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Written by Seré Prince Halverson

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SERÉ PRINCE HALVERSON

The Underside of Joy

HARPER

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1

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For Stan

Chapter One

I recently read a study that claimed happy people aren't made. They're born. Happiness, the report pointed out, is all about genetics – a cheerful gene passed merrily, merrily down from one smiling generation to the next. I know enough about life to understand the old adage that one person can't make you happy, or that money can't buy happiness. But I'm not buying this theory that your bliss can be only as deep as your gene pool.

For three years, I did backflips in the deep end of happiness.

The joy was palpable and often loud. Other times it softened – Zach's milky breath on my neck, or Annie's hair entwined in my fingers as I braided it, or Joe's humming some old Crowded House song in the shower while I brushed my teeth. The steam on the mirror blurred my vision, misted my reflection, like a soft-focus photograph smoothing out my wrinkles, but even those

didn't bother me. You can't have crow's-feet if you don't smile, and I smiled a lot.

I also know now, years later, something else: The most genuine happiness cannot be so pure, so deep, or so blind.

On that first dawn of the summer of '99, Joe pulled the comforter down and kissed my forehead. I opened one eye. He wore his grey sweatshirt, his camera bag slung over his shoulder, his toothpaste and coffee breath whispering something about heading out to Bodega before he opened the store. He traced the freckles on my arm where he always said they spelled his name. He'd say I had so many freckles that he could see the letters not just for Joe, but for Joseph Anthony Capozzi, Jr – all on my arm. That morning he added, 'Wow, *junior's* even spelled *out*.' He tucked the blanket back over me. 'You're amazing.'

'You're a smart-ass,' I said, already falling back to sleep. But I was smiling. We'd had a good night. He whispered that he'd left me a note, and I heard him walk out the door, down the porch steps, the truck door yawning open, the engine crowing louder and louder, then fading, until he was gone.

Later that morning, the kids climbed into bed with me, giggling. Zach lifted the sun-dappled sheet and held it over his head for a sail. Annie, as always, elected herself captain. Even before breakfast, we set out across an uncharted expanse, a smooth surface hiding the tangled, slippery underneath of things, destination unknown.

We clung to each other on the old rumpled Sealy Posturepedic, but we hadn't yet heard the news that would change everything. We were playing Ship.

By their pronouncements, we faced a hairy morning at sea, and I needed coffee. Badly. I sat up and peeked over the sail at them, both their spun-gold heads still matted from sleep. 'I'm rowing out to Kitchen Island for supplies.'

'Not when such danger lurks,' Annie said. *Lurks?* I thought. When I was six, had I even heard of that word? She bolted up, hands on hips while she balanced on the shifting mattress. 'We might lose you.'

I stood, glad that I'd thought to slip my underwear and Joe's T-shirt back on before I'd fallen asleep the night before. 'But how, dear one, will we fight off the pirates without cookies?'

They looked at each other. Their eyes asked without words: Before *breakfast*? Has she lost her *mind*?

Cookies before breakfast . . . Oh, why the hell not? I felt a bit celebratory. It was the first fogless morning in weeks. The whole house glowed with the return of the prodigal sun, and the worry that had been pressing itself down on me had lifted. I picked up my water glass and the note Joe had left underneath it, the words blurred slightly by the water ring: *Ella Bella, Gone to capture it all out at the coast before I open. Loved last night. Kisses to AeZ. Come by later if . . .* but his last words were puddled ink streaks.

I'd loved the previous night too. After we'd tucked the kids in, we talked in the kitchen until dark, leaning back against the counters, him with his hands deep in

his pockets, the way he always stood. We stuck to safe topics: Annie and Zach, a picnic we'd planned for Sunday, crazy town gossip he'd heard at the store – anything but the store itself. He threw his head back, laughing at something I said. What was it? I couldn't remember.

We had fought the day before. After fifty-nine years in business, Capozzi's Market was struggling. I wanted Joe to tell his dad. Joe wanted to keep pretending business was fine. Joe could barely tell *himself* the truth, let alone his father. Then he'd have a moment of clarity, tell me something about an overdue bill or how slow the inventory was moving, and I would freak out, which would immediately shut him back down. Call it a bad pattern we'd been following the past several months. Joe pushed off from the counter, came to me, held my shoulders, said, 'We need to find a way to talk about the hard stuff.' I nodded. We agreed that, until recently, there hadn't been that much hard stuff to talk about.

