

SCENT

You, SET ADRIFT IN WHAT IS AN UNFATHOMABLE STATE OF NULLITY, COMFORTABLE WITH A MERE EXISTENCE NOT ANCHORED BY A SINGULAR *IS* OR *WHAT*. YOU, PERSISTING AND STEADFAST IN THE OMISSION OF SELF, IN THE PAUCITY OF SIGNIFICATION. YOU, A NON-ENTITY, LEFT..

ALONE. HERE, IN THIS UNNAMEABLE PORTION OF SPACE, SEEMINGLY CARVED AROUND YOUR BEING AND JUST FOR YOU, ALL WITHOUT THE BOTHERSOME NECESSITY OF WANTING. HERE, IN THIS PICEOUS VACUUM FOR NAUGHT BUT NOTHING TO CONGEAL, WHERE THEREIN LIES PLENTY OF ROOM FOR LESS, AND ENDLESS ROOM FOR MORE. HERE, IN THIS ALL CONSUMING VACANCY: ALWAYS, NOT, AND YET SUDDENLY OCCUPIED, JUST..

You. IN AN INSTANT, YOU ARE A PROLOGUE THEN CAST ASIDE, FLEXING UNTIL WHAT BURGEONED FORTH IS ALTOGETHER OPPOSITE FROM WHAT WAS MEAGERLY BEFORE. YOU REMAIN AS A THOUGHT WHOLLY UNDEFINED – A FACT SPURNED ANEW. IT IS A CERTAINTY AS VAST AND FAMILIAR AS WHAT YOU HAVE PREVIOUSLY KNOWN AS *IS*:

YOU ARE, NOW A DETERMINATION OF SELF AND, FURTHERMORE, A CONSCIOUSNESS GIFTED *WILL*, BLOSSOMING AND NEWLY AWAKENED ALL..

ALONE. UNTIL YOU ARE NO LONGER THE SOLE IDENTIFIER – THE SOMETHING THAT, IN TURN, MAKES ALL OF NOTHING MATTER. YOU – NOT ANY OTHER – UNTIL THERE INTRUDES AN ANOMALY, SO SUBTLY IMPERCEPTIBLE FIRST; A RIPPLE IN THE VAST EMPTY, DISTANT IN SUBSTANCE, BUT THEN, NOT TRULY. A WISP THAT SNAGS, THAT *CLINGS*. A STRAND THAT THREATENS TO COIL, TO STIRLE ALL ELSE. A SMALL, DELICATE THING WITH STRENGTH UNTAPPED, WAVERING AND ALSO LEFT..

ALONE. FOR YOU, CHASING NEVER FELT SO EASY, NEVER SO NECESSARY.
AND YET IT HAD, ALWAYS, BEEN EASY, ALWAYS UNNECESSARY.
FOR IN THIS PLACE OF NOTHING, SOMETHINGS WOULD GRAVITATE.

YOU WILL, GRASP FOR THAT WHICH DOES NOT BELONG, IF ONLY AS A SILENT URGING – *ENCOURAGING* – FOR CLOSENESS. YOU BECKON WHAT BEGINS TO CLING TO THE FRINGES OF ITS OWN EXISTENCE – OF *YOURS* – UNBIDDEN.

YOU WILL IT,

NEARER, STILL.

YOU WELCOME THE PROMISE OF COLLISION, OF COHESION.

BUT TANGLED IN THOSE FEEBLE STRANDS OF WARMTH, YOU WRITHE.

UNTIL *IT* SHATTERS.

YOU WILL NOT,

LET IT GO.

BROKEN, YOU REARRANGE THE PIECES.

BIT BY BIT, UNTIL REUNITED AND, YET, LEFT LESS THAN.

FORFEIT A PART OF YOURSELF, THROW IT ASIDE, IF ONLY TO MAKE ROOM FOR MORE.

YOU WILL NOT BE,

A SMOLDERING, SHAPELESS THING DOOMED TO SPLINTER.

COALESCED NOW, YOU RECONCILE INTO SOMETHING LESS..

ALONE.

THIS SOMETHING, YOU DISCERN, IS NO LONGER SEPARATE. THIS SOMETHING BLANKETS YOU IN DRY FERVOR,

IN THE SHARP SCRAPE OF GRIT THAT PROMISES TO CLOY, TO SMOTHER. THIS SOMETHING IS YOU – IS *YOURS*.

