EMERGING WRITER'S CONTEST WINNER
NONFICTION

In nonfiction, our winner is **Ellen Adams** for her essay "The Something I Am Telling You."

Nonfiction judge Meghan Daum said of the piece: "In telling the story of a brain losing its moorings, the author pulled off an astonishing trick and made me feel like the brain itself was talking to me. There is lyricism and soulful reckoning here but there are also synapses, receptors, electricity. It left me more feeling more alive than when I started, jolted into attention at the strangeness and fleetingness of life."

Ellen Adams' work appears or is forthcoming in *Kenyon Review Online, Black Warrior Review, Crazyhorse, The Southwest Review, The Carolina Quarterly,* and *Singapore Art Museum*, among others. Previously, she was a Fulbright grantee, a McGinnis-Ritchie Award for Fiction recipient, and a college instructor of writing and literature. She graduated from Princeton University and holds an MFA in Fiction from Brooklyn College. She now lives and works in Seattle, where she is revising a novel and developing a book-length work of nonfiction.

"I wrote this essay while living inside a tight circle of discretion after a difficult diagnosis. In my few attempts to reach outside the secrecy and share with others the emergence and implications of this news, I found that language—a bridge to others, a ferry out of aloneness—failed me. This essay is an effort to find my way out of that collapse. The process of writing it felt like a crucible in its own right; for that, I am grateful to be a writer."

ELLEN ADAMS

The Something I Am Telling You

Let me tell you something secret. My first migraine arrived when I was twelve. That is not the secret. The summer-camp priest creaked the cabin door open and anointed my forehead with oil. She prayed over me from the Book of Common Prayer, then found a fresh trash can for the vomit. Woozy and speechless, I tossed in the sweat of my sleeping bag. I was missing hikes, waterfront, music jams, campfire. Rec class. I could hear them on the ballfield.

In college, a mentor missed our meetings; she'd had a stroke, but that wasn't the why of her absence. She said some days she'd lose her language—understanding, speaking, reading it—until, on a timeline of its own, it came back to her.

Years of migraines later, I was on a date with a Thai artist when half my face went numb and I could not find my words. This is not the secret either. I knew I should be speaking Thai, or at least English, across the table, but all I had was French. Not my manners. Not my good sense. French was not a language we shared. I thought I had dropped cleanly down the manhole into madness, as if madness were such a swift drop. I wondered at the beer can's mouth: when had a pill or powder slipped in? The question came as a feeling, not words. My body, and the question inside it, was a car filling up with the river it'd steered into. The feeling rose, as waters do, through my body, leaving a pocket of oxygen compacting at the top. Sloshing, unkind borders. In these situations, you must break something to swim free. Smash the window, idiot. I leaned back on my bed.

My language returned in the morning. The artist came back with jok, Thai remedy for the ill, from the corner shop with the plaid vinyl tablecloths. What a crazy date I'd been. I apologized: the crying, the vomiting, the francophone babbling. I saw the poker face. I ate the jok. The artist left for Bangkok.

*

After the coup, suddenly stateside in an unknown city, I became an employee in a cubicle. *Cubicled* gets the red squiggles of a wrong word, but is also a more precise form of *corralled*. In my cubicle, the muddling returned: numb lip, then numb face, then slurred speech, then language lost except for French. The migraines surfaced twice a week now. I couldn't read my inbox. Colleagues appeared with questions. I knew in that wordless, rising way that I looked mad and sounded drunk. I hunt-and-pecked my way through messages to my boss that I was going home sick. Call this girl a cab. Too broke for the cab, I fought the sunlight to the bus stop, tears behind dark glasses, hands clenched as a reminder: do not say *Merci* to the bus driver.

The college mentor. She'd had this. The dropping out of maternal language. But why my French? Drugs in the coffee machine? I learn the word *aphasia*. Acquired language, sometimes attained through survival in immersion's waters, is deposited in a different part of the brain than our maternal communication. I include this new vocabulary in the hunt-and-peck emails.

When I was younger, I entered often a tunnel of counting: numbers tapped out with my fingers or steps. I knew what OCD was, and I feared being trapped inside those letters, counting an unnerving tedium down the tunnel track. The French say *chiffre* for written numerals—the form the number makes against the black of a chalkboard or the white of printer paper—but these numbers' denotations were bodily, a more ominous compulsion than a number line, the arrow toward infinity at its right-hand end. Losing my language felt like that counting tunnel, like that forward-moving trap.

