

#1

the old god

nature's continuous cycle
is hard, strict and brief: a vicious dichotomy,
a forked road
encountered each season, a season
of mini-aeons
sprout, grow green and come to an end
each day.

salmon splash, jump

and struggle to swim (some of them die)
up-stream, falling waves crash
against sharp rocks, whistling winds howl
as feathered wings beat
overhead.

eagles screech, glide

and hover on air
currents, ripples on the surface
of jagged waters
gleam, fish-scales
house
the noon days' meal.

the linear course of the stream below,

the vastness above the hunting ground:

a crossroads
where fate and freedom intersect, only one god
reigns here:
it's been known by many names.

Gaia, Kishar, Aranyani,
Jörð, Opis,
and *Veles*; its law transcends
beyond mere language,
into momentary circumstance.

- [REDACTED]

Original

#2

Playground

Existence is a merry-go-round.

We are thrust into life to find this ride's already spinning.

The firm hands of our Father are already slapping the rails; slowly,
we start

to gain
momentum.

We smile and laugh as we twirl round and round.

Wind rustles through our hair
like leaves kicked up by our Father,
as he runs alongside,
pushing us
ever faster.

We start to feel dizzy; our vision blurs.

The blues,

greens, all the colors

mix into grey—the hue of the pea-gravel under our Father's feet
as he gives one final push to the rails.

We spin so fast

that for one moment all of time freezes

and we stand as monuments to our selves.

Nature's law soon shatters the stillness and we slide, screaming, towards the edge.

Desperately we grasp for a rail,

any rail,

that's in our reach;

our fingers clasp metal and we hold on
for dear life.

~~XXXXXXXXXX~~

#3

Remember Sisyphus

once you realize the gods have hardened their hearts
against you
just remember the vigilance of Sisyphus.
with stoic perseverance he strives; pushes the massive weight of stone,
day after day,
up the steep incline of eternity.
his fingers splinter as they grind against the granite,
the soles of his feet crack
and peel,
heal then tear; bleed
again; he never stops pushing
as his muscles fatigue he labors and toils -- laying a path made of blood-brick
with blackened sweat for the mortar --
through the work of iron days,

even though,
he knows he has to watch as the immense
boulder rolls back down
the path he had carved through eternity.

do not think for one instant, o' beautiful child,
there isn't a profound lesson to be learned
in this:

as you grow older the days grow shorter;

they also grow more difficult,

even just living, day to day, becomes hard.

when the heavy-handed malaise of jaded maturity strikes--
and it will, often-- remember,
remember vigilant Sisyphus:
he bleeds; toils;
never has he broken under the weight of his responsibility,
neither should you when faced with strife.

we are all fighting a hard battle
and we are all going to lose.

that doesn't mean we should give up;
quit; bellyache and moan.
you got dealt a bad hand? fine, acknowledged.
now move on.

you've got to keep on striving,
working,
toiling
just like Sisyphus, no matter the cost; always keep your integrity--
your honor, your spirit, your aura, your mystic whatever--
stepped against the misfortunes of life.

when it comes down to virtue versus vice be firm in your resolve,
that's a fist-fight you want to win. life's too short for anything less.

#3

you and I don't have forever. those coveted, gilded,
treasured hours tick away,
one by one, the way leaves fall off an autumn tree: effortlessly.

the arms of death close, quick and swift,
around our once beautiful bodies
without a thought to how gentle the tenderness of our heart.
there will soon come a day when we,
each in our own turn, must build

a pyre to roast a friend upon.

[REDACTED]

#4

Boe Douglass

Smoke arose from the crippled, deceased bodies laying scattered across the field that lifeless morning of 1975. Boe James Douglass, a young man who had joined the force in spite of feeling useful and in an attempt to bring meaning to his life, walked about with his fellow brothers in arms as they attempted to count up all the dead. They mourned the fallen and soluted those who still stood. The vicious war, now called "The Vietnam War," is the causing agent to the lost lives of these fallen soldiers. The war was now finished and Boe, who yearned for meaning about his young life and self, was left feeling more lost than before he had entered into such a suicidal contract.

