

CHUCK CARLISE

A Broken Escalator Still Isn't the Stairs

To say one is missing is to talk of perspective. You say, she is not with me. You say, he is not where I want him. There are footprints on the trail, & they lead somewhere you are nervous to follow. Stare long enough & they code like glyphs, like a language you feel you ought to know. Do they track toward you or away? You say, I will wait here. You say, I will follow them out. Words bring you no closer to knowing. Who were you to own these eyes at all?

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For the first few weeks, I can't sleep through the night. I awake to her voice like a farmer in a minefield 20 years after the war, who steps three inches to the left & in his heel feels earth shake for the tiniest instant, before what's past comes to take him.

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The international terminal is full of shadows & long breath, the sleepless dusk of waiting. Half a decade since I was last here (boneshaking motion of those years—constant, anxious). Across the water, my great-grandfather's Sicily of cliffsides & steep, narrow roads. So many places to vanish. I'd gone searching for his fingerprints then. Kept an apartment, stayed half a year. Lost a lover back home instead—bleery months that followed, slow clumsy groping for balance. The quiet gathers in this sterile hanger—accumulates. A thing that feels necessary only because it's been there so long.

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Walls tell the same story in every room. Outside, night is a cloth dropping over a lampshade—radiant dimming, a nervous erasure. A thing happening far away. This is where you are, the walls say. It's all they ever say.

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This morning a man goes missing on a mountainside half a world from here—my friend (who knows him) frantic back home; a pause in a story that may never restart. The helplessness of distance, of not-knowing. Through the glass, the sun sinks into a field of weeds & runway lights—empty jetway washed in gold, alive. There are days I want to disappear just to know that I can. That I can come back in the end.

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To say one is missing is to insist on the physics of the body. In occupied space. The stairstep's center dip. The duomo's steeple points. There is heat & there is color, but we measure them by degrees. The inflection of a voice in a crowded hall. How accusing is its tone? How playful? Demand an answer, a resolution. Demand to know. Believe someone was there to begin with.

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On the flight, I nod off trying to remember the circumference of the halo my arms made circling her shoulders & chest. 'You kiss me like a baby sometimes,' she says, watching us in the mirror while I bury my face in the soft shiver behind her ear. Don't tell me I am making this up. She laughs & closes her eyes, & I'd sooner drop out of the sky in a cloud of ash. Why would you tell me that?

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This is a story about remembering: neurons pop like an invasion, like a firestorm, sparks & shrapnel lighting the dark space in every direction. You don't see them. You see because of them.

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My last time flying over this water, I was an animal—desperate, flailing, confused. I wanted my bones to go soft till I'd melt between the seats & vibrate like a splitting cell, like a single giant muscle, a jellyfish blowing gulfwater through my faults & formless tendrils.

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Ocean rolls & twists seven miles beneath us, so remote it's an act of faith just believing it's there.

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To say one is missing is to acknowledge how the objects in the room have lost meaning—how they assemble themselves so precisely for a world that does not exist. How absurd the arrangement of pens on the desk, the reflection of light on the windowglass. When you enter a room, you already know the quiet. You know it & know it.

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Bobbing under a cloud bank on the long approach. Peaks of volcanic islands, one after another—then the peninsula, a steam-edge fold in the shallow sea.

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A man on the train calls Rome an endless excavation. Down the coast a few hours south, I think the world itself is the opposite. All our dynamite & digging, sloughing away stones, while the Earth liquefies & spreads, cools to blowing dust. Where is Carthage now?

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Statues of the Virgin everywhere—her shrines wreathed in votive candles & chipped paint. They rise from retaining walls, flank balcony gates—shallow platforms cut from the corners of buildings. Our Lady of Perpetual Watching. Holy Mother of Never Being Alone. She is ragged, crumbling smile on what's left of her lips. I turn a corner. Another. She never stops. Queen of Surveillance. Of Having Nowhere to Hide.

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Two 12-year-old girls shoot through minefield Milazzo traffic on a bleeting white scooter; streetlights catch the broken glass by an overflowing dumpster the striking sanitation men haven't gathered in weeks. In the piazza, an old man in three piece suit paces back & forth alone.

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The square of dry asphalt beneath a parked car in the rain. More.

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To say one is missing is to cede responsibility, to create distance, passive observation. You wake in a room to men paving the street—smell of tarsmoke & blacktop. May as well be anywhere. Somewhere else, the streetlamps flicker on, the sun beginning to fade. Through the window now, a screech of gears—then shouting, a crowd. Gasoline in the air. Something frantic. In that dusk, no one's saying, he's far away. They're saying, he left.