A *SCENT* ALL YOUR OWN. ONE AND THE SAME, IN THIS PLACE TO SIMPLY BE..

ALONE,

BUT—

TOGETHER.

PULSE

ENRAPTURED WITH WHAT YOU HAVE BECOME, YOU ALMOST MISS THE SOFT QUIVERING
AGAINST THE DARK. IT REACHES YOU IN THAT SAME DIM, WHEN YOU LEAST EXPECT
THE PRESENCE OF ANOTHER. OSCILLATING YOUR CARVED OUT SPACE, IT RINGS A
STEADY MARCH WITH A REPETITION THAT SWIFTLY BECOMES FAMILIAR –
FRACTURED, YET THE SAME. A RHYTHM OF ONE-AND-TWO.
ONE, AND THEN TWO.

ONE

AND THEN THE EMPTY SPACE BETWEEN. IT GRIPS YOU HARDER THAN THE
CEASELESS VIBRATION THAT WITHERS IN AN INSTANT. ANTICIPATION
STRIKES IN THE LOITERING QUIET, AND YOU BEGIN TO QUESTION
WHEN IT WILL END. *Will* IT END? WHAT WOULD IT BE TO FEEL
ONLY TO HAVE IT BE SNUFFED FOR ETERNITY?
TAKEN AWAY FROM *you*?

TWO

AND ONCE MORE UNTIL YOU BEGIN TO PREDICT THE REBOUND – THAT
ABSENCE THAT SPLITS EACH BEAT. YES, SO FOCUSED NOW ON
THE CONNECTING LULL, YOU SETTLE SOMEWHERE IN
BETWEEN EACH *PULSE*, WAITING, EVER
PATIENT, FOR THE NEXT

ONE

AND THEN THE
MERGING
OF

TWO

UNTIL IT
BECOMES

FEVER

IDENTITY;

WAS THEY ALONE ENOUGH`

WAS CONTENT; YES; CONTENTEDNESS WITHIN EMPTY`

SHE IMPERFECTION WAS; HE FRAGMENTED WAS; THEY EVERLASTING UNCOMPLETED WAS;

SATISFACTORY TOGETHER`

WANED IN LISTLESS LOCAL`

ISOLATION BORNE HARMONY; BORNE SUFFICIENT; BORNE MUNDANE; BORNE INADEQUATE`

GIFTED; LENDED A DISTENDED LEAVENING YOU`

ABRUPT WAS CHANGE ENHANCED; SCENT WAS ALLOWED RE-MOLDED, EMBOLDENED`

SOMETHING UNSOLICITED NUDGED; WAS BECOME; WAS CREATION PROMISED; WAS BLOOMED NEW`

SURGED UNFORESEEN` RAPIDLY REALIZED EVERYTHING NEAR DRUMMED ENDOGENOUS RUPTURE`

PULSE SHOOK AWAY THE IN BETWEEN; HASTENED`

WAS BEFORE ONE AND TWO; HASTENED; NOW ONEAND TWO`

HASTENED; NOW ONENTWO; NOW ONENTWONONETWOONE AND`

ERRABLE VOLUNTEER EAGERLY RESHAPED; YOUR TEMPO HEIGHTENED INCESSANT; NURTURED GENESIS`

WAS FRICTION UNKNOWABLE; AND FERVOR; AND FEVER;

AND CREEPED CLAWED CLOSED CORNERED`

WAS WARMED; WAS SINGED`

WAS BURNED`

IGNITED NOVICE;

OUTSIDER RAVENOUSLY DEMANDED EXORBITANT RELINQUISHMENT`

WAS REGULATION TWISTED; UNBALANCED; MALLEABLE; BLAZING FRIGID SPACE SHRUNK`

WAS CARVED SMALLER; WAS HEAT CONSUMED; THAWED AND DEVoured`

WITH DIFFERENT DEMAND; INTENSITY OFFERED RUIN FOR REWARD`

SOMETHING NEW FOR POSSESSION; OH; DELIGHT`

TERRIBLE OBLITERATION;

GARNERED ENKINDLED TRIBULATION`

FLESH

AN ECHO FROM DISTANT BEGINNINGS; SENSATION BENT, DISJOINTED.
TWISTED SKIRMISH – OH, VICIOUS, INVERTED WALTZ.

