



# ***Afterimages***

*Poetry by Shel Raphen*

# Content Warning

These poems discuss, and may explicitly mention or describe, sensitive issues

Including

Emotional & Physical Abuse

Child Abuse & Neglect

Sexual Assault

Suicide

Some poems evoke images of gore

An audiobook version of this chapbook is available at <https://datapup.info/writing/afterimages>

entopic phenomenon

Look up and  
see the swimming things  
When the sky is clear  
and blue

Your brain hides them  
From day to day  
You are filling in  
And erasing them

They are your blood cells  
They're always there

Look at the sky  
A reminder  
What you see  
is constructed

It already happened

Look too long  
And the shadow remains  
Moving

Shifting  
Memory is but a drawing  
Of a drawing  
Of a drawing  
In a book

words obscured  
By a lingering shadow

## Testimony

The four walls were bookshelves  
A table with nine chairs  
Witnesses, defendants, plaintiffs,  
and spectators sat on windowsills  
Spectators, knitting hats,

I learned to testify

You can't understand.  
How could I have seen this like you?  
You didn't have our words  
Our architecture  
Your walls were not bookshelves

I didn't understand outsiders.  
I stopped talking to them.

Four wooden walls  
bugs flit between  
a dim blue star  
lit the room

the gap in my memory goes here

A voice like soft steam  
Esther, a medium  
channels Abraham  
A higher being

To describe is to create  
Thought makes reality  
illness is a belief  
Death is fictitious  
The physical is mindset  
Manifest

At some point,  
i grew ill

At some point,  
I stopped believing in Abraham  
I decided something must be real out there  
there needs to be  
it needs to be  
not my fault

*One time, I found a copy of Dianetics in our bathroom*

*I told my dad not to read that stuff*

*It's just propaganda for some cult you know*

*I testified to graduate  
I testified to win my Title IX  
I testify for pity  
I testify for respect*

*My tragic story  
justifies my flaws*

*it needs to line up  
or you won't believe me  
understand me  
like me*

*Why am I like this?*

Everything seems softer in the distance  
The leaves meld  
Letters melt

There are times the distance shallows  
All seems projected  
on a screen

This memory from long ago  
An afterimage in my eyes  
So simple,  
sitting on the fire escape  
to see the pond from up high.





# Revision

A garage  
with barn house doors  
dry winter air  
outside  
a car running  
inside

when i relax, my vision doubles

1. i was stupid

2. it was an accident

1. it was my first suicide attempt

2. i didn't know,

it was neglect

nobody told me

about exhaust

i was told

'go start the car'

it was in the garage

i was 12

i think

im unsure

maybe i'll be wrong again

maybe this isn't really what happened

maybe i'm lying

and i just

don't

know

there is no ground  
& no ceiling

a slip sideways  
another ahead

a skipped track  
corrupted data

Decisions desire to be  
Poems not beliefs  
Metaphors for  
Anxieties These  
Thoughts fly away  
losing ~~the ground~~  
sight of  
Reality

I can't want to be  
myself. I understand  
a personality disorder means  
I am the disorder  
There's no changing who I  
am as a being I will  
be loved another body will  
walk around it will both like  
I looked but will be so  
scary to SPARKY NOT ME

scattered across the floor

I'm a self-insert  
character an annoying  
I'm distorting reality &  
I'm causing global warming  
I'm representing me I  
STOP representing  
me to stop putting  
myself at myself I  
to find way to  
problems. Cut  
out with from kids

