DIVING BOARD

THE FACILITY'S PARKING LOT IS FULL OF CARS. Facundo leaves his far from the entrance and walks over with his daughter, under the sun. Always look both ways, he tells her. The cars drive slowly here, but they can come out of nowhere. It's important to pay attention. Josefina smiles. Out of nowhere? she asks. It's a figure of speech, Facundo explains, not entirely sure if his daughter is mocking him. He feels her small, sweaty hand in his, the contact a comfort.

They're walking toward the ticket office. He asks her if she missed him and she nods. Are you sure? Yes, Dad, she says, laughing. I'm sure I missed you.

Facundo pays the entry fee. Josefina still gets in with the child fare. They look for two free deck chairs close to the shallow end. A backpack hangs off one of her shoulders. It's pink, like her bathing suit and the elastic band that ties her hair back. In it is a pair of underwear, a towel, and a T-shirt. Facundo thinks about when he'll have to get her changed. She's too old for the men's change room now. He'll have to wait next to the door, look for a woman who

seems trustworthy, ask her for the favour, wait. Five or ten minutes. That's what he did a few weeks back at the washroom when they were at the movies. It was like peering into a bottomless pit.

The swimming pool is huge and full of people. It's L-shaped. The deep end, a sign reads, is three metres. That's where the diving board is. The ladder rises high enough that even Facundo can imagine the vertigo someone must feel from the top. The board extends over the water and people jump off it. One by one. Some lean over and hesitate for a second, but they look back and see the next person, who's already climbing up, blocking the only exit. Then they bounce, leap into the air, and hit the water. With their eyes closed or their nose plugged or their arms wide open and a sharp scream that cuts out when they plunge into the water. But others are more resolved and don't hesitate. Their eyes forward, their back straight, the run-up, the jump.

Can I jump? Josefina asks. Facundo laughs. No, Jose. That's for grown-ups. Kids aren't allowed. But then he looks again and sees a boy younger than his daughter. A short, skinny kid who can't be more than seven. A man who must be the kid's father applauds from the water. The lifeguard looks at them through his sunglasses. He doesn't shout, doesn't blow his whistle, doesn't do anything. The kid waves, smiles nervously, runs to the end of the diving board, and does a cannonball. His father plunges underwater and a second later comes up with the kid holding on to his neck. Josefina looks at Facundo again. We'll see later, he tells her.

The foot of the L is the shallow end. Facundo walks to the ladder with his daughter. He tries to hold her hand, but she runs ahead and gets away from him. You could slip, he calls

after her. Josefina doesn't hear him. He picks up his pace and reaches her as she's about to get into the water.

She wants to show him everything she learned in swim class. She tells him to pick a style and then she swims from end to end. Facundo sees her come and go. Crawl, backstroke, breaststroke, doggy paddle. Doggy paddle? she asks. There's no such thing, Dad. Facundo demonstrates and Josefina laughs. She's silent and then looks toward the diving board again. Now can I? He says no, it's dangerous. Josefina puts her arms on the edge of the pool and rests her head on them. Her lips are pursed, her body clenched. He goes over to her and pulls back the hair stuck to her cheeks. Later, he promises. We're going to have lunch now.

Hamburgers with french fries and pop. Facundo barely eats, looks at the diving board. The tables are near the shallow end, separated from the water by a fence. The ground is full of crushed food and goop. To go back to the other side, you have to step in clean water so you don't drag the filth into the pool. But the water is still dirty. An oily film of sunscreen floats to the surface and forms patches that reflect different colours. A fat woman jumps off the diving board and, when she lands, splashes the closest deck chairs. Two women applaud from below. She's followed by a man of Facundo's age, blond and hairy-chested. Then a woman in a bikini, the top of which comes off when she hits the water. Someone whistles and the woman covers herself, laughs.

Two boys barely younger than Josefina appear on the diving board. The lifeguard stands up and blows his whistle. Facundo puts down his hamburger. But the lifeguard raises a finger and the boys understand before Facundo does that

they have to jump one at a time, that the only thing they can't do is go together.

Josefina eats half the food on her plate. Can I go now? she asks. You have to digest first, Facundo answers. In a little while. They return to the deck chairs. Josefina goes into the water and approaches two girls shyly, but right away they become friends.