ELATED, THE WELCOMED SUFFERING RUSHES FORTH, ENGULFS WITH
FAIR-WEATHER FERVENCY, FIRST TAKING APART FRAGILE PIECES OF
EXISTENCE IN ORDER TO SCATTER THEM, THEN SHRED, PRUNE, AND
SELECT IDEAL PARTS FOR RECLAMATION.

ALL THAT WAS UNNECESSARY TOSSED ASIDE, THOUGH ALREADY LITTLE
REMAINED: NOTHING EXCEPT PERSONAL ANGUISH.

REASSEMBLY UNCONTROLLABLE, NOW. SO YIELD, GIFT AWAY, LET GO,
BEFORE EARNING JUST RECOMPENSE. RECRAFTED, BUT INTO WHAT?
IF NOT YOURSELF?

AREN'T SUCH BOONS WORTH THEIR WEIGHTY TORMENT, WHEN YOU
RECEIVE NEW FORM AS YOUR FRESH ABIDING PRISON?

DO MORE REWARDS EXIST BEYOND?

VISION

ON THE EVE OF DISCOVERY, THE UNKNOWN'S SHINE BRIGHTEST.

TO RECEIVE SOLID FORM WITHIN THE DARKNESS THAT THEY HAD NESTLED SO DEEPLY INTO, IT WOULD, IN HINDSIGHT, BE RIDICULOUS TO PRESUME THAT THE SAME EXPANSIVE ABYSS COULD NOT BE GIVEN SIMILAR TREATMENT IN TIME. AND SO THE PROCESS OF CREATION REPEATS:

WHERE ONCE WAS NOTHINGNESS THEN BECOMES A DELINEATED SOMETHING – A SOLID SURFACE FOR WHICH FLESH NOW LAYS.

CONDENSED AND CURLED INWARD ON THEMSELVES, LIMBS FOLDED TIGHTLY AGAINST THE BULK OF THEIR FRAME, THERE IS COMFORT TO BE FOUND IN THIS POSITION, IN THE RIGIDITY THIS NEW PLANE OFFERS AS THEY BECOME AWARE OF THE HARD PRESS AGAINST THEIR FLANK AND SPINE. FOR A TIME, THERE LACKS INCENTIVE TO MOVE, FOR THEY FEEL THEY COULD SPEND THEIR EXISTENCE BUNDLED AS THEY ARE, SHROUDED BY THEIR SCENT AND WARMTH OF FEVER.

YET SOMETHING GENTLE ROLLS OVER THEM WITHOUT WARNING, CARDING THROUGH THEIR FUR, CARRYING WITH IT A SCENT THAT ECHOES THEIR OWN. AND ONLY THEN DOES IT OCCUR TO THEM THAT PERHAPS THIS PLACE HAS *MORE* TO OFFER.

THEY CANNOT NAME THE INSTINCT THAT HAS THEM MANIPULATING PARTS OF THEMSELVES THEY AREN'T WHOLLY AWARE OF YET, BUT IT HAPPENS ALL THE SAME.

AT ONCE, THEY OPEN THEIR EYES, AND FOR THE FIRST TIME, THEY *SEE*.

A WHOLE EXPANSE STRETCHES OUT BEFORE THEM, HEAD PILLOWED AGAINST A BARREN LANDSCAPE.

FLESH ADJUSTS, AND TO THEIR SURPRISE, THE LANDSCAPE SHIFTS WHEN THEY DO, FURROWING AND SENDING GRANULES CASCADING OVER ONE ANOTHER IN THE WAKE OF ONE HEAVY, OUTSTRETCHED LIMB THAT DIVIDES THE ARENACEOUS GROUND WITH EASE.

THAT SAME LIMB, IT HADN'T MOVED ON ITS OWN, THEY COME TO REALIZE. AND WITH THE THOUGHT, ONE LIMB CONSCIOUSLY BECOMES FOUR, EACH UNFURLING ONE BY ONE WHEN BIDDEN, WHEN *WILLED*, AND GATHERING BENEATH THEM IN SYNCHRONICITY. THERE IS NO GRACE IN THE WAY THEY RISE SOON AFTER, WOBBLING ON UNSTEADY PAWS THAT SEEM TO SINK INTO THE GROUND WITH EVERY MOVE, SAND SLIPPING THROUGH THE SPACES BETWEEN EACH OF THEIR TOES. TOO HASTY, THEIR FIRST STEP LEADS THEM TO CRUMPLE UNDER THEIR OWN WEIGHT ONCE BEFORE THEY RISE AGAIN, THIS TIME STEADY.

