

A Winter Bloom

It's winter, and I don't know what I'm doing out here. The worn soles of my sneakers slip on roots and rocks, and I think about the sound an ankle must make when it breaks. I've layered an army jacket on top of a hoodie on top of a thermal henley, and I felt the wave of activating sweat glands two miles ago. The chill is working its way to my bones. That much I know.

Alex is ahead of me. His hiking boots grip the gravel and soft earth. He leads the way forward on this well-traveled mountain trail, but even I can tell we're getting to the point where most people turn back because it's a long way to the parking lot, a long way home, and it gets dark early this time of year.

"I used to come up this way a lot, you know," Alex says. "Good for thinking and quiet. Far enough to get away but not so far that you need more than a day trip. You can get out here from time to time, but it isn't the back yard. Know what I'm saying?"

I do.

“It’s all just so beautiful.”

It is.

“So how about we do it right here?”

I say, “Let’s keep going.”

He shrugs with his hands dug into his hard-shell coat pockets, and we keep moving.

He’s right, though. Despite the barrenness of the landscape, it’s beautiful. There’s something about the jagged, naked trees. They look brittle, like old memorial stones. I’m tempted to kick one just to see if it crumbles, but that would be disrespectful. They are dead, and we respect the dead. When they are reborn, though, they will pull sustenance from the ground and the air. They will store critical elements for life like vaults. For a while, they will flourish, and then, by this time next year, they will have given all they had to give to this world. There’s a cycle to it, isn’t there? To everything. Everyone knows it because we see it unfold like this at different scales.

Alex says, “You know the mayfly lives only long enough to see one edition of the New York Times? If I were a mayfly, I’d hope for good news that day.”

“If you were a mayfly, I don’t think you’d care.”

“True. My only concern would be getting it on.”

“And someone smacking you with the New York Times.”

At the cosmic level, a star once crushed the ingredients of life into existence and deposited them on a celestial body. That’s where we came from, and it’s only natural that we should return. It’s balance, isn’t it?

Eventually, that star will go out, too.

The urn is getting heavy, but I haven't said anything to Alex about it. It's my weight to carry.

"God, it's cold, isn't it?" Alex says.

I smile. "You always liked the cold."

"Aren't you cold?"

"I'm fine."

"I thought I taught you to dress better for this kind of thing."

"I did the best I could with what I had."

Alex grunts in response, a noncommittal acknowledgement if I've ever heard one.

He's behind me when we come to a craggy boulder that overhangs a ravine deep enough to take a limb or a life, depending on the landing. Gravity is like the earth calling us back, right? It's like, every day of our lives, our home, the only home with any permanence, is just beneath our feet, and I wonder about the significance of place, why here is important when there is just as good. I don't think it's something to be known. It's something to be felt, a triggered sense of meaning to be interpreted and understood. Finding the right place is the nature of sentimentality, but that doesn't mean it should be frivolous.

I'll know it when I feel it.

Alex approaches the ravine's edge. He doesn't look down. He looks across, through the bare trees on the other side, up the mountain in the west where the gray sun peeks at us like a tired, curious eye.

"It's a nice view," Alex says. He cups his mouth and howls into the expanse. His voice ricochets across the wilderness until every soundwave finds a particle in which to rest. Einstein

said energy is neither created nor destroyed, only transformed. I've been thinking about that a lot lately.

Alex says, "Up there on that mountain, sometimes the snow falls so thick it clings to the trees like they're in bloom. It looks like a sea of white flowers, and this whole area is so quiet because sound is absorbed by the accumulation, and I imagine everything that's alive is silent in awe just like me. You know that peace, the feeling of harmony with nature, like everything is the way it ought to be."

He waits for me there, his gaze like an invitation to come and have a look.

"This isn't right," I say and lead him forward. "It's just not right."

On the other side of the boulder, the dirt has eroded and slipped down the incline. Some ranger has pounded stakes with orange flags into the ground and tied a yellow cord between them. There is no sign, but the message is clear.

"Be careful," Alex says.

"I'll be okay."

We press on in the silence and isolation of the wild, and I'm reminded I didn't put much thought into this before leaving home. It was a sudden urge, a need I didn't understand, and Alex said he'd come and show me the way because of course he did. I have always trusted in Alex to prepare for the worst and to get us to where we needed to go.

I have water and some granola bars in my backpack, and a book in case I get bored, I guess, and my phone, which lost service on one of the winding roads when I was still behind the wheel. I never questioned making it back to the car before sunset or what I'd do for warmth if I didn't. I suppose I could use the book for kindling, but I don't have matches.

Alex grins. He knows what I'm thinking and pulls a cheap plastic lighter from his pocket. He flicks his thumb and creates a spark but nothing else. "Damn," he says and frowns.