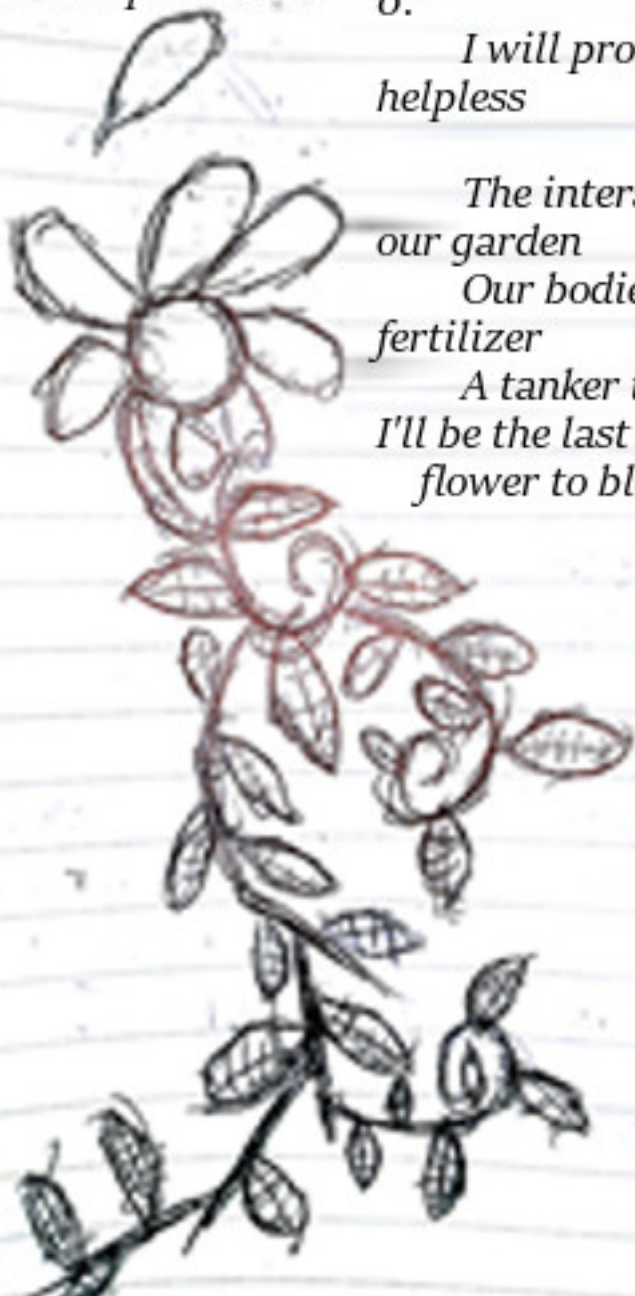
o:

*I will prove we aren't  
helpless*

*The interstate will be  
our garden*

*Our bodies  
fertilizer*

*A tanker the gardener  
I'll be the last  
flower to bloom*



1:

*I know you want to be  
The most fuckable compost  
On the pile of dead girls, but,  
Nothing will grow from your body  
You are salt, not fertilizer*

2:

*listen,*

*i dont care about being a martyr,  
when i say i'll eventually kill myself  
it feels like the only true  
right  
thing  
i've ever told anybody*

1:

*Suicide would be hypocritical  
For girls like us:  
It's a privilege to kill yourself*

*I am good, I am helpful,  
I have survived abuse  
I am an inspiration*

2:

*you say ab-use*

*like*

*there's a right way to be used*

*the only problem was we were used*

*incorrectly*

*like*

*you see us as sub-human*

*sub-servient*

*i'll take our humanity in our hands*

*& make them recognize it*

*freedom from encyclopedias*

*from googling & helping & trying & keeping up*

*with the footwork of living*

1:

*There is no freedom in death  
You only become an idea  
Completely controlled by others  
Used to show off how pained they are  
How compassionate  
Nobody will speak badly of us again  
Only because nobody will truly be  
Speaking about us again*

2:

*the only reason yr afraid is*

*you have to follow your institutions & rules*

*you don't want to fail & be one of those people*

*who take time off*

*there's nothing bad about being of those people &*

*be honest,*

*we'd both love the attention from a failed suicide attempt*

1:

*Shut Up*

*It's my responsibility to make others feel better*

*It's my responsibility to keep other people from killing themselves*

*It's all on me*

*It's all on me*

*I live for others & can't let them down*

2:

*we are alive but*

*you are still treating our body like fertilizer*

*tearing off rotting flesh &*

*giving it away*

*to other people's gardens*

*won't stop that we're rotting*

*i'll be the gardener*

*the flowers our freedom*

*blooming watered not from sweat but tears*

## Porcupinebird

I thought my spines were wings

When I grew them

I fell and couldn't be caught

Their arms must have bled

I landed in an ocean of

whirring white noise

machines like mezuzahs

I pray for health

Please remove my spines

I met ewe in a meadow

Of circuits and waves

Soft wool, warm wool

Steel wool upon your chin

Soft palms, warm hands

Dry hands, a harsh winter

You press in closer

I fear that I am hurting you

My spines must be digging

"Are you okay?" I ask

you affirm and press in closer

"Are you sure?"

