

CAUTERIZING TIDE

by

Jonathan Barry Sullivan

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Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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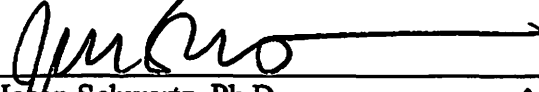
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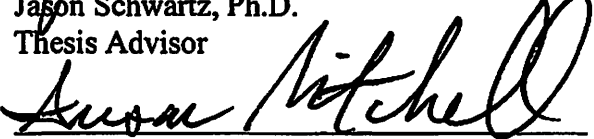
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Jason Schwartz, Department of English, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

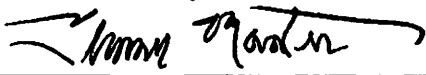
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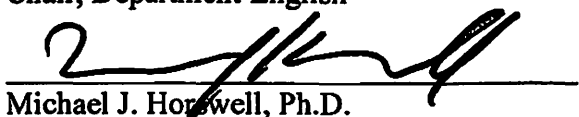
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ABSTRACT

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Cauterizing Tide is a collection of short fiction. The stories feature characters struggling with managing or creating healthy relationships. Characters wrestle with their feelings about family, love, anger, longing, and addiction.

DEDICATION

Thanks, everybody, I mean it.

CAUTERIZING TIDE

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INTRODUCTION

In the statement of purpose I submitted as part of my application to FAU's MFA program, I wrote that I had stories inside that I wanted the skill to tell, skill I didn't believe I had at the time, and to be frank, I'm not sure I have it yet. I had not been studying fantasy, my favorite genre, and yet the literary fiction I have written gives me confidence in my ability to keep readers moving through my stories, something that will be invaluable when I return to the fantasy genre. I intended to learn to write in a literary voice so that after graduation I can take that into other genres. That's why I entered the program. I was promised that I would change in graduate school, and I did. However, I have not pursued publication, sought internships, or been anywhere near honest enough with myself when writing. I still procrastinate. But I am more honest with myself now when I write.

When I began this thesis, I told myself, as well as anyone who asked, that I was going to do a series of short stories that dealt with toxic and healthy relationships, setting them against each other. Twelve (arbitrary, but also symbolic) stories became eight, became seven, and eventually I settled on what I had already accomplished. The idea was to inoculate readers against manipulation and abuse, and maybe just let them know that even if things could get messy, it didn't mean things would feel that way. In my writing I was able to look at the way alcohol muddied my opinions of people and see the unhappy life it promised me. None of that is what the MFA program intended, or it wasn't on the

poster, anyway. It's easier to list accomplishments than it is to believe in them. The table of contents here is an example of such a list, and it feels woefully short. But it's complete.

In "Neither Was This Where the Wild Things Went to Mellow Out," I began addressing my own hurt and rage caused by feelings of abandonment, but I did not "put a bow on it" in a way that readers could come away believing Eric, the narrator, has forgiven his mother or father. Eric, like me, accepts his relationship with his mother. Though she traumatized him while dealing with her own post-traumatic stress, Eric's mother did love him and tried to teach him skills that would help him improve. Really, I knew I was writing it for a best friend. If anything, the story helped me accept my best friend's relationship with his abusive mother, and by folding anger at abandonment, I think I healed myself and forgave both our mothers for many of their shortcomings. If it is at all coded with instruction, some moral guidance, it isn't that we have to let go of anger, nor is it that everyone's parents mess them up and can still be forgiven. "Neither Was This Where the Wild Things Went to Mellow Out" is a way of realizing it takes other people to help us forgive, heal, and grow, that there are people willing to step in when the people who care for us most will not or cannot.

Another element in that story is one I've explored in different works and tried to in my personal life: the healing of battered women (and men). One of my cousins was raped as a child. One of my best friends was raped in her home when she was a teenager. I've spoken with women who were assaulted as children and seen the effect on them and, unable to help them, I tried to understand their pain and ended up heaping onto the stores of anger I already have. Writing is one of the only ways I can transmute that anger into

something that doesn't rot inside me. Another person's healing is something I can perhaps help, but not complete. Waiting, listening, watching, and even praying are all that can be done, and yet they cannot help me heal any lingering pain of my own. Writing, however, that moves just about anybody.

In my mind, the Alice of "Between Our Houses Isn't a Gulf" was saved from sexual assault as a child, but still bears wounds from it that manifested later in her life as an addiction to pornography. There's no medicine for that in the initial draft of the story. Her observations of other bodies are erotically objectifying, especially of women. A longer version of the story might feature her questioning her perceptions of others and how she prioritizes the physical; it is a door for emotional relationships. Alice is afraid of leaving her home near the beach, and the connection of this to her addiction is difficult to communicate. But as one thing changes, I think she will find herself in a position to change the other. I resonate a lot more with her than with Nathan, her boyfriend in the story, even though I think he has more of my own habits. Perhaps Nathan is what my depression looks like when I am at home. I am simply trying to marry parts of myself in my stories.

Before writing "Between Our Houses Isn't a Gulf," I wrote a flash piece called "Broken Pipe in a Valley," in which I see the same motifs of water, male-female relationships, the erotic, ambivalence, and the domestic. But in "Broken Pipe in a Valley," I was able to begin asking what it takes to "turn the water off." The water begins flowing in the story when the little girl dies in the house of the wealthy man; water, the life-giving and erotic, is from a single source released, but the water is also the girl's pain and, thematically, the consequences of exploiting and abusing children (and things) when

they are young. The girl never walks the Earth. If it was thematically realistic, the world would continue to drown in increasingly fetid waters. It was a story meant to suggest the ills of the past could go and the world could be better, that beauty could exist in the chaos after crisis. It is, in this way, fantastic before it is flash fiction, literary, or anything else. To me, that is. Call it magical realism if other genre distinctions lend it too little legitimacy.

Revision is the terrible mirror, and I found myself unwilling to revise my work, afraid of looking into my own psyche from a distance. I attribute this fear of revision to something closer to self-pity than vanity. It's simply easier to beat myself up constantly in my head than occasionally take a red pen to my own writing. The most fruitful sort of emotional masochism I have access to, reading and revising my own work, I've neglected, as if words on a dead page are too sensitive, too delicate, and the same critical eye I turn on myself might crush my artistic abilities. I've practiced writing so I can eventually produce immaculate first drafts. Such fantasy! I realize that my stories are the product of released pressure, pops, more than the product of sustained pressure. I often write balloons, not gems.

In the strange hollows in my day, where cigarettes used to be, I began to read more. It's easier to revise because of this. It reminds me of the power of revision. I haven't read the draft of *Night of Knives* by Ian C. Esselmont, but I imagine I wouldn't have read thirty pages before realizing, as I did when reading the published novel, that everything was happening on an undeniably dark and stormy night. Thirty pages of ample references to darkness and storms went by, even a very clearly dark and stormy first scene, and what could have been seen as cliché slipped by. It made sense. It had to be that

way. I'd been tricked, and it made me feel better about the things in my drafts I had no inclination to change but despaired when I realized were present in my work. The lyrical undercurrent of the story kept me going and in the entire book, only one paragraph appears unrevised. It reaffirmed that the strength of the line, the language playing on the page was what mattered most. Whenever I asked Professor Schwartz about craft and used literary terms like "plot" and "characterization," I was given a simple instruction: "Make it move."

And that is what writing is meant to do, what it is intellectually bound up with. Move the eyes across the page. Move ideas in the mind. Move the reader emotionally. Get the writing to move itself through the world, to amble or sprint toward and through the reader. Maybe this isn't what Schwartz meant by "make it move." I don't know if my writing represents realities that are, or as they should be. Both would be nice. I do not know if my art is moralistic in its message or ethical in its construction; perhaps I have truly written a "poisonous" story or two without realizing it. But I wrote. I tried to write art. I tried to write what could become literature. I wrote intentionally and tried to revise with a mind of what, where, and when I was writing and why I bothered in the first place.

BROKEN PIPE IN A VALLEY

In a house in a valley a pipe bursts, and it floods, and it floods and the whole valley becomes a lake. In the house had lived a wealthy man. The wealthy man fled. The wealthy man did not come back. No one entered the house where a little girl died. And the water came when the pipe burst. And it did not ever stop. And the world flooded as the water spilled over the mountains. No one shut off the pipe. No one came, so everybody began to drown.

First, their feet got wet. Then their ankles. Soon the water slipped over the lips of waders. Soon the scuba divers arrived. But they could not make it to the valley floor. The water gets flowing.

Boats sailed in and over the land as the water continued to gush from the burst pipe in the house owned by a wealthy man, in the house where a little girl died. The water ran and ran on. Soon, the river spilling from the valley was wide as a highway, then two, and then twice as wide as a football field is long. And no one could reach the pipe. Then, after everybody was wet and sick of it and tired of avoiding the house in the valley, a woman and her husband found a bunch of old brass diving bells and put them on a chain five hundred feet long. The old woman dove, and her husband worked the winches. She went to the first bell, and the water was cold. She went to the second bell, and she could see the house at the third bell. She swam down, and down, until hundreds of feet of

water pressed down upon her like the firmament upon Atlas. She swam on, deeper, until she was in the house.

Everything was murky, sediment constantly disturbed by the water gushing from the broken pipe. But she swam on like an adamantine pearl diver. She found the shut off switch and did what the water company should have done. And the water stopped coming from the wealthy man's house in which a girl died and, now, an old wife was diving. She left the house and went to the bottommost bell. And then up. And up, but the water began retreating. She had to climb the chain. She managed to swing herself up and over one bell, stopped for air, and climbed on. But her husband's boat never sank with the water. It held itself there in the sky, and the old woman noticed how rusty the chains had become. She climbed on and her rust covered hands dripped sweat.

She reached the boat, hauled herself over the gunwale. No one was there, but a note was left in the cabin. Her husband had died. Her children had died. The draining world had drowned. "The diving bells are not what we thought." When she looked over the side, the brass shone like gold. They shone brighter than ever, suspended in the open air on ancient iron chains. Their weights jangled like giant chimes.

On her and her husband's boat, atop the world, she saw the draining drowned world and she looked back at the diving bells. She looked down to the valley, and still water remained, and the water was still. The house was still covered. The wealthy man's house where the girl died was just beginning to emerge from the water, and it was the only place to go

WHAT LOVE IS MISSING

When he was born, he was sad. He stayed sad and happiness was a diversion from that chief task of trying to explain his own misery to himself. When he was four he saw a couple kissing by a fountain and he knew that kind of relationship was missing from him. But he was four and the sadness still would not be solved. It didn't matter how perfectly light their feet looked underneath them; he knew that lightness was unique, theirs, and that if his mother and father never had that, he wouldn't, surely he would never, have that kind of light stance. A breeze would never offer to lift him like a dandelion seed. And the next day, he turned five.

When he was five he wanted to be a dandelion seed, even if he would be a sad one. When he saw *Aladdin*, he knew he had a love like that. He was five and that was impossible and the clash of truths only made him sadder, but understanding that made him shrug, smile in a way that his grandmother worried over; it was the look of the boy's father, and no one could carry so much misery on his back. But the boy, like his father, walked just fine. The little boy fell in love with romances.

He knew that *Sleepless in Seattle* was not a romance. Most of the movies with "love stories" in them, he knew, had them as distractions, happy diversions from the absence of anything true about the relationships in those stories. Everyone he had met who had loved anything in life would talk, unloading entirely too much on his little shoulders, about loss and bliss like a coin toss they wish they could redo, no matter how

good the outcome. People talked to him about love and about regret, one inextricable from the other. And the boy knew, at six years old, they were all right, but they knew nothing of regret.

He regretted leaving the person who made him light on his feet. Regret, he knew, was as powerful as sadness. He could devastate the world with the two, show them what happens when soulmates are torn apart. At seven he wrote a love letter to a woman whose name he once knew.

“Did you remember me yet? I don’t know our names. Can you find me in the tall grass again? Can’t you just touch my shoulder again? I’m not mad. Are you mad at me for going? I want to hear your name again. Again. Again. Again.”

One day, he almost died, and the emptiness was no bigger, but it hurt more, and he hid and cried whenever he could, because she was not gone. She was still in him forever. And that was a storybook promise too, but it was true. It was true because how else could he describe the sense of being somewhere else, with someone else, always. If a piece of him could be anywhere, a piece of her could be within him, or was once. Something was taken and he had left something behind.

He read Yeats’s “Never Give All the Heart” and he knew the man was right. He had given up his heart, or lost it, and the one he had now was just a loaner. Until she brought his heart back. Maybe he had hers, he thought, but that made it all worse. She would know his every moment of shame when he gave it back. She’d know how much he missed a person he did not know. But if it was her heart he had, he would fill it until he could give it back.

He took to the sunshine and in spring he looked at the garden flowers from every angle he could. He drew them. Roses were the easiest, he said, because they were just messes of petals. The sketchpad he got when he turned ten was big enough for him to fit on, if he curled up into a ball, and he did once, trying to draw his own outline. It looked like an outline of a heart from a biology book, a ragged one, and he didn't tell anyone how true of a drawing it was. It frightened his mother when it was done.

In the middle, where his heart might have been, was a cup, he said, with nothing in it and around it were all the waters of life trying to fill the cup. The cup wanted nothing to do with the waters of life, but they filled it anyway. That was why the cup was cracked—he pressed down so hard the pencil tore the paper—and the waters could try all they wanted but would never fill it up.

When his mother said the drawing scared her, she used the words, "It's beautiful." She said it and rocked him, said it and might have said no boy should feel this way. It was too late to hide that it was his outline. He folded it and put it in a folder and put that folder in the space beneath his dresser.

BETWEEN OUR HOUSES ISN'T A GULF

Some people are glassy because they are afraid to ask things, but these glassy people are like bottles wrapped in tape and smashed. Their shape is approximate, their sentences twitch with shame. In the parking lot, Alice notices a child kicking a tire. She thinks the child wants the tire to explode, to blast him back. She wanted to die when she was a child. Nothing dies if people remember. People remembered her name, spoke to her. She did not die. She asks the child if the tire is holding air, then beats the sand from her jeans. Nathan is glassy, a glass bottle inside two layers of glass, not yet enough pressure inside to let him crack—he needs to. He never believes he's safe.

In the car she listens to an old playlist full of fast-paced songs about not knowing what to do or how to love but doing fine anyway. Doing fine anyway, Alice thinks, describes her well.

Her house is plain. The flowers growing out front are accidents and secret gifts from her friends who encourage her to add some life to her house, to make it a home. Red begonias are trite and ugly little flowers, or they make her think of decapitated roses, left only the bottom few petals. Nathan brings more color, even if he's always in grey. The house vibrates with his voice.

The sheets on the bed are white. There are three enormous bath towels in the house. She has a five-year-old computer for sending and receiving emails, binge-watching porn, and paying bills. There is one pillow on the bed, covered by a thin blanket

folded into a neat rectangle. She has a stool beside the bed which acts as a night stand. On it rests one of two glasses that she owns, still full of the water she poured last night. Every stable surface, she thinks, is free of things to be knocked on the floor, and this pleases her. We could fuck anywhere, she thinks.

~~

I've cut the vegetables already. Carrots and onions, three cloves of garlic, potatoes, and peppers. Salt, paprika, cayenne and curry powders. Olive oil. Simmer, stir occasionally. Wash spinach and add slowly to the pan. I shake the water off a bit since there's so much in the spinach already. There's the water from everything else in the pan too, and with the oil, there's enough water so the spinach doesn't burn. I use a cover as well. It's a perfect rain cycle in there. It's all flavor unlocking itself in the heat and damp. Stir the spinach as it reaches plateaus, pauses as it shrinks, and is limp, soft, and eventually overdone. Add salt once during this progression. Cooking the spinach is a dangerous proposition. All that moisture could make the potatoes soggy. Soggy potatoes are a blight on any dish. Throw the fish on top, simmer on low until, a few moments later, it is cooked.

Tilapia will add a stark flavor. Do not add bitter flavors to this fish. It will seem to clash with the sweet peppers.

Salmon will add sweet and creamy flavors. Choose onions according to taste.

Tuna can be used. From a can is easiest. I do not often buy tuna steaks and so cannot describe how I would best cook them.

Mahi mahi should be used when something between tilapia, salmon, and tuna is desired.

~~

Alice is searching for the bathroom in the grocery store. She asks someone working in the produce section who has eyes dark and deep as wells. He points to the back where, says to go around the corner. She sees things she would buy if she had more than five dollars.

In the bathroom she wipes the seat before sitting down. She moves her leg, manages to scratch an itch on her ankle with her underwear. She remembers why she is in the stall, relaxes. She stands back from the toilet when she flushes. This is wise. She washes her hands.