I counted us lucky. 'Annie, Zach. Us . . .' Instead of tackling difficult topics right then, I'd kissed him and led him to our bedroom.

I feigned rowing down the narrow hall, stepping over Zach's brontosaurus and a half-built Lego castle, until I was out of view, then stood in the kitchen braiding my hair in an effort to restrain it into single-file order down the back of my neck. Our house was a bit like my red hair – a mass of colour and disarray. We'd torn out the wall between the kitchen and living room, so,

from where I stood, I could see the shelves crammed to the ceiling with books and plants and various art projects – a Popsicle-stick boat painted yellow and purple, a lopsided clay vase with *Happy Mother's Day* spelled out in macaroni letters, the *M* long gone but leaving an indent in its place. Large patchworks of Joe's black-and-white photographs hung in the few spaces that didn't have built-ins or windows. One giant French window opened out to the front porch and our property beyond. The old glass made a feeble insulator, but we couldn't bring ourselves to part with it. We loved its wavy effect on the view, as if we looked through water at the hydrangeas that lapped at the porch, the lavender field waiting to be harvested, the chicken coop and brambles of blackberries, the old tilted barn, built long before Grandpa Sergio bought the land in the thirties, and finally, growing across the meadow from the redwoods and oaks, the vegetable garden, our pride and glory. We had about an acre – mostly in the sun, all above the flood line, with a glimpse of the river if you stood in just the right spot.

Joe and I enjoyed tending the land, and it showed. But none of us, including the kids, were gifted at orderliness when it came to inside our home. I didn't worry about it. My previous house – and life – had been extremely tidy, yet severe and empty, so I shrugged off the mess as a necessary side effect of a full life.

I took out the milk, then stuck Joe's note on the fridge with a magnet. I'm not sure why I didn't throw it out; it was probably the sweetness of the previous night's reconciliation that I wanted to hang on to, the *Ella Bella* . . .

My name is Ella Beene, and as one might imagine, I've had my share of nicknames. Of all of them, Joe's was one I downright cherished. I'm not a physical beauty – not ugly, but nothing near what I'd look like if I'd had a say in the matter. Yes, the red hair intrigues. But after that, things are pretty basic. I'm fair and freckled, too tall and skinny for some, with decent features – brown eyes, nice enough lips – that look better when I remember to wear makeup. But here's the thing: I knew Joe liked the whole package. The inside, the outside, the in-between places, the whole five foot ten of me. And since all my nicknames fit me at their appointed times, I let myself bask in that one: Bella. So there I was. Thirty-five years old, beautiful in Italian, on a Saturday morning, making strong coffee, preparing a breakfast appetizer of cookies and milk for our children.

'Cookies. Me want cookies.' The sailors had jumped ship and were trying to make their eyes bulge, taking the glasses of milk from the kitchen counter and a couple of oatmeal squares. Our dog, Callie, a yellow Lab and husky mix who knew how to work her most forlorn expression, sat thumping her tail until I gave her a biscuit and let her out. I sipped my coffee and watched Annie and Zach shove cookies in their mouths, grunting, letting crumbs fly. This was the one thing *Sesame Street* taught them that I could have done without.

The sun beckoned us outside, so I asked them to hurry and get dressed, then went to pull on a pair of shorts and finally stick a load of darks into the washer.

As I added the last pair of jeans, Zach ran in buck naked and held up his footed pyjamas. 'I do it myself,' he said. I was impressed he hadn't left them in the usual heap on the floor, and I picked him up so he could drop in his contribution. His butt was cool against my arm. We watched until the agitator sucked the swirl of fire trucks and blue fleece below into the sudsy water. I set him down and he careened out, his feet slapping down the wood hall. Except for shoe-lace tying, which Zach was still a few years from, both kids had become alarmingly self-sufficient. Annie was more than ready for first grade, and now Zach for preschool, even if I wasn't quite ready for them to go.

This would be a milestone year: Joe would save the sinking grocery store that had been in his family for three generations. I would go back to work, starting a new job in the fall as a guide for Fish and Wildlife. And Annie and Zach would zoom out the door each morning on their ever-growing limbs, each taking giant leaps along that ever-shortening path of their childhood.