You affirm and squeeze me tighter

Your wool must be red by now.



I warned you. you said  
"You have no spines,  
you said you've been trampled  
yet you haven't grown thorns  
all I feel is cozy  
I am blushing, not bleeding"

In the hushed ocean  
In the room where I  
pluck my spines  
I am assured this is normal  
Did you know that  
under these spines  
you are a mammal  
You do not need wings  
to lay in the grass  
and gaze at the stars

## DIARY CARD

Therapist:

*flesh art*OTHER  
TARGET:D  
A  
YSELF  
HARM

SUICIDE

*I flay my skin and  
Sling it onto the table  
This is my art  
I have weaponized it*

Urge  
0-5Action  
Y/NUrge  
0-5Action  
Y/N

*Skin on the table  
Bare flesh dripping  
Your discomfort validates me*

*I logged the seventh consecutive 0 in a column  
Under Suicide: Felt Urge  
Wondering if I'll still be able to write good poetry*

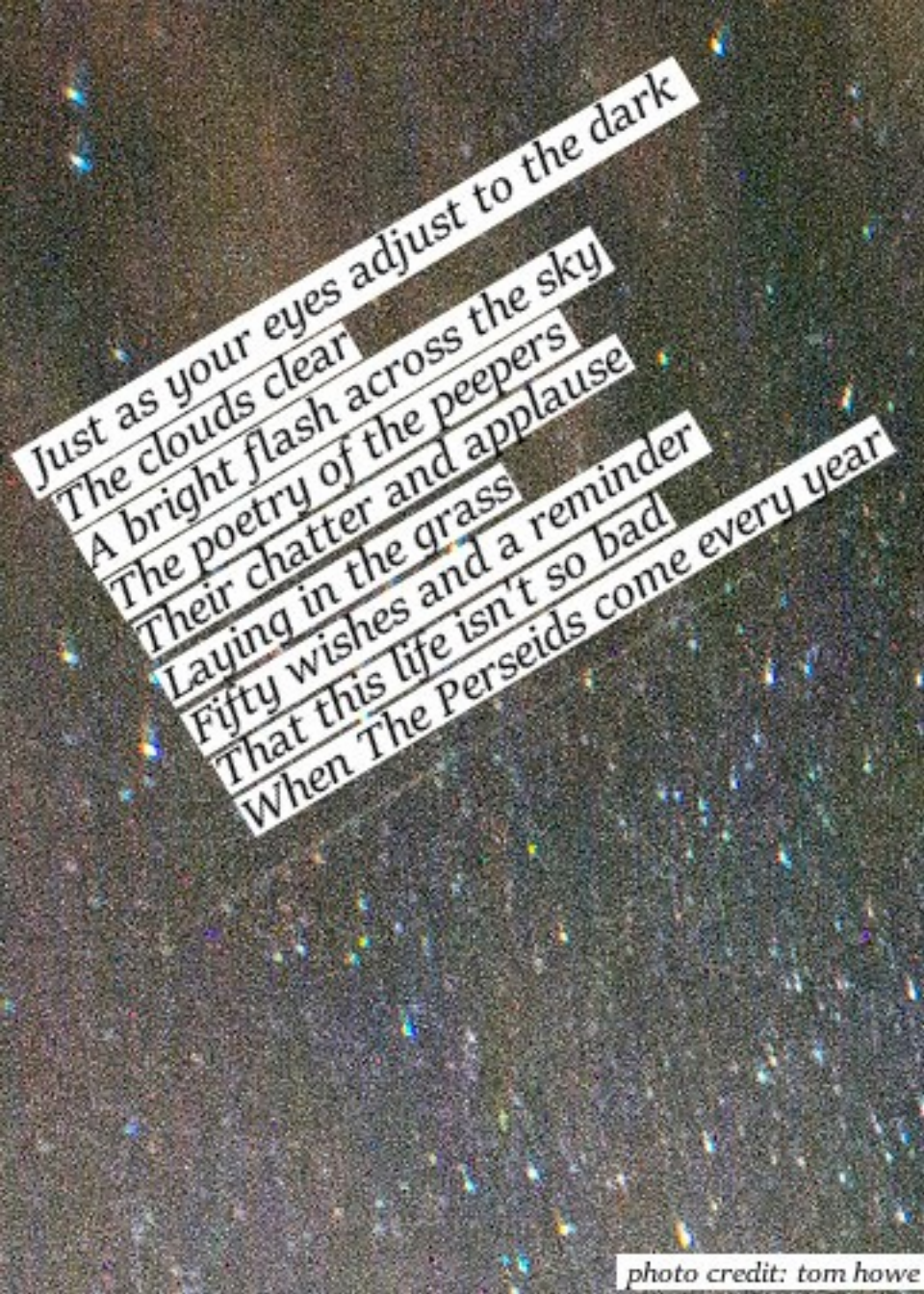
URGES SCALE:

