

# Imagining California

**June 11, 2018**

Dear Ysiss,

I have decided to start writing letters to you.

I know you won't write back, know I can never really reach you no matter what sort of postage stamp I slap onto the skin of this strange envelope.

But sometimes it's just good to have someone to write to, not just the gentle echoing cavity behind my eyes. Not just the dust on this patch of rug, not just the empty kitchen.

You are your own kind of absence to write to, no longer being here.

How is it in California? I heard the forests are burning.

Hope you are doing well.

## Taking My Time

I waited as long as I could.  
That is what the legend, whispered  
to me by my mother in the dark, tells—  
that I drifted down the river of my non-  
being for a fortnight too long, that even  
when they poured chemicals into the  
stream, to force me out, I would  
not come, too comfortable,  
curled in my warm sanctuary,  
satisfied to stay there, in wicked stasis,  
floating; and, looking back, it is hard to  
shake the sense, encoded in fetal flesh, that  
being born was not in my interest. Since then,  
it seems I have always been the last to emerge  
from the car, the dance floor, to come indoors,  
begging my parents for just a few more minutes,  
just a few more minutes, resisting the momentum  
of my existence, longing to stall the clock's call,  
living as if soft womb-walls surround me  
still, still taking my time as if time does  
not take too, as if the time I take  
will not eventually run out,  
though I know, cruelly,  
otherwise.

## Homeland

I was born in the heart of the desert  
among the bright lights and streets  
of that big little city in the wasteland.

I did not stay long, do not even  
remember it. Nor do I recall  
passing by the sun as we traversed

the sky, crossing the land in our pale  
yellow chariot, but I imagine it must have been  
something like that, a mirror image,

for I rose in the West, then was set  
in the East. And now,  
I begin to come full circle.

I grew in lush Connecticut forests,  
a sliver of city sitting under my skin. My roots  
are as deep as anyone's, unshakeable,

entrenched in the hard earth like corpses  
and I inherit the dust. I carry so many  
fragments in my blood—the Rochester streetlamps

my mother bathed in, the Groton submarine bases  
her father served at, the chicken-farm cadences  
of Blackstone fused to his tongue, his *Haow ah yoo?*

And there is more—lodged in my ears,  
the church-bells of San Francesco mix  
with the babble of Schio gossip, the scandal

my ancestors ignited before leaving Vicenza,  
and Italy, altogether. I sing the desperation  
of my fourteen-year old great-grandfather,

his flight from barren fields and Irish death  
to Ellis Island's hard embrace, inconceivable  
to me, like discovering a drop of French-Canadian blood

in our veins was to my uncles and aunts.  
I was not fazed. I am used to not being quite  
pure, not quite having a homeland, not knowing

where to return to, to whom my allegiance lies,  
what with my father, the alien, the immigrant,

who came here from England like the colonists,

met my mother in California, and decided  
it was worth staying. The result—I was born  
in the heart of the desert, an American dream,

a nightmare, distant lands  
cobbled together beneath my skin,  
a never-ending graveyard in my mind.

**June 18, 2018**

Dear Ysiss,

Writing to you feels like writing to a lost toy, or to Reno, or to a younger draft of myself.

It's like writing to an old house years after you moved, or atoms, or a piece of eyelash that fell off the wet lid of my mind years ago, but still circulates in the bubbling grey space between memory and imagination.

It's speaking to rearranged furniture, to the old positions they used to sit in in your living room, it's entering that living room and feeling some deep, unnameable ache.

It's taking every piece of paper I saved in boxes and drawers and hidden under floorboards, every old math test and love note, hoarded like nuts in preparation for a long, dark winter, and trying to cut and paste the letters into a ransom letter for myself, where I am both price and hostage, into a new Rosetta Stone from which nothing can be learned, into the present screaming, long and low into itself, calling out for the past it used to be.