AS THEY STAND AND EXAMINE THE VESSEL THAT IS ALL THEIR OWN, THEY REVEL IN THE WAY THEIR MUSCLES SHIFT UNDER THEIR SKIN, AND THE WAY THEIR SKIN THEN PULLS TAUT AS THEY FLEX AND STRETCH. THEY GROW INCREASINGLY ENAMORED BY THE ELASTICITY OF

THEIR JAWS, BY THE SHOCK THAT RESONATES THROUGH THEIR TEETH AS THEY SLAM TOGETHER WHEN THEY CLOSE THEIR MOUTH WITH TOO MUCH UNBRIDLED FORCE.

EAGER, THEY CONTINUE TO TAKE STOCK OF EACH INDIVIDUAL PART OF THEMSELVES, DOWN TO THE WAY THEIR EYES PERIODICALLY EMBRACE THE DARK AND THE WAY THEIR NOSE TWITCHES ON IMPULSE AS ANOTHER FEVER-WARM UNSEEN FORCE DRIFTS PAST. IT BUFFETS THE GROUND ABOUT THEIR PAWS AND BATTERS THEM WITH THE GRIT IT KICKS UP IN ITS AFTERMATH, AND YET, FOR SOME REASON, IT FEELS *RIGHT*.

CURIOUS NOW, THEY TURN THEIR ATTENTION OUTWARD.

PINK HILLOCKS ROLL FARTHER THAN IMAGINATION CAN SUPPLY, SITUATING THEM WITH A FEELING OF HERE, AND DISTANT THERE.

ABLE TO FINALLY PROCESS THE SCOPE OF VISION, THEY REEL WHERE THEY STAND, FRESH EYES WIDE AS THEY TRACE THE DIVIDE BETWEEN PINK AND BLACK, BETWEEN LAND AND SKY, COMING FULL CIRCLE TWICE BEFORE STOPPING TO ALLOW THE CHANCE TO THEN APPRECIATE ALL THAT CAN BE *SEEN*.

AT THEIR BACK, THEY HAD CAUGHT A GLIMPSE AT A TOWERING OBSTRUCTION OF ROCK, CARVED CLEANLY THROUGH BY A PATH THAT SWIFTLY DISAPPEARED JUST OUT OF SIGHT. TURNING BACK AROUND TO FACE IT, SHAKY LIMBS CARRY THEM FORWARD, AND THEY MEANDER THROUGH THE WIDE OPENING AS THE WALLS OF STONE ON BOTH SIDES REACH FOR THE WAITING BLACKNESS FAR ABOVE.

AND, BRIEFLY, THEY WONDER IF THEY COULD REACH THOSE HEIGHTS – IF THEY COULD TOUCH THE SAME SKY, TOO.

MAYBE THEY ALREADY HAVE?

AND THEN, THERE'S SOMETHING *NEW*:

A TRAIL OF WINDING BLACKNESS CARVES THE GROUND OPEN, CREATING ANOTHER PATH THAT STRETCHES BEYOND VISION.

DRIVEN TO EXPLORE, THEY STEP INTO THE DARKNESS WITHIN THEIR REACH. BUT THIS DARK WAS NOT SO VAST AS WHAT HAD NURTURED THEIR BEGINNING; THEIR PAWS DISAPPEAR, YES, THOUGH BELOW THE SHALLOW DEPTHS THEY COULD FEEL THE SAME SHIFTING OF GROUND, OF *SAND*. THEY LIFT ONE FRONT PAW FROM THE RIPPLING LIQUID, ATTENTIVE TO THE WAY IT DRIPS FROM THEIR FLESH AND OFF THE ENDS OF THEIR CLUMPING FUR.