EMO

0= N

*You've lost the color in your eyes  
The iris' shades, desaturated  
Gray, glaring back in the reflection  
on the glass of the bus shelter  
When did this happen?*





Just as your eyes adjust to the dark  
The clouds clear  
A bright flash across the sky  
The poetry of the peepers  
Their chatter and applause  
Laying in the grass  
Fifty wishes and a reminder  
That this life isn't so bad  
When The Perseids come every year

## A Collar Cutting Poem

It is time to wear the collar  
With pearls and a heart-shaped tag  
Tight around your neck  
Is the arm full of fire

It's time to wear the smile  
And be told you look scared

This paper  
Framed by leather

A circle on a square  
Is proof that you can't be uprooted  
It is the silver scissors that can  
cut the umbilical cord  
Feeding the placenta into the baby  
After it has grown  
Sick and miserable

It's time to tell the truth  
Spit out this rock you've been  
Holding in your mouth  
The one that's been  
rolling down a hill  
Collecting snow and dirt

Wielding your scissors  
Undo the stitching on your mouth  
Put away your needle  
You have no more need for it

*by the pond*

*of the river*

*in the valley*

*a dam holds the water in*

*the creek rushes under me*

*on the bridge*

*on the dam*

*they are kind to me here*

surrounded by day lily stems  
in the house  
in the overgrowth  
they are not kind to me here

