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CAROLINA CHAVARRIAGA  
SHEILA VAN DELFT

## dissociative amnesia

my little sister fills in childhood gaps,  
flashes of blueberry fields and  
country summers.  
crows cawing in the distance,  
chalk left on the pavement.

*is that a body?*  
i can't remember.

my father claims he acted out  
childhood television shows in our living room.  
i don't believe him.  
no, i remember him behind glass, buzzcut,

baby girl pigtails reflected in the pane.  
there is no doting father  
singing in funny voices  
in my memory.

the little girl freezes ladybugs for later.  
she pounds her tiny fists  
on oak dressers barricading doors,  
sits at the top of the banister  
watching, when she shouldn't, as po-po  
take him away.  
this is what she holds onto twenty years later,  
when the dark still terrifies and everything  
is wrong.

when i finish crying, i hold her trembling body.  
i wish she were catching butterflies  
for the sheer joy of it.  
the forest is a kaleidoscope  
and she is safe safe safe.  
i hold her until she is still,  
kiss her forehead, and leave her  
to decompose.  
it's autumn but winter is coming.  
only tiny scattered bones will remain  
when i return in the summer.

then,  
and only then,  
will i allow myself  
to mourn.

## The Namesake

I remember the station wagon. The one with the wood panelling on the sides that you used to see a lot back then in the early seventies. It was clunky, always smelled damp, and if you sat in there with shorts on you'd regret it because having three kids (four kids, I mean) means you simply cannot avoid the sharp crumbs from stale crackers that get stuck in the upholstery and ultimately return to haunt the back of your thighs. We strapped Pete Jr. into a baby seat in the back and my sisters squabbled over who would get to hold him first; this new piece of our family who would make us complete. I tried to squabble too, but they were both older than me and more crafty. So after quickly being ruled out of potential siblings who would be the first to hold our new baby brother, I resorted to examining him there in the baby seat. He looked like the baby photos we had in the big album on the living room bookshelf. Pink and soft and almost unlike a human at all. His skin was pale, almost translucent, and his hair was barely a wisp of cotton. He lay there mewling with his little fists clenched and skinny legs kicking sporadically. In fact, he looked so much like the photos of us when we were babies that I thought Julie must have been trying to trick me when she said that he did not have the same mother and father as we did.

“Why is he so skinny?” asked Julie.

My mother replied, “his mother was sick, dear.”

I could hear my oldest sister Laurie mumble under her breath, “right, just like I was ‘sick’ after Tony Reinheller’s party last weekend.”

The meaning beneath their words eluded me. To me, he was perfect. There was silence for a moment as Julie appeared to ponder something else.

“Why does he have the same name as Dad?” she asked.

“Well,” replied my mother, “it’s kind of like a prayer that when he grows up he will be like Dad and carry on his name.”

That seemed like a good prayer to me. Our father was kind and gentle, yet strong and wise. As the youngest of his three girls, I think he always had a soft spot for me. I looked down at the fragile infant beside me and knew that I would have a soft spot for him, too. I offered him my finger and he grasped it with his five miniature ones. I leaned my head against his car seat and watched the summer sun jump in and out behind the trees. As our station wagon glided down the road, I vowed in my little heart to love and protect him. I imagined a secret bond between him and me; the youngest siblings against the world. The others wouldn’t understand him like I did and that filled me with a certain sense of pride. We pulled into our driveway and stepped out together as a new family.

~

I remember the cop car. I remember the tires crunching up our gravel driveway, and the flashing lights our bedroom curtains couldn’t keep out. Julie and I were sharing a room and had been trying or pretending to sleep for an indeterminate amount of time. I rolled over to look at the little digital clock on my bedside table, which informed me it was 2:14 a.m.

“Is that him?” Julie whispered.

In response, we each peeled back our covers and tiptoed over to the window, our steps muted by soft, warm carpet. Peeking through the curtains we had a clear view of the driveway and the dusty sedan that now occupied it. It was a clear night, but the air had that certain prick to it that meant autumn was coming. I’m sure my parents weren’t asleep either; they were outside before the cop could even undo his seatbelt. I wiped away the fog from my breath on the window and watched my parents approach the car. My mother had her robe wrapped tightly

around her plump body and beside her, my father's tall frame drooped slightly. Even from here I could tell that his hair was a little whiter and his blue eyes were a little more tired, and it sent a pang through my chest. I felt angry at Pete for the toll his actions took on their bodies and souls. He was selfish; reckless.