I don't have a car. A bus moves me forward to my referral with a neurologist. I tell her about the French. She asked me why I've come alone, and then she orderes an MRI. Not long after, she leaves a voicemail that they've found a tumor. Incidental. I don't know where to go with this tumor except into the shower. I tell the shower, "I have a tumor in my head." The voicemail tells me it is tiny and pituitary, that it isn't about the French or the migraines, that I should hurry back. I cry behind the shower curtain, then take the bus to work, where I don't tell anyone in the office; that is also not the secret. I do not know until the return visit to the woman in my voicemail that you should not go alone with your brain to a neurologist. She refers me to a different specialist, the finer details of his field: neuroendocrinology. That one wants a better portrait, a sharper picture. He wants some precision.

To get an MRI, you go into a tube, which is similar in shape to a tunnel. It can feel like a tunnel, except that in the ones I go into, they put around my head a lot of plastic pillows, specially shaped to stabilize a skull. My last time in the tube was 45 minutes. It is a long while to stay still, and it is important not to cry. Such movement blurs the image, à la *Portrait Standing on Diving Board* versus *Portrait of Leap from Bridge*. I try to pass these sessions by measuring their duration. They are each a different length. A lady gets on a speaker with a flight attendant voice and tells me how long this next photo shoot will be; they are each a different length, and some are double digits of minutes. On my lonesome, I take it over from there. The first few times I went into the tunnel tube, I counted the kind of breaths you'd summon in under the high ceiling of a meditation hall, but the counting felt like my younger self's tapping. So I turned to the alphabet. The ABC song of Roman script: children sing it early on, then store it away like instinct. It comes with a built-in metronome, which keeps me, there, on beat, measuring the moments away with letters. Anyone in any tube can try it.

This essay is not for everyone. Supporting a friend through a tumor is also not for everyone. One friend went silent when I requested company in the seventy-two hours leading up to an MRI and A Telling Visit with My Neuroendocrinologist. When I could calm down enough from both the visit and the cold floorboards under the the pulled-out rug of friendship, she told me she hadn't thought it was a tumor. She'd thought it was just something in my head that they were keeping an eye on. I'd used *tumor* in writing, conversation, text message; I had a file full of previous accuracies. But tumors are not for everyone. The writings of *tumor* are not for everyone. I know this now, but still I wish there was a mailing list to showing who, instead, they are for. Advance

notice, a spreadsheet, a sticky mailing label to know for sure. What resentment in delivery, and what confusion and shame in the Return to Sender, the wrong address you'd handwritten under *To*.

An important lesson I learned in my twenties, a lesson that should not be so secret if you substitute my *I* for your *I*, is that I cannot solve other people's problems. What they did keep secret, though, at the chalkboard, with their chalking, is that it isn't always unfeasible for me to solve my own. Like a tumor, for example.

I am told, high up in the hospital, that I should feel lucky my tumor is not something worse, that if it grows, it will grow slowly. This makes me feel like the scaffolding of my fear is built with immorality. The scaffolding, and its swamp-green netting, make it hard to find the address, the entrance. I can't get inside this thing inside me.

The hospital routine I now call mine includes 30 minutes in a vinyl chair with a chemical in my arm. The compound sends a cold feeling up my vein and a metal taste into my saliva. The nurses, beforehand, give a single-spaced printout explaining why non-patients are not welcome in the vinyl chair room. Privacy. Discretion. My first time there, I am the only one in a chair. Days after the bookends of blood draws, a nurse tells me by phone that the levels are wrong. I learn I am in trouble. I step into my boss' empty office. I am crying hard at work. The nurse goes on and on about an experimental drug, the appeals process for insurance coverage, then ends by saying they can see me that day. I am to hurry. I pay a cab fare to the hospital. I keep dry-eyed and still as they take from my vein new vials for the story. A week later, the same nurse calls. The trouble, she tells me, is now false alarm. The tumor is not secreting. It is hiding away, not sending out. My new prescription, she tells me, is to wait until we test again. There is joy in her voice, joy in my cell phone. I find it hard to trust this new good news. I find it hard to trust the scaffolding. I am supposed to believe the re-done outcome, but the first call is what feels real.