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In this country, I'm told, when they dub an actor's voice, the double stays with him for life. Some grow famous, cast shadows with bodies no one ever sees. Others fade like a daydream interrupted by carhorn, tiresqueal—a thing that will always ride shotgun to an image that was never its own.

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Nothing is ever forgotten, just misplaced. The rhythm of reciting your first address, scent of the yew trees in that yard. On the street below, a man with your father's hands steps off the curb, squints toward a cathedral up the hill. (Life as a drawer of postcards—each moment distinct, regular, scattered among all the others.) When he turns the corner the sky is a cloudless dome. You already have no words to describe it.

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Imagine: your whole identity built on erasing another's voice.

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The rain tonight, a fever breaking.

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To say one is missing is to speak without context, without here-&-now. A state of being with no edges or agency. The ceiling collapses in the storm—plaster & sheetrock, splintered wedges of polished wood. You learn to live against the wall, on the perimeter, with need. Not to long for, but simply to be without. In a state of absence. Of missing.

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Open water is never actually open water. On a long enough horizon, there is always rock, dust, root to hem it in. Still, in the rutted blue between the last buoy & the distant ghost of land, it's easy to believe in flatness & empty air. When the volcano's shape darkens from haze to shadow to obsidian & pumice beach, I am more relieved than I'd expected. The absoluteness of its presence. The blackness & sulphur & spit. The utter lack of doubt.

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This is how you tell a true story: fly halfway around the world alone & speak only phrasebook monostichs for days on end. Shiver when cold, perspire when hot. Nod in assent, shrug in confusion. This is how you tell a true story: wake up panting from a nightmare you don't understand. Feel your face flush any time you try to make sense of it. Describe it to no one, ever.

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Her voice is still a tiny flash of light—bright enough to pull my eyes from the road; never lasting long enough to leave any residue of warmth.

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When Vesuvius opened its eyes, they say, ash teemed in the sky for hours. They watched from the foothills, stood in the wide streets, holding hands. Prayer is a kind of transference of agency, & no one fled as the heavens grew dark & heavy. When

the canopy collapsed, the cinder & dust didn't squall from the clouds as smoking rain, but burst across the valley, swallowed the city like a tidal wave.

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Heat lightning in the clouds, like camera flashes in all directions. The air silent & strange, body braced for a crack of impact that never comes.

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To say one is missing is to build walls around air. To claim ownership, to isolate. Talk in states of being, not becoming—remember it as a stack of bordered slides. You are shivering in the dark while she stands to leave, & the streetlight briefly forms a halo behind her head. Your shoulders rattle & you rewrite the story as it happens. Not this slide, another. Not a halo, a hole.

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Smoke & mirrors, they call it when what's taken's not really gone. Now you see it, now you don't. So many ways to hope. Once upon a time, a city snuffed meant nothing left—the great Punic empire burned to cinders, fields salted to years of dust. When the Earth ends a story, it's more of a trade, a hiding game—rabbits, tophats. Catania's black sidewalks of magma & ash; paintings on the brothel walls unearthed in Pompeii.

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Snap a picture of the grasses ahead—impossibly green where the trail crosses over. Vertigo of the moment.—steep hillside scattered with rocks. Sometimes it's hard to believe you'll ever die.

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An empty chair at the table? No. A phonecall gone unanswered? No. A half-sleep reach across an empty bed? No. None of these.

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Claustrophobia is a train window fogsmeared with dust & spores like snowflake crystals. An island: an organism remaking itself. When we pass through the tunnel, the skin sheds to palm stalks & fruit-heavy prickly-pear, feudal olive plots abandoned & overfull, their branches in the air like mangled hands. Snakeskin & chrysalis are broken by bacteria, carried off by nesting sparrows. I sift rockdust through my fingers, spread a layer on the floor by my feet. I am alive & the island moves below.

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To say one is missing is to suggest search, possibility, the transience of loss.
To say one is missing is to create order & correctness. Then break it.
To admit regret, desperation.
To be humbled, even when no one else can know.

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We've all suffered enough, haven't we? As with most things, it's more a question of 'when.' (Venice racing to become the sea again, a tower tipping fractions by the year.) Back in Portland, I'd jog around Tabor like a dog in the sun—eyes wide, licking the Douglas Fir scent from the air. When Hood blows its crown again, this is the fracture that will bury my house in flaming iron & lead. I don't want to be beautiful, a man on a cell phone says. I want my fucking man back. I follow on his face. The universe whispers, 'no.'

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The climb takes all morning—rim finally yielding by noon. White sulfur smoke in the air, singeing & acrid—a bouquet of lace breezing from dust-dry rock. The crater is shallower than it seems from below—a shot-glass of ash & cracked mudstone. The sky at eye-level. It's all around—an unbroken field of blue. Impossible to say where it ends & the sea begins.