

June 5, 2019

Inside the tornado, in a chair, by the fire, I sit confidently; the rocks glass in my hand, the fire in the fireplace, and my countenance - evidence of my self-assuredness. My body, though, lies outside the tempest: a chain smoking, alcoholic, cancer patient, that's been called "psychologically unemployable" by the devil himself, and blows spastically in the wind like the shame of a defeated army. I wonder how many days I'm buying with my celibacy - dry days spent watching the young and becoming more and more pre-occupied with death. My castration silent, complete. A shivering wet paper bag of bone and organ. Afraid to be hated. Afraid to be judged. A man wades before me in all of his bloated glory, smoking cigarettes in the surf and scaring the mothers back to to the beach and I want to be him and not me, quietly hiding my mistakes, swimming with my shirt on.

And why do I feel this way? If only I could boast of understanding the quiet march of the triumphant soldier. Knowing only defeat I convince myself I am regrouping for the next offensive. The others, them, "they," don't seem bothered by it (sure some of them are, I am not the only one hung up on this post, by these strings). The wheel, the blind steps, the last shred of paper skin plucked from my bones, having been long cleaned of their meat. I would say, "The worst of it is..." but it's all bad. I am all bad.

We stand on the seashore, ten years old, in a circle of peers. She waits, smiling, for me to ask. I know she will say yes. Everybody knows. But I am frozen.

My back, sun-burned, leans sticky against the tiny beached sail-boat abandoned by its pilot. The kids around us begin to lose patience, some pleading, others scoffing. She peers at me through the blinding white light of the sun. I ask. She says yes. The crowd breathes a sigh of relief and claps me on the back. I ask her if she wants to hold hands and walk down the beach. We do. The crowd leaves us alone, to figure out our new roles. I have no idea how to act. We walk back. I want to take another turn; she wants to get back to her friends. Things get awkward under my grotesque idea of what it means to be together. I have no model for people in love. I think they hold hands.

I have jumped, straight into the abyss, and there's always a thud before off I go, limping in a new direction, battered, a delusional gleam in my eye. Ultimately, I know I will be defeated. But it makes no difference because, for now, I can still put up a decent fight, so I do. But it's not a fight. It's a slippery slide off to the side, a bail-out while the car is still rolling.

We stand in the garden watching Papa. He wants us to get the pumpkin seeds from his car. Six years old, I'm the youngest and I never do anything right. I leap from my place in the dirt and dart toward the old blue Pontiac parked at the top of the driveway, half-way down the hill from the garden. My brother and his friend run past me, reaching the car first before flinging open the passenger side doors and climbing inside. I reach the driver's side door and slide in next to my brother, his friend smiling in the back seat. A handle sticks out between the two front seats and I grab it tightly, feeling the tension of the entire car in my hands. The button on the end of the lever presses in easily and the car gives a jolt before beginning to

roll downhill. I jump out of the driver's side door, leaving the older boys dumfounded and racing toward the street in the now free-wheeling machine. The tire barely misses my foot as I maneuver out of the way of the open door and watch as the car builds speed. Adults from all around suddenly appear and begin running toward us. The car reaches the bottom of the hill and plows through the mailbox, the open driver's side door bends backwards on the hinge and every mother but my own screams helplessly at the melee. I am unsure how to feel. I certainly was proud of my escape, but my mother is angry. My great-grandfather is trying to take the blame. The car has rolled to a stop in the yard across the street. The only damage done is to our mailbox and the driver's side door. The now ghost-white boys run up the hill at me but are stopped in their assault by relieved adults who hug them senselessly. I never figured out why my brother and his friend didn't just jump. Weeks later, Papa would fall out of the broken driver's side door and lose all his teeth on the street, replacing them with false ones. After that, I thought it was funny when he would take them out, close one eye, and pretend to be Popeye the Sailor Man.

I don't remember anything else about the garden that year. I imagine it grew but I don't have any memories of fresh produce. The thing I remember most as a kid is eating peanut butter and jelly on toast and drinking chocolate milk while the air conditioner hums comfortingly over the din of cartoon television: my mother at work and my brother at practice for whichever sport is seasonably appropriate. And Jesus. I am in and out of Jesus the whole time.

Jesus was handed over to me as someone who wouldn't approve of my thoughts. It's hard to live when every thought feels like a crime against God. Going to Hell was something I feared, like I feared booster shots and finger sticks. TO HELL WITH ME! MY THOUGHTS ARE NOT GOOD THOUGHTS. My prayers became obsessive chants.

DEAR GOD,

PLEASE DON'T LET ME GO TO HELL.

PLEASE FORGIVE ME FOR ALL OF MY SINS.

I LOVE YOU, GOD.

GOODNIGHT.

WAIT!

P.S. PLEASE LET ME DIE OF OLD AGE, GOD.

I LOVE YOU.

GOODNIGHT.