THE MISSING SLATE

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LIMBUS



(http://themissingslate.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/IMG_5779.jpg)
Untitled by Rahim Baloch.
Image Courtesy: ArtChowk Gallery(http://www.artchowk.com)

February 5th

What do unborn babies dream of? I had asked myself a week or two after I found out my wife was pregnant. I had imagined that they dream of the color of sound and heat, of liquid against the absence of light. But I knew that what had been inside her wasn't a baby yet, not then, not exactly, but would become one, the beginning of something… something more than I could have imagined, but I tried….

At the time I had asked myself that question, she was but a ball of cells, a blastocyst is the extraterrestrial term. She was but a shape, a formation wherein, shape upon shape, she'd become a little human. And, oh…when she would be birthed through liquid into light, knowing the true expanse and feeling of the outside world, she would expand, grow, like a super absorbent polymer toy whose medium was now air. But not just air, love and light and warmth and, for a time, milk…the question that now plagues my mind is more onerous, with the replacement of a single word: what do dead babies dream of? I know it's not a question exactly. Yes, it's grammatically correct, but perhaps that's where it ends, in the grammar. How can anyone make sense of such a question? I cannot.

February 10th

I don't know how much I can write. It's too painful. Reading the above entry caused nausea, dizziness. I used to record my dreams as a child. Some nights I'd forget to write the dream down, other nights I'd forget the dream itself, as if the thing had drowned in my mind. I had killed it and mourned it simultaneously. Oh, God…I had to retreat to the bathroom for a moment and stomach acid came up. It burned my innards, my throat, my

mouth. More than that, it felt like the juices had tried to digest me on their way out. The burning doesn't feel as if it will go away....

As I mentioned, I had tried to log my dreams but it took years to finally fill a single notebook. And now I can't find it or any other markings of the nocturnal narratives of my past. Perhaps it is for the best. But one dream I had the other night won't go away. It remains like a freshly watched film. It is obdurate, damn it. I figure it wants to be told:

I had found myself on a beach, no past, no future, only the breathing waves of the sea. But as I opened my eyes, in the dream, I felt as though someone or something was with me. A presence that needed my guidance and watchfulness, my protection. Yet I didn't know where it was and so my duty was destined to become a failure. That feeling of failure was palpable. It weighed me down and molded my body against the sands. With all my strength I stood up, feeling like Atlas, condemned to hold the earth on my shoulders. Upright, against the coming winds, was when I saw her.

February 11th

I couldn't go any further. I tried, but some weights are too heavy to bear. Something happened today that has forced me to finish the narrative, and so I will:

I saw her. On the shore. My darling daughter. She had grown beyond the womb. She was tall. She was a woman. She wore a kind of white dress that could have been for a wedding she would never have. But, either the imagination of my subconscious is limited, or it plays with my emotions, my fear and my depression. This woman's face...I'll call her the name that had been decided so early in the pregnancy, a name reminiscent of Lilianna, her mother...Marianna's face was premature. The flowing strands of blonde hair were attached to fair, almost translucent skin, where one could see shy blue veins here and there on her temples, but it tapered, like an amputee...her face tapered into a fetus. Her philtrum had yet to weld itself and so it hung as two flaps of skin, making a black triangle out of the toothless, gaping mouth. Her nose was flat and porcine. Her eyes were sunken and

positioned closer to the sides of her head rather than projecting from the front of her face. I'm almost sure that if I had attempted to caress her cheek, it would have come off as melted wax. For a little girl to be cursed with an ungrown face, it was horrid. It was unjust. I felt myself wanting to, dare I write it, curse God. But those feelings are the wildness of dreams, and, upon awakening and drying myself of tears, I prayed for forgiveness. I've yet to see Father Joseph for confession, but, if I can gather myself, I soon will.

The dream is not yet over: as it was my duty to protect Marianna, to hold her and to love her, I would, no matter what she looked like. She was my daughter. And so I ran after her, but she evaded me. Disappeared. I looked everywhere, yet she was nowhere. I sprinted down the course of the beach, thinking I had lost her forever...again. I called her name: "Marianna! Marianna!" But all I ran to was more loneliness. On I went, up the rocky length of a hill, and I didn't stop until I made it to the cliff overlooking the tumultuous water. For some reason, the area was Mediterranean. I had only seen such vistas on postcards. I sat on the edge of the cliff, short of breath. I cried. The kind of crying that can only occur in dreams, because the atmosphere cries with you, shaking and shifting as if it too had lungs and tear ducts. In reality, it is only God and I who cry. No one else. God should be everything. I know He should. But it doesn't feel that way. Forgive me....

From my resting place on the precipice, with my feet dangling, I looked at the swirling and sloshing of the gray water. The sun was still in the sky, but it emitted a

> The figure seemed to think for a moment, shifting between the murk of the past and the far grasp of the future. "She could be dead, or she could be alive." Its voice sounded clear yet remote. There were many voices, or two: young and old, thought patterns and dust-covered croaks. "You won't know unless you die yourself. At that time, you'll be able to peer inside the

box. Until then, she’s both.”

lightless fire. I could hear the waves against the rocks, sounding like the crushing and snapping of bones. Then, I saw a body floating in the water, engulfed and regurgitated by waves. I knew it had to have been Marianna. To save her, I did what any father would do. I dove down into the sea. When I resurfaced, I couldn’t see her. The waters were too violent. I swam, calling for her. The salt-ridden water continued to fill my mouth as I gargled her name. I swam until I surrendered to the lassitude of my limbs and passed out or fell asleep. Perhaps, during that time, I dreamt other dreams, or perhaps I slept without any odd narrative other than the one I was already in. After so long, my body shrunk as if in formaldehyde. I was washed ashore an island of black sand and let out a muscled yawn. The grains of sand were little pieces of coal and thick, curled flakes of ash. There was nothing on the island. It was so minuscule it could barely pass for one. In my peripheral vision, I saw a figure beside me. Hazy. Indistinct. Something standing outside of time. When I turned to look at it, I couldn’t tell if it had the face of a carcass or a fetus, like Marianna. I was compelled to ask it something: “Do you think she’s dead?”