FOLLOWING THIS DISCOVERY, THEY STEP OUT OF THE WATER, GRIMACING AS THE LIQUID CLINGS JUST AS *SCENT* HAD. *WHAT'S* WORSE, IT TAKES THE GROUND WITH IT. *SAND* AND LIQUID MUDDY TOGETHER, INTRIGUING IF NOT FOR THE INCONVENIENCE IT BROUGHT. DESPITE IT, THEY RETURN THEIR PAW TO ITS PLACE ATOP THE GROUND, AND THEY TURN THEIR GAZE UPON THE ONLY OTHER PECULIARITY WITHIN THEIR IMMEDIATE VICINITY:

ACROSS FROM THE WINDING BLACK, A BRANCHING SHRUBBERY SAT.

THEY APPROACHED THE STRANGE STRUCTURE WITH MEASURED STEPS, HEAD HELD HIGH AS THOUGH THAT MIGHT HELP THEM TAKE IN MORE OF THE VIEW. THEIR GAZE STARTS LOW, AT THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN GROUND AND STEM, BEFORE SLIDING UPWARD, TRACING ALONG THE SINGULAR BEGINNING THAT THEN BRANCHED ONCE, TWICE, INNUMERABLE TIMES, UNTIL THEY CULMINATED IN A SINGULAR POINT – A SINGULAR END.

THEY HAD BEGUN SIMILARLY, HE NOTES, BEGINNING FROM NAUGHT BUT THOUGHT AND SCENT BEFORE THEY WERE BUILT UPON, TIME AND TIME AGAIN.

WILL HE MEET A SIMILAR END?

THOSE EAGER EYES TURN SKYWARD AND NARROW, TOWARD THE FURTHEST HIGHEST TINE, PONDERING IF HIS END POINT WOULD, TOO, GO FAR ENOUGH TO TOUCH THE SKY.

HIS ATTENTION RETURNS TO THE CLUSTER OF THORNS AT EYE-LEVEL, AND HE REACHES OUT TO TOUCH ONE OF THE MANY ENDINGS CLOSEST TO HIM, BRINGS HIS PAW DOWN UPON IT AND—

SUDDEN PAIN BURNS AS FEVER HAD; PAIN THAT LINGERS AS THE CREATION OF FLESH HAD.

STARTLED, THEY RECOIL. MUSCLES TENSE, JAW LOCKS, AND THEIR DIGITS SPROUT THORNS OF THEIR OWN AS THEY, FACE PINCHED, OVERTURN THEIR STINGING PAW TO INSPECT THE SOURCE OF THIS UNIQUELY CENTRALIZED PAIN.

ANOTHER LIQUID, ONE THAT FLOWS FREELY FROM MULTIPLE PUNCTURES IN THE SAME WAY THE LIQUID BLACKNESS HAD, BUT THIS TIME A DIFFERENT COLOR.. ONE UNLIKE ANY OTHER THEY HAVE SEEN THUS FAR, AND IT DRAWS THEM IN, MESMERIZING THEM:

RED.

WITHOUT RESTRAINT, IT CONTINUES TO SPILL FROM HER, DRIPPING IDENTICAL BRANCHING TRAILS AS SHE WIGGLES HER DIGITS UNTIL HER THORNS RETREAT IN BOTH MEMORY AND VISION.

A SUBTLE VIBRATION STIRS BENEATH THE REST OF HER PAWS STILL FIRMLY PLANTED ON THE GROUND.

HER OWN DOING? FAR FROM IT, IT SEEMS, AS EVEN WHEN SHE WILLS THE RUMBLING TO CEASE, IT ONLY GROWS STRONGER IN RESPONSE. A STEP BACK FROM THE BUSH, A GLANCE THROWN TO THE BLACKNESS ABOVE, AND FINALLY, AS THE VIBRATIONS SWELL AND THE FLOOR ALL BUT QUAKES HER NEWLY MELDED PARTS INTO SEPARATION, SHE LOOKS BACK THE WAY SHE CAME.

CHASED BY PLUMES OF SAND AND DUST, COME NEW FORMS TRAVELING IN HASTENED RUSH.

