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The Gold Earring: New York City on April 3,
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My gold earring is in the blazer's inside pocket. If you are looking at the coat, it's on the left. If you are wearing the coat, it's on the right. I thought you might want to know when you see my body and I only have on one earring. This is all so strange because I was doing quite well—ready for discharge actually. My neighbor was the one who looked like death. Eighty-five, diabetic, overweight. Me, I'm beautiful, sixty-six, chocolate brown hair in a short bob, and I like my nails a deep red. I was initially admitted with shortness of breath after quarantining with my eldest son, my sister, and my husband in our apartment in Hamilton Heights. Covid came into quarantine with us, invisible at first, and infected us all. My husband died just before I arrived at the hospital. Maybe that's why I'm not as strong as I could have been.

As I died I could not breathe, suddenly. They could not get a read from the pulse ox on my finger, so they attached it to my ear. That's where the earring comes in. As this was all happening—the not breathing, the not being able to speak, the not being able to move, I could hear. I could hear when they called my daughter in Minneapolis. I could hear when she said she loved me, she said I was strong. I

could hear when she said goodbye. I could hear while I was dying and fighting and losing.

I lost and gained in an instant, I lost my family, I lost my body, but in an electric moment I got unhooked from the only truth I've known—of being in one place and experiencing one moment. Years ago, while walking in Inwood Hill Park, I saw countless small birds fly, at once and with no pause, through multiple holes in a chain link fence. It surprised me, I didn't know it was possible. And at this moment, the moment of my own death, I feel as if the countless small birds of my mind fly, at once and without pause, out of my now lifeless body. On myself, my old self, I cannot focus.

I see the room next door, a man is on a breathing tube, in a coma. His mind is a stream of saguaro cacti, javelinas, and jumping chollas. I see trees with white bark growing in riverbeds in the valleys of high desert mountains. His thoughts are pulsing to a rhythm that seems to drain and then inject color from the landscape. I look and hear more and see that he is in sync with his ventilator. He is near naked on the bed, his skin paler on his torso than his sun kissed arms and face. Oh, all the things I never noticed before!

There's a woman in the room, she is not in the landscape with saguaro cacti. She is facing another bed. She is in head-to-toe PPE: the hijab, the space suit, the nun's habit, the scuba gear for the modern doctor. Her thoughts are very small, lost in her garb. In fact, her thoughts are less than one inch. A one-inch thought? I dive in and the thought is purple and blue, it's a blister and she's looking at it.

How can one moment, one inch, be so very large and feel near infinite? Her gaze pulls out, and I see she is looking at a man old and near bald who is like me—very, very dead. The blister on his nose is from his oxygen mask, but he doesn't need his mask anymore.

I can't find his thoughts; can the dead speak to the dead? I wipe the inside of the doctor's thoughts for traces of him. He was a carpenter on the Lower East Side for decades and he had planned to move in with his son and grand-son before getting sick with Covid. He had been dipping his toes into death for days now. In the moments before he died, the doctor had held her phone in a zip lock bag to his ear. His mask was still delivering oxygen and his breathing looked so jagged; irregular and gulping. She looked at his face and searched for signs that he was hearing his son's words. She saw only the huge busyness of breathing the last ineffective breaths. We drowned in air, he and I.

I see the floor, with discarded PPE and tubing, like tangles of white seaweed. There are four beds; two are empty, strewn at strange angles. Death has rushed through this room and left it in disarray. There is a single grey Nike sneaker on the floor. It is well worn and the laces are still tied. I can see the imprint of a big toe. The sneaker looks like it was trying to run, but got left behind, like Cinderella's glass slipper.

I know where the second earring is. I can't tell you the story of the second shoe. There's so much loss here, and words fail to describe it. I feel the moments before words, without words that exist

in a soft mist of feeling. Words are too small to contain any of this. I drift, I widen, I step off all the details. Like countless small birds flying at once and without pause—I am gone.

About the Authors

Lara Marcuse and **Madeline Fields** are epileptologists who were deployed to take care of Covid patients during the NYC surge in the Spring of 2020. They felt surrounded by death and wrote this work of fiction with the voice of someone on the other side of the divide. Email: lara.marcuse@mssm.edu; madeline.fields@mssm.edu