A bird hopped about the pavement while stabbing at bread crumbs with his bright orange beak. As he hopped about he soon realized that he was not the only creature facing starvation that morning in ¹⁹⁹⁰~~1980~~ upper Manhattan. Boe Douglass crept across the pavement ever so easily as if he would drop dead in his tracks if he missed a single crumb. Many mornings were the same. The same sick aching in his stomach as he continued on his day long hunt for fullness. The same broken and meaningless feeling that he once thought he had finally fulfilled back in 1975. The pure knowledge of knowing that survival was once again a key factor in this chapter of his life burned thoroughly throughout his soul. It was all he seemed to understand anymore. A Vietnam Veteran who fought for his country alongside his brothers, those who had fallen and those who still stood aging with only the horrific memories of that dreadful war zone clouded in their memory, was now alone. A now homeless Vietnam Veteran who woke up every morning to continue his fight against hunger and anymore, depression.

Almost as if it was apart of his daily routine, Boe would wake up in a panicked sweat feeling as if time had projected him back to 1975. He would begin every morning like this; dreading the hunger he was now awake to notice and still mourning the loss of innocence he once lost in Vietnam. He walked the streets of Manhattan in hope for the dumpster sitting behind the old diner on 2nd and Main to be full this morning. He crept along as people dismissed his presence as if he were just a part of the scenery. As he approached the diner his eyes began to shine as he sighted the trash out back was unusually yet reassuringly full. He headed in the direction of half eaten meals and hunger stricken flies that swarmed his soon to be breakfast. Boe reached the back end of the restaurant when he noticed he was being watched. A young girl, about 6, ever so eager to understand him watched from a distance as he continued on. For a moment, Boe disengaged the lil girl and furthered sifting through his only menu. The little girl, later known as Grace, approached Boe Douglass with a helping hand.

"Here's a half eaten piece of toast mister! Do you like toast?" Cried Grace in Boe's direction. Boe looked to his left in utter shock. No one has ever taken time to acknowledge him let alone help him.

"Just what do you reckon you're doin missy?" Boe asked in a gentle voice.

"Here's another piece of toast Mr.! This one's got butter on it too!" Grace belted out ignoring the question asked.

With disbelief in his eyes and total gratitude in his heart he welcomed the young child and began to dig on. Except for the random shouts of findings from Grace, the two of them rummaged about in utter silence. Boe, now nearly full, took a seat on an old crate that sat up against the dumpster. As his hunger was temporarily cured, he could not come to understand why this little brown eyed girl was so eager to be around him. By all means he enjoyed the human interaction and was grateful for her presence but why? Why would a young girl take time to sit in the company of a poor man. Boe, puzzled, began to mess with the buttons on his only physical artifact from the war; his jacket.

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"Where did you get that jacket mister?" asked Grace with eagerness in her voice and curiosity in her eyes.

"The Vietnam War back in 1975. Way before your time darlin." Boe Explained.

"What's a war?" Questioned the lil girl.

Her simple question took Boe by surprise. What was a war? It's evil of course he thought. It takes at the lives and well beings of individuals. It's a justified solution to an unexplainable problem. It's a masked murderer that sweeps across the battlefield taking innocent lives. The lives of people he once grew so attached to. The lives of his brothers that stood beside him on the battlefield. The lives that now haunt his every thought.