The cop approached my parents and I watched their conversation as puffs of air against the night sky. My eyes wandered over to the cop car and I could just make out the silhouette of my now teenage brother through the windows and behind the partition. He sat alone and unmoving until the cop meandered over to let him out. And then silently, I watched Pete be born from the back seat. His body language showed no remorse, no evidence of a lesson learned. I realized I was holding my breath, searching for some sign that this time was different. By the way he pushed inside in front of my parents with his head held high, I could tell that it was not. We heard the front door close and my sisters and I wordlessly returned to our beds. This was the third time he had tried to run away in the last few months and it just didn't make any sense. My parents, my sisters; all of us, we were good to him. We loved him as our own and gave him every opportunity for success. But he seemed at every fork to choose the wrong direction. He did poorly in school, in sports, and his only friend was his annoying pet bird, Charlie.

Nothing seemed to explain it and I laid there all night feeling angry and hurt and thinking, *why, why, why, can't he just be normal?*

~

I remember the rental. The leather seats amplified the bitter winter and made it so you somehow felt colder in the shelter of the car than you did exposed to the elements. Rentals are always dull and lifeless and depressing. It occurred to me that a rental is destined to a life of not really belonging to anyone and I wondered if that's how he felt too. Our damp bodies and stale breath clouded the

windows. Gray upholstery, gray sky, gray hearts. Wordlessly, my father turned the ignition and blasted the heat. I know we were all thinking that it could never penetrate the cold, a part of us would feel cold forever. Two days ago we got the call and all congregated there as soon as we could. Julie, Laurie, and I were now grown with families of our own and each traveled from different parts of the country to get there.

My body was numb as we drove through the dirty city streets that had become his home. The distant horns of other cars and drumming rain and *click click click* of the indicators barely registered in my brain's periphery. When we arrived at our destination I found that I didn't mind the rental so much. I felt like a child wanting to wait in the car while my mother went to pick up groceries. Then my father was opening the door and taking my hand to help me out. The funeral home had a darkness that made my skin crawl and threatened to suffocate my lungs. We collected the last piece of our family in a form reduced to ashes and we got back in the car. From the backseat I stared at my mother's wrinkled hands and the ceramic pot they held so desperately. A kind of madness bubbled in my throat as I considered arguing with my sisters over who would get to hold him first. I fought the urge to snatch him away and strap him in beside me to make sure nothing could ever hurt him again. To remind him he has to stay here to carry on our father's name.

*Was this our fault?*

They told us the reason for his death was undetermined but you could tell they didn't really care about another bum on the streets, and it wasn't that hard to read between the lines.

*Could we have stopped this?*

If we kept in touch, if we sent him money, if I kept my vow, if, if, if. If he had been born thirty years later maybe we would have understood his brain and the

things his mother did to it. Maybe we would have known how to help him.

We kept driving and the city grew smaller and smaller in the rear view mirror. The landscape became mountainous and a dense wood grew to our right, the ocean still on our left. He loved the woods and so that is where we went, as deep in as we could drive with daylight on our side. Finally, we arrived at an old, small pullout, and my father killed the engine. We stepped out as a family, whole and broken, and laid our missing piece to rest.

## Let's Start Living

The river of life keeps flowing;  
it goes on and on, ending  
who knows when,  
in an ocean with unknown creatures.

We're the fish that swim;  
or perhaps we're the rocks  
that no matter how hard the current,  
stick strongly to the bottom  
and let water flow by.

Must we drown away  
with nothing but  
salt in our mouths;  
or can we jump out,  
do pirouettes in the air,  
smelling the trees  
that we hope to reach?

Sometimes the current  
is too fast  
for us to keep up  
and suddenly  
we're drowning.

We're drowning and  
waiting for the water  
to slow down.

If we have a choice,  
why keep waiting,  
drowning under rocks,  
when we could  
start swimming?



## A Close Shave

I put my foot into the hot bath—it sends my nerves into a frenzy. I take another step in and slowly lower myself into the sudsy water. With my body acclimating to the harsh temperature, I settle in and let the water reach my collar bones. I turn the tap off with the flick of my foot. I inhale the lavender coming from the bubble bath, the scent reminding me of summer dinners at my parents' place.

