

Robin

I remember some of it, not all of it, but I have learned that loss is a dust ring dancing around one solitary planet of grief, a crooked shadow of life that alters our dreary stars and eats away at the paling sliver of moon.

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I feel human and hollow in a pre-historic kind of way, as though my body has known this emptiness anciently, perhaps in a past life, and I study this solitude as I stagger through yet another quiet neighbourhood in yet another quiet town, in this quiet, straight edged (but half-tender) world, licking old wounds and thinking how brave it truly is; to be damaged and silenced but to hunger still and anyway.

A church bell sounds from some place distant. I swallow as the faraway noise passes through me like a draught. I gawk at an old swing-set swaying slowly in someone's front garden; resembling an awkward teenager lurking nervously at the back of the school dance. The sentimentalist in me feels heavy, a sort of tremulous nostalgia settling in my face and legs and spine, and I grieve momentarily for the rusty swing sets of my past. I hold the breath at the base of my throat until my eyes grow watery and desperate- and then, from some strange, voiceless thing inside of me that I am so gravely aware of, I find the will to let it go. I feel a quietness in my body and my damp clothes hang limply from it like the skin of a rabbit. I can see my breath falling slowly through the air. A robin wanders by my feet, as curious and as vulnerable as a child, and sweat gathers at the beginnings of my hair which I thread my fingers through and tug. An iron chill piles on top of my several layers of skin and loneliness, and I press my hands together as if in prayer and rub them together for a fragment of heat. Winter is pressing down on me and I can feel it in my fingers. My mind taunts and hypnotises me until the colours of the sky become that of a wild painting or faraway dream. My stomach heaves. My lungs quiver and cough. I see her before she sees me.

We move like stray animals beneath the watery light of the stars. We're headed home. When we were kids we'd pretend that the sky was backlit, that the gods were resting beneath it, playing cards and laughing at all of us paper humans and our crumpled paper lives, stunted and fragile and endlessly unaware of the fire. We'd throw our arms up towards the moon as if demanding its attention and watch the open wound of sky shiver in response. She always thought that there really

was something or someone up there that could see us. I always thought how daft we must look if there was.

I glance at her sideways and wonder if she can remember the laughing gods, too.

She pulls prayers out from between my teeth and swallows my sobs like holy water. She was always the more religious of us both, her and her unwavering belief. She stands watching me as I sit cross-legged on the kitchen floor, eyes drenched, pulling a Christmas cracker with myself. I don't wince when it takes its last dying yelp. The smell of gun powder reminds me of home, or a fragment of one, a home that exists not in this life but in a past one, one where I'd read the stupid joke from my broken cracker and laugh so hard I'd get a stomach ache. Here the walls are quiet. Here, the blood moving through me is slow and thin and dry. Here, here I have to press my fingers to my chest to check if my heart's still beating.

It's not. Not like before.

She says we have to talk about it. I look at her mouth twisting while she speaks and tear the icing from the stomach of a gingerbread man, resting it on my tongue until it looks like the warming snow outside. She crosses over and sits down on the damp floor beside me. Our skin reeks of the same grief. I tell her that I can't understand it- how the worst thing in the world can happen and a person can still say their prayers at night. She nods slowly and smiles weakly, her thin arms hugging her knees to her chest. She thinks that we'll be brought together again, her and I, after this life is over- in God's house. I want to burn that house to the ground with my body asleep inside of its walls. Our dusty, dreary dreams are sprawled out dry and seedless at the mouth of her grave, and I carry them in the insides of me, as close to me now, as skin. In life, in death; the child in me mourns for the child in her. I'd wring my own neck if it meant she could stay long enough to be whole again. I swallow the melted icing on my tongue and scramble to my feet, thrusting a sweaty hand at hers before pulling her up beside me. My thin, bony fingers fall straight the air. A church bell sounds from some place distant. I break. I break.

I fall asleep thinking of the wounded animal of her body, how it was here for a moment and then gone. The wet day leaks back into the clammy hands of the sky, and a fading robin sobs quietly beneath an endless moon. When the morning light stretches through and through my skin, I too stretch, and skip all five stages of grief. I dress in black and limp back to the wild, empty laughter of the living, back to that half-tender world and all of those half-empty bottles of wine.

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I once read a story about a dead robin. Read about how the wind slow-danced around it, lifting the feathers from its still and silenced body. I thought how solemn it was. How even in death, the feathers of the bird still rose and fell. How a young girl passed a cluster of bones and paused only for a moment. How she would go on to forget in future moments about the wind and the bird and how it swayed in its grave, but that I would not. I spent a long time thinking about those matted feathers, and how the wind might lay them to rest by the sea. The world doesn't dance around the things and people that have left it. It twirls over their bones and laughs. Maybe what I'm trying to say is that I'm the feather, and that she was the bird. The wind will carry me to different places, a place far from here or perhaps even just in grasping distance of her. The sound of the bullet kissing her teeth has bled through all of my Winters. Now all of the robins are silent.

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I remember some of it, not all of it, but my sister can no longer fly.