



It is Saturday and we are doing laundry. We have the wash-basin on a table. I ask Calum for string. “We have utility line in the glove box,” he tells me, so I grab his keys and fetch it. I worry a bit of the line over my knife and it frays and snaps. Calum has a little torch that he uses to smoke.

“Calum?”

“Yes?”

“Can I borrow the torch?”

“Sure.”

I walk up to two big trees, I think they are some kind of pine, or fir, or spruce, which I cannot tell apart. I tie the string around the trunks. I don’t know any knots. I melt the ends of the line with the torch. Calum drapes a pair of my wet shorts over the line, and it sags a little, but it stays up. Later, after dinner, I make a fire with green wood and damp leaves and

the smoke pours over the clothes. “You’ve smoked our clothes,” Calum says.

“Sorry.”

The next morning we drive two hundred miles to the center of everything. I don’t see him again until winter in New Mexico when I get very sick and drive his car over a curb but everything is fine except I have to go home early again.

## My Own Summer



Last year Calum’s father called me and said Calum was in Omaha so I got tickets and ran out to nowhere to see the American enterprise and No. 210/No. 211 Orange, after Calum got out from Omaha.

“Alright, it is 12:50. On Friday, January 26th. I think I recorded this morning. We packed up and headed out north. At the cliffs, there were anchors drilled in. We climbed up to a cave. I wanted to see how far back it went, but Calum said he smelled something wrong.”

That was in New Mexico, after I got sick. Today is Saturday again, and I am doing laundry. In front of the tent there’s a piece of shale and behind me there’s the cliff. The air slides down the canyon wall and slips over the shale and eddies in the hollow where the tent is. I have a plastic basin in front of me. It is poly-something.

I use Calum’s soap. I think it smells like pine. I talked to him again today. It had been a few months. I used the telephone down at the general store. “I miss you too,” he said. I explained why I avoid him sometimes. I said that he reminds me of when I was very sick. We met because we had never

met anyone who was unwell in quite the same way and there is a peculiar closeness which comes from finding one's own disease in others. It is not romantic at all but instead it is like constantly trying to tell everyone something very obvious and then he is the first person who understands anything at all.

"I'm feeling a lot better lately," Calum said. "We should catch up." He said he's cold. He was out in the desert for a long time.

When Calum's father told me Calum was in Omaha I took a long weekend off reading George Herbert to go see him and touch him and see we were both still real because the last time we were both very confused all the time and then he said it wasn't my fault and I didn't know if he still was. We drove back down two hundred miles and then for months I didn't know if he was and then his father called and said "He's in the hospital in Omaha." That was after that and before New Mexico, but I always forget that time.

In those days I was very close to God.

## § 1. Morality Play

### Scene 1

*Early morning, security line at an international airport somewhere in Middle America. **TRANSPORTATION***

***SECURITY OFFICER MARK GUTIERREZ** stands at a podium, checking boarding passes and drivers' licenses.*

***CHRONOS** enters, dressed as a Sikh. He carries an immense harvesting scythe at his side. **MARK** drinks periodically from a cup of coffee emblazoned with the seal of the Transportation Security Administration.*

**MARK.** Boarding pass and ID, please.  
**CHRONOS.** Right here.  
**MARK.** Oh, *FATHER TIME*. I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you.  
**CHRONOS.** That's alright.  
*Mark notices the scythe*  
**MARK.** You can't bring that through here.  
**CHRONOS.** This is my *kirpan*. I am a follower of the ten Gurus, sworn never to depart my arms. I am forever vigilant in defense of the oppressed and the downtrodden.  
**MARK.** Oh, sorry.

## Scene 2

**CHRONOS** boards a plane full of beautiful, delicate people with confused expressions and kills them one by one as they talk amongst themselves.

