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Tom Gunnels

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Here Roams The Wolf, The Eagle Whets Its Beak

— Lord Byron, from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

The sun has risen, ever so slowly, in the horizon. I watch her dressing in the tent, the silhouette of her body shaking across the orange nylon, cast by the unsteady flame of a small lantern. It is a struggle, I can tell. Time is never kind to aging bodies.

Do you need any help? I ask, knowing the answer.

I'll manage, she says.

I look into the fire. She always does.

Winded, she jokes *What's for breakfast?*

I look around and say nothing. We laugh.

I watch her crawl out of the tent. *Did you hear the wolves last night?* I ask as she pulls herself up next to me onto the old log.

It was beautiful, she says, *wonderful fire*.

We sit for a moment in silence, the murmur of the nearby river and the erratic crackling of fire filling the gap.

What do you think they were howling about? She asks quietly. *It sounded somber*.

I turn my head and look at her. The wrinkles of her face seem softer in the light of the fire.

I say *Loneliness, perhaps*.

Long ago, we found each other by chance. Nothing more than that, nothing less. In those days, she was an artist. Her paintings were beautiful. She sometimes painted with her breath, blowing the watery ink around the canvas the way the wind effortlessly colors the sky in autumn. *The wolf mates for life*, she said one day between breaths, her cheek resting on canvas, *and after the loss of their partner, they often never move on, but remain solitary*. The ink swirled and twisted, *I wonder*, she said, *maybe sometimes that's why they howl at night*.

She never signed her paintings, dated them, or left any hint as to where they came from. *There's something about it* she said. *The wolf knows its weight in this world; it knows it's no larger than the breadth of its howl. It doesn't try to be anything more than what it is*. I still can't say that I truly know where she came from, or how she came to be. To love something simply for what it is, nothing more, nothing less, is a beautiful thing.

Look what I found this morning. I say, pulling an eagle feather out from behind my back. *On my walk, before you woke up.*

Beautiful, she says, reaching out and taking the feather from my hand. *Keeping the walks up?*

Doctor's Orders, I joke.

She glides her fingers along its slender spine.

We sit for a moment and I look at her. Her hair has gotten long, comforting her shoulders with its delicate weight, the wiry ringlets of grey wound unevenly like a nest. Maybe that's why it seems comforting.

How are you feeling? I ask.

Old, she laughs, *Too old for my own good. Where did you find this?*

I take her hand. It feels like crumpled paper, the kind I loved to make as a child; soft, tender, delicate. The kind that I would grind in my hand, over and over, until it slowly frayed and fell apart.

I found it on my walk this morning. Before you woke up.

We pause, listening to the murmur of the river nearby.

You already told me that, didn't you?

She puts the feather behind her ear. She looks into my eyes and for a moment she smiles, sending waves of folding creases across her cheeks. Emotion wells in her eyes and she quickly looks down, breathing in deep and patting the water that wets her skin.

I say *I love you.*

She says *I love you too. So goddamned much.*

I remember once when we laid naked beneath the stars in a field of rolling greens that could have gone on forever. It could have ended just over the horizon, too. It didn't matter.

Dew clutched to the grass, our lungs bathing in the sodden air.

I love that smell she said.

I said *I do too,* my head resting on her shoulder, nose pressed against her neck, wrapped in her hair, the cool dampness raising our skin in speckles.

Do goosebumps always pop up in the same place, each time you get them?

I don't know.

Would you want to know, if you could?

I guess so.

But it wouldn't change anything if you did know, would it?

I guess not. A goosebump's a goosebump.

I like that. A goosebump's a goosebump.

I kissed her neck and the goosebumps that graced it. I wondered, *Next time, will they be the same?*

There was something about that night. There was something about the touch of grass against our skin. The slight prick that reminded us *this is what you are;* something about the smell of dirt and earthworms that told us *this is what you'll be;* and something about when we made love that screamed *this is as real as it gets.*



TREE

MACASKILL WRIGHT / PEN ON PAPER

Something told us *this is how it begins. This is how it ends.*

I pick up a stick the length of my body, pull out a knife from my pocket, and begin whittling the end into a point.

You really think we can keep this up? she smiles and asks.

Grinning, I press down on the point with my thumb.

No. But it's fun to pretend.

My knees feel like rusted clockwork as I slowly creak to my feet. I use the spear as a crutch and extend my hand. Her wilted fingers reach out, creeping like vines and wrapping around my wrist. We walk, arms entwined, down the rocky slope.

At the bottom, a river wanders. The water flows over a sudden drop and for a moment, it follows no pattern. It falls. It strays, shattering, tearing. Melting back together. We walk to the pool where all the water collects and swirls, foaming. Two gently rounded rocks barely break the surface, stationary in the circling current. I dig the spear into the water and lean on it, swinging my legs like stubborn tree trunks over the water and onto one of the waiting whetstones. I root myself steady and stand, catching my breath.

I feel the wind blow through my hair.

What are you doing just standing there, I'm hungry, she says, her timeless smile as white as the drifting foam that collects by my feet.

I see fish dart between shadows cast by the floating froth. Raising the spear, my arm trembles slightly. I feel a strength in my bones long forgotten as I thrust the stick towards the fleeting reflection of a trout. It is weary, but it is there. I feel it. The spear rips through the water and I feel it lodge into the ground. Pulling back, the tip emerges from the water, dripping fishless.

I think we may be fucked, I joke.

We laugh.

You need to thrust faster, she says, driving an imaginary javelin towards the water.

I look over at her and smirk. *It's been a long time since I've heard that.*

Oh dear, she says, dismissing me with a single wave and a sly grin.

