

Descending

That day the earth was so hard you couldn't break ground even with a spoon. In the desert, mineral deposits calcify the soil until a dropped marble could bounce right off the top. It was the day we got the dog, and we were barbequing in my backyard. Plato was scrambling around the jaundiced grass with my brother Justin, and Lenor and I were by the fence with her friend Maria, working a patch of caliche we hoped to turn into a garden. We'd been at it an hour, but the ground was impenetrable, like trying to spoon a scoopful from solid stone.

Earlier that afternoon, after surprising her with the puppy, I'd *nearly* asked Lenor to marry me. Never thought that would happen. But without expecting it, the words almost fell off my tongue, and although this scared me right to silence, I knew it wouldn't be long before I finally gave up and settled in. After that, who knows what came next? You can spend revolving years relationshiping, telling yourself all kinds of stories, while in the end you always refuse to settle for anything less than exactly, exactly the person you wanted. And then one day you reach an age when you just stop revolving. There's no explanation. The wheel just stops. I was with Lenor when it happened.

Maria slathered her shoulders in sunscreen that Jackson Pollacked from a flatulent pink bottle. "It's no good being dark," she said. I'd given up on the garden and Lenor was helping Maria with the lotion. They grew up together here in Phoenix. Whenever we see Maria, Lenor tells me what a good pair she and Justin would make, and she's right; Maria and Justin would be the most sensible pairing in the world, except that Justin is still in love with Aspen.

Aspen is a vegan yoga instructor who lives in an off-the-grid co-op in Burlington, Vermont. She supplements her income by selling a line of hemp yoga clothing whose motto

is, “Yoga makes you fart.” I once told her that being vegan must have the same effect. She looked at me sternly and said farting is natural and therefore beautiful.

Aspen and Justin have dated on and off since college, which maybe explains Justin’s mutiny to vegetarianism after he left home all those years ago. At the time, our father had joked, “So that’s why they call it the Ivy League,” as if ivy were part of a vegetarian diet; as if the whole east coast was a place too arrogant for steak; but mostly as if, in leaving Phoenix for the far side of the country, Justin had renounced his allegiance to the kind of ruggedness born from this hard western earth. Our father was impenetrable too.

Maria capped the bottle of sunscreen and dropped it into her bag. “But it’s not the sun that’s dangerous,” she said. “Around here, *we’re* the cancer.”

I looked over at the house: a renovated two-bedroom Craftsman on Roosevelt, near downtown. I still felt a new-owner’s pride. Across the street was the barrio, with its *vatos* and *cholos* and their high-banged girls always sitting out front waiting for something to happen, but our side of the street was in a historic district where most residents did their waiting inside. I’d bought here because of the upside: coffee shops and galleries were opening nearby; they’d made a light rail stop just blocks away; the neighborhood was changing. I’d seen my window.

And now we even had a dog.

Plato had a knotted toy in his maw, and Justin was on all fours, wresting it away. I hadn’t realized Justin even liked dogs. He’d been out east so long I didn’t know what else I didn’t know. We’d been hoping to get him and Maria together, and Maria knew it, which is maybe why she looked at Lenor sometimes and Lenor just shrugged. Justin only scampered after Plato with all his attention. He’d always done whatever it was he wanted; I could be forgiven for never knowing his reasons.

“More drinks,” I said.

That night, after everyone left, Lenor and I stayed out back and watched the sun go down and the stars come out. Crepuscular birds sailed off from phone lines. The brightened moon was only a curve in all that sky, but behind it the rest of its sphere remained auspiciously visible and pale. Lenor held my pinky hooked in hers, letting our hands dangle between our chairs. There were others like us; I knew this moment—the stillness of the early night, the puppy in the yard, even the way we held hands with just our pinkies—I knew it made us a cliché, but that didn’t mean we were absolved of the joy in living our own experience.

Beneath my feet the yard felt more forgiving than it had during the day. My feet seemed to sink into it, as if stepping on a memory-foam mattress. The half-inch soles of my sandals disappeared in the compressed surface, but I lifted my heels and the ground was the same as before.

