins to learn my neighborhood on walks in fall sunlight. She gets lost trying to find the Wawa down the road when I crave mac and cheese. Encircling the community center, a playground rests next to a garden that has gone feral this late in the season. *No dogs allowed*, the sign says.

Still, most mornings, people run their pets there anyway.

We are in a historic drought, though the world is so upside-down that people barely talk about it. This is the driest October in recorded history. Walking through the grass, I shatter scattered leaves like glass. Sometimes, the world feels so desiccated. On my neighbor's side of the driveway, though—even still—there is a tangle of roses. Strange bursts of pink.

When I look at them, I think about it: Everyone is a magician of hope if they work for it.