She gets distracted playing with the girls. Facundo tries to read but he can't really focus; he's constantly looking over the book. Everything's fine, his daughter seems to be having a good time, but he needs to keep an eye on the water, the crowd, the sun that's beginning to set and lull him to sleep.

After a while, Josefina's friends leave. She gets out of the water and goes over to her dad. I'm going to the diving board. It's a question but it's also a statement. He closes his book while Josefina hops from side to side. She's wet and plays at making footprints on the ground. She's happy.

There aren't that many people left. About ten stand in line and Facundo waits with her. Are you coming up? she asks. He says no, he'll be in the water to help her out. I can do it by myself, she says defensively. It's very high, sweetheart. When you hit the water, you'll sink down. I know you can do it by yourself, but I'll be there just in case.

Behind them is a young woman. The line moves and they take a step forward. Josefina turns around and looks at her. The woman smiles. Are you going to jump? she asks. Josefina says yes. A brave girl, the woman says. I'm not sure I will. Josefina looks at the diving board, her eyes bright. I'll give you a push if you like. She and the woman laugh.

Facundo sees his chance. He tells the woman he wants to wait for his daughter in the water. He asks if she can keep an

eye on Josefina when they climb the diving board, if it's not a bother— Of course not, she interrupts him. No problem. Attractive woman, Facundo thinks, and wonders if she's there alone.

Up on the diving board, a boy jumps, rotates in the air, and falls badly. His body smacks the water and everyone turns to look. The boy climbs out of the pool, his back and face red. Do a pencil dive, Facundo tells his daughter. Make sure you jump straight, your arms next to your body, so you fall feet first. I know, Dad, Josefina says, with a weariness she learned from her mother, as if she knows everything.

They're already at the bottom of the ladder. Josefina grabs the rail. Facundo looks at the woman, who tells him not to worry. He thanks her again and jumps into the water. He puts one hand on the edge of the pool and follows Josefina with his eyes. Hold on tight, he yells. But she doesn't seem to hear him. Though two can't go up at a time, the woman climbs three steps behind Josefina to catch her in case she slips.

Facundo looks up and is blinded by the light. He tries to cast a shadow over his eyes while he treads water. His daughter is already on the diving board and she leans her head over the edge to look down, her feet planted firmly on the wood. She waves at Facundo. He can barely see the outline of her body against the setting sun.

Josefina leans over again, gauging the distance. She walks back to get a running start. She runs, jumps. He closes his eyes for a second, they're irritated by the sun and the bleach. He hears a scream or a laugh. When he opens his eyes, Josefina should be in the air, about to fall, but she's not. He hasn't heard a splash either. Up above, the woman appears on the diving board. She looks down for Josefina.

Facundo is still for a second or two, uncomprehending. Then he plunges underwater.

There's no one there, no bubbles rising, no water churned up. Just the azure bottom painted with black lines. Everything is very still, frozen. Facundo sticks his head out of the water and looks at the lifeguard, motions to him. The lifeguard stands up, takes off his glasses, and jumps into the pool.

He swims with agile strokes, turning on his axis to look in every direction. Facundo dives down until he touches the bottom with his hand. He runs out of air and comes up to breathe. The woman is climbing back down the stairs. People are complaining. The lifeguard sticks his head out of the water and asks what happened, says there's no one to rescue. Facundo explains it to him. My daughter jumped, she was in the air, and then nothing. That can't be, the lifeguard says. The woman runs over to them. Where is she? she asks. She saw her, says Facundo. We both saw her.

That can't be, the lifeguard says again. People come over to listen. Facundo looks around him, at the faces of all the kids there. Then he goes back underwater.

Two or three employees ask the crowd if anyone saw a girl jump off the diving board. A girl in a pink bathing suit. Facundo sticks his head out of the water. He's agitated. Except for the woman who went up with Josefina, everyone says no. A manager comes over to see what's going on. That can't be, he says. Facundo leaves the water and goes over to his deck chair. His T-shirt, his book, and his daughter's backpack are still there. He shows them these things and they tell him not to worry, she has to be somewhere. The woman is with him. I saw her, she jumped, the

woman says. The lifeguard and the manager look at her. We've let them know at the entrance and called the police. Don't worry.

People start to leave. No one jumps after Josefina. I saw her, the woman says again. Facundo shows them the backpack once more. He opens it. Takes out Josefina's T-shirt, her hair elastics, her towel.