The figure seemed to think for a moment, shifting between the murk of the past and the far grasp of the future. “She could be dead, or she could be alive.” Its voice sounded clear yet remote. There were many voices, or two: young and old, thought patterns and dust-covered croaks. “You won’t know unless you die yourself. At that time, you’ll be able to peer inside the box. Until then, she’s both.”

In the dream I didn’t realize the figure was, in a way, referring to Schrodinger’s thought experiment, involving a cat, a box, and a flask of hydrocyanic acid, all governed by radioactive decay.

“I can’t comprehend that, that she’s both,” I told it.

“Perhaps, eventually, if you do comprehend it, and if it gives you comfort, then you shouldn’t look for that box, never open it.”

“No…no, I couldn’t do that. I’d have to know, I’d have to know for sure.”

I looked into its face, its facelessness, like gazing into a slowly vanishing mirror.

“This can’t go on forever,” it said.

“What do you mean?”

“Eternal, timeless, eternity, forever, they are all meaningless. It’s not only a wish, but the wish itself is an illusion. The sun won’t even last forever.”

“I never thought it would. But…I don’t think I ever thought it wouldn’t, either. I just don’t know.”

I realize now that I was speaking to a personification of my doubt, if nothing else. And Doubt knows what I want to know: is my unborn, dead daughter, is my unchristened baby, in purgatory? By what means could she have gotten into heaven? These questions are what feed my doubt to begin with. It’s just too much….

After my exchange with Doubt, a kind of climax in the dream occurred. The ‘reality’ around me began to melt while particles of ash rose above. I breathed in and out the freezing air. The particles became static clouds of dots and a microscopic ember sparked in each one, like a piece of wool catching fire. Distant, they began to glow white while the sky closed over in darker and darker blackness. A metallic scent came from the nothingness. The ground beneath my feet began to tremble, and then it must have given way, falling into an abyss. I glanced down and confirmed what was happening. Yes, the ground had fallen away. I was floating. The darkness below was so pure and warm. I felt the presence of something, like when I had been on the beach, and looked up. Ahead of me stretched

the Milky Way. The dust had become stars, the ground had become planets. My skin quivered in unison with the stars. I felt gravity invite me forward and I floated closer and closer. Through the light-dusted darkness, I fell away into a single point, into the sun.

February 12th

I wrote down the dream because something happened to me that day. But by the end of the entry, I was too drained to go on. Reading it now makes me frustrated, angry. In my other hand I'm clutching my rosary till it digs into my palm. How can I write so…what's the word? Poetically? How can I write like that when my daughter is dead? Only dreams can make one do that, which is why I'm beginning to think that dreams are a distraction at best and something that can kill me at worst. But if I'm going to make it, whatever that may even mean, I'm going to have to stop the fantasies. I'll tell you now what caused me to write the dream in the first place. As my alarm clock went off, it was somehow set to the radio, and a curious report began, which I later found in the paper: *The NASA's Solar Events Observatory, with its constant eye on the sun, imaged one of the most significant solar flares ever recorded. The solar flare emission peaked last Sunday at 3:00 a.m. on the right side of the sun and was categorized as an X5.1-class flare. World-renowned cosmologist Dr. Nyson comments: "It just goes to show you that the sun is what gives us all life, it's truly and literally, the light, the life-source, of our existence. But, as I've said before, the universe is out to kill us. It momentarily gives us life, our brief, flickering moment, and then snatches it. As for the sun, to us, such a flare could burn the planet to ash quicker than we butter our toast, but to the sun, that flare was barely even a yawn, barely an early morning stretch."*

Last Sunday is when I had had the dream, and 3 a.m. is when I'm usually in the full rhythm of sleep. What a coincidence that I had flown into the sun and subsequently the largest solar flare occurred? It makes me wonder, and it might explain quite a bit, if not a part of me, my soul, my spirit perhaps, had really been shed and cast into the furnace, so to speak. Ever since I lost her, I've felt like I no longer have a complete spirit, in every

sense of the word, all except for *spirits*, those that are consumed, those that lighten my burden. I haven't mentioned it yet, but I might as well mention it now: I was a recovering alcoholic, and it feels as though I'm about to embrace that stigmatized label again. It is with the greatest of resistances, through God, that I've been able to drink only some nights, and never enough to wake up with so much as a headache. But I fear that these spirits, as the slow replacement of my own, will allow me to lose myself not in dreams and not in reality, but in numbness like no other. I can already feel it now. I've been able to fight the urges some days, and some days not. But as time passes I become more afraid... I'm so alone.

February 20th

The loneliness hasn't ceased. On the contrary, it grows every day. It swells as a chasm in the chest. I miss her. I miss both of them....

All fetuses have life-nurturing bodies in which for months they swim in a secret sea of sustenance. All babies have mothers. Yet I have mentioned the mother, my former wife Lily, only twice. Once at the beginning of this black notebook, and again when recalling my daughter's name. The thought of Lily is painful, but maybe writing about her will act as a kind of catharsis, just as writing about my beloved daughter has helped me, although in the smallest way. Nonetheless, in the ever-growing void, light, however infinitesimal, is a welcome change....

