ODETTE AUGER

Run

Resting my head on the bus window, I watch the desert's shifting ecosystems as the bus winds through the landforms of Hopi territory.

A yellow wildlife crossing sign zips past, and I straighten up to see more. I lift my finger and slowly pull it across the horizon, repeating the movement back and forth to better note movement. After ten minutes I give up. The black silhouette on the sign looked like mule deer antlers—they're in the desert, too? I feel my eyebrows touch as I close my eyes and frown, visualizing the vastness of their range.

Closing my eyes, I feel the memory of shag rug under my fingertips. I'm the first one awake, waiting for cartoons to come on. The coloured bars of the station's test pattern fill the screen, the volume off so I don't wake anyone.

I turn my attention to the bookshelves. They're mostly empty, except for the bottom shelf. It's filled with Dr. Seuss, one book coming each month through a mail subscription. On the higher shelf, Papa has his book; Big Game of North America *is a big hardcover book with full-page photos. I slide it off slowly, to avoid making noise.*

It's heavy on my pyjama'd knees and falls open to my favourite chapter. A big mule deer looks over its shoulder at me. I look at the white patch on its bum and wonder if this makes it easier to hunt. I flip the page, and a white tail deer is leaping away, the photo slightly blurred on the flashing white, turned-up tail.

I open my eyes to watch the landscape again. The last wildlife sign was for wild burros, an hour ago in Hualapai territory. Brought to Arizona to haul loads for miners, they've adapted to the desert and thrived. I smile, remembering the Phoenix news in the hotel room last

night, describing the overpopulation concern. "We know that they're harming other species that are Indigenous." I think of the prospectors who brought the burros 150 years ago, or the Jesuits before that.

I'm prepared for the next sign, a jumping pronghorn. I push against the window, hoping to see one. I lift my camera, on video slo-mo setting just in case. Alert, watching, I wait until the hills fall away and I can see open grass, the pale yellow polka-dotted with dark-green pinyon pine.

I swallow a hard lump of emotion. I would be so happy to see one. For the past twenty-five years I've driven the highway back home in BC, passing "elk crossing" road signs and I still haven't seen a single one.

One day with my three kids in the backseat, the question came, "What's that animal?" I had to describe what an elk was, my mouth watering a little as I thought of the winter stews I'd taken for granted. Tears start spiking, so I push the thought away and keep my eyes out for wildlife.

Another yellow triangle sign is fast approaching. I see the silhouette: pronghorn. I know those horns, from one of my favourite photos in Papa's book. "Oh, those are far away, baby girl," he smiled when I asked about the antelopes. I admired the striking ring marking their necks, not like any deer I've ever seen hanging upside down in our garage.

A twinge of headache stings my temple, eye-strain from focusing on blurred landscape. The bus slows suddenly, and I stand slightly to see what's up. Not a deer, just a highway-crew truck parked, but overlapping into our lane. The bus veers a bit, and we pass the truck. Two men are bundling something off the road, into the back of the truck. I know, and don't want to know if it's a deer they're cleaning up.

I sit back in my seat and look at my hands. I study my nails, the one that's always a little lopsided compared to the others. When I'm calm, I look out at the rippling grass, the soft yellow of autumn meadows.

That's when I see him: a coyote, bounding over the grass. He's running, but not as fast as he could be. He looks like he's enjoying the feeling of running over the open ground. I wonder briefly if he was attracted to the roadkill deer, and the truck frightened him off. Or maybe he was chasing the deer, and it ran into the highway. It doesn't matter now; a pain in the centre of my chest tells me how beautiful this moment is.

Run, keep running, my heart stretches out to the coyote, wanting to run with all the relatives I've missed.