A police officer is at the entrance, asking for ID from the people who leave. Some don't have any on them and complain. Facundo is called over to ask whether a dark-skinned girl with short hair is Josefina. He runs to the door. He sees the girl and shakes his head. The girl's mother smiles at him, an understanding look on her face, without letting go of her daughter's hand. Another police officer checks the change rooms and a third one the fence that borders the facility. It's impossible, they all say.

Facundo's cellphone rings, it's Josefina's mother. He's not going to answer now. The place is almost empty, night is falling. It's just the police officers and employees on one side, the woman and him on the other. Facundo looks at her. You saw her. She bites her lip. Please tell them you saw her. I did, the woman mumbles. But then she looks at the floor and says she doesn't know, that it can't be. We have to take your statements, the police officers cut in. The woman looks at her watch anxiously. Facundo is still holding Josefina's backpack in one hand. He realizes this because he's clutching it so tightly his fingers start to hurt. He puts it on a deck chair. The diving board looms high over the water. He walks toward the ladder. They call out to him but he doesn't stop. He climbs quickly, walks to the end of the diving board, and looks down. From up there it seems higher.

The water is too still, the vertigo makes him dizzy. But he closes his eyes and jumps.

He feels the speed of the fall in the pit of his stomach, then he's struck. His body sinks and he opens his eyes. The bubbles clear, fire upward. The water, the azure bottom, the black lines. Nothing else.

A BOUQUET OF THISTLES

A WHITE HORSE APPROACHES ALONG THE DIRT ROAD, its gait crooked. It seems to glow in the dark of night, as though it were sheathed in a milky aura. Alonso wipes the sweat stinging his eyes and blinks. For a second he thinks the horse is a figment of his imagination, something about its walk has the subdued cadence of a dream. He hears an owl hoot and takes a sip of wine, then places his glass on the ground and goes up to the gate. It's only then that he sees a man leading the horse by the reins.

Good evening, the stranger says, and touches his cap. I'm headed for the Ortigozas' ranch.

The Ortigozas', Alonso replies. Over that way.

The man nods, looks toward the road. The horse can go no farther, he says. Can you give him some water? I'll be back for him in a few days.

The horse is panting with short, stifled breaths, its mouth half-open and its white eyes protruding from the sockets.

I've come for the slaughter, I'll bring you some chorizos on my return, says the man, unsaddling the horse.

Alonso says nothing, looks at the deep hollows between the animal's ribs. The man thanks him, hands him the reins, nods goodbye, and leaves whistling, the saddle slung over his shoulder.

He watches the man leave until he hears the owl again. Then he shudders, as though a chill has crept down his back, and ties the reins to the hitching post in the overgrown grass. He pets the animal on the neck, looks it in the eye; he can barely make out its pupils behind a grey veil, like it has cataracts.

He goes to get a bucket and fills it with water. On his way, he serves himself a glass of wine from the demijohn. María has just turned on a light, she's awake.

The horse doesn't want to drink, it's barely moving. Alonso brings the bucket to its mouth, but it's no use. He pats it affectionately on the back and looks toward the light in the window. Then he pulls up some thistles, gathers them in a bouquet, and sucks the drop of blood that wells on the tip of his thumb.

María is in her nightgown. Alonso hands her the bouquet, but she doesn't even look at it. What's that thing doing here? she asks. He turns toward the horse, as though this were enough, as though to say, It's here, that's what it's doing. You smell, María says, and returns to the bedroom.

Alonso puts the bouquet in a glass of water, then goes back out. He looks at the stars for a while and takes small sips of wine. Eventually, he drifts off in his chair.

He shivers in the frigid dawn and it wakes him. The first thing he sees is the layer of frost on his boots. Then the horse, which is dead.

María asks him again. Alonso looks at her and takes a bite of bread. The butter has gone off slightly and last night's wine is acidic in the back of his throat. He chews, swallows. A man left it here, he tells her. He'll be back for it, says he'll pay in product.

He left it here alive, she says. Alonso feels his chest burning and suppresses the urge to heave, breathes deeply. María's hair is dry and thick. The sun coming in through the window gives it an opaque shine. He reaches out a hand and strokes her skin, takes a lock and rolls it between his fingertips. María stands up and steps back. Let go of me, she says. Everything dies here except you.

The sun sets and the man doesn't return. Alonso goes into the house, pours himself a glass of wine, takes a sip. He hears grunts and runs outside, trips on the steps. He falls and the glass shatters.