I was an English teacher at Tiaro Middle School back then, and still am. Although the institution has allowed me time off, I don't believe I can ever return. I can picture them all: the children, little bodies cramped into individual desks, their eyes so uninterested and devoid of shine, their mouths perpetually pulled into a parabola by sheer boredom, their chins dotted and downward. My methods never worked. Pop quizzes, power points, discussions, workshops, relevant Mad Libs, field trips, a slackness on the rule against food and drink in the classroom, and eventually free-for-all learning, which devolved into a

cafeteria kind of madness. Every attempt was a failure. I couldn't reach any of them. The only thing that mattered to me was making things matter in others people's lives. I tried to teach the classic literature that I grew up with: Fitzgerald, Salinger, Hurston, Lee, even a greatly failed attempt at Faulkner. I wanted to instill and share with them a love of knowledge. Unable to do that, I went to see Father Joseph about some ways in which I could try to inspire my students on a different level. He mentioned that I could use the Holy Spirit as a teaching tool. Once they accept the Holy Spirit, they could learn everything I wanted to teach them, the entire syllabus and more, he said. Father Joseph suggested I sit in on the Bible study sessions led by a new volunteer named Lily, and so I did (I hadn't attended Bible study since I was a kid, and, even though I remembered my classes fairly well, I thought at the time that I might still be able to acquire something, a 'refresher' of sorts, if nothing else).

The study took place in a room in the church I had never seen before, obviously designed for the children. One wall was covered in painted polka dots the size of saucers. The largest polka dot floated in the very middle of the rest and had been painted to look like the earth. The other wall was blank, save for a painted cross that looked three-dimensional. Motley patterned and sized couches, about three, took up most of the space, along with a beanbag in the farthest corner (there was a mini-fridge adjacent to the beanbag, where I imagined juice or popsicles for the children were stored; conversely, the study rooms of my childhood were simply four walls and a ceiling; that was all we needed), and a pink and white podium that Lily stood behind. She smiled at me with closed lips and distant eyes. The room was chilled by air conditioning, yet I could pick up on a pocket of warmness in her direction. A kind of harmless and soothing radiation. I took a few steps in her direction and the light in the room seemed repelled by me, or attracted to her, which for sure I couldn't say. Ink-black lashes, chlorophyll irises. Her eyes were more than just distant, they were immensely contemplative of the unbroken world around her. They belonged more to a bird of paradise than a mere mammal. I could tell by her gaze that she had the love of knowledge. Cardamom freckles were sprinkled beneath her eyes and over

the wide bridge of her nose, giving her an adolescent air, but I knew that was deceptive. Her bottom lip bulged slightly larger than the upper one, jutting not in a pout, but in an assurance of herself. She wore a maroon dress that covered most of her skin, which alone exuded an authority of decency, yet I could see that, too, in the way she stood so upright.

She said, “Are you lost?”

> How I picture it now...I must have seemed so strange. I took her stolen glances as interest, but, at the time, never thought that it could have been a symptom of timidity. As it turned out, she had been interested in me. Near the end of the study, after the kids’ energy seemed to deplete, and they all slumped over each other like ragdolls that giants were tired of playing

She pronounced the word ‘lost’ as if she meant the opposite, as if she found me. In a way, she did.

“I’m Peter,” I said, massaging the palm of my left hand with the thumb of my right. “I’m sitting in.”

She raised her convex chin some. “To learn?”

“I imagine so.”

“We have frozen treats. Help yourself,” she said while turning to point to the mini-fridge with her chin. In that slight turning motion I saw how her eyes didn’t just absorb the light, they fed on it and attempted to gain something that they didn’t have before, something she desperately needed. I knew the pallid and artificial fluorescence of this room wouldn’t do, though.

“I mean to watch you teach. You have a way with the children, I was told.”

“Not me, no.”

“But you’re able to use the Holy Spirit?”

with, she called on me to participate.

"To let the Holy Spirit use them. Please, sit."

For some reason that I still don't understand, I chose to sit on the beanbag, and I'm sure I looked ridiculous throughout Lily's presentation and discussion. She was phenomenal with the children, like they were her own. I'd never seen such enthusiasm. They were mesmerized by her. Although I didn't doubt the Holy Spirit played a role in this theological learning, I knew that Lily's habit of being deserved a portion of the credit. The way she leaned forward or knelt when speaking to the group. How she asked the questions, how she truly wanted to know what they thought, rather than forcing them to think a particular way. They all responded to her, every last one, and I knew she was close with them. For that length of time, they were her children. During the study, her eyes looked toward me thirty-six times (I counted). Each glance was accompanied by the slightest rise of her right eyebrow. At least she found me amusing, I thought.

The subject of that day was a bit peculiar, if not simply coincidental. She spoke to the children about Saint Peter, my namesake and one of the apostles of Jesus Christ. Saint Peter, knowing himself unworthy, requested to be crucified upside down, rather than in the same way of our Lord. I must admit that I may have heard only half of what she was talking about. I was too enamored with her features, her physical presence. A sin, I know. But it proved to be love, not lust, and so I know He has forgiven me at least that much. I noticed that when she spoke, shaking her head some, it seemed her hair was a continuous cascade of curls, each the color of a water-dipped walnut. Sometimes she would put her finger in one or more of the curls, and wrap them tight around the skin of her knuckle. I couldn't see but I imagined the red line that appeared there, the impression. I had wondered if she did this out of anxiety, nervousness with speaking in groups, but then I thought that it was probably me. Ridiculous me sitting on the unusually hard beanbag, not saying a word, only staring. How I picture it now...I must have seemed so strange. I took her stolen glances as interest, but, at the time, never thought that it could have been a symptom of timidity. As it turned out, she had been interested in me. Near the end of the

study, after the kids' energy seemed to deplete, and they all slumped over each other like ragdolls that giants were tired of playing with, she called on me to participate.

"Well?"

"Well, of course," I said, without knowing what I just confirmed.

