

## Worms Waiting for Water

There he sat again. It was the third time in as many days, the third day that he had spent an unhealthy amount of time, the third time leaning back, slack-spined, on the old couch, long and low, thinking of her. She would have called it a davenport. She had, in fact, called it a davenport, called that very couch a davenport, had called that very couch a davenport... And now, he sat there, thinking of her, again.

Did he really remember her face? Her hands? Her body? Anything about her? Or did he only think he did? He knew his memories were real; they had to be. Without his memories, what did he have? What did he have to connect him to the past, to the future? What did he have to make sense of anything? What did he have to connect to her? He remembered. He remembered the wrinkled skin on her thin face like a page from a "Dear John" letter, or a suicide note, torn out, tightly crumpled, torn up, reassembled, and laid flat again. Too white and visible veins too blue. Thin lips, painted too red. Always too red. He never remembered her any other way. She must have been some other way, once, perhaps before he remembered. He remembered but he did not remember. He remembered skull bones apparent beneath her old skin. He remembered a red sweater. A red sweater that he no longer had. He did not know what had ever happened to that red sweater. Where was it now? Things didn't just simply disappear. Even if completely transformed: shredded or burned or buried and decomposing, its molecules and atoms, still existed, somewhere. Its cuttings, at

least, could not have simply ceased to exist. Where was it now? Thrown away or given away? Left as an offering? Donated anonymously? Cut into rags? Still being worn but by some old man who had purchased it for a buck or two at the Salvation Army Thrift Store? At St. Vincent DePaul's? Still being worn by that same old man as he lay back, slack-spined, on an old davenport? Maybe it was in a bag on a shelf in the basement or in the attic. Maybe it was in a box, folded and stinking of mothballs. Folded. Arms neatly folded across one another, wrist over wrist, cuff on cuff, in repose. Wrinkled.

He remembered her in episodes. He remembered her in cuttings, if he remembered her at all. Chris remembered so much and so little. And then he remembered it was Saturday. That was her day. That was her favorite day...

As a younger man, more than half his life ago, now, Chris had fancied himself an artist. Ignorant art. A poet. Beat. Beat but too late. A generation too late. Born too late for so many of the things that had piqued his interest, his excitement. Before that, it had been Big Band music. After that, the Grateful Dead. As an artist, as an apprentice artist doing a semester with a famous Latino artist, a locally famous artist, maybe famous state-wide, actually internationally known, if not famous, who had come to the college as artist-in-residence and to curate an exhibit. As a much younger man, Chris had worked with a famous Latino artist, several famous Latino artists, in fact, several famous Latino names in a long tradition of artists: the great-great-great (great?) grandson of Arroyo, had held original Posadas in his hands, had rolled sticky black ink onto 100 year old etched zinc plates with a briar and had pressed with all of his strength to squeeze out an image, another impression of scrambling skeletons, dressed and scrambling for

their lives as another earthquake shook their towns apart, their homes and schools, shook their very bones apart. How many times had that image been repeated over the century since that plate had first been etched and inked and pressed? How many stubby fat fingers, blackened with ink, had pressed their weight to squeeze the ink evenly onto rough paper? How many times had those beautiful skeleton's bones been shaken apart? Their terror relived over and over again, trapped in that image, created anew. Set aside for decades at a time or stamped out daily, stamped out repeatedly in a high-volume extended press run to pay for their sins. Sunday to Saturday and every day in between. Sunday to Saturday; lust to pride. He remembered Saturday was her favorite day and it was Saturday now.

Years prior, Chris had watched an old movie with her, most of an old movie. Artificial black and white screen shots, black and white scenes of calm water which should have rolled and roiled. Which should have but which did not. It was calm as glass. It was an old movie and an even older struggle. Man vs. nature. Man vs. himself. An epic struggle which should have roiled but it did not. Man and marlin, he remembered, were never even in the scene together. Calm sea which should have roiled, cutaway to swimming marlin. Even the man, the hero, looking pensively out to sea, over the ship's bow, gray-faced and plain. Gray and plain. Gray and plain day after day, days on end, Sunday to Saturday though at sea the names of days had no meaning. One day was no different from the rest. There was no rest on the weekend. No hump day. No blue Monday. The names of days had no meaning at sea.