**WOMAN.** We are dying.  
**BOY.** I will say. We are being killed.  
**BOY 2.** Seems that way.

**CHRONOS** kills **BOY 2**. He was very beautiful. Now he is dead. **CHRONOS** kills **WOMAN** and **BOY**.

**MAN.** Listen here!  
**MAN 2.** Yes?  
**MAN.** We are not being killed.  
**MAN 2.** Oh, that's nice. I was worried.

**CHRONOS** *kills* **MAN** *and* **MAN 2**.

**BOY 3.** Hey Mister Time.

**CHRONOS** *pauses*.

**BOY 3.** Don't kill me. I don't want to die. I am beautiful and proud and I love Man and all creation and I am young and strong.

**CHRONOS** *kills* **BOY 3**. *He looked like Björn Andrésen. Now he is dead. There will not be any more of him, not any more.*

**CHRONOS.** So there.

### Scene 3

*At the security line, MARK GUTIERREZ presiding. AION enters, looking put-upon, hurried, and increasingly panicked.*

**AION.** I've got to catch a flight.

**MARK.** That's good.

**AION.** I've lost my boarding pass.

**MARK.** What's the flight number?

**AION.** It's, um.

*He leans in, whispers.*

**AION.** WHITE AMERICA!

*His whisper is stentorian, resonant, lush. It careens off the low, pitted plaster ceiling and echoes through the building. Everyone stares. He looks embarrassed.*

**MARK.** It's already left.

*AION is crestfallen.*

**MARK.** Here. Let me see your ID. You can go get something from one of the shops.

**AION.** Alright. Here it is.

**MARK.** Oh dear.

*He picks up the desk phone and speaks into it.*

**MARK.** Need some help.

*After a moment, JOHN enters.*

**JOHN.** What's going on?

**MARK** gives **AION**'s drivers' license to **JOHN**.

**MARK.** Have a look.

**JOHN.** Oh dear.

**AION.** What's the matter?

**MARK.** Really? You're *FATHER TIME*?

**AION.** Yeah! Don't you know me?

**MARK.** Look, just wait over there for a bit.

*Mark gestures vaguely to his side.*

**AION.** Alright.

#### Scene 4

*Onboard another plane, populated entirely by immigrant laborers, business executives, and applied mathematicians from South Asia. They are serious, competent people. There is nothing objectionable about them. CHRONOS is amiably discussing plans for the construction of a new port in Benin with three of them near the front of the plane.*

**CHRONOS.** I think we're making a lot of progress.

**ENGINEER.** Yes, certainly.

*Suddenly, a laborer points at something out the window.*

**LABORER.** Look! America!

**CHRONOS.** Very good.

**CHRONOS** *walks to the cockpit. The pilot is a somber-looking man from South Asia. CHRONOS quietly mouths a few words to him and he crashes the plane into America. He crashes the whole plane into America. Everyone survives. The death toll is negative four billion. They build a new urban center out of bits of the plane and house three billion people and increase GDP by two hundred trillion dollars and the LABORER is awarded a Korea Hero of Labor even though he is from Nepal.*

**CHRONOS.** The end.

## § 2. Monteverde

Some years ago I went away to Costa Rica for school. All my friends and I and some others packed up and went for school together. We stayed in a big building all together like a barracks with many rooms on a hill above the treeline. It had two floors and there were tables on a flat place outside down below. It was covered in concrete. From the flat place there was a bent steel pipe. It looked like it was trying to hold the wall up. I would hang from it where it bent over and look at people talking until an adult came and said, “Don’t do that. You could hurt yourself.” Further up the hill there was a big wood house to keep the sun out. It had no walls and that was where we ate. We ate *gallo pinto* because it is the only thing in Costa Rica. It is beans and rice and some other things and

also we played cards most days when it was warm and there was nothing else to do.