Boe Douglass dismissed his final thought on war and its destruction of the human race when he soon realized all was quiet. He looked around at his surroundings and soon realized that his new friend was no where to be found. Little Grace was no where. The more Boe sat and thought about it the more he came to realize that he had been alone this whole time. Was it a mirage? Was the little girl he befriended simply a projection of his loneliness? Could it be that the little girl he came to know as Grace was grace itself in the form of a companion? The longing feeling of reassurance and peace of mind that Boe had become immune to was now washed away with the impact of...grace. Grace, which softened his heart and finally yet truly fulfilled his yearning for meaning in his life, was now sufficient. It poured out of him in the form of tears as he was able to grasp the concept of life and release the burning hatred and disappointment that that cold war back in 1975 had placed upon him. He swallowed grace with every final bit of strength he had and knew that he would forever remain full.

Hot, Hot Prison

the night air was cool, but the room was hot and muggy.
her arm was draped across my chest,
like a toga thrown over the shoulder of fair Augustus.

- the long, white covers kept us safe, locked,
in a drunken cocoon of warmth, while our able bodies were radiators
steaming with heat, eager sweat,
or perhaps, some breed of drunken affection—as it had so often
—stuck our flesh together, and we squirmed,
helplessly trapped, like love-bugs
in passion's might web.

one of us, the darlings with blood-shot eyes,
kicked the covers off in the night, and we were freed from our lust prison,
two one night lovers, it came as no surprise the morning,
after, was cold and lifeless. red lights flashed on the face of the alarm clock,
her arm hung over the side of the bed languidly,
some sunken flag on a windless day
forgetting it had a solid mass attached.

I sluggishly leapt from the peak of dreams;
dove onto the wooden floor-boards of the old house.
as if some forgotten U-boat still adrift at sea,
it seems my wits, too, were undermanned.

An ill placed landing caused me to trip over the ceremonial cans
of Schlitz malt-liquor used to construct the altar to Dionysus
during the previous night's revelry.

those unfortunate steps—
damn them

—they dragged her, screaming, from liquored sleep. She stomped in anger,
throwing the usual morning fit, and proceeded to blame me for the uncontrollable:
the depiction of women in modern media, Hume's induction fallacy,
and god-given patriarchies.

women like that, so rare, so uniquely vivacious
you must take them for a lover,
always desire to be the wild hunter, never the prey,
and she played the lion well. oh, how she roared,
hurling wild curses,
until finally she laid a filial plague upon my house,
with such conviction,
that she must've been the red-eyed understudy of Mercutio.

Neely Held

#5

that woman was furious;
there wasn't any way to get out of this situation without her proving it;
that's just what she did as she circled the room
and found it, the only thing I cared about,
the only thing that brought consolation in this sick,
sad world: the photo.
in the old, dusty make-shift frame with the cardboard back

ripped off some imported wine box years ago—
probably Merlot or a decent Chianti—
with cursive scribbled across it in the familiar shiny slate of graphite,
sits my grandfather back in the 40's,
back in his navy days, the good ol' days. the days when men still went out
fishing before church or read the paper over a cup of black
coffee in the morning. no cream, no sugar, just boiling water
and dark beans from a robust field in South Colombia.
her almond brown eyes shone
ferociously, the same ferocity witnessed by my grandfather
as the blazing sun rose each morning over the Pacific.

before my wits sounded the alarm her mind was already made-up,
that woman pitched that photo with such a vendetta,
I swear,
she was possessed by Sandy Koufax's ghost,
who thought it was the World Series;
the Dodgers were one strike-out from winning,
and I was the last batter up.

[REDACTED]

those infuriating steps—
down them
—they dropped her, screaming, from liquored sleep. She stomped in anger,
throwing the usual morning fit, and proceeded to blame me for the uncontrollable;
the depiction of women in modern media, Hume's induction fallacy,
and god-given patriarchy.

women like that, so rare, so uniquely vivacious
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with arch conviction,
that she int'ave been the red-eyed understudy of Mervyn.

#6

Laney sat at her usual table with her notebook and the frown on her face that had been there for the past week.

"Hey Sugar, here's your Thursday," Shirley set her plate on the table.

"Thanks Shirley," She smiled back.

"You know I love you, but you gotta learn to cook sometime."