She smiled knowingly and the flecked, soft bulb of her nose expanded and retracted.

"Peter is my name after all."

By now she knew I was teasing her, and I wasn't so sure that she enjoyed it, but her tone was facetious.

"That's a time out for you, Peter. Vanity is unsightly." She looked at the children and they snickered. Now that I think about it, there was one child who hadn't participated as zealously as the others. He wore a full three-piece suit, like a miniature man, and sported a bowl haircut. You could see in his face that time out was a real prospect, a potential and shameful danger in this room, and perhaps in his life as a whole. By looking at the aloofness in his expression, I knew Lily was strict. She demanded respect, not just verbally, mind you, but through action....

February 21st

I already knew how much I hurt for Lily, the mother of my missed and missing daughter, my beautiful baby daughter, but remembering that barely stoical child from the first time I sat in on Lily's Bible study class reminded me of some of the darkness in our relationship. If I did the wrong thing or said the wrong thing, she became, not someone different, but someone not. She closed up and surrounded herself with an entirely officious aura. It seemed that anger and resentment was barely contained in the narrow vault of her body. One incident occurred at church, when we met a new convert, a single and promiscuous-

looking woman. I had complimented the elegance of her dress. I can't recall now what it looked like exactly, something whose lengths of fabric met over the stranger's heart and clipped to an antique brooch. And, if I recall correctly, she responded with a sly wink. That day was designated for Lily to talk about her methods with the children and for me to talk about what I've learned while observing her classes. Yet, when Peter and Lilianna were called to the microphone, I ended up going alone. I had looked around the room for her and eventually saw her standing solidly by the frame of the door that led to the ladies' restroom. After she made sure that I could see the blankness in her gaze and the floral brick of her mouth, she descended backward into the shadows of the hall. I ultimately made a fool of myself by talking about the necessities of the Holy Spirit, as if I had any idea how the divine realms operated. I was given, after some stumbling and stuttering, what I perceived as pity applause, and then I went to check on Lily.

"Lily?" I said while tapping on the door of a locked stall. I knew no one would walk in on us. Everyone always stampeded to the restroom after the final word of Father Joseph's sermon. I heard the vortical noise of the toilet flushing and she promptly opened up the stall.

"What," she said as she walked to the sink to wash her hands. I saw through the white foam that she was rubbing each side of each finger, twice. The soap was scented an inappropriately pleasant lavender. I stood watching, not sure what to say.

"Were you crying?" I knew it was a silly question, considering her face was dry and unmoved.

"Ha!"

The synthetic laugh echoed against the porcelain tiles of the walls. I wouldn't have known she produced the awkward syllable if I didn't see her jaw open and close in one motorized motion. Keep in mind I had no idea that this behavior was spawned from my carelessly commenting on another woman's dress.

She turned around and faced me.

“We like each other,” she said. “I like you. You like me. I don’t want to share you with anyone.”

“With who-whom are you sharing me?”

She didn’t explain; she wouldn’t explain. She was above mere words. I was expected to know, and while we stood there, looking at each other, I replayed what I could remember of the last couple hours until my mind’s eye landed on the glinting lapis lazuli of the brooch and the dress. I knew. And in her barely lifted eyebrows she knew I did.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I-I didn’t know.”

“What didn’t you know?” she asked.

“That you liked me. How…how—”

“Wasn’t it obvious?” Now she was on the cusp of tears. The fluorescent lights above us began to flicker so suddenly that I couldn’t tell if my sight was the culprit of the phenomenon or if it really was some anomaly in the electricity. Her face, then, seemed to be suspended from the mold and skin of her head, floating. I recognized her flushed lips, and her eyes that were made a trampled gold by the spasms of synthetic light. In and out of green and gold. The colors. Each one unsure of itself. In the darkness of her chest were the curving and bursting illuminations of a night carnival, her heart. I knew I loved her more than I loved literature.

Their solemnity was broken by squeaks of distress. Lily paid no mind. Her constant waltz was so innocent, so pregnant with terse movement, that I wanted to surround her in my arms, but instead I audibly sighed as if to expel

my urge, or at least keep it at bay.

The nature of her eyes might make more sense if I recount our second meeting: after my first Bible study class with her, I summoned the gumption—mostly by looking down at my brown, lusterless shoes—to ask her if she would want to go for a walk in the park tomorrow. “The crows are pleasant to watch,” I said. She told me she would be delighted, although her features didn’t betray any excitement she may have had. I took her cryptic demeanor as a challenge. One that I solved the next afternoon....

We had been walking in the shade of mossy oaks for some stretch of time, following the paved path before us.

“Looks like Central Park,” she said, swinging one foot in front of the other in the manner of an effete soldier. Light and dark blotches trailed across every inch of her body as she moved. I wondered if she took notice of this visual effect occurring on me as well.

She was somewhat ahead of me, so I half called, “You’re from New York?”

“I went there once, with my father.”

“I’ve never been,” I said.

“He’s gone now....”

“Oh, your father? I’m sorry.”

The quiet between us was especially poignant. The drone of the trees as they shook by the wind kept as constant as the ocean’s. If I had closed my eyes, I probably would have been unable to distinguish one setting from the other.

“May I ask what happened?”

“Heart attack,” she said. “Usual for his age, his diet.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I was always uncomfortable talking to people about loved ones they lost. That was all I could bring myself to say in those moments. But I made a conscious effort to say something else. What I came up with was equally as original: “He’s with God now.” But I myself had always found comfort in this notion. Something that has been denied to me ever since....

“Yes,” she said. I couldn’t tell if she was serious or sarcastic, which, in a way, disturbed me.