When I first met them, Annie was three and Zach was six months. I had been on my way from San Diego to a new life, though I wasn't sure where or what it would be. I'd stopped in the small, funky town of Elbow along the Redwoods River in Northern California. The town was named for its location on the forty-five-degree bend in the river, but locals joked that it was named for elbow macaroni because so many Italians lived there. I planned to get a sandwich and an iced tea,

then maybe stretch my legs and walk down the path I'd read about to the sandy beach along the river, but a dark-haired man was locking up the market. A little girl squirmed out of his grasp while he tried to get the key in the lock and balance a baby in his other arm. She pulled loose and raced out towards me, into my legs. Her blonde head grazed my knees, and she laughed and reached her arms to me. 'Up.'

'Annie!' the man called. He was lean, a bit dishevelled and anxious, but significantly easy on the eyes.

I asked him, 'Is it okay?'

He grinned relief. 'If you don't mind?' *Mind?* I scooped her into my arms and she started playing with my braid. He said, 'The kid doesn't have a shy bone in her body.' I could feel her chubby legs secured around my hips, could smell Johnson's baby shampoo, cut grass, wood smoke, a hint of mud. A whisper of grape juice-stained breath brushed my cheek. She'd held my braid tight in her fist but she hadn't pulled.

Callie barked and, from the kitchen, I saw Frank Civiletti's police cruiser. That was odd. Frank knew Joe wouldn't be home. They'd been best friends since grade school, and they always talked over morning coffee at the store. I hadn't heard Frank coming, but there he was, slowly heading up the drive, his tires popping gravel. Also odd. Frank never drove slowly. And Frank always turned his siren on when he made our turn from the main road. His ritual for the kids. I looked at the microwave clock: 8:53. Already? I picked up the phone, then set it down. Joe hadn't called when he

got to the store. Joe *always* called. 'Here.' I grabbed the egg baskets and handed them to the kids. 'Check on the Ladies and bring us back some breakfast.' I opened the kitchen door and watched them run down to the coop, waving and calling out, 'Uncle Frank! Turn on your siren.'

But he didn't; he parked the car. I stood in the kitchen. I stared at the compost bucket on the counter. Coffee grounds Joe had used that morning, the banana peel from his breakfast. The far edges of my happiness began to brown, then curl.

I heard Frank's door open and shut, his footsteps on the gravel, on the porch. His tap on the front door's window. Annie and Zach were busy collecting eggs at the coop. Zach let out a string of laughter, and I wanted to stop right there and wrap it around our life so we could keep it intact and whole. I forced myself out of the kitchen, down the hall, stepping over the toys still on the floor, seeing Frank through the paned watery glass stare down at a button on his uniform. *Look up and give me your Jim Carrey grin. Just walk in, like you usually do, you bastard. Raid the fridge before you say hello.* Now we stood with the door between us. He looked up with red-rimmed eyes. I turned, headed back down the hallway, heard him open the door.

'Ella,' he said, behind me. 'Let's sit down.'

'No.' His footsteps followed me. I waved him away without turning to see him. 'No.'

'Ella. It was a sleeper wave, out at Bodega Head,' he said to my back. 'It rose out of nowhere.'

He told me Joe was shooting the cliff out on First

Rock. Witnesses said they shouted a warning, but he couldn't hear them over the wind, the ocean. It knocked him over and took him clean. He was gone before anyone could move.

'Where is he?' I turned when Frank didn't answer. I grabbed his collar. 'Where?'

He glanced down again, then forced his eyes back on me. 'We don't know. He hasn't shown up yet.'

I felt a small hope look up, start to rise. 'He's still alive. He is! I need to get out there. We need to go. I'll call Marcella. Where's the phone? Where are my shoes?'

'Lizzie's already on her way over to pick up the kids.'

I ran towards our bedroom, stepped on the brontosaurus, fell hard on my knee, pushed myself back up before Frank could help me.

'Listen, El. I would not be saying any of this to you if I thought there was a chance he was alive. Someone even said they saw a spray of blood. We think he hit his head. He never came up for air.' Frank said something about this happening every year, as if I were some out-of-towner. As if Joe were.

'This doesn't happen to Joe.'

Joe could swim for miles. He had two kids that needed him. He had me. I dug in the closet for my hiking boots. Joe was alive and I had to find him. 'A little blood? He probably scraped his arm.' I found the boots, pulled the comforter off the bed. He would be freezing. I grabbed the binoculars from the hall tree. I opened the screen door and stepped out on the porch, tripping on the dragging blanket. I called back, 'Am I driving myself? Or are you coming?'