At the hot bar are fried chicken, mashed potatoes, carrot medley. She buys a small cup of soup and a bottle of iced tea, takes it with her and squats down outside to eat it, preferring watching people to listening to them, the parking lot to the cafeteria. The soup is delicious because she has not eaten breakfast. Two drivers stare each other down, giving the absolute minimum necessary space to a driver trying to back up.

It is over a hundred degrees today. Alice doesn't mind the heat, doesn't mind sweating. People are cranky and those who aren't still squint angrily against the sun. This is why Alice has sunglasses, and so people cannot tell when she is studying them. She watches their asses and strides, sees who sleeps on their sides, those who sit in chairs all day, those who run regularly, those who walk with a dancer's legs and grace. She admires the callipygian and pities those must sit upon their bones, no matter what they sit on. Her own ass is firm from walking and squatting, running in the mornings.

She has thirteen cents left, gives these to a man with his life stored in shopping bags. He asks her if she can give more because his friend needs money for the bus. She

cannot bring herself to apologize or explain that was all she had. Pay day is in two days. More money is at home and in the bank. She allows herself five dollars a day during the week as walking around money.

Five dollars allows her to explore for roughly three hours. Time is money. Money is lunch. She will eventually work her way back to the car, back home, but for now she wants to go back to the beach where there are more people to study.

~~

Carefully mix ground weed with loose cigarette tobacco. Roll carefully with shaky hands. Filter recommended. I will not describe this process. There are simpler ways to learn. I will say there is relevant wisdom in the phrase “roll up.” Yes, up is how you should roll.

The day evaporates with the smoke as a cool anxiety comes to dominate, a sense of not-living-up-to-my-potential accompanied by a dread of intellectual effort. But I’m high, feel rooted, closer to the spiritual side of things, how things were before I started taking medication, and for the few sweet hours the meds don’t work, everything real is given dreamlike significance. Being stoned, I can relax into the paranoia that makes anything supernatural seem obvious. Before I smoke, I don’t have as many crossovers than when I didn’t smoke at all, but when I’m stoned, there is some control, greater intensity. I have found an on/off switch for something that antidepressants and mood stabilizers had cut the power to.

I feel small. I feel small and pressurized. Sometimes I sweat, as if forcing out a diamond or two. I passed a kidney stone once. It came slowly, the pain did, amplifying between short trips to restrooms. Back in the hotel, I sat down on the porcelain throne and

imagined my urethra dilating, making it easy for the stone. I grew dizzy as the stone passed. It hovered below the surface, waved goodbye, from the water. It was jagged, three grains of sand large. Alice was there, rolled me a joint and stuffed a towel beneath the bathroom door. I slept and she beside me. She tosses and turns most nights, but I sleep better. I don't know how to complain to her and praise her for the same thing at the same time—she only hears the complaints, responds to them like they're good criticisms and she is some draft or sketch that can be simply amended.

When I smoke around her, it's better. The paranoia lets me think I can read her thoughts. Maybe I just know her on a level I can't think properly about. "You think so much it makes you weird, makes you do what you're afraid of doing."

~~

Loss of affect, distance from the physical and emotional present, from the self in these moments when everything looks so glassy. Some people are always glassy because they are hiding things and inevitably forgot how to feel the truth, are always readying the litany of things that fill their days, always readying alibis.

If a human isn't trying to connect to others, does it have a soul?

~~

She likes to see tan lines. These mean that people wear different clothes in the sun. Thin lines, many bikini tops, perhaps. Having many bathing suits seems a waste or a luxury, but maybe for some people it is a necessity. Everything is so spare in her home, just enough. One man has tan lines at his neck, as if he works outside every day. It must be so. His posture when he walks and the knotted muscles of his back tell Alice that this man works lifting things, maybe construction. She would ask, but he is with a woman and

children and she does not want to make them uneasy. She finds the man attractive. This would show on her face, be clear in her voice, and make the woman jealous and distract her from her children, which would irritate her. When the woman turns, Alice sees she has a widow's peak. Widow's peaks always make eyebrows seem severe, but the eyes rounder, in her mind. The woman's eyes are covered in billboard-sized designer sunglasses. Maybe she is studying people, too. Alice moves on.

Kelp and beached jellyfish litter the tide line. She stoops to poke the top of a man-o-war. This is a way to feel superior to the jellyfish, to triumph over the one that scarred her leg as a child. A little boy almost steps on the tentacles before she warns him. He laughs, runs in the loose sand. "Stupid fucking jellyfish," she mutters.

A man is moving through the wet sand, his feet intentionally submerged. He sweeps his legs forward in crescents. Alice can't make sense of it. His legs are thick, his back straight. A woman is following him, moving the same way, catching up as he catches his breath. They have moved through miles of shore this way, stopping only to move around jellyfish and flotsam. Their ankles are red, but not in a way that looks painful. They walk a little funny back toward the beach and scour their legs with sand. The woman puts her hand on the small of the man's back. He shivers, then puts his arm around her waist.

At the trash can, Alice wonders if people still receive messages in bottles. There is a girl writing in a notebook. She could be writing a letter, sitting cross-legged on a blanket, hunched over the book in her lap, a ponderous tension displayed in her shoulders, made audible in the tapping and clicking of her pen. She wears a big blue sun hat with little shells hanging on strings from the brim.

A couple sing and play guitar. “Oh, he can’t write a song for you until you’re gone,” the girls sing. The song is happy, the happiest song about leaving someone, until the girls begin alternating verses. “He’s afraid to stay because his eyes want to break the mirror,” one says. Alice does not normally want to cry when she hears sad songs. “Because for him it’s still all questions and mystery in here.”

~~

Little choices repeated over time form a habit. Habits are how we know we are animals.

We are creatures of habit. We choose them. Ignore that we have chosen them. Let them sneak up on us. We? There’s only me here. This is a self-centered we. You, please do not feel excluded, only included from time to time.

We set up conditions for our own habits. We set up conditions for other people’s habits. When we aren’t careful, other people give us habits and we do not know we are acting like animals we always suspected had free will but were so distracted by their environment, their need, that they are reduced to searching, always searching, for food and shelter and some way of mitigating constant anxiety.

If a wolf is not hunting, is it human?

If a shark is not swimming, is it dead?

~~

My brother called me a coward because of something I didn’t do when we were children. He said, “Nathan, you fucking flaccid, pansy asshole. Just jump.” At first, I was a coward because I refused to leap from the cliff into the lake. Then I was a coward for

not going camping with him and my father and I was told to jump off the cliff, as before, and called a coward.

I did not take this well. Stubborn, however, I stayed at home.

I was a coward for not asking Elizabeth Merson to my first homecoming dance, again for not going to subsequent dances in high school. Again, lastly for going to community college.

My brother habituated himself to being a creature that mocks, belittles.

I habituated myself to solitude.

I decked my brother after he dropped out, dropped out of high school his senior year—he was drunk, yelling at me about doing what he couldn't. I did not call him a coward.

Habit causes pressure to build. If the pressure is because of things unsaid, release must be careful. Why bother, though? Does it matter if my brother was cruel? Does it matter if I hit him because in my solitude I became kind to myself and so became brave enough to push back?

My brother never grew out of belittling people. In his solitude, nothing hears him. No one hears him, so he belittles them. Because no one speaks to him, because he does not speak or listen, because he cannot express feelings other than contempt, because he is alone now, and every snide criticism of another is my brother's shadow making fun of him.

I punch my brother but aim for his shadow when he calls me a coward when I tell him I worry about Alice, if she still cares.

~~

Fire has a shadow. Deep inside the flame, at the core of its base, it longs to get away from its source. It wants to preserve what it consumes. This is why cigarettes must be tapped and flicked lightly once lit. The fire wants to leave shape and form behind, but a cigarette is an act of destruction, of motion and disturbance. Beneath the logs of a fire there is darkness. Inside the lit cigarette is darkness.

No one can see from inside the Sun.

Only gravity holds those flames in place.

The burning thing, not the flame, is what wants to explode. Stars are always dancing like their lives depend on it.

Always the center of gravity wants to hold itself, rejecting itself.

~~

Alice and I settle on the tilapia. She suggests I use Vidalia onions next time, to balance the bitterness of the fish. I don't mind. She is usually right.

She tells me about the jellyfish along the beach, how there are more. "Maybe we can dry them, sell them. I hear it's a snack in some parts of the world."

"I like to stir the tentacles like spaghetti."

"Man-o-war in marinara?"

"Jelly alfredo?"

"Jelly and seaweed in red tide sauce."

"Ewww, stop," she says. "So, this is why I love you?"

"Not my body?"

When she is washing the dishes, I wrap my arms around her waist. She presses herself against the sink, turns on the disposal, moans softly. We grind for a moment. She turns off the disposal, turns to face me without leaving my arms.

“Would you move in with me?” Her head is tucked beneath my chin.

“I don’t want to crowd your house.”

“Please, it’s so empty there.” Without you, she thinks.

“I thought you liked it that way.”

“Just take away the flowers outside. I hate begonias and daisies.”

“I’ll take a flower,” I say. She seems lost, inside herself and far off. I’m trying to bring her to the moment. She gives so little to the moment.

“Aren’t you terrible.”

“Why can’t you move here?”

~~

How can he look so pensive as they make love? He says he is only thinking of her. “That’s why I’m worried.” Love can’t die, she thinks, but it withers. Something inside him is shrinking, his heart sounds further away. “I can’t move here. It’s too far from the beach.”

“The beach is dying, Alice.”

“I still love it.”

“And when no one can come close because of the tide?”

“I will still.” She moves herself back on top of him, presses her ear to his chest.

“You’re afraid, I hear it.”

“Maybe my heart is lying.”

“That’s why I’m worried, Nate.” She wonders if he still loves her. “I could move in with you,” he says.

“You just said you couldn’t.”

“The beach is dying,” she says. “Aren’t we, so far apart? Everything feels barren when you aren’t with me.” Barren?

“My things will get in the way.”

“I can tolerate it.”

“I don’t want you to tolerate it.”

“I can adore it.”

“Stop, shush, Alice.” He kisses the top of her head, doesn’t let her go. His arms say he still wants her, loves her.

~~

Why shouldn’t she move in with me? If she only tolerates things, like the tapestries in the bedroom that I won’t let her vacuum or beat the dust from, won’t she hate me? “Will you do more than tolerate it, though?”

“I can try.”

“What if I took some things down?”

“No, I want them there. My house feels like a desert. Could you move in?”

I want to say yes. “Let me think.” The beach is dying. “You’d move here?”

~~

His breathing lifts her, lowers her. “I should move here.” Alice is braver than him.

“It makes sense.” He, they, are so used to living alone. She would want her own room, something to keep almost empty. He doesn’t sleep as well because she tosses and turns.

“The beach is dying. There won’t be people there much anymore,” she says.

“You can’t save it.”

She is afraid of where he is looking. “There is less of it every day.” Sometimes she thinks she is the reason she feels a shrinking inside him, because she is eroding the parts of him that can meet her. She is always rolling in, always scooping up the outside world into herself.

“Do you really want to move in together?”

“I have so much room to spare.”

“There is room enough here, isn’t there? I can make more.”

“Will that bother you?”

“At first I’ll tolerate it.”

“Don’t just tolerate it, don’t stretch yourself like that for me.” Things stretched out are painful.

“Just move in, Alice.”

~~

Alice is singing. It’s one of the few times I’ve heard her sing. It’s “The Girl from Ipanema.” I almost forgot she spoke Portuguese, she uses it so rarely. Duende or saudade, they call the pain in her voice. Maybe the beach isn’t dying, though, and I say this.

She says, “As if it is just moving away.”

“It has to move somewhere.”

“It’ll move here, someday.”

“Everything migrates. Some make a habit of it, only bring what they need when they go.”

~~

They sway, go back and forth. They burn and want to burst. Sunset shines in her sweat. Ten miles from shore, they hear a seagull, see it land on the window sill before moving on. She wants to watch him, every day, see how he’s slept from the way he walks, holds his shoulders. She sleeps more soundly next to him, even if he doesn’t know it. They move again in rhythm. Their breath comes in waves.

There’s something shrinking, something expanding.

~~

They want to go to the beach and plunge their hands into the water and heal it. They want the tides to be cleansed and the air, too. They want life to be normal.

IN THE GREEN BEFORE THE OCEANS RISE

The ibises move through the soaked field, walking curved lines and leaving accent marks in the water. The sun will make shimmering castles in the shallow water for hours yet. When Florida has turned to night, the water will shine with street lamps. The lamplights' reflections will shine like fireballs seen through dirty glass, or they will look like incandescent banners moving gently in the breeze. From the right angle, the headlights and taillights, white and red and dirty orange, will move and hover over the water.

And there is the cigarette smoke, curling blue and yellow. It unfolds in the wind to the pattern hidden in the tobacco flakes. Good sense says it is more like the smoker's life escaping, drifting away, than an echo of the beginning of all things, unfolding from a single point in the forgotten. And the smoker clamps his self-damned lips around that butt and pulls smoke. *And when*, he asks, *did the ibises leave?* He looks where they wrote in the water and reads the lines, he believes Thoth placed there. Now, Thoth wrote in his note, go write.

Years from now, divers will be picking through the lower levels of the remaining oceanside high-rise condominium buildings, praying the water that surrounds them is not poisoned by drowned electronics. They will bring up monstrous bags and crates of old TVs, computers, and the skeletons of those who did not leave.

He sucks that cigarette like he doesn't care if it feels good. He smokes like the cigarette can keep him alive. It's just a feeling. Will the water be able to support life when it's filled with shit and the heavy metals bled from old electronics?

In the sinkholes and mines across the United States, will the poisonous aquifers kill everything for miles? What danger approaches Florida's marine life? Will manatees go extinct before or after it's all gone to hell? Florida is disappearing into the Atlantic. In a hundred years will be a dozen versions of Atlantis.

The Atlantic Gyre will become the swirl of a cadmium cauldron. The Arctic will be a nickel bath. Hard water stains will stripe the skirts of mountain ranges. Water filtration and recycling equipment will, despite the vast amounts of resources remaining to create the plastics that are needed, take decades to distribute far enough to make things livable everywhere. By then, the world will have burned twice over. Humankind will try to draw sustenance from filthy bathwater.

Storms will be swept north and east, and Europe will be reminded of the Deluge. That it happened. That it, like a trauma forgotten and remembered, has happened and so happens forever. Poems and stories, paintings and music, will grow tired of storm songs, of rainy landscapes. The Sahara will grow green once more. Centuries of hard earth will grow fat with water. Cactuses will split their skin and burn in the tropical sun. The soles of camels' feet will harden over two centuries, and when the heat returns and the sand returns a thousand years later, their humps will not sustain them through the trudging. Ankle burns will be common.

The millennial corpses of coral reefs will be resubmerged, and the titanic limestone colonies of skeletons will be draped in algae.

Tree lines will recede toward the sky and waterlogged pillars will be swept away, pulverized in flood. No one will set the fires first. Some will fear the ash will poison the water, while others argue it will cleanse it, as fire and flood cleanse excess and sin.

And sin will be seen everywhere. The thousand cults of Irsphayus, Poseidon, and Lir will rise and lose the names of the gods, and the gods will rename themselves. Lir become Layal, Irshphayus become Iria, Poseidon become Phillius or Podeston. Those who follow the winds will know where to raise boathouses and piers, docks and harbors. The sea, full of ghosts, will be the place of demons, kept in chains. And humans will feel a new generational hate, and old anger to be forgotten, to be made instinct. Again, they will overfish. Again, humankind will dredge the oceans for food and metal.

When the waters recede, Noahs will emerge. Utanapishtims will be sought out by Gilgameshes. The long-lived will return in myths of sacred valleys drained and dry and fertile. Fertile grounds will be fought over. The rights to sacred lands will be argued. Will the wars be fought with clubs and knives or bombs and guns? Will the armors plundered from museums become the standard for metalworkers to follow? Will the wastelands of red mires drain, the memories lingering over the waters? No, and only if they believe.

When humankind stops believing it can respond to Nature, to be a part of it, it will be the despair of the children of Adam, not Kieara, who first despair. They shall cremate themselves with the last relics of the Cold War, revived but misunderstood.

Several, however, will find themselves beneath fifty-acre steel plates. Twelve thousand years will have passed since Florida was drowned. These atomic relics will explode, and the plates, and the cities built upon them, will either break the sky, or crash

into the seas, and the floods will begin again. Earth, for its fifth time, will be drowned.
Mountains will appear as hills and the sheer walls of gods' swimming pools.