Squirrels cleaved to the bark of trees, some upside with heads bent upward, tails of white-tipped hairs spiraled against their backs. Rodent gargoyles keeping vigil. As we walked by, they retreated to the highest points amidst the silhouetted leaves. Their solemnity was broken by squeaks of distress. Lily paid no mind. Her constant waltz was so innocent, so pregnant with terse movement, that I wanted to surround her in my arms, but instead I audibly sighed as if to expel my urge, or at least keep it at bay.

“So where are you from?”

“Why the interest?”

“I want to get to know you.”

She looked at me with the raise of that right eyebrow. I could tell she took pleasure in my wanting to know. I still wasn’t sure if she cared to know more about me.

“Pittsburgh, actually. I grew up in a cookie cutter house, on a street that looked like all streets. My childhood was no different than anyone else’s.”

“Oh,” I said. “Does that trouble you?”

“No, not particularly.”

“I grew up here. I’ve never left Florida.”

“And does that trouble you?”

“Since I was a kid I’ve told people that I travel all the time, in books.”

“Don’t you think that’s escapism?” she said.

Two runners passed by us in neon sneakers. Their labored breaths complemented each other: *huff, huff, huff*.

“Not escapism,” I said. “More like…visitation. I visit the places and worlds that I’ve never actually seen.”

“Sounds spooky.”

“Well, I guess it is in a way. Books are sheets of magic bound together.”

“Now you’re being ridiculous.”

I could feel the blood rushing to my cheeks. What was I doing, trying to impress her?

“You can’t sound like, like Mr. Rogers,” she told him. “You have to be honest with the kids. That’s the only way you’ll connect with them, any of them.”

I didn’t like being lectured in this manner, but I thought that she probably had a point, a hint toward the truth.

“You know, I’ve never lost someone I loved before,” I told her. “I can only imagine how you feel about your father. I’m not too close with my parents, but I love them. And if they

were to pass on I would feel their absence. I think I would have these two missing chunks in my brain."

"The memories are still there," she said. "Always. The times he'd bring me home a handful of mints and I'd stuff both my cheeks with them, like one of those squirrels." She motioned with a vague wave of her hand. So she had noticed them after all. I underestimated her perceptivity. "Then the darker times," she continued, "like when I ran across the road without looking. He brought me back into the house. His face was shaking with anger, and you could see the tiniest ripples in the skin below his eyes. He took a pencil from his desk, and in a flat voice, he said, 'This could have been you,' and he snapped the pencil inches from my face. I can still hear the cracking of the wood, the shattering of the led. I can see the individual splinters rising between his face and mine. But then it goes blank after that, or watery is more like it. I cried, naturally."

"I take it that's what you picture before crossing."

"Exactly. That's what I mean, the honesty, the sheer and brutal honesty. It's necessary if you want to teach someone something. I've never forgotten my father's lesson and even now I always look both ways. Twice, sometimes three glances each way."

"You have a lot of memories like that?"

"Some dark like that, yes. But it's light disguised as dark, really. Of course I didn't know it then. But there are no holes. The absence isn't like that. It's just that the memories are different, they're coated differently."

"What do you mean?"

"How do I put this—"

"Coated?"

> “Then the darker times,” she continued, “like when I ran across the road without looking. He brought me back into the house. His face was shaking with anger, and you could see the tiniest ripples in the skin below his eyes. He took a pencil from his desk, and in a flat voice, he said, ‘This could have been you,’ and he snapped the pencil inches from my face. I can still hear the cracking of the wood, the shattering of the led. I can see the individual splinters rising between his

“They feature someone who isn’t here anymore,” she said, incredulity in her tone. “I can’t get in my car and pay him a visit. That’s not an option. The memories hold him fully now.” She paused to consider. “Like when you see a really old movie and think to yourself, ‘Everyone in this is dead.’”

If she spoke like that, maybe she had been sarcastic in her response to my saying her father was with God. But I never had the audacity to ask. I also feared the answer. I needed her to believe so I could believe, too. There was also the possibility that she relied on me for the same reason. Beliefs, I now know, sustain their foundation on the beliefs of other people, family, friends. The bedrock is composed of belief upon belief, with no end until the black tar-covered core of disbelief is reached, if ever.

Ahead, I could see a white wall of light at the end of the tree-sheltered walkway. There was a murder of crows perched at different heights: one on an overarching branch, another walking on the ground and shifting its wings like the arthritic shoulders of an old man, two side by side on the back of a bench, and the largest specimen of them all swooping across the path as nothing more than a black blur.

“There they are,” I said.

We both stopped. I stood a few steps behind her. The way her curled hair shifted from side to side indicated that she

> face and mine. But then it goes blank after that, or watery is more like it. I cried, naturally."

was studying the crows. Intently, I imagined, with faint lines making themselves visible around her eyes. I took some steps forward, cautiously, lest I disturb the ceremonious quiet, for even the wind ceased, allowing the trees to rest their fidgeting, until I was at her side. Due to my closer proximity, the crow scrounging on the ground began to quicken its gait, bobbing its feathered head like an Egyptian cartoon. She put her arm around my waist, the first time she touched me. Then all five crows, and a sixth that had been hiding in the foliage, retreated through the trees and landed on a clearing, some of them hopping and spreading open their wings. They spoke to each other in alien warbles, cawing louder and louder. Then it occurred to me that they weren't retreating, as the squirrels had, but, rather, making way for us, as death does for those who come after.

Lily must have been thinking something similar, because she whispered a Latin invocation, "*Absit omen*."

We began walking in sync. I felt a tension in her body, not toward me, but in relation to the approaching light. Her movements conveyed a hesitance, a minute urge to go backward, from whence we came. But I had returned her arm's grip with a gentle clutching of my own around her shoulders, and so we walked holding each other, a makeshift cradle, and after some further distance I could tell she felt safer. So did I. Before we crossed the threshold, into the brightness, my nose tingled. Then I felt the blanket-like warmth as the canopied path opened up. I looked at the sun to catalyze a sneeze. My involuntary reaction was to stretch open my collar and expel the wet air into my shirt.