The heat is welcomed by my achy joints. The stinging pain in my shoulder blades from today's hike is starting to subside. Resting my head against the edge of the tub, I close my eyes and begin to drift, but then my phone rings. I lean over the edge of the tub to see it's David calling.

I dry off one hand on the bathmat and pick up my phone from the floor.

"Hey, babe. Just catching your flight?"

"Ummm... I just arrived."

"Oh fuck, did I get the times mixed up?" I'm about to jump up from the tub.

"No, no, it's my fault. I got onto an earlier flight. I would have called but my phone died. I couldn't find a charger until I was on the plane."

I push the stopper with my toe and the water starts draining. "Okay, well, I can be right there."

"It's okay babe, I'll just bus home. I don't have much luggage. Just wanted to warn you I'll be home sooner than expected."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, of course! I should be home in forty-five or so. Is that enough time? I didn't even think to ask if you're home. I just really want to see you."

I stick out my leg from the bathtub and extend my foot against the tile. I

examine my leg, looking at all the dark hairs swirling around my calves like small tidal waves.

“Yeah, I’m home. That’s enough time.”

“Perfect! I’ll see you soon-ish. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

I chuck my phone back onto the floor and jump up from the tub. I close the shower curtain and twist on the showerhead. The water is freezing, but I don’t have time to be cold. I rinse off all the remaining suds from my bubble bath and turn off the shower. I get out and quickly dry myself with one of my bleach-stained towels. I wrap myself in the towel and start applying green tea moisturizer to my face.

I notice how bushy my eyebrows have become—my unibrow is trying to resurrect itself. I grab the tweezers out from my cabinet and reach up to my face to begin plucking the growing caterpillars when I notice the soft blanket of fur that’s regrown on my forearm. I put down the tweezers and grab my razor from the shelf in my shower, and then I remember the hair on my legs. I look at my legs, then back at my arms, trying to decide which is more important, then I remember I have armpits.

I lift my arms and scan the area. Small bushels of hair resembling the beginnings of tumbleweeds have formed. As my arms are in the air, my towel loosens and falls to the cream tile. I look down at the area below my torso and remember another spot I haven’t shaved.

“FUCK.”

~

I remember in grade three, my best friend had always had dark hair on her forearms—I had never thought anything of it. One day we were in the library going through an *I Spy* book.

“I spy with my little eye something red.”

I scanned through the chaos of random toys and animals until I spotted a fire hydrant. “Fire hydrant?”

“Yes! Okay, your turn.”

A boy in our class sat down at our table and asked if he could join us. We played a few rounds until he said, “I spy with my little eye, something with... big hairy ape arms.”

I diligently searched the image for what he was describing but couldn’t find anything. I looked back up to see him laughing. My friend’s face was bright red. Some other kids caught wind of this and started calling her Ape Arms. After that, she always wore long-sleeved shirts.

In grade five, we had just finished running laps, and I was sitting with my little cluster of friends trying to catch our breath on the dirty gymnasium floor. One of my friends was sitting with her legs stretched out, rubbing her shins, saying she needed to shave. Another girl chimed in, telling her to try waxing because it lasts longer. I remember looking down at my bare legs covered in a healthy coat of peach fuzz and suddenly feeling disgusted.

Later that night, I went home asking my dad if I could have one of his stick razors. He was confused and asked me why. I said to shave my legs—I’ll never forget the angry expression that grew across his face once those words fell out of my mouth.

“You’re too young.”

I stole a razor from him anyway and began shaving in secret—I was so scared I would get caught. I continued shaving my legs two times a week, up until three weeks ago.

By grade nine, my friend with the dark hair on her arms had become an avid waxer. I went with her to her appointment; she was getting her first “moustache wax”. I told her she didn’t need one, but she insisted she did because her

brothers kept teasing her about it.

I sat in the waiting room while she was in her appointment. Twenty minutes passed, and she came out. Her upper lip was bright red, and she looked like she was going to faint. I walked her home, and she didn't talk much because her lips were starting to swell. The next day I didn't see her at school. I got a text from her saying she must have had an allergic reaction because her face swelled up, but that her skin was so smooth, and her mustache was gone.

Wax terrified me, but I began hyper-fixating on my eyebrows and upper lip, so I started tweezing the hell out of them. I quickly gave up on the lip because it hurt too much, but I continued to tweeze my brows four times a week, up until three weeks ago.