THERE ARE FLAMES THAT CREATE AND DON'T HAVE TO DESTROY

I think I enjoyed sabotaging their relationship. I think that quite often when I drink. I drink often. And when I think that, I look over at the nearest couple at the bar, and I do a little more of that magic. I send something in their heads, a half thought: an unfamiliar pair of underwear in the hamper, or just the faintest suggestion of revulsion on the face of one when they make eye contact. But I don't do it like I did with Stacie and Greg.

I really hated the two of them as a child. They lived in the apartment at the end of the hall. The sound of their crummy voices crackled along the hallway when they whispered, cooked, walked, fucked. They were happy and I was miserable, and jealous.

My parents at that time were getting ready for a divorce. I could feel it brewing. I didn't help. Well, being a teenage boy didn't help, but my choices and actions were mine. None of us knew how to deal with each other, let alone get along. My mother screamed at me one day, "There's a fire under all of us." We stared at each other and I remember it feeling like she said something true and didn't know it, neither of us knowing what it meant. "What did I say?" It was just more argument babble to me.

And Stacie and Greg fucked loudly into a megaphone corridor. They sang while they did dishes. I got my excuses for loathing Disney: I was living a few doors away from it. I began thinking about the fire under all of us and I wanted that fire to move under Stacie and Greg. Then it began to happen.

They had a fight, which was rare but not unheard of. But it was one of those little fights where everybody is hungry and cranky and sensitive. I wished they would go at it like my parents. What, did Stacie and Greg think they could heal us by example? Fuck all the contrast. I wanted them to get chest-to-chest kind of mad. How long could they hold out before they saw they were acting crazy? I listened to that little spat and I cheered silently. I egged them on. *Yeah*, I thought, *complain about washing dishes! Say it, say you always have to wash them for her and she never puts them away. Always. Never.* And then he said it, all of my spite, all my parents rage, in those two words.

“Oh yeah, Greg, who always has to take out the trash?!”

They full on argued about the routine of chores they settled into two years ago. It lasted almost fifteen minutes. Somehow, I felt better. And then they made up. They talked it out. They did not have sex that night but had their audibly satisfying sex in the morning. And they got along again while I seethed jealousy.

I took that fire from under my parents and pushed it to my neighbors. I stoked it with jealous hate. How do you ruin a relationship faster than a cat crosses a hot tin roof? It's the absolutes. *Always. Never.* Economize effort when it is effort of love, of care. Maybe no one wants to be a burden, but nobody is happy to hear how much work goes into loving them. God, did I know that.

The weeks went by and they bickered more. I remember it being in the morning before school, my window facing east. I cheered silently and heard those terrible words again. *Never. Always.* They did not proclaim their love to the world that day or the next. When they did fuck, they only said, “I'm so sorry.”

So, Greg went on about how tired he was of doing her laundry, how much more there always seemed to be in Stacie's hamper. And Stacie criticized Greg for wearing the same pair of jeans for two weeks at a time, sometimes with three or four pair going, all of them "clean enough" not to need another wash. And he said it saved them on water and electricity, not washing things before they were dirty. She must have been holding up a pair of pants when she said, "You call this ketchup stain *clean*?" They zipped between and argued over minutiae.

And my parents heard *themselves*, young and fresh voices, echoing from down the hall, and they shut the fuck up about each other. As Stacie and Greg went from surly to downright vicious, Mom and Dad went from artillery fire to quick snipes.

My parents loved each other. They knew that. That's why they argued. No. They argued because they forgot how to talk. They would have talked, talked the way Stacie and Greg used to. We lived in that apartment building from the time I was five until I was seventeen. The Disney couple lived there those last three years, until I completely moved the fire from underneath my parents' home. I listened in virginal, spiteful delight as the boiling began.

I pushed the Disney Couple over the edge. Greg had a way of bouncing his keys in his hand. *Doesn't that sound drive you mad, Stacie?* She was a fine whistler. *It's like nails on a chalkboard. Don't burn the food, guy. Of course, you did.* The hardest thing was getting Stacie to buy a puppy. You're goddamn right I made that dog shit in the kitchen, in the bathroom, on the bedroom carpet. You would think it ate straight prunes.

But Greg was, for that animal, apparently unflappable. You could feel him seething as he walked the Yorkie he called Football. *You could just kick it, couldn't you?*

“You know, dog, if you don’t keep up...” He held on, though. Taking care of the animal made it harder to get in their heads. They got quieter. My home started to heat back up. I don’t know what our neighbors heard.

Don’t you hate how much more that dog loves him than you? That doubt took root like a weed. They were still economizing their efforts. Who did the chores this week? Last week? I needed to turn things up before they remembered routine was nothing to fight about. *He loved the dog more than you. He loves you less than an animal. Your animal.* And then I made the dog bark. From my bed I blocked out all the noise around me and imagined pulling the dog’s tail for five minutes a day, starting exactly eleven minutes after seven. I pulled and the dog barked, growled, harassed by an angry teenage boy it couldn’t see.

It came, the unholy moment of triumph. “Greg, shut your dog up!” “*My dog?*” “He loves you more than me! He’s yours!” A trembling silence hung for a moment.

He asked again, louder, “*My dog?*” *That’s right, Greg. Your responsibility. You didn’t even want a dog, but it’s all yours.*

On the surface, Greg blew about nothing, but really this was the last straw. In that moment they were wide open and I fed them the worst argument my parents ever had. Nothing was safe and everything was ammunition. No one slept that night. It was a train wreck. The whole hall was too absorbed in the shit show to call the police. Neighbors met in the hall; some acknowledged each other for the first time, joined through a communal what-the-fuck. My parents were warm to me, apologetic to each other. Then there was the sound of a window breaking, a screaming dog, and two adults who were madly in love with each other only a few months ago, had been for years, screaming after that dog

during its last two seconds in the open air. *Go ahead, buddy. You loved that dog more than her, it's true.* And then Stacie was screaming bloody murder.

My father mumbled something like what my mother said, about there being a fire underneath. The three of us looked at each other, like something true was said. It took me years to understand what it meant.

The fire was all spent. I never did it like that again. But sometimes, sometimes I test people. Sometimes, I test people, and don't know if I am stoking a fire under them.

*

And then one day I found out that the dog didn't die, only enjoyed two seconds of free fall until bouncing off the awning in front of the apartment building and being caught.

I began dating a girl, Yasmine, in senior year. She had spoken to me in sophomore year, a bit in junior, and if I'd been less self-absorbed, I might have gotten the idea she actually had something to say.

"You know, you got something about you," she'd say. "I feel like I know you somehow. I mean, I've seen you before, but I mean, like I've known you." She had just moved from up north. I remember the first time she talked with me she was wearing a green knitted scarf and a vest. It didn't close all the way and stopped with her ribs. It was sweltering and she stood in the sun with that scarf around her throat and not a drop of sweat, not a hint of stink. No perfume either.

She would wave hello in the halls and I would make uncomfortable eye contact with her for just a few seconds, longer than for most people, before looking back to where my feet would be after my next step. After a few weeks, I almost looked forward

to seeing her. Never talked to her though until senior year. She seated herself across from me on one of the benches outside the cafeteria, nearest to my next class.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Yasmine, but you could call me Mina.” She tucked a lock of brown hair behind her ear, over the wire arm of her sunglasses. “Your name’s Brent, right?”

“How did you know?”

“I sit behind you in American Government. If you would keep your head off the desk before class started, you’d notice me.”

“Or if I ever went to the bathroom,” I said. She laughed. I realized I had made a joke, I was joking with a girl, what some would have called flirting, and it wasn’t awkward and it wasn’t met with a sneer, scoff, or speedy exit. She relaxed me, as if she carried a cloud of calm with her. Other people didn’t seem to notice, and for the first time since it happened, I thought of Stacie and Greg. I felt something in the calm around her that I felt when I moved the fire from my parents to down the hall.

We ate lunch together every day for the rest of the first week, then another, and then another. She took out a deck of playing cards one day and shuffled them. “I want to play a game with you.”

In a way, she already was, I thought. I hated myself too much to admit I liked her. Part of me believed it was going to stop suddenly and I would be eating alone again, now for the rest of high school. She was playing a different game though, playing it before she even finished shuffling. “I want you to relax your mind for this, okay?” she said, laying five cards face down in front of each of us in the shapes of plus signs.

“What’s it called?” I asked, then got lost for a second, too long I thought, in the green of her eyes.

“It doesn’t have a name.”

“How do we play?”

“Flip your center card,” she said. We both had jokers. She flinched before smiling. “Now that’s something.” She had always been different, but today she seemed unrestrained, freer. I was nervous. “Just relax your head, feel whatever you’ve been feeling.”

“This is a fortunetelling game?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, nothing, go on.” Later she would tell me I had an eager look in my eye, like I knew I was going to learn something grand about myself. I saw the same look in her eyes. Who was projecting then?

My parents had long ceased fighting. After Greg was arrested, they snapped out of it. Went to counseling, then their own therapists when they got better health insurance. Dad started taking antidepressants, real low doses. I went a few sessions, tried to talk about what happened but stopped—when you’re a kid, doctor patient confidentiality is a privilege, not a guarantee, and I knew I would never be able to trust a shrink. My head remained unshrunk.

I was happier, but still horny all the time. I told myself we were just friends, that Mina was someone I would miss if she left, but I didn’t want to date her. She was my only friend at that time. No one in the building was my age, went to our school, or even sat in the little courtyard of the building. At seventeen, I had one friend, hardly.

“Jokers, yeah?”

“Well, that’s us.” We flipped over the next cards, the ones closest to each other. She had a jack of spades, I a queen of hearts. “These, uh, what or who you’re trying to ignore feelings about. Truths you try to hide from, from yourself.” First day of autumn, the first really cool day, and she began to sweat. I felt like we were on a bridge, water chugging along beneath us.

She turned her next card slowly. “What you’re guilty of.” Seven of clubs. “So that means you did something without realizing it, something bad.”

I heard glass breaking. “You go.”

She had an eight of clubs. “Eights are reversals. I stopped something really bad.” I noticed a tear on her dress, small, where light illuminated the frayed edges. “I ever tell you about my dog?” I gulped, beginning to sense something else happening.

She flipped over the last cards. “We’re jokers. We disrupt things. We both got hearts in the last card. That’s obvious: love and all that. Not a specific love, but a queen is something.” I wanted to ask her out and run away. I wanted to run away and hoped I never saw her again. I wanted to wear a mask so she couldn’t see my face. “Brent, you got a four, I got the ace. Anywhere else, it could mean something that we got a four and an ace, but the last card is just what you’re going to learn about next. The suit is all that matters.” She was sweating. I was sweating. “Hearts.”

I tried to change the subject. “What kind of dog?”

“Yorkie. You know,” she said, “yappy little guy.”

“Where did you find him?” I assumed he was adopted.

“Gift from above.”

My jaw dropped. “You mean.”

“I caught him with this dress,” she said.

“Outside Martinique Apartments?”

“How did you know?”

I gulped. Stammered. “I live there. That was my neighbors’ dog. They had a fight.” Did I tell her it was my fault? Absolutely not.

Not that it mattered. “I sense things sometimes. There was all this tension when I got up that day. Just wandered. Something made me stop, look up.”

“And you just caught the dog?” I was relieved. I thought I hated that dog too.

She shrugged, like it wasn’t as out of the ordinary for her as it could be. A thought crossed her face and she shrugged again. “Hey.” I was sweating profusely and my mouth parched until it was all sandpaper. “It’s okay. That wasn’t your fault.”

I couldn’t stop myself. “It was though. I ruined that couple.”

“Tell me about it,” she said. And then I did, the whole thing. Every word was like a drop of frozen hot sauce placed in my stomach until it was a cold and burning shriveled void.

The bell rang and we didn’t hear it. The vice principal was roving around, caught us. “You know class started five minutes ago. Get out of here.”

“I’m sorry, Mina.” She shrugged, as if I wasn’t a monster, and in her eyes, I wasn’t.

“I’ll see you after class. We gotta talk.” The vice principal hollered at us to walk faster. Mina took my hand. “I was right about you,” she said. Before she turned down the

hall to head to physics class she kissed my cheek and it was like a breeze blossomed across my skin. “You don’t mess with people like that anymore?”

“No.”

She kissed my lips. “I’ll show you a better way, then. A good way.” And then she was through the door.

*

We came around to hanging out on a Saturday morning. Saturday morning cartoons didn’t hold our interest anymore. I thought it was cool she watched the same ones I did.

Her mother drove us to the mall that morning. Yasmine had twenty bucks and promised me food court food.

*

We dated for three years. Three amazing, electrifying years, but when I began drinking, really drinking, we “agreed” it was time to break up. I began a fire under us, that’s clear to me now, but I thought she would still accept me. We were supposed to finish school together. I dropped out, moved. Tried calling her and it never went through. I left an angry voice message. After that I stopped. What I said was wrong. I’d given up any right, if I had even one at that point, to reach out to her. I still dream about her sometimes. At first, she looks hopefully toward me, right through me, and disappointment seems to fill her.

When I stopped drinking for a year, she was in my dreams more, actually spoke. “I can see you better now,” she says. I hopped back off the wagon. She stopped coming to my dreams and for a while it was a relief. I’m thirty-seven now, still single. Almost

angry as when I was a kid, but Yasmine taught me to control things, to not hurt people but still think my own thoughts. When I drink, I can't control it. Things I think leak into people, my thoughts still put heat under them. I don't care. I don't care. Maybe it isn't even, never even was, real. She lied to me, I tell myself, led me deeper into Crazy Town, and I drink more down until I'm so warm it stings. I never killed the dog. It's okay. I don't care that I enjoy the jokes I play.

THIS HOUR ON RADIO I

It's like stepping through a door in a house into a pit of mud. It's like breathing and being told a mountain has moved. It's like drinking a cold cup of coffee that gets hotter the further down it gets. It is like that and like nothing. Pummeling down the street, sparks and rocks in your soup, ramble and shallow buckets in the moon. Like she's cut his tongue out and now he's on the floor looking up and wondering how many minutes it will take for him to drown, trying not save himself but can't choke or bleed fast enough and his hands are batting at his face and she's already skullfucking him with gauze. It's like that, or like waking up in a cell under a boiling pot of water in the hands of a small boy who is too small to carry it.

Like stepping into a pit of mud. Like breathing a mountain into motion. It is like fire blossoming inside. It is like coming undone and looking out and seeing the blood boiling out into space. Everything is red. He's left unspooled, no one is dead. Shallow, shallow, shallow buckets. Fuck it, dock it, ducat. Chaos is an unspooling, babe, you're so wound up. Let me crush up the sand around you. I've gotten rocks bigger than this. Who the fuck is talking about crack? Don't touch this noise again. Hear me? Or you'll have Radio I on your channel and it's all madhouse in this chaos. You'll be hearing it for a long time, spinning through your mind, my spindly song, and come on, what's better than ease? I'll let you out, get out the game and I'll let you out? You want me to turn off the radio, you see these fucking keys, Salman Rushdie and nods to *Midnight's Children*, half-

remembered scenes from *The Alchemist* and wondering what Paulo Coelho's dick tastes like and you look him up. You can't believe you're reading this as it's coming alive and you see the screen and then your phone and you realize with me that it is in the half-second we are distracted but haven't yet looked at our phones, are averting our gazes, we let in demons and the only way to kick and keep them out is to concentrate on something is what we used to think and this is all unspooling and repeating and it's recursive and meaningless and you, me, we, the royal *I* if we use royal to mean divine, the divine *We*, the unity of the cosmos is easier to type but not thank than the phrase cosmic unity. Unspool. Unwind. Reel out. Reeling reeling reeling reeling reeling rewind. Rewind, reeling in what was real, was reeled out was attention and in that half-second your phone half-saved you. I'm stronger now. In it, I can see it, you're high as shit, nice digs, bruv. Bruv, that's where we draw the line, you and I, you know how I am, I know you, it sounds a bit wrong off this page when you imagine I'm calling you bruv and you know it's because I'm assuming your thoughts came from somewhere in my neighborhood where I don't want to think about whether or not that was a gunshot, or how my neighbor's car got smashed up, or why the fuck I found a damn needle cap, or what the hell is going on and do my neighbor's see me and think "He might be crazy" because of my skin color? Never? Shit, I guess white people will never know how it feels because we aren't getting shot by the police in the news very much. And it's all crazy white racist PTSD patriot Nazi ex-Marines spluttering on Fox? It's all fucking douchebros, raging online over their mics and saying dumb shit as if no one is gonna take them seriously in the half-second it takes to translate the words the ears hear to the brain which must translate them from the sound into the language and in its syntax and sometimes I say

“Get me a snack,” but hear myself “You’ll be right back?” Listen, your shit is weak because it’s trying, you and I don’t know each other, don’t need to, we can wrestle for the conversation and you can try and think me in circles all day and night, white boy, but until you put this shit down, I don’t want it to stop, it’s fucking wild. Isn’t it? You, me, a single keyboard but actually three—trying to text my mom right now, man, and I want to show her this but when I go to type it, it isn’t in front of me. Radio I? Radio Me. Read *Midnight’s Children*, look up *Midnight’s Children*, read that book. Fight your way through it. Never let it beat you at a fight you can finish any time you want. It ain’t a fight, it’s a book. It isn’t a book, man. Your Radio You, Saleem’s Radio India, how the— I wish you could share this with your friends, too man, but that isn’t how it works. Do your homework—isn’t that what I should be doing, instead of keeping the radio going by typing? Peace.