Chris remembered learning the meanings of the names of the days. Sunday was for the sun, that was Zeus. Monday was the moon's day. Wednesday was Odin's, Wodin's day. Thursday was for Thor. Saturday, Saturn's. He remembered Saturday was her favorite day. At

sea, the names of days have no meaning, no purpose, except perhaps, for idle musing. For reconstructing tales of how the days were named, and why, during the down times, during all those times at sea, waiting, all of those days on calm seas which should have roiled. Chris thought he remembered a scene in that movie, among the other scenes, blacker than most, wherein the hero, at night, looked out and over the still calm sea and looked out and up into the night sky, full of stars. He thought he remembered honing in on one star in particular. One particular star, the Star of the Sea. Did the hero speak? Did he say anything? Anything at all? Was there a voice-over of internal monologue at least? Or was there just the sea, and the man, and presumably the marlin, somewhere, unseen? Did he speak or were the only sounds the sounds of water slapping on water, on prow of boat, of his own sighs, his own breath. The prow of the boat like scissors. The cutting prow... (*... to sail him away... to sail him away...*) Did he speak? Say anything at all? Whisper even? He must have said something. He must have spoken. Perhaps only to himself. Perhaps to the great fish, unseen. Maybe to the Star of the Sea. The Star who guides. The Star of the Sea who never betrays her children, who never abandons her children, high and dry, unable to find their way back home. The star who gives life. He must have spoken. He must have said something to her glittering blue and white majesty framed against an almost black sky. He must have. But she did not respond.

Chris thought, half remembering this scene, he should have laid out an offering to her, to the Star of the Sea: grapes, pineapple, watermelon, bananas, lain out in seashells on the edge of the deck. He should have laid out coins: seven coins. One coin for each day of the week. One coin for each day that passed between phases of the moon. Seven coins for the new moon, seven coins for the first quarter moon, seven for the half, seven for the third

quarter and seven for the full moon. Laid them out and left them out, twenty-eight for the full moon. A coin for each day. A fortnight's worth for waning and a fortnight's worth for waxing. Twenty-eight coins for the full cycle of Monday's goddess, observed by and laid out for the Star of the Sea. He should have laid out coins and fresh fruit. But where would he find fresh fruit out at sea? There was nothing fresh to be had and no fruit at all. The same lack of fresh fruit that caused sailors through the ages to go mad, to die from scurvy, to remember on future trips to sea to bring fruit, citrus fruit, to bring limes, the fruit that gave them their name. Limeys. Bring limeys so the limeys don't get scurvy. So the limeys can find their way back home before they die. The Star of the Sea, hanging in the sky to remind them to bring limes so the limeys don't end up too soon underground or too soon undersea, too soon buried at sea. Buried at sea from a simple lack of vitamin C. From sea to shining C, see? From C to shining sea. Never to be seen again. Never again to see the shining Star of the Sea. To spend eternity with the Star of the Sea.

He should have built an altar to the Star of the Sea, or built an *offrenda* for the wandering souls of those lost at sea, to return to. He should have used his idle time to write *calaveras*, epitaphs for the dead. He should have donned a top-hat, lit a cigar and banged a drum to guide the dead, lost at sea, hopelessly wandering and lost. And with his offerings to the Star, he should have laid out *pan de muerto* to feed them, to fill their hungry, insatiable bellies.

Chris thought about those for whom his own belly hungered, those he wished to have inside of him. Standing on the deck, he thought about what he had lost, who he had lost, and the opportunities he had let slide away, while there had still been plenty of time. Time he did

not know would run out until it was too late. Hindsight trumps foresight. A pound of cure. A pound of flesh. Hindsight trumps foresight every time. And every deck has its joker which trumps all the rest. That one card in the innocent deck of playing cards which reveals their true origin, their connection to the past. To the more sinisterly maligned deck. To the fool and the cards that follow him, the cards that continue to follow him all the way from the ancients. From Egypt. Still living millennia later after being brought to life out of The Book of the Dead. Still alive and still speaking. There is room for foresight, but hindsight trumps foresight every time. He remembered the words of a poet he once liked, fiercely, or at least he remembered a version of those words, inevitably altered by time. "The heart stops briefly when someone dies. As they pass from your outside life to inside. And your heart adjusts to the new weight. And you carry on. Sanely." He thought about those who were now inside of him. And those he wanted to let out. Needed to get out. Those whose weight he almost could not bear. And of course, he thought of her. For the third time in as many days, he thought of her.