The book is a mass market paperback copy of *The Hobbit*. Alex gave me a leather-bound hardcover edition for my birthday years ago. It sits on my bookshelf at home. I've never read it. But I've read this paperback to tatters. The spine is cracked and indecipherable. The pages are still gray, but I hope this copy makes it until they yellow. Sometimes, I flip to a page at random and read about the encounter with the trolls or the exploits of the dwarves or the battle of wits with Golem or the debate with the dragon. Always, the hobbit's sense of wonder and adventure prevails over his fear, and it's like Alex is speaking to me, like his voice echoed back in time to whisper in Tolkien's ear so that he could *tap-tap-ding* on his typewriter the specific words I would one day need.

That's how it feels with people you love, isn't it? The connections are impossible, but they are there.

"You're going to have to choose a place soon," Alex says.

"Roads go ever, ever on," I sing.

Ahead, I spot a tail yanked along like a flag, and I freeze. Something on four legs stops midstep and stares at me.

"Look at that," Alex says, crouching low.

I follow his lead. "What is it?"

"A fox."

"You sure?"

"I smelled its piss a minute ago."

“Fox piss?”

“It’s unmistakable.”

“Okay. Are we okay?”

Alex chuckles. “Yeah, foxes are mostly scavengers. They’ll prey on small animals, like mice. They’re cowards, really. But they sure are beautiful.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m glad there’s a fox here. You know, foxes get a bad rap. We think of them as mischievous and deceitful, but some folklore reveres them as mystical and sacred, even helpful. And they’re really resilient. They thrive in natural and human environments.” He looks up to me. His eyes are pleading. “What do you think about this place?”

I wipe my runny nose. “Let’s go a little further. If we don’t find anything better, we’ll head back, and you can choose.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

The fox darts into the brush beside the trail, and we continue on.

“It’s farther, by the way,” Alex says.

“What?”

“Farther, not further. You said further. Farther is for distances you can measure.”

“How do you know?”

“That’s a silly question. You know that. You’re the smart one.”

“You could have gone to college if you’d wanted.”

“I was done with the student thing after high school.”

“You could have done it.”

He smirks at me. “Never too late until it’s too late, eh?”

We follow the trail until it isn’t a trail anymore. The deadfall deepens until we’re trudging through years of accumulation. I think about how it’s a kind of history or legacy. As I step and grind old life down, I think about the fertile earth beneath, how I’m part of a process that replenishes it. My presence here is destruction, but I’m quickening the return to balance.

The trees encroach, and the way forward isn’t clear. We weave through a forest of pillars upholding nothing, giant hands splayed to a gray sky, the earth awaiting its due.

“I liked that ravine,” Alex says. “There’s a nice stream in the spring, and people will come by every now and then.”

“You always hated people.”

“Someone every now and then isn’t so bad.”

I wonder if place matters because it’s our only way to feel we have any say in the matter.

Then the trees part, and the wilderness opens to a meadow. I stop and imagine butterflies and the buzz of insects at dusk on warm summer days. I imagine Alex and me as kids, racing to tag each other or throwing baseballs as far as we can until our arms tingle. I imagine cutting lines through the grass upon our trusty mountain bikes. I imagine watching our border collie, Mage, leaping into view like a dolphin breaching the sea. I imagine us lying down as if we’re hiding from the world, star gazing and whispering secrets like our parents or teachers, anyone who wants to stop us from being kids, are on the prowl. We could have done all of that here.

“This is good,” I say.

The urn is cold and heavy as I walk into the open, and I settle somewhere out there where distance doesn't matter. We're in that field, with all of its possibilities, that which could have happened, and that's all that matters.

"Should I say something?" I ask.

"I think you've already said it all," Alex says.

I open the urn, and I hear a voice from inside, like the breathing of the ocean in a conch shell, like something is trapped even though the escape route is open. Or maybe that is the measure of its being, that it can continuously speak and never be silenced.

I cover my mouth and nose, and I lean like I'm peering over the edge of a perilous drop.

Alex is beside me, hovering over my shoulder. "You afraid of getting some of it on you?"

I plug my nose. "Id all dneeds do stay here."

He shrugs. "It would be pretty gross." He chuckles. "But also funny."

I imagine myself hesitating so that I won't, and then I pour. The ashes spill like sand, like dirt, like nourishment fed to an open mouth. The bulk of it clumps in a pile, but a plume hangs and carries on the breeze, particles settling on every blade of grass from here to the tree line and beyond. He was never going to be contained.

I turn the urn right side up, and that sound is still coming from inside. I suppose it always will.

Out in the meadow where distance doesn't matter, Alex is both near and far, and he raises his face to the sky and closes his eyes in the waning light. He is warm now. Even I can tell.

"Thanks, bro," he says. "This is nice. This is real nice."

I nod and start back to the car, and he is walking beside me. I look at him.

“What?” he says. “Did you expect me to stay here?”

“No,” I say. “This is good.”