Lily laughed.

"That's disgusting," she said.

When I recovered, I looked at her and saw her eyes as they were meant to be. Golden in the light of the sun. Not the drab, faux rays invented by Man. This was her element, what her formerly green eyes had been yearning for. Light from a real source. Nurturing and plentiful.

Through a smile she said, “What?”

“Nothing. I just thought of something. That boy from yesterday. In the three-piece suit. Is he yours?”

“I don’t have any children.”

Admitting that caused her eyes to flicker a shade darker.

“I suspect you’re childless, too,” she said.

Responding to her overt question and the one beneath, I said, “Yes….”

We realized where our invisible connection found itself, within the core of our yearning to love a child of our own, a mutual affinity for parenthood. I could read in her eyes another Latin phrase she would utter: “*Deo volente*.”

February 22nd

In the last entry, I found myself writing in a narrative style, which is suitable in a couple ways. First of all, my memory is not photographic, nor is it film-like, it is hazy and full of holes, some of my memories are even watered down to general emotions only, and so a narrative allows me to fill in gaps where necessary. In addition, I’ve always wanted to write a novel, although not exactly a memoir. I wanted to write something that could teach children to think. Lily, of course, always told me there’s already a book for that, and she had been right. I ended up not just shadowing her during Bible study classes, but filling in on days she couldn’t attend. I found myself, too, being much stricter to the child in the

three-piece suit, whose name was Joshua, although he preferred Josh. He wore that suit compulsorily, he attended class compulsorily. He possessed no will to learn about Catholicism, and I even caught him rolling his eyes on occasion, as if he was better than everyone in the room. Recently, my sins outweigh any roll of the eyes, but that's because my eyes have been opened to a deep and troubling truth. Marianna is still without me, and I'm without her. This injustice is something little Joshua could never fathom. Regarding Joshua, Lily had explained to me, "Some are immune to the Holy Spirit. Those are the children we need to look out for the most. We must never let up on them. Otherwise, we might as well give them to the Devil ourselves. No matter what harsh punishments we inflict, we know it's for their own good. It's to protect them against the punishments of hell. Our souls are capable of untold suffering." She nearly sounded like a brimstone preacher, but I knew she was being honest, as she had explained to me during our walk in the park. Father Joseph was not silent on the horrors of hell, either. Many of his sermons described what lay in wait for wayward souls. What parent would let their child have any chance of suffering in such a place? The first time I punished Joshua, my nerves were on end, admittedly, yet I felt exhilarated afterward. It felt righteous. I was a divine doctor administering the only reliable treatment for a sickly soul. I was doing the work of God.

February 25th

I've been putting it off as long as I possibly can. But it must be written: Lily and I had vaguely thought our marriage ordained by God. And it was, it was. But we didn't fully realize it, and that may have been the problem. The constant bickering, the butting of coiled horns. If only we knew that the horns had been false, things of the unreal, illusions of the Devil, then we could have shed that which wasn't there and embraced, intersecting our bodies in love. And yet, that is what we did. We had decided to make a life together, in both meanings of the phrase. Lily's stomach continued to expand until it was clear a tiny being waded within.

Marianna was nothing like what I head dreamt near the beginning of this month, the fetus-faced woman. The reality was different. More or less horrifying, I can't say. To place any numerical value on this heartbreak would be impossible. But it was real, terribly real. I'll recount the hospital scene: legs agape, Lily huffed and puffed as if she was trying to raze a brick building. Her face reddened to a blaze. Her fine wrinkles deepened. Like flower buds, her eyes held shut. For some reason, the doctor and nurses began to look concerned. They told me I needed to leave, that she needed the air, but I only walked backward, anticipating something, until my back bumped against the wall near the door. Lily released a scream, the first of many, and when her eyes blossomed she saw the doctor's widened gaze and ovate mouth. Her irises withered into a dull gray, a gray that remained until she left me. In the end, I couldn't provide what she had wanted, what I had wanted, whether it was my fault or not, she resented me and me alone, so she left. She wouldn't try again, she couldn't. She had been too traumatized by what occurred: Marianna emerged—or fell out, for her arms slung over her emaciated head like a body unconsciously does when falling from a great height—as a shrunken, pink and red and black mass, charred, with an organic rope around her neck. I can't remember what happened next, but after Lily's wailing lowered into silent whimpers and her tears slid with the viscosity of syrup, the rinsed baby was presented to us in a white bundle. She was the color of lead now, frozen by a storm we knew not of, and the blanket around her was the closest she would come to the winter coat she had so desperately needed. But it was too late. Lily's pain, her sacrifice by labor, sowed only more pain, more sacrifice. That's when I knew the punishments of hell were not limited to the hereafter, sometimes they existed in the before.

April 18th

I haven't written in this notebook for a while, although I've tried. The sober moments come and go, enveloped in a headache, stung by thoughts. My attempts to write while numbed and indifferent, though, are shown to be

> I went and had a few drinks in the kitchen just now. I feel calmer. There are

unintelligible, both the handwriting and the content. The lights force me to stare at the lines of my notebook and nowhere else, lest they blind me. They force me to focus. I'm sitting in an incensed fog. In an odd way, it's slightly comforting. It's just me here.