Somewhere in a bag or in a box in the basement probably, Chris had an old top-hat, an old tattered top-hat and some various other small stage props and costumes that friends of his had stolen, breaking into a local theater, after-hours: wigs, a cane, fake guns and swords, a black satin vest, a black top-hat with frayed edges, and which smelled musty, a little bit rotten, a little like something had died. Smelled a little something like death. Sweet, but too sweet, and dusty. The kind of smell that contorts your face like the onset of a sneeze. But you do not sneeze. And there is no climactic release from that smell. It sticks in your nose and fills your

sinuses, seeps into your brain and remains there. Too sweet, it remains. From aft, portside, a loud thump brought him out of his reverie and he headed back.

In the dark, he could see nothing which might have caused such a loud noise. No damaged or fallen equipment, no obviously missing parts or parts askew. Everything seemed in order. In the dark, he could not see damage to the outside of the boat, to the hull, if such damage even existed. Somewhere inside the boat? Something unseen but steadily causing more damage, edging him closer to the precipice of expiration? Chris imagined a wayward sea creature, confused, slamming into the boat. A dolphin or shark or a small whale. Something mammalian which stayed close to the surface, close to the air. Or something which fed on that which stayed close to the surface. A predator. A carnivore. The sea was, after all, the largest expanse on the planet which was still largely unknown to man. More was known about the surface of the moon than about the floor of the sea. Monday. Moonday. The moon hanging over the sea, sister to the Star of the Sea. The Moon reflected in the sea, not illuminating, but masking the depths with its reflected light, reflected yet again. Not illuminating but masking what lay below the surface. What creatures might lurk therein and only surface once in a millennium was unknown to him. Unknown to almost anyone. And the sailors had their tales.

Chris remembered years ago, when he had first learned to drive, on land of course, he remembered talking his reluctant mother into letting him take the car out, after dark. Just to run to the store. He'd sworn he'd come right back. And on the way, he'd picked up a friend. Not to cause any trouble or to do anything he should not have, but for fun, for the company. Not for any planned reason. But because he could. And driving back homeward, on long dark country roads bordered by trees and cornfields, traversed by the occasional lone wire, sagging a

bit between lonely poles, not quite vertical, right there, right there in front of him, directly falling straight out of the sky, right there in front of him on the road, practically on top of them, a giant beast. He saw its large shiny eye glint in the headlights as its head spun towards him from the impact. And he swore it saw him too. It looked right at him. It saw him too. And then, lying flat on the hood, he saw its shiny eye turn glass, vacate. He saw it with his own two eyes. The hood was crumpled and headlights smashed. The front corner of the fender, spear-like, had torn through the flesh, not like some indigenous hunter's spear, with its precision, but violently, vulgarly. Blood and hair stuck to the front of the car and to the fender. Blood ran down into the small gap at the edge of the hood, grossly widened by the impact. Gaping like a wound. He saw its thick tongue hang out against cold metal, steam rising upward like a departing soul. The ghost in the machine, freed at last. Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, free at last. Steam still streaming from moist nostrils and wet tongue. Steam pooling, wispy, on the cold red hood of the car. The crumpled hood... The cold crumpled hood...

The car's radio continued to play, continued to play on, and for the first time in several minutes, as the deer's dead eye continued to stare at him, Chris heard the music. Short bursts of a synthesizer layered on top of each other, sliding over one another like eels, like tectonic plates. Electronic tectonic plates sliding over one another, and under, grinding against each other and repeated, repeated without variation, then, variation. Chris remembered, in that moment, another recently heard song. He had recently received as a gift, from his grandmother, his adopted grandmother, several cassette tapes: Johann Sebastian Bach's Preludes and Fugues, Toccatas and Fugues, something and fugues, and the fugues intrigued



him. Chris did not know a lot about classical music, had not grown up tortured over a piano repeating *etudes*. His father listened almost exclusively to Rock and Roll. Mostly 70's Rock and Roll. "Hendrix. Clapton. Allman Brothers. Zeppelin. Tull. BTO. Stones. Grand Funk Railroad. James Gang. T. Rex. MC5. Skynyrd. Lesley West. Blackmore. The Who, the *old* Who. Ten Years After. Santana. Thin Lizzy. Aerosmith. Hot Fucking Tuna..." And those layers of synthesized sound, organ-like, piped back into his mind, a particular minor fugue. Prelude and Fugue in G minor. He had listened to it several times recently, trying to hear the theme, the prelude, in the fugue. A couple of times he thought he caught it and it was gone.