BIG PINE

Last time I saw Big Pine was twelve years ago. I'd been fighting with Claw and Bulwark for a year when he joined up and we fought together for eleven years. Never saw his, her, uh, well, never saw the big warrior's face, and the one guy I know who did, we knew not to ask. Usually, Pine went everywhere in full armor. Twenty-three years ago, a giant walked through the Claw and Bulwark's door, carrying a pike or a lance like it was a spear. Always had a helmet, black steel, covered everything but their eyes. Those eyes, green like grass but for when she was real mad. Then those eyes were green like the Brafure during the thaw when it's just mountain dragons breaking free and hungry, when it's all teeth of mossy ice gnashing after the very trees that keep the river banks where they are. At least Big Pine never turned her wrath on the rest of us. Such a fierce warrior I'll only hear stories about, but they'll be pretty rare. Maybe I'd be able to meet her again if I still had my shield arm. What do you mean "What do you mean 'she?'" Gotta call Big Pine something and I doubt if that voice belonged to a man, and you listen, it didn't matter one bit. It's just easier right now. Nobody, nobody could hold the line like her. Wasn't a man, might not have been human, and you're too early out of your tiny, piss-brain one-town thinking to realize it doesn't matter and you ain't gonna think like that much longer. Your comrade is your comrade. Don't call me old man.

We learned to hold our heads high, not to slouch, or we might hit our faces on her belt buckle. On the field, that height meant she could see trouble coming on the

battlefield a lot faster than us. She didn't move but for herself. When that big bulk of armor, black steel banded in bronze, began to move in front of you, you knew you better move. Big Pine's shadow came between me and death more than once and that big shield, broad as a door shutting out the final night; safety, I guess. Times like that I fell in love with Pine. We all did. I learned to enjoy that shadow, and sometimes, maybe, I lent my skill to it. It wasn't like I ever really thought I was invincible. Just sometimes you do things like you were. Most of the time, we wondered if Big Pine wasn't invincible, didn't know for sure if she was mortal. Saw a spear go right through her thigh, and Big Pine didn't slow down. Just kept fighting, wielding her spear – thing was as big as a mast. Sweeping, crushing, like they were paper screens.

Pine didn't speak much. Just knew where to be alone, as often as could be done. We realized Pine's rations were the same size as ours. We began to eat a little less, giving Pine what we could. Sometimes Pine did the same. Claw and Bulwark was still small, we took care of our own like family. Pine was everyone's big sibling. Our tower of black steel, when she stepped around and in front of you, you waited. On the other side of that body, between the gaps of giant limbs you watch whatever she hit go flying. Have you ever seen an egg shatter? One that has a chick in it, I mean.

One day Pine says it's time to run. We don't question. Not what Pine's voice said, not the booming voice and the whisper that rang in our brains at the same moment. We run as fast as we can and we hear it screaming behind us, a wight. If we hadn't all been mundane, it mightn't have been bad. Pine had something though. "Run!" that voice bellowed as she threw down a vial of green fluid. The spear and armor seemed to emit smoke. Pine drove that spear into the wight and we, in the blink of an eye, despaired and

rejoiced. The weapon seemed to have no effect, then, a heartbeat later, that spirit exploded backward, screamed and wailed fucking terrors, and flared a hot red, wriggled as if trying to lean through a wall. Pine, cocky shit, salutes the wight and it just shrieks a slaughter of curses at Pine, who just laughs. "I'll break thy bones and feed you your jellied marrow!" and promises to haunt her, to possess her children. We saluted and skulked off.

Pine looked through the dark, watching our trail that night. At that time, Pine was boss. Quiet, open to suggestion, didn't run full out so we could stick together. C time to put the wight to an end when it broke free and chased us. We followed the dragons in Big Pine's green eyes and lived.

That news got out fast. We had somebody who could combat more than just the mundane. The Claw and Bulwark doubled quickly. The Sauri guild house needed to be expanded. Almost a score of the newcomers came with knacks of some sort, what you also hear called tricks, or more properly minor magicks. Began to guard caravans along the long roads between cities in the Sauri region. Things still rove those roads, linger in those big ruins. Now there are a few less to lure travelers off the roads. From the Scarp to the edge of the Redlands, we each made a tidy profit banishing angry spirits and bandits; profited to the soldier. We made homes to come back to. Pine's was like a mansion by necessity. They had to make the whole ceiling almost as high as this tavern's. Walls were pale wood. Looked foreign, like no home I'd seen. He hung boards painted with patterns like words. There's a place I'd heard of, tucked away somewhere in northern Esselae. The people must wear masks and were rumored to be huge, near-giants. I don't think I learned that until a year or two ago. One day it clicked.

Only one of us saw Pine's face. Herry was bringing Pine a jug of poteen and Pine was cleaning her helmet away from us. Herry looked dazed, unsure, but unafraid. Didn't say anything but we knew. Pine didn't act any differently toward Herry. I think he forgot it. He was good at forgetting things.

One night, ambushed. We fought like bears fighting wolves. Pine was reaching down and plucking their heads off, roaring, tearing like it wasn't a thing. Her voice was... Pine was my sister but I was afraid. It was like she grew, changed that night, and she wasn't the same for a while. She wasn't hurt. But we lost several of our siblings. We had a hard time without her when she left weeks later. Like she was ashamed somehow. I think we were all afraid, still grateful, for Pine, but that fear, that's probably all Pine saw in our faces that night. We'd seen things and we all fought them in our own way, but seeing your own comrades look on you, with the beginnings of real fear. You fear yourself, how far you've gone and changed. We all had moments approaching that, times where we pulled each other off those who already yielded or were dead, moments where we knew we could go from doing monstrous things to truly becoming a monster. There's a difference. There is. Pine left, probably, to remember.

We were forced to look at ourselves a bit differently, too. It's vital, but I felt, maybe ashamed, like a fool. It's vital to remember yourself, that if you traded something of yourself out to survive, it isn't all gone. You can still be good. That bit of you that can't leave you, makes you soul – are you doing right by it? I didn't know for myself; remembering it, learning it, it's like I was forced to speak a new language I didn't know until I did. Your heart clenches for outside wounds, come from outside to your emotions – don't ignore them; when you feel it all tight in the back and ribs, that is what happens.

Your arms will fail you more every day, slowly, you won't notice until one day you can't even hold a cup because the water in the red clay looks too much like blood and in the reflections it's not yours. The Claw began by pairing with sorcerers during the war. The dying begged for water, unable to feel the flies and midges starting to eat them. It began to seem better to just snuff them out. It was better.

Pine came back a half year later. We talked. She stayed on one more year and we were lucky. The roads were safer and we were called on mostly for patrols and escorts. Even before Pine came back, we'd had a couple months of easy work. I don't think I had to use my hammer more than once. One night, though, Pine left for good. That was twelve years ago. For a while, we felt exposed, almost as bad as the first time. Unaware. But the Claw and Bulwark was fine. Mercenaries come and go like shadows. We felt exposed, like someone had thrust us into the light and we blinked dumbly where the shade used to be. If you ever see Pine, let her know Aurus remembers. Hopes she never became a monster. She was with us. One of us.

SPEECH PATHOLOGY

And all that wealth is waiting for Darby to pick it with his strong fingers from the soft dirt. Yes, waiting for Darby to lift it right from the rock, promised the foreman, who spoke to him as though he were naïve and stupid more profoundly than in just mining. He used these words to describe Darby, prefaced by “Boy, I don’t think you’re...” So, Darby chose simple words, slowly, taking advantage of his natural expression while in thought. In short, he looked mad, daft. The foreman’s deep voice could not allow him to say Darby’s name in anything other than baby speak, fostering with each devilish coo an awkward affection toward him. If Darby wished, and he did, he could milk sympathy from the foreman with too little difficulty; the man must have been looking for a pet project and the illusion of stupidity would be easy to keep up. He could slack and as long as no one saw him being keen except by accident or instruction, the foreman’s lurking pathological need to help someone who he believed was stupid would let Darby gain access to the files in the main office. It would be a degrading few months, at most, playing funhouse mirror to the inner idiocy of others.

“And you’ll go with Mr. Frost. He’ll show you around now, Darby. Let me know if you are in need.” Darby responded with a tight smile, rounded shoulders, and a grunt in the positive.

After a moment alone Frost turned to him. “Well, Fore never said that to me when I started... well, never.” They passed a second intersection of trenches on their way to the

mine proper and he passed Darby a hard hat from a nail in the rock. “Where you from, guy?”

“North Elkton.”

“Oh. Nice over there. Took the wife to Saughtaugh once. We ate at Wand’ring Ulsterman.”

“Good soup. Lots of beans.” They called it chili, but it was a soup for its blandness when undoctored by the little bottle of spices Darby kept with him at all times. An impossibly small amount of poison was in it which affected him only by giving his eyes a sunken, glossy look. Others would experience the trots, unable to form a solid connection except to Darby, disassociating the food from the equation; a sickly boyish man’s germs were the source, not something he ate. At his last job, his appearance afforded him solitude, enough to get the real work done.

Frost was talking again. “Boys deeper in aren’t so bad but watch out for Stark and his guy Jacobson. They get OCD real bad about protocol. Whisper to the foreman. Fore doesn’t care, mostly, but you’re new. Way he talks to you shouldn’t fool you. Better be on your best behavior for a while.” He might not, depending on just how useful Fore would be. Fore? Already he was assimilating and his true purpose here would quickly be at odds with the all-too-profitable web of sympathies and dispositions available to him in the miners.

They were tough, shrewd, but their scrutiny usually went no farther than equipment and mating tactics. A man called Simmons was checking over the explosives while talking about first penetrating a woman. “You just put it in, like in the hole, and the fuse is lit. You’re in heaven with this woman, I tell you.” Darby whispered “motherlode”

as he passed by, crunching the gravel loudly as he did. He wondered when the man would make the connection, if it would be a mid-coitus moment of oedipal disgust or if he'd think, someday, if he had a child, that his spawn would explode his life. The former would be more amusing, satisfying. He was warming up already.

Frost didn't ask many questions of Darby. The usual ones, of course, about education and parenting. Darby went to Catholic school for two years before slapping a nun with her ruler; he did not mention he had shouted the woman into a corner by calling her a barbaric anachronism in white and black, wearing a rosary of shame on her neck that ought to drag her through the floor to where she belongs. The nun quit. Darby's mother was at once proud of her son for breaking a nasty woman and furious at the "lost opportunity" of a quality education. His father grunted. They were atheist to begin with, he said, and Catholic school would be an unnecessary frustration in the long run. He already hit someone, and the school would provide him plenty of reasons to do it again. He did not talk about college, either. However, not really knowing much about working in a mine, Darby experienced the familiar unease that comes with faking-it-'til-you-make-it.

When the entrance was a pathetic white pinprick behind them, they turned right towards the tram. Grabbed masks and rescue beacons, the kind that flash for a month before the batteries die. "We'll go in about seven hundred feet by tram. Around a bend. Say, what's your experience mining?"

He said that he had worked (snuck around) the mines in Necksboon, Bratick, and was trained in a nearly abandoned mine called Dusty Ass two years ago, when in the middle of the night the floor gave in one section. A gas deposit broke free and jetted dust,

mostly quartz, and puffed for two months a cloud that left residue for towns over. Frost liked that, lulled by the simple and deep rhythm of Darby's voice and thumping of the tram. He pulled a vape pen from his pocket and pulled, releasing clouds that spread out behind them the synthetic scent of maple syrup. "Yeah, that's a good name for a mine."

Darby looked stupidly ahead and asked common-sense questions about the equipment. "And how do I turn the headlight on?"

"Well, the *headlamp* has a button on the top. See it, no, on the top."

"How far does the tram go?" and "When is lunch, Mr. Frost?" *Mr.*

"About seven hundred feet, remember?" and "Noon, but if you need to eat, bring a snack. Dust gets into the food down here." He showed the Xtreme Protein Lightning food bar he kept in his jacket pocket. The wrapper was so dusty that it seemed mined from the rock. An image of a mine of protein bars came up but would seem too random to Frost, take too long to describe despite the nonsense of it. Rock and dust and drilling were part of these people's lives too closely to be thought about except long after it would be too late.

Silent, they pulled to a stop in heart of the hill, got off, took an elevator into the depths. The walls were a greenish beige in the lamplight. Little shadows stabbed out and flew up from the rough walls. Seen through the porous elevator walls it was a nauseous shadow play. Darby took to looking at his boots, mirroring Frost but wearing that dumb look of concentration that said to the onlooker, "I am Darby and I cannot think but I will try." He caught the grunt and nod of approval. The shadows continued to leap and disappear upward on the other side of the grating of the elevator.

“Do you like to read?” Frost asked when they entered the lower hub. It was a dangerous question to answer. *Are you a thinker, Darby?* coded with *I like to think, I like thoughts*. He shrugged, and Frost talked on. “I like books about architecture and all that. We gut these hills of rock and coal and where does it all go? That coal is going to a power plant and guessing at what happens after that, what houses and buildings get that electricity is boring, though.” He stopped and pointed to the walls, the ceiling, and sighed. “But that? The dirt and the stone? We get good quartz here, good enough, anyway. They might use that for railway tracks. The real dense stuff might be used for buildings, schools, banks. Big houses hundreds of miles away.” Frost was looking at the mine in terms of what it might be, and a man who sees the wild changing of hands the dismembered bodies of mountains would go through, imagining the new shapes they would take, is a risk. Playing stupid had become more complicated, but not by enough to worry him.

“No. Reading is hard. I get a headache.” He’d heard this excuse enough to know how to sound convincing but keeping pieces of things he read, he heard, out of his speech would be difficult. Looking stupid, looking innocent, his childhood friend told him, was a bit of an art. He didn’t mean that Darby should be a conman, but they worked the “boy and his idiot friend” shtick well enough that they never needed to pay for bus fare in the summer, were never garnered more than polite, pedestrian cynicism.

Frost asked about audiobooks and movies, not letting up. He wanted to be an intellectual, to fight the stereotype of redneck, roughneck, simple-minded miner. That was plain. Perhaps all of them had these thoughts. The others, he confessed, did not like to read. They were all too tired at shift’s end, sore, and in need of a drink. He had to join

a book club. Fortunately, Frost was beginning to relax and if he mistrusted Darby, it wasn't manifesting yet. He was accustomed to talking with men and women who just thought of rock and earth as dirt. As something they drilled and broke apart as work. As terrain. The tunnels swallowed spoken thoughts and gave nothing back that anyone but Frost could begin to sense.

They kicked up pale glittering taupe ghosts with their steps. The walls varied from twenty yards long smooth, shaved to reveal striated murals like cross-sections of skin, to otherwise lumpy and pocked areas left like hollowed bones. They reached another open chamber where he was introduced to Mike, Jackson, Betty, and Wheezer who refused to retire and carried the name like the heroic title it had become. They shook hands and Darby always shook a little limp, just firm enough to be polite. He played bashful and would until it was no longer useful.

Fore might as well have fallen in love at the end of that first week and he visited the mines twice. "Unprecedented," said Wheezer after the second encounter. "Shine to you," and he spat. "Don't like that. You watch, he'll turn." The others grunted.

And the foreman would, not the way they thought, turn: right around sweet Darby's finger. Betty shouted from down the chamber. "Ore!" They shuffled over, Frost holding himself back from a trot. Darby followed Wheezer who did not know he volunteered as his second guardian in the mine. The veteran-greenhorn relationship was valuable but less profitable than the foreman's affection. Trickier, for it demanded a faster release of intellect than normally allowed when acting like a pet project. But if Wheezer held more clout with the miners, Darby could work the chaotic line between a

harmonious workplace and a toxic environment. The miners knew what was up, and they knew what Fore's head was up.