Each day we walked down to the forest to help count the trees. Sometimes we also walked to the big nets but mostly only when it was dark out. We wrote down which birds were in the nets and at night there were bats too. Some of them had little bits of metal wrapped around their legs with numbers. We wrote down the numbers. One day we went to the nets during the day and it was very bright and I felt very sick and I leaned on a tree and a woman said “Are you okay” and gave me water and told me not to count the birds and I should rest so I laid down in the dust and she said “Move over there in the shade” so I did and I laid there and then after some time I felt better.

There was another hill that was across the valley and it was higher so it faded away. You could see it from where we lived and we walked up there sometimes too. It was always cold when you walked up and there was mist on the air. You could see it like walking in a cloud so it was called *bosque nuboso*. The forest there was not space and air and light like it is here. It was dense and green and very complicated. It was a very old and careful machine. It was like a fine wristwatch. It was very wet.

I once played outside with a boy who I did not know well. We were eating *gallo pinto* and some *platanos* with it. Every day we had *gallo pinto*. It was good. There were wasps and we chased them away because they tried to eat our food. I was scared of wasps but he was not so I would run out in the grass and he would chase them and then I would come back. We were young and strong and we did push ups with one arm together because we could. He was an athlete and we talked



about climbing which I had done for many years but I can't remember what he did. It was like dancing and it was bright and I felt the sun on me. I remember he was beautiful. I try to think of him but then he is another boy from another time so I don't know who it was. I remember there was another boy who was cross with me. "Show-off," he said but that didn't matter because it wasn't for him.

One day in the clouds we found a little scorpion. At night it was dark dull orange under the flashlight. It was beautiful. I remember it clearly on a little concrete path so it must have been an outpost. Up there every plant had bugs that looked just like it. There were so many different plants each with its own bugs all to itself. The man with us explained that Costa Rica doesn't have an army anymore but has the most different bugs and plants of any place anywhere. He was very proud of this. He told us about a very important bird too and I think we were counting the trees because they were trying to fix the forest to save the bird or maybe it was the other way around.

I remember I fell asleep each night with my good friend. He slept in the other bed back on the hill. Before we slept we talked about the girls and which parts of them we liked. At night it was always like cold air inside me and the world moved through me as if I felt the whole earth under my skin at once and was alive. I wanted to eat and breathe and touch every beautiful thing but I was afraid. Sometimes I still feel like everything is inside me at once and I wish I knew how to bring it back because it was the point of something and better than anything and too important to let it go.

I had my favorite book and made him read it one day. He only read the part at the beginning. A boy tries to speak and it all comes out wrong like a horrible animal. One night we

talked about girls and I liked him talking so I said “keep talking” and he said he was my friend and it wasn’t his responsibility. He got up and went for a walk, “I’m going to get some air.” I was the worst person then and I had done the worst thing that I would never forget. It was cold outside and he walked and I was radiant with sick heat. We were always good friends and it stayed that way because it was a small thing and he was alright and came back later after I had gone to sleep and it was like nothing happened.

The next day in the cloud the man told us about the vines. The trees had green vines wrapped around like a fishing net and sometimes the vines were a hollow tree shape standing alone with nothing inside. He called it *higuerón* which is a kind of fig. He explained the fig is like a womb for the wasps and they need the fig to grow. Also the wasp is a messenger so the *higuerón* needs the wasp because otherwise it is alone. The wasp is a messenger and carries the seed of the *higuerón*. When the *higuerón* is young it grows without roots just hanging from tree-branches and it eats little scraps of sun and drinks air. “Birds, wasps, and bats are the main pollinators. The birds and bats also disperse seeds, and they depend on the figs for food,” someone said. Most everything lived above our heads. I was looking at a very thin bug that was exactly like the twig it was on until it moved strangely dancing back and forth. Someone was saying something in an important voice.

“You kids are lucky. The air is drying out,” he said.

### § 3. Railway Sleepers

Calum and I are walking along the rail embankment today. Early this morning we broke camp and packed lunch and hiked down out of the foothills. Below the tree line everything is flat and you can see up the ridge and across in the distance some silver gleam of the towns.

