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Moonlight

In the village of Asgata where my father grew up, old houses sink into a valley and the hills rise up all around. My father moved my mother, brother and me back to his hometown in the Cyprus countryside when I was ten and as a teenager, I used to run up in his mountains for an hour before dark. Gullied roads cut through the underbrush of terebinth, sage, and thyme and into a sparse forest of juniper, wild carob and pine. On days when the law prohibits hunters from shooting at the thrush and rabbits, I go out into the hills and run alone. Around and around itself a mountain takes you, up to its spine, a ridge of dips and peaks. And you can see the other side, the city spreading out toward water. On moonlit nights you can see the footprints of God scintillating on the sea. When I used to return each evening, he would ask me, "Did you see the moon?" As if anybody could miss the moon that showers light into a sky just turning navy.

Dusk settles but rocks and thorns remain visible in the growing dark. White light falls on my shoulders, the moon pencils sharp, black shadows on the earth. Bats flap by, then vanish. I run at night because of the moon, and I stay in the hills late because of the moon. I stare a little at the moon before rounding that last bend before the house.

But I would always ask him where it was, and he would point, and I would crane my neck and look because the raising of his weakened arm was his gift. As a father ages, a daughter learns how badly he wants to go on as before, though his children aren't children and nothing is as before.

When I lived in my parents' house here as a teenager, my mother and father used to tell me that my running made them worry—it's dark outside, the snakes don't sleep, hunting dogs stray, you could trip and fall and nobody would find you until morning. My father quoted lines from Seferis, our favorite poet—

*And now the new moon's come up wrapped
In the arms of the old moon, with the beautiful island bleeding
The wounded, the calm, the strong island, the innocent*

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In cities, I can hardly see the sky. I live in an American city now, and night is only night, black patches of sky, dark trees turned yellow in electric light. No one sees the stripe of the galaxy, no one sees stars. One night though I was walking through a parking lot with friends and saw the moon between a hospital building and a school. Did you see the moon? I asked. Then apologized: I don't mean to condescend, sound patronizing or say that you didn't see—my father always asks me just that way.

How do you begin to talk about a father who is far away?

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Seferis, a diplomat for Greece all through the Metaxas dictatorship, the Nazi occupation, the devastating civil war that followed, was a poet, too. He wrote by night of old tragedy and new horror. He stayed in the British resort at Platres when my father was sixteen and guerilla warfare against the crown was starting.

*"The nightingales won't let you sleep in Platres."
What is Platres?
Who knows this island?
I lived my life hearing names for the first time;
New lands, new madnesses of men
Or of the gods.*

My father carried letters, passed out pamphlets. Seferis knew that independence would not bring peace. Soon after Cyprus was a state, another war tore the island open. A new “solution” has been imminent ever since.

My father’s home is wounded by politics and drought. Our village draws water from its own underground vein, which is shared among many farmers and therefore weak by day. My father waters the apple trees, jasmine, and bougainvillea every night after sunset and every morning before dawn. He holds the hose over little moats around every tree and waits for each to fill. He forms a small sea around the roses, careful not to expose any roots. A hedge of rose-laurel divides our land from the neighbors’, and bright pink flowers bloom across the way.

When I return all pumped and sweaty from the hills, my father points to a moon just cresting over the horizon. It is red like blood, and I sometimes feel that he is pointing to a place of violence and torment that lives beyond our hills. When I run, I listen, half expecting to hear a wail, some sort of lament.

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The neighbors’ rose bushes do not grow tall like ours. My father prunes the older leaves before they die, before they stunt the growth of the bush. *The dead understand only the language of flowers. On the trail of asphodels, hyacinths and violets we find our dead*, the poet says.

I ask my father how he learned to train the roses to bloom all year. From my mother, he says. I ask, and she, from hers? No, he says, Yaya Agathe learned about the garden by watching it fail and grow, day by day and year by year, as a child learns to speak by listening. After answering a question, my father walks around the house again.

My father has worn the grass thin, one large circle, more like an earth-colored square scratched into the thirsty grass around the house. He stoops at odd moments to inspect the flowers, pluck some mint or lavender to rub between his fingers. My mother never gets his shirts quite clean on account of all the leaves left in his pockets.

When do you begin to mourn for those you love?

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The violent sun has burnt blisters in the vulnerable skin on my father's head. He lost all his hair at twenty but rarely wears a hat. His cheeks are fallen, his face drawn back against the skull; sadness and strength-sapping medication have turned his eyes into upside-down crescents, softened and still. When he smiles, his mouth bends into the shape of a half moon.

When my father was just twenty-something, he already had a family and when he was still just twenty-something his first wife started dying slowly, so fast. Family and friends told my dad to hope and pray and he did. Sentenced to remain alone among the living, my father lived. He married again.

