

Mesozoic

I.

I was living with a woman called Nan at the time. She was built like a mountain, all standing rock and strong muscle beneath that pale surface, like the froth of water through rapids.

She roused me from our bed early one morning that last winter, out to see the sunrise. “It’s coming,” she whispered, “I can feel it.”

I felt nothing, but I didn’t have to. We waited for it—me in my faded gray underwear by the cabin window, her in her thick black coat and sky blue hat, leaving uneven footprints as she went off towards the edge of the land. She used to walk in even steps when we met; it had been years now that her hips swung like that and dragged her feet behind them.

When I could measure her in the space between my forefinger and thumb, I slipped Levi’s over my legs and a coat over my shoulders. The doorknob stuck in my hand as I shut it behind me, moving towards her. My breath led the way, suspended in the air around my face.

It has never been conclusively proven that time cannot stop, or does not, in cases like this. That when following her across the back field that morning, time did not entirely slow, did not stop, did not twist on itself and unravel entirely. I swear the mountains fell and grew again in the time it took to reach her. I swear we were young again. I swear we had almost never come here. I swear we were almost never born.

She stopped just ahead, and the sky bled over the strands of blonde hair that fell around her shoulders. I could not see her eyes, but I knew them the way I know the smell of snow. Like sea glass, displaced to a world miles above the sea. I knew they would be filling with water as

the thing rose over her, drifting until it would fall behind us again that night. “People used to kill each other for this,” she said, turning to face me, her teeth chattering.

Her body was at once bred and poorly trained for these winters. She came to me from the desert just south of here, her mother before that from the coast, her mother before that across five thousand miles of Atlantic. She had been raised among saguaros and javelinas; her heart was a canyon and her blood was clay dust. She had driven fifteen hours from home for me.

She measured everything like this: fifteen hours from home. Twelve years since we began sharing our blankets and fever dreams. Twenty since she could recall a wishbone and her baby brother, another winter, a different lifetime.

“People killed each other for gold and land,” I corrected her. She ignored me; in her world, people killed each other for the sun.

When it was over and the sky was no longer any color but blue, she trudged past the waking rabbits, past me, back to the cabin. She slowed, approaching it, and stared at the knob with eyes wider than her face should have allowed. The hair on my forearms stood beneath the coat sleeves, predicting the next gust of wind. I couldn’t hear the next words she said over the pounding in my ears. The door had locked behind us.

II.

There was a fur left on the couch when we had moved in, a big brown thing from my father.

“Did you...?” she asked, pointing at it with those soft, thick hands.

I shook my head. I had never killed a living thing until I met her.

She wrapped it around herself and stood in front of the streaked mirror, turning halfway as if to catch it unaware. I stood beside her, just for that moment.

I imagine we always looked this strange to others. She was all light, her blonde hair and smooth, round face, the whites of her eyes pure as porcelain. I was dark, from the thick waves of hair that fell to my blackened eyelashes, the whites around my own irises gone yellow, the skin over my cheekbones darkened and scarred from winters of frostbite and summers of burn. Where she was untouched, I was inscribed: my bones ached where they had broken falling from trees, my skin was a constellation of freckles and sun spots. She opened the fur to hold me inside of it.

She began bringing it to bed after the miscarriage. She could hear footsteps, she said, outside the window, and then inside the cabin. The fur was the only thing she could bury herself beneath that could filter out the sound. I would get out of bed for her, look behind it and in the closet, underneath the crawlspace, would throw my arms around in the darkness to scare off whatever it was she feared. I would take my father's gun from the locker and point it at the door until she pretended to fall back asleep.

A few months after this began, she would go into the shower in the corner of the bathroom, turn the faucet on as hot as the heater could make it, and cry until the water ran out. I could hear it over the water. She sobbed like a train robber, like a child collapsing on the tracks.

She stopped showering at the very end, could not bear the water on her skin. "He drowned," she told me once, as I dried our coats in front of the fireplace. "The baby drowned." I held her as she told me about the parts of this land that used to be underwater, a hundred million years before we got there. She showed me fossils in her books, seashells that had been found just a few hours from where we slept. She pointed to proof that saltwater had once flooded my father's fields.

III.