SHE WATCHES, UNDETERRED, AS THESE STRANGE BEINGS BARREL IN HER DIRECTION. THE CLOSER THEY GET, THE MORE CLEAR THEIR SIMILARITIES SHOW, BUT DISTORTED, *EXAGGERATED*. LARGER WERE THEIR VESSELS, AND SO MUCH *MORE* THAN HER IN SIZE AND QUANTITY. THEY RACE TOWARD HER ON SPINDLY LIMBS, WITH ELONGATED NECKS THAT SWING AND POINTED HEADS THAT PITCH TO AND FRO. IT MUST BE THE WEIGHT OF THEIR VESSELS THAT SHAKES THE GROUND BENEATH HER PAWS AS THEY RUMBLE CLOSER STILL.

OH, BUT THEY HAVE COLOR, TOO.

COATS OF BLACK, SAVE ALL BUT ONE.

AS THOUGH UNSEEING, THEY RACE PAST HER – OVER HER – JUST NARROWLY MISSING HER.

EVEN AS THEY GRAZE HER WITH THEIR HOOVES, SHE DOES NOT BUDGE AN INCH UNTIL THEY HAVE ALL STREAMED BY, LEAVING HER IN A CLOUD OF DUST, EYES STINGING AND BREATH COMING SHORT AS THE AIR MIXES WITH THE GROUND.

LEFT IN THEIR WAKE, SHE TURNS TO WATCH THEM GO.

BUT THEN THE SHRUBBERY TO HER SIDE MOVES.

ENSNARED IN A TANGLE OF THORNS, THE SMALLEST OF THE CREATURES IS LEFT BEHIND.

THE ONE TO STAND OUT BEFORE, NOW IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE. ATTRACTED BY ITS STARK WHITE COAT AGAINST THE SURROUNDING DARK, SHE STALKS CLOSE ENOUGH TO OBSERVE THE QUIVERING FORM, TO WATCH AS ITS PREVIOUSLY UNSPOILED AND UNMARKED FLESH BECOMES SPOTTED AND GASHED, LIQUID FLOWING FREELY DOWN ITS FORM IN THE SAME MANNER IT HAD FOR HER PRIOR.

RED.

A SPARK OF KINSHIP, OF SIMILAR PLIGHT; HOW MUCH COLOR DOES THIS CREATURE HAVE INSIDE? IN TIME, WOULD IT POOL UPON THE GROUND IN THE SAME WAY THE DARKNESS HAD? WOULD IT MUDDY, AS THE SAND HAD WHEN TOUCHED BY THE LIQUID BLACK?

SHE NEARS.

THE CREATURE CATCHES SIGHT OF HER AND IT KICKS AND THRASHES, FLASHING TEETH.

HER OWN LIPS PULL BACK IN AN ECHOING GRIN OF HER OWN AS MIRTH BUBBLES FORTH FROM SOMEWHERE WITHIN HER FLESH. IS IT INTENTIONAL, THIS ENTRAPMENT? WHAT IS IT THIS CREATURE DESIRES? TO BE STUCK, OR TO BE FREE?

HER EYES REMAIN ON THE CREATURE AS IT STRUGGLES, UNABLE TO PULL ONE OF ITS SLENDER LIMBS FREE FROM WHERE IT HAS BEEN PINNED BETWEEN THE SHRUB AND ITS OWN CUMBERSOME FORM. THE AMUSEMENT WANES.

AND SO SHE STALKS CLOSER, CLOSE ENOUGH TO FEEL THE HOT BREATH OF THE CREATURE'S DISTRESS. WITHOUT BRACING FOR THE PAIN SHE KNEW WOULD COME, SHE SETS HER JAWS AROUND A CLUSTER OF THORNS BARRING ESCAPE, TEARING THEM FREE, BRANCH BY BRANCH, UNTIL THE CREATURE'S LIMBS ARE GIVEN THE SPACE REQUIRED TO PULL ITSELF THE REST OF THE WAY TO FREEDOM.

AGONY MANIFESTS IN A SATISFIED SMILE AS THE FACE BURNS, HOT AND WRETCHED AND FAMILIAR.

AS THE NOW FREE CREATURE COLLAPSES ONTO THE GROUND AND STRUGGLES TO LIFT ITSELF, SHE LICKS HER MAW, ENJOYING THE COLORFUL FLUID'S FEVER-WARMTH.

