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BRINK

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*the edge or margin of a
steep place or of land
bordering water*

any extreme edge

*a crucial or critical point,
especially of a situation or
state beyond which success
or catastrophe occurs*

We speak of it as if it were a place with a particular geography. Notice the valleys you might *fall into* or might *climb out of*. Are you the one who will peer over the rim? It's a location avoidable by luck or omission: follow directions and make no wrong turns.

Or it's not a place at all—it's an object that is sticky, undesirable, rotted by shame. It's a posture. A position. A person.

But our language doesn't always match the lived experience. That's the trouble with trouble.

Collected here are stories that claim trouble as opportunity.

Here are stories about bodies and food; images of the sky above our heads and the ground beneath our feet. Here are stories that linger in the unspoken space between affliction and expectation. Stories that affirm why we need to talk more about shelter and avoidance. They ask us to pay attention to what might have been and what thankfully was not. They allow for the possibility that trouble might be the very thing that saves you.

Trouble agitates, and there is something about this disturbance that changes who we are and where we stand in this world. Tell me, who is it you want to be?

—Nina Lohman, Publisher

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So you are sitting but really what you are doing is avoiding. Across the kitchen and through the double door, out in the open, you are just straight up avoiding the game. And you say, *I wouldn't mind playing, no really, I really wouldn't mind playing, I wouldn't mind but I don't want to have to come up with anything, no, I really just don't want to be the one doing the asking, I'm all answers.* You want to be all the right answers. But when you retreated from the hiding, from the avoidance, and you placed yourself on the living room rug, you are all the wrong ones. And you never even got the chance to ask, never even had the chance to begin, because it's never the coffee creamer. It's you on those incoherent nights. You with your inability to just. keep. things. to. yourself. It's funny you'd even think it would be the coffee creamer, ha ha, you say to yourself, ha ha, as she walks away out the door and doesn't look back. Which we know is the formula. Which is the recipe followed right down to a T. And you feel the pit much larger than before. Before, it wasn't much more than a gnat landing again and again, but this is stirring. This is the pot, and there you are. There you are with your stupid fucking face and your stupid fucking answers stirring shit up like you always do.

And then it's the pit for you. You might as well have asked if butter was a carb. You might as well have said silver hoops are your thing. Because if there ever had been a time to lie, maybe it was this. Maybe it was now. Maybe it was after you said truth and realized you really really meant to say dare. Because then it's all pickle juice. It's the small cups all lined up 1-2-3, in quick succession, just like old times. Just like before. When he would start acting unhinged. Like a door out of its frame. Like a barrel roll down the driveway. And you'd follow the formula. You'd make it your aim to disappear if not in person then in every other way possible. And you'd do it so damn well. You'd do it exactly to a T. That's the way you'd save you from the wall. Anything was better. Better, then, were those little cups in quick succession 4-5-6. Time both shrinking and expanding; the more you are there for it, the less you will know. And there is the pickle juice and the chips in the lemon press and it's silly, isn't it? Because it's all just a joke. Because it's always just a joke and they think it's going to be one but really it will be 7-8-9. And isn't that news to you? Isn't it still news to you each time; each time it is news to you as you rinse the burn away. You the incoherent barrel roll. You the tornado siren. You the door off the hinges.

'Cause it's a straight line. It's always a straight line from 1 to 10. From the stir to the pot—from the kitchen floor to the hammock—from the cup to the throat—to the burn and the blur.

LIMESTONE

Corinna Cook

1. Limestone is the way, in Missouri, for a rock to be a plate that water slides on. Limestone is also a statement: I (says limestone) was the floor of a shallow sea.
2. I live by the side of the sea in Missouri. This is, of course, impossible. Missouri is inland. Plates of rock sit at the base of bluffs. Freshwater creeks slide over the plates day after day, water rising or falling, flooding or parching.
3. Cross such a creek barefoot sometime. And be careful: a scrim of algae makes a creek floor slick. The dangers are not unlike slipping and falling in the bathtub—the rock is exactly that smooth, exactly that flat in some places, and is just as steeply curved into its funnels and divots in others.

4. Alone but for the dog, I find myself barefoot in Missouri's smooth-bottomed creeks often enough. You creep into my mind, even here. I concentrate on sound footing. No need to meet your eyes.

