

bucket of keys

by Glynnis Eldridge

I had one delicious expired Toblerone just now.
I can't think about anything but what I shouldn't be doing.
Some days I don't like myself.
Once dad told me to be a prodigy
I thought he was telling me another joke, so I laughed.
He smirked how he does.
Sometimes I think he just smirks at everything, regardless of how he feels.
He laughs from his middle, leans back in his seat so the front legs lift from the floor,
covers his eyes and says "ah jeez," like he shouldn't have thought that thing to be funny.

Dad calls me and I watch the phone ring.
He sends a text instead of leaving a voicemail,
it says, "call me."
It always does.

On Father's Day I was in the passenger seat.
I hadn't contacted him in months.
I sent him a text saying the usual formalities:
hi,
how are you,
I hope you're doing well.
Happy father's day.
(And this one:) Love you.

Dad has been signing off his phone calls with love yous I've responded to with good-bye since he moved out when I was six.
This finally unprompted "Love you," he met hours later with "Thanks."

I imaged him at his mother's house, eating chicken and tabouli with her at her round marble table, leaning back and laughing, then

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reading my "love you" and excusing himself to cry in the bathroom.

When I got the "thanks," it was dark
outside of Pittsburgh in the passenger seat.

I cried to myself, sniffing but otherwise quiet.

You asked me what was wrong and I couldn't say what.
You said you were worried from the long pauses.
"I told my dad I love him for the first time in maybe a decade and he
only said thanks."

Your stepmother texts you with reminders of Father's Day.
Call him, she said, and you didn't.
He wouldn't call me back when I was younger.
Now he calls me and I don't pick up.
This is what you say.

That weekend at your mother's house I stepped in bubble gum at
the government office.
Your brother laughed at me dancing in the bagel shop.
You bought new gym shorts and I scanned my feet.

Everything opened up in the attic with left over gummy worms
and peach rings.
My old dog hit by a car the first weekend in a new house in a new
part of the country,
the star appearing on my leg,
the skin I thought I could peel off.

Something that turned palpable then still remains.

For seven more weeks we are prohibited from speaking
for academic reasons.
This last one has been a cruel blur:
endless, and confusing to be alone,
speaking only to me from your bed inside ancient thick walls,
the remnants of a wifi connection,
waving at each other through tiny cameras and pixelated screens
you can only whisper to me.
I cannot hear my voice through your headphones.
Our language could expel you back to me.