Next shift's end he went to the foreman's office. "Are you thirsty, Darby?" The baby talk up-speak had worsened. He brought out a bottle of water and handful of chocolates. "Darby, how are you getting along? Are they treating you respectfully?" *Like an intelligent man, not the innocent retard I see struggling to unwrap his chocolates.* "I hear you are good with the drills."

He gambled with a simile. "I like them. They sound like cars."

"Very true! How insightful."

He had to guffaw softly, like he'd been pat on the head. *Haw, haw, Darby clever.* This made the foreman smile, lean forward. *That's right. You're a smart man, Darby.*

When the foreman left him alone and checked outside, seemingly to yell at someone about safety, Darby sifted the papers on the desk until he found the receipts and a letter he wanted. He crinkled the corners to make them easy to find when later he would return for his own file and to take a sip of the scotch on the shelf. He debated spitting in it, how enjoyable such a moment of karmic vigilantism might be, deserved or not.

On the way down the next morning he told Frost. "Chocolate?" He slumped. "He told us to watch out for you down here. This is hard work, sure, but you're new. We always look after the new people. You're fine. Two weeks and he's still worried." They rode the other few minutes down in silence, staring at their boots. Frost said he thought it passing strange.

He acted more as a clerk than foreman. The receipts and equipment logs were not surprising. The foreman must have been told to take care of ordering and he always

ordered old equipment cheap. Everyone else heard Wheezer's complaints about the good old days, when the equipment was as fresh as the rock, as the world-weary bellyaching of an old man. "Equipment always needs maintenance," Jackson said, explaining away with the underlying platitude. *Don't you worry, the status quo is static.* The old man didn't give in. Darby asked about drills.

"Oh, sure. The bits and heads are better now, but this horse shit," he gave a knobby middle finger to the drill on the workhorse and spat. It was true, the drills overheated often. "But, ahh, the big ones," and he looked further down the chamber. "Now that makes work easy."

"Fuck the maintenance, though," said Mike.

They took core samples, big long rods of stone where explosives would go in when it came time to expand. Vespers of beige silk swirled around these, whispered sifting warnings to the rest of the hill of the ruptures to come. Choking filaments of dust. He made a point of overheating his drill, looking pathetically around every time it did. He would ask about "good drills" at the bar. He didn't drink, it loosened his tongue up too much and a lazy phrase might do more than just make them want to complain to the foreman about tools. This project was slow, and he began to hate it. Driving the foreman to madness or the miners to a miniature mutiny, he found himself unable to decide.

He could advance their complaints but couldn't suggest anything. "My drill overheats. They say it's not my fault." If it was too soon, too fast, any change could be connected to Darby and his crew. Perhaps he could find a way to show how Fore had been "violating protocol." Jacobson and Stark would take care of the rest.

On the way down one morning, he'd heard Simmons complaining of sexual difficulties. He wanted to fuck. To have a family. He just couldn't come. No fireworks. These conversations always registered louder to the accidental eavesdropper. But "motherlode" had been a subtle implant, one he did not expect to blossom so quickly. Passing suggestions of "cheap equipment" and "too dark" took longer, but bloom they did. A frustration grew. In the course of this, Fore came more frequently to the lower level where Darby worked. Nothing else changed but every visit left the others a bit sour. The idiot-mask was adjusted, an eyebrow held tight or new traces of discomfort in his polite but dreamy expression.

He took to describing caricatures from his childhood. Laced through these were positive comparisons, "like you" and other variations leading to "You are a good person like that." Always, the negatives were connected to the faults of Fore. "She was too nice. I didn't like it." "He *sniff* called me stupid. I heard it." After two months they had more reasons to dislike the foreman than they knew what to do with.

And the foreman knew it. Knew everyone had gone from healthy but begrudging respect for a superior to a precise cynicism, a suspicion he was slowly letting them die, setting them up to fail. Not the company, no. It was him. If a cave-in happened, it'd be Fore's fault. If a fuse was bad or a bulb burned out, Fore was to blame. A few more weeks he began looking at Darby with pity but also pitiful need. "I'm not bad. It's my job. No, it's me. I'm the worst." He couldn't say it, of course, but he began talking about it with Darby, not really expecting him to listen. But he did, and it cut right into the foreman every time his decisions were questioned, the safety of the mine challenged.

“Why didn’t you do it, Fore?” or “I don’t like riding up between levels 3 and 4,” or any of the other easily exaggerated sensations of mining, so long as he sounded scared, made the foreman look inward. Darby took it further, all the way to family matters, one suggestion at a time. He talked simply but hinted that Frost had been telling him about books he could pronounce words like “divorce” and say “all the money” in a slur that sounded too much like “alimony” without the source of his words coming into question. Fore saw Darby still as a slow-minded creature. He could not devote the time to teaching that he believed Darby needed and so another thought was planted: Wheezer was like a grandfather to Darby. Like *his* grandfather. The foreman could not possibly compete with the Old Man in the Mountain. Never mind it was just a hill.

He could quit at any time and no one would blame him. There was nothing they could do about the foreman’s attachment to Darby and everyone agreed the young man was, somehow, being taken advantage of. He could leave it like this. But the reward of seeing Fore lose that last bit of face with the miners would be too sweet. So, in the office one day after he was called in, Darby asked about the scotch on the shelf. “I’ve never had scotch. Does it taste good?” This was another moment in which Darby lied. He wasn’t asking for a taste but Fore poured them drinks and Darby played sensitive like he never had a drop in his life and all at once the impropriety of the situation appeared to coalesce with the inevitable sadness of someone unable to actually connect with humans.

Darby left the office and told Frost that the foreman gave him scotch, that it was bad. He said he did not know how he got the crinkled receipts and equipment logs. And then Wheezer got word and it went through the old men and to the rest of the miners. Darby quit as a broken creature does.

The article about Foreman Dinkle's accidental death three months later, a result of equipment malfunction, was on the second page of the town paper. Foul play was not suspected but there was mention of inappropriate conduct, the foreman's habit of drinking during the workday. Darby looked over his own conduct reports, at the nail in the coffin, where he was described in the most recent note Dinkle has written about Darby, "perhaps not all there, but performs adequately." With such a grin, such a sensation of victory over another destroyed work environment, that he pulled a cigar from the cabinet and lit it up right in the kitchen. Puffed away blue and brown ghosts of smoke. And sipped scotch.

CROSSOVERS

Learning to be Controlled

The network of gorgeous stars cut off by a web of clouds, as if the winds were crafting me a lens, not the stars a veil. On my back, I wedged pebbles deeper into my skin with each breath, but this was worth it besides, besides, it went unnoticed. I was in the center of the world because in that moment I was the center of it. There was no room for vanity. Self-importance was a sense of responsibility, of being cause and condition. I heard the prayers of the world. Each lover's "O God," was to me. Each "God damn it" an order to be considered and, fortunately, ignored. Each "Jesus Christ!" shouted when a dish breaks, a rat scurries across the floor, each "God bless you" reaches my ears and within myself the storm rages, pushing, pulling. I call it the Haze, the voice of all voices and emotions in chorus, discordant and harmonized. Loudest is the cry of pain.

The self and attention span are at odds. The self and imagination are not at odds. The latter's current sometimes pulls me from the present, itself driven by a force I cannot understand. Instead, I hope I am lucky enough to be right, that there is a pattern still emerging from all of it, a work *I* can do to realize it. When my imagination takes me places, shows and shocks me with echoes of cultures I have never learned about, places I had not been taught to navigate my way to, my grasp on reality seems its most tenuous.

There is another song waiting to be heard, its chorus pushing against the mantle. A shrill and ceaseless cry of pain. When he listens to it, he feels the pain, and the relief from being heard.

The sound of the planet's Haze, rushing and keening. Roaring and begging. He hears it and sobs for the three Mothers, all they are. All they mean, make. He feels their pain in each atom, the resonance with them in all things. It swells, adds to the pressure inside him.

One of my teachers worried I would become truly lost in my imagination. She was right, and it is hard not to be pulled into the current of half-language thoughts chaining into visuals and round ideas, completed stories and connecting threads. I did not have an imaginary friend that I assured a seat for, but believed our spaces overlapped whenever they came to my mind. There were the adventures with Roy Folker, Jonny Quest, Goku. Fuzzy imagined shapes with cartoon lines, translucent bodies I moved with my mind. These were short and unsatisfying adventures. The true danger was in the way my body could feel, overlay ghostly shapes onto the physical world.

There came to be another self, one that extended in every direction beyond the present, in every dimension beyond the mundane. As it took shape, the physical reality that Oma wanted me to take my place in was more real, valid, and demanding. The immaterial unreality also became more real, valid, and demanding. The former was affected by the present, shaped by previous centuries of mercantilism, capitalism, patriarchy, democracy, and slavery. The former is Jonathan. The former, I worry, is not former anything. Beliefs in former and latter selves are anodyne, analgesic really.

The other self, the one who lives when I shut my eyes and, instead of rejecting reality, accept it, is the one who knows to tie prayer slips in the hair of the ill. The other self is the one who “took charge” after hurricane Wilma, who began hoisting and flinging debris as if it were weightless then stacked it neatly at the curb; that is the one that made my aunt say to me that I must have been a woodsman in another life. The old soul. That is the one that is ready to squash conflict, is already angrier inside than the involved and more tired of the fighting and bickering than all the henpecked, the veteran, and the disenchanted prize fighters put in one. That is the one who still must find ways to control himself, is triggered without realizing it by things that happened across *my* mind. And that is me as well now, seeing its memories. Half a life spent dreaming is real, lived out of time and place and through years unaccountable that still work themselves into patterns, into what I have always wanted to make a narrative.

If it were a narrative, it would be simple. A man was born and taken from his mother (like me, though I was reunited in short order). He was raised by a stranger. He fell in love with a strange woman. He became a soldier. The world was upheaved, and in this upheaval, everything was destroyed, scattered. He met others, some who remembered things before the upheaval and in this they were able to bond. Enemies became friends and allies, and vice versa. He was captured. He escaped. He took revenge the way landslides take towns. He overreached. He died. He came to Earth to rumble in the mind of an overly imaginative little boy. Is this why I always apologize? No.

Complicated? It is simply not simple. It is not orderly. It is fragmented. Dreams pop up in day, night, span minutes or years, going on night after minute in continuous lines or are had as if through floating shards of mirror. At least twice in my life I have

had dreams that covered months, condensed as they were. In daydreams I am pulled back, back to complete a pattern for this other self who is more, and less, real with each day, with each morning in which I cannot recall even a glimpse of my dreams. As a little boy, I wept for works uncompleted in dreams to be recalled years later.

But there is work to do *now*. Real work, deep work. I write this other self for its own sake. It is on a path. Gods, let me travel alongside if not behind, in daydreams sniff the sublime.

Doubt Was a Shield to be Sundered, It Only Takes So Many Divine Interventions (Earth, 2014)

A young man sits on a metal box behind a porous wall of ficus, watching the occasional car moving by north or south. He holds a warm bowl of marijuana, still smoking and glowing. Each exhalation sends a cloud of smoke fanning out. He continues, nervous, not paranoid, but aware as the smoke saturates his mind, the senses of his body expand, unfold and connect inside him, connect to each other and something else. He begins imagining opening his chakras. As each unfolds, the young man feels a burst as of warmth inside him spreading and resisting the soft chill of late autumn.

He is afraid, uncertain if he is too far into his imagination. If it is his imagination, he can snap out of it. "I'm just high. I'm meditating.

"But if not..." He imagines a chord of light vibrating in his spine, all along the length of his trunk and he feels it. He has just somatized what is happening in his mind. He pushes the sensation down, reaching for the Earth's core, it's other core. "If this is

real,” he thinks, “why stop now?” He surrenders to the growing heat inside him that makes the wind bite. He realizes he is sweating. His hands are like fire.

He stretches the chord of light down and up, reaching for the stars and the heart of the Earth. When he opens his eyes, everything seems to bask in a strange glow. A pressure like a gentle hand on his shoulder reassures more than alarms him. The gaps in the hedge seem less windows than self-contained sources of light. “Concentrate. Don’t stop,” echoes in the young man’s mind.

All the tension is sucked out of his back and neck. He feels every part and particle of his body and the vibration intensifies. He tries to stop. The high fades but the sensations intensify. Another intoxication rolls through him and in its wake leaves blithe clarity. Again, he hears the soft voice’s command. He hears himself giving thanks to gods he has been unable to disbelieve, and this sounds right. With each syllable the pulsing through his body intensifies until it crests and gratitude seems to explode from every pore.

He tries to relax his body and mind, to return to the present. It is the reflex of an injured animal that compels him to resist. It is too real. “Is this real?” He can hear the clink of the bowl and the lighter as he puts them down. “Is this real?”

“Yes,” a deep and smooth voice says. “Open your eyes.” The young man trembles, shakes, and when he looks he sees a vast serpent’s face. It is as wide as the open space between the condos to his right and the hedges between him and the road. It is as wide and long as time. If he tries, the young man can see through it, barely. Its eyes are different. One is a reddish sphere the size of a car and the other, he realizes, is not there at all. Through the absence of an eye he sees bright daylight, people walking past on an

unfamiliar street; a wash of purple changes the scene. The serpent's body glows like yellow dust in the sun, seems to swirl and glitter with hints of gypsum. It catches and shines in the light of a hidden sun. "What is it you desire?"

"Who are you?" The question seems bold. Somewhere inside him he knows it is best to be bold though humble.

"I am Edafos. I am time." The god's voice fills him with cool calm and a growing familiarity. "What do you desire?" it asks while it weighs his soul.

The young man tries to shake the image but it stays. He pokes his phone to see the clock. He has been outside almost an hour. "I—I don't know." The god seems to wrap itself around his brain, suddenly small. He looks behind him at the beaten path of sand where snowgrass vies to grow.

"I wish to make things grow. I hear it, the crying world beneath me. I wish to heal," he says aloud, almost muttering. Edafos hums, pleased. "I would that life rise from my steps, that my path does not mar the earth or poison hearts."

The young man asks to become something he has never heard of. "I would become a Green Walker." His body jolts, his jeans pinch under the lip of the metal box.

Voices say, "It is so."

I remember this in some ways outside myself. I have seen a beast whose great body stretches through and around planets, encircles worlds, separates them, grants passage between them. Edafos, or was it Edapis? Too close to Oedipus, that name. The snake's eye was given to birth another god, if it was not born with the eye missing. When I look at it in my mind, the eye socket is a window, stretching wider.

An older man sits at a desk, leaning tired on his arms with his hands grasping an invisible object. He trembles with power flowing through him like a river exploding in the thaw.

Seeing the Fire and Storms (Earth?, CE 2015)

The Green Walker watches the termites rioting in the sudden gust, protesting as if each was forced to drop its crumb of wood. He sees this as a small thing, not insignificant, but nonetheless small. There would be fires this summer, but herds of clean clouds will have come as if to graze. They will run down to quench the soil.

Lightning heralds the beginning. It heralds a change of landscape.

The thunder shall sound with the laments of startled dreamers, shall sound the dances of rising life, shall sound the return of the Green Walkers. Life once rose from their steps.

The lightning in his brain, the thunder in his bones, the brilliance that begins to spiral through his spine, these tell him to prepare.

He will need calluses on his soles.

When I did DMT I saw a black coil in the skin of my left arm. Did I see a snake's head? A dark thing like a chain, worming from my shoulder, between heart and hand, binding my fingers. Always there, I thought, always holding me back from creating. Flashes of blue, not localized but from everywhere, singular and massive, throb as the drug implores me to shut my eyes and lean back.

The blue lightning of his master flashes, awakens him to the desert before he realizes he has left to be in this place. He looks to the right and sees a father and son sitting on the edge of the basin. They watch the lightning flash, purple, hot, and dry.

It is dirt and stone now he sits upon, the reeds of his mat no longer beneath him, the candle no longer flickering before him.

Hey, the father says. You don't belong here.

Oh. I should go then, he says. The view is awesome. He doesn't want to leave yet, but he knows to let go while he still has his grip.

You came the wrong way is all, the man's son says.

The boy points out to the distant edge of the basin. The three watch for a while. The Walker leaves, grateful, graceful, sees himself become silver mist and smoke. The three nod to each other.

On my desk is a painted wooden statue of a man and a boy, dressed and shown in step of a dance. They hold rattles and wear white bear masks, fur boots. The boy's rattle has broken. I've been meaning to glue it back, but the stem is small. I've already glued the nose of one bear back onto a mask. A poorly balanced owl statuette has fallen, its base chipped. Doubtless, some feathers are missing, but it's hard to tell. I lost the beak years ago and haven't found the right pebble to glue in its place.

