

I.

I was four years old when I first met a dragon. I never told my mother. I didn't think she'd understand.

(I was wrong, obviously. But I was wrong about a lot of things when it came to her. This is not particularly unusual. I think, perhaps, none of us ever know our mothers, not really. Or at least, not until it's too late.)

The day I met a dragon, was, for me, a day of loss, set in a time of instability. My mother had been gone for over two months. My father, whose face had become as empty and expressionless as a hand in a glove, gave me no explanation. My auntie Marla, who had come to stay with us to take care of me while my mother was gone, was similarly blank. Neither spoke of my mother's status or whereabouts. They did not tell me when she would be back. I was a child, and was therefore given no information, no frame of reference, and no means by which I might ask a question. They told me to be a good girl. They hoped I would forget.

There was, back then, a little old lady who lived across our alley. She had a garden and a beautiful shed and several chickens who lived in a small coop with a faux owl perched on top. Sometimes, when I wandered into her yard to say hello, she would give me a bundle of carrots. Sometimes she would hand me an egg. Or a cookie. Or a basket full of strawberries. I loved her. She was, for me, the one sensible thing in a too-often senseless world. She spoke with a heavy accent—Polish, I learned much later—and called me her little *żabko*, as I was always jumping about like a frog, and then would put me to work picking ground-cherries or early tomatoes or nasturtiums or sweet peas. And then, after a bit, she would take my hand and walk me home, admonishing my mother (before her disappearance) or my aunt (during those long months of mother-

missing). “You must keep your eyes on this one,” she’d scold, “or one day she’ll sprout wings and fly away.”

It was the very end of July when I met the dragon, on an oppressively hot and humid afternoon. One of those days when thunderstorms linger just at the edge of the sky, hulking in raggedy murmurs for hours, waiting to bring in their whirlwinds of opposites—making the light dark, howling at silences, and wringing all the wetness out of the air like a great, soaked sponge. At this moment, though, the storm had not yet hit, and the whole world simply waited. The air was so damp and warm that it was nearly solid. My scalp sweated into my braids, and my smocked dress had become crinkled with my grubby handprints.

I remember the staccato barking of a neighborhood dog.

I remember the far-off rumble of a revving engine. This was likely my aunt, fixing yet another neighbor’s car. My aunt was a mechanic, and people said she had magic hands. She could take any broken machine and make it live again.

I remember the strange, electric hum of cicadas calling to one another from tree to tree to tree.

I remember the floating motes of dust and pollen hanging in the air, glinting in the slant of light.

I remember a series of sounds from my neighbor’s backyard. A man’s roar. A woman’s scream. A panicked gasping. A scabble and a thud. And then, a quiet, awestruck *Oh!*

Each one of these memories is clear and keen as broken glass. I had no means to understand them at the time—no way to find the link between distinct and seemingly unrelated moments and bits of information. It took years for me to learn how to piece them together. I have stored these memories the way any child stores memory—a haphazard collection of sharp, bright objects socked away on the darkest shelves in the dustiest corners of our mental filing systems. They stay there, those memories, rattling in the dark. Scratching at the walls. Disrupting our careful ordering of what we think is true. And injuring us when we forget how dangerous they are, and we grasp too hard.

I opened the back gate and walked into the old lady’s yard, as

I had done a hundred times. The chickens were silent. The cicadas stopped humming and the birds stopped calling. The old lady was nowhere to be seen. Instead, there in the center of the yard, I saw a dragon sitting on its bottom, midway between the tomatoes and the shed. It had an astonished expression on its enormous face. It stared at its hands. It stared at its feet. It craned its neck behind itself to get a load of its wings. I didn't cry out. I didn't run away. I didn't even move. I simply stood, rooted to the ground, and stared at the dragon.

Finally, because I had come to see the little old lady, and I was nothing if not a purposeful little girl, I cleared my throat and demanded to know where she was. The dragon looked at me, startled. It said nothing. It winked one eye. It held one finger to its lipless jaws as though to say "Shh." And then, without waiting for anything else, it curled its legs under its great body like a spring, tilted its face upward toward the clouds overhead, unfurled its wings, and, with a grunt, pushed the earth away, leaping toward the sky. I watched it ascend higher and higher, eventually arcing westward, disappearing over the wide crowns of the elm trees.

I didn't see the little old lady again after that. No one mentioned her. It was as though she never existed. I tried to ask, but I didn't have enough information to even form a question. I looked to the adults in my life to provide reason or reassurance, but found none. Only silence. The little old lady was gone. I saw something that I couldn't understand. There was no space to mention it.

Eventually, her house was boarded up and her yard grew over and her garden became a tangled mass. People walked by her house without giving it a second glance.

I was four years old when I first saw a dragon. I was four years old when I first learned to be silent about dragons. Perhaps this is how we learn silence—an absence of words, an absence of context, a hole in the universe where the truth should be.