I grew up in New York, while my father built up a school for Greek immigrants. In a photograph of my father holding a third baby, a son, his face shines circular and full. His smile faded after he brought us to the homeland—a grand adventure—where the delight of doing this great patriotic thing waned fast. He didn't know what he would find when, with his children still young and his wife happy in America, my father moved us all across the ocean to his old home.

He remembered honest people and houses built of stone. Slow-baked tiles roofed the houses. But we found sand and cinderblock, fake wood, and tin. His sisters in New

York all said, Stay here Andreas, but my father said, My children have to know who they are. He wanted to build in Platres, up in the highest mountains, away from all the bustle, away from the coast and dry plains, where rivers gush and a garden won't dry up in drought. But he had to be practical, so he built a house in the low hills of his own village, close to the city and the sea. We went to school there, learned poetry and history, and finished school.

But the strain of an impossible ideal damaged our united brightness. The moving brought suspicions and tears into the fabric of our family, and a few years into the adventure he started to wear away that square of grass outside.

He would call me out to listen to the poet, point to the ground where I would sit beside his folding chair under a pine, with the thick scent of drying needles all around us. *Few are the moonlit nights I've liked.* His radio crackled, and we often lost the station but my father adjusted the antenna so that we could catch the end.

In Cyprus, you can't keep track of your own heart's mourning because there is your own loneliness, your pain: your family living somewhere else and breaking, and then there is your country, divided, without defense or hope.

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Heart muscle tears like any other human thing; after years of perfect self-duplication, our cells can easily make a mistake. When our mother got cancer, though, and our father got heart disease in that same sixth year of life in Cyprus, they did not consider human bodies and the inevitable, inexorable transience of our lives—they blamed the new home, the island-destination of my father's choosing; they blamed the strain of a life so far away from where they'd started.

On the night my mother came out of the doctor's office clean, the lymph nodes clear, the cancer gone, my father's voice shivered and his eyes flashed in the light of a street lamp, gleaming and wet—he said, Thank God—these children have to have a mother.

It was night, there was a moon, we drove home.

Earlier that year a silent heart attack had scalloped out a flap in my father's heart muscle, scar tissue that's loose and open, like a bay. That little bay inside my father's heart might draw blood in and slow it down. Then it might clot. The little clot would travel up to my father's brain and kill him as it tried to squeeze through capillaries thin as hair. He takes blood thinner and looks at his life waning like a moon.

When he's scratched by a thorn, blood trickles down his arm or leg for hours. To live, my father needs to work, training vines to splintering trellises, or planting bulbs for new flowers. He ties saplings to stakes and pulls up weeds and thistles from among the roses, always dodging the poisonous little caterpillars, which bite.

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Guardian of the garden now, unable to teach high school history any longer, my father plays teacher at home: Did you see the moon rise? Some nights, the moon rises while my mother and brother and I are all done with running and with being outside. We sit watching television, grading papers, rinsing dishes, reading.

For years, my father tried to correct my mother's habit of missing moonrise, of missing everything there was to relish in the homeland. Dad always calls to my mother by name: "Georgia, come and see the moon." We love the inside of the house too much, he says. An air of resignation, almost sneering but too tired for sneering, colors these

calls to see the moonrise. My father has grown tired of his family's indifference to the moon, to the movement of stars, to the spectacle in the sky. So he's impatient, resigned to her nonplussed attitude and yet so eager to indict it, and condemn her ingratitude as if the Lord were hosting a party in our yard and this moonshine were His banquet. We won't appreciate the beauty of a young moon in an evening sky when it is tiny as an infant's fingernail, a puncture in the blue-black emptiness. Usually he sits alone to watch it rising. We've already marveled at the milky band that straps around our sky, that band of stars that looks just like a long, narrow cloud. We ignore the planets Venus and Mars with their distinct, tremorless glow. We won't look at the hovering constellations, the cross, the bear.

But on the nights when we do at last answer his command, we sit outside with my father and we all talk together through the rising display. We look up, or across to the horizon where he points. And for a dozen minutes, fifteen maybe, we find something to discuss—politics, the prospect of rain or more heat, our relatives and friends. Each night brings a subtly new shade of glowing crimson. And then the sphere starts to look like hot iron or like raw flesh, open for surgery. I've never found the right words for the wonder of it, and if I think too hard I feel fear; if one of us gasps, then my father looks glad—we have at last grasped the secret of the nighttime, this awful beauty.

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In this house of cinderblock and illness, my father splits the nighttime space with me. If Dino is up, he is out, and when he pulls up in a car throbbing hip-hop, he stands behind the hedge of oleander until his cigarette is done. He ducks into his bedroom and sleeps.