## **Boston Snowfall**

From this high up, there is  
an ashiness to the snow, falling  
steadily like the disintegration of  
a burning heaven, dusting the ground  
around the graves with a grayness  
that could swallow any body, each  
flake like a fallen angel, or a  
fleck of feather, each stone  
a shadow, the whole yard  
a crowd of shades, assembling  
amidst the decay, the trees above  
them black and bare as death, or burnt  
skeletons, or maybe just people  
trying to live through this winter,  
amidst the swirling cold, amidst  
the infinitesimal fragments  
of a falling sky.

**Addressed to an Irish Grave**

Slab-pyramid no higher than my chest,  
tucked away behind the church  
with faces peering out of the stone,  
let me peer inside you. Let me  
look between the leaves of stone,  
this book binding shut on the dead,  
and see the skeletons crumbled inside,  
the dirt and dust their gaping  
eyes and raw calcium have become,  
the invisible bodies left piled past  
the pasture where the cows graze,  
and not far from the holy well.  
Let me look inside, and see.

## To the Rabbit

Your fur still glimmers with silver, in a way,  
 though mossed and matted, and imbued with dark streaks,  
 for a touch of sunset from the ending day  
 still falls upon it, soft, as it lightly reeks.

I was not expecting to discover you  
 as I peered over the stone lip of this mound,  
 yet to my wandering eyes you came in view  
 nestled at rest in your corner of the ground,

right down the incline from Noah Dogeett's stone  
 shared with his wife and daughters, all in the same  
 spot, almost at the doorway to the unknown:  
 Number 10 it reads—but above it no name.

Was that your destination, O little friend  
 when you came down this grassy street, to this door,  
 or was this merely the spot which you happened  
 to arrive at, accidentally, before

whatever happened happened? I wish I knew  
 what, wish I could see it, as I see you now,  
 wish you could somehow tell me. But of course you  
 have no mouth, or voice, or eyes, to tell me how

you came to be splayed out like this, on your side  
 back legs separated from the exploded  
 mess of your rear end, the pasted chunks of hide  
 pressed into the grass, green mixed with white and red,

your face half-torn away, bones painted with blood  
 revealed to me, as I stare and stare and stare  
 at your ravaged little body, good as mud  
 to all these passersby. Do I even care?

And who will bury you, my little rabbit?  
 In this whole graveyard, only you are left out  
 in the cold. Forgive us. It is our habit  
 to ignore the deaths we do not care about.

Murder victim in a landscape of the dead,  
 ripped apart, the cave of your skull home for flies,  
 you lie there. Each person passing turns their head,  
 sees you, keeps walking. They do not use their eyes.

## **In the Burren**

Everywhere I go, I remind myself  
I am walking on remains, on life  
forms long swallowed into the stomach  
of prehistory, and dissolved in the rain,

this fossilization of everything  
that came before me buried  
beneath my feet. The earth  
is one vast gravesite, the past

layered into rock like stacked coffins,  
and everything decomposing  
back into itself eventually.  
How many molecules

that were once here comprise me?  
How much of my form is excrement  
turned fertilizer turned flower burst  
from between the cracks of a vast

karst corpsescape? How many  
extinct species have been recycled  
into me? How many ghosts live  
in the mineral of my bones?

## Jordan

She haunts us, still, her vacant eyes staring out  
from the dark frame, which sits on our shelf

next to the glass orb I would turn in my hands  
as I gazed back at her, trying to read the past.

No sepia tones distort this picture—there is  
only pure black and pure white, her pale

face stark as the moon, freckled with craters,  
hair like night framing it. Years after she died,

I learned there was a river named after her,  
felt it running through my mind.

She was already blind by the time  
they realized her nerves were burning,

lightning bolts surging down her spine,  
too late to stop the one that claimed her.

They'd named her Jordan, and I wonder  
if she made it across. My aunt believes

she is in Heaven. It is how she sleeps at night.  
But I stayed awake. She was eleven.