A gaunt dog is trying to take a bite out of the horse's back. It hears the noise and distances itself by a few metres. Alonso wets a finger in the puddle of wine, brings it to his mouth. He rubs his scraped elbow, gets up, and approaches slowly. The dog, thinking it's been given permission, takes another bite.

Alonso swings his leg and kicks the dog on the rump. It lands off to the side and lies there, its snout in the dirt. It moans and looks around out of the corner of its eye. Alonso stomps on the ground, tells it to get lost. The dog limps away.

María is in the window, Alonso feels her behind his neck. But when he turns around, no one is there.

That night there's a storm. María shakes Alonso awake. The roof of the chicken coop collapsed, she yells. The hens! He's nauseous, every time his heart beats he feels a stabbing pain

behind his eyes. In the rain, he rescues as many hens as he can and carries them to the kitchen. He makes four or five trips. María swears under her breath, the floor is covered in mud. He cleans it with a rag so she can get back to sleep. Then he turns off the lights and sits down. The hens walk between his legs. He hears their idiotic clucking, the fluttering of wings, the storm.

Alonso repairs the roof as best he can, with the supplies he has on hand. There's no money to buy more. Beneath the sheet metal he finds three dead hens. María makes chicken stew.

The grocer's pickup approaches, raising dust along the road. Alonso takes a package of eggs to the gate. The pickup stops and the kid driving lowers the window.

Juárez says he can't give you no more on credit, that if you can't pay what you owe, you get nothing.

The crops haven't come up yet, Juárez knows that.

The kid shrugs. Alonso sees him look at the horse.

A man left it here for me to look after, he says. He'll be bringing some chorizos and other things. Give me a demijohn, I've got three dozen. Take them, they're good. Alonso sticks the package of eggs in the window. The kid hesitates, but he grabs the package and places it on the passenger seat.

Alonso goes to the rear of the pickup and grabs a demijohn.

He waits for the man in his chair until night falls, taking long sips, gazing at the sky. María leaves the house, wrapped in a blanket.

It's cold, she says.

He'll be coming, he'll bring the chorizos, Alonso tells her, nodding, confident. He'll be coming.

He left that animal with you on purpose, María says. He took you for a fool.

Alonso looks at the horse. The purple tongue poking out of the open mouth, the dark red flesh where the dog took a bite. It's beginning to smell.

I'm talking to you, María says. The house is freezing.

Alonso takes a sip and stands up. He looks for the axe and gets some logs from the stack of wood. He begins to chop them.

Idiot, María says. Not in the dark.

Alonso swings the axe harder. He splits the first log in three pieces. He gets started on the second, but after a few blows, he misses and drives the head of the axe into his boot. He grits his teeth and closes his eyes. He feels a stabbing pain, but a few seconds later it's followed by numbness.

What did I tell you?

Alonso limps to his glass, downs the wine in it. He continues to chop wood until there's enough for two or three nights. He doesn't miss again. In the house, he gets a fire going. Covered in sweat, his arms aching, he feels the wound in his foot as a distant throbbing. María lies down and he waits for the fire to catch, feeds it slowly.

The house warms and Alonso closes the door to the wood stove, goes up to María, and kisses her on the forehead. She scowls, shoos him away in her sleep.

In the kitchen, he takes his boot off. The cut, on his instep, is about four centimetres long. It looks deep and is surrounded by a purple ring. He goes back outside to his chair.

In the morning, he can't put weight on his right foot. María cleans the chicken coop on her own and he remains in his chair, his leg propped up on a log, until he finishes the demijohn. Before it gets dark he calls the grocer's. Don Juárez answers.

Today or tomorrow I'll be getting product from a slaughter.

No, Alonso.

I have a watch.

What watch?

A gold one.

We'll see tomorrow.

No, Juárez, today.

He goes into the house while María is still in the chicken coop. The watch is in the night table drawer, hidden at the back, wrapped in a handkerchief. It's engraved with his father-in-law's name and a date. Alonso winds it up, sets the time.

He limps to the gate and waits for the pickup. The kid leaves him two demijohns, some bread, yerba mate, sugar, and a package of expensive soap.

Show me the watch.

Alonso takes it out of his pocket and the kid looks it over, knocks on the glass with a knuckle, brings it to his ear, and listens to the second hand. He nods.