What a terrible feeling...for all I really know, what I'm writing now is equally unreadable, unable to be understood. I think Father Joseph is onto me. Who am I fooling? He knows all too well about my problems, which is why I have about a dozen or so unheard messages on the machine from him. At least, I think it's him. Last I heard, he extended a helping hand to me. I'm not exactly avoiding him. I'm sparing him. But, if I can gather my wits, I might just visit him and confess my sins and doubts. But for what? To spare myself from hell when my own daughter is stuck between all worlds? It's not fair. It's not fair. It's not fair. It's not fair. It's not fair. It's not fair. It's not fair...I write the words but they don't change anything. Nothing will. And sometimes I even feel my prayers fall on, not deaf ears, but nonexistent ones. I do need his help, Father Joseph's. A part of me loathes admitting it. I just remembered, it's Easter today, during this cruel month of April. The wall calendar in the kitchen confirms it. So this was the day our Lord was resurrected. Three days and three nights. After he sacrificed himself for our sins. Yet I seem to be increasing his burden, driving the nails and thorns deeper, twisting the tip of the spear. His tears are mine and mine are his. I concede my sins are mostly thoughts. Some are action. Gluttony with the bottle. And, in a recent rage, I cast my rosary against the wall and the beads scattered across the floor. The little cross lies there,

> answers to these questions, so I'm told. Some are simply not yet known, others are being debated, and a few are set in stone, as it were, yet I find them unsatisfactory. The details are practically bureaucratic. I realize I need help. There is something wrong with me, a buildup of some black bile. A humor that would make Hippocrates squeamish.

inverted from my viewpoint. My most recent sin, some few minutes ago, was a thought in the form of a question: Why can't my daughter be resurrected? I've read the Bible. Other than Jesus, there was Lazarus who coughed in his tomb. Then there were the myriad sleeping saints who rose from their graves and walked through the holy city. So it can be done. When was the last time? Why not now? Why not her? Is that what she's doing then? Sleeping in a shoebox-sized coffin? Is that it? Then, God, wake her up. God!

I went and had a few drinks in the kitchen just now. I feel calmer. There are answers to these questions, so I'm told. Some are simply not yet known, others are being debated, and a few are set in stone, as it were, yet I find them unsatisfactory. The details are practically bureaucratic. I realize I need help. There is something wrong with me, a buildup of some black bile. A humor that would make Hippocrates squeamish. And I wouldn't doubt its contagiousness. While in the kitchen, I listened to the messages from Father Joseph, as I had suspected. He cares for my wellbeing, he's worried about me. We were never very close, not like we should have been, but I know he's sincere. I need him. And it seems he has invited me to a church function held for He who has risen. I think I'll go.

April 20th

The other day wasn't a total failure. I learned some things. As the rest of the congregation pretended they weren't eyeing me, I talked to Father Joseph. Every second, I thought of how he must smell it on my breath, the withered sting of alcohol. I could see it, his round and oily noise twitching. By the time I arrived at the gathering, I was, you could say, drunk. But not as much as I could have been. I was able to walk and talk, although barely, and even recall, through a sepia tinge, most of what had happened.

Father Joseph was no doubt pleased to see me, if not surprised, but also worried, probably due to the smell of my words, if not my ambling posture. I greeted him like an old friend, pretending I hadn't been a recluse for the past few months, as though the black beneath my eyes didn't betray a loss, an unnamable doubt. Or was it ambiguous hatred? The

difference between the two seems negligible. We distinguish doubt and hatred for convenience, as a matter of speech.

“I knew you’d come. We’ve got quite a gathering today. And, my, look at all the little ones —.” Father’s voice was choked by his own gelatinous throat. He burrowed a finger in his collar, sliding it back and forth. Every now and then, the light would catch his circular spectacles and turn them into shining discs, his eyes totally obscured. “I...,” he said, clearing the tunnel. Beyond Father Joseph’s lint-speckled shoulder, and over the altar, hung the nearly life-size crucifix, with Jesus’ arms wide open, his face without emotion, other than a relaxed welcoming, but I kept thinking, as I felt the delicate spray of Father’s speech, if Jesus is welcoming me, or anyone, then why must his palms be nailed in forced invitation? For a moment, I thought Father Joseph could hear or read my thoughts, what with the way his eyes bulged during the moments I could see them, but I knew it was ridiculous. Only God knew. I had to stifle an urge, then, to throw myself at the feet of Father Joseph and confess everything, and then crawl to the altar and relinquish myself to His power. They’d all probably shrug it away as the spirits speaking, the bitter ones that had taken hold of my faculties.

“Saint Peter,” he said as a coda to whatever speech came before. He was looking at the bright mosaic of the Saint crucified upside-down, stuck in a perpetual fall, a halo around his head. “Your namesake, is it not? Wonderful. Just wonderful.”

I had come for his help, as I had done in the very beginning. But something wasn’t right. What I didn’t expect was the way I felt about the rest of the congregation. They held their children closely as they passed me, pretending to examine the multitude of Easter lilies that adorned every crevice and step and shelf. I saw Robert, with that slick parting in his already thinning hair, sitting with his squirming four-year-old boy. He turned, perhaps to look for his dominating wife. He made contact with my fogged eyes, for the briefest second, and he gave me an awkward blink. The right lid closed just a little faster than the left, demonstrating the unevenness of his whole life. Warning me, too, that family life isn’t

what it's cracked up to be. But what he really feared, I know, was me taking his place, or him taking mine. *Better Peter than me*, I'm sure he was thinking to himself. He returned to his forward-facing position as if nothing ever happened, as if I existed not fully, but half at best. I knew his type, ever since I shook his flaccid hand. He did what he was told. The garbage was always outside on Wednesdays at 7:30 a.m., not a minute early or late. Likewise with his job at the Dollar General, where he smiled at anyone or anything, except me in that moment. We all knew his wife was with someone else, fucking the brains out of some lucky neighbor. I don't recall seeing her that day, either. Only more evidence of the unevenness of his blinking life.