Frank's wife, Lizzie, loaded Zach into their Radio Flyer wagon with their daughter, Molly, while Annie stuck her arm through the handle and shouted through her cupped hands, 'We're taking the rowboat to shore. Watch for pirates.'

I waved and tried to sound cheerful. 'Got it. Thanks, Lizzie.' She nodded, solemn. Lizzie Civiletti was not my friend; she'd told me that, soon after I came to town. And yet neither was she unkind. She would protect the kids from any telltale signs of panic. As much as I wanted to go to them, to gather them up to me, I smiled, I waved again, I blew kisses.

Chapter Two

Frank drove the winding road with his lights spinning circles. I closed my eyes, didn't look at the rolling hills I knew would be shimmering, dotted with what Joe called the 'Extremely Happy California Cows.' *He's fine. He's fine! He's disoriented. He hit his head. He's not sure where he is. A concussion, maybe. He's wandering the beach at Salmon Creek. That's it! The wave pulled him out and dashed him down the coast a ways, but there he is. He's talking to some high school boys. They have surfboards. Dude. Did you ride that gnarly wave? They've built a fire even though the signs prohibit it. They offer him beer and hot dogs. They forgot the buns, but here's mustard. He's famished. He has a flash of memory. It all comes back to him.*

Us. Making up. Just the night before. Standing in the kitchen, easing our way back together, then falling into bed, relieved. We were lousy fighters, but we could win medals for making up. He had kissed my stomach in a southbound line until I moaned, kissed my thighs

until I whimpered, until we both gave in. Later, as I drifted off, he propped himself up on his elbow and looked down at me. ‘I have something I need to tell you.’

I tried to fight the pull of sleep. ‘You want to *talk?* *Now?*’ It was a noble effort to be more open, but, Jesus, right after sex? Wasn’t that womankind’s most annoying tactic? So I was a man about it and said, ‘You can’t go and get me this blissed out and then tell me we have to talk.’ I figured it was more bad news about the store.

‘Fair enough,’ he said. ‘Tomorrow, then. We’ll make it a date. I’ll see if Mom will take the kids.’

‘Ooooh. A date.’ Maybe it wasn’t about the store. Hell, I thought. Maybe it’s *good* news.

He smiled and touched my nose. I hadn’t said, *No, we have to talk now.* I hadn’t fretted. I had immediately fallen asleep.

So, no. Joe could not be dead. He was eating hot dogs and drinking beer and talking surfing. He still needed to talk to me about something. I opened my eyes.

Frank sped through Bodega Bay – with its seafood restaurants and souvenir shops, the pink-and-white-striped saltwater taffy store the kids could never get past without insisting we stop – along the curved bayside road and its hand-painted sandwich signs advertising the latest catch, the air a mingle of smoked salmon and sea and wildflowers, up the curved ridge to Bodega Head, Joe’s favourite place on the planet.

There was the trailhead to the hike we’d taken so many times, along the cliff. On one side the sea down

below, on the other a prairie of shore wildflowers – with the yarrow, or *Achillea borealis*, the sand verbena, or *Abronia umbellate* – down to the grassy dunes. Joe was always impressed with my ability to not only identify the birds and wildflowers, but rattle off their Latin names too, a gift I'd inherited from my father.

The parking lot was full, including several sheriff's cars, a fire truck, paramedics, and there at the end by the trail, Joe's old truck. He called it the Green Hornet. I grabbed the binoculars, got out of Frank's cruiser, and slammed the door. A helicopter headed north, following the shoreline, its blades thumping, a thunderous, too-rapid heartbeat fading away.

I had no jacket, and the wind whipped against my bare arms, burned my eyes. Frank draped the comforter around me. I said, 'Please don't make me talk to anyone.'

'You got it.'

'I need to go alone.' He pulled me into his side, then released me. I walked to Joe's truck. Unlocked, of course. His blue down jacket, stained and worn in, just the way he liked it. I slipped it on. Warm from the sun. I left the blanket in the car so it would be warm for him too. His thermos lay on the floor. I shook it: empty. I lifted the rubber mat and saw his keys, as I knew I would, and stuck them in my pocket.