María approaches as the pickup is pulling away. She asks Alonso how he paid. He opens the bag, takes out the soap, and shows it to her, but she looks at the two demijohns.

I got them on credit until the crops come up, he says.

What crops?

Alonso stands there with his arm outstretched, the soap in his hand. María goes into the house.

His foot swells and the horse reeks. The wound on its back, where the dog took a bite, is seething with maggots. A caracara perches on its head and begins to peck at an eye. Alonso looks for some stones. He tosses them one by one, but doesn't hit the bird.

María comes over and looks at his foot. You have to go into town, to the hospital.

Alonso grabs one of her arms and pulls her to him, inhales her scent. The soap smells of honey. She shakes herself free. He throws another stone, misses again. The caracara plunges its beak into the horse's eye, pulls off a piece, and flies away with bits hanging from its mouth.

I hope your foot rots, María says.

Alonso's foot is black and swollen, festering. He washes the wound. The sky has been blue for days, and though it's chilly, the sun beats down from an early hour, the earth steams. The whole farm now reeks, they can't go near the corpse. Against the light, gases are visible rising from it.

Alonso sees the man approach along the road. He picks up the stick he's been using as a crutch and walks to the gate, covering his nose with a handkerchief. The man looks at the horse, at the flies' restless buzzing. He smiles.

Over a hundred kilometres he held out, at a gallop. Still, I thought he'd make it.

Alonso doesn't reply, he has nothing to say.

What happened to your foot? the man asks.

Nothing, it'll heal on its own. What about the slaughter?

Went well, the man says, and takes six chorizos out of a bag, hands them to Alonso. He looks at the horse again. It's unfortunate, but thanks all the same. Good luck with that. He points to Alonso's foot, touches his cap, and starts to walk away.

Hey, Alonso calls. What about the horse?

The man turns around. Oh, he says. I'd help but there's work to do. If you've no way to move him, cover him with a bit of lime. It'll stop him from smelling so bad.

No, Alonso says, but the man is already far off and doesn't seem to have heard.

Alonso lights the fire and waits in his chair, his face to the sun. María's screams wake him. The watch, where's the watch? He says nothing, feigns a long yawn. María comes outside and slaps him on the head with her open palm. He covers himself with his hands. We'll go look for it, he says.

You go look for it, she tells him. I'm leaving. I'll be back with my brother for my things, so you'd better find it. She goes to the shed, takes out the rusted bike, opens the gate, and rides off along the dirt road, swerving around the puddles.

The embers are soon red. Alonso moves them off to the side, gets the grill, and places the chorizos on it. With his eyes closed, he takes it all in, the fat crackling on the hot iron, the smell hovering in the air, the kilometres and kilometres of fields surrounding him, the earth yielding plants that grow and dry out and grow again, the animals that are born, die, and rot; and he feels like a negligible part of all of it, rotating around the sun; and why bother, he wants to know, why bother resisting the inertia if he need only look up at the sky to comprehend that the circular movement, unhurried, unstopping, will one day collapse on itself, and everything will be part of a single cloud of dust and gas; and why Alonso, why María, why all the watches in the world, all the dead horses, all the hectares of dry earth.

THE CLOUD

Translated with the author

AT FIRST, IT WAS LIKE A FRAYED BALL OF YARN, white and translucent, hanging motionless in the sky. The year had just begun and we were excited. Martín was starting elementary school and Clarita was already in fourth grade. She'd heard it would be the toughest year yet and she wanted to be ready. As for Pía, the worst of it was over, she hadn't had a bout of restlessness in months. We were happy.

Over the next few days, the cloud began to thicken and its greyish hue darkened. Within a week, it was like solid, wet dough. At home, we waited for rain. We sat under the awning, convinced it was about to pour, and gazed at the black sky. Martín and Clarita played with the snails; there were dozens of them, maybe hundreds, crawling up into our yard. Pía smiled at the kids and I kept thinking we really did have the perfect family.

The temperature rose slowly and at first we didn't notice. We tolerated the heat because we figured it would cool down at any minute, as soon as it rained. The branches hung heavy in the trees, bowed toward the ground. The

air was stagnant and sticky. Every room in the house was impregnated with a pungent smell, like wet cardboard. The walls and floors began to sweat and were soon covered with tiny drops. Then the furniture swelled and slugs appeared, feeding on the moist wood.

Pía began to behave oddly again. She was overflowing with energy. She stayed up late and went on about how beautiful the fog was, how mysterious everything now looked.

