

The Shadow

Midnight Beach Fire

Instead of fading as a memory, the beach trip to Wingaersheek after graduation has gained in power: the gray day with the tide all the way out and a strange island off in the distance calling our names as we shared the vodka, set the hukkah pipe up near the wall and started dancing on the deserted beach, the gang in short-shorts and sweatshirts raving away from the wall down to the water, wading out to the sandbar in our own world of vodka, cigarettes and love. Past dark we built a beach fire, kindled with driftwood, glowing over the water like a setting sun. I stood night watch with Caitlin over sleeping lovers covered by their blankets, Lucy and Lillian resting on each other's arms, Kieran and Santi topping and tailing along the sea wall, Connor and Brockton making suspicious movements in a shared sleeping bag. We walked hand in hand to the water's edge, firelight reaching towards moonlight, Cait stood up to her ankles with her hair down, absorbed into the scenery so purely as to lose the powers of speech, her hands behind her back in a

gesture for her lover to hold them, but to stay behind her. In her warm and tingling palms I wondered how she saw the world, what transformations these salt air breezes and flickering ocean reflections formed along her oculus nerve. She was wading into the water to be free, to find a great love that could swallow her whole. She was up to her waist and the water was cold. It made her legs feel weightless, and gave her palms something to do as they swirled a current around her narrow thighs.

Come with me, and swim, she'd said.

Don't you wanna sleep, I'd said.

I want to swim.

I'll watch from here.

Her head above the water, gone as she dove. In black depths, a nighttime swimmer's courage, coming up twenty feet further out to sea facing the silver mooned horizon line; our planet's edge, with stars rising beyond the end of the ocean in trails of light before going blank in a great radius around

the light of the moon. The light hiding behind the light, the dark hiding behind the dark, and the dark hiding behind the light again.

At dawn she walked through the marsh on the boardwalk and stood beside our van alone for a while, leaning against the front door. Something in the sunrise, its pastel colors, the rolls of grassland rising in a great dune down to the sea, was so beautiful it hurt. Seagulls blackened by the light behind them crossed over the shore and climbed on warm drafts in slow tacking forms over the water. The sand under her feet was cold from the night. Walking down the boardwalk, coming to the boardwalk's end, she leaned on the railing watching her sleeping brethren cleaning up around the fire. A wave came in long and slow with the tide all the way out, and the boy she'd once loved stood by himself down where the sand got smooth and hard, jeans rolled up his ankles, not so much the man she'd wanted him to become, gasping all night with his pitiful orgasm, caught by the kid things she'd gotten over long ago, acting hard and tough in the face of any situation – a cataract in his

assessment of the world, turning her adventurous spirit into jealousy-kindling. It was so long over and so hard to end it.

With sand in our boots and our hair we'd piled into Caitlin's car and lay there in love with everyone, One Sunday Morning by Wilco on the aux:

Against the weather dawning

Over the sea

My father said what I had become

No one should be

Outside I looked lived in

Like the bones in a shrine

How am I forgiven

Oh, I'll give it time.

Fallow Rut

That was where Cait's head remained in the final days of summer: how to leave behind a great love with grace; how the great tenderness of shared virginity and its aftermath could be abandoned without shattering what remained of our friendship. How to go our separate ways and not wreck a good past.

We were friends for longer than we were lovers, and lovers only on the condition of always putting friendship first, so we told ourselves our breakup was only of the romantic structure, and once that was removed the deeper love of friendship could survive.

...from strangers to friends, and friends into lovers, and strangers again...

Jesus what a lyric.

As August ended Cait stood by the car in the light from my kitchen windows, waving. I took the keys from the bowl and headed out. The incessant

frog song of our town creaked through the dark pines from all sides of the night. Her handbag on her hip, her statement of intent in how close to the house she was willing to come: into the light on the driveway, but no further. I found the button that lowered the roof. The roof lowered. She reached into my lap and took my hand.

We entwined our fingers for the drive across town. In her hands I awoke from a seventeen-day cavern in my psyche, my sense of self rediscovered by her touch.

Parked car left behind us by the stone wall, farm fields blue in the moonlight, our destination the single twisting tree in the center of the open fields, surrounded by the caldera of dark woods.

Hard trunk against our backs. Soft soil under the palms of our hands.

We stared in silence across the perennially brown field, perennially tractor-rutted and never planted, where last summer we ran as drunk as we'd ever been towards the darkness of the woods, and said *let's just do it, right now let's make a family*. Our decision was made by a descending angel, so it

felt, who stayed our hand, and whispered, *not now*. We had held each other and agreed, *not now, when we were sober*. One of those moments when angels save your life, or perhaps it was her common sense coming to the surface that caused the sensation of a descending angel, her wariness bringing enlightenment to our dark scrum, coming back to earth with wisdom: maybe don't get pregnant at midnight in the furrow? I pretended I agreed but now I wished we'd made that baby.

"So," she said, "we broke up."

"But we're still friends."

"Always."

"I thought we were getting married," I said.

"No one marries their high school sweet hearts."

"What made you want to do it, though?"

"You agreed, we were going to see other people."