Her legacy is silence. There are times  
when I wonder if we have all forgotten her.

But I still remember her stuttering, like a dying  
ember, over *The Polar Express*, that December

when we sat in the shadows of a bedroom  
with white snowlight in the window.

I did not know, then, how precious each  
word was, when we read together, so long ago.

**December 2, 2018**

Dear Ysiss,

It is gray in Philadelphia today, and December is closing in upon the land like a vise, and all my vices lie scattered on the sidewalk like fallen leaves, crumble into pavement.

I am trying to find a word for the ache of empty trees, of bare branches dark as a question mark, stretching out in a sea of scribblings on the colorless page of the sky.

Most days I think the ache is just growing up, the stretch of the soul as it tries to fit this sharp, vibrating body.

Sometimes I equate it to awe, the observation of glory (or beauty, or whatever you want to call it) in the world and the distance between you and the glory driving through the heart like a knife that my aunts and uncles call grace. I was never raised religious, can't say I believe in a God, even though I feel like I search for one in everything. Is that just a way of saying I'm searching for meaning? Or is it that I find meaning constantly and, in doing so, am ground up against the rough wall of my inability to articulate it?

Do questions like this make more sense where you are, Ysiss? Does it all coalesce into something speakable, something you can invoke to the air in California, where the legal weed smoke mixes with the ashes of burning forests? Do you have grey days there or is it sunny, sunny all the time?

### At Poulnabrone dolmen

Tourists crowd about it. Take  
pictures, so you can never  
really see it without them.  
The way it communicates

with the horizon off over  
the cracked, jagged chessboard  
of limestone. Over the stone  
wall and the fields, the coffin

lid of trees waits for the sun's  
descent from a sky grey and flat  
as these long slabs. The portal  
stone lying before the tunnel

they form with the earth,  
while the capstone stretches out  
and up at an angle, a runway, held  
aloft for millennia by pure physics

and the ingenuity of gravity,  
the weight distributed exactly .  
*The Taj Mahal of Ireland*, I hear  
one man call it, and what

an unassuming palace, simple  
tomb, no gold or ornamentation,  
no magnificence except in how  
it remains, tented above the final

resting place, lasting for longer  
than we can ever hope to.

## American Wake

1.

They would make tombs facing the West, I am told,  
so that the spirit could head towards

the setting sun, the Land of the Dead, which for me,  
of course, is America, my Underworld

home, mythland, uncharted spirit realm, Wild  
West of my history, vast desert

and aching metropolis at the heart of it, full of ghosts.  
And when the time came

for anyone to set out on the journey to that Promised  
Land without famine or joblessness

or the violence of the British, they would hold  
an American wake, as if

as soon as they passed over the Styx-like Atlantic  
waters, and washed up

into the next life, they would never come back.  
Migration as a kind of death,

the absence left in its wake. Did they hold one  
for my grandmother's grandparents,

for her father at fourteen, before they passed into  
the Halls of Judgment

at Ellis Island, to give birth to her, to this poem?  
There's a thin line

between celebration and mourning. How do you  
mourn yourself? I mean

celebrate yourself? Dance yourself into shade,  
treat yourself as ghost

while others kiss what is left of you, and loose you  
into dusk, into the chilly water?

## 2.

The Living Wake for Joan is my mother's idea,  
just an excuse for a party, really. Joan hasn't died  
nor is she close to dying, she's just lost a lot

of weight recently, after months of dedication  
and diet and exercise and, being Joan, she wants  
to celebrate. There is relief in the lessening of weight

upon her, the heavy build that runs in Joan's family  
—Irish immigrants, the same as on my mother's  
mother's side—eased from her a little. Red-faced and the life

of every room she walks into, it is impossible  
not to love Joan. And *why wait*, my mother argues,  
*until someone is gone to say nice things about them?*

And so the scheme is gleefully agreed upon,  
and the Joan enthusiasts (of which there are many) gather  
and after the party has been in full swing for a couple hours

everyone is gathered on the back lawn and Joan sat  
in a chair and told to keep quiet while we praise her,  
which of course she doesn't, too full of life to play dead,

to let us tell her what she means to us without responding.  
It will kill her, I know, when she finally is dead,  
and unable to give reply as we speak about her.