the air is thick  
with pollen

an infection

an illness falls upon me

i fear i will breathe

wrong

"I love you" means

"love me" means

"you should love me" means

"why don't you love me" means

a stinging nettle, a gift

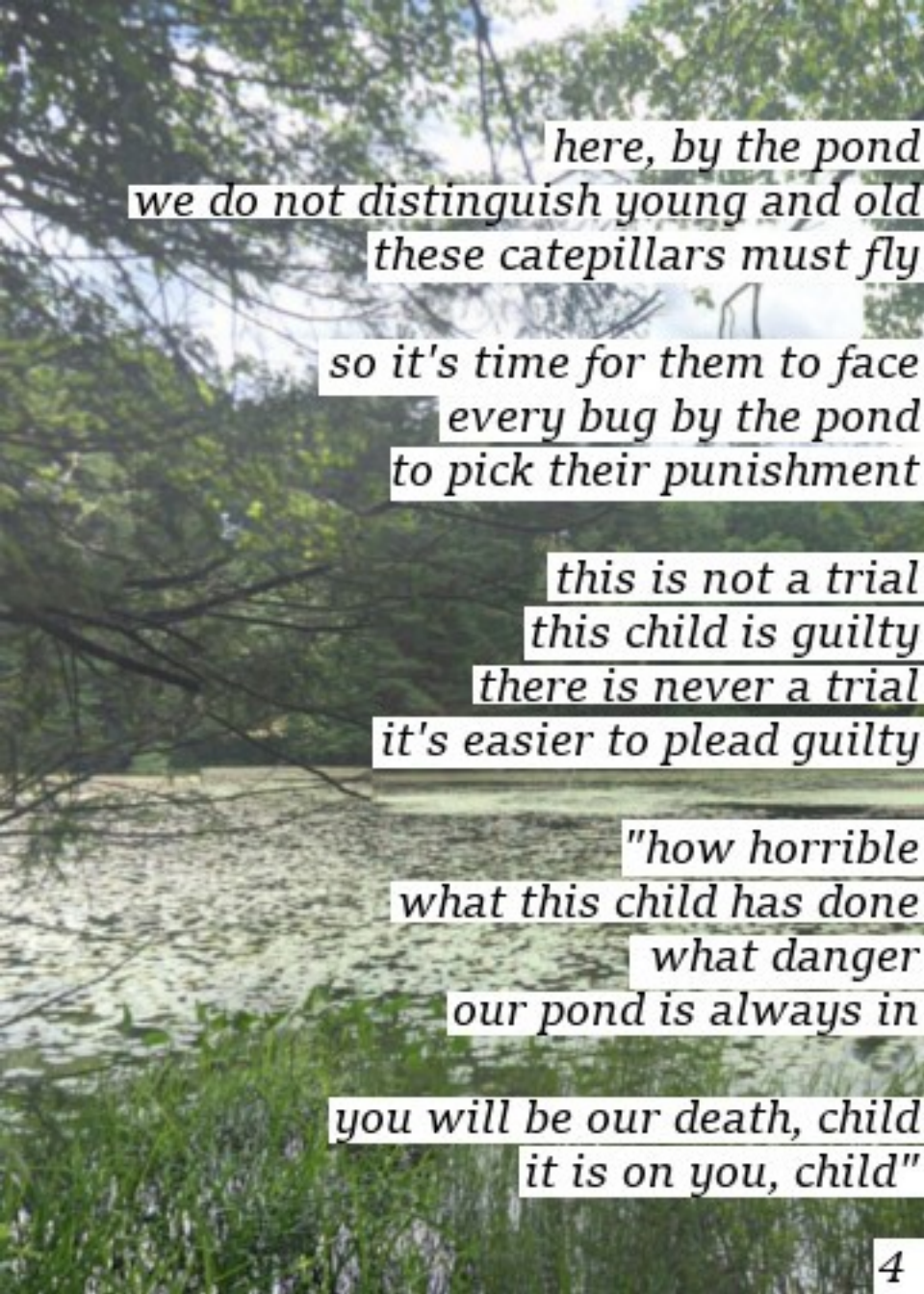
to rub upon your skin

until you say "i love you"

kindness is

being left alone.