5. Because I am in graduate school again, I read Foucault and other comforting old Frenchmen. While writing his own books, Foucault sought experiences aimed at pulling himself free of himself.

6. You and I met on spongy ground in the interior of Alaska. It has been six or seven years since I saw you last, though you are everywhere. That is how I know I am still the same. As antidote, I frequent Missouri's patches of hardwood forest and crowd myself with trees to evade your absence.

7. Frequent creeks part the trees in wide, shallow swaths. Most creek water is sluggish. It is always going nowhere, always going somewhere.

8. Not all of Missouri's creek beds are like plates; plenty have bottoms of gravel and are home to crayfish, to copperheads. And plenty of these creeks go dry. There is a name for this. As everywhere, common occurrences here bear names: here we call them "losing" creeks and "intermittent" streams. "Losing" and "intermittent" allude to waterlessness. Sometimes these creeks run, and sometimes they are the dry, winding troughs hikers cross in the woods with neither leap nor splash, troughs crossed by crunching over gravel or clacking across a slab.

9. Once, we drove six hundred and forty miles out of Interior Alaska's boreal forest (birch trees, black spruce) and into the coastal rainforest south of it (western hemlock, Sitka spruce, yellow cedar). This is in you? you asked upon seeing the dank forest of my childhood. Dropping down over the last mountain pass and meeting with the sea, you repeated the question: This is in you?

Shot, reverse shot: a forest on the mountainside, the sea sloshing its knees—an ocean overhung at its edge by branches slung with moss or sometimes kelp, where a wave has clapped a rock just right and tossed seaweed straight up.

Three days? Four? Then it was time to go, time to put ourselves six hundred forty miles north of the rainforest, which we did. But first you raced into the sea, cutting your feet on barnacles and bits of slate or shale, elbows akimbo as you bounded through shin-deep, then thigh-deep, waves. You dove in. You popped back out. You stood near me a moment later, shining wet, goosebumps like sandpaper, shoulders hunched, fists clenched. The wind was sharp, stealing seawater from your brown curls faster even than it could drip onto your neck.

This is in you?

After that it would have been easy to think it was in you, too. It is still easy to think so. But that was an ancient life. Letters scratched in black pen, posted to your childhood address in an East Coast suburb, go unanswered.

10. To see this is to see that it is intolerable. Naturally, I zip my eyes. I enroll in a doctoral program, go to the tamed and built-up middle continent, and live in the predawn of the earliest mornings as a scholar distracted by barred owls. Daytimes I rest in the hubbub of the academy waiting for my wounds to scissor shut.

11. Opened and closed. Opened and closed. The rhythmic "disappearance" of oneself in and through one's work.

12. Initially, you were the one with plans to become an academic. And so perhaps I am not the same as I once was at all, for now I study to become you. Though of course that is impossible.

13. At the time, I had never seen the white pines that grow, seemingly from the sidewalks, in your East Coast childhood city. Limbs manicured in the name of city management. I wonder now if you told me about them. You must have. What business, did I have overlooking this picture? You: coming from a place of overpasses and culverts, where a tree that rises does so out of cement. I did not even register the proposition.

14. In Missouri, I discover "losing creeks" run with water here, go dry there, then run with water again farther down the line. The thing is that where a losing creek is dry, the water is not actually gone. It is only lost to the surface—lost, in other words, because

rather than run as a ribbon reflecting the sky, it takes the lightless, airless path, seeping through stone. The big picture, here, is that Missouri's rocks have holes. Midcontinent, what we walk on isn't solid.

15. The art of seeing, Foucault suggests, has to do with the art of seeing outside ourselves. But critics insist Foucault's "outside" doesn't actually mean the external world. Rather, they suggest it means the world outside the text—the world itself is not possible to see or foresee.

16. You left. Inept at leaving, you kept coming back. This caused us both much suffering, but that is not the problem at hand. The problem is that I, skilled at departure, left only once. Perhaps you felt outdone. Perhaps you felt overshadowed by my decisiveness. That was not my object. I felt, and still feel, this particular rupture as a nonevent.

17. Please don't ask me about midcontinent farmland—it goes for miles, but I know little of it. Instead I am learning the hydrology of midwestern hardwood forests. On patches of land set aside for trees to do what they will, creek beds rest in plain sight. Creek water is coy—it moves slowly and often dips underground. This coyness is a lure.