I write a poem for that night, one of my first  
real ones, and my mother cries reading it beforehand.  
She and Joan are best friends from college,

and *it's just nice*, she tells me, *to see that so much*  
*of what I love about her, you love too*. I read the poem aloud  
for everyone, Joan gazing up at me out of her invisible

coffin, and I cannot imagine her dead, don't know  
how I will give goodbye to her, when, at last,  
we have to let her go, what any of us will be able to say.

3.

My Nana's wake was in a small room  
off the side of the main church,  
and I remember rows of chairs  
and red candles, the coffin wide  
open to reveal her, Lethe-dipped  
and peaceful at last.

Almost twelve, I didn't know  
what a wake was, and Mom  
explained it to me in hushed tones  
as my relatives bent over the deep  
lining of the box. Going up to it  
I didn't know how to feel,

staring down at her white curls  
and unreal face smoothed  
of wrinkles, her eyes closed  
like so many of the times I visited.  
And when, I wondered, though  
I knew better, would she wake?

**The last time I saw you**

before I left for Europe you told me  
about Nana, about the days when she  
lay confined, as you do now, to this  
adjustable cage of a nursing home bed,  
when she couldn't move, much less  
speak, much less remember herself  
and everyone around her, and I  
was too young to know what going on,  
much less help, much less remember it  
now, all I can remember, all I knew was  
she was dying, but I'll never forget that  
never forget you telling me about  
how you once left her sleeping  
for two minutes to use the toilet,  
and how she woke up screaming,  
thinking you had left her forever.  
Is it like that for you, now, every time  
you wake up, and she's not there,  
only she doesn't come back when  
your heart wails, and will I wail too  
when it's your turn, will it follow me  
my whole life, the sound of it,  
until I too am trapped in a bed, the ghost  
of your tears when you told me  
*I miss her so much* dripping into life  
on my aged, withered cheeks?

**June 23, 2018**

Dear Ysiss,

Today I feel more disconnected from you than Athena is with Zeus' skull, or Pegasus with the dripping innards of Medusa's throat.

We all pull ourselves out of some slime-filled cavity, someone else's imagination, we all crawl from the warm muck of another's death, or at least another's immortal suffering.

We all emerge from a skin that is not our own, even if it once was, serpentine rebirth, reverse Ouroboros, a recurring splitting of the skin, and the wrenching of a new body out of the past.

I have crawled through so many other bodies, other beings, other reamalgamations of matter, and most days I sit, quivering, waiting to burst out of this one, to break through the atmosphere of myself until I am back in dead space, trying to relearn how to breathe, how to build a new habitable world around me, so much rock and oxygen and pulsing hot liquid, which will always end in atrophy, which I will always inevitably have to leave.

**Reflux**

My throat feels like a sacked temple  
raw with the ravaging of invading soldiers,  
my breath hissing from me like gas set

to burst into flame. Every cough that crackles  
in me reminds me of my grandfather,  
of the deep wet grinding of his retch,

the warfare within him, buildings crumbling  
in his lungs with each hack and shudder  
of his wheezing, emaciated chest,

leaving him gasping, defeated, mid-  
sentence, esophagus acid-scarred  
from reflux. This is my inheritance

from him. And everything I eat comes back up,  
like family history, rising in my throat  
and flooding my mouth, half-digested scraps

washing up on the shore of my teeth,  
burning trash returning with the tide.  
I taste bile, and swallow, accept my legacy,

this regurgitation. And aren't we all just  
our parents' parasites, and they our sickness, each  
feeding on the other until we can't be told apart?