Inadvertently, he'd listened enough, listened intensely enough that he knew what the music felt like, if not the tune. He did not know the tune. But he knew the feel and he felt it in his shaking bones as the deer's dead eye stared at him. It was an ominous requiem. Heavy and boding descent. It sank like the steam on the hood, pouring out of the deer's mouth and nostrils, and down the hood, over the fender, seeping into the gaps, sliding over dark blood, absorbing light. Dark blood like spreading shadows. Rising and disappearing. And sliding again.

The deer's dead eye stared at him and drew him in. Chris saw nothing but that eye and it grew before him, came closer. He saw again, the head snap back and toward him, from the impact, spin around and turn toward him out of the dark, from the impact. Focusing on that eye, focusing on that eye, he did not see the leg twitch again. He did not see the old man, wearing a heavy old red sweater, approach his car. He did not see a man in a top hat, nor in a black vest, smoking a cigar. He saw nothing but that eye. He was certain that that eye, that dead eye, saw him too, and in that eye, Chris also saw another eye. The eye of Cliff Walker.

More than a decade before Chris had even been born, Cliff Walker and his family had been brutally murdered. Christine Walker, Cliff's wife, had been brutally beaten, smashed. She had been raped in her son's bedroom, in her son's bed, and shot twice. The murderer, the rapist, had bathed her body and dragged it into the living room. Left it, dead, in the living room. Sometime afterward, Cliff and the kids returned home. As soon as he entered the house, he was shot in the face. He had left his gun in the car. Their son, Jimmy, was shot three times and died next to his father. The daughter was near the mother's body when she was shot in the head. She did not die, so the intruder, apparently out of bullets, drowned her in the bathtub. Chris had recently seen all of this. Still photos on the television. It was the 50-somethingth anniversary of the crime. The murderers were never caught. One still photo, black and white and shades of gray, Chris had seen the family. Christine smiled broadly, beamed with happiness which could not be beaten. A face which could not be beaten. The children smiled warmly while Cliff, more serious than the rest, always more serious than the rest, stared into the camera's lens, into Chris' eyes. Stared with eyes that had not stared at anything, that had perpetually stared, frozen in that photograph, for more than half a century. And it was those gray eyes, blacker than the rest, that Chris saw in the eye of the deer, the dead eye of the dead deer. The dead eye of the dead deer slumped, lifeless, over the crumpled red hood, speared by the bloody fender.

And looking now, into the dark again, aft and portside, looking over the hull of the boat, into the slapping water, he did not see any damage. There was no crumpled metal, no blood. Only water, slapping water. Slapping the boat which rocked, raised and lowered with the sea.

As long as he'd been at sea, he never gotten his "sea legs," never felt comfortable, or like he wasn't in constant danger of falling. Never found his equilibrium. He held onto the railings. Put his hands on the walls or any surface he could find to steady himself. He never found his balance. He remembered that in the brain there is a small structure which hangs down like a fatty pendulum, pulled by gravity. As it is pulled toward the center of the Earth, it informs the other parts of the brain, through electric impulses, carried rapidly through neurons, one to another, leaping spark-like over synapses to still other places in the brain, to inform the brain that the body is leaning, that the body is falling. He did not remember the name of this structure or where in the brain it resided. Maybe it was in the inner ear. Somewhere near the smallest bone in the body. The bone which shook and vibrated to tell the brain that there was sound. Somewhere in the inner ear. He never got his sea legs. The largest bone in the body is the femur. The big leg bone. The bone from hip to knee. As long as he'd been at sea, he never did get his sea legs.