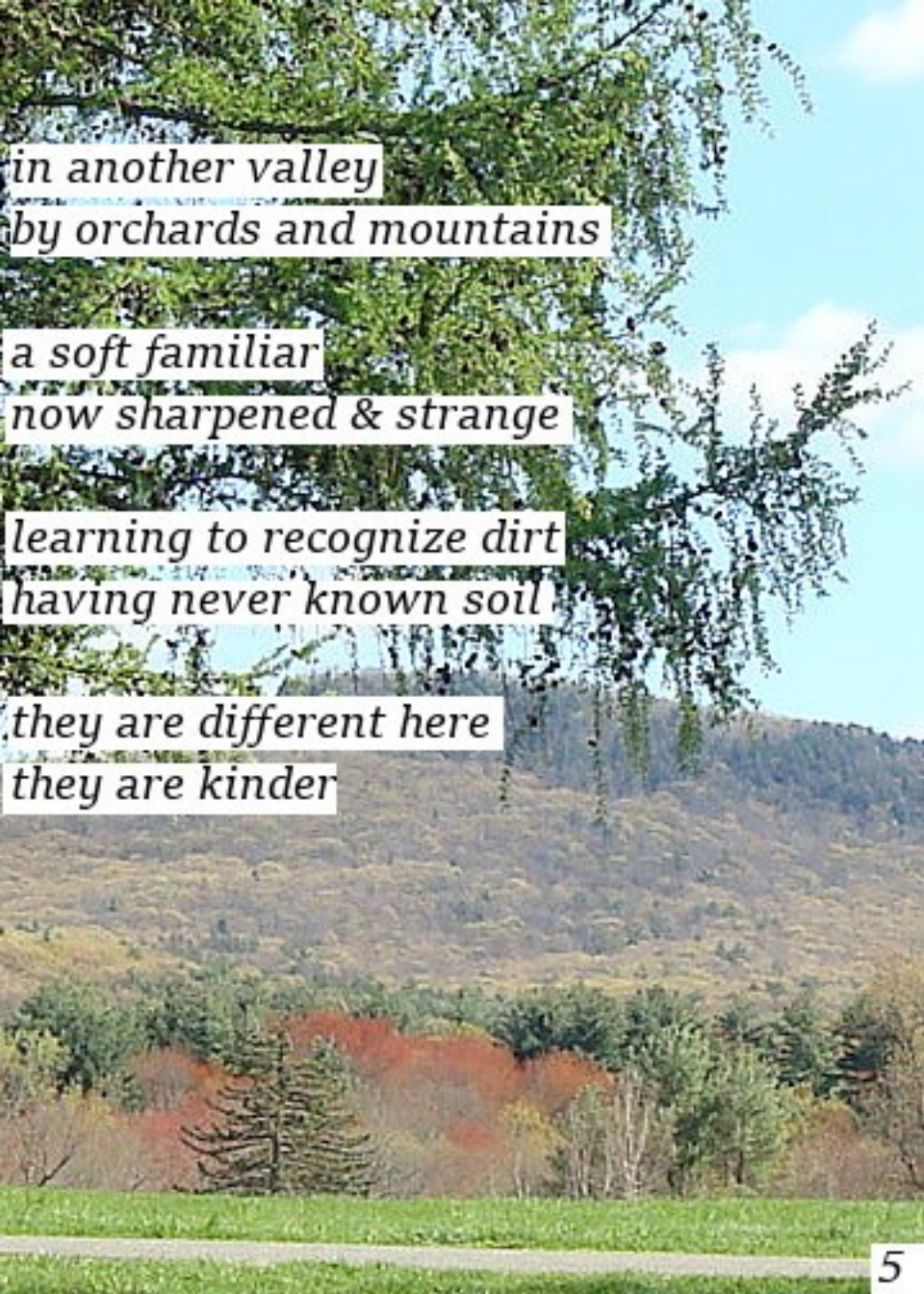
here, by the pond  
we do not distinguish young and old  
these caterpillars must fly

so it's time for them to face  
every bug by the pond  
to pick their punishment

this is not a trial  
this child is guilty  
there is never a trial  
it's easier to plead guilty

"how horrible  
what this child has done  
what danger  
our pond is always in

you will be our death, child  
it is on you, child"