In grade ten I was sitting in socials and overheard this girl with perfectly hairless skin and waxed eyebrows complaining about how she kept forgetting to shave her arms. Another girl in the class said to her that the hair grows back darker when you do that, she said that it was a myth. I went home that afternoon and hesitantly shaved my arms. A week passed and the lack of hair on my arms made me realize she was right; it was a myth. I continued to shave my arms every week, up until three weeks ago.

In grade eleven, I got my first boyfriend and he told me he liked his girlfriends to be hairless. I began shaving everything and became accustomed to the razor burns of cheap metal, ingrown hairs, and accidental cuts on my shins, ankles and places that should never have a blade held against them. I continued this ritual up until three weeks ago.

~

I sit on my itchy bathmat, analyzing every hair on my body, ruminating about what will happen when David finally sees me. I can picture him walking in, hoping to see his perfectly hairless girlfriend and be disappointed to see that in her place

is *Mr. Snuffleupagus*. Not once in the four years that we have been dating has he seen me with more than a little stubble. It's not like I planned to stop shaving while he was on his trip. I've just been so busy it's been the last thing on my mind.

An email notification lights up my phone. My heart flutters as I notice the time—I didn't have enough time to shave everything, to begin with, and I most definitely don't have time for it now. I decide I'll just shave the hair on my legs. I sit on the edge of my tub and turn on the tap, running my shins through the icy water. I can feel a knot starting to grow in the pit of my stomach. I pick up the loofa from my shower rack and begin rubbing it in a circular motion against my pale skin. I soap up my shins and the scent of cucumber and melon floods my nostrils. I grab the cheap pink razor from the rack. It's about to make contact with my skin, my heart is pumping, my hand begins to shake. I stop myself.

I put down the razor, rinse off my legs, get up from the tub, and dry myself off. I go to my bedroom and pick out some shorts and a tank top. I put them on, then begin to dry my hair. I look at the time on my phone—David will be home any minute now.

I pull out two mugs from the kitchen cabinet and fill the kettle to make some coffee. A cool sensation is growing in my palms, and I can feel my throat getting tight—Almost the same feeling I get when I'm hiking up narrow terrain. I know David, I know he wouldn't judge me for hair, but this jittery feeling rocketing through my body makes me think otherwise.

The kettle finishes boiling. I take out two coffee filters and place them into the mugs, scooping ground dark roast into each. I swirl the hot water into them. Notes of chocolate and hazelnut gently caress my nose. I bring the mugs to the dining table and sit down. I look down at my legs with the dark swirls of hair dancing around them. Suddenly I have the familiar feeling of disgust I had when I was ten. I quickly get up to throw on some sweatpants, but I'm interrupted by a knock

on the door.

I gulp and walk to the door. I take a deep breath and open it. David is on the other side, beaming. His hair is shaggy, and his beard is thick and scraggly. We embrace, and he plants a huge kiss on my cheek. His facial hair scratches up against my temple. He looks into my eyes and tells me he's missed my face.

## Catching Stars



## A VISIT FROM DEATH

When Death came to visit me one day,  
he didn't hide behind a cloak  
or have a tall silver sickle  
whose blade itched to slice my head off clean.  
Death came to me in a pair.  
One half the image of light, the other of darkness.  
Weaving together in places but distinct.  
They terrified yet intrigued me,  
their presence, comfortingly strange.  
Their eyes were empty but filled with  
something I can only describe as Serenity.  
It poured and dripped out of their  
sockets like the sand in my hourglass,  
spilling onto their freshly pressed suits and ties.  
Instinct told me to start bargaining,  
already grieving what I had not yet lost.  
But my time was approaching, my seconds  
counting down and down. Losing time to panic.  
A deal had been made from the moment  
of my first breath. And a bounty was due.  
And I was outnumbered.  
So I took their outstretched hands,  
feeling a little okay.  
Their fingers were so fucking cold and  
that chill swallowed me whole in a  
blizzard of black ice and snowflakes.  
And my shivering became stillness.  
The universe was quiet.  
And still, their hands were holding mine.