“I think I had too much to drink,” I said.

Lenor made an inadvertent snort, though it may have been a laugh.

“Me too,” she said.

“You think I did, or you did too?”

She squeezed my hand and nodded toward Plato, who was pawing at the brick of our so-called garden. Behind him bits of dirt flew across the ground and I could see he was making some progress. I went over and picked up the spoon. It eased into the dirt and unearthed a chunk the size of a fist. Maybe Plato had found a soft spot. I kept digging. Chunk after chunk of dry earth came unclumped from its bed. The chunks felt less like the stone they’d seemed before than like sponges, the living kind, almost throbbing. I moved to

get up and it was then I noticed my knees and toes had sunk into the grass. Not much, hardly enough to notice, but decidedly so: it was as if the yard was going soft.

Then Lenor was behind me with her hands under my armpits.

“Come on to bed,” she said.

We stumbled together across the weird lawn.

“I think I’m worried about my brother,” I told her.

“I’m worried about you,” she said.

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Within two weeks, the tenderness of the ground had grown even more pronounced. Others noticed it too. There was no mistaking it now: the ground could bear no weight without swallowing the bottom of anything on it. People shrunk. Poor Plato was up to his belly with his short, puppy legs submerged. He looked like a hairy lump, weaving around the ground. John and Joan on the morning radio swore the phenomenon was another consequence of global warming. “It’s not just the icebergs anymore,” John said in his radio voice. “The *earth’s* melting out there. We should have seen this coming.” But Joan didn’t appear especially concerned. “I figure we’re safe,” she predicted, “at least for *our* lifetimes.”

What made this strange predicament even more peculiar was the curious factor that nobody’s ambulation seemed the least impeded by having now to walk with their ankles underground. If you lifted a foot, or jumped, you could easily bring yourself to rise again into the clear, open air, but you always came back down into a deeper, softer landing. It felt like standing in whipped cream. Some people tried to lie on their stomachs and disappear completely, but underground it was impossible to breathe, and all anyone saw there was the same streaked darkness we see when we close our eyes.

Meanwhile I began spending more time with Justin. To anyone else, my brother would have appeared normal, even cheerful. Justin had a smiling demeanor, and a few years ago, around the time of his supposedly final-final breakup with Aspen, when his face began to show the first signs of age, it manifested as faint parenthesis of wrinkles around his mouth—the trace of his perpetual smile. This smile hadn't gone away now that he'd moved to the Valley, and he seemed excited to start at ASU in the fall, when he would teach a philosophy class as an adjunct. But still. He seemed off.

"Everything okay these days?" he asked me one morning. We were at the golf course, trying to get a round in before the earth sunk even more and playing became impossible. "With *me*?" I said. But that was Justin: forever the older brother. I told him what I thought was true, that I was beginning to feel my life start to happen. The house, the dog, Lenor. "I'm finally settling," I said.

"Down or for?"

I balanced my beer on the painted-rock tee marker so it wouldn't disappear, and then I took some practice swings, first with a two-iron, then with a driver.

"For the first time," I said, "I'm able to see myself in a situation I can sustain."

Justin squinted off toward the fairway. The foursome ahead of us was scattered around the distant green, each person bent over and pacing in circles as if looking in the grass for a dropped contact lens.

"Are you sure about that?" he said.

I had chosen the driver.

"It's no fun playing it safe."

"That's not what I meant," Justin sighed, but I was cueing up my ball and he stopped talking. The sun spilled everywhere: over the grass, the saguaro, the mesquite, over the palo

verde, chaparral, and ocotillo. That was the sun's way out here, a thing that couldn't be contained. I couldn't see and swung too hard and topped the ball and it dribbled ahead some ways then disappeared into the grass.

"Not sure you'll find that one," Justin said.

At the clubhouse they'd given us special, extended tees so the golf balls wouldn't sink. These worked well enough from the tee box. Placing a tee in the ground was like easing a candle into a birthday cake, but after that, on the fairway, just to swing felt like hacking into that cake in the hopes your ball was buried somewhere inside. We carted onward keeping our eyes fixed on our best guess for a landing point.