My mother sleeps through the night. My father, who grew up without electric light, still dons pajamas as soon as the watering is done. But he can no longer sleep past one, and when I leave my room to get some water, a little air, he is there—shuffling from kitchen to stone patio or back, radio tuned to the truckers' station, kettle boiling for tea made of aniseed and sage. In the nighttime space we share, I have always simply walked around my father. But on nights when there wasn't a moon, when we trusted our night-vision a little too well, we have stubbed our toes, nearly hit the walls. Once or twice, I nearly hit my father.

From the loft, I listen while my father sits there waiting out the dark. I hear the matches struck to light a flame for tea, I hear the kettle and the clink of stainless steel and china. All night, he breaks off little pieces of toast and sharp cheese and munches with bare gums. By three-thirty or four he has brewed the coffee and the smells steal upstairs. On most of my nights I have drifted off to sleep under the siege of morning.

When do we begin to mourn the living who must leave us?

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My brother and I fought bitterly as children. Dino threw things at me, wanted to play Monopoly and soccer, begged to play anything, even dolls. I wanted to do my homework alone, play alone, run alone. Hungry for my company, he hit me, kicked me—all for the want of me. At the beach one day, my brother threw a flat sharp small stone at the back of my head as I was walking away into the waves. I played the martyr, bled a drop or two, then showed the wound to our parents who sat watching us from under a flowering acacia on the sand.

I got him punished. We talked about hate, stuck our tongues out and spit.

A year after the silent heart attack that no one noticed, our parents left us in the house all night because my father's white shirt had turned all crimson from the running blood. Our father lost his last tooth that night and when he cut his mouth the blood thinner made his blood pour. At the hospital the doctors tried to give him back enough blood to keep a man alive. We waited. How many rags he reddened that night, and his hands, how the blood stuck to his fingers. How the blood poured down his arms, matted the hair. We opened all the shutters but there wasn't a moon. My brother went upstairs and clanked back down dragging a half-broken aluminum cot, pushed it into his own room next to his bed and said, Sleep here Jo. I slept. After that we didn't fight. Twelve years later, moonless nights make me I think I'm in that room—I hear my brother's breathing—

When do we begin to weep for the living, who must leave us?

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When my father went away with my mother to America one summer in order to have a special medical exam, he left Dino and me in charge of his garden. Neither of us wanted to wake up as early as our father, but you have to water before dawn so Dino watered after clubbing at four in the morning or sometimes I rose before the break of day. Dino said, Can you cook for all my friends Jo, and I said, Sure, just wash my car. Then he swept the floors and I dragged a mop behind him. Dino brought his friends over and filled our father's house with laughing teenage voices, vodka Jell-O shots and music.

While our father had tubes run through his body, and had test upon excruciating test, we opened up his house, turned on the lights and turned up the music; as our father lay in a bed on the other side of the ocean, we laughed and drank and then we danced.

He came home not cured but tested, tired but all right. Our father inspected the lemon trees leaf by leaf, looked at the poplars, cyclamen, lavender, hyacinth and jasmine. We lost one geranium, forgotten in the farthest corner of the yard. Oleander still circled the house along with capers, rosemary and cyclamen that crept out from between rocks. Our father smiled wide at the blooming orchids, a patch of daisies booming by a pine—thank God, thank God—he smiled—my children know how to keep things alive.

When do we begin to mourn for those we love; once we begin, how do we end it?

And when we are mourning, do we dance?

We all die in time.

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When the moon sets, my father rises. At one in the morning, when his head runs out of sleep, he shuffles out the door in his slippers. Outside, he sips tea and watches the slow spinning of stars, the subtle orbit of planets and the hurried trajectory of the moon.

I don't really know how to love a man, not even a father. Instead, I open up my intact heart and bow my head and listen for his waning heartbeat. Sometimes we sit together with the scent of watered earth all around us, and then the faded or invisible half of the moon comes out of shadow and we see a full circle, part navy and part bright.

Amica silentia lunae, beloved silences of the moon, Seferis writes, translating Horace's Latin lines into a Greek that lingers in our lives today. The moon washes over my father's garden, and all the colors change at night. Gray poplars and the leaves of olive trees reflect light in silver. Our parched grass shines green, and the grayish gravel street looks paved and black. Moonlight washes my father's body, so that in the gleaming he is whole again and strong.

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All of us delight a little in the moon, its glow like glass, its craters dark. The blazing rock of light spins into shadow so soon. And as the moon falls through the sky and fades into morning or blackens into more night, I know this truth. My dad, my lonesome father, will look with me tonight at the fading moon with this same thrill, this strange longing, and this, our nighttime knowledge that sun and moon will go on—even as our own small lives run out of light.