## The Witches And The Rock

There is a man in a high-visibility vest standing astride the cracked wooden posts that line the gates of Redwood Park. Ahead, past him, the asphalt gives way to a wide gravel road that glistens still with the memory of yesterday's drizzling. Cars, trucks, and large white vans crowd its sides like a herd of bison drinking from the shallows of a great grey river.

The man speaks after I roll down the window. "Are you here for *asdfghjk*?"

I can't *quite* make out what he said, but I'm not here for anything other than a relaxing walk, so I shake my head.

"Ah, well, the lot's closed till six tomorrow, but Redwood's still open if you manage to walk in. Just have to find a place to park outside, somewhere. Sorry, mate."

I tell him it's alright, give him a thank you, and pull in far enough to swing the car around. My heart sinks a bit. I had hoped the park would be relatively empty considering the pandemic, but it appeared that an ass-load of people had claimed the place already. Finding a legal place to park in an area such as this will undoubtedly prove to be laborious, and I've only an hour or two to myself before I have to return home.

There's already an exasperated aura that's followed me here. The past year has felt like heavy sandpaper wielded by an unpracticed hand – instead of smoothed surfaces, I've come out feeling uneven – worn down into sharp, blood-stained edges. I contemplate simply leaving and taking the twenty-minute drive back down 20<sup>th</sup> avenue towards the highway; I could sit on the porch and watch the hummingbirds drink from our feeder. But it's a thought that comes not from a sense

of flexibility or understanding. Beneath that humble little excuse for an alternative is a small child curled in on himself.

I take stock of that feeling – despair – strangely triggered by the most innocuous of circumstances, and pack it up for further reflection. I'm *not* the kind of person that runs, anymore.

I'm not.

After a couple of U-turns and a lot of looking around, I spot a City of Surrey van parked on the gravel boundary between a forest road and the fence of a large farm. It's a good fifteen-minute stroll to the park from here, but that doesn't bother me much.

With the sound of rushing cars and a distant thrum, I turn the key and let the engine wind down with a mechanical sigh. The baubles that dangle from my keychain clatter together metallically; there's a sense of peace that comes from the silence thereafter – a humble opening through which the wholeness of the world is glimpsed. I sit in it for a little while, watching the dust whisp across the dashboard, feeling the cracks in the false leather of my weathered seat.

I did it.

A minor victory, considering the state of things. The fact that this feels at all triumphal is in itself a glint of comedy. But I'm not above the universe's light, be it a well or a whisper.

Reaching the park takes no time at all. I catch glimpses of a few chickadees along the way, hanging upside down from needled branches searching for pine nuts. Remembering the memoir that I picked from the list of assigned readings for my writing class, I briefly recall the author's distinct reflections on the nature of the earth and our ever-evolving position within it. On the confines of modern-day life and our inability to remain present – on the detachment from our sense of purpose and quality.

Does the chickadee feel trapped in its eternal sourcing of food? Does it seek for some life beyond the mere eking out of its existence? I doubt it. There appears to me to be some sense of deep and encompassing interest behind the eyes of this creature. No anxious fluttering or dread haunts it as the bird flits from branch to branch. The totality of its mind is entirely dedicated to the tree – to a gathering of maroon specks that harbour nourishment beneath splintered eaves.

The human mind has given us the capacity to see beyond those glades of satisfaction. We wonder, suffer and scurry about beneath the shadow of the future. We are intelligent enough to worry about our eventual needs *and* to understand when we fail to prepare for them.

There's a piece of me that wonders who is better off. The chickadee, or me? That bird does not see the coming storm. It does not heed any news but the calls of its peers and the ethereal herald of coming seasons. It doesn't know that those seasons will change. That the very air it commands will twist red and fill with ash. That the bugs it depends upon to live may suffocate and die, and then...

Would a bird mourn the loss of its chicks, too hungry even to make the flight back to its nest? Would it wish to see them one last time?

~

I've come to speak with the Witches of the Redwood. To seek advice on this withering human journey. To know why it is that this year has weathered me so – why I feel as if my spirit is an entire forest fire condensed into a singular, quivering cinder. I had thought myself not to be an angry man – beyond the rage of dragons – but perhaps it had merely been concealed like all the other parts of me. Kept locked up tightly in a box lest my own needs become burdensome.

I traipse up a gravel incline beyond the fence that marks the eastern side entrance. The entire parking lot is a bustle. The clank of metal trailer doors, whirring of food truck fridges and the ascending tri-tone beeps of handheld radios are like

an assault on sanctity.