Now we walk along the rail line because the grass is high here. I take a careful step and another from tie to every third tie on and on down the line. Calum walks next to me. The gravel ballast settles with a soft sound under his boots.

“Where do they get the gravel?” he says.

“Probably from the mine.”

I kick down between two ties and the gravel rubs rusty streaks on the vamp of my boot.

“Iron,” he observes.

“Look, the rock is gray down there. Slate or something. See how it comes up at the edges?”

“Yeah.”

Calum looks up from the grass. He turns to me a bit and smiles. His hat droops over his face in the middle where the brim bends so the wind doesn't take it. My hat is tied around my chin with pink utility cord. “550 cord,” the package proclaimed. It had a little picture of a handsome guy in a gray flight suit.

“Bright out,” Calum says. “You alright?”

“I'm fine.”

Calum is looking out at the grass again. The hills are on my right and the railway curves a little with them as they fall back. It goes around the hills like it's avoiding them. The

railway comes up and the hills just stand there until the rail backs away but it still keeps close like it's just there on accident. Calum walks on the left and looks out at the grass. Sometimes there are spots with big rocks or flat slabs at an angle where the dirt slides off. Otherwise it's just grass. "Laminae," I proclaim. I turn the word over in my mouth a bit and say it again slowly. "Laminae." Calum looks at me questioningly. He opens his canteen and drinks a bit. "What?" he asks. "The rock. The slate with the sheets. The sheets are called laminae," I explain. He looks at a big flat rock contemplatively.

"Wonder if this was a lake or something."

"Probably. Dry enough now."

"At least enough for lots of grass though. Further down it's all just creosote and stuff."

I stop to open up my canteen and drink for a bit. Calum unbuckles the strap and shrugs off his pack to look for something. After a moment he pulls out a little wax paper bundle. He unwraps it carefully and puts the paper back in his bag. It's a sandwich. The bread isn't toasted. He takes a few bites and looks at me. His eyes are bright in a field of bronze. I smile at him and he smiles gently and we look back a bit at the track curving behind us.

The sun is a still white disc in the sky. Behind Calum the sun is a sharp circle on smooth blue. The sky is a rich blue at the zenith and in the distance the grass is lost in pale cornflower. There are no clouds. It is like the whole world is lined out in drypoint.

Calum is still eating his sandwich so I sit down on the ties and look at him some more. I think about the gravel and the miners and how it got here and what it was like building the

railway way out here in the sun. It must have been a powerful thing like tending a great tree or a clinging vine on the whole soil of America. Calum looks peaceful so I don't say anything and he looks intense and careful out over the grass at the pale distance.

He turns and looks down at me. His face is shadowed now and his eyes are gentle and the sun is over his shoulder like an old saint.

“Not hungry?”

“No, not yet. I had plenty this morning.”

He sits down and pats the ground beside him so I scoot up over the left rail to plant myself right there in the gravel. My pack rests on the steel and pulls at my waist so I unbuckle it and put it behind me on the ties.

“You see that shadow out there?” he says.

“No. Where?”

He points so I squint and hold my hand up to the sun and I see a form in the paleness like a little scrap of diaphanous blue pasted on all the other blue just soaking up a bit more light.

“Yeah. I see it.”

“That's the butte,” he says. “Over the border.”

“Oh.”

“There's a lake there too. I was out there last month.”

“How far is that?”

He shrugs. “Didn't bring a map. Probably like thirty miles.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. That whole area is a table-land a few thousand feet up. Here we're close to sea level. We can't see the rise up to the plateau, but we can see the butte because it sticks up from that a bit more.”

“And there’s enough rain up there for a lake.”

“Mhm.”