Can you live without devouring the dead?  
Can you eat without becoming food?

## Self-Portrait as Tantalus

*after Natalie Diaz*

“Heaven’—is what I cannot reach!  
 The Apple on the Tree—  
 Provided it do hopeless—hang—  
 That—‘Heaven’ is—to Me!”

—Emily Dickinson, “‘Heaven’—is what I cannot reach!”

*I have life-threatening food allergies to  
 milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, sesame, chicken, fish...*  
 That’s the mantra I repeat and  
 repeat and repeat, but what I don’t  
 say is that I am starving, ravenous  
 for all the things I cannot taste.

*I would die if I couldn’t eat that!* they  
 squawk. I resist the urge to retort that  
 I’d die if I did. In a way, I’m already dead,  
 straining for existence but never reaching it,

a skeleton of want, stripped  
 to the bones of my desires; a spider  
 stuck in my own web, hanging,  
 undevoured, undevouring. Caught,  
 I stand with my head in the noose,  
 forever waiting to drop.

Once beloved by the gods, the mighty  
 and magnificent emperor of my brain. Now,  
 my stomach is king, eating me  
 up until all that is left is hunger. You are  
 what you eat, so I must be nothing,  
 nothing but what I want, so

I want. I want and want and want and want

so much more than I can ever have.  
 Even if I tasted all I crave, it would  
 shrivel away to ash in my mouth,  
 hot coals and embers  
 setting me on fire for more.

Is it so horrible  
 that I had a hankering for immortality?  
 That I wanted a small taste  
 of heaven, to be closer to the gods,

further from death?  
Why couldn't they have just shared?  
And why was nothing else  
good enough for me afterwards?

Zeus, I'm so hungry I need food I need it  
give it to me. Anger blossoms, blood-red,  
making me clench and tense  
and twitch and shake with impatience,  
fuck, I am so fucking hungry,  
*feed me – !*

I understand.

We want. We want and want and want and want and want...

**July 17, 2018**

Dear Ysiss,

Every time I say your name aloud, people think I am talking about Isis, the Egyptian goddess, and that's not far off from the truth. You are a goddess now, in a way, your black hair wreathed in gold, you dark skin shining royal.

What are deities if not the dead we forgot, were told the story of, and re-imagined, their graves the temples we pilgrimage to, like lonely monks, worshippers praying to the bones, knowing dust is more holy, their hymns like letters, released to the sky?

But I don't have a grave to visit, Ysiss, the only temple I can commit you to is this paper, the only altar I can pray at is this notebook, the only resting place I can dig you is the whole of California, whose forests are burn as I write this, as if bombs had exploded in them. I ignore the smoke. I keep writing letters, making blood sacrifices to you, searching for answers, and chanting your name.

## Orpheus

*after Meagan R. Thomas*

There is an Underworld  
within her, and within  
me too, a dark place  
that drags her down,  
all ghost and cry, slick  
river of her tears and me  
tunneling down after her  
with my lyre of kisses,  
my songs of comfort she never  
wants to hear. There is  
such exhaustion in bargaining  
with her captors, trying  
to get them to see how much  
I care about her, to let  
her go, at least for a little  
while. And when  
they have agreed to  
a bargain straight from  
the Bible, that makes me  
Lot's wife, it is my lot  
to lead her with my treble,  
my staircase of melody,  
my winding tune up  
through the dark and out  
onto the flowers. I try  
not to let the whispering  
of spirits in my stomach  
freeze me, keep me down  
there with her, but keep  
playing, keep moving forward,  
and dragging her along  
behind me on a cord of song,  
of *I love you* and *It will  
be okay*. I don't know  
how well she can hear  
down here, so I play as loud  
as I can, sing at the top  
of my lungs, hope  
she is there behind me,  
following, It is so hard  
to not look back, to be  
sure that she is there, when  
she gives no response  
to my instrument, this tongue,

my refrain of questions.  
And I pray I do not make  
the mistake of emerging  
onto solid earth and assuming  
she has done the same,  
of turning too soon. And if  
I do... Maybe it is not for me  
to be her hero, to lead her  
back to the light, but rather  
to sit with her in the dark  
and hold her hand. Keep  
my mouth shut and let her  
be unreal for as long  
as she needs to, let her  
come back to life on her own.