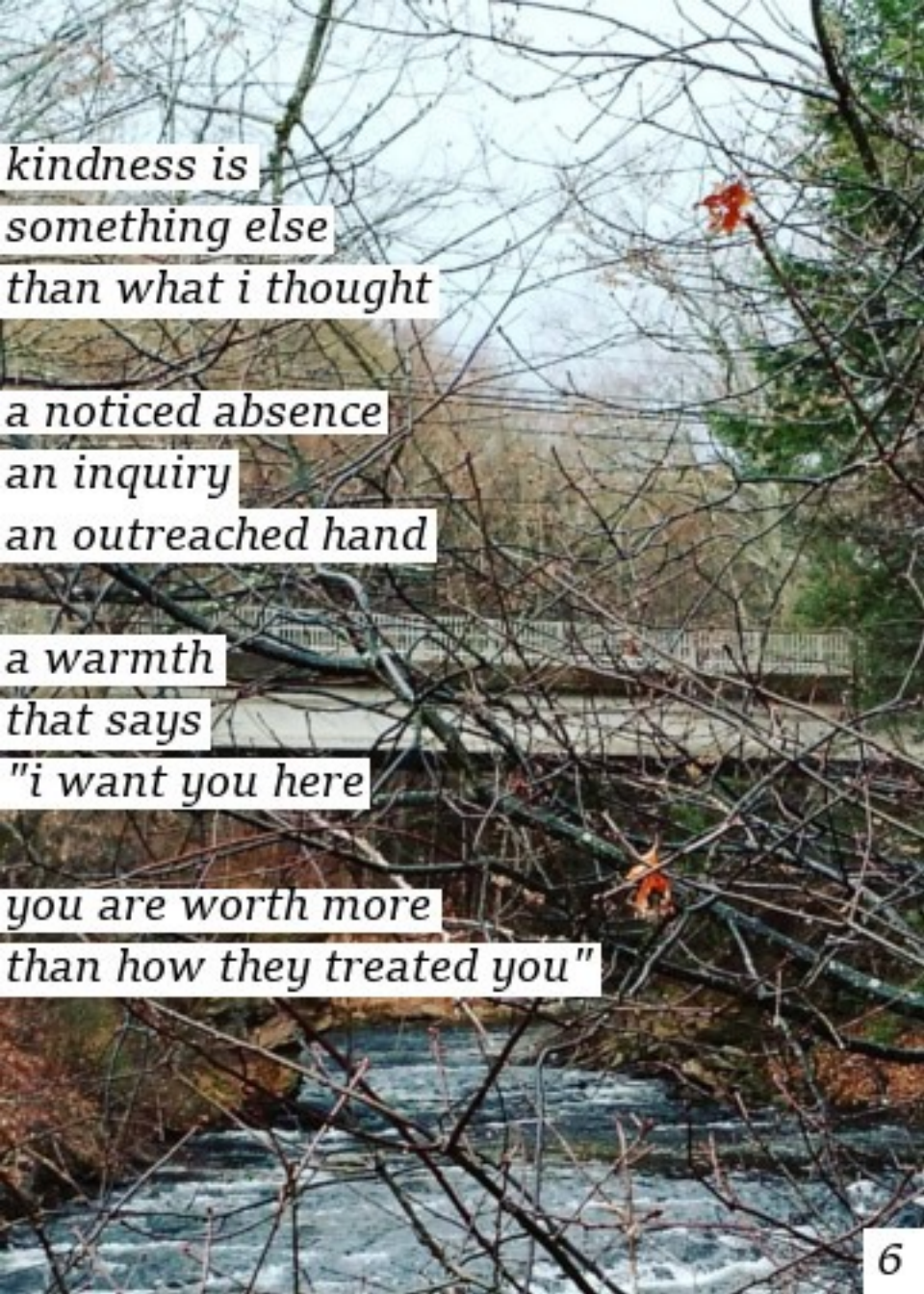


*in another valley  
by orchards and mountains*

*a soft familiar  
now sharpened & strange*

*learning to recognize dirt  
having never known soil*

*they are different here  
they are kinder*



*kindness is  
something else  
than what i thought*

*a noticed absence  
an inquiry  
an outreached hand*

*a warmth  
that says  
"i want you here"*

*you are worth more  
than how they treated you"*

A photograph of a stone chimney in a forest. The chimney is built from stacked stones and has a dark opening at the base. The background shows trees and a forest floor covered in fallen leaves. The text is overlaid on the image in white boxes.

