

*Forget the future.
I'd worship someone who could do that.
On the way you may want to look back,
Or not, but if you can say
There's nothing ahead
There will be nothing there.*

~Rumi



Already Mira had left, backpacking backpack strapped with toothpaste and pens stolen from the bank, and balled socks, and literally nothing else that was starchy or somber enough for Grandpap's get-him-in-the-ground family get-together.

The backpack itself is yellow, like an adventure, which this would not be. Or maybe it would; I don't know, our experiences diverged as soon as they slipped out the door.

So we kissed and they slipped out the door. Soft like a schwa at the end of a word, as is their rippleless habit.

And so then I napped. I woke up at dusk and looked out the window: Ancho the not-stray cat made a suicide run in front of a truck.¹ Then she hid triumphantly under a different truck. Cocky bastard.

Then roofs, ashtrays, helicopter-seeds swept the golden open, bobbing lonely. Helicopter seeds look nothing like honeysuckle trees! Apply pressure, stomp, so that I burst under your foot!

With Mira gone my emotions were raw like skin in the wind.

It was Thursday night, Hallie's grieving circle night. So I went. So what? Not because I had anything in particular to grieve or to say: in fact the opposite. I just wanted to hear what others said, and feel what the others felt. I was empty, and therefore inclined to agree with others; grace.

This is a good trick to be connected, I have found.



¹ I mean, she was fine, I wasn't *worried*. The Oracle had predicted NO (local) DEATHS again this week; but the Oracle has been wrong (once), and anyway one doesn't like to see cat brains on the road.

So I hurried to Hallie's, with the half-moon peeking at me as it rose through consciousness. I hurried; I was lonely. Do I have to say why?

If I did, you would recognize yourself in myself and we would both fall into the ground. This never ends.

Hallie is the banjo-playing fishergirl next door. Company gathers to Hallie like company gathers under an oak.

It helps that she is often at midafternoon making music under an oak. It also helps that she looks like an elf: short hair, sharp nose, and an intricate blue cross-section tattoo of a cabbage slice on her upper left bicep.

Play those strings more softly, the twilight wind said to Hallie, and Hallie is like a tree, she bows to the wind. As I came up she rested, making a doorway where I could come in.

I had to squint to make out faces, as I came into the firelight, and everybody could see me but I couldn't see them.

Bee was there, and Skunk was there, and Goonface. And others that were seated farther from my feeble attention.

No-one said boo or howya, but Goonface got busy spiking a squash kabob,² and he handed it to Skunk, who smeared the squash hunk with a pulp of pounded sunflower seeds, and something green.³ Then the roasting-stick was handed around. I stuck it in the fire. No-one spoke.

This was Hallie's gathering, she carried the heavy weight of talking first. But she did not yet. She sat a little distant from everyone else.

My squash hunk steamed. The steam smelled like pepper. Everybody was grateful to have something to smell. Goonface spiked more kabobs.

Sorry there aren't some fish, to-nite. Some-thins scaren em. No bites. Only thing biting is the flies, and she scratched her arm as she said this, Hallie did.

So it goes. I said.

² Squash grows readily here. We eat a lot of squash. And pumpkin... and....tubers....

³ I think it was parsley? Beggars can't be choosers. But I MISS SALT.

Thanks to Hallie's prompting I had spoken and was thus part of the group. Hallie is usually alone, unless it has happened otherwise; and when she is with her people she is as attentive to group temperature as a mother or a bomb-defusing crew.

Whwhite rabbits. I hate whwhite rabbits said Skunk.

Just say 'wite.' said Bee the merry contrarian.

Whoowite.

Wack of you. Said Goonface.

W-hack you upside. Said Skunk, and then felt bad, and gave Goonface a backrub.

My squash hunk sizzled squash juice and I retracted it from the fire. Squash doesn't brown well, it just gets too soft and slides off the stick.

Hallie plucked her banjo once, set it down, and began.

'Ppreciate ya'll coming over, it's good for folks to talk things out.

Yuh

Yeah

Course

I said nothing.

Though I know we do a lotta talking down in front of the Oracle and at Council. But that's decision-talking. This is thought-talking, it doesn't have to go anywhere.

People come and go, but keepin' vigil like this is the presence that remains. Ok, now I always tell the same story, cause I can't figure it out. Ya'll already know my big sister Emma cannon-balled off the Cannon cliff, hehah. Heh. Three years ago now. I'm always thinking.