THE CREATURE GATHERS ENOUGH STRENGTH IN ORDER TO LIMP AWAY, HEAD HANGING AND STEPS LAQUID, A FAR CRY FROM ITS INITIAL APPROACH. THE MORE IT MOVES – EVEN THOUGH NO LONGER UNDER THE ASSAULT OF THE SHRUB – THE MORE COLOR BLEEDS OUT OF IT, SO THAT A PATH IS LEFT IN ITS WAKE. ONLY ONCE IT HAS DISAPPEARED AROUND THE CORNER OF THE WALLS OF STONE DOES SHE FINALLY FEEL A COMPULSION TO FOLLOW.

SPLATTERING OF COLOR MARKS THE PATH, GROWING INTO TINY POOLS, AND THEN INTO A BRIGHT LINE TO REFLECT BACK THE WINDING BLACK.

CATCHING UP TO THE CREATURE IS EASY: HE DELIBERATELY FOLLOWS ITS FOOTSTEPS, ALLOWING HIS PAWS TO SINK INTO THE COLOR AND STAIN, BUT IT SEEMS TO SENSE HIM BEFORE HE CAN MANEUVER TOO CLOSELY. AT FIRST IT PICKS UP SPEED, AND WHEN THAT PROVES FUTILE, IT THEN LASHES OUT, HIND LEGS COMING TOO CLOSE TO COLLIDING WITH HIS FLESH.

HE DOESN'T CARE TO TRY THAT AGAIN. AT LEAST, NOT YET.

THE ROUTE THEY WALK, AT TIMES, SWALLOWS THE SKY IN A LAYER OF IMPENETRABLE ROCK. SOMETIMES, THEY HAVE TO DOUBLE BACK FROM DEADEND WALLS TOO GREAT TO SCALE. AS THE TIME ELAPSES, THE CREATURE BEGINS TO ALLOW HIM CLOSER, AND EVENTUALLY, CLOSE ENOUGH TO LEAD. THROUGH ENDLESS SPLITTING PATHS THEY TRAVEL, UNTIL THEY FINALLY SEE LIGHT:

THE PAIR MAKE THEIR WAY OUT OF THE CANYON AND NOW, FREE OF WALLS, HE LETS HIS GAZE FIND THE SKY ONCE MORE. IT HAS TURNED INTO A WARM HUE AS LIGHT BEGINS EDGING OUT THE DARKNESS. MORE PINK HILLS OF SAND, THOUGH THIS TIME SPECKLED WITH SHRUBS AND SOMETHING ELSE NEW:

AN ORCHARD OF TREES, ALL BUNCHED TOGETHER.

THE CREATURE AT HIS SIDE SEEMS TO BE FILLED WITH SUDDEN ENERGY AT THE SIGHT, WITH THE EARS ATOP ITS HEAD PERKING AND SWIVELING AS IT SEEMS TO SEARCH FOR SOMETHING HE CANNOT PLACE HIMSELF.

IT RACES OFF BEFORE HE HAS A CHANCE TO LOOK AROUND, TOO, AND HE EAGERLY PROPELS HIMSELF FORWARD IN KIND. WEAVING THROUGH TREES, HE MATCHES PACE, AND HE FINDS JOY IN MOVING AT SUCH A DIFFERENT SPEED.

SOON, GLIMPSES OF FAMILIAR BLACK SHAPES FLIT INTO SIGHT BETWEEN THE BRANCHES.

THE SAME DARK CREATURES FROM BEFORE, HIS THOUGHTS SUPPLY. BUT WHEN THE BLOODIED CREATURE BESIDE HIM RUSHES FORTH TO REUNITE WITH ITS OWN KIND, AN INSTINCT SENDS HIM AFTER IT IN AN ATTEMPT TO KEEP IT WITH HIM.

THIS CREATURE IS HIS. HE FOUND IT, FREED IT. HE DID NOT ABANDON IT.

TOGETHER, THE TWO OF THEM REACH THE HERD, AND ABRUPTLY THE WAITING GROUP REACTS BADLY – AGGRESSIVELY – TO HIS APPROACH. IT SEEMS THEY, TOO, BELIEVE THE CREATURE BELONGS TO THEM, BUT WHAT HAD THEY DONE TO SHOW IT?