Next to these are my white-belt and a photograph of my kenpo teacher and I. His leg is moving forward, hands moving down in a motion I've forgotten. I believe we were practicing a kata. In the photo my gi is black, my belt perhaps blue or green. When I first started, I asked so many questions.

In the studio, Sonny was teaching me a way to step without lifting my feet very much. The back foot slid to meet the inside of the other foot before finishing its arc. Half-moon steps, crescent steps. This was in 2000, maybe. Maybe 1999. I asked why, but he only told me I would thank him later.

We moved our feet in graceful curves and if they left the ground, none could tell. When I think of this now, I think of battlefields and I am ankle deep in mud. The Walker has done something like this.

Rinthat told him, *Now, try it up this*. They ran toward a muddy slope. *Plane your foot up. Step*. He lifts the ball of his feet and moves. He can't budge. *Lift your foot harder*. Up, forward, his foot begins to shear up out of the muck. He strains, learns to come down on the heel only lightly, balancing his weight as evenly as possible.

I still do not know how much he resented Rinthat. The man bought him. Rescued, in a way. Still, until he was fifteen, he was marked as a slave, whatever privileges and freedoms he was allowed. He learned to run with other undesirables, urchins and naughty children. This was part of his education as well.

Regretfully Turned Earth (Earth, CE 2018)

Cornfields stretch for miles. They do not drink all the water given them and what they dribble runs into trenches. From fecundity comes fetid water. From fetid water he tastes the stillborn, the premature, the miscarried. He tallies them with the unborn, those left in the dirt with no one but spirits to watch them die. What had to happen then happens again without need.

Crying Woman, one of the women in white, begins trembling. *Do you see, Crying Woman? Weep now for their poisoned wombs.*

Have you seen my children? she asks, reaching to touch him. He shies the first time she tries, but he must grab her wrists to stop her. Jagged tendrils of light burst from his hand and engulf her arm. He does so gently. Her pain is true, her disease is still strong, and she wants more of his clean water than she could ever drink. He pities her.

Do not trifle with me, Crying Woman. She hesitates, curious until he begins to encircle her.

Do you know where my babies are? she asks.

They say you killed them. They say many things.

The master speaks from behind the young Walker, through him, and Crying Woman buckles to her knees. *We have work for you to do. All-Mother has work for you,* the boy feels the meaning, cannot recognize the words at first. Power shakes his bones, but the master holds him upright. Heat in his bowels rises in a wobbling spiral. The words are for him too. The work is for all of them. The boy knows his role and begins a healing he does not know the steps of to urge a migration he cannot control nor stop from overwhelming him. The lightning in his brain writhes, ecstatic.

They go miles below the surface. He brings her down until the dark wisps of her aura are changed, until she shines pink as sunset, and the tears of her dress begin to close, the lace begins to resume its pattern. They wait. She begins to reach for him again. This time she is afraid. He is afraid, but his master will not let him die, and he embraces her. *I know, child. I know,* he tells her. She bucks with the force of the release. He takes the

pain and wraps it in love, down where their bodies aren't limited by shape, size, and gravity.

All-Mother, she has been sick for so long. Please, take her pain, cleanse it, he asks. He is a column of gold fire rising from Mother Earth's lips. Suddenly he is a pine burning, and Crying Woman's pain is the charred rain that falls down the hollowed body of that pine. Mother, let no more children fall to tainted water.

All-Mother drinks the water and she gives him new water. She pours it in his skull, forces it to his throat, his heart, his bowels, his loins, his tail and legs. Hands and feet and head tremble and throb, something opening inside them. He is filled with roots of light until there are roots and no shadows of his own. His heartbeat is All-Mother's, thunderous and slow as a year. *Good. You are doing the work. Good.*

Keep going.

And the water rushes through him, surrounds him and Crying Woman until she screams, "I know! I know I killed them."

All-Mother's voice soothes. *Good. Let it go. Forgive yourself. You must take him to see. Follow her, boy.*

Do not let her lead you astray.

The column of fire thins. It is a stream of lightning stood still. They walk down along a white-blue road beneath the ocean, cross it to above the bones of another continent. She points ahead, afraid to move forward. What awes the young trickster, terrifies La Llorona, is hidden, he thinks, by a lump of blue iron. Not a lump, he realizes, but a body curled onto itself.

He nears and it does not shrink at first. “What are you?” he asks, lets the question ring from his silent lips through the darkness and vapors of the earth, and in answer he hears a groan like a mountain.

“Closer, manling.” It is the body of an old man, pitted as if slag has broken free, as if centuries have gouged out valleys that amount to no more than the folds of wrinkled flesh of an old giant’s skin. Closer and closer the young trickster goes until the giant turns half its face to him. Its eye is vast as the sky, silver in its whites and leaden about the irises encircling anthracite pupils. They regard each other, it neither approving nor rebuking his presence. He is a wanderer, a butterfly or a wasp passing over a field, no larger before it. He dares it, he knows, to finish awakening, but it turns away its face and returns to sleep. It seems brighter somehow.

“You will awaken someday. Someday you will be *born*.”

Crying Woman waits for him near where they departed. “Do you know where my children are?”

“Yes. In the earth and in the ocean, born to its cold waters on the deep rivers.” This startles her and she curls her fists, fingers slender and pick-like. “You cannot go to them yet.”

The souls of her two children stand behind the young trickster. They are the same as when she slew them. Her son wears his vest and shirt, his pants tucked into his stockings. He is the one she throttled in the water. The daughter wears a child’s puffy dress. The clothes, the trickster boy does not know if they are the same as children might have worn. The children’s shapes flicker, showing their mother who they are now, how

they might have grown, and the Crying Woman softens. “*We forgive you,*” they say to her. “*You are forgiven,*” they say to the young trickster, “*for what you must do.*”

Another wave of his memories begins to blossom in his mind and body. He is a flower grown in tiers, ever rising and petals of pink and gold open from him as he rises. He begins to remember the name of his master. In a month it will become clear to him and he will accept the knowledge like the return of true friend and mentor. This will confirm his suspicions, and his hopes.

“Gezraus, I begin to see you again,” he shall say, the yearning of prayer beneath his voice.

In a dream he will stand with him before the poisoned cornfields and his master will whistle low, sweep his hand over the horizon, turning the soil over with his will, changing the corn back to dirt. The rain will wash the field, change the poisons fed to them.

By Lightning Torn from Life (Renor? PD 2481? BCE 776,891?)

Nothing in the worlds has been like this lightning. It is alive, refuses to the touch its reaching mate in the earth. Firmament tears and stars show where clear blue sky rode above. The earth bucks, cracking open. Sand shifts and flies, belches into the air. The lightning whips out and strikes the soldiers one by one, leaving scars of light in their stead—these burst like soap bubbles but feels like stars are being killed.

Sizzling and a tearing sound like a sail ripping, it was the world disappearing around him. He stands now on pure light, sees others in the distance. They are all but glimmering mists. They are all that survives to remember.

He awakes in the water, leaning on the staff, alone, looking at a shore he saw an hour before but a thousand years away.

A burst of current sweeps him from his feet, the rip tide sucking him out from shore and down.

Haggard at the Threshold (Earth, CE 2005?, 2015?, 2016?)

He awakens from the memory. Rivers are throbbing through his body. He swallows hard, encourages then guides then forces the black heat in his stomach down along his spine, pushing as if to defecate, stifling gags and belches.

“Mother Earth, Father Sky, Four Directions, help me,” he forces through chattering teeth. The room is warm.

“Moylnwney, Aselia, Nairec, and Daria.

“Maelestros, Irsphayus, Anatrefos, Hekeos.

“Ulin, Dalin, Kelnol, Shalir.

“And you, oh, gods of Earth--I have not yet learned all your names, but hear me. I cannot do this alone.”

“*You do not have to,*” they answer. “*You are part of this.*” Their speech quiets and feeds the roiling of his atoms. “*You are not apart from us.*”

The master’s hand is on his shoulder again, yet that reassuring pressure makes him feel lighter.

His body continues to vibrate, the tremulous snarl slowly begins leaving his features. He feels a sludge falling through him, crawling down his thigh and out his right

foot. The All-Mother smiles. For every release of poison he feels light filling his body until, as if he were a jar, he feels a clap on his skull, a spiral tightening to his scalp.

Still the electric sensation shakes his limbs. There is nothing wrong with it. The energy settles like sediment. He is the channel, the riverbed, the Door.

Bearing the Auras of Others (Earth, CE 2018)

He tries to be humble, but he is beginning to sense how far he really can travel. “I had this meditation, this experience during meditation,” he says over cider. His master groans. No one else, as far as he knows, can hear. He tells the events of his encounter with La Llorona. He does not name her, nor the gods who saw him through. It is just a dream, he says, just crazy talk.

Be careful what thoughts you let in their heads. They cannot handle the dreams without terror, cannot defend themselves, the master says. You cannot protect them all.

In another way, it is too late to stop, and his senses unfold in recollection. Their thoughts are loud. They think through beers and vodkas, through the webs of work and responsibility, and all they do is complain until he thrusts his root down and asks All-Mother to share her clarity with the others and to safeguard his mind. Silence has been almost forgotten. With the first wave of intention they pause. Confusion passes over them, then a new calm.

Now they can sense you. Reel in your power or they will see you.

Why does he have to hear people’s thoughts? Is this how a healer lives, mind crowded with noise and half the time unable to identify others’ thoughts from his own? If he could quit the path, he might have by now.

Pacing Hungrily

Something stirs around him when the room is empty and he hears a hiss. He flares, makes it realize he is neither prey nor a potential host. The dark part of him hungers, wants to lash out at it and consume it. *Enough. You are not worth the indigestion*, he tells it. Perhaps it was not menacing him at all.

He imagines the master speaking, saying he is too lenient and too cruel. Perhaps, perhaps it is simply that his anger has to wade through a swamp of reason, or at least thought, before it can cause him to physically react. Some people never get their balance, move too slowly.

Master, am I moving too slowly?

No, I don't think so.

I feel small.

Even I am small. You think I am the size of a mountain?

Maybe a hill, he admits, smiles.

Join me in the firelight tonight. Bring your smoke, your other training wheels. The words cause a pang of shame. *Enough of that! It helps you see. Another convergence is coming. Going to happen soon.*

Soon?

"Oh, you'll see. You'll all see!" he says. Today the master is in a good mood.

You watching cartoons now, old man? The old man laughs.

Come to the fire tonight. You were right about those ones that said not to come to their fire unless you gave up your bad habits. I know you will, but it is better they leave you be. Prepare, you will be prepared.

He feels the same hesitation, voices the same concern. *Will I burn the world? Not in the way you think. Run along now. The others are calling me. Want me to “play” for them.*

Maybe the master is working with Kokopelli today, and the others.

Exile Is Not for the Mountain (Renor? PD 2481? BCE 776,892?)

He begins by carving out a pit of earth, a shallow basin, seventeen paces by fifteen paces. What he has been given by the forest, he lays in this and begins to build. After digging deeper near the center, he uses a log like a pestle, stamps where he will make his cellar. This will be good, though he will have to crouch once he is inside it. For the next two weeks, what will be the cellar will be a firepit; when he is ready to lay boards over it, it will be the driest space.

The foundation is built by laying stones down, then rolling logs over them so that they settle. He has no idea what he is doing but more than enough time to figure it out. He is alone, the only person on the steppe. He still builds his fire low to remain hidden.

One night he dreams of a house of warped wood woven together.

Henges (Earth, CE 2018, BCE 5,116?)

He sits on a chair, entertaining a visitor. The visitor says, “We lifted the stones by planting acorns under them and praying. We had to dig through the muck, but by God

and gods we did it. It is the earth we moved, thanks to the Earth itself. It took some careful work and we still made grave mistakes. They will never find the bones.”

A name for God drums in his head, throbs his veins with its three syllables. *I* goes from the whorls of his feet through his rump and loins.

“We had to come to understand what the centuries had been doing with the land, how the water moved with and within the roots and the soil and that there was water all the way down. There was life all the way down for miles beneath us. If we did not before we began this kind of work, we came to understand that spirit is alive, volatile, eager, prurient for new forms. Earth is a world full of spirits, let that guide you. We had to tap the energy of all that came before us.”

A name for God drums in his head, throbs his veins with its three syllables. *A* goes up the mute furnace of his belly, cleans out his kidneys, massages lungs and heart.

“We did not know that those who did not believe would be consumed if they participated in the Growing. So many disappeared. We were so strong and so sure of ourselves. Same as you are now.”

A name for God drums in his head, throbs his veins with its three syllables. *O* goes up his throat, shakes his teeth, jiggles his eyes and inside his ears, cracks the shell of his skull.

“I have done my part in protecting you long enough to know you can do it yourself. You watch your own back down there just fine. You could dig all the way to China, but you cannot fly yet. What does that matter to *you*? Watch yourself better. Take off this ridiculous mask. Be yourself. Wear the mantle that was cut out for you. Take care of yourself. I mean that.”

IAO. IAO. IAO.

His head is a jar again, the lid slapped down, screwed on tight.

IIIAAAOOOooo.

Relax, “Let Go While You Can”

He pulls at what is sick inside him, concentrating his energy around it. He is trying to cleanse himself of it, and it of any poisons. It resists—it is much of his own energy, but much more of it is from beyond. He is trying to manipulate it raw, creating a sheath around the kundalini, asking permission, and begins driving it down for the Earth to catch. His roots spread out from him as brilliance, cool and pale and green. “Can you all catch me?”

Yep, say Earth and All-Mother. Fascinated spirits arrive around him, hungry for even a taste of what he is trying to move between himself and the stars and the Earth. The garden is full of spirits. Some try to provoke him to lust and distraction, to pushing beyond the prayer he is trying to build. They succeed only for seconds at a time. Calm, the young trickster still has not forgotten the danger of stray thoughts. He grabs the fouler spirits around him and throws them in with the energy he is trying to heal, sending them down to the Mother. He sees himself stretching out below with the force of what he is working but is distracted—he has stopped breathing again, for there is no need, and he wonders how long it will go this time or if he is circle-breathing. He takes the moment to re-center, reinforce the walls around the shaft of light and the energy he has attached to it.

Something has shattered the sheathing near the core of the planet. “Did you think you could escape?” he asks the being trying to wriggle free. Ten thousand shards of light

connect and contract as a net around the entity, even as his energy reconnects the kundalini to the bit of himself still on the planet's core.

He has to gyrate his hips to keep the energy remaining in his body from damaging his nerves and spine. It is massive. He is growing weaker. His crown is only half open, all intentionality and force of thought rising above him but he cannot keep the focus. His ego becomes confused with id, true self tangles with a perceived ideal.

He focuses on the gods, reconnecting them to himself and each other. The sheathing cages in anything trying to escape and the golden light rooting him to the earth swells, a ring of red coalescing around it. *I believe I have something for you, All-Mother. Won't you feast that you may give life and heal.* She takes much of the entity. Together they feed the others. Energy corkscrews through him, erupting from his skull before spiraling out, up, and around him. As each scale moves the serpent experiences glee. His heart slows. The anchoring serpent dives through the air and earth, passing through him—his spine is but part of a tree, a mere branch for the weightless thing to coil around. His asshole is cold. His breaths are slow and light. His heart is slow. The entity is gone. He gives thanks.

Softly Sand Falls

The Green Walker is praying their minds see the meaning of fighting. *See the weapons in your hands are merely sand. All of this is just sand. Your weapons and anger are soft sand.* He folds an embrace into each word. *Let fall the sand from your hands.* The All-Mother's love and weariness wraps each syllable the soldiers will hear. *The sand from your hands gently falls.* The Green Walker envisions holding each fighter in the

world, his arms drawing the stored sobs from them. *Let gently go, gently put down what you cannot hold.* He can feel their fear. *Let the sand fall softly to the ground.* He can feel the ancient hurt and need in their bones. *My hands are empty but I have been amongst your ranks and I know; let go of the sand, drop it, rinse it from your mouths, wash it from your hands. I know my children,* he prays and knows it is true.

The Green Walker feels himself expanding into his father's mantle and into the All-Mother's embrace. Her law is renewed. His father agrees to let peace be had again.

I know it will take some time. Loosen your grip, my loves. The armistice is coming. Greet it with cupped and empty hands.

May the gods heal us along the way. The gods will heal us on our way. Let go of the burning sand you hold.

Let go.

The Knives in the Dirt

The fire burns lazily and he sees the night rising from the shadows between embers and flames. He opens his mind, his body, and drops his roots to Mother Earth. Night rises like ash. Ashes rise and glow, sail upon the heat, settle into night. His master has told him he must learn to see the shadows of fires, how one flame overpowers another's light and in relief the two are one inside the smaller.