Would she stick it out here if she had stuck it out? Sorry, let me work out what I mean.

Everybody dutifully stared at the fire.

I mean I wanted to heal her so, so badly. So life pre-Absolution⁴ made her sick. But the thing is, it made us all sick. The Absolution is here. But I'm still guilty.

Not guilty, said someone, but Hallie didn't hear.

I remember once she came to me and asked me to take her scissors and all the knives in the house and hide them. I did that.

She couldn't regulate. Gnats had an easy passageway to her brain. But if she was ok, she was ok. She did better than me in school and kept a job waitressing and found time to draw crazy things like tigers with wings, or faceless black holes.

I asked her 'where do you get your ideas from?'

She said 'ideas?' I've never had one.'

It was like she had a nervous disorder within the larger nervous disorder of capitalism. I thought it was capitalism. But it wasn't just that. Because remember, the night DSA⁵ won big supermajorities?

We remember that, said Bee.

We remember, said I.

That was the first night anybody who doesn't read The Tempest⁶ guessed what was coming. It should have been a good sign, for her!

It was a good sign for everybody else. I mean I went out with DSA homies and drank myself stupid. That was only a few months before the first big strike wave, remember.

We remember, said Skunk.

If only she held on- Absolution almost there!- but she couldn't hang on. Or could she? I tell this story every week, because I can't figure it out.

She jumped two nights after that!

At last I tried my squash. It was fibery hotdelicious and I burnt my tongue.

⁴ Apocalypse + Revolution + Solution

⁵ Democratic Socialists of America

⁶ Nobody reads The Tempest, whispered Goonface. I know, said Skunk. Hallie's a huge nerd.

I couldn't help myself. I consulted the Oracle.

I asked it, 'Was there anything I could have done to prevent my sister's suicide?'

And the Oracle said, 'Yes.'



Hallie had done her part. The group was closer because we all knew that none of us knew what she could have done.

She was quiet. Now Goonface took it up.

He finished his squash hunk. Skunk was kneading his bare shoulders.

He wore an offwhite tank-top, cutoff jeans with three patches, and no shoes. The patches were sewn with dental floss. One patch read:

FUCK COPS

Another read:

END MONEY

And the third:

HAIL SATAN / GLUTTON FOR PUNISHMENT / NOT DONE YET I GUESS

He had designed them himself.

Goonface had a bindle tattooed on his left hand,⁷ barbed wire tattooed on his left bicep, jingle bells tattooed on his right bicep, keen clear eyes like a dog in a kennel, tattoos on both his knees with worn creases in them where his knees bend, and his knuckles read UNDR/DOGS.

His voice was surprisingly high, like when you look up and see birds that look like they're just too up there.

I remember, when the strikes broke out. I was farting around Pittsburg, at the time, when word got round that yinz here in 'yota were gonna have a heck of a time holding the Enbridge line.

⁷ His drawing hand.

I was squattin' w/ my buddy Wes at that time- I never told yinz about Wes?

He looked over his shoulder at Skunk.

No! Skunk said near his ear loudly.

Ok, damn. Well Wes was the roundest, meanest motherfucker in the ring. Maybe you know it, maybe you don't, but I used to box, back in Pittsburg.

I love perogies, I'm from Pittsburg, yada yinz yada yinz, sang Bee.

My fragile masculinity doesn't let me say I love the Pitsstop enough. I love the Pits and I love yinz, said Goonface.

Eww, blocked.

I WANNA HEAR ABOUT THE MOTHERFUCKER said Skunk near his ear loudly again.

Ok, damn! We matched up, he clocked me. Guess what he clocked me with?

VOTER/SUPPRESSION! Skunk had a habit of blurting.

That's nowhere near 8 letters, try again.

FUCK/LIFE!

Close! Actually it was DEAD/WIFE.

No. said Bee.

Yeahuh. He never wanted to forget his dear dead wifey.

What a simp, said Skunk, and in the resulting laughter-commotion I finally finished my damp squash hunk.

Yeah, I simped hard for him. Said Goonface, and he snapped a twig and threw it in the fire.

Cute, said Bee.

No, like he was smart. Too smart for his own good. Like I said, when we got word about how the construction strikes were goin' over 'ere, he had no questions. He knew what we hadda do. He came to me and said: Gooon-Face!

