Looking out the Window of Dunkin’ Donuts, Contemplating McLean Hospital’s Research

Jessica Harman

The landscape puts its jigsaw together cleanly, clearly blue in blue, bird in bird. The hospital’s hills ripple under an asylum of birches—shadows look more resolute than the sky’s nearly-still sense of time. I am at the bottom of the hill, at the low point of a wave. An American flag rushes against a flagpole, then goes quiet, the POW MIA flag under it like a tiny shadow.

I do not understand shadows, where they come from, where they go. I cast them, though, my mind roiling like the first sea. I see shadows where they’re not, doctors say. A man is not entering my room. A woman is not on fire in her own mind. The walls are not moving like a migration of monarch butterflies. I go back to the hospital to tell them how I know this, now. They want to know. They have me talk about the directions of traveling dots on a computer screen. It corresponds, somehow. I see constellations, cities where I have lived, languages the world is trying to forget, or rediscover. I simply tell them if the dots move right or left—

Evacuation Instructions

Elliott Holt

His wife has disabled the smoke detector. “It annoyed me,” she says. “I couldn’t concentrate with the noise.”

“Why was it beeping?” he says. “What happened?”

She is reading, curled up with her legs tucked under her body, the book resting on the arm of the sofa. She looks up at him slowly. It takes a moment for her eyes to focus. “What?” she says.

“Why was it beeping?” he says again.

“Oh,” she says. “It was toast. Just burning toast. That thing is too sensitive.”

There are wires dangling from the ceiling. There is a crack in the paint. “What did you do?” he says.

“I hit it with a broom,” she says. “I couldn’t make it shut up.”

He can see her, standing on a chair, hair flying everywhere, stamping her foot and slamming the broomstick into the ceiling. “But what did you do to your nose?” he says.

“What do you mean?” A trickle of blood is winding its way from a nostril to her chin.

“Look,” he says.

It takes her a minute to realize what’s going on. She is like a cartoon dog that has to smell the smoke before she knows her tail is on fire. “God,” she says as the blood spills onto her blouse. “That’s so gross.”

He follows her into the bathroom, watches her stuff toilet paper up her nostril and tip her head back. “Probably allergies,” she says.

“She wants to lie down?”

“It’s fine.”

“And the smoke detector?”

“It made me want to slit my wrists,” she says. “It was too insistent.”

“That thing could save your life,” he says.

She rolls her eyes. It is a bad habit she has. This impatience with the world, and her inability to hide it. Even after eighteen years of marriage, he’s not immune to her behavior.

“And if there were a fire?” he says.