Some sort of festival is taking place, then? In a pandemic? Certainly not. And yet it might as well be with the sheer volume of bodies swirling through the lot.

I give it as wide a berth as I can, trying to puzzle out what the commotion is in service to. A corporate entity, undoubtedly. A lot of food, labourers, and lights; the path that leads through the field has been laid with dozens of plywood boards, tracks for a machine. But who would wheel a vehicle into the woods?

My mind is grateful for the sudden distraction. There's a mystery afoot here, now – an invasion of the Witch's domain.

Past the treeline, the path is lined with cables. Generators and power bars hum underneath tents and the shade of small metal structures. The entire forest is wired – thick red, blue and yellow roots tangled up amongst the undergrowth. A large cherry-picker stands near the Elf Tree, workers heaving a five-foot camera contraption up in an attempt to fasten it to the crane's arm. A film, then. Or a television show. I make a silent oath to burn them all at the stake if the solitary green tree comes to any harm.

I cut my walk down the incline past the cameramen towards the stocky bench tree and out past it into the field. The last time I visited, in the summer of the year before, this clearing had been filled with white daisies – the one beyond, too, transformed from an empty plain into a vast range of purple lupines and contented bees. Nearing the end of winter, now, the fields seem perched on the edge of manifestation. Awaiting some particular summons – a vibration of the earth or a particular branding of spring sunlight. Perhaps they, like me, are waiting on the robin's cheery warbling to raise them back up from a waking sleep.

I punch through into the tight copse of trees between the fields. I can see the Heart Tree across the clearing ahead, with its atrial branches, the place where I found snowdrop flowers when I first came here. It has lost a limb.

A large, shorn-off cut of the wood sits beside the path, its distinct amber colouring browned at the edges like clouds of cream swirling into coffee. I recall that my writing professor likes wood or something, so I make a note of it, pulling out a notepad to scribble it down. The forest seems to be full of meaning today, or perhaps it is only that I am paying closer attention to it. An invasion force, crowding, broken hearts...

There are a few people approaching along the path from the direction of the field. To my left is a shoddy dirt trough that must have been worn into the hillside by hundreds of feet over the years. I've gazed down into that quiet wood each time I've come and opted instead to push for the farthest meadow – the massive clearing where I first fell in love with the park. This time, however, the quiet calls out soothingly to me. I can feel the Witches watching through the eyes of the park's birds. Pushing me. We have plenty of time to talk. Now is the time to listen.

I push down the path, over roots and small tangles of shorn twigs and branches. The air is brisk and cool here. It's been overcast all day, so the light is dim beneath the hillside's viridian canopy. There isn't a soul in sight but for the birds and me. They follow close behind, twittering in the branches above, inquisitive and flighty.

*“Onward,”* they seem to whisper. *“Deeper.”*

Just past the point where I cannot hear the whirring of gears and electricity anymore, I'm drawn to stillness. A dying fir bends weakly over the path, wrapped up – cradled – by a rather large holly bush. The sharp leaves seem to extend on beyond a reasonable height, branches intermingling with the decayed bark of the wilted fir.

On the *other* side of the path is an equally strange sight: a needled tree curled in on itself, cowering – not more than a few feet tall. The curiosity of the scenario is striking – a bush and a tree grown to the heights of what the other should have been.

I reach out with two fingers and rub the holly's waxed leaves, taking care not to prick myself. There's something here. Something that speaks. Like a parable in the scripture I once believed – a Burning Bush.

Indeed, the jagged bush-tree seems in its own way to be a great fire, consuming and somehow supported by the dying husk within it. Perhaps the deathly tree is a symbol of the mood I've brought along with me – the holly a sharpened blaze of repressed wrath.

Or maybe that shadowed husk of a fir is being kept at bay, wrapped up tightly by the strength of that flame – the holly has grown tall and strong, beyond what it should be capable of. Perhaps it protects the small, crooked, *fearful* fir bush on the other side of the path – keeps its friend safe from the darkness with its warmth and light.

The park birds are suddenly silent, hearkening to the sheer imminence thrumming throughout the garden's bones – seeping up from the dirt. I catch a glimpse of them – ravens. A bonded pair soaring from the tip of one tree to another, ruffling feathers.