"Do you still think of Aspen?" I asked him.

"I try not to."

"But you do?"

"Every day," he said.

He left the cart and pulled a club from his bag, then began the process of rooting around in the grass for his buried ball. I brought my drink and a club and went off looking for mine.

We took some hacks, missed, took some more a few yards away, missed, and finally gave up and went back to the cart.

"I have a theory about health," Justin said. He had his hand in his bag, looking for another ball. I wasn't sure I wanted to keep on playing. "Here's my theory," he said. "It's that health is always either ascendant or descendent. It's never static. There's no such thing as holding steady. We're either getting healthier or getting worse."

"And right now, which one are you?"

"I think we're all descending."

“Let’s go home,” I said.

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We went out to breakfast. There’s a place called Lolo’s Lenor and I like that sells waffles and fried chicken with maple gravy so good it makes your teeth squeak. I called Lenor to join us.

“Don’t you need brother time?” she asked.

“You should come,” I urged her. I was sure from my voice that she’d know, because our special connection would make her know, that I was asking her to be there.

Spending time with Justin wasn’t the same anymore. His five years seniority had always seemed insurmountable when he and Aspen were serious, when he was in graduate school, and I was still at home sneaking girls in through the garage. But now he was thirty-one, single, in a job whose contract expired at the end of the semester, and I was the only person he knew in Phoenix. Now *I* was the grown-up.

We were sitting in a booth by a plate glass window looking on to the parking lot. Lolo’s granddaughter, Amber, came by with the menus tucked into her armpit.

“Where your honey-buns at?” she asked.

She meant Lenor. We were her regulars. Amber was one of those people for whom being blunt came across as an endearment. She wore her weight like a haircut, like it was a style. I introduced her to Justin and ordered the usual for me and Lenor, who I said would be here soon.

“The ground still falling out there?” she said, and then beamed with a toothy smile when Justin seemed about to respond. “You ain’t have to answer, sweetheart. There ain’t nothing to say.”

Justin ordered sweet tea and no straw. Amber left us a basket of cornbread. When she left Justin looked around and said, “There was this great soul food place up in Harlem I used to go to. Up on 125th. I could never get Aspen to come, so I’d bring a book and just sit there by myself, eating. Collards, yams, you name it. This was the real thing.”

“This is the real thing too.”

“It may be,” he said. “But in Harlem it’s different. You walk outside and it’s sidewalk, cars, people. It’s guys hawking at girls. It’s barbershops and beauty salons, the kind people go to just to hang around. It’s corner stores. It’s new Nikes and sagging pants. It’s bus passes and chewing gum. It’s not the same out here.”

“It’s better out here.”

“I don’t know,” Justin said. And I didn’t know what he was trying to say.

The food came quickly, before Lenor arrived, and all three of our plates sat there unattended while I stirred my Bloody Mary. But not until Lenor walked in, carrying Plato under her arm, turning heads, not until she’d scooted in next to me in the banquette, not until she’d kissed me and explained she brought the dog because she was afraid if she left him at home she might come back and find he’d disappeared completely, not until we’d done with the preliminaries and fallen into the silence that accompanies mid-meal eating, not until Justin fisted a liberal shower of salt over his receding plate of food, not until then did I notice he’d ordered chicken.

“Woah,” I said. “What happened to the vegetarian?”

Justin sopped a fork of cooked bird in gravy and jammed it into his mouth. He chewed and smiled with bulging cheeks.

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By September, we began to notice the buildings going under. The foundations had been sinking gradually, imperceptibly, until now. Now we were shin deep inside, knee deep out. It's hard to explain what this felt like; it was as if the world had two floors, and the unnatural one—the one that held people and all that we had built—was slowly falling out beneath us. This left a space between how deep we stood and how high the surface appeared. It was a bit like standing in a children's pool, except we were wading through the earth.

Plato learned to live atop the furniture.

