

as we dissolved into
the afternoon sun:
a story

Rynn Acker

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First Digital Edition 2024

All work and design by Rynn Acker

First digital edition is not intended for sale. There are no ISBNs.

Published by Rynn Acker.
<https://rynside.com/>.

Prologue

If I'm going to tell this story it needs to happen suddenly. I have always told it suddenly. It always comes up quietly, the grim reaper rises instantly out of the silence in the room, gets me talking, and in a few words everyone knows. As it happens when people meet with a celebrity they think so often about, they're not sure what to say. The quiet deepens. The story rises further and further out of me: a flood.

The water rises and the losses collect, collate, aggregate, fold up, unfold, generalize, wash right down through the rivers and into estuaries where we lose track, at which point we lose it all again, newly, as we do when pieces come back with the rain, slow reminders that again and again slip through our hands.

Two months after I left home it was destroyed. Like Buffalo Creek, the flood came in the morning, full of rage.

I like God's analogy here.

To the extent that there was a choice to be made about events that were both bound to happen by continuous negligence, the best effort was made to form a link. The events become tangled, unified, churned together in time.

My sister wrote a lot about that tangling. She tucked a manuscript away in my boxes when I went away. She told me, after I found it, that it was meant to be mine, after all, an elegy for someone a long way from home.

What little of her writing stayed above water seems an augury, another grim act of God piled on the rest. I lose it now, in giving it to you.

Speaker

Then again there is the bloom,
Something sparks out
From deep inside the brush,

I should tell you all this now,
If I must tell you something
At the end of each journey there is a burst,

Like lightning reaching out from rain
In the silty gray sky,
And I am the thunder calling it.

A low hum builds in the soil
Resonates to a chant
Reverberates into me and I shout

Without pain, without surprise
With all the indifference
With all my fibers and my being.

I am the confidant of the lost.
Death lives in my throat.
Is that what I'm choking on?

Destiny

Black smoke runs down the tracks,
Sinks as a fog into the rolling hills.

She plumes and plumes, bursting forth
Running by, seems to ungulate

With a rhythm, a heartbeat, hammering,
Arms up and down, faces caked with dust

Sweat running down, the running always
Towards the sun, chasing the day into night,

Burning, with coal tinder, under the fire
What is there in it that moves us?

How is the energy taken from the hardened
Oil of bones upon bones, the earth-digested grief

Extracted and released, as this torrent
Flooding out, this unquiet mass

A sandstorm on which I watch men
And birds and hills alike choke.

To travel is always to march the warpath
Pressing down, down into the mantle.

Bridge

River runs, running over, running past, running from
Bubbling, babbling, beats rumbling over the surface
Of the earth, turning, teetering, tottering, tomorrow

Rolls in over the rotting washed away in the river,
Blowing, buffeting, billowing bitter scent of
Threads unraveling, teeth taking, tightening

Rigor mortis, rigors, shaking, the chill, the
Blizzards, breaking, bluing skin freezing
Tightening, freezing tense, tremoring,

Retaining imprints, replicas of the
Bodies, below the ice, below the water,
Transforming, terra preta, terror —

Running river
Below the bridge
That takes me where tomorrow goes, tell me

River, reveal to me, what
Becomes of last year's snows—
Tell me where tomorrow goes.

Morning Glory

My very waking in this place is a sin.

The passage of every hour, a reminder of the distance

Of how I have invented space between here and home

Of how space wavers and changes, compresses, expands;

I wake early so the sunrise can teach me how to bring up

From the veil of darkness, from under the ocean

Shimmering radiance, teach me to draw stares like you,

Teach me this love from afar, this warmth at a distance

I want to hear your secrets in the heat of the afternoon

And know why whispering them is more unnerving than

Shouting them to the world; show the world your sorrow

Tell us your sins your guilt the confession box is the screen

Of the canopy, or the clouds, every journey

Is the journey of us under the sun — the light

Moving towards and away, us reaching out, tangling,

darkness falling. Where is the sun this morning?

Why has it yet to rise?

The damp cold of the dew is setting in.

Wisper

Does it seem to you like I'm trying to confess something?
Is that why the susurrations draw you in?
Is that why you stare so longingly at the deadfall and cringe
At the crunch of the leaves in autumn?

I suspect you sense, as we all do, in the stillness of things
The voice of the earth about to begin
The next line, and I know, as you yearn to understand,
How spirits sublimate, then settle.

So I have nothing to tell you. I am merely trying to suggest
That before you lick your lips to speak
You are already known here. You are already in the soil.
There is no need to bury yourself deeper.

Web

I want to weave a world as our mother
Weaved a family out of nothing but blood.

I want to sow with the threads of disaster,
Sew the seeds of emptiness into warmth

I want to piece together a home now,
Peace for a change, order, for once.

Dissolution is a kind of order, right? Heat death,
Dispersion, diffusion, homogenous, home.

I only want to taste the fresh water of the well
To lick the fresh rain off the grass —

A kiss, to at once eat and be eaten to share,
But for a moment, atoms, digestions.