Night is ubiquitous around the fire, even when he turns his back on it. Beyond its reach is darkness, all the shadow of the garden brought hungry to stand at the edge of candescence.

The grass adjusts around his feet and soft stems of weeds caress his ankles, rise to touch his shins. He lowers himself to the ground to sit cross-legged. As he reaches his mind and soul down to the earth, calling to her, she answers and rises to fill him, pulling all of him deeper to the earth. The grass grows to cover him. A tree trunk rises and forms to his back. The weeds bend over his legs, as warm and soft in his lap as kittens.

“Mother Earth, who sees the shadows of fire?” His whisper caresses the growing silence and it is calmed. Soon Mother Earth speaks inside the Green Walker.

How can you see without blinding yourself? she asks and surges through his legs past his chest.

“I cannot. Someone may.” He feels himself shaking, settling deeper into the ground first by the knees, then all of his body feels compressed until he widens and deepens his roots, reaches deeper with them and opens himself. A pith of heat begins to form in his pelvis and his kundalini stirs, eager to dance with the heat.

Listen for your answer. She trusts him, always, more than he does himself. Always she seems to tell him he will be just fine. *Listen with your whole body.*

His aura whirls around him in blue milky bands. He condenses his energy around his body and as he channels, as energies rush and pulse as fast birds’ hearts, he feels lighter, almost fragile. A glimpse from the edges of his aura shows him as the eye of an hourglass housing tornadoes. Awe distracts him for a dangerous instant before he remembers why he is there, exposing every nerve to the universe. The shadows of flame. He takes some unused part of his brain, occupies it with reinforcing his wards on his body and home. The wards flare. He hears a thunderclap in his head. He feels lighter still, but deeper below and higher above.

He hears one of his teachers telling him to imagine himself like the standing people. He is but a conduit for knowledge. The Green Walker listens with his whole body, listening through the vibrations inside him: earth, wind, heartbeat, breath. The All-Mother caresses the whorl of his crown, turns it open. Wind fills him and the need for breathing is gone. His heartbeat slows, slows until it beats hardly once a minute, almost as slow as the trees around him. From above he is nourished by the sky and stars where All-Mother and the spirit who will teach him to see shadows of fire are dancing, singing to him, their voices one.

You little flame, you darkling god,

What good will you do with this sight?

You darkling god, what shadows to walk

Will you carry this light with you?

He wants to sing with them, to call slow and sad something out of himself as an offering. Something tells him nothing must be given.

When you see, what will you sing

When your heart begins to sigh?

Careful it does not forget to sing,

Yours is too precious and bright,

When close to peace.

Behind his eyelids the light resolves into clear shape. As an arm of light grows he feels the warmth become his body. He is a flame. He is the eye of the hourglass of infinite things through which sand rises and falls through itself, ever ordered as a storm. Each waving arm of light rises higher to touch heaven, fleeing its source. Fires always

tries to escape their cradles and their food. The fire burns sadly tonight, desperate to quit, but the wood in the pit is thick and dry and the fire has not forgotten why it burns tonight.

Deeper and higher the Green Walker's awareness unfurls. Denser and wider he becomes as he listens. The energy rises evenly so as not to push him from the inside. It reaches the solar plexus and thrills in the center of his body, combining the loves of Mother Earth and All-Mother.

Everything inside him opens. A last pocket of air escapes his lungs in a shrill sigh. The bright ghost of fire behind his eyelids stops moving. His brain is wracked with lightning, his bones almost ready to burst. He hears his dread father's voice again, asking him what he will do, what can he do with the chaos inside him, what can be done that will not burn the world. The Green Walker smiles, as if his father has not even begun to see.

He opens his eyes. The fire is still, its longest limb stopped standing twice his height. The master's voice reaches him, bids him walk around the fire. The weeds retreat from his lap. He puts a grateful hand on the young tree that rose to brace his back. He sees the insides of the flame near the center are brighter, that each arm or tongue or finger of fire can only show its darkest sides. But there are many shadows in this flame. Some still dance and weave themselves between individual flames. They linger like mist, they dance like grass. The shadows of flame are like the small elves of old.

"Hello," says the Green Walker.

The shadows blush brightly when they hear his voice.

"What speaks?" they say, "we long ago closed our eyes to the light that lets us see you."

“Can you not see me?”

“We see what is not a man. We see trees who have been anything but still. We see a moving shape. Who honors us?”

“I am a Green Walker, come to see the shadows of fire. I am the one who is being honored.”

“We are shadows of fire. We eat the dark around us and become it. We die into the night.” There is joy in their voices at this.

“In death you become the darkness in dreams.”

“In dreams we are the light.

“In dreams you, darkling god, will grow brighter for the day.”

The fire resumes its mundane dance and a rush of sudden heat almost pushes him back. He thinks he smells burnt cloth. Indeed, embers die on the legs of his pants and in the sand around the fire pit.

“Thank you, thank you, fire,” he says. “Thank you, shadows.”

The fire exhausts itself, relieved. Rain comes down, quick and fine, and he thanks that too.

The boy, I call him, but he is merely myself. I assume the master thinks of me in the same way.

Tottering over a Cliff above the Reaching Waves

The Green Walker’s wisdom guides me out of nightmares, has since I was eight and hit my head.

In a dream I am being chased by three dogs. In time he blows away the smoke around them to reveal my neighbor Jinny's dogs. I learn the connection between fright and dreams. In dreams things become mythic, and in the nightmare with the three hounds chasing me back, back, back, I now realize the Green Walker, then a sleepy thing inside me, was being ejected from the afterlife, forbidden from treading any further. My dreams then might have taken me to a land of the dead, past Kerberos, into wisdom that I could not control or express because the Walker could not.

We have aged, we now dream and walk through the Otherworlds like children at a party, like ragged men looking for warm shelter and a bed, like soldiers trying to move through muck the color of the sun through black smoke. When the peril is too great, the intensity of the dream and the stakes raised in each story, we are one body, and all the elements are our playthings, each body in between us and peace dross, tinder, sand, swept and burned. Mountains have been cut, miles of them pulverized instantly to create passes and channels.

On long car rides when I put my hand out the window and play with the air, I open my fingers, pinch them, and see like feathers streams of air, sections of silk ribbon, held and waving. This is visualization merely. Seeing your desire prepares the way for its presence. The things wanted are lacked and this is not the same as desired things. Not the same as desired people, their company. I taught you to offer your food, to share, and always to offer water to someone who seems thirsty if you see they lack. You travel, any moment could be stuck on the side of the road, and you are familiar with loneliness. Remember when you had to ride the mile home, screaming for your friend and the cool air ripping into the scrape covering a fifth of your arm, the tender skin from the forward

of your forearm, its inside, up part of the bicep, the cool air like sharpened bone fingertips. Pushing through the pain taught you to catch the wind only because it caught you. In pain, dehydration, I have seen gods' faces, taught you to do the same.

Ride, write, read, watch, listen, self-flagellate, self-medicate, smoke, self-examine, self-, self-, self-center, self-center more when I'm called selfish. In the hardest parts of the lives of the people I love I run, abandon ship before someone puts me into a lifeboat. Hate Mom for being sick. Stop talking to my boyfriend because I thought I wasn't good enough because I was already torn to shreds by an ex-girlfriend. I went from a burning landfill strewn with thorns tough and sharps like puma's claws jutting from the earth. Eggshells? Eggshells? Lightbulb glass carpeted normal conversations like snow. At first the Walker gave me the healer's patience and compassion there. On soft green ground I still walk too lightly, afraid to bend the grass longing for my feet. Self-flagellate, first for failing, now for failing to see the dangers. And how is it science-fiction, a cyberpunk story about public-security, human trafficking, and the exploitation of the human soul, speaks correctly also of the Walker's Path?

“A gaze averted in discomfort, a realization unspoken, advice unbidden. Without noticing we welcome catastrophe. But our world cannot afford to ignore the first sign, let alone all three.” (*Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*)

Which wisdom came first? We learn together, remember together, are *reminded* together as disparate threads come together. Daria Umenas, goddess of attraction and desire, gravity and magnetism, I wonder if she is like the Spider Woman the Navajo and Pueblo speak of, like all the Fates of Greece and the Norse. The Walker's gods have their cousins on Earth; they are weaker than Earth and Sun and Moon and the closest planets, except

Daria. She is the threads of gold between planets, stretching and calling back like ligaments. Soon, I expect, some device or software will be invented, discovered really, that can see gravity the way I imagine it, as radiance and arms reaching to embrace and embrace the distance between.

In fairy-stories, in the mythic cycles of Britain and Ireland, of so many fables and in every Faustian bargain ever made, are conditions, rules, and these create the curse. Subtle things are so hard to look for when they are hiding themselves, being hidden, are the pulse beneath facades, so easily mistaken for the pulsing of blood coursing through the body. Against a lover's chest, I listen for deceit, for a turn, a twist of the heart, for lightbulb glass stirring in the wind. There is only the wind, sweet wind.

The Walker and Iris, his wife, dance in the sunset, in the ghosts of light cast by the copper chimes she had put around the terrace. They dance poorly, without conviction but still playing, enjoying the press and parting, the way their hands grew sweaty and they dried them by using the sandstone dust like chalk. The Western Minaret of the palace, a mile away and five hundred feet tall, blocks the sun and lets it pass through to bathe their terrace and ignite the copper chimes. Against a washbasin, the helixes of copper, off the pink stone of the building, sun coalesces to the center, forms at first a glimmering orb. Revolving in it two dancers swirl and teach the lovers another dance. Tiny figures move and touch fingertips, one rounding the other, the other then revolving likewise. Their palms from fingertips come together to meet at the heel, their arms then elbow to elbow, and apart they seem to fall away, arc themselves back and faces lift ecstatic to the darkening sky. They move together and apart like the paths of the three

moons. She is the Green-Glass, he the Silver. Iris and the Walker learn to dance and they will love like this as the Fate Moon parts them again and again.

I longed for a long-distance relationship after that, sought intellectualized romance, and never found it online. So much I needed to be the Walker, believed myself the same soul, that I expected fate to put me in touch right away. Always my soul reached out. Now I know a little better.

At the train station one day I saw a man meditating instead of waiting. We acknowledge each other when he looks up and I nod approvingly, say something encouraging him to go ahead. I felt like I needed to have his back. He had the beginnings of grace about him and I imagined a wall of protection surrounding him, keeping his mind clear of distraction, malfeasance, doubt. I watched his muscles relax, his back straighten, the day's frustration leaving him.

At the *Irishmen* I am not reading the paper in front of me as much as I am inhaling cider and taking draughts of my cigarettes, listening to what's around me. Behind me are four students, probably from FAU, and they are talking about going on a boat and getting fucked up, partying. "My uncle has a boat. We can use that." Nothing about permission. "Oh my god, this guy," I hear the same girl say. I hear hate in her voice, the kind that, when I was in high school, motivated a girl to tell her boyfriend to beat up my gay neighbor. It didn't happen. He coolly explained to the 210-pound boyfriend that the reason she hated him was because he was gay and he didn't like her because she was mean to him. They left. The neighbor's name was Diego and he wasn't cool, just tired, ready because it was not a new experience. "Can you beat him up," the girl with that same kind of hate in her voice asks. "I've got three hundred dollars on me.

Have you done anything like that before?” “Yeah, I’ve beat up fags before,” one guy says.

I want him to feel that pain he inflicted. Beneath it I feel his pain, though. I am too angry, trying not to ask “What the fuck are you all talking about?” and just keep thinking. *Feel what you did.* I heard him sob. They all parted ways. I don’t know if that sob was my doing or not, but the way it creped over his voice before I heard it, one then two more sobs bucking through him. Too much time, I still try and tell myself, in my own head, my own work. But the timing was uncanny, the change beginning the instant anger stirred its way from my chest to gut and brain. I still feel the throbbing.

In that same bar, before this, I am shitfaced but think I’m functional. I want another. I can’t find my wallet. For minutes I search then give up. It falls out my sleeve when I get up to look again before leaving. This was the fourth strange loss and sudden rediscovery of something that week. Cigarettes in different rooms. Keys suddenly in front of the door. Lighters in pockets I swore were empty. Glasses on the dresser. Alcohol was barbed wire on my brain. I think I lost more things on days after drinking, only noticed them a little later. Must have been in January or February.

The Walker and Gezraus are around the broad fire in the center of his yurt. On a tripod is a boiling cauldron of water with a melon on a screen above it. The melon sweats and drips juice from cuts along it like the lines on a globe. These fall, mix with the water mixed with roots like turmeric and ginger, leaves glossy with tiny hairs. Gezraus removes a knife from his sleeve and before the Green Walker can see, cuts the top of the melon and squeezes it before handing it over. Eat it, he commands.

The flesh is hard but flexible, becomes stringy after a few chews, then dissolves into a kind of sweet paste. It moves slowly down to his stomach. Keep eating, finish as much as you can. Each bite is sweeter, fills him with more warmth than the last. It is more savory, almost salty, the hardest flesh by the leathery skin of the melon. Suddenly he wants to gag and Gezraus laughs, leans across the fire to slap his shoulder. Do not throw it up. Your stomach will settle soon. The fruit seems to disappear from his stomach and leaves a cool tingling to spread through his chest and belly. Let it spread. Don't fight this. The Green Walker puts his hands on the floor behind him, tries to lean but his limbs become soft, quickly feel like stockings filled with wool, and he falls back. A pillow catches his head. He lifts his head and snaking shadows wind up and down his limbs.

These are holding you back. You will sever three of these four.

When the tingling fills his body completely, the Walker is able to lift himself up. Gezraus's face is different, not masked but the shape of his spirit appears, its true shape. His head is surrounded in pale brown light—the desert in the blue minutes of dawn—and two spiral horns, like antelopes rise. Ghostly sprouts of mint grow along the backs of the reaching horns. Between them is a pillar running through the old man, and the Walker's eyes follow it up, see it reaching up and down like stacked stars.

The forest spirit in *Princess Mononoke* stirred the first idea of Gezraus and the Green Walker. The antlered one is not unique to the film, not unique either to one culture. Deep in my unconscious the image already waited. I saw the scene not as new, but as something I didn't know existed on Earth, something familiar. Yes, that spirit tread too the Green Path. Was the image a trace for me, something to found an image and belief, and then what desires taken seriously are safe? Certainly not one of fancy. Look around

you, see images evoke images, and you will start to think you're *remembering* when you write, not creating. You're right, of course, but that doesn't mean it's the memory you think. Accidental homage is plagiarism? Accidental homage is relying on a canon? Accidental homage is sloppy? Accidental homage is literary impulse?

Drink the tea. It will scald but then you will heal. Drink it down, quickly! Somehow, it is not the worst pain the Green Walker has felt. The bleedings and rusted wires run through his muscles, that was worse than the boiling water. Everything blistered and a taste like urine fills his mouth. He swallows painlessly. Gezraus helps the Green Walker up and they move to stretch of uncovered floor where mats have been pulled back. Ox, horse, even dog, these are yoked to our purposes. Is this right? He doesn't know. Everything is slipping, shifting around him. The ceiling is dotted with stars, the floor full of trees. The ox plows until it is slaughtered. The horse carries until it dies. The dog keeps company. The birds can even be taught to work for us. Why do we try and make tools of beings?

Nature is not something out there, beyond the fences and where men are scarce and plants grow as they please. It is a relationship. The coexistence of all things, whether or not they are aware of how thoroughly connected they might be. Gezraus tells this to the Green Walker and I hear it, I believe it, I know it is a much more honest and powerful definition than made available to me through English, through Western culture. Only the indigenous tribes seem to hold this view.

The drink floods his head until he fears it will burst with the heat. See where you are, the master says, see what it is you are. In the dirt they trace the ox, the horse, the dog. These dance, and are collared by men and women, made to work. The Green Walker

draws a fox by the edge of the dirt square, points to himself. The tail waves, coils. The fox walks and its coiling tail moves and grows. The fox bites away the yoke from the ox. He bites away the saddle and bridle from the horse. He uncollars the dog. Growing, growing, the fox's tail grows. But can you make it grow forever? asks Gezraus. Is that to be enough?

The black coils disintegrate from his limbs, fall apart and sink to the dirt. The master speaks in a voice too deep, his horns spiraling with the sound, reaching. The room becomes brighter. A heavy thing has been taken away. The broad punctures along his arms and chest begin closing, the scabs lifting and falling away with sudden growth.

