

Valadez: for Jacob

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Jacob calls me his childless mother. Can a son disown his parents? Jacob steals a car, a boat, a bike, a skateboard and flies away to prove it's possible. The skateboard was seventh grade, the mountain bike before he learned to ride one, the car his last arrest, the boat two nights ago, my birthday—so I would know that he remembered and understand how he thinks of me.

His gift is my fear, stars and sea, the hours I drift in a world without him. His gift is a battered boat washed ashore, morning fog that shrouds the island—five-foot swells and broken waves—the wordless night, our lives ruptured.

His gift is the moment he reappears: barefoot boy high on the cliffs, lost child found, climbing the ledges. He is rescued and restored, returned to his identity as Jacob Trace, Juvenile Offender.

My son lives in exile: *The Rock*, he says, *Escape from Alcatraz* his favorite movie. The thin copper bark of the Pacific madrone peels away to expose luminous green skin beneath it, smooth as human skin, so bright and pale it glows even in shadow. Madrones do not bend from the sea. They reach with long limbs toward the ocean—as if some night they might pull themselves free of rock and soil to dance their way across the water. These are the beings that guard Valadez, the island paradise where my son is captive.

Jacob, I am writing a letter you may never read, a dispatch from my motel, Raven's Roost, damp nest in Kaslo. I walked half a mile in the cold rain, up the steep hill from the dock to the Madrone Cove School for Youth at Risk only to have your counsellor say, *Jacob doesn't choose to see you.*

It is your last freedom: the right to refuse me.

When you cried in the night, before you had language, your father said, *Don't go, wait two more minutes.* And it was true: if I could have stayed, you might have sobbed yourself back to sleep, understood beyond words that loneliness is inevitable. But your hunger was a hole in my heart. I could not deny you. If I waited too long, you'd fret yourself sick and couldn't bear to be touched, as if your tiny body forgot the difference between pain and comfort. I came quickly, with unspoken joy. I loved the night, walking in the yard to calm us both, you cradled inside my down coat, the moon behind a wisp of clouds, showing its face, then disappearing.

I carried you in my own body. I imagined you before you were conceived. Your egg was inside me before I was born. You were already here when I was small inside the womb of my mother—and I inside of her, before she was born. And so it is, through all time, through all beings: mother in child and child in mother. Let this be your proof: I cannot undo, I cannot unlove you.

Jacob, if the green light spilling through the tall canopy of broadleaf maples on Valadez

is God, if light is love, it is a love so vast you can never be outside it. If the sharp, sweet smell of red cedar is just one way God has of waking you and bringing you to your senses, where on this earth can you go where love will not find you?

Life everywhere is life—not before, not later—now, exactly as we are, here, in the place God circled. What if every living being is God speaking? Yellow lilies on the pond, lichen breaking stone, harbor seals laughing. Imagine it is true: the great blue heron with its dangling legs is God, rising. The turkey vultures hunched in fog—God, watching. When they fly at dusk, their wings span sixty inches. They rock the night with calamitous flapping.

On your island, the mink is gone, the wolf extirpated, but the little red fox slips his paws into the speckled flowers of the foxglove and runs away, leaving no scent of his own, no imprint to follow.

We live with the ones we see, and the ones we imagine. Your grandfather walks these woods with elk and bear as companions. The kinglet flashes his ruby crown; the cormorant flies underwater. Tree frogs sing after rain, your holy, captive choir.

Now, while the dark of day protects us, I want to steal a little boat and row to you across the water. I want to hide you in myself, my body's most amazing secret. Lord, let me speak as birds speak, with a heart that grand, with tremulous music.

Jacob, night is breaking into day; I hear stars falling.