**August 10, 2018**

Dear Ysiss,

Today I am both in love with the ocean and scared of it.

It wrinkles up at me out of itself, the surface of it like aged skin, the metallic sheen of it glinting in the mist that sits on it like a shroud. It waits outside the window, waiting for me to come running to it, to dive into its steely embrace, its cold.

It's so hard to love something that is cold, and dead, and cannot love you back, but it's the easiest thing in the world to love an idea. This is what you and the ocean have in common.

It is munching at the edge of the sand, creeping in the garden, its salty locks withering the plants, asking to be let in.

We like to think this world belongs to us, but really the ocean was here first, and it will always will take back what is its. The polar ice caps will be gone soon—ice will become a myth—and then there will be nothing to stop it.

## Ice

The wind has not lost its chill,  
but the mud beneath my shoes is warmer,  
the city softening with my step. I can walk

with my long coat loose around me,  
and my ears unsheathed from the woolen den  
of my hat.. The sky is a miracle, the fading

light refracting off buildings and spires as if  
Boston is a kaleidoscope, and we just the twirling  
edges of a more beautiful, incessantly shifting pattern.

The pond in the Public Garden has frozen, and  
half the city walks on it, as if they are Christ. I  
am no exception, and I scrape my soles

over ice, across history, somewhere between  
a stone and tenderness. The small island  
no one but ducks visits looms before me,

and I trek to its banks, thinking about mammoths  
and land bridges, about when everything was  
equally ice, when waves didn't divide us from

each other, and living was just another word  
for keeping warm. As I mount this new land,  
and settle into the curl of bare bark and quiet,

I think about the ice shattering us to doomsday,  
about everything else dissolving into its own  
swallowing, leaving me just this place.

And now, a jet's white has begun to burn  
its way through my dusty gold,  
these shadows set to crumple to pink

and dissipate into nothing. And now  
it is cold again, the moon cracking  
through the blue, as I abandon

my new land, and set out across the ice.

**July 29, 2018**

Dear Ysiss,

Sometimes I wonder how you would have survived, even if you hadn't died.

**It's been six months since you died,**

and everyone in the family tells me  
how beautiful the poem I wrote for you was.  
That when I mounted the pulpit, Christ's  
invisible carcass bleeding over me, yours  
stinking in the coffin below me, you heard  
me read the words I wrote in Italy while your cancer  
grew worse, the piece I was revising to  
show to you when Mom got the call  
and I knew instantly you had gone.  
I knew because she vanished into the back  
room. I knew because I'd been trying  
to fix that damn poem all morning,  
had given up, almost, was on a break,  
avoiding it, hiding from you. But then  
you died and I had to finish it.  
And everyone keeps telling me you heard it,  
and I want to scream at them  
that you'll never hear it, that that's  
the whole point, that when I first  
put pen to the paper in Schio  
to say good-bye to you, I could see  
myself reading it at your funeral,  
that you would never hear it, because  
it was never for you, just me, only me,  
an artifice against you dying, a lie  
to everyone and myself that I cared,  
that I wasn't ready for it, that I haven't  
been waiting for you to die my whole life.

## When You Go

I am not sure I will cry.

Not because I will not be sad,  
but because I will be ready,  
like I hope you are. I hope

when you go it is soft as the rose petal  
I'm bringing you home from Schio,  
though I know it will be withered  
and cracking into dust like  
dried blood by the time I return.

