

Forethought of Grief

I was ten years old when my dreaming started to go.

I didn't notice at first. It's common, of course, for people to go long stretches without ever remembering their dreams. By the time I did notice, it had been four full years since I'd had a dream I could recall.

I was too embarrassed to say anything at first. But when I went with my mother to see my doctor, I brought it up at the end of my check-up, and he looked at me with grave concern in his eyes.

He took a seat and cleared his throat. His usual jovial, client-facing self seemed to give way to the downward pull of gravity, and he said, "Ma'am, it's something we're starting to see more often with children and young adults. We haven't identified a cause and we don't yet know what the long-term effects will be, but I," and his eyes, glasses-framed, seemed to narrow at me, "recommend you keep a close eye on him."

We drove home, my mom asking me about my friends and school, but glancing over frightfully every few minutes. Finally, she asked, "so you really don't ever – dream?"

Not that I could remember, I said. She paused for a moment. "So, what was the last dream you had that you *could* remember?"

Sometimes stories only emerge in the telling. And as I told her, the disparate recollections of it began to knit themselves back together.

It was a dream he'd had since he could remember. Each successive time, it was increasingly vacant. He always dreamt of a plain. At first, it was filled with animals, and trees, and his dream-self was afraid of going near them. Now it was vacant, as far as the eye could see. Mile after mile of the same landscape, copied over and over again, endlessly repeating itself on the terrain of his dream. It used to be more varied, he thought absently – perhaps it too tended away from diversity. The grass was that ugly, muddled, fading green and yellowish-brown, but the savannah made it work. It felt rough on his feet, and the land offered no reprieve from the sun. It was through here that he wandered. Through a world mercilessly stuck at high noon.

He walked and walked, inspired by the unseen forces that press the dream-narrative on. A hill began to appear in the corner of his vision, and his body shifted towards it, drawn there like

magnetic north. And eventually, he arrived at the mouth of a cavern in the hill. He entered without hesitation.

The cavern was damper and cooler than the plain on which it sat. He felt a drop of water trickle off of the ceiling and into his palm, colder and more shocking than it had any right to be. He looked and dimly saw the top of the cavern stretching away. The hill was deceptively small; from the outside, it looked as though it was no larger than his childhood home. Inside though, it contained its own infinity. He could just barely make out the shapes of stalactites above him, each dripping white. Underfoot collected pools of liquid. The ceiling looked like it was full of stars, getting further and further away with each successive *plip* until they each eventually trickled into nonexistence. He shuddered, drew a deep breath, and walked further in.

The chamber grew narrower as he walked through it. First, he ducked his head, then hunched his back and finally he crawled on all fours. The longer he walked, though, the more restrictive the passage grew; eventually, he was flat on his stomach, dragging himself along by his forearms. Just when he thought he couldn't take it any longer and started to feel himself suffocating in the dark, he tumbled out and into another chamber.

There, he teetered cautiously, blindly groping his way toward the walls of the room. He felt his way along, his eyes unable to guide him any further. The ocular gave way to the tactile, and his world become hard and soft, malleable and intractable. He moved along the side of the chamber and instantly recoiled. Instead of the cool, hard rock, he felt something soft – like flesh. He touched it again experimentally, and it didn't seem to react in any way. He took a slow step forward and felt his way closer. He moved his small hand along it, and it was soon greeted by something silky smooth. A suit, he was sure of it. He stood up on his tiptoes and felt a mound in his palm, two depressions and what seemed to be a five-o'clock shadow.

His father stood before him, inanimate.

He walked further along the wall, pausing only briefly once he recognized his mother's perfume. He moved past his younger brother without delay.

After an eternity of tip-toing around the expanse of the cave, he felt his way to a cold, hard surface. Moving his hands around it, he found a handle, braced his legs, and shoved his way into light.

His eyes took a moment to adjust. He blinked rapidly, ambling around while his sight recalibrated.

The first thing that he noticed was that the room was filthy. The floor was caked in mud, and shit, and dirt. Weeds sprung up optimistically wherever they could find a crack in the concrete. Hateful, artificial fluorescent lamps hung from the ceiling. And the back half of the room was covered, wall to wall, in wild animals.

Maneless, ribbed lions cowered in the corner. Tremulous giraffes clung to the wall, and wide-eyed gazelles stared frightfully at the center of the room. They pressed themselves against one another as he inched closer. And there stood a slim figure, brandishing a firearm in one hand and a whip in the other. And the figure turned, and looked at him, and the face that stared back was his own. It smiled, wider, and wider, and the world was engulfed in the bright hue of his smile, and all was white, and then all was gone.

For a while there was silence. All my mom could think to add was that lions had gone extinct in the wild right before my tenth birthday.