Through the binoculars the water flashed a multitude of lights, as if taking pictures of its own crime scene.

In March and April, we'd packed a picnic and brought the kids out to watch for whales. We'd searched the horizon with the same binoculars, marvelled at the grey

whales' graceful sky hopping and breaching. We told the kids the story of Jonah and the whale, how one minute Jonah was tossed overboard into the sea, and the next minute swallowed by the whale, along for the ride. Annie rolled her eyes and said 'Yeah. Riiiiight.' I'd laughed, confessed to them that even when I was a little kid in Sunday school, I'd found the story hard to swallow.

But now I was willing to believe anything, to pray anything, to promise anything. 'Please, please, please, please . . .'

I headed down the lower trail, seeing Joe taking each step, strong, alive. An easy climb up First Rock, the white water swirling far below, unthreatening. *But you broke your own rule, Joe, didn't you? The one you always told me and Annie and Zach: Never turn your back on the ocean.* The Coast Guard boat moved steadily, not stopping. I glanced over my shoulder at the cliff. It looked like the clenched fist of God, the clinging reddish sea figs its scraped and bleeding knuckles. *Please, please. Tell me where he is.*

I climbed down the rock. The sun's reflection off the water made me wince. Farther down, I saw it wasn't the water, but metal wedged deep between two other rocks. I stepped over to investigate. Was it . . .? I scrambled down closer. There, waiting for me to notice it, lay Joe's tripod. His camera was gone.

Wait. That's it. That's what he's doing. He's hunting for his camera. He's sick about it. He's in the dunes somewhere, lost. All those deer trails, confusing, every dune starts to look the same and it's hard to tell what

you've covered and the wind is whipping and you're tired and you have to lie down. So cold. A doe watches tentatively but she senses your desperation and she approaches, lies down to warm you and she licks the salt off your nose.

You are fine! You're just trying to find your way back. 'Don't be angry,' you'll say, wiping my tears with your thumbs, holding my face to yours, your fingers locked in my hair. 'I'm so sorry,' you'll say. I'll shake my head to tell you all is forgiven thank you for fighting that wave thank you for coming back to us. I'll bury my nose in your neck, the salt will rub off on my cheek. You'll smell like dried blood and fish and kelp and deer and wood smoke and life.

I wandered the dunes past dark, long after they called off the search for the day. The half-moon disclosed nothing. Frank said even less. Usually he never shut up.

Joe's Green Hornet sat empty, the only vehicle in the parking lot other than Frank's cruiser. I wanted to leave the truck for Joe, so I unlocked it, replaced the keys under the mat. I slipped off his jacket and left that for him too, along with the blanket.

I climbed in with Frank, quiet, as the dispatcher gave an address for a domestic dispute. I wanted to be with the kids but I didn't want my face to let on, to drive a spike through their contented unknowing.

Frank offered to keep Joe's parents and extended family away at least until morning. I nodded. I couldn't hear his parents or brother or anyone else cry, couldn't hear anything that would acknowledge defeat. We needed to focus on finding him.

Once home, I called the kids. 'Are you having fun?' I asked Annie.

'Oh yes,' she said. 'Lizzie let us take off all the cushions on all the furniture and build a house. *And* she said we can even sleep in it tonight.'

'Too cool. So you want to spend the night?'

'I think we better. Molly will only sleep out here if I'm with her. You know Molly.'

'Yeah, then you better.'

'Night, Mommy. Can I talk to Daddy?'

I leaned over, pulled the lace on my boot, swallowed, forced my voice to sound light. 'He's not here yet, Banannie.'

'Okay, well then, give him this.' I knew she was hugging the phone. 'And this one's for you . . . Bye.'

Zach got on the line just long enough to say, 'I muchly love you.' I hung up, kept sitting on the couch. Callie lay down at my feet and let out a long sigh. The hall light picked up objects in the dark room. I'd set up Joe's tripod in the corner to welcome him. Its three legs, its absent camera now seemed a terrible omen. I stared at the Capozzi family clock ticking on the end table. Yes. No. Yes. No. I opened the glass. The swinging pendulum: this way. That way. I stuck my finger in to stop it. Silence. My fingertip steered the hour hand backward, back to that morning, when this time I felt Joe stretching awake, kissed the soft hair on his chest, grabbed his warm shoulder, said, 'Stay. Don't go. Stay here with us.'