"I know. I'll do it tomorrow," She teased.

"Uh huh, I'll see you tomorrow for Fish Fryday." Shirley patted her shoulder and walked back into the kitchen. She watched as the pencil scribbled back and forth, and then the eraser went where her latest creation should have and she smiled wistfully at the young woman.

Laney walked out the front door of the small restaurant, around the corner, and entered the side door. Shirley's Temple was the kind of place you wouldn't even notice unless you knew it was there, and even more surprising was the apartment right above it that even the usual patrons never noticed. It was very small, would never fit a family, but was perfect for a young woman living alone for the first time. The girl walked through her barren kitchen, through the sparsely decorated living room, and into the empty bedroom where she took her stash out from under her bed and rolled a joint. Crossing back the way she came, she climbed out onto the roof of the Temple. She wasn't sure where the screen from the kitchen window had gone, but as long as she could sit on the roof and smoke, she wouldn't bother to look for it. She inhaled deeply and let her thoughts drift.

This time last year she would never have touched an illegal substance, but so much had changed when she met him. With his short brown hair, striking blue eyes, and thin boyish frame, he looked just like her dad. When she stood close enough to shake his hand, he smelled like him too. The air of cigarette smoke, stale beer, and the sweet sting of pot clung to him and with one sniff she was sitting in her father's living room again. His absence tore at her more than she could bear and this man was the perfect substitute for her grief stricken heart. It never mattered to her that he was almost ten years her senior-in fact it may have added to the Freudian attraction. He helped her pack up her father's empty house and unpack her same belongings into his own small home. They were engaged within the year and when he asked her to move across the country with him, she went.

A car alarm went off in the street below and startled her back inside. She had the munchies. Laney wandered the kitchen opening her cabinets in vain. All that the small central room contained were the original appliances and her three drinking cups. Shirley had offered her plenty of dishes when she moved in, but what was the point? Her dad had been a chef and she couldn't be bothered to share his passion when she had the chance. Now she could barely stand to look at a stove. She walked into the living room and sat down on the couch. Picking up her cell phone from the small side table, she knocked

over her water cup. As she called for a pizza, she ran through the kitchen to the bathroom and grabbed one of her two towels from under the sink. She mopped up the water before it could reach the cord of the single lamp in the living room and finished her order. She threw the cup into the kitchen sink and sat back down on the couch. She considered watching a movie, but she knew the pizza man would be knocking in about thirty minutes and she had to be able to hear him all the way down the stairs. It was times like this that she wished she had just paid to have cable set up, but she knew she would never leave the house again if given the chance to sit and watch marathons of *NCIS* and her other beloved crime shows. The paranoia that accompanied them was worse without a man around to even offer the illusion of protection so she just couldn't bring herself to do it. The video rental store down the street offered a cheaper and easier way to pass the time.

In her bedroom, she revisited her shoe box stash and rolled another joint. Her whole life was shoe box after shoe box that she had shoved under her bed. It was one thing to set up the few items she had kept between the moves, but to see her life collected into about five boxes the size of her feet was too depressing to face. She had set up the bare minimum she needed to live. Her couch, her TV and her bed occupied most of the space. The door to the small walk-in closet hid her clothes and was the less important of the two doors in the whole place. The only other door she had was to the bathroom and she was thankful for that, even if she never had company. As she slid the box back under her bed, she knocked the top off of the one next to it and memories spilled over the floor and her feet. She looked at the beautiful girl smiling next to the gorgeous man and envied their love. A pit opened in her gut as she looked over the other photos, letters, and keepsakes. Trying not to look the lovers in the eye, she threw the offending objects back into the box. She grabbed her lighter, the box that seemed to weigh much more than it should, and went back to the kitchen. She opened the doors below her sink and threw the box behind her trash can, hoping she could hide from the past, but not yet ready to chuck it completely. She looked at her watch and climbed back out onto the roof. She had about twenty minutes to get her mind right while she waited for her dinner, and then she would continue her letter.

