A doe watched my brother Pete watch me get out of my car, carry the groceries.

Then he made a movie of the doe watching us, of me standing by a lodgepole pine.

We stowed my stuff in his apartment, headed into nearby woods that were strewn with old tires and broken bags of trash. An abandoned refrigerator had landed face down. He wondered aloud if there could be a body inside.

After our walk, we sat in his kitchen, heard, through thin plasterboard, the woman next door cough.

*

I died thirteen times in Vietnam, he told me.

Once I got shot by a diamond. The person’s body shuts down as if he’s dead, but the body’s working to get the diamond out.

Another time, crossing a river on pilings, I got shot by Vietcong. The guys I was with had to carry me.

Then we were in a hole, threw mortars into the village.

The others didn’t seem to mind killing. I wondered if it was because they’d been killed themselves and gone to a parallel universe. Every so often, I met people like that in Vietnam.

Only some can go back and forth, others can’t, and, for a few, there’s a last time. Then they stay there.

Maybe schizophrenia is when someone carries the memory of both worlds.
The last time, you don’t feel anything, you don’t know anything, nothing hurts.

*

Next door, the woman coughed. He worried she might have a disease that could travel through the wall.

We watched the movie of the doe and me and made dinner, cleared a space on the kitchen table, shared spaghetti, salad, bread. I put two packages of candles on the cake.

He made a movie of the cake, of us lighting the candles, me singing Happy Birthday, him blowing out all the flames in one breath. We watched the movie. During quiet parts, we could hear the woman cough.

*

I think the fourteenth death was final.

His face above the blown-out candles. For a long time, I wondered what he wished.

Catherine Freeling

Kathryn Dunlevie, “Sing,” mixed media on album cover