I saw, too, Mr. and Mrs. Benedict dressed for the occasion in pastel colors. Those colors… the Benedicts had been at the shower, and they had brought brightly colored outfits for every day of the week as gifts: orange, yellow, lime, pink, sky blue, purple, and white. Those colors belong to the air now. When I nodded at the Benedicts, they each straightened their outfits. It seemed their clothing had suddenly become disheveled and required taming then and there, and on they had walked. If anything, I had thought the congregation would treat me like a long lost family member, if not a pitiable orphan. That word alone holds so much heaviness in the two syllables that it caused me to drop my pen.… But, no, they treated me like a changeling. A thing not wanted. And they were right. I was changed.

As I had meant to tell, I felt about this flock as a wolf would. Not a particularly menacing or hostile wolf, but a fangless, injured lone wolf. Wanting no part in anything but his own suffering. Cast out. They no doubt sensed this, saw me for what I was, not that I tried to hide it: wrinkled shirtsleeves rolled to the elbow, beltless slacks, scuffed and worn dress shoes. Well, I could have arrived in nothing but my underwear, so I spared them and myself that much indecency.

"Peter," said Father Joseph. He pronounced my name as if I was the martyred Saint himself, and he reached for my hand, but before he could touch me I withdrew it. I

He returned to his forward-facing position as if nothing ever happened, as if I existed not fully, but half at best. I knew his type, ever since I shook his flaccid hand. He did what he was told. The garbage was always outside on Wednesdays at 7:30 a.m., not a minute early or late. Likewise with his job at the Dollar General, where he smiled at anyone or anything, except me in that moment. We all knew his wife was with someone else, fucking the brains out of some lucky neighbor. I don't

immediately regretted that.

In a lower voice he said again, "Peter."

I told him that I needed to speak with him, that I needed to confess.

"Well, of course. Of course," he said. Sticking now two fingers down his collar. I couldn't tell if he was sweating or not.

My memory wavers after this, but somehow I made it to the confessional and Father Joseph was on the other side. Although I wasn't so sure it was him, because his face seemed changed through the screen, like a figment.

"Bless me father, for I have sinned, it's, it's been months since my last confession."

"How long is that, Peter?"

"Months, Father. Four, maybe five."

I listed my sins, and although I couldn't see his face clearly, somehow I knew he was unmoved, unsurprised. I examined my conscience, as I had always been instructed to do. I knew the bile had tainted it. Once I was finished, it became very quiet, the flock outside seemed hushed as well. And so I thought that maybe Father Joseph was moved, but in what way I did not know. Silence upon silence. For how long, I couldn't say. Then, just like that,

> recall seeing her that day, either. Only more evidence of the unevenness of his blinking life.

he told me to say a number of prayers for penance. I uttered my act of contrition: “My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good, I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things.” It was near the end of that last sentence that I slurred beyond comprehension. It was a lapse that felt to undo everything I had just confessed, but I didn’t realize it then. After catching my spoiled breath, there was more silence, and it was too much for me to bear. I broke it, with a question: “Why, Father?”

I thought I could see his lids close as he looked down at the floor, and then the white lower hemisphere of his eyes as he looked upward to God.

“We’ve spoken about this, child.”

I realize now, but didn’t at the time, that he was calling me child, as he always had done. Regardless, it all comes to the same thing. The child, my child.

“I just don’t understand.”

I was crying, and I felt as if he pitied me as one would pity the guilty.

“There is good hope that, with time, God will show her the way, Peter. Sometimes we can’t claim understanding, we can’t search for it, because His ways are, at times, too mysterious for mere human understanding. And these are the times where your faith must remain resilient. After all, what use is faith if it breaks down in the hardest and darkest of times? I know you are strong, Peter. And your church is here for you whenever you doubt that. I too, have lost loved ones, and miss them dearly. Remember, as I remember, God is here for you, for us. Always.”

April 23rd

I re-read the above entry, fully sober now, and I discovered two things, one more disturbing than the other. The first is that what Father Joseph told me is the same thing he told me ever since, which almost leads me to believe that he has practiced a kind of script, although it is, dare I say, improvised. Different semantics, or grammar, or structure, but invariably including God, faith, and understanding or lack thereof. I don't blame him, I suppose, how could I? I blame myself, why should I want understanding in the first place? He might very well be right. I've conceded it before. What happened cannot be understood. Not by me, not by anyone but God. At times, I wonder how even He can understand, and I know that I should never question His power, however inadvertently, but....

I recall now the second point, the disturbing discovery. While praying after my confession, to demonstrate my regret, my slur on the word love was more than that. It was much more. Thinking about it, writing about it, makes my hand, my whole body, tremble, but I think...I don't know if I can love Him more than her. I don't think I can. I don't think I could. I love her, Marianna, more than myself, more than the world. There is no space or structure greater than my love for my daughter. I don't think I could ever ask forgiveness for this. I don't think I want to. More evidence that my soul has flown into the sun.

After I had said my prayer of apology, Father Joseph did not give me absolution....

June 1st

I found some loose notes that I will transcribe here: What is it? An echoless void sustained by the constant ululations of its multitudinous occupants, row upon row of ethereal cribs containing the crooning and cooing of toothless creatures unfamiliar with the teat, waiting for the holy water to splash against their gummy skulls lest they stay on the fringe for time untold, or simply the infinity

There is no space or structure greater than my love for my daughter. I don't think I could ever ask forgiveness for this. I don't think I want to. More

stretched feeling of an impulse without a mother, an instinct forever insatiable?

evidence that my soul has flown into the sun.

December 25th

It's not that I blame Him for what happened. It's that the world ended for me, yet it continues to spin. It ended for her before the light of morning. I no longer believe in purgatory, or the unfinality of death. I no longer believe in the church, or the trinity, whose head is that of God, the unseeable animal.

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