

Do You Remember That Time on the Road?

We ate Ritz crackers with cheese and blood-red jam almost every night one summer we travelled. Rain pinged the top of the station wagon. I slept in a tank top. You sometimes checked my forehead for a fever with both sides of your hand before pressing each palm against my pink pink cheeks. We parked at rest stops in the open palm of the great plains for the night, and it is still the best I have ever slept.

I can describe the kind of missing as homesickness. The only person on earth who understands the gravity of this loss is you.

In California, I almost told you I loved you while we ate, that time we had to stop driving because I couldn't stop crying. You fed me crackers, then, too, topped them with cheese and jam yourself. I ate through breath-heavy sobs, choking on the sandy crumbs. I could taste my tears. I strained my eyes to read the printed signs where we pulled over: *Do not feed the cats*. And sure enough, here was one now, white tail like the open end of a quote. You bent down and reached the pale half-moons of your fingernails. The cat darted away. Yards across the parking lot, a stranger moved through tai chi under the sharp fluorescence of a streetlamp, and you said, "That guy creeps me out," and I shut my mouth because "I love you" didn't fit in this scene. Instead, I waited for you to dip the butter knife back into the jam jar and spread the sticky seeded red across the white slate of cheddar, the crumbly ridges of the cracker perched between your thumb and middle finger. You took turns churning out crackers. First me, then you, then me again. You licked the knife clean and again checked my flesh for fever.

No one at home understood this choice. I wanted to be selfish. I wanted them on my side. Instead I listened: my mother's "That was the love of your life. Most people never get one." followed by "Do you still speak to her" and "Will you speak to her" and "I have no problem with her" months later, my sister who wanted to console you instead, my brother who still saw you as one of us.

It felt like falling, this knowing and sense of doom. You once said you loved me like I loved you, but I did not press.

Do you remember, just after California, Crater Lake? I felt like I was falling forever into the blue, and at the last second I looked down. It was then that I hit the water. My head snapped back with the force, and I couldn't turn my head for days. You had to drive. You didn't mind. You hated how I hesitated when passing on a two lane road. In Oregon we did what lovers do—invent constellations, shower together, scrub each other's backs with slow, steady circles. We cooked dinner, sometimes. Once it was ramen while we watched a pod of whales climb the coast. Sometimes it was only crackers. Crackers, cheese, and sucker-tart jam. Only this time, I had the knife.