18. Perhaps I have you on the mind in no other sense than hydrologically, but as such, you fit. The side of the sea in Missouri rims the edge of your interruption.

19. Along the parched bed of even a losing creek, somewhere, water surfaces. Sometimes it's enough to create a flow. Perhaps the water pools, perhaps it is placid as a pond, perhaps a single oak leaf floats on it, immobile. But farther down where the creek bed narrows, the water ruffles, the creek flows around a bend under the bluffs. Joy: it runs! But just beyond, there is a gravel bar into which the water disappears. The loss is, like any, a grave one.

20. In absence, French philosophers see plenitude.

21. There is no denying my disappointment in a losing creek. Picking my way through the too-thick summer air, turning one ankle or the other on chunks of the pale gravel they call chert, I have to tell myself that even scummy puddled water is, in losing creeks, an act of overflow. What seems puny signals abundance, albeit subterranean. It's abundance in a dimension I don't inhabit.

22. If I ever say, such beautiful lines—whether I say it of a dancer or of words on a page—this is all I mean. Leaving your clothes on a rock, on the grass, on time, on with it, onward, your high-stepping bird legs, those arms like bent coat hangers, all that jerking and flapping and whooping: it is always a path to the water. A delight in imminent submersion, in submersion consummated.

23. I hear of people going down to the river to pray. A nonbeliever, I do nothing of the sort. Yet I check on the creeks every day, get in them, out of them, eye them, crouch on their banks. Here you are only an afterthought.

24. I dreamed once of the sea in Missouri. I dreamed of a little blue house by the sea; it was helpful. But it was just a dream, you know. A reflection of a reflection.

25. Maurice Blanchot, friend of Foucault, affirmed the value of madness and idle talk.

26. Since Blanchot and Foucault never met, their friendship was rich with nonmeetings. Here is Blanchot's account of one: I never met [Foucault], except one time, in the courtyard of the Sorbonne, during the events of May '68, perhaps in June or July (but I was later told he wasn't there). . . . Perhaps we may simply have missed each other. Theirs was a perpetual exchange of phantasms.

27. At first I thought my dream of the sea came from the acrobatics of my own fixation. Simply put, I missed the dark sea roving at the hem of northern mountains and so dreamed an alternate sea into being right here in Missouri.

28. Initially I am suspicious of a sea that steps outside of time to go sloshing around inside the hardwood forest of middle America.

29. But I start getting used to it: this place must be of the sea. I know this because I saw it in a dream. Having seen the sea in a dream, I feel inexplicably reunited with you, as if here in the dream-sea swims your ghost-body.

30. Joining in reverie, Blanchot's meetings with Foucault were rich and unreal and coursed with nonconnection. Absence, for Blanchot and Foucault, was no constraint. It was an opening, a fullness of possibility, for anything can rush in to fill a space held empty.

31. That sea that stepped out of time and into my dream? It is not an invention. It made these rocks into which creek water runs to hide from the daylight. Scientists know this because Missouri's rocks bear fossil traces of sea creatures.

32. Ancient Missouri flooded, dried, and flooded again, in hundred-million-year cycles.

33. The forest grows on rock that bears traces of the sea, though of course the forest could not subsist if the sea were here in body.

34. Disguise yourself, please: people may think it strange we are so often together. Given your absence.

35. How many times did a sea flood over ancient Missouri? I don't know. But each time, the water was shallow, warm and filled with light. I imagine it was green. Algae would have been plentiful. Invertebrates, too. Some were mobile (clam-like brachiopods or fierce beetle-ish trilobites) but it's the stationary ones, the crinoids, that so legibly signed their bodies into the limestone. They were the ones anchored as sea lilies under the water. Rocks in Missouri are the carpet our ancients crawled on, burrowed in, and clung to.

36. And each time an inland sea covered Missouri, it brought with it all the wealth and hunger of the ocean, all its life, and all its death. Think of the shells, the skeletons.

37. Each layer of limestone is made of these little broken lives, these little broken houses, pulverized to sediment. Present-day hardwood forests may well seem to grow on rock, but the rocks are not so inert as all that. They are million-year graveyards. There is nothing unhaunted about them. Nothing utterly inland, either. For limestone, the sea is both maker and memory.