Every night had been this way for the past few months--ever since she came back. She spent her days eating at Shirley's, isolated in her small apartment, and only socialized when she ran out of Chronic. Her buddy always tried to get her to stay and chat, but she never wanted to anymore. She got what she needed, stayed just long enough to sample whatever new breed he had, and quickly went back home to enjoy the company of fictional characters never looked at her with pity, and never let her down. Her previously small frame was now ten pounds thicker and she could no longer remember life outside her small radius. She spent her nights in a fog of her own creation thinking about the men she missed and writing letters. When she was in a decent mood the letters were full of love and forgiveness, and when she wasn't they were full of questions she swore she wouldn't ask.

Do you remember when we first met? I don't remember what it was like not to know you, and yet I know there was something before....there should be something after. I remember the waitress on our first date asked if we were twins and how we laughed. Do your other girls look like me? Like us? How many are there? How many children think their father is gone? How many wives have written missing persons reports after their loving husband went out for cigarettes and never came back? Do you love her like you loved me? Did you ever really love me? I wonder if you're with her now. Do you tuck in your son,

and kiss your daughter goodnight, and then lay down with your wife? Or did you walk out of that store and never turn back? Are you somewhere alone right now thinking of me, or have you already found a new girl? I ran into an old band friend from high school the other day and she's already graduating college and got a job at our old elementary school. That could have been me. Without you. But now this is me without you. I used to imagine teaching in those familiar hallways, but I can't see forward anymore. You can't have the ring back. I wear it to ward off potential heartbreaks....and I wear it to pretend I never met her. I wear it because I know, if you ever wanted to, you could come back home and I would be waiting to pick up right where we left off. I wear it because it holds the only future I can see and without it I'm lost.

The morning light streamed through the bare window of the bedroom and Laney woke in a mess of paper and ash. Still clothed and drooling on her latest letter, she took a deep breath. The smell of bacon wafted from the Temple downstairs and with a sigh, she got out of bed and stripped on her way to the bathroom. Her hair still dripping from her shower, she entered the restaurant and ordered breakfast. Shirley looked at her with deeper concern than she could mask, and when she delivered Laney's breakfast, she sat down for a talk with her late best friend's daughter.

"Honey I can't take this anymore", she started, "it's been months and every day you look more like a ghost of the woman I know you can be. I know this last year's been hard, but you can't let your life pass by you anymore. It's not what your dad would have wanted and it's not something I can keep watching."

"Well I guess he shouldn't have left me here all by myself" Laney quipped. She wasn't in the mood for a lecture. "Or he could have left some kind of instructions in his note. Something like 'don't let your life pass you by. P.s. I'm sorry'"

"How dare you!" Shirley scolded. "That man loved you and when he did what he did he wasn't in the right mind to think of how it would hurt us. When that demon gets your heart and your head all twisted up you can't see the good anymore. But we can't bring him back by stopping our lives."

"So that's why you haven't hired a new cook? Because he's not coming back?" She regretted the words as soon as she spoke them. She had been so wrapped up in her fling and the sudden break that she forgot to see that Shirley was hurting too.

"I haven't hired a new cook because I'm hoping you might grow up soon and get a job. I've always been your family, I'm happy to be your teacher, but I'm not gonna sit around and watch you destroy yourself over some man who was never worth your time. I understood you needed to grieve after your father was gone, but this is not who you were meant to be. I couldn't save him, but I'll be damned if you think I'll let you go down the same way. Get it together or find somewhere else to eat." Shirley stalked back to the kitchen and Laney left her cold breakfast on the table.

That night, her sleep was fitful and restless. She tossed and turned and finally got up. When she walked into the kitchen, her father was there.

"Dad?"

"Hey baby."

"What the hell is going on? You can't be here, you're dead." Her dad crossed the kitchen and held one of her hands. He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and looked into her eyes.