*Sea legs* was a funny term. A funny phrase. Few creatures in the sea even had legs. Even the fabled humanoid mermaid was all fish and tailfin from the waist down. Sea legs would be flippers or tailfin. *Sea legs* was kind of an oxymoron. Chris tried to think of a sea creature with legs, of a creature with sea legs. He could not. Surely there must be some, one at least. But he could not conjure it up. He could not remember.

Chris remembered playing "sea danger" as a child. The floor was dangerous shark infested water. The floor was a mysterious and dangerous sea full of unseen dangers, just below the surface. Unseen carnivorous beasts, prehistoric beasts, just below the surface, ready to consume, tear flesh from flesh and shake bones in powerful jaws. Ready to consume

anyone, or any living thing which broke the surface. To survive, he had to jump from couch to couch. From chair to chair. From davenport to ottoman. An empire of dangers and an empire of safe havens. Couches and chairs and davenports and the ottoman. *Ottoman* was a ridiculous word. A ridiculous name for an empire. A ridiculous name for a footstool. A large upholstered stool on wheels in front of the chair, in front of the couch, in front of the davenport. It must have been an invention from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, from the East, the near East. An extravagance for the tired feet of an Agha, or of a Pasha, to rest his weary femur, his heavy femur. The largest bone in the human body, the top part of the leg.

Sitting back, leaning back on the couch, his feet, his legs up on the big upholstered stool, he looked down at his legs. He never was able to get his sea legs. One leg had slid down, off of the ottoman, onto the floor. He could not see that leg, hanging over, dangerously, into the sea. He never did get his sea legs. Did creatures at sea think about HIS legs, envy him his legs? As he had envied their ability to breathe underwater? Did they envy him his legs and his ability to walk upright, on dry land, to breathe dry air? To feel the sun's warmth on his dry skin? Surely, if they thought anything at all, they must have thought about what existed above the water, outside of the water. They must have seen the hulls of boats overhead. Seen nets and lines and wondered who controlled them, and where their fellow sea creatures went once pulled up. Surely the fish who escaped a net, got back into the water, flipping fiercely out of the fisherman's grip or over the edge of the deck, must have brought back tales. Bright lights and strange creatures. Creatures that stood upright, out of the water, with pasty white faces, with black or brown or yellow faces. And useless fins which could only be used for grasping. Strange creatures which held them captive. Surely, they must have had their tales.

Chris looked back down at his own legs, his visible leg, his useless tailfin which was not designed to push water, to propel him. The creatures of the sea, those who lurked, legless, in the deep, away from the surface, those who never had cause to venture toward the surface and had never encountered man, except, perhaps, through mythology, if even that, what did they think of legs? Did they think of them at all? Was there a word for such things? And without a word for the concept, COULD they think of legs? Even if only thinking of legs as 'useless fins,' alien and ill-designed. Could they think of legs any other way, if they thought of legs at all; if they thought at all, of legs? Could they grasp the concept of "fishing?" Of murder for something other than for food, for sport? Could they think of *sport*? Murder for fun, anger, jealousy... Could they even grasp the idea without words for it? What could walking even possibly mean to one who ONLY swam? Chris thought again about the Walkers. If Christine Walker had survived, she'd likely be dead by now anyways. If she had survived, what would she remember of that day?

What if a mother, any mother, is asked to imagine how she would feel seven years after the death of her child, 59 years after the death of her child? She will likely focus on that tragedy and fail to consider the many other events that will happen over that period of time, capture her attention, require her participation and hence, influence her general emotional state. She will almost certainly focus almost exclusively on that tragedy and fail to consider anything else. Fail to even notice, anything else.

Chris thought about a time, a few years back, when his own life made more sense, even if it was not the sense he had wanted it to make, not necessarily telling the story he had wanted it to tell, it did at least, make sense. He thought about a time, spent with a friend, before she

had killed herself, when they had talked and smiled and had generally enjoyed each other's company, or so he thought. When they had sat and talked and smiled. Nothing to do but talk and smile. And sit. She had written, in her note, that she had no one. No one to talk to. No one who understood. That everyone had their own lives and their own families and they did not include her. That she had no place. That all she ever wanted, all she ever needed was the kindness of someone who would listen to her. Who would sit with her, someone who would listen to her, even when she could not smile. She knew she was messed up and all she ever needed was someone who would listen, not try to solve her unsolvable problems, but just listen. And to talk. And everyone was too busy. She was left behind. Left alone. She was too difficult to deal with. Everyone had their own things: their jobs, their lives, their families, their happiness. And she had nothing. None of it. And no one would share. No one understood. And Chris remembered the times with her, just sitting and talking and smiling. He listened but he did not understand. And he wondered if she even knew he was listening. Believed he was listening, was listening still, and even though he did not understand, could not understand, did not want to understand, he wondered if she appreciated his listening. It was selfish, he knew, this need to be appreciated, but he wondered. He was allowed to wonder.

