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Room full of *Cosmos*

UNDER A SOMBRE SKY, we walk through the land we recently purchased, a forest of beech and maple and fir near an old bog, and we hesitate before its still waters and shadows. (The indigo bunting I'll surprise next summer in the low tree near the winding road, the brown rabbit I'll watch from the kitchen window—she sits for an hour by the log and gives her whole body a wash—and the ruby-throated hummingbird who will stop for a moment on the railing of the deck, his back to me as he plans his next flight, crystal tongue flickering in and out.)

Charlene and Ted come over to chat while we're gazing at the land, while we decide at which angle the cottage will be placed. They come to talk about their plans for next door, the huge house, the second-hand windows, the special design over the archway between living-room and dining-room. I tell Charlene about the house in town we just sold, the one we lived in for six years every summer. Soon after we moved in, we learned that it was the house of Althea Winter, who died in the bedroom the year before we bought. Much later yet, we found out from some townspeople that Charlene was her niece, and we started to piece the story together. Over the years, it felt like the ghost of Althea came often to visit, to oversee our dreams and our failures in love and constancy and to help with my mother's death from pneumonia five hundred miles away. (The stack of empty tobacco tins, the cigarettes she rolls, her ghost face peers at us from the corner of the bedroom, the raccoon wheezes outside our window.) I mention the poem I wrote about Althea, published in a magazine in California. She's very impressed

("My aunt in a magazine in California," Charlene marvels) and says she'd sure like to see it, so I promise to send her a copy when I get back to the city.

Charlene confides that of all the family, she was the only one to help her aunt when she was very sick. She brought her soup and held up her head. Althea fought and cursed that bastard of a husband who left her (he will drive by in the car and stare glumly at us as we wash down the kitchen just after we move in), but she trusted Charlene, who did what she could.

Speaking of magazines, Charlene proudly describes her collection, her room full of *Cosmos*. They're stacked in the trailer on her parents' property next to the lake where she and Ted have been living for years and where they'll stay until their house is finished. ("Those Winters," say the townsfolk, "been squatting that land for decades, what nerve." The falling down pier, the rickety boat, the minnow business, a kitchen garden bursting with tomatoes, giant sunflowers, purple dahlias, marigolds, old tires, a fridge, and across the road in a pen, the horse called Lady.)

Just now she's waiting tables at the Pines on the highway (best cheeseburgers in town, we all know) until Ted's arm is better and he can go back on the road crew. Her jacket is torn and she weighs two hundred pounds but she reads those *Cosmos* and finds out about fashion and makeup and chic stuff, how to keep her man. She knows these tricks as we chat and step over piles of deer pellets. We gaze at the maple and beech and the dying trees in the bog between our parcels of land where we're building our houses, where she'll pile her *Cosmos* and I'll type my poems hoping someday they'll fill up a book.

When I get back to Oshawa, I type out a copy of the poem about Charlene's aunt, the one in the magazine, and I send it to her, hoping she'll like it. But she never replies, and I wonder why.