That fall Lenor started school again—she taught fourth graders at a nearby K-8—and the University assigned Justin another class, so we didn't see him as often. Compared with his years out east, of course, having him in town gave me a much better chance to see how my brother lives. I can tell you it's not that exciting: read, exercise, eat; read, exercise, eat...

When I did see him I asked if he liked it out here, being out west again. He said it wasn't the same as he remembered it. I asked how so. He just said you can't go home again and left it at that. Is the job good, I asked. It's fine, he said, but the students aren't as smart and the faculty work like mechanics. It's all practical and functional and not like it was out east. Are you dating yet, I always asked him. No, he wasn't. And whenever I mentioned Maria he politely changed the subject.

For my part, I was holding steady. My record store was struggling, but it wasn't so bad listening to music all day with college kids I could employ by offering minimum wage and permission to be high on the job. Fridays I shut down early and opened a six-pack we'd all share in the back.

One Friday Lenor came home from school with drawings the kids had done in her class: drawings of trees and mountains and rolling fields that folded away toward wherever forever is. These drawings were astoundingly accomplished.

“They’ve never done work like this before,” she said. “It’s like they’re seeing everything anew.”

This was true. Until I saw the drawings, I hadn’t noticed my own heightened attention to the world around me. But around this time the world took on more urgency, more acute emotion, more beauty. The trees looked taller, the mountains more sturdy. It seemed that the more the earth took of us and the things people had put atop it, the more vivid it became.

“I don’t want to lose this,” I told Lenor.

“What’s this?” she said.

I held out my arms, indicating everything. But I just said, “I don’t know.”

And I didn’t.

Every day the world was getting more confusing. Lenor would marry me if I asked, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. And here Justin was single and couldn’t take advantage. One incident I remember clearly from that time is the night Justin called to invite me to a lecture on campus.

“What’s it on?” I said. What I meant was: what’s it about?

I was standing on our weedy kitchen floor—or, rather, in it—wondering if I’d ever have to mow indoors. Justin said the lecture was called, “Living the Wakeful Life.”

“Sounds like a snoozer,” I declared.

Really, I wanted to stay in for the night, to watch a movie with Lenor, to try holding on to the feeling of something normal; but Lenor mouthed, *You should go.*

Bleb, I grimaced back.

He's trying.

"You have to drive," I told Justin.

In the car, my brother had the radio tuned to John and Joan. A studio guest who'd been introduced as a preeminent geologist was saying, "What we have right now is your basic extinction event during an interglacial period. The difference is, we've never seen this kind of cataclysm before."

Justin turned off the dial.

"Have you gone to see Mom and Dad?" he said.

"No."

"We should go."

I agreed, but he kept driving toward campus and parked us alongside other cars that seemed all to have no tires.

The lecture took place in a bright auditorium with tiered seats and a wall of chalkboards down front that the speaker didn't bother to use. Instead she stood at a podium, partly submerged with it into earthen dirt and tufts of grass, wearing reading glasses that hung from a string around her neck but fell repeatedly too far down her nose, so she had constantly to reposition them as she read from a manuscript whose pages she hadn't stapled together. Fortunately, I was up top, on solid ground. More fortunately, I was close to the spread of wines and various cheeses cubed into toothpicked dice.

The woman lecturing was talking about two kinds of people: those who want to regain the person that they once were, and those who no longer want to be the way they'd always been. Something like that. I was thinking about the time, once, before I met Lenor, when I went home with a midget.

I know, I know.

She was a bartender. We'd chatted all night, drinking, laughing. She lived in a studio above the bar, and after closing she told me to wait fifteen minutes then meet her upstairs.

She was up there sitting on her bed, still in her clothes. She was so nervous, this girl, didn't even stand up when I came in. She'd already lit candles and the whole place smelled vaguely like a holiday I couldn't name. I approached her and we kissed. She pulled off my shirt and unhooked my belt. And it was then—when I was trumpeting in her hands—that she looked up timidly from the edge of the bed and said, "I'm kind of short."