"Did I agree?"

"You agreed. We talked all night about it."

“When?”

“On Lafayette. At the Lake in the Clouds. We talked all night and you agreed we were going to see other people, and then you got mad at me when I did.”

She was becoming lonelier the longer we spent together, and was thinking of her friends. I asked her if she wanted me to drive her somewhere else.

‘Will you bring me to Katie’s house?’

Bring me - that meant once *brought* we’d go our separate ways.

Her plans were no longer my plans.

When Cait was dropped off at Katie’s house, when my dad’s car was back in my driveway undamaged and the roof raised, I sat alone on the front steps of my house in the dark unable to come to terms with what the term *bring me* insinuated: the separation of our lives. *Want to go to Katie’s house* – *want to go* was the vernacular of the past two years. But now... *bring me*.

An unrecognizable sense of being surrounded by living yet invisible beings erupted in my consciousness and I ran into the house. I closed the door to my bedroom but the invisible spirits remained.

The sensation of being chosen out of many and beckoned away from the fold swarmed over me: *everyone else goes on, except you*, that was its message, *You, little shit, you come over here to me. Everyone else goes on. Not you.* Burgeoning fire and brimstone below my soul, a cavernous depth opening and out loud I felt myself saying, *what is this monster*, this creature of demons and darkness that arrived behind my back without my knowledge and seeped over the front of my soul until my face was its face, my voice its voice, my possession by dark spirits finally complete.

End of August

I ran out past the highway, through the woods, to a grass park overlooking the wide water of Walden Pond. It shone silvery through the trees, its dark wooded shoreline flooded up to the roots.

I walked around the pond, wire fencing on either side of the path, stopping at a set of stone steps leading down the steep bank into the green and welcoming serenity, three steps reaching down into the water, three more continuing under the surface, the last darkly submerged, hardly visible on the bottom. I sat on the third step with my headphones out, hearing how quiet the lake became as a cloud bank moved over the trees; empty waters moving in the wind, miniature rolling waves washing the pebbles. The water was empty, towards the center the surface turned to sky, reflections of the passing clouds seeping under my skin as water seeped onto my cheeks like an underground river flowing out the side of a cliff, misted by the wind into its molecular vapor form, flying over the earth, the vast savannah, unbound from soil, space bound, held down by gravity and pushed up by air, equalized perfectly into this droplet shape surrounded by other drops that form a cloud, clustered into raindrops,

released into space in an indefinite descent ending with the clattering of a tin roof, the whisper of an overflowing gutter, the swishing of rain pants, then the great reception in which the drop is now the lake and the lake is now the drop.

Our gang returned habitually like salmon to Walden at the end of each summer, but this year everyone was in motion, heading into different parts of life, different people filling the spots always, at one time, reserved for one another.

I stayed there alone until the gang arrived at midnight. On the beach we huddled together to go in all at once. We sprinted down the ramp and ran in a great cloud of youth across the sand straight into the water like mad lemmings, pulverizing the black surface into glimmering droplets of moonlight as we hacked away at the lake filling the air with glitter, in love with splashing one another, a funny thing the great apes like to do, splash each other just for fun, scare each other just for fun, and whatever is fun for all apes is my favorite

thing; it's great to be put on our proper level with our cousin chimpanzees, the purest form of feeling alive is to be the animal we are; to munch a banana on all fours is fun for all involved, banana too, which exists, probably, to be eaten so the seeds of the banana tree will spread. Bananas love to be eaten.

Most people were knee high in the black water. Some neck deep.

Distantly Thoreau's cove was illuminated by the ochre skies in the direction of Boston, separated from the dark forest shoreline by its gradations of darkness only, a contrast almost completely indiscernible but for the familiarity of the scene.

We sat in a group around our illegal, irresponsible fire, warming our bodies and clustered together in love. They all shared a deeper love than mine. Their roots were long, they went back to nursery, and this was not the case with me, I was brought into their group through Caitlin, and there was again the feeling that when everyone separated for any length of time, only the most meaningful connections would survive. It begged for some discussion, but when all you wanted to talk about was why you were feeling bad most people

were not interested. No, they were interested and wanted to help, but had to stop enjoying themselves to do so, and so then your contribution of heavy weights and dimmed enjoyment was visible, which was the opposite of what *talking about it* was meant to achieve. The end of things was clear; these were friendships that would not last. There was no easy extrication, a mile length of emotional rope tied everyone in a Gordian knot, and nothing I said would untangle it. They would live together happily for the rest of their lives, and I would have my own people, but there was nothing left for this friend group. And Caitlin was in the group deep enough to hold it together for life, she got all our friends, and I got none of them. I had no words for this when Dan said from the other side of the flames that I looked *introspective and deep in thought*. It was the last act of a wonderful time in our lives, I felt, I wanted to be sad about it, but it wasn't sadness I felt, it was loneliness, which took place outside of their group, whereas the sadness of separation was something done together, still an act of love, a joyful sadness, the droplets of my joy hiding in the shadows of my sorrow, as King Duncan said.