38. In strains of thought inhabited by Foucault and Blanchot, death, like any other ending, is a nonevent. The event is the encounter.

39. Fossils are insistent storytellers. They don't embroider. They say it straight and leave us to our reckoning. What's more, fossils mix tenses without respite.

40. Foucault and Blanchot know what they need and say so outright. They require a continual inclusion of the past within any understanding of the future.

41. You and all your ribby angles, you and your kneecaps, you and your ankles like doorknobs, I remember you naked, cooking us an Easter breakfast, just a ball cap on your head and rubber clogs on your feet, bending to drag a pan out of the oven, then slamming the door to save heat. There was still plenty of snow on the ground; it was a chilly time to forego clothing. But the sun came in bright and slant. We could see all the specks in the air, and I'm certain now you undressed for the light above all else. You loved to have light washing over your body. The air was alive with dust motes tumbling in the wake of your every move.

42. Memory is not, for all that, my primary concern.

43. Time, writes Blanchot, has radically changed its meaning and flow. Time without present, I without I.

44. There is no sea in Missouri. On modern maps eight states ring Missouri: Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Illinois. None of these bordering states edge up against saltwater, either.

The shore of the Gulf of Mexico lies over six hundred miles from Missouri's southern border. The Atlantic Ocean is about nine hundred miles from the state's eastern edge. The Pacific lies some fifteen hundred miles to the west, and Hudson Bay is still a good thousand miles north.

45. As such, I study but do not become you at all. An optimist might suggest your shape depends on the shores of me and that I, in turn, am made of what you leave there. But I am sure I have retreated so far inland as to defy the very notion: we are not so vast, you and I. We are not so vast.

46. Bluffside, inland, south, I walk the rocks. I pick up fossils.

47. Time collapses. In the hardwood forest, the sea sits in branches.

48. I don't remember exactly why I left you, though I do remember a moment of lucidity: all at once, I perceived your repeated departures as unacceptable. I made no effort to retain the clarity of the moment and merely proceeded with swift action. Free of cause and effect it was a nonevent, accumulating no narrative. Born of a mood, at most a shifting sky.

49. We had three chickens, all named for writers. Gabriel, for García Márquez, and Cormac, as in McCarthy. Was the third Alice (Munro) or did we call her William? (Faulkner.) Either way, I studied for exams; you built the coop. And there was a splinter, the width of a hair, that slid beneath the fingernail of your right index, so sharp that the pang of it—the pang!—made you drop the tool, made you gaze in wonder at your finger, suggested to you the word “splinter,” splin-ter. You thought the trochee was beautiful and so repeated the word from which a drop of blood bloomed beneath your nail.

50. Before Missouri's limestone was limestone, it was fine beach mud. Soft enough to cushion pieces of broken sea skeletons while they fossilized, tiny ridges and swirls imprinting perfectly. Somehow this all hardened into layers of pale stone, so that life walking over it now no longer leaves prints.

51. This is in you?

52. A word: epeiric. The temporary swath of shallow sea that sweeps in over the middle of a continent, makes the ground a seafloor. Also known as a “marine transgression,” as if the epeiric sea's intrusion was fundamentally immoral. Nonsense, I say: judge not the sea. But the transgression is real, and materially so, for water displaces air. Thus, a glimpse of elbow, kneecap. You swim the epeiric sea. You're in it. It's in you. Epeir-ic, I sometimes say to myself, as you would.

53. I'll try once again to say it straight: Missouri is a former seabed. The rock underfoot is mostly sedimentary, mostly from the Paleozoic Era. Paleozoic means “ancient life.” When pressed, I could laugh and say of you, he is just a Paleozoic, but grammar prevents it.

54. Unlike a “losing creek” which channels slow-moving water in the bottoms and is a loyal partner to the water's flow, be it above or below ground, an “intermittent stream”

marks nothing of the deeper places. An intermittent stream only flows when the rains come; it is there for the champagne, a burbling gusher, a feeder, a path to lead rain falling on high ground straight to the bottoms.

55. The past does not fall away. It is embedded in the thing itself. Trivial, this observation, for an intermittent stream anticipates only plenitude. It faces resolutely downhill, poised to deliver a quick clean rinse to the watershed below.