As program staff at summer camp, we used to weed out milk thistle. An invasive species, carried in on wind or boots or a potted, gifted plant, it is spiky and waist-tall or taller. It is also beautiful in fullest violet bloom and very hard to hinder. It grows so fast it might outrun you. It watches on from everywhere as you sweat inside your gloves. Sometimes you want to give up the digging and let it have its way with your terrains. This tumor feels like that thistle, its effort. There are phones ringing, and phones waiting to ring, and all of them are everywhere, and all of them are loud. When is the phone call that's not contradiction? It is a lot of doom to wait for. To wander toward leaving when you are worried about dying is a shameful secret to keep. It snuck up on me like a leak. Ideation isn't action, but it wears the same fabrics of disgrace. I imagine you can spot them; I imagine now you know.

Somewhere in my gut the conviction persists that I deserve my tumor, that I've deserved its phone calls, and the aloneness I have found, feeling always in another room from people I have tried to love will tell. Sometimes the good fight is too much fight. I am not a strong swimmer, and there have been moments I have wanted to lie back in that sea of milk thistle, in its purple, prickly fields, and fill my lungs forever with falsehood. Fear, when I can name it, is what keeps me swimming back for the sun on the other side of liquid. The fear says, "This will kill you."

I work in a large organization with very nice pens and legal pads in both yellow and white paper and a computer that crashes and elevators that glide up and down, strangely smooth and quiet.

My colleagues express worries with exuberance about things that feel like another planet to me. In conference rooms, they have ideation sessions about work oceans away. They brainstorm. They storm my brain. I walk through the hallways of their planet, then go home to a different one. The lift in my apartment building shakes so long that you feel you are in a dryer that will never turn off. When I have people over the first time, they often become anxious we'll be trapped in the elevator, yet it makes for a good laugh once inside my apartment. I try to remember to offer a glass of water whenever someone visits my home. It gives them permission to stay. At the large organization, there is a lot of Kool-Aid about "bringing" your "whole self" to work. We are supposed to drink it and believe. It seems difficult, and also unwise, for me to enter wholly

into anything self-related at work. There is so much handwaving. The hallways are crowded with many hands wringing, sometimes over tiny, tinny increments of ascension. My own plate, balanced on two tight fists, is too full for those kinds of jerky motions. I am managing the milk thistle. Away on my planet, I am trying to breathe in air.

This workplace offers health insurance of celestial reach, eye-care coverage for regular visits with the ophthalmologist to make sure a tumor isn't elbowing out your peripheral vision, and paid medical leave if you need transsphenoidal endoscopic surgery. I keep my insurance claims. I keep tabs: the true costs of an MRI, a seat on a couch of the post-traumatic-stress specialist, a twenty-minute consultation with the top-of-the-field surgeon. Life rafts and life jackets boast bright colors, visual pragmatics of recognition in times of distress. You do not want to have to root around for a neutral tone if the vessel's going down. To me, my health benefits are neon. They are the fluorescent beams of a spacecraft hovering above my every decision and concern. They spot and shut down any interest outside the rink of their security. They are a safety net. They are a net. They trawl my gratitude, relief, and ambition. My desire swims ovals, confused by the strings.

This is a secret I cannot tell entirely; it is not my story to share. I want to say, though, that each week I travel south of the city to visit two small sisters with lumpy shapes in their skulls and scars on their scalps. I want to say that each time I hold their bodies or their little toddler heads, I am so, so grateful they are alive, and that suddenly the shape of my heart is too large to fit anywhere.

Time to rush to a new paragraph; I will weep if I think about it long enough to think.

In the newsprint of my hometown, where proper nouns like Jesus and God appear in letters to the editor, as a child I read in an etiquette column that a topic should not be brought to a table if it cannot be fully fleshed out. I read that it is rude to raise, then withhold. But there is a problem with wholeness. There are things we cannot get at wholly. This is why the milk thistle flourishes. It is not enough to see the skull's contents on a lightbox screen, to utter the word tumor in the shower, then to

others. It is not enough to ask for help, to request it to your home address. It is not enough to watch the YouTube catalogue of patients discussing surgery aftermaths. It is certainly not enough to revere your glasses as if they were made of more than plastic, to look for scraps of safety or signs of Okay in your peripheral vision. Is it growing? Is it slow? We do not know what will happen. We do not know what we are doing. It is a rude business, uncertainty. It does not follow the rules, and it takes to any soil. It will stain your laundered tablecloth.