I hope it is gentle as the hum  
of the twelve guitar strings you plucked  
delicately for me when I was little,  
curled on your carpet and needing  
entertainment other than a fiftieth rewatch  
of *Pocahontas* or *Kids for Character*  
or *Disney Sing Along Songs: I Love to Laugh!*  
I hope you laugh, before you go, that you go

after an especially good joke, probably one  
of your own invention, that you float away  
as lightly as a dance, as the notes you whistled  
as you played for me. I hope your breath  
is smooth and even, even as it departs you,  
that the storm of your coughing subsides,

that your frustrations come to rest.  
"I can take up to ten frustrations," you tell me  
again and again, like commandments,  
"but aftah the eleventh is when I really lose it!"  
I hope you don't lose it, hope you know  
you're not lost. "The only thing I haven't  
lost is my sense of humah," you say, that and

the Blackstone accent fused to your tongue,  
curling in my ears like paper in a fire  
that's been keeping me warm my whole life,  
that will echo in the grate of my ears  
long after it has gone out. And when you go

out, I hope you're not scared, and I hope  
you're not sad, hope you know that  
when you go you're going home,

back to that little house I used to chase  
 my brother through, into the back rooms  
 where the past was tucked away, sinking  
 into your armchair, sinking back into the earth,  
 the roots of your garden curling about you  
 like an embrace, your joy shining like the sun.

You brought a piece of that garden  
 with you to the nursing home  
 when it became clear Nana was  
 staying there, and so you were too.

I hope you see her again. I know  
 you miss her, in a way I can't,  
 and if you do see her, tell her I'm sorry  
 for not knowing her better before she went,

but that I'll always remember when  
 she went—October, sixth grade—  
 like I'll always remember when  
 you go, etched onto my brain  
 with the scalpels I lacerate myself with  
 every time someone else I love leaves.

But I will not cry—no.

Let me let you go, so that  
 when you go, I am ready  
 like I hope you are. Let this

poem be like open hands, or a kiss  
 on the cheek, like my final visit  
 so I know I'm making it. Let me  
 play for you this time, these words  
 the strings, my voice  
 the fingers across them.  
 You can whistle along until you  
 can't anymore, until your eyes close,  
 and your breath calms at last.

Come. Let me  
 sing you to sleep.

*for Robert A. Rubega*  
*August 2, 1927 – December 31, 2017*  
*Written in Schio, Italy – November 2, 2017*

## Prayer for Isaiah

I remember the day your parents announced you  
and your brothers, still curled and forming within  
your mother's womb, to the rest of the family,  
the enormous black and white picture, the jubilation,  
the guessing and the awe with which we all learned  
of your arrival: *Triples. Three boys.* At the time,  
I wondered how your parents would manage  
with all three of you. Forgive me. Now I wonder  
how they will keep going without you, dear child,  
born too soon and with the world whistling into  
your side. They named you for a prophet, and who  
could have seen this coming, who could have foretold  
how long you would hang on for, how soon  
you would pass out of our arms. And across  
the country, in Dayton, in El Paso, so many other  
innocents go with you. And across the ocean,  
I hide in a closet in Ireland and write poetry  
to the grandparents you will never meet, though  
I know everyone in the family will tell themselves  
you are with them now, that they are taking care  
of you, that God wanted you, needed to claim you,  
bring his small prophet home. I don't know  
how to pray unless it is through these poems,  
and even then I'm not sure what I believe in,  
but I want you to know I cried today for you,  
and for your parent, for the brothers who will grow  
without you. Want you to know you are so loved,  
even now, even though we never got to meet you,  
to see what kind of beautiful person  
you would become.

*for Isaiah Claude Rubega*

*April 7, 2019 – August 5, 2019*

*Written in Ballyvaughn, Ireland – August 4, 2019*

**August 17, 2018**

Dear Ysiss,

I might be with you soon.

Probably not.

The doctors have me hooked up and everyone says I'll be fine.