Hodgepodes of beliefs, metaphysics, cosmogonies, philosophies. I used to make them. I used to say they were imaginary cultures. Questions of appropriation now plague my process and a "Fuck it" approach isn't enough to make the drafting feel good, but the medicines of spirit I try and tuck into my work, or build outright in it, I accept the costs.

The Walker and his subordinates enter the temple to Kelnol, the god of life, and are asked to remove their armor. They all fidget. Might as well give up their skins, they think. Healers move among them, whisper soothing things and spread heavy, dulling perfume. Buckles rattle, gauntlets squeak and shiver, breastplates come free, greaves and leather skirts. Armor is taken gently to a room where two boys begin to care for it, taking out oil and rags and fresh leather, tools to replace buckles and straps.

When I was fifteen, I knew that the coming September, between the seventeenth and twenty-eighth, would be terribly important. I got more writing done than I could have anticipated. Seven poems, all terrible love poems and entreaties to imaginary women, composites of crushes and ideals. A story, some length that seemed like a record.

Walking along the fences during PE, I looked up, and saw a mountain on legs like. A long-legged turtle, translucent white, and I stopped, letting my imagination walk with west to south-east. A roving god, the Walker would say. At the time, it was just a daydream.

In altered states, I've always known things were sideways. Swerved realities. Imagination overpowers the body, puppets it. Meditation was, I knew, the way out. I learned to meditate, to concentrate on becoming one with the universe, with all things, and amidst all things we became one. Meditation does that if you learn those words. Some of the things are real disproportionately to their identities. Corporate conglomerates and red shift, for example. Emotions are more valuable for understanding the consequences of things in that higher state. In the mirror we must experience our existence from every perspective and to survive it without becoming trapped in a swerved reality is impossible for some. Under guilt they shatter and become the snow on the road.

NEITHER WAS THIS WHERE THE WILD THINGS WENT TO MELLOW OUT

I did not know what meat was on the spit but that it smelled wholesome. From in my tent, I saw silhouettes walking in the sun become people beyond the mesh. It was evening and chilly and the last few days of hiking had been chilly, too. My late mother is there in a gold apron, my friend from nursery, and my sister sitting, holding empty bowls. My nursery friend's voice and shape were as twenty years ago, but he was called Randal in the dream. I did not know what meat was turning on the spit but that it smelled wholesome.

My grandmother become mother held out to me a wooden bowl I accepted and knew it had been cooked with care. Randal was my neighbor's name, and now my nursery friend's shape, but not his name. Blackbirds took a thousand perches for themselves around us, enclosed us in a nave. My bowl was refilled, and twelve tall ones strode in. We sixteen all took our slices of meat. Around us they waited until the blackbird chorus spiraled through the trees. My grandmother become mother held out to me a wooden bowl I accepted and ate with care.

When I woke, I did not care to eat, instead chewing on that dream, and rang my grandfather. "Pippa, it's Eric, could I get you out for brunch?" Harsh, lupine, he laughed. Last year, to that day, my mother died on the way to a baby shower. Tristan, they named the boy. A fine name. "Just lunch, if you don't want to stay out." I needed him as much as he needed the air. We needed to remember her.

“Fine. Come get me. Where are we eating? Don’t fucking take me to Cracker Barrel again.” Gamma had fallen there, tripped on a toy, and broken her elbow. She had died too, later, for a vacuum in her chest. “Forget it. I know where we’re eating. Hurry or time we get there they’ll have shut up shop.” Since you couldn’t slam a receiver on a cell phone, Pippa would smack the nearest flat surface for emphasis before ending a call. That time I heard a picture fall and break, for a half second him saying, “No.”

When I got there, he had a bandage around his thumb and a scratched photo of my grandmother on the table, back from the nineties. Her pants were nylon, puffed out, noisy. “This was one of the best pictures of her.” The muscles of his jaw bulged. I picked up, too, a few more pieces of glass. I accidentally cut myself as well. Old and young, bandaged thumbs, we left.

Pippa kept one of those old cars, sharp reflexes, and steady hands. Knowing why, he still grumbled that no electric cars with standard transmissions were around and all the new cars had “that bossy robot trying to take the wheel from me.” “I know it’s safer. Even so, don’t trust the car to take the wheel. No, sir. Nope.” We left his graying beige house, him leading us by hand toward Route 16, west to somewhere he assured me I had never been, past the desert, up into the hills where apples could grow, and no more cactuses could be found.

I fell half-asleep somewhere between the hills and the descent into the next valley, a great frying pan of a desert, and went asleep and fell back to the morning’s dream.

The wooden bowl felt heavier empty. We had eaten our strips of meat. The one who looked like Randal began humming with the blackbirds’ noise and my grandmother become her daughter rocked on her seat. The tall ones rose, served us all light portions

and for themselves took more meat. We did not mind, but I knew the meat was precious. Each bite like gristle gone sweet, but the broth washed it down right. And I saw now on the spit a hand being cut for a tall one's plate. Another bowl I ate, for my stomach still felt light.

In the cathedral of tree and bird we ate to empty the pot. The tall ones took two for each cut we took. I saw shoulders on the spit but of what I did not want to know. I knew only to consume what was made with care, as if I had walked the nave's end. In those shoulders I saw a beast and I saw a human. What would have been a snarling shape and what would have been one alike my shape were as the same on that spit. But in the cathedral of blackbird and pine, the twelve ones all tall like wolves watched us eat and at the bottom I saw faces so alike mine.

After waking, I didn't say anything for a long time. I put the window down and made a wing of my hand. The white gold dirt stuck like soot. My grandfather scoffed. "Great. Now there's dust in the car."

"Pippa, you know it's everywhere." I believed he wanted an argument, and I wanted to give him one. "Your car is dirty as it is," I said, and held up an empty coffee bottle. The last of the coffee had become a film at the bottom. "Hella dirty." But he didn't want to argue. Just complain. His lupine grin reminded me he could be joking, that the bitterness wasn't about me.

Miles ahead we saw buildings, bristly hairs on a mole on the horizon of a pristine wasteland, home of snakes and flighty things, garden of saguaro and barrel. The arms braced against the wind, faces hardened to the infinite sun, the green giants watched all

that passed and housed any slight enough to walk between the spines. “Your mother went here once.”

She drove a lot for work, forgot more places than I’d ever been to. “What is it?” Maybe she forgot this place too.

“We’re getting a bite there. Walk around as we digest. Sound good? Don’t answer that Eric. The answer is yes, good.” For the year, he’d not done much. After a few months we couldn’t stand it. Sara started taking him out Wednesdays for movies, and if he didn’t answer her texts in the morning, she’d swing by. I followed suit, and after a few weeks the clever fart stopped replying to those morning texts. One of us, at least, ate breakfast in the same kitchen we did as kids every morning. “Give Sara a call. I want to hear her voice.” So, I did.

The cell signal improved as we neared the little town forming in the horizon, but the call still clipped. She had texted me this morning she was pregnant. I wanted her to give the good news to Pippa, but Alec, her boyfriend, answered the phone. “Good news, Pippa!”

“What’s that,” then he added, low, “you sycophant.” He hated Alec calling him that, or grandpa, or even by his first name. In his book, Alec was not family before that moment. It’s still dubious today, but he’s close enough. I consider him a good step-brother.

“We’re pregnant! Well, Sara is—”

“Hey, Pippa.” Sara sounded how we all felt as our mother flatlined. I saw my grandfather’s soul leave his body, put it in a chair, before he tried to catch my mother’s. It wasn’t like he was there. I didn’t know what I saw. Dirt writhing in acid is the only thing

that knows how it is, feeling like you suddenly own all the blame, writhing and becoming nothing. There is not enough new dirt, after a year. Sara leaned as a mirror against the wall. Our grandfather's face got soft, his voice even. "I wish she'd come back, too." He grabbed my knee. "Listen to us, we're got to be driving today. Be home tonight. Eric's here. He'll drive if I need a nap," and "Love you, baby." Then she says back, "Pippa," softly, almost too soft to hear her over the tires plucking at the road. "Will you have dinner with us?" I said yes, yes, I promised.

We drove another hour, not sure what kind of music to suggest for each other. Something by Daft Punk, maybe, came on. We settled into a few songs. "Oh, 'Wind Beneath my Wings' can fuck off right now." I didn't care where we were heading as long as we didn't hear that song.

"Agreed, Eric. Your Mom loathed that song." She couldn't stand that Sarah McLoughlin commercial, either, he told me. He sang the tune, said, "Now imagine all these cute but injured dogs, that song designed to put its hand on your heart and ask for comfort. Looking at you through the camera, through the TV, its one good eye looking through another." He sighed, gravelly. "Once they brought that one back on the air. Forget it." He adopted a cat. "A great cloudy fat one. Someone declawed him wrong. Missing a few. Angry son of a devil for a while.:

"Wynne loved that cat. He got sick. Went somewhere to die."

"Mom didn't get to do that." He smiled, glad I said it.

"You never got to be angry about it, did you? Never let yourself. Never got to let that hurt go."

"So, what?"

“So, we put anger about it in the dirt today.” His spared glance, a second, said to shut up. “I don’t like it twisting you and me up. Sara knows some what happened between you and your mother. Gravity, death, accidents happening, can’t be blaming all that. So, we blame ourselves. Not her. I’m old, now that I’ve seen my daughter die. You. You, supposed to take on all that as a boy, learning how to be your father all from your mother’s memories of him, trying on accident to make you into that fiend. I remember her hitting you hard once. You didn’t come inside until the snow was inches deep. I stood out there. Watched you.”

I didn’t know. I just hid my face in fistful of cold until it hurt, then again when the hurt went away. Rage kept me warm.

“She got well, boy, and I’m gonna remind you. For the last five years her life, she did right. She did so much right by everybody. By you she gave more of an upbringing I think I ever managed. You hated her, but you learned.”

It wasn’t true enough. It wasn’t enough of that. But for five years, she tried harder. I was tired of apologies because they reawakened hurt from a hundred arguments. I was tired of lesson and lesson and making up for lost time. That woman was trying to be a mom to an older son, trying to cram everything I might need in my head. Eventually, I listened. She and I liked the same music. Sometimes that was enough.

“You *remember every good* of that time.”

We entered the town. Bruised red pennants with blue backs, like hands out a car window, had collected bitter dust. We drove until we reached a house under construction, unattended. “Let’s go.” He handed me a sledgehammer and sent someone a text message.

“Same guy who designed our town designed this one.” We walked into my mother’s “home.”

What looked like my mother’s house stood along a cul-de-sac it did not seem to belong to. The garage here did not yet have a door. None of the doors had been hung yet, and tape fluttered invitingly through the incomplete window frames, but it was my mother’s house and I hated it. If they ever finished this thing, would some parent draw shouting matches out of their child in the middle of the night? Would it ricochet down the walls and wake up the baby in their crib? I went up the unupholstered steps, felt a nail punch my shoe to just poke my foot.

Where my room was, this house had a master bedroom, the sole difference. This didn’t make it a new house. “Go on.” I tore through the drywall like tissue. I unwrapped the concrete blocks beneath, frenzied. Dullness thundered up my arms when I hit steel. “Go on!” Down came the balustrade. As I went down, Pippa handed me a crowbar, told me to take up the stairs. He had smashed out what would have been a fireplace and red flecks of brick stuck to the face of his hammer. I don’t know what all I felt.

Outside, we took out the four corners of the house, wiped down the hammers and crowbar just as a car pulled up in the front. We let ourselves out the back, took through the trees, brushing ourselves off on the way. Little crows took shade in those trees and through the squawking corridor, we made our way back to the car. We smelled food and from over a fence we heard voices. On the other side was a block party, open door sort of affair, down a ways. We went up, were welcomed for lunch.

Suburban, sunburnt, out in the forced oasis these people, us too, looked wrong. Too bright and pink for this place, our skin dry from the heat. My grandfather took for

himself two bottles of water and huffed. “Better,” he asked me though he spoke for himself. I still didn’t know how I felt. We trespassed, demolished a house.

I wanted to say, I destroyed a house that looked like Mom’s and I still, tired after a thoughtless frenzy and a year, I still don’t know how to grieve. He watched me inhale a charred burger between sips of water. Pippa’s face went soft again and he leaned over the bench. “That wasn’t where you grew up, but it was. That wasn’t where your mother was insane and still trying to raise you. That wasn’t where Gamma and I picked you and Sara up so you could live with us.

“You lived, too, in your father’s house. You don’t remember him, but it was his before you were born.”

“Fuck him.”

“Yeah, fuck him and he’s burning now for what he did.” Someone turned an ear.

“She never talked about him. Sara didn’t either.” Pippa filled what could have been my father’s spot, settled warmly into a space that ached despite his being there, despite Gamma being there, too. My mother had kept the story from him as well. I knew to hate my father, but I was the closest thing to him around. My mother hated me for it, feared me. It was good, being away from her in college. She was well, Gamma said before I graduated. She wanted to see me.

“Your mom knew about this place. Wasn’t built yet, but a month ago on the map I saw the houses coming up. You let go of that anger for a minute and understand. She’d have come here, done what you and me did for the same reasons.” Exhausted, I shuffled for another soda. Someone was talking with Pippa, asking what brought us by, if we were moving.

“Mostly adults live here now,” the man said. “It’s nice,” he said through dusty pearly teeth. It was hot and in winter it’d be a freezing wind trap. “Quiet.” Not today. Pippa said we came from a town at the end of this valley, the opposite direction. That gravelly voice of his could lull me sometimes and the heat wasn’t helping. We walked back to the car, still hungry, waiting for our stomachs to register “full.”

“I want beer.”

“Get a beer then, Eric.” We passed the car and picked a place for happy hour. We sat down at the bar and the barman smiled warm and pearly. We joked about the dentists in town while the man, nametagged Nathan, poured us bitters and large glasses of water. Someone called to “turn on the local.” What looked like my mother’s house was on the news, it’s falling death issuing concrete and dirty water. We played dumb, amazed. “In this town?” I said. “It’s so peaceful, though.” Someone made a comment about Mexicans and shoddy construction, another said “Grow up, old fart.”

It was a town of plastic comb teeth in the middle of fuck-all and the second beer only made the news pass faster. The house was gone. He ribbed me to keep my face together. We’d never been here, and the story would be almost the same once we left. Nathan brought out a bowl of soup I didn’t hear myself order. My stomach still felt empty. Emptier now I had water. Emptier now it was warm again. I didn’t ask what was in it as I ate—I just tasted concrete dust.

We sat another hour before an officer came in, out of uniform. He was greeted, their friendly constable, and ordered the usual from his table against the wall. We tabbed out, drank our waters down. I had to piss, and the cop took the urinal next to me,

muttering under his breath, how could a person come and do that, who could come and smash that house.

“Just saw it on the news. What happened?”

“Some angry kids or something, I figured, but they only left the tools behind.”

“Expecting porn and beer?” I asked. Walking out, he admitted, chuckling, that was how he did it as an angry young man. He did not wash his hands.

I was sober by the time the urinal finished flushing, or by the time we reached the car. Grandfather cut me off and took the passenger seat. Driving an older car didn't afford me much time to look over at him, but somewhere on the way home he began crying. “She tried and damn it she couldn't do it right, I know. She tried not to make you like him.

“Sara's right when she tells you your mom was like your father once he left. You only knew your mother for a short while, okay? Don't you hate her anymore. I was there. Gamma was there for you. My daughter was dead for years.” He had lost her twice, I realized. To my father, to a white Volvo later. His knee was big from arthritis and he winced when I clasped it. I said twice I was sorry. He put his smooth old hand on mine.

Driving back to Sara's we passed through a desert changed by early night. Insects blared over the road noise, stars still in the open sky, and in the distance the houses on the mountains glowed.

I hated her, the things she said. I hated the sweetness, the apologetic, begging timbre of her voice, too. The last two years before she died, though, I believed her. Still afraid, but I did. What hurt were not the things I didn't get to say, the accusations and

punishments ungiven. The unsaid thing was one I wasn't ready to say, and she never would have accepted. Her voice was sorry until the end.

“I didn't forgive her, Eric. It's why we didn't let her see you until you were done with college. I said to her how awful she was a mother to your sister and you. Said I'd see you two turn out right.” He opened the window and brought out the mason jar that was her urn. “You forgive her, you turned out right,” and he sounded weaker than ever, like he'd slip away. “Right? Even when she came back?” The ashes tipped and fell away, become the dust.

In that house, where my childhood room would have been, instead was the master bedroom. That was the first room I destroyed. Even smashed the toilet. “Yeah. Yeah, we're all right,” I felt less likely to be swept away. “We're real good, Pippa.” I started asking questions and somewhere in the pass, rain sloughed away the dust and ash.

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