

Magpies
Lalini Shanela Ranaraja

On a hilltop in Gelderland
you look south over the river and say
apparently on clear days you can see all the way to Nijmegen
but I don't think that's true.

I watch the delicate way you hold the railing,
bundled in the blue college hoodie you wore
the first time I asked you to coffee and think
how are we here.

We have walked through the town that you told me you were from
last September, when I couldn't find it on the map
of Holland that I had in my head, but now I'm here,
in an autumnal arboretum far
from bustling Amsterdam and I think I start to understand
you're everything you've never said you are.

You lead the way through yellow woods
where dragonflies glitter on frosted leaves
and I chatter at the magpies fluttering in pairs
through the trees as we weave along the dike, through wide-open light,
to the town, to the square where they signed the armistice.

Silver-haired couples holding hands
dodge the man with the street organ who's wafting music over the cobbles
while you and I avoid eye contact and attempt not to trip.

I don't realize we've walked five miles until I see you drag your feet;
it's been a while since anyone's tried keeping up with me.

So we seek sanctuary in a bookstore and I hide in the poetry aisle
to watch you trail long fingers down the spines of fantasy thrillers,
think of the historical romance I lent you
that you still haven't given back.

Before we leave you approach me wordlessly
holding open a bird book, magpies bright on the page.

In an instant I know forever that their name in Dutch is *ekster*;
I think *never stop showing me things*, think *keep walking with me*.

Through old streets. Through fragile sunlight. Through this place where you grew up.
But then you're standing at the bus station with your bike in your hands
and I say *well then*

because if I don't get on this bus I'll miss both my trains, and this is improbable,
how far we've come
how much we've lost
how we're still here.

I get on the bus. You bike away.

Five minutes later we roar past the crosswalk
where you are waiting for the light to change.
We raise our hands together,
palm to palm through a pane of mottled glass,
softly blurred, like black and white wings
flashing through grass.