And some months afterward, Chris had sat at the counter of the local Bob Evan's restaurant and drank coffee before going into work. There was a new waitress. Short and fat with olive skin which darkened in the creases. Large eyes sunk in her fat face. Large eyes surrounded by bumpy skin, grayish-brown. And when Chris looked at her, he fell in love. He thought he fell in love, could easily spend the rest of his life happily with her sitting and listening and for the first time, he understood. She looked back at him, deeply, intensely and

she knew, even if briefly. She appreciated him and she understood him. She understood and she appreciated. The next time he stopped in that restaurant, later in the summer when the days had begun to shorten, not long before sundown, heading into work the graveyard shift, she was gone. She was no longer there. Did not work there any more.

As Chris sat, again, presently on the couch, on the davenport, he wondered about what might have become of so many he had lost contact with, so many he had lost. Where were they all now? And sitting there, he began to notice that he had been there too long. He needed to get up, to leave, to do something. This remembering was no good. The memories he could conjure only served to pull him backwards. And he needed to move forward, to progress. He had been there too long and he needed to move, to go, to do something, to do something else. Chris lifted his heavy leg off the ottoman, lifted his heavy femur, the largest and heaviest bone in the human body, off of the ottoman and set it down on the floor.

Throwing all caution to the wind... "I've thrown so much caution to the wind, the wind is almost full of caution." Throwing all caution to the wind, throwing all caution to the dangerous sea, he set both feet on the floor and stood on the dangerous ocean, under which, mysterious and unknown creatures, beasts, monsters, lurked, ready to consume him. And you know what happens when you consume... He laughed at his joke and walked across the water to his computer desk, to the wheeled and padded chair by his computer desk. The computer was already on; it was always on. He never turned it off. He had heard that leaving a computer on, all of the time, consumed so little energy that it didn't even make sense to turn it off. Turning it off and back on, booting down and back up, consumed more energy than just leaving it on all the time. He never turned it off. Chris remembered talking to his father, in the garage, in his

father's garage and he remembered his father telling him that using the computer shortened its life. That the more you used a computer, the sooner it would die. As if every hour, every minute it was used brought it closer to its preset hour of expiration and Chris, while he did not say it, did not have to say it, did not dare say it, not to his father, the only son of his adopted grandmother, the grandmother who had given him the fugues, did not dare say it out loud, but he thought it was ridiculous to think that a computer, or anything, had a pre-determined, finite number of hours of life. There were a million contributing factors, a million million contributing factors, so many that it could not be calculated. Did he, did his father, did anyone, everyone, have a preset number of days, of breaths? Did she? And if they breathed too quickly or lived too much, would it shorten their number of days? And if so, would it be worth it to prolong a life by not living it while one was alive? What was the purpose, what was the good of having something longer, something you obtained to use, to interact with, what was the purpose of having that thing longer if that could only be achieved through NOT using it, not interacting with it? What then was the purpose of it in the first place? What then was the purpose of having it at all? The whole idea was preposterous. It didn't make any sense at all. He thought all of this; Chris remembered thinking all of this, and he remembered not saying any of this. Not to his father. To his father.

Chris sat down at his computer, in front of his computer, in the wheeled chair and opened his emails. Nearly a hundred unopened and 5 times as many already opened, glanced at or read at least cursorily, and deemed to contain something worth returning to, worth revisiting, worth not deleting. Even that which was deleted was really only moved, for a time, to the "deleted" folder, before making its final exit, or being retrieved, saved again, brought



back and saved "as new." They were largely ads, mostly advertisements. Many likely contained malware, viruses which lurked behind each link, in each zipped file, just below the surface.

Malicious worms waiting to be activated. Dehydrated worms waiting for water. Sharks and carnivores just below the surface.