Until then, I'd noticed nothing. Behind the bar, she'd seemed normal enough, vertically speaking. Presently she tugged up the legs of her jeans and de-booted using two hands for each foot. I noticed her boots had some kind of prosthetic lift to the soles, but nothing peculiar had yet to register.

I was drunk! She'd been behind the bar all night! She was cute!

Then she stood up from the mattress, eyeing me nervously, and suddenly I was standing undressed before a girl whose forehead was even with my navel.

"I can't do this," the lecturer suddenly said.

An abrupt fragility filled the auditorium.

"I can't stand here knee deep in the grass talking to you all like nothing's wrong. Something awful is happening. And we don't know what it is. All we have to explain it are comparisons. Has anyone noticed? People say it's *like* this, it's *like* that. 'It's like the opacity function on Photoshop,' I heard that one today. 'Like the Earth's pixels are no longer solid, and we're falling right through.' This is our world, people, made into a simile. And I think everyone uses similes to describe what's happening because this is something no one has ever seen. There *is* no comparison. I guess I just want to say, I think that's beautiful."

The lecturer had started to cry, soft tears she wiped with the knuckle of her thumb, before she clutched her papers in her hand and hastened away from the podium, leaving through double doors with a bright EXIT sign overhead.

When voices rose again and conversation resumed, a bearded man in a corduroy coat stood up and said, "Please, nobody go. There's still food and wine. Let's make the most of what we have while we can."

Which is exactly what I did. I stood in back, close to the wine, giving Justin his options.

"How about her?" I said, indicating a skinny brunette wearing black leggings under a slinky shirt that functioned as a dress.

"Ugh."

"How about the redhead?" The place was full of women, and I had decided Justin needed to meet one.

"Married," he said, but in a voice that obviously had no interest in carrying on. He asked what I thought about the lecture.

"Come on," I told him. "You're not trying."

Justin looked at his feet and shook his head. "You're not paying attention," he said.

So I did what any loving brother would do: I stopped the next woman who walked by.

"Excuse me," I said. "I want you to meet my brother, Justin." The woman was attractive and more or less his age, but none of that mattered. The point was, Justin needed to get out there again, interact with the fairer sex: meet someone. "Justin teaches here in the philosophy department," I said, feeling myself get on a roll. "He's the smartest guy I know.

New to town and super friendly. Plus he's got washboard abs and he knows how to use them, if you know what I mean—"

Justin took my wrist. Several sips of wine leaped overboard from my cup to the tile floor, and splattered there like pale, watered-down blood.

"I'm sorry, Nancy," he apologized.

"These are tough times for all of us," she said.

On the way home we didn't speak. I turned on the radio; Justin turned it off. We passed some people waiting at a bus stop, who looked about three feet tall because most of their legs were submerged where the sidewalk used to be. I thought of that girl, the midget whose name I can't remember, and wondered where she was. I thought that she might have disappeared already, been taken in by the ground. It wasn't fair. I rolled down the window to feel the desert's nighttime breeze, listening to the sound of the world disappearing.

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By the time we were chest deep they'd closed the airports. Planes couldn't land. You didn't see many cars on the roads. Already people were converting rooftops into livable space. They built new roofs as shelters, but then wanted to live on top of these, and then built new shelters to live beneath, but moved on top of these, on and on, ascending as high as they could go. Ultimately, the sky would be our only shelter.

I realized one Sunday afternoon that it was already too late to visit my parents' gravesite: their headstones would have sunk underground with their caskets. In a panic I took the car out and mowed through the undone streets, able to see through only a narrow band at the top of the windshield. All the usual landmarks were gone: no more roads or sidewalks, buildings disappearing, street signs poking from the ground like flowers.

The place the cemetery was supposed to be had grown over with jaundiced grass. It reminded me of an empty battlefield long after a war whose history I didn't know. I stopped the car and got out, climbed on top; I looked out over the field and tried to feel the spirits of the dead, hovering over the grass. I listened for whatever any of them might want to say.

Nothing revealed itself.