*they were not kind to me there*

*the dam breaks*

*the pond rushes forth*

*how could i have forgotten?*

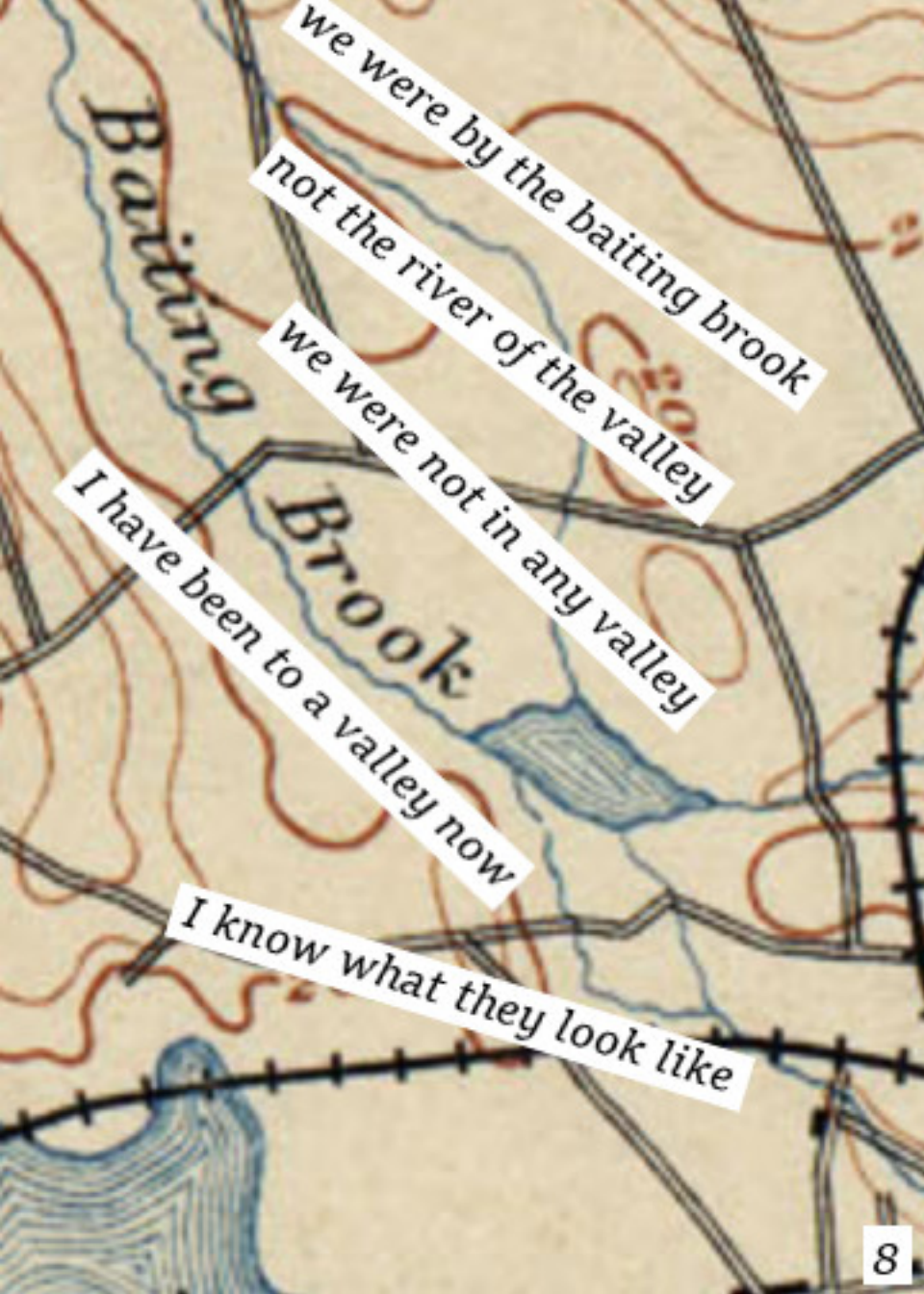
*the sting of ice water*

*against my face*

*my wrists*

*tied to a chair*

*that chilly april night*




we were by the baiting brook

not the river of the valley

we were not in any valley

I have been to a valley now

I know what they look like



*"i love you" means*

*"stay,*

*for i will listen*

*when you tell me*

*i have hurt you"*

*Everything that happens*

*However you tell it*

*Whatever you skip*

*Shapes you*

*And when the world quivers*

*and history begins to rot*

*fingernails curl over into claws*

*and strange instructions speckle your ears*

*breathe in and remember*

*Everything you are*

*Makes absolute*

*Perfect*

*Sense*

*You must learn to hold the things that contradict*

*A reflection on narratives, truth, and justification*  
*[and growing up in a cult?]*

<https://datapup.info>