One night she woke me by setting our bed on fire. The footsteps were right there, she swore, the clock had gone wrong, the whole night had flipped and she nearly choked on the cigarette she was smoking when it happened. A train had been coming out of nowhere, she told me. Straight through the bedroom. Straight towards us. The railroad workers from a hundred years ago had tried to warn her. She had tried to scream, but it had been drowned out.

She dropped the cigarette in the chaos—an accident—but she had let the thing burn, stayed there watching it until I jumped up as it singed the hair on my legs. “I didn’t know what to do,” she said, holding a new cigarette from the wrong end.

I scrambled for water, my skin tingling. “How long have you been smoking?” I asked, watching the smoke of now-dead flames. Her eyes flitted around the room. She opened her mouth but nothing came out.

I carried her to the couch, where she could watch me at the stove. I put on a small metal pot of water, taking my time over it, then dug a tea bag out from the back of the cabinet, then the pill bottle, and shook it for her to hear. “Okay?” I asked her. She nodded, and her fingers turned to the legs of a spider, crawling over her stomach and clutching the skin there. When I brought her the mug, I brought the pine oil with it, and rubbed it onto her shoulders and back. The smell of tree-ness, the arboreal way of it nearly covered the smell of burned blankets.

She asked for meat from the freezer to cool off her skin. She wouldn’t let it go, even once she fell back asleep several hours later, once a patch of light had crept in.

I had taken the mattress outside to air it, and now stood beside it on the porch as I called her mother.

“She says she’s hearing footsteps,” I told the woman. “She says she saw a train come through the wall. She says the screams wake her.”

“Maybe there are footsteps,” her mother told me, voice crackling through the receiver.

“Maybe there are screams.”

“She won’t go outside,” I told her. “She used to take the horses out, and now she won’t go near them. She says they don’t belong here. She says none of us belongs here.”

She urged us to come down to the desert for Christmas. To get out of those underwater mountains and away from the trees.

IV.

On the drive back from her mother’s house, the highway faded off into one line through the national forest. She worked the pedals of our truck like an extension of her limbs, a natural pressure to the way she slid them up and down. It was more hers than even I was, smelled of her hair and rusted at the same joints her own body did. The steering wheel moved beneath her gloves like she once slid under my hands.

We almost made it home in silence, save for two stops along the way. Once we parked the truck where we could see the steam rise in pillars from geothermal-heated pools, and a woman with a ring through her septum charged us seven dollars each to strip and tip toe across patches of ice on a makeshift boardwalk until we reached the water. The smell of sulfur made our noses pinch, and we slipped beneath the surface with a cough.

We had come here before, in the earlier days, and she had explained the center of the earth and the bubbling water to me through the steam. She had been a science teacher once, far from here, in a classroom of other desert children. She had taught them about sulfuric pools and geysers and glaciers. She taught them about land bridges and Alaska. She taught them about oil. She taught them about how the desert, the forests, the whole world used to be underwater.

We stopped one last time at the sand dunes, watching families trek off across the land and slide down shapeshifting sides of the hills there. The children shrieked as their fathers jumped off steep edges, rolling over themselves with laughter. She made us wait until the families had all but cleared out before she got out of the car.

I pointed at a sign that diagrammed the sand before us. “How did it get here?” I asked, knowing she knew. She didn’t say anything. “What’s all that sand doing landlocked and built up?” She smiled at me, softly, as if the trying counted for anything, and started walking towards the highest peak. I carried her scarf, her hat, her gloves, following her movement, copying her gait. When I got cold I stopped her, wrapping the scarf around her neck and covering that same soft smile before we started walking again.

After another hour, we arrived at the top, and she folded in on herself. “It wasn’t always like this,” she said, waving her arm in front of us, back towards the other dunes and the truck.

V.

That last winter, after I stopped shaking the doorknob and pounding at the wood my father had built into this place, I moved to the frosted window. She only spoke when I raised my fist to meet it: “Wait.”

I looked at her then, at the lines around her eyes and the wide curve of her chin, her nose red and running, the reflection of those last few centuries spent on this land written across her skin. “This is how it should be,” she was saying. My fist uncurled, the hand going to her instead.

It would be like falling asleep, she said. Just breathing in and out until we drifted off, no sounds but the wind, no living things but the land. And she lay me down and told me to watch the sky. I did what she asked. “Now just breathe. I’ll breathe too.”

Like drowning, she said. Like one hundred million years ago. I remember thinking;
finally, this is what it feels like. This is what she means.