Afterwards I stopped at the shop and opened the bourbon I kept in my desk. I packed a bowl and cued some Prince on the turntable. The artist formerly known as "the artist formerly known as Prince" always cheered me up. A few drinks in I got back in the car—there was no one on the roads now anyway—and went by Lolo's to bring home some dinner. The door tinkled when I pushed it open.

At a table nearby I could hear a man describing the disappearance of his sister. By way of illustration, he pressed a baby carrot into his mashed potatoes until it disappeared completely.

"Gone," he said.

The person he was eating with set down her fork and wadded up her napkin, grimacing.

Amber sauntered over to the register, where I was waiting for service.

"You all right, sweetheart?"

"Of course," I said.

"Good, 'cause your brother's in the corner."

Then I saw him, across the dining room, at a table with Maria. Their plates were already empty, but he was talking avidly, moving his hands through the air for emphasis. Maria's mouth opened into a guffaw that I couldn't hear. They both smiled, and Justin reached across the table to take her hand.

“I’m going to let them be,” I said. “But do me a favor.” I removed some cash from my billfold and counted it before setting the bills on the counter. “Pick up their check for them. Tell them it’s on me.”

Outside I called Lenor. I was excited.

“It’s awful,” she said. “Come home. Come home now.”

“But I have news,” I said.

“Just come home!”

At home I found her on a ladder that we’d leaned against the house to access the roof. I had the thought that, in a photograph of someone on a ladder, it’s impossible to determine if the person is climbing up or climbing down. Maybe, when you were standing still, it was also impossible to tell the difference between ascending and descending health. The world seemed to be doing both at once. Lenor was standing still, her instep arch balanced on a middle rung, her neck craned and looking out across the yard.

“It’s Plato,” she said. “I can’t find him anywhere!”

I looked out across the lawn but couldn’t see very far; only my head and shoulders were above ground.

“Lenor, come down,” I said.

“He’s got to be somewhere. I just want to find him. I have to find him.”

“Lenor, he’s gone.”

“It’s my boyfriend who’s gone,” she snapped. “You probably don’t even realize. You drink too much. You aren’t ever going to marry me. You say this place is important to you. You say I’m important to you. This home and our dog. I wanted to build something with you. Instead the world is falling away from us and you don’t even notice.”

Lenor climbed down the ladder and slunk into the earth, then stood there submerged, as if not knowing what to do. I realized I missed just watching the way she stood, with her palm on an outthrust hip, her perfect legs lit by the sun, whenever she was upset. Although I couldn't see her legs anymore, I could tell she was standing that way now. I walked toward her then—there was nothing else to do—with my arms out for a hug. This only brought my arms to graze across the surface of the grass, so to her I must have looked like a pair of shoulders and a face moving toward her on a sled. I must have looked like a forklift, trying to raise the world.

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Not long after that, Lenor's school closed for good. Most of the students had gone under. The playground had become a sandbox. I quit going to work, too. We managed to move our couch and lawn chairs on top of the roof, and that's how we spent our time: sitting under the sun, watching the horizon get flatter by the day.

Justin built some stilts that attached to his legs, and he carried a long, long cane to keep his balance. He gave sets to each of us, including Maria. In this way we walked around and didn't have to live on the rooftops: our little family of tripods.

But only so much time could be arrested before all of us had sunk too far. We were somewhere near where the house used to be. It was impossible anymore to know for sure where we were in relation to where we'd once been. For hours I'd been trying to prop up Lenor, the shortest of our group, to keep her head above ground. My neck ached from facing upward. Overhead the naked sun made it unbearable to open our eyes, but I kept squinting and peeking out, not wanting the world to go dark just yet.

“Talk about being in over your head,” said Justin.

Only by periphery could we see each other at all. The sun was too bright and I closed my eyes. I imagined the moment when we would all be only wrists and hands, clutching up toward the vacant sky. And I felt at that moment, felt with all the aching I had ever known, that we would all be reaching for something, maybe even for each other, as long as the world had light to see and air to breathe, and even then on into the darkness.