

# Alternate Endings

BEATRICE LAZARUS

Before a wild species was loosed from its den; before the bat's spit splashed into human eyes; before you slashed the porch screen, screaming *let me in*; before the empty bird's nest crumbled and fell, splintering like bone dust at my feet; before I believed you loved me when you kissed the soft space of my neck; before I emptied my father's house into the pick-up truck; before sympathy cards dwindled to one;

before I stood in the tub and shaved long hairs from my legs with his razor; before you hurled names like cherry bombs that burned down the house; before your Crown Victoria crashed into a pine tree into a house into a truck; before the windshield shattered and punctured our arteries; before I deceived myself as if an enemy, believing the lie; before I was held captive by a violating force; before a baby's gaze existed only

in imagination; before wasps slashed our arms like Swiss Army knives; before I planted red geraniums at his grave and washed my father's headstone; before lilies and hummingbirds vanished from the backyard, and baby birds overheated in a nest of broken eggshells; before the bough cracked in the tortuous gloom; before I took hour-long soaks, my body shriveling underwater;

before you dragged me onto the porch under the dark bulb of the moon; before you fell unconscious on the couch, reeking of wine; before I found you breathless, your face indigo, a bent blossom, as if a plastic bag were wrapped around your head; before I dropped breadcrumbs into hungry open beaks; before I locked myself in the closet, pressing my father's shirt to my mouth;

before you sat on the bed, humming, as I painted my toenails crimson; before you clogged the porch with empty bottles; before the moon popped open like a locket you gave me; before all the bird eggs burst; before the fig tree my father gave us twisted in wind; before the bird weaved its nest on a sinuous branch; before there was no concept of grief; before I thought I had no choice,

it was twilight and we were unmasked, majestic lovers in hot violet air, not knowing we would carry that evening with us when we walked into the yard with its harvest of light and buttery tendrils, and you said I love you, asked me to marry you in a strange new city, the answer waiting on my lips before you pointed to a long-reaching branch and said, *Look. A bluebird's nest. Isn't it beautiful?*