After a meal, I tell a friend I feel gutted about the healthcare vote on preexisting conditions. No matter how hard I scrub my apartment or how loud I blast the music, I cannot calm down. With an untroubled frankness that bothers me still, she tells me that she cannot relate, and then the subject changes, as if she's turned in her permission slip and the field trip's leaving soon.

I need to get out of my house. I need to get out of the base of my brain. So I rent a therapist's office on Saturdays and Sundays as a writing studio. Given its weekday purposes, it comes with a couch. Sometimes, I sleep there overnight. There's nothing mentioned in the lease, but still I hope my landlord isn't reading this. I like to wake up to an empty office of desk. This morning through the wall-wide windows, I hear a loudspeakered rally for a soccer match in the square outside. When I go downstairs for a pastry, I see a bright sun is out along with the fans' lime green and blue. I sit in it and among them with a coffee and quiche. A lime green child is called to the stage, his wobbly kid voice amplified through the square: "I'm Sounders 'til I die / I'm Sounders 'til I die / I know I am / I'm sure I am / I'm Sounders 'til I die." What shaky-voiced certainty in that microphone, its to-the-deathbed allegiance chanted back by the crowd. A few rows ahead, a woman's clothing tells me, "KNOW PAIN KNOW GAIN." Gain. I don't know what gains I should be knowing. I do know it is a good day to be wearing my pink sweatshirt with rose-threaded skulls on the boobs. I do know I've got Susan Sontag's *Illness as a Metaphor* on the desk upstairs, a grammar I am learning.

I found my skulled pink sweatshirt at a discount shop. I took it from its hanger because I was astonished that I liked it so much. Rattling, to realize I'd been drawn to it. I don't wear pink, even in muted, beiger

shades like this one. I avoid polyester, and this sweatshirt has a 40% blend. I wanted it on my body, though: over my torso, across my shoulders, down to my wrists, up to my neck. I tried it on in the large mirrors of the discount store. Yes. Yes, I can do this. I am not much of an athlete, but I am working on some atrophied instincts. Whether by function of alchemy or emergence of an element, my insides spoke up and surprised me with a strange humming in my head and a pull from my innards; I brought the sweatshirt home from the cash register.

Later, at a bar, the guy at the tap filling my half-pint told me, "I like it, but it's morbid." I felt an earnest glee: assessed and understood. I'm wearing the sweatshirt again today in the therapist office weekend studio. I am a woman on top of her laundry; I wear it every weekend now.

A person very dear to me is confused by the sweatshirt. So much is confusing. Secrets beget dysfunction. I am trying to explain what it is like to have a tumor in my head. The best I can come up with is, "It is always scary to have a tumor at the base of your brain. You cannot put it on some pragmatic shelf until the next MRI." It staggers me to have to elucidate the basics. The loose pieces of unknowns on the table are: growth in my tumor; cancer in my brain; losing my sight; needing surgery; dying in surgery; not being able to work after surgery; needing to be on astronomically expensive medications the rest of my life because they've cut from the gland that is the control tower for the brain. But the word tumor doesn't seem to change weather patterns upon a face, even after the description of the possible odds and ends and outcomes I've laid out over the tablecloth. It stays in that funny space of the subjunctive. *Irrealis,* linguists call it.

The Latin for milk thistle is *silybum marianum*. It has medicinal uses for liver and gallbladder disorders, and possibly for hangovers, but the language is what can guide me here, not its physical applications. Mayo Clinic's free, generously accurate online reference—unlike other blue links waiting to blow larger, misinformed winds into my billowed fears—tells me that, in medicine, the term *milk thistle* can be used interchangeably with the shorter *silymarin*. A nickname. Silly *marinero*. Silly sailor, Spanish. Out there, scooting full mast over whitecaps free of worry, zipping far beneath a lofty brain tumor that a screen has shaped like a cloud. Some days, I long for *irrealis*, for silly sailboats, for the ropes in my hand to pull. Off I go, away, no life jacket orange. Should this silly nautical jaunt capsize—if I die before I wake—at least I will not see the cloud above from underneath the choppy water.

But water—all this water. Something pulls me out. The kind of thirst that shocks once a hangover settles in, the body's reminder, after a sojourn to other, uninhibited realities, that it does indeed have needs. Secrete, emit, release; it wears its special sweatshirt. It tells me to listen. It has something to tell me. It wants to be real and indicative, though it speaks in the imperative. Through the machinery and the fabrics and the alphabet of MRI tubes, it has something to tell me that, once said, will not be secret. It tells me: do not drown.