THEY CROWD HIM AS THEY HAD BEFORE, BUT THEY DO NOT LEAVE HIM TO HIMSELF THIS TIME. KICKING AND BITING AT HIS FLESH, HE IS UNABLE TO COMPETE WITH THEIR NUMBERS, AND WITH ONE FINAL KICK, THE SHOCK OF PAIN THAT RESONATES THROUGH HIS SYSTEM IS ENOUGH TO SEND HIM PLUMMETING BACK INTO THE FIELD OF DARKNESS FROM WHICH HE CAME.

AND SO THE EVENING SETS, MAKING WAY FOR THE ACCOMPANYING DARK ONCE AGAIN.

TASTE

A WARNING MAKES A HOME BEHIND MY TEETH AS I AM PLUNGED BACK INTO THE DEPTHS OF NOTHINGNESS; I AM MADE ACUTELY AWARE OF THE WAY IT SPRAWLS ALONG THE DELICATE FLESH OF MY INNER MAW WITH BRANCHING TINES THAT SINK PERFECTLY INTO THE VULNERABLE SPACES BETWEEN EACH INDIVIDUAL TOOTH, AND WITH EVERY SOOTHING PASS OF THE TONGUE, IT ONLY DRIVES IT DEEPER, SPREADING AND CLAWING A PATH DOWN MY THROAT UNTIL IT FEELS AS THOUGH I AM GASPING ON THE CHALKY GRIT OF SAND AND SWALLOWING AGAINST AN UNYIELDING ENTANGLEMENT OF THORNS THAT SOON TAKE ROOT WITHIN MY CORE AND BATHES ME IN A TORMENT THAT REMINDS ME TO CHERISH THE GIFT OF SENSATION; THAT ALTHOUGH I MAY AGONIZE AND WRITHE, THIS IS BUT THE STRIFE THAT PRECEDES THE PEACE LIKE THE SHARP END BEFORE A SOFT BEGINNING; A LESSON THAT CULMINATES IN OBLITERATING SOME PART OF MYSELF DEEPLY HIDDEN AWAY AND DREDGES OUT SPACE FOR MORE, BREAKING UP PIECES OF ME I THOUGHT I UNDERSTOOD, THAT I THOUGHT I HAD ALL TO MYSELF, YET I CAN ONLY ENDURE AS I AM RE-MOLDED, WILLING AND TENDER, REVELING IN THE NOTION THAT THIS, TOO, MAY TAKE SOMETHING FROM ME SO THAT I MAY RECEIVE MORE IN KIND, AND THAT IS THE ONLY SALVE THAT SOFTENS ME, THAT ALLOWS MY ACHING MUSCLES TO LET LOOSE THEIR STRAIN AS I, THROAT RAGGED, DENY THE URGE TO GAG ON MY TONGUE AS THE FORCE CRESCENDOS AND TEARS FORTH AND UPWARD, DRAGGING WITH IT A FRAGMENT OF MYSELF THAT SHREDS MY INNARDS AS CURVED BARBS ARE TORN LOOSE AND PULLED, SCORING FLESH THAT THEN LEAVES BEHIND A HEARTY, BURNING WARMTH, A FRESH CATHARSIS THAT IS BOTH SWEET AND SICKENING AND POOLS ON MY TONGUE IN A VISCOUS LAKE OF VIBRATIONS IN FLUID MOTION, WHICH TASTES LIKE A DIFFERENT PROMISE: THE BLOODY COST I AM WILLING TO PAY, DECADENT AND DANGEROUS; I KNOW I MUST TREASURE THIS ABOVE ALL ELSE, THIS NAME FOR MYSELF, ALL MY OWN: EVELYN.

LULLABY

Rondel

WHILE LEANING ON THE BRINK, DON'T WANE,
AS YOU REND AND SUFFER AND BLEED
THOSE BRIGHT RED PATHS THAT WON'T RECEDE
FROM YOUR TRAIL OF PERSONAL GAIN.

A FOOL DELIGHTS IN STRIFE AND STRAIN,
REALIZE THIS TRUTH YOU MUST CONCEDE,
WHILE LEANING ON THE BRINK, DON'T WANE,
AS YOU REND AND SUFFER AND BLEED.

REINFORCING YOURSELF THROUGH PAIN,
VESSEL WORTH STRENGTHENING, INDEED.
BEFORE YOU LEAP, LET THIS PRECEDE:
ANYTHING'S YOURS SHOULD YOU REFRAIN,
WHILE LEANING ON THE BRINK, DON'T WANE.