The thought of how strange this all is – the serendipitous nature of everything happening – dances in the back of my mind. The childlike part of me is excited – attentive. I whisper thanks to the ground through a grin that's painted itself across my face, and press on.

The path winds onward, down and down; I pass a little man and his dog on the way, their footfalls a quiet shushing in the dirt. The distance between myself and the earth filters away like dry soil beneath an archaeologist's brush.

*"Today is Qumran."*

I find myself again at a fork in the road. A small trail that drops off a sharp ledge winds down and away from the curve in the footpath; I cannot see beyond the decline, but it pulls on my spirit, nonetheless. The ghost of solitude and discovery

instilled in me when I was very young reveals itself to me very rarely these days. Is there less to discover, now? Or have I simply forgotten to keep pushing the boundaries of comfort and routine? I know the answer, of course, but asking the question anyway is in itself an active reflection and acknowledgement.

I really *do* need to get out more.

I slide down the side path, the sounds of the highway coming through clearer now. The little trail bends into a clearing full of barren bushes that rise up like thin, fragile bones. In the center is a rock – a *boulder*. The size of a small truck and cracked all over. Fissures run down its length, branching near the top before meeting again, creating a vague oval shape. The line winds on and down to where the boulder meets the soil.

I'm immediately struck by the stone's visage. The oval is an *eye*. The fissure is at once a teardrop drawing itself down the stone's weathered cheekbone. A mound above the shape becomes a *brow*, and the smooth cut along and under the front a *mouth*!

A great *dragon's* head lies before me, hidden from sight at the base of a lonely trail.

Weeping Dragon Rock. This place is not a *garden*, but a *graveyard*.

Redwood Park was built along the spine of a dead, primordial serpent of fire.

~

What I expect is a rush of psychic wind, for my body to burst alight with that strange, apocryphal power I have so often felt during moments of growth. To feel my muscles start to shake – resonating to some deep and elemental frequency like a cymatic plate.

Sorrow fills that space, instead.

It's a low, wet, earthen tone, like the solemn tricking of an underground aquifer.

I choose to honour it; now is not the time for blazing revelation – today, the dragon and I must grieve.

There's a deep well of compassion that blossoms in me, here at the bottom of the trail, and I reach out a single hand, gently resting my palm against the stone's cracked face.

“What happened to you?”

I sense the burning of forests, the deaths of a hundred-thousand men. The dragon does not reply in words, but in spirit – conjuring the story through me from the place where all myths are rooted. A myth of loss and pain that, like all stories of suffering, deals, at its core, with helplessness.

The memories of my own upbringing flash before me, too. I remember my thirteen-year-old body, sitting outside, alone, in the cold under the awning of the school's entrance, scratching tally marks of days into concrete pillars as if it was some sort of joke.

At the time I hadn't realized how strange my life was. In my mind, the insane sorts of responsibilities that had been thrust upon me were just inevitable byproducts of living in a working family. I had never really considered trauma as a *concept*, let alone eight-ish years of its effects on my character. Sometimes things just didn't work out.

It took almost flunking out of university, quitting my job, and coming within inches of throwing myself into traffic to really realize that I needed a bit of a mental reset. I had been learning my entire life – from birth to age twenty-one – that the whims of the world came at my own expense – that failure was the default state of things.

I still feel those seeds in me, like the trapping corridors of some dark architecture – the furious, fearful, anguished ghost of a man with a scythe in his hands, seeking nothing but sleep, and the end of all things.



Writing was once an attempt at exorcism for me. I wagered that if I just *thought* or *felt* hard enough, that haunting presence could be reasoned or healed away.

My conception of health is very different now. That solemn man is a part of me. A psychic shadow. But what cannot be banished can be understood, and ideally – soothed.

Today, the dragon is its own shadow. Within this inexorable rock lies the same fury that bubbles inside my own chest – a scorching torment of melted flesh and black, crumbling bones. And yet, the dragon weeps. Weeps for the world it lost to violence and death, for the prejudice of the townspeople that pained it so and drove it slowly to madness.

I can sense peace, too, at the bottom of this place. Time is in flux, here. Indeed, even in death, with tears slipping softly down its weathered cheeks, the dragon taps into a sadness not bludgeoned by darkness. There is purity here – the purity that birthed the garden, blossomed that strange holly bush into the likeness of a great tree, and cradled space for purple lupines and ghostly snowdrops.