A trout suspends itself next to a marbled stone. Leaning completely into my plunge, I hit the checkered rock instead. The stick veers askew and my feet uproot. I tumble into the water sideways with as much grace as a falling tree. The water feels arctic; my eyes open, looking up. From below, the foam looks like clouds. I drift for a moment and watch the clouds weave curiously with the current above my head. I surface to her wading out to me, amused.

Maybe next time, she says, *Better, though.*

I breathe for a moment. *It's a completely different world,* I say.

What is?

She smiles, says *C'est la vie,* and offers a hand.

I think I'll just float a few, I say.

I lower myself into the river again, floating on my back and looking up at the sky. *Do you remember when we were in San Diego, I raise my head to ask her,*

and we stopped at the zoo?

Her lips purse and she stands a little straighter.

Of course I remember.

That's not what I mean, dear. I'm sorry.

I know she says, but I think to myself Does she?

We were at the polar bear exhibit, I say, and we saw that one off on its own, sleeping on the ground next to a log, in a separate pen.

Her eyebrows narrow as she listens. Is she searching, or just concentrating?

It wasn't like the other pen. It was flat. He had nothing to climb, nothing to stand on.

She nods slowly.

An employee said it was because he was too old. He couldn't survive with the others. So they moved him. The employee joked, called his new pen "The Nursing Home."

We were at the San Diego Zoo, weren't we?

Yes, I say, *we were.*

Why are you looking at me like that?

I sigh a smile. *Just looking,* I say, but what I want to say is *Don't worry, dear. Only the small things, only the small things.* I want to say *We won't let it be more than that.*

But what I want most is the chance to say goodbye. The chance to say *goodnight, I love you.* That's all we really want, a chance for once to say *Yes, this is how it goes.*

She removes her shirt, a dark blue stain from yesterday's blueberry snack coating her sleeve. The bones of her shoulders push outward beneath her baggy skin, drooping the way sopping clothes stick to flesh, as she unbuttons her pants. She tosses her clothes to the bank, her muscle swaying, surrendered, below her arm. She doesn't try to cover anything; she simply smiles, brushing the wiry hair from her eyes, coaxing it like strands of dried wheatgrass behind her ear.

It's beautiful out, isn't it?

Yes, I say, looking at her, *it is.*

It's beautiful out now, but the night will not be so kind.

We spend the rest of the day floating with the clouds, our clothes discarded, drying on the grass. We have no weight; exposed, suspended, the vast sky looking down on us. We laugh at our decrepit bodies and the way our wrinkles wrinkle, even more, in the endless flowing water. And occasionally, we pathetically wave our spear at a passing fish.

I often sat there at night, playing the piano as she painted. We talked, but more than anything we just enjoyed each other's company. Her at her easel, me at my piano, across the room from one another. During weekdays, I was a teacher of English and literature. During the weekends, we retreated from the city to the lakes and rivers beyond, beckoned by simpler things.

One morning we watched a porcupine listlessly shuffle through our camp, his thorn coated hide unruffled, wandering. The following day we found him beneath a pine tree, lying alone, dead. It was as if he had prepared a bed of needles and softly slipped away, to sleep, knowing he would never wake again. We sat for a while with the porcupine, tossing a pine cone back and forth to each other.

It's quite beautiful, she said.

Something always on the defensive, defenseless.

Knowing what it is, and what it will become.

There was something about the bed of needles, as if he found comfort in them, in their familiar prick; lonesome, as if he thought *you can't love me, but I can love you.*

Last week, we sold our house here in Alaska. We tried to give it away, but law wouldn't allow it. So we sold it, for a dollar, to a young family with too many small mouths to feed and not enough money to feed them. We had a garage sale the week before, only everything was free. Our piano went to a six year old with anxious fingers and dreams bigger than his father's paycheck; our collection of books to an aging man who reads to escape, sitting in his stuffed leather chair next to the fire, book in hand, dreaming of what it would be like to turn back the pages of time.

We left the next day, walking up to Rusty's Bush Adventures a few towns away.

We asked Rusty to fly us to Little Green Lake.

Little Green Lake, he said, don't know if I've ever heard of that one.

I showed him on a map.

He said, *Shit, that's out in the middle a nowhere.*

We know.

A few hundred dollars later, he landed his bush plane on the small lake and we surprised him with the rest of our savings. Gleeful, he promised that next week, when he booked a three week long Caribbean vacation for two, all he would say to his wife and friends would be *business is good.*

He floated his plane over to the shore and left us standing on the sandy bank with our tent and a backpack half full. We began walking the water's edge when he turned off the motor, the plane drifting slowly along next to us. He watched us for a moment and called out.

I don't know what you two're all about, out here in the bush an' all...but tell me again, so I can rest knowin' I heard you right. You don't want me comin' back?

We know where we are headed, I shouted, my voice cracking from the strain. Don't worry.

How long'll you be out here, ya' think?

We can probably make it a week or so.

And what if you don't make it?

We've already made it, she yelled.

He shook his head and started up the engine again.

I didn't make a fire tonight. I couldn't. My arms felt heavy, burdening. We rest, listening to the giant oaks sway and creak in the persistent wind. Our clothes lay damp, huddled in a pile near our tent. Now, we surrender each breath in a puff of white smoke. The cold has crept into our bodies. It settles in our empty stomachs, to stay. She is shivering deeply, my arms wound tightly around her.

I haven't felt you tremble this much since the first time we made love, I tease.

Oh stop, she sighs.

I say I love you.

She says I love you too. So goddamned much.

Tonight, we sleep out in the grass, its gentle prick against our skin, my nose pressed to her neck, wrapped in her hair. Something about the ache in our bones tells us *this is it*. Under the dusted grey moon sky, we hear the cry of a wolf. Something tells us *he is not alone*. The sound of the howl warns.

I kiss the goosebumps that grace her neck.

I whisper Tonight, they will not go hungry.