

On Johnny Cash's "God's Gonna Cut You Down"

Engram Wilkinson

He makes it clear from the beginning: you can run on for a long time, run on for a long time. I haven't been jogging recently—this September was laid down with large cracks between its days, the streets of this month poorly planned, their uneven sidewalks guaranteed to give me shin splints. But now it is October and how desperately I want my legs to ache. I use my calves to climb onto the roof through my tiny bedroom window and shout into the early light, If it must be cold, let it be cold absolutely. Every morning I am ignored. The leaves pretend to change and Life, which supposedly begins anew in the crispness of Fall, is suspended in the humidity, in the dew of trees whose branches and resins are stinking up the mornings with a new definition for sublimity. Everywhere I am alone. You taught me about the fourth dimension, during conversations on nights like this one, how every human is essentially a worm, forever attached to the long trail of past lives. Past mistakes, I corrected, and quickly changed the topic. We were messy in those days—now I'm different. I'm not feeling well yet but today I tidied the living room, even ran a disinfecting wipe across the coffee table. If you could be here now I'd show you how orderly I've arranged the books on my bookshelf, I'd play the song that has gotten me through all this, this country song I think you'd actually like, one of Cash's best. I could talk about the enigmatic midnight rider, the liar's long tongue, and how the entire song begs we speak. It begins with a shuffle-clap, something thunderous, the sound of the ground growing hard. How I read it: our remaining wild places fail to resemble one another: north, a disorder of roses; south, white-tailed deer afraid, like me, they've been the wrong animal for this life. If I could live this life in starfish forms I'd never tire of any arm, five possibilities for touching you all at once.

I want to grow these arms and live underwater. I want you to agree there's something heartbreaking about Johnny's octave-rise as God commands go do my will. How do we contain our memories, make them manageable and handheld? If you want a souvenir I have emotions I could sneak into the bottoms of cereal boxes, small shapes of me prepared for your hands, your curiosity. This poem is meant to warn you about the fragile slipperiness of a brain turned about in the hands, like an oval of soap or dead butterfly. Maybe you're tired of warnings, each boldface note typed along the bottle: TAKE WITH MEALS. TAKE WITH WATER. Is it not enough to take each surrender? To God I say, I'm submerged, I'm busy, there's no way to cup the water in these hands and swallow. My mouth is under my chest—lately I've had to eat my prey whole, climbing over clams and forcing them down. Some mornings I forget breakfast, only coffee, which I leave on the windowsill when I go walking along the roof. I've almost forgotten this song, the one you've never heard before, the one that still shuffles. It rattles the aquarium and other animals fall under me. In a dream I swam and had many arms, used them to conquer the ocean, made it sound my own song in 4/4 as it arrived to you in New Jersey. I am trapped in the stomach of myself, the stomach of a starfish, of a worm and efforts to escape sink me lower. I wonder how tightly I can squeeze the long, writhing body of your own life, your stopped time, and expose an opening through which I could crawl, digging into that quiet stomach and—somehow, without arms—rescue you into the warm air, the ocean's gasps.