I want to roost, and feed my kin, watch them rise
As I grow awake, to wake up with the world

On the other side of my bed, to sleep under a tree
And dream-weave Indra's net back from stardust.

Cavern

One last rest in this husk I've made my own.
One last night telling stories to my children.
One last winter from whose sleep I'll never wake, that is

One last blanket of snow over this verdure,
One last bite of the cold and chip off my heart
One last whisper, before the last night falls, of a story:

Once there was a bear much like me, a mother
Of aging sons, a mother braided with her
Offspring, a mother careful, a mother full of love so

Overflowing it spilled out and became water.
Only when the world grew cold for winter,
Of course, the sweet water became ice and snow, still

Overflowing, but hardened for the hard times,
Often falling soft as a blanket in the night, so when
One sleeps long in the cold, long enough to melt into water,

One has been reunited with that great mother,
One is loved so fully they return to her,
One mixes, once again, with the great love of the earth.

One last laugh pressed out from the drowsy,
One last sigh that fades slow, soft into sleep,
One last snore heard, and a last little lick of I love you.

Mockingsong

The metamorphosis is me.

I mix with the starling and the sparrow
I fly with the crow and vulture
I taste, with the albatross, of Prometheus.

I know, I have met, with the passenger pigeon,
The face of extinction, all the words humans said,

The parrot, nevermore, the calls I know,
The calls my kin will not
But from the mockery my mouth can make.

I have sung odes, dirges, elegies, and poems of all kinds
I have burrowed with owls, seen with hawks
I have consumed with, from, and by the eagles, danced with them,
I have learned, above all, respect for my others.

I have risen like the phoenix, like Lazarus,
I have learned immortality
And divinity from the peacock and quetzal

I have fought along with the hummingbirds and
I have loved alongside the doves in flight.

I've moved with ravens,
Mowed with kingfishers,
Died with macaws, in other words

I have dissolved

In the songs of brothers

I have harmonized

With even the rain

Sung the ocean into moonlight

Stirred up dreams

Hurricanes

Whirls and waves. Sisters,

On just wingbeats, I have become the wind, water, everything.

So when I speak, I speak with every voice to tell you,

And in every way I know, I know I should say:

Nothing is as you think. It's different, and luckier.

Embrace it. Embrace me as I call out one last time

In this voice nearly forgotten,

Find me in the dark.

One last light twinkling out deep in space,

One last heartbeat thrumming on and on

One last song for the falling as they fade, sing with me

For, finally I am the metamorphosis.

Milk

I can't remember a time that I haven't known you.
Honestly, the first think I remember is the milk,
The way you gave it out so freely, as if there were plenty,

I think that abundance erased what scarce things
Were left over from the past,
So I could fill their space with this life instead,

I love, and know only this fullness, our conversations,
Your hands and den and love,
They are the fullness of my life, and I thank you.

I've lapped up the last of what I'll take from you now.
The best way to show my appreciation, I think
Is to disappear. I'm going now, I hope you'll understand.

Nectar

I'll say this much though I know very little of this world
It has been my home, and
I leave it to find another, so others may find this one.

Chrysalis

Every birth I've had has been wet and
Every transformation quiet.

Every taste savored because
None of us get much time.

I'll tell you now as you've heard before,
You move in the scars of the earth,

You fester in the wounds.
That's not wrong, it's true.

The roar and rush of your movements
Tell me everything I need to know:

That you are hungry,
And about to be reborn.

Spring

I lost myself somewhere near the pond,
Sun blazing overhead, pressing down,
I was going somewhere. I was far away.

And the water said, clear as day,
“Poor thing, I cannot help you
I can only drown out the light.”

Into the Afternoon Sun

I wish I could say it happened at night.
But it was the middle of the afternoon,

And when we died we dissolved into the
Rushing heat of the sun, into the water,

Every piece of me slipped away bit by bit,
Pulled off gently, sorted up or down by gravity,

We sublimed in an instant, the body melted
Into the earth and we rose to the afternoon sun,

Swirling up like the thin smoke of smolders,
Slipping into a new world so quickly.

We know it, but we've never been so close,
Never been so touched, not in this way.

With a spark we woke to a new home under the afternoon
Sun, we arrived. With nothing left to say, we spoke no longer.

Epilogue

I wrote this all down hastily. It was a matter of hours. It's the first time I've traced her handwriting and exposed it to something she feared, some kind of scrutiny, some kind of destruction she would face in generalization.

It hasn't destroyed her.

Another irony of this being the only thing that wasn't swept away is that it's the only thing she wrote that wasn't meant to be felt alone. The rest of her work reeks of sorrow, the kind of lyricism we're accustomed to keeping to ourselves, the sort of poetry one reads alone, with the setting of the sun, that one overhears from a neighbor who can't help but murmur the sticky words until they make a clear, loud kind of sense out of a quiet life.

I didn't get those. I can't remember any of them and neither does the paper. Those sorrowful things brine the ocean.

But the dissolutions? Those stay, and only because she got rid of them, because she gave herself away, far away.

This part of her left home with me, it was her way of going with me, now her way of staying, her way of coping with my going now mine for hers. There's beauty in that, a twist of fate.