I walked down the beach away from everyone, onto the dark pathways. The forest was quiet. I moved without knowing why, heading out on a whim, slicing the knot perhaps. Shadows of the moonlight on the dirt trail, and glowing white granite blocks when I passed the stone steps of memory. I was on the far side of the pond, looking back at the main beach to my friends in the firelight. I was alone. I was amongst the stars now and would make my way out of this plane of existence into the one where acts of the flesh were acts of the flesh, to be noted but not taken seriously. I sat on the step with the terrifying sensation of having my feet below the surface of a lake I could not see into. I decided to swim back to our shore and come out of the water like a beast to surprise my friends.

It was warm once I was in it, my suit was still wet from our first arrival. I swam towards them to crawl along the bottom, creep out of the water and grab an ankle and really make them holler... and I was almost halfway there when Dan spotted me and waved from the shore, and I had no choice but to wave back and pretend I was just going for a long swim. Why was I the only

one obsessed with scaring people, I loved it. It was my favorite thing to do. I could sit inside a cupboard for hours waiting for Dan to open it. My finest hour was the nightlong watch I stood outside his house waiting for him to reach the wood pile in the morning, for I had built myself inside it and when he came out with his canvas bag for the dawn wood stove and uncovered my abode, he screamed an utterly disgusted scream of horror; no great noise to shock him, just a ghoulish grin and two raised, eagle-clawed hands, and eternal laughter as reward.

Climbing out of the water to join the collective, some happy chanting from kids who'd come off good years with stories and status and renewed awareness of the social due owed to them by others – all this scorn poured from my eyes and laden my friends with totally unfair judgments, and my sonnet of the summer sprang to mind: *I feel myself being awful, but I cannot stop it.* From the cloistered shadows Caitlin's voice rang clearest to my tuned and ready ear. Shocking, the power of one voice to stand out among many.

Her conversation revealed things I'd never noticed about her before, a lost gesture saying so much more than all our pillow talk, a revealing laugh at some new interest; asking her about these moments when the night was over had been my favorite, but these observations now would be left as questions for all time –perhaps the chief reason not to spend time together after breaking up, as what one is unable not to notice nor able to ask about accumulates into a trove of data forever left unprocessed, exploding out later in pointless letters and phone calls that obsess over little moments from years ago, moments so common as to be utterly banal but that nonetheless entrance the searcher, who without rest disturbs these ghosts, trying to get free.

Singing her pleasures of a social life gone fully astray from adolescent constrictions, her womanly extroversion making me sick with jealousy; that to Cait, nothing about me said *hang on to that guy*, that it was freedom and the common virtues she was searching for in a mate, and that in whatever fleshy vessel they appeared she did not care, caused a great resentment that my body, which had once been a carrier for goodness, right action, thoughtfulness,

and was now hollowed by my lazy negligence, offered nothing that she needed and she was gone. *I am detritus.*

The Shadow

Inside on my bed facedown. Swimsuit dripping from the edge of the bathtub. House silent. The first two hours of September.

A useless get-together of total bullshit. Verbally expressing the opposite of what I was feeling until the cognitive dissonance became unbearable and we hugged goodbye in the final act of hypocrisy. Fuck I want to cry. Anger so boiling my bones break inside their fleshy caskets and my fleshy caskets boil inside their hateful captivity of form, fucked up anger at being shaped in this specific way – legs, feet on the legs, arms, hands on the arms, neck, infernally long and bent fucked up chiropractic nightmare of a neck with head on neck, what's the word for the disorder where you're seized with an unstoppable urge

to amputate your own limbs, to chop your own body to pieces, whatever that disorder is I have it because I want to cut off the right leg to rid myself of my mother who lives inside me, and chop off my right arm to rid myself of my father who lives inside me, and then chop off my head to cut off all the fucked up ancestors who have lived inside me my entire life, and who I renounce totally, completely fucked off with the lot of them, then cut off my balls and throw them over the telephone line like shoes, finally severing my cock and weighing it down with bricks to the bottom of the sea, and then at long last throwing my mangled torso from the top of the tallest pine to at last, at last, at last, smash my hollow body all to bits.

Headphones in. The music to heal these awful shames is Linkin Park, at painful volume; good painful, like running til you puke. Linkin Park is hatred, and gut-wrenching remorse the second that hatred crosses your lips – the song Numb above all else is the only thing that can match my inner disturbance when I throw vitriol at the world for reasons I cannot fathom other than as

some desperate call for love. But hatred still lands on their ears as hatred, no, no, no, no, I didn't mean it like that, Christ I'm sorry, please forgive me. Linkin Park is good at that feeling.

Numb by Linkin Park:

*I'm tired of being what you want me to be...don't know what you're expecting
of me, put under the pressure of walking in your shoes...every step that I take
is another mistake to you...*

Something like that.

And then there's always One Sunday Morning by Wilco, a song that now permanently recalls the sensation of a hukkah on the lungs with the promise of vodka moments away, an endless sheet of silver ocean stretching along the

length of an endless and entirely deserted bank of perfectly flat, perfectly dark sand.

Something sad keeps me moving

So I wandered around

I fell in love with the burden

Hooooolding me down.