Said Goonface, in a boom-low voice.

I'm going west! And I needja! Are you down?

Obviously, we had to consult Oracle before we left.

And everyone shifted around at the sudden appearance of the antagonist.

I was losing feeling in my ass and did a lumpy hip-thrust. Bee had found a cricket in the grass and was methodically picking its legs off one by one; Hallie just looked discomforted, like she had to fart.

I forgot this was the grieving circle, said someone on the outskirts, someone I didn't know.

Golly grief, said Goonface, get ready to be sad, I guess. Cuz you already know how this is gonna go.

The Oracle is gonna make a prediction you don't like, said Bee.

In fact what it said was: if you both go to the Enbridge picket line, one of you will die.

I wonder which one? said Skunk.

Of course it doesn't tell you which one, Bee insisted.

I don't think The Oracle knew. It bases its predictions on statistical likelihoods, and statistically, one of us was gonna do something stupid. It just has more data than we do.

Metadata, yes, more than the rest of us will ever have, yes I know. Said Bee.

And the fact of the matter is that we were enemies of the state; the cops knew our look. Like it was a fair prediction, is what I'm saying.

And Goonface smiled his devil-biting sharp-canine smile.

And you know how strikes go. And you know Wes knew that too.

WELL WHAT HAPPENED?

Goonface pulled Skunk into his lap, possibly so they would stop yelling in his ear.

We showed up. It was a mess. On one side the construction workers, striking, the ones that hadn't scabbed; water defenders with them; on the other, the state patrol, the city cops and the National Guard, with their guns harder than their dicks. You remember the demands?

Shut down the oil rigs, save something for our kids! I blurted out. I surprised myself.

Right. Said Goonface. What a mess! The first night was tear gas and rubber bullets, and the line held; but we couldn't spare another night. I couldn't find no leader! It was a mess. We slept on the ground, Wes told me don't take no chances cuz he's out to protect me, he's the one that brought me into this mess and all that, and I told him aren't we all born messy?

But I musta not meant it, said Goonface, cuz I wasn't tryna die that day. I lettem protect me. Wes was out to make a splash. Strikes needa see some blood, ya see? The line needs something to rally around, or else it dissipates. And 'ee knew that, 'ee was a good seasoned troublemaker.

So that morning, in front of the whole damn line, Goonface said, and suddenly his face got blank and simple. He jumped in a concrete mixer.

And they were pouring that concrete down a hole, and he clogged the pipes with his human body. No oil could flow, and the line went crazy. All of a sudden we were winning cuz one of our guys sacrificed himself. And we won that strike. All those Enbridge workers were rerouted to work on the failing 'yota bridges, no more oil.

Skunk whistled softly.

But the thing is, said Goonface, and here's the part that always wrings me. I don't think he woulda jumped, if the Oracle hadn't said one of us hadta die. What if it hadn't said nothing?

Then you woulda lost, said Bee.

Maybe, said Goonface. Or maybe sacrifice was just the most statistically-likely scenario, and if he didn't already feel he had to do it, something else woulda happened.

You don't have to feel guilty, Goony. Said Hallie. It was the first thing she'd said in awhile.

Goonface looked at her.

Don't I?



I'm all mixed up. I said. I was standing. *Can't you see? The Oracle's the problem.*

We can't get rid of the Oracle, Bee said, wisely sitting down. *We don't even have quorum.*

I thought you'd be on my side, Bee. I sat down heavily.

I'm on your side, said Goonface, and he winked at me. *Something should be done.*

I also think we should debate the idea of shutting off the Oracle, said Hallie. *Now that we're a little bit post-Absolution, I'm not sure we have a need for it. It might hurt more than it helps.*

I agree. Said Bee. *But this is grieving circle. We gotta discuss this at Council, with everybody.*



It was confusingly, later. Skunk had pissed on the fire. No light to see by. Some had left. Goonface had slunk off.

The sleepest amongst us, Bee and myself and Skunk and Hallie, sat together breathing, pretending we were in bed.

I'm gonna kick ya'll out soon, I gotta sleep. Said Hallie.

Sure. Said Bee. *Yo, does anyone know where Goonface went?*

I knew where Goonface had gone. I had seen him sneak out, a half-hour ago, up the hill towards the house where the Oracle slept, and I also knew he kept wire-cutters in his pocket. Something had to be done...

No. I lied. *I haven't seen him.*

