

I could stuff my ears full of cotton. I could live underwater. I could blare white noise from a speaker on my back and still he would scream. It wakes me at nights--it never seems to end. The sound grows louder until the only other sound is my heart in my ears like a fever. Once in the birthplace of Cervantes, I had an apartment. The walls were white and the stairs were marble and to get in the building you had to unlock two heavy metal gates. The neighbors and I hung our laundry in the laddered courtyard and on warm days we were a spring-soft tower of Babel and no one could hear a thing. Because I knew he was waiting for me I took the long way home from class, down the path along the Henares river, and listened to the storks tap-tapping their beaks, the clucks growing louder in their orange throats, then the whoosh of their black-tipped wings as they landed in their giant nests. The city had built metal bowls on the roofs for the nests because the weight of domesticity can cave a roof. We used to talk about having children then, on nights I wasn't being punished, though this began to happen less and less. He didn't seem to care about the storks and the way the city seemed to be built for them. They even guarded the old castle that was closed to visitors. He never even saw the river and the blue jacaranda that made me a carpet of my favorite color, where I listened to a podcast about Robert Lowell unraveling, calling my Mom who was just waking up in Texas, telling her so many lies I could barely keep them straight. This is what happens when your relationship is poison, you become all the things you weren't. A liar. A spooked horse. A deer in the woods, always hiding. Back at the apartment, everything became his until I had to knock on the living room door for permission to enter like a child. If I forgot, I had to go back out and try again. Do I need to mention that this was for my job, an apartment I had earned alone? But this is really about my mother, hero of my adult life. Because when I came home that day, I was wearing my headphones and she was there listening. Because I was afraid. Her voice there, directing me, like we were CIA agents and the man who would hurt me was wearing a boyfriend mask. She could hear everything he was saying to me every name he was calling me. This is one of the most intimate moments my mother and I have shared since I was a baby, since she held me in her lap to show me pictures, or stroked my sweaty forehead in a fever. At 32 years old I was more of a child than I had been when her alcoholism made me into an adult. And because she was 5,000 miles away all she could do is listen. All she could do was speak to me in her soothing voice that pulsed through a thin white wire tucked inside my shirt. So when he started to put her hands on me she knew not to yell and her voice did not rise in pitch, the way you know not to raise your voice in pitch when you want your horse to slow down keep it steady and low and go down in town. Do you know how to call the police she said her voice low and steady as the sound of a river flowing through. Lock the door she said. Make sure he takes all his things she said. And when he ripped the earbud from my ear my only last connection to safety was severed and her disembodied voice clattered to the floor. But she was there again when he was gone. And she was there every day until I left Spain, a voice inside the little white pods in my ears, and when I returned to Texas I lay down on her couch for two days, my head in her lap like a child. I would not trust another person again for a very long time. In a fever, I dream my one good dream: the sky is raining petals, everyone is speaking Spanish. I walk to the cathedral and giant birds are nesting overhead. I am alone. Home is on a thin wire, only an ocean away.