

## The Signal Fire

It is too cold to live at the top of the mountain, where the kindling rests. Even down here, at the base camp, you keep the fire going: enough to boil snow, enough to read by. You ration blue-lined paper, creased and torn into thin strips. You write one line of the poem you are either composing or remembering, stare at it, roll it into a pill, and swallow it. Sustenance enough to keep you from forgetting your duty and dispersing into the mountain air. You keep your gaze at the surrounding mountaintops. There are other signal keepers. So you have heard, or were born believing, or have told yourself — hard to tell the difference after all these centuries. Steel gray is the brightest the sky gets because other kinds of fires, fires that do not speak but silence speech, have been burning, and after all these centuries you, too, have forgotten the saffron of dawn, the saffron of dusk. Another verse crumples into another pill. You tend the cookfire in its mandala and wait for a fire on one of the surrounding peaks. Not a gong, not an air raid siren, not the grounded thunder of an avalanche, not the static-crackle of either fireworks or Kalashnikovs: You have heard all of these, some of them more than once a day, but you know them for the noise. You have run out of paper strips. You remember nothing of what you wrote and ate and read and love because they compose you now. At last, with premeditated impulsiveness, you take off your threadbare coat and crack your tentpole over your knee. The cookfire crowns a makeshift torch. You sprint up the mountain, which shifts under your boots. It is made of bones, carpal dice, runic ribs, moth-filled skulls you recognize like your own face multiplied in a mirror maze. At the top of the mountain stands the shrine with its giant bowl full of printed manuscript pages that bear everything you wrote and ate and read and love, one memory that composes you. A kiss of the torch, and they all go up, sacrificed. One by one, stretching into the distance in every direction, peak after peak lights up. You have ignited the signal you were waiting for. Though the city has been sacked, her citizens remain. We are reading and spreading the signal. We are still here.