The next day a Swiss tourist found Joe's body, bloated and wrapped in kelp, as if the sea had mummified him

in some feeble attempt at apology. This time I opened the door for Frank and hugged him before he could speak. When he leaned back, he just shook his head. I opened my mouth to say *No* but the word sank, soundless.

I insisted on seeing him. Alone. Frank drove me to McCready's and stood beside me while a grey-haired woman with orange-tinted skin explained that Joe wasn't really ready to be viewed.

'Ready?' A strange, high-pitched laugh eked past the lump in my throat.

Frank tilted his head at me. 'Ella . . .'

'Well? Who the hell is ever *ready*?'

'Excuse me, young –' But then she shook her head, reached out and took both my hands in hers, said, 'Come this way, dear.' She ushered me down a carpeted hallway, past the magnolia wallpaper and mahogany wainscoting, from the noble facade to the laboratorial back rooms, the hallway now flecked green linoleum, chipped in places, unworthy of its calling.

How could this be? That he lay on a table in a cooled room that resembled an oversize stainless-steel kitchen? Someone had parted his hair on the wrong side and combed it, perhaps to hide the wound on his head, and they covered him up to his neck with a sheet – that was it. I took off my jacket and tucked it over his shoulders and chest, saying his name over and over.

They had closed his eyes, but I could tell the way his lid sunk in that his right eye was missing.

I used to tell him his eyes were satellite pictures of

Earth – ocean blue with light green flecks. I joked that he had global vision, that I saw the world in his eyes. They could go from sorrow to teasing mischief in three seconds flat. They could pull me from chores to bed in even less time. Their sarcastic roll could piss me off, too, in no time at all.

His amazing photographer’s eye with its unique take on things – where had it gone? Would Joe’s vision live on soaring in a gull or scampering sideways in a near-sighted rock crab?

His hair felt stiff from the salt, not soft and curly through my fingers. I pushed it over to the right side. ‘There, honey,’ I said, wiping my nose on my sleeve. ‘There you go.’ His stubbled face, so cold. Joe had a baby face that he needed to shave only every three or four days, his Friday shadow. He said he couldn’t possibly be Italian; he must have been adopted. He’d rub his chin and say, ‘Gotta shave every damn week.’

He was handsome and sexy in his imperfection. I ran my finger down his slightly crooked nose, along the ridge of his slightly big ears. When we first met, I’d guessed correctly that he’d been an awkward teenager, a late bloomer. He had an appealing humility that couldn’t be faked by the men who’d managed to start breaking girls’ hearts back in seventh grade. He was always surprised that women found him attractive.

I slipped my hand under the sheet and held his arm, so cold, willed him to tense the thick ropes of muscles that ran their length, to laugh and say in his grandmother’s accent: *You like, Bella?* Instead, I could almost

hear him say, *Take care of Annie and Zach*. Almost, but not quite.

I nodded anyway. 'Don't worry, honey. I don't want you to worry, okay?'

I kissed his cold, cold face and laid my head on his collapsed chest, where his lungs had filled with water and left his heart an island. I lay there for a long time. The door opened, then didn't close. Someone waiting. Making sure I didn't fall apart. I would not fall apart. I had to help Annie and Zach through this. I whispered, 'Good-bye, sweet man. Good-bye.'

I don't even pretend to know what might happen to us after we die because the possibilities are endless. I have a degree in biology and feel most at home in nature, yet I'm confounded by *human* nature, by those things that cannot be observed and named and catalogued, a woman of science who slogs off the trail into mystery and ponders at the feet of folklore. So I often wonder if Joe had watched us that morning while we were playing Ship, in those bridging moments between before and after. Had he watched us from the massive redwoods he so revered, then from a cloud? Then from a star? The photographer in him would have delighted in the different perspectives, this after-alifetime chance to see that which is too deep and wide to be contained by any frame. Or was that him, that male fuchsia-throated Anna's Hummingbird, *Calypte anna*, that hung around for days? He flittered inches from my nose when I sat on our porch, so close, I could feel his wings beating air on my cheek.

‘Joe?’ He took off suddenly, making giant swoops like handwriting in the sky. I know the swoops are part of their impressive mating ritual. And yet now I can’t help wondering if it was Joe, panicked, attempting to write me a message, frantically trying to tell me his many secrets, to warn me of all that he’d left unsaid.