I stare at the shape in the distance. Calum eats more sandwich. There’s a bit of mustard on his face so I reach over and wipe it off with my finger. “Thanks,” he says. He smiles again and the sun is warm on my back and I stretch out on the gravel with my hat tilted down to shade my face. The ballast is hot under me and digs into me gently all over. I am warm and I imagine myself a serene fakir on his bed of nails or hot coals. I pick up a piece of gravel and toss it into the grass below and it disappears and the grass rustles for a moment and then is still again.

Calum finishes his sandwich and licks his fingers and takes a drink of water. “We should get going,” he says, “I’d like to get in before too late while the shops are still open. We need more lentils.” I bend myself up and onto my feet and push my hat back up on my head and Calum stands up next to me and puts his pack on and buckles it. I get my pack off the rails and put it on too and we start walking again.

## § 4. Telescope

I was at a birthday party somewhere. The girl sitting across from me was tall and sallow and very pretty. She was talking very rapidly with a sort of feverish energy about metallurgy. “If the steel is cooled quickly enough, you get martensite, which is very hard and wear-resistant. That’s what they make scalpels out of,” she said. “Don’t they make scalpels out of obsidian sometimes?” I asked, making conversation. “Yeah. Sometimes,” she said. She started

talking about her work, which had something to do with plumbing. “High temperature alloys are very difficult to machine so we’re using a laser to sinter metal powder to make the valves,” she said. I saw one of my friends across the room by the staircase so I mentioned I had got to talk to him and got up while she looked vacantly in my general direction as though nothing had happened.

My friend greeted me and glanced over at the girl I’d walked away from and then looked back at me blankly. He was wearing an outrageous, insufferable hat with a very short circular crown and a narrow brim. He removed it and used it to gesture vaguely in my direction in a sort of mock-obsequious way, and I saw that around the top of the crown the rim was crimped or indented so that there was a slight depression inscribing a smaller circle within the circle of the round edge. This apparatus was made of felt and rather bent and misshapen and for a moment the whole room was circumscribed around it like an orrery. Then he replaced the poor thing on his head and walked over to the very same girl I’d just left.

## § 5. Father Lichter

He’s got a projector with the little cards for it on the table at the back of the room and the lights are dimmed so I can see the rest of the boys but not really what they look like just that they’re there. There are just a few of us and him at the front in a twill suit in the dark and he’s lit up softly by the glow of the screen by his side. He’s got a slide up with the ‘E E’ sort of eye test they use for retards and younger boys who don’t

know letters yet and foreigners and stuff like that and he's looking at it sort of askance and fiddling with the front of the projector so the image gets soft and then sharp and soft again. Now he sighs a bit and I guess it looks alright to him so he picks something up off the table and steps up to the front of the room again but now he's got a little box in his hand with a cable coming out of it and some buttons.

"Welcome," he says. "I'm very pleased to have all of you here with me today."

I sit down a bit lower in my chair and stretch out my legs. I've got a pencil tucked behind my ear so I take it out and hold it in my hand and turn it back and forth so it taps against my fingers on either side lightly each time. The man at the front of the room looks at me. His expression is indiscernible in the cool light of 'E Ǝ'. "Please stop that," he says. His voice is careful and not unkind. I put the pencil back behind my ear and he sort of stands up a bit more like he's going to keep getting taller right up through the ceiling.

"Welcome," he says. "This is a very important day for you all, as I'm sure you're well aware."

I don't know what he's talking about so I look at him very intently because I want to make sure I don't miss anything. He pushes a button on the little box and it makes a soft click and then the projector carousel makes a little rattling sound and the 'E Ǝ' slides away and now there's a picture of a big colonial bungalow with cream siding and red-brick trim and a big arched portico for cars to drive right up to the entrance without getting rained on. When I look at this picture on the screen up front I feel really lonely or empty or something but I keep looking at it because it feels important. The house is big and flat and low to the ground like when boys fight a lot and



they start to move their bodies balanced over the earth like a pillar to make it harder to knock them down.