The cloud lowered and became foamy and tangible. It was around then that one of the floorboards snapped into the air and landed on the table during dinner. Pía let out a scream that seemed to come from deep within her, one impossible to contain. Then she looked at us and burst into hysterical laughter.

I convinced her that she needed to get some rest and took her to bed. The sheets stuck to my back, it was impossible to get comfortable. I listened to her talk about ghosts. She told me stories from her childhood in the country, about how the dead rose at dawn and wandered, hidden in the fog. She talked like she could see them, as though they were there, staring at us from the darkness. When she fell asleep, I got up and walked to the window. I wanted a smoke, but my lighter wouldn't work and all the matches broke when I struck them. Instead, I looked out the window for a while, the street lights glowing with a weak halo.

There was mould on every surface. If we kept still, we could see the white fuzz growing slowly, spreading over the walls, floors, and ceiling. One morning, Martín slipped and broke his elbow. Our car wouldn't start, the ignition had rusted and I couldn't get the key to turn. The cab we took almost crashed twice. The driver couldn't see anything. Martín

was on my lap and Clarita sat to my right. Pía was on my left, but she just looked out the window like her mind was further and further away.

The hospital was dark. Doctors roamed the aisles like sleepwalkers. The waiting room, which was huge, felt like a sauna. We heard mute whispers, coughs, distant cries. Shadows appeared next to us and then vanished.

We waited an hour. The doctors set Martín's bones. When he cried out, I felt it deep inside me. They put a cast on his arm and gave him a bunch of pills that upset his stomach and made him drowsy but didn't help much with the pain.

Pía couldn't keep still. She danced through the house, humming all day long. Or else she was silent for hours, hidden in the cloud. I'd look for her, without success, until finally she'd come up and scare me from behind, roaring. I'd try to grab her, ask her to please calm down and help me with the kids, but she'd always vanish, leaving behind nothing but her laughter, coming from all over.

I took Martín to our bed and opened the windows wide. The air in the kids' room was stifling. Clarita helped me with the errands. One morning, we went out to look for a supermarket. We had to walk for a while; everything was closed and the streets were deserted. We were about to give up when we heard noises. We followed them through the fog to a huge supermarket where people were fighting, trying to take home more than their quota. Long lines had formed to pay for a few goods. The computers weren't working; all the electronic devices were broken. Bills had to be taken carefully out of pockets and placed in a cashier's hand, one at a time, so they wouldn't tear. There were just a few rusty cans of food left. On the way home we had to stop and rest a couple of times. Our bodies felt heavy, like wet wool.

The snails and slugs became a plague. They fell from the ceiling, crawled into our shoes. We tried to build barriers with salt, but the little we had left was a wet mush that stuck to our hands. Clarita swept the bugs out of the house three times a day, but then she started to have trouble breathing. The air was full of spores that closed up our throats. I took her to our bed and placed her next to Martín. I tried to make them comfortable, but their postures seemed unearthly, like they were broken dolls. With every breath, a dirty whistle rose from their chests.

Pía perfected her hiding spots and I couldn't find her anymore. In some corner of the house, she hummed in a low, phantom-like voice from morning until night.

I found the first sore on my index finger. The skin tore open, revealing threads of red flesh. It didn't bleed, just oozed sticky and watery pus. I stripped, my body was covered in small wounds; ulcers like tight lips opened outward. They didn't hurt, only itched. I checked the kids. Like mine, their motionless bodies were swollen and covered in small cuts.

They had trouble eating; their jaws were stiff. When I tried to feed them with a fork, they just turned their heads and moaned. It sounded like a death rattle.

I looked for Pía one last time. Her voice seemed to come from everywhere, like she had merged with the cloud. I went out and tried to scream, but I didn't have enough air in my lungs. I wouldn't have known what to say anyway, or who to say it to.

I went back into the house to lie down with my children. I was exhausted and decided not to get up again. I don't know how many hours passed; it could have been two or twenty. Day and night differed only by a pale glow that

barely came in through the window. I felt like I was choking and clenched my fists as tightly as I could, clutching the sheets like I was about to fall into a bottomless pit. I saw colours bursting behind my eyelids and heard a buzzing in my ears.

I imagined this was how it felt to die: mounting confusion, a disturbing sound that rises to a climax, then cuts out suddenly. But I was wrong. It was raining.