"I'm ok." He said emphatically.

"What? No you're not. You're not here." The timer on her stove dinged, distracting them both. Her dad turned and led her by the hand to the oven. He opened the door and the furling smoke blocked her view of what he lifted out.

"What is it?"

"Whatever you make of it." He said. He held her gaze for a moment and kissed her on the forehead. He turned her to face the stove and she watched the smoke blow out the big kitchen window. As the dish came into view, she turned to her dad, but he was gone.

Laney woke with a start and rubbed her chest. She walked into the kitchen, but as she expected, it was empty. She shook her head hard and for the first time in a long time, she looked in the mirror. Her cheeks were chubby from too many nights of the munchies, her hair was oily and unkempt and even the usual light that used to burn in her eyes was dim. She saw the potential of his face there. She had his eyes, his nose, his chin--it was a wonder she could look so feminine with so many masculine features. She took a deep breath and got in the shower. When she came out, she stood in front of the mirror again and cut her hair.

As she cleaned up, a stir in her stomach made her open the shoe box she had hidden behind the trash can weeks ago. She looked at the pictures of herself and her ex-fiancé. They smiled for the camera and stood close, but their eyes weren't involved. When she really studied the features she once found so handsome, she was surprised at the revelation. She found the notebook full of unsent letters and wrote a new, final note. *I'm not attracted to you. I don't love you. Goodbye.* Carrying her things out onto the roof she laughed and dropped the letters into the box, followed by a match. The sun shone brightly as the smoke floated off the roof and away from her.

Smiling for the first time in months she whispered, "It's what you make of it."

Laney ran downstairs to apologize to Shirley. She spent the rest of the morning in the kitchen learning what she could. She made bacon and eggs, biscuits and gravy with hash browns, and a couple of pancakes that she couldn't serve to any paying customer. She laughed and talked with the people in the kitchen and at lunch time, she left it up to the professionals. As she ducked out of the kitchen she called "I've gotta do something important."

She drove to the nearest pawn shop and sold her engagement ring. She didn't care how much it went for, her inheritance would keep her stable for quite a while, she just knew she wanted it gone.

#6

Feeling twenty pounds lighter and a couple thousand dollars richer, Laney decided it was time to decorate the place she would be calling home for the foreseeable future. She went to the home décor store and found a heavy frame wrapping around a big golden heart with one cursive word inside: love. Because it was from her, and no one else, she bought it and hung it in her living room. Shirley gave her plates, bowls, glasses, coffee cups, and all the basic kitchen ware she needed.

The next day, Shirley took a rare sick day and took Laney shopping. They bought a microwave, a toaster oven, a blender, and all the odds and ends she might need to cook for herself and learn to make her favorite dishes. The ladies bought wall decorations for every room in the house and Shirley even helped Laney hang them around the apartment. She surrounded herself with pictures of the ocean and anything nautical. She bought a noise machine for her bedroom to put on her new bedside table and set it to ocean sounds, determined to fall asleep to relaxing noise instead of smoking until she passed out. She didn't give up her favorite hobby, but she vowed to find a healthier way to enjoy it.

At the end of the day, the women brought home groceries and filled the kitchen to capacity. Laney had ingredients she had never heard of, but Shirley promised to teach the girl everything she knew about good food. For the first time, Laney felt like her small apartment was not large and overbearing, but quaint and homey. She walked through her spacious kitchen and imagined the feasts and abominations she would create on the roomy counter tops. She peeped through the door to her bathroom and smiled at the new beauty products sitting on her shelf, as the underwater themed shower curtain threw blue light all over the walls. In the living room, she sat next to her favorite woman and looked around at the paintings and pictures hanging on the walls. She sat crossed legged on the couch, set her wine glass on her new coffee table, and looked at the woman who had been a mother, sister, aunt, and friend to her her whole life. They drank and laughed and talked about the future that both women could now see, shining like a beacon in front of them.

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