I guess when I wake up we'll see.

## Almost Dying

The dull yellow of the curtain becomes  
 so important, the way the covers  
 cradle your legs. The blood  
 pressure cuff that will not stop squeezing  
 your arm, like your mom on the drive here.  
 The white hospital band rattling about your wrist

like the ones they would strap on you  
 at the Community Center every time  
 you went to swim as a kid. You would always  
 rip it off early, while you were still in the water,  
 find the inner tab and pull, feel that satisfying  
 release, let it float away from you.

This one has your name on it, last name first,  
 then comma, first name, middle name,  
 and then your date of birth, and you start to think of it  
 as your tombstone. Wonder  
 if you should take a picture, post it online.  
 Wonder if you deserve to die just for thinking

that. Your phone sits heavy in your pocket  
 and your partner is three time zones away,  
 and what if you never hear her voice again?  
 You wish you could call her. Wish you could get up  
 and hug your parents. Wish your brother was here,  
 so you could tell him you're sorry.

You start to think about everything in terms of lasts,

like that sunset outside the car window  
 as it hurtled you through the hills, violent  
 pink streaks and diagonal yellows cutting  
 the fading sky, and you murmured, *It's beautiful*,  
 as if it would save you. Kept your eyes on it  
 because you know how twilight ends.

Now you lie here in dim fluorescence,  
 and the IV is like a snake, fangs latched  
 to your arm. You feel its coiled weight  
 every time you move. Snot stuffs  
 your right nostril, and your right eye weeps,  
 and the back of your throat is like granite

crumbling, closing. And this was not the shirt  
 you wanted to die in, and you are not sure

you want the book of poetry in your lap  
to be the last thing you ever read, and will that  
yellow curtain be the last sight your eyelids  
swallow up? You struggle for your notebook,

clutch the pen in your limpening hand, the Benadryl  
closing around your brain like cotton, and blank white  
has never been so terrifying to you, because what  
are you leaving behind, what will be left of you once  
they have buried your jawbone, your poisoned stomach,  
your throat turned to stone, what if you don't wake up,

what if these are the last words you write, what if

**February 11, 2016**

Dear Ysiss,

There are days when I think about you  
so much it's amazing I ever forgot you.  
Your name resounds within me when I  
think of it, like the echo in a hollow chamber  
of an explosion that never happened,

and where memory fails me, I imagine.

I imagine playing pretend with you, tumbling  
around a green backyard.  
I imagine the turn of pages in the dim  
of naptime, stories coming alive around us.  
I imagine your kindness, your milk-imbibed coffee  
skin shrouded by soft, delicate curls,  
your tiny nose and sweet laughter.  
I imagine what you must look like now,  
who you have become.

I imagine you in California, with the sun,  
while I am here, shackled in East Coast winter.  
I imagine you imagining me as much as I  
imagine you, imagine you remember me,  
the friend you had to leave behind,  
as you lie on hot sand,  
the waves scraping your toes.

I imagine the day you disappeared,  
imagine everything splintering, asking,  
asking where you were, where you went,  
if you were okay, why your cubby  
was never even cleaned out, questions  
I'm still asking, even though  
I know the answer—

you went to California.

So I imagine meeting you there  
one day, recognizing you instantly,  
and you me, each of us the deepest  
missing piece of the other.  
I imagine talking for hours, seeing you  
every day, as we re-learn who we are.  
I imagine it being  
so easy.

I imagine staying in California with you,  
falling for you like I didn't know  
how to then, like I can't now when all I have  
of you to love is what I can  
imagine.

Every night, I go to bed with you  
in my mind, dreaming about California  
so much that sometimes I have to wonder  
if it even exists, dreaming about you so much  
that you stop becoming real, but

I save myself. I imagine—

a past that I can't remember,  
a future that will never happen,  
that my best friend is not gone  
forever,

that you are just in California,  
and that I will find you there  
someday.