

Here

by *Hannah West*

I chose to forget my dreams this morning. I dressed quickly in thick wool and hurdled off the cabin steps, walking stick sinking musically into the dirt after every other step. I watched my slender arms swinging back and forth and my oversized boots kicking up streams of sand on the well-known trail. I know myself only in fragments like this. I never look in the mirror. All I care to remember is that my eyes are brown, my long hair this non-committal color, neither light nor dark.

The fulgent sunrise divides the filter of ashen clouds and floods gold the rim of the lake. Steeped in this growing early glow, ranks of pines assemble on the shore alongside their own trembling reflections. Mammoth gray mountains, with their great white tusks raised, dip into the beryl blue waters. Like a glass slate Moraine Lake imitates the bright vacancy above so that there are two heavens and only enough earth to forge a thin horizon between them. I am entirely alone as my pebble-studded soles meet the tides.

Perched on my washed-up petrified pedestal, I watch the dawn swell and it occurs to me as it does each day that I am so small, so separate from this marvel of a world surrounding. It reminds me that I am not magnificent, however magnificent it feels to walk this empty world. All of it is mine and none of it is mine.

Nibaw laps up water and paces earnestly along the rocky shoreline, flinging his tufted tail while I inertly take in the vacant wild. His glacial eyes flash me a look that asks why I haven't given him breakfast yet. I walk back through my garden to dig up strawberries and tomatoes to process—I'm always stocking up for winter—and then I read a fishing magazine while Nibaw eats his dog chow. I notice the boots rubbing blisters on my feet again, so I hunt for bandages in the bathroom, passively picking up and putting aside the antiques of a past life: a tube of mascara, a bottle of perfume, a hairdryer. I try not to look in the mirror but my eyes touch on my reflection, as briefly and regretfully as a hand on a hot stove burner. My dream comes back to me and I race to push it from my mind.

I don't usually dodge memories. Sometimes I steep in them, just not for long or the heaviness settles in my chest and I start to think that this isn't

really life, or that nothing I do matters. And I don't believe that, even after more than a year of this. I'm surrounded by souvenirs in our vacation cabin: Dad's paintings on the wall, his fishing and hunting gear in the shed, his films and books on the shelves; my older brother's acoustic guitar, his warm sweaters in the closet, his scuffed leather boots that I've made my own. They were here. That's what all these hand-me-downs say.

In this hand-me-down world I like to do things differently than before; I sleep with my head at the footboard of the queen-sized bed and never sit in my seat at the table, only in the fourth chair that was never claimed. These habits lessen the sting somehow. I spend all day outdoors unless it's storming, and sometimes even when it is. I tire myself out wandering through the wilderness and come here to sleep and eat. It's no fight to survive, no tattered dystopia. Just stillness and beauty.

After breakfast, we walk down to the dock where there are beached canoes that used to belong to the lodge on the south shore. I tie them together and haul them into the water where they bob like bright buoys. I launch the first and jump in shakily, a signal to Nibaw that it's time to play our game. With his tongue lolling like a pendulum, he waits anxiously for the last canoe to skid offshore and pull tight on its tether, and then hops on the caboose, the red vessel at the end of the straggling train. I dip my oar in and out of the water as I head for the far shore. The poised surface undulates with each stroke like fragments of light shooting through sapphire, and in response the ripples drift on endlessly, leaving nothing unawakened. I am here.

I tie my canoe to a tree onshore, climb back in, and lift my arms high. "Ready?"

Nibaw, just a small speck in his red caboose, waits for my signal to start the race. The second I drop my arms, we both take our first leap into the next boat. I clumsily regain my balance as the canoe pitches back and forth on the waves we generate. He's already halfway across the course as I'm just now putting the shallows behind me—I'm no competition for a husky, but at least I don't fall in anymore. We intersect cautiously and a few seconds later Nibaw barks at me from the western shore. When I reach my finish line, I untie the last canoe and double back to meet him.

Frayed clouds coast overhead as we hike up the hill slope. We're going to the Tower, the short, stilted tree house I put together on a high grassy

plateau overlooking the water. When we arrive, I yank out the axe that's embedded in a felled tree and chop up musky wood for a fire. I have more than enough already, but I have to stay busy. When the mindless work of making kindling doesn't keep the dream far enough away, I recite my endless grocery list aloud. In about a week, I'll ride my bike to the nearest superstore and amass all the non-perishables that will fit in my cart.

While the afternoon deepens, I climb down to my cliff-diving spot and throw off my clothes. The water is startling, mind-numbing, exhilarating. I yield to the depths for these euphoric seconds during which I lose all memories, lose all sense of time, until the cold feels like warmth. I don't let go of the moment until my lungs ache and I find the surface. I heave in breaths as I lift myself onto the rocks and settle on the grass to let the sun evaporate the chill. I don't wake up until the light changes from gold to orange and casts its slant bands of color on the mountains.

I make dinner with supplies back at the Tower and give Nibaw the leftovers like I always do. My campfire rises toward the faint stars that appear even while daylight persists and, even though I can see them often this time of year, my awe toward them never lessens—and neither does that raw ache in the pit of my chest that comes as I study them alone. Soon there will be thousands teeming in the blackness.

Nibaw, who is napping happily by the fire, barely glances up as I retreat into the dark and climb inside the Tower. I unhook the slats in the roof and lay on the mound of blankets, still transfixed by the emerging stars. Weighed down and set free all at once by their beauty, I let my guard down and the pent-up memories swarm in. I stretch out my arm over the empty space at my side—that same vacancy that fills my whole world, but that seems so much vaster in these few feet next to me—and allow the dream to flood my every thought.

I hear Seth and Dad playing pool down the hall and the muted hum of the announcer's voice as he narrates the football game we're half-watching. The house smells like Chinese takeout, as it usually does on the weekends. On the couch in the living room there is a familiar arm around my shoulders as I gradually fall asleep. It's him.

That's all there is to the dream. It fades away and I cling instead to the gleaming image of him, at least, being here with me, even if it's only him—to curb the loneliness, to wake up every day and face this outland-

ish fate with courage that puts my courage to shame.

It's thoughts like this that made me want it all to end. But I'm here. This is life, and I will honor it. I will live out my days nobly, forgetting my dreams and memories, never looking in the mirror, exploring this stillness and beauty and never asking for answers. I know that on the other side of death all this madness will look like plain reason.

You would think being alone in this world—being the solitary earth-fixed human left—would come like a storm, like a darkness, but it came softer than a sunrise.