I walk around the rock, tracing my fingers across it as I go. There is a ledge of shorn stone that sits at knee height on the back of it. I place my foot in the nook and pull myself onto the dragon's head.

It's not very high, but as I pull myself down into a seated position atop it, I find myself on an eye-level with the tips of spindly bone branches that clutter the clearing. Closing my eyes, I breathe in deeply, trying for a moment, to taste the wind.

Instead, I notice a warmth, as the blackness of my eyelids bleeds at once into a grapefruit red. I open my eyes.

As if on cue, through a space in the trees that lines up perfectly with the rock, the sun: soft and amber in the afternoon sky, cascades into the clearing, causing bits of wet wood and stone to sparkle like a million dazzling sprites beneath me.

I begin to cry.

~

In Buddhist philosophy, the impressions and illusory notions about the character of life that we inherit throughout our lives manifest within us as “saṃskāra”, which I have heard characterized as an undigested ball of food. It’s rather appropriate, I would say.

I think if we’re not careful, pain stacks on itself over time. By the end, you’re left with a jenga tower of little bits of hurt that feels impossible to deconstruct without toppling the whole structure. Everything is mixed in with everything else, and so we let it sit until it curdles in our bellies – until it bursts out in spite of us.

Here, sitting on top of the stone, I am reminded once again that healing is an ongoing process. That these formations within us, like the ghostly man, must be objects of care. Though his methods may be warped by attachment, he has always been trying to protect me from harm. That is the ultimate purpose of anger and fear and sadness, after all.

I have often wondered whether there will be parks or trees or birds in the future. I can’t look out into my backyard and behold the wonder of two Northern Flickers engaging in a fencing duel without my ghosts reminding me that their population has more than halved since 1966.

It’s this inability to engage untethered to anything wonderful that has weathered me down to a splinter. It seems like most of humanity is perfectly content to wander headfirst into a woodchipper up until the very last moment – the first wailing gash. I *feel* like we should be better than that – that object permanence is a thing even toddlers must understand. Sometimes I get so angry that I want to literally strangle half the population. To show them how it will feel when the skies blacken – how it might feel to choke to death on one’s own impotence.

It’s this dragon. Or what the dragon used to be. A revenant of all the worlds

we have destroyed without knowing.

And I want so desperately - *so, so* desperately - to stop us from killing more.

Of course, crazier things have been done. Perhaps it is not so impossible that the world can be saved. Indeed, here, in the sunlight, I feel as if it is folly to give up at all. That every action, even at the scale of a single human, can mitigate the effects of disaster.

That is the animus of anger, purified. To engage with that which would harm us and set up boundaries against it. There may come a time where dragon fire is a necessary measure to safeguard the planet, but it is not anywhere close to today. If half the world is as asleep as I believe it to be, then the real task of anger in a modern-day setting is awareness. Teaching.

Perhaps we all just need a little help. Some dragon training.

~

I kneel before the Great Witchwall, examining the myriad birdhouses that line the fallen tree's dirt-covered roots.

A complex mixture - a Jenga tower - of worry, determination, anger, and joy swirls within me like magical power, ready to be used. If I was able to see into the realm of spirits as the Witches do, my flesh would be aglow with a brilliant prismatic aura.

"What would you have your Herald do?"

*"Begin."*

## tinder poem

(to J)

i have a story for you  
it is a bit sad  
but this is also a tinder poem  
so not that sad  
i have left Nelson  
sorry j  
i would have loved to hear your stories  
maybe we would've even created our own stories  
maybe we'd get a dog  
and name that dog  
after another letter of the alphabet  
like "d" or "y"  
i like "y" a lot  
how strange that would be  
to yell "why!" out of our basement apartment  
though i guess our landlords would already know  
that i was a poet (unemployed)  
and that you would come home  
from work and console me from shouting

and we'd wait patiently  
for y to come home  
and when y never came home  
we would have a funeral  
and both of us would be very sad  
and we'd probably break up  
because i'd leave one too many  
dishes in the sink  
or you'd only half-tell stories  
before losing your train  
of thought staring out the window  
and maybe you'd get another dog  
but it wouldn't feel the same  
\*the good thing  
is that this isn't real  
it's just a tinder poem  
from a tinder boy  
you didn't meet  
because i was too slow  
writing this poem  
anyways  
you're really cute