Above the portico there's a veranda that goes around the side of the house with a whole mess of roofs and little arches above it and a low fence to stop people falling off. The roof is held up by lots of columns that are all the same that come out of the fence. The columns look like big fire poker and are part of the fence too but the rest of the fence that goes across between them in rows from top to bottom is painted white. You can only see some of the house because there are big trees growing up in front of the house and the branches come almost all the way onto the veranda but always stop just before it. The light on the pavement and the wall and the fence is mottled and patchy like when an old wool shirt is worn out so you can catch glimpses of skin between the warp threads in all the places where it stretches.

“What do you see?” asks the man in the front which startles me because I was trying to think very carefully about the big house and why it makes me feel like I have forgotten something or like I had something very important that has been taken away from me. One of the boys in the front raises his hand and the man says “Yes, Ellis?” so that boy's name is Ellis I guess. I can't see him very well.

“I see a woman,” Ellis says. His voice is frail. “It's the top half of her and she isn't wearing any clothes,” he says. As he speaks his small voice is strange and thick like an adult who caught a boy doing something very bad and is trying not to yell so instead says things in a soft careful voice with hard edges that is much worse. The man at the front closes his eyes and tilts his head a bit as Ellis speaks.

“She is very pale and her skin is smooth and her hair is

dark. She looks a bit sad and her mouth is open slightly and I can see a little bit of her teeth but she's not smiling at all her mouth is just open a little bit."

"Anything else?" asks the man.

"I can see all her breasts and they're round and curve up a little at the front," Ellis says. "There's a necklace too that's all she's got on her and it's on a silver chain and rests down between her breasts and it's something like an egg or a teardrop shape and you can see in it a little bit like clouds or something like that but frozen still in the necklace. She's very pretty and nice and she's older than me but much younger than you sir and younger than my mother too and I like looking at her very much but it's too bad because even though I like to look at her so much there is something wrong with the picture that makes me feel awful like there is something missing in me and I think it's because where it looks like clouds in the necklace they're supposed to be moving in it not still like a picture even though I know it's just a picture."

"Why's that, Ellis?"

"That's just how they are I can feel it that it's not right at all like this," he says and his voice settles like the voice of a boy and is thin and he puts his hands up to his face in the dim light. "Can I see the rest of her sir?"

ONE

*Look! Come here—*

Ellis sits there only for an instant. He is very quiet and still and then he shifts a little and nothing happens at all for an instant. Then he gets up frantically and jerkily and throws himself out of his chair and gets caught on the side of his desk and trips. He catches himself and pulls away and straightens up and rushes to the door with his head down. He

opens the door and turns a little and I see his face and it is bright and hot and shines so that it hurts to look at.

TWO

*it's right here—*

His hair is like the piece inside a lightbulb all over and he is stiff like a terrible coiled spring and the leg of his pants is torn and then he is gone and the light in the room is as bright as any day. The light makes two lines on the floor from the sides of the door and they are the edge of seeing because the rest of the room is gone so that there is nothing there at all.

THREE

*to think we've been—*

The door opens and slowly opens more and slows down and I am there in the light. It slides over me and in parts of the room there is something or there is nothing but I am in the middle of it all. The other boys in the wedge of light are there with their brown and blonde hair glowing over their quiet faces. They wear dark blue jackets and vests and short pants and white socks and shiny black shoes just like me.

FOUR

*looking all this time—*

The man at the front in the twill suit is all in the light. I can see all of him at once for just an instant when the door stops before it moves again. He stares at the door and I look at his upper lip shining beaded with sweat and he turns and stares back at the screen with a funny look and then he has a hard searching face and then he looks and sees me look at him so his face relaxes and then sets flat and cold and kind.

FIVE

*when it was here all along.*

Then the door closes and it is dark so I can't see anything at all other than the screen and the pale edge of the side of the man in the front. All I can really see is the screen so I look back at the big house which is still there and I think about it some more and try to figure it out.

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