

Forest, Water, Hair

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A tree rustled as the wind picked up, branches shaking. Its small white flowers swarmed about like bees. The limbs writhed fluidly like eels, or the dance of fire, struggled fiercely, bent with moans, cracked open at sharp angles showing white inside. Then, suddenly, they were still. Slowly, like someone glancing over their shoulder, the tree turned to me, reared back a bit. It was filled with a strange passion, furious. I gripped my hair. The branches came for me with all the firmness of trees. They sunk themselves into my shuddering chest and came out my back, went through the bus stop wall. My eyes rolled back hard and snapped shut.

These days, dosed up on quetiapine antipsychotic and benzodiazepine sedative, I've stopped hallucinating. I don't laugh inexplicably, wander aimlessly in the streets, stare into forests.

Back then, Anne came around the corner abruptly. I tried to loosen my limbs from where they were plastered to the bus stop, tried to slouch casual. But she could tell all the same. She kneaded her skinny fingers into my curls and said, "Feel this, right here." She pressed her forehead up against mine. "Come back." Slowly, my body began to unwind.

Back when we first met she pulled me out with her eyes, that tunneling, monolithic gaze that snapped into an abandoned world—a world I'd thought only my own. We shared what we'd seen. I told her of the rigor in wood, the burning girl, the eye in the sky. And she told me of her faeries, despite that such sharing made the secretive creatures gnaw at her knees. In the textbooks, these delusional states fall somewhere between the daze after a sucker punch and being fast asleep. But I don't think that's true. With Anne I was awake.

When my great grandfather died, he left our family his house on an island, where we spent what warm months we could. There smell of salt water permeated everything. Anne, a native, always teased me a bit when I said such dreamy things about home. That is, until the year we sold the house.

That year, we slouched on a curb corner in early June, the Milky Way splattered above our heads. She turned to me, chiding, "We'll only have the summer, you know." I looked at the cobblestones.

"Then we'll break the moments," I said. "We'll split them over and over

and we'll have all the time in the world." She smiled.

The next Wednesday she told me she wanted to show me something. We walked in comfortable silence, padding along the tide where the sand was firm. Our noses were a ripe strawberry tone by the time we got there, to that massive rock. It struck up out of the water, slick with spray, a deep slate color and bigger than a house. Anne stopped, stared long at it. It was hers. She spoke as if to herself, "We spread my father here."

The quiet after she said it was different. Anne began to backpedal then lowered her head with intention—a hunting dog spotting a fox in the snow. Her muscles strained against her bones and she sprung forward, ran a splashing yard through the surf and up the thing, her freckled feet scampering on holds I couldn't see. At the top, victorious, grinning wide, the light glared off her teeth. Her eyes were wild with sun, feverous.

She let her head down and knelt on the rock. Her long hair spread over it in wet swirls. Her shoulders bobbed rhythmically with her breath. Suddenly though, she coiled like a snake and flung her body out over the water. She fell, belly flopping it with a resounding smack. When she didn't come up I dove in after her, scanning about as the salty water stung my eyes.

Her hands gripped me and forced my head down. My feet slipped out over into where they couldn't touch. She was a wiry girl and I hadn't taken a full breath. We thrashed and my brain swirled. Little gold specks started blinking in my vision. My heart started pounding desperately. At the time I found the sheer kinetics of the moment magnificent. Every cell in my body was active and each moment filled with a raw intensity—the eroticism of fear. I stopped struggling and remembered the old tales of the beginning of the world, where at first Ouranos came into being—and further back, to where there was undifferentiated continuity—a slick surface of ice on which the mind can't grasp anything because there's nothing to grab on to. The thought lasted only a split second, as there were more pressing matters. I was drowning with a hard-on.

I struck up and made contact—an elbow in Anne's mouth. Her hands released. I broke water for a moment, gasping. She reclined in the water, still grinning, some blood on her teeth. I crawled out of the surf and knelt, chuckling water onto the sand. Anne came up behind me and I grabbed her around the throat, threw her to the ground, my hands still clenched around her neck.

"What the fuck, Anne?"

She tried to speak, but I had her too tight. She winked at me knowingly, knew the shape of my terror, how badly part of me wanted to choke the life out of her... just to have, as I'd put it to her, some comfort, something human, a tenderness with the safety of solitude, a warm thing I wasn't afraid of.

I had to stop, though, to blank that drive out. I called in my mind to the tree and it was there again in front of me. I sloughed myself off of her onto my back. My eyes rolled ninety degrees up, still open. Every muscle in my body went taut. I felt Anne slip my trunks off my stiff legs, her hands press on my arced-up chest as her supple girl-legs straddled me. She was shivering. She bit my ear.

“You scare me,” she whispered. “I like that you scare me.”

One day she curled into a ball on the couch. She said that she wanted to die. I said, “If that’s how you feel, let’s go out to the ridge, look it in the face.” She slammed the screen door and we drove across the moors, sand flying off the wheels of my truck. We passed a cranberry bog, its surface thick with bright, ripe flesh. A dog with a purple tongue paddled across it, its nose parting the body of fruit. The cranberries rippled. Anne walked up to the cliff and stared out. Her yellow dress rippled in the wind.

I knew I couldn’t stop her. I watched as she stared past her feet at the shit-colored dirt of the ridge, which gave way to pale sand and the sickly olive water under the flat line of horizon. We stood that way, silent for a long time. A seagull picked an oyster from the surf and pushed the wind down, rising, then released it. Anne moved toward the edge.

For a moment I thought she might really go. But she just sat, let her ankles dangle over the edge, the soles of her feet in empty space. I sat down beside her. “You know, if you lean forward I’ll try to catch you. I’ll go, too.”

“I know,” she said. Light gave away a gap in the clouds, falling in a patch on the water. I remembered that fish tend to stay where it hits, where it’s warmer. We got back in the truck. We put the seats all the way back. We put maps over the windows to keep out the sun and napped.

The day I left I cut her hair. Her sunburnt shoulders moved softly with her breath as wet clumps amassed on the green tile floor. When I was done she went outside to rinse her head under the hose. It was raining. The kitchen windows gleamed with water over the cutting board, where there were peaches we’d sliced for dessert. I gathered clumps of her hair and put them in an empty mason jar.