

IN MEMORIES

I remember the subtle bow of the bluestem towards Damian as he descended the hill. The thistles stuttered beside him, the weeds crawled under him, and the dust fluttered upwards with each step he took. Birds flew from their positions as he disturbed the tall grass. And the newborn sun flared out in front of him as he walked, throwing his long shadow behind him, across the burnt prairie, onto myself. I could only look forward because he protected me from the brutal light.

Damian's eyes, which were dark blue stones built into his face, always looked forward. They never moved or shivered. And yet, there was a sense of movement to those eyes all the same. So, he walked where his eyes led: forward. Forward at a steady pace. His shoulders never bobbed or rocked. His feet stomped into the dusty prairie with balance and authority, even on the slope of the hill.

Behind him, I stumbled along, trying to keep pace while also trying to remain balanced. My small strides could never match his though. And we continued on, with me at least six feet behind, lingering in his long shadow.

We made our way past the wild grasses and thistles, eventually passing the old oak tree which marked off the farming grounds. The sky before us was then a pastel. A pastel of yellows and soft blues and all the blazing, nascent colors of morning which smeared themselves across the horizon. The colors moved and twisted and developed. I could not help but stop and admire the animated portrait, and so Damian gained even more ground in front of me. I knew what he would say about my observations. That the sky is just the sky. He does not admire nature, he simply understands it. He sees with that overwhelming lucidity of age that puts everything in its right place.

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And then we were there, where the grass had been dug up and all that remained was the dirt mixed with stray runners. Damian paused, examined the section, and squatted down to feel the dirt with his fingers. There he sat, moving the dirt through his hand. Finally, he moved over to the cultivator which had been left by the field overnight.

“Not enough. Need to go over it again. Fetch the horse.”

I did as I was told. Inside the stable, I smelled the straw and the horse and the dust, always the parched dust above everything else. The horse whined and moaned at me through his wooden room. I opened the door and I fixed the reigns to him with that familiar motion, although I cannot remember if he resisted the bit in his mouth like he usually did or if he simply submitted. The memories of both occurrences blur together in my mind today and are recalled whenever I think of the horse. I remember all things of this time and Damian and mix them all together into this one memory. I took the horse and led him outside, back to the dirt. There I found that Damian had lit up a hand rolled cigarette with a match, and a burst of smoke enveloped his eyes.

“Alright, boy. You know what to do.”

The hours passed. The clouds disappeared, and the sun was in the sky alone. I was glad I had my hat. I walked beside the horse and tugged at his reigns while he dragged the iron cultivator through the soil. The rust stained piece of metal would bob and scrape at the ground, and sometimes I had to help the horse pull it when it got stuck in the dirt clots. The elderly horse, whose veins were starting to pop out vigorously from his skin, walked with his bulky legs awkwardly in the soft ground, and I had to remain close by to keep the iron going straight.

Damian had watched me start the work, but then walked off to the stable. Under the canopy he took up his axe and began to work a chunk of wood. During these hours I saw that

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piece turn into a smooth rod. He cut boards and nailed them together. He put out his cigarette and worked at making a new one. I knew that he was building a bookshelf for Johona, the one he kept on promising to make for her, but was only now starting on. The bookshelf would take a few days to finish. So I understood why he smoked while he did this job that wouldn't be finished. And I understood why he did that kind of work today instead of his usual chores.

The sun completed its journey across the sky slowly, so slowly that one could never grasp any individual instance of change. And, in the same slow way, the land below me submitted to my persistence.

Before the sun fell Damian reappeared at the plot, with the smoke still rising all around his face, to watch me. Now and again he would place the cigarette between his fingers and remove it, and sniff, and readjust his hat, and then return it to his mouth. I remember how once, when one of our cows got stuck in some mud after a storm, he had descended into the mud pit, with a rolled cigar like that in his mouth. He positioned himself behind the cow and then pushed with strength that I simply could not, and still cannot, understand. Some strength pooled and fought for in his past that my own future would never allow me to obtain. I grew to be larger than him, and yet I don't think I have ever had nor ever will have his strength. A strength which allowed him to find stability in the mud, and with that footing he was able to push. Slowly, incredibly slowly, did the cow work itself out of the mud, with Damian pushing against it the whole time, with that incredible strength, with his entire body seemingly carved out of stone, with the smoke rising upwards, clouding his face, so that I could not see him.

Today, though. Today his work had been slower, slower even than my own. And I knew why. Because of tomorrow. I wanted to ask him about tomorrow. I wanted to ask him that simple question, ask him the simple question about tomorrow, ask him the question that danced in the

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air like the dust, and still dances today as I write this. The answer dances, just out of my grasp, all around me and choking me and falling on me, and I can't hold of it.

He watched my work, and instructed me. "Keep her steady. Watch the back left spike, it's loose. Son. Do your work right. Slower. Do it right. All you have is what you make. Keep it straight. Slower, son. Slower. Do it right."

When the sun began to set, we made our way back to the house, with him leading the horse. I remember how my eyes grew moist with tears as we slowly walked back.

"When will it happen?"

"When will what happen?"

"When will they come tomorrow?"

"Oh, that."

"Yes."

"I don't know."

"Okay."

"Okay."

We stayed outside the house for a while that night- me to watch the sunset, him to finish his tobacco. The dust and dryness sapped the moisture from my eyes. The stars came out into a cloudless night, a million of them, poking through the blackness, and I stared up at them in adoration. Damian also looked up to them, but not for the same reason. The stars themselves seemed to bow respectfully to the man, simply because of the way he placed himself in relation to them. Because of the way he stared with those eyes of his. Towards the future. For him, there was no past, no present. Only the future, only the above. The world, nature, men- they meant nothing, nothing, nothing... His family- nothing.

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That night, I stayed in my room. I remember lying on the hard wooden floor because I refused to lie in the bed. Because if I had lain in the bed I would have fallen asleep comfortably, but I refused to be comfortable that night.

It was not far into the evening when I heard my mother play the piano from the other room. She played the keys softly, but the music still rose and filled my room through the open window. God, how I remember that song. It was an oriental tune: In Memories. Its beat is slow and steady, honest in scale, knowing its purpose, and therefore transcending its given position. Knowing its purpose. Knowing its place. Glory be to those who know. The meek inherit the entirety of the earth. Did God come down in thunder and gunfire? The thunder and gunfire and storms and stars have all submitted themselves. Understood their purpose.

In Memories is a song about war and those who have fallen. It reminds me of the past and Damian and Johona. But then grains of dust shot through my window with a dry breeze, and reminded me of the future.

That night, Damian must have been in the makeshift chapel at the back of our cabin, like always. After all, to him, that night was no different than any other night, even if the future was approaching quickly. Perhaps his brother James came that night to see him as well, although James was not a religious man.

I remember the words Uncle James spoke to me once after a heated argument with Damian, "Always remember where you came from, boy." Even back then I knew better, and scoffed at those words. But those words have cursed me. Damn him! I *have* remembered where I came from, but not by choice.

... My mind was a maelstrom that night. Because that was the first time I thought about what Damian meant to me. About who Damian was. About who I was. About what the sky was.

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About what God was. I stopped calling him father that night and began calling him Damian, because I wanted to be more like him. It was hot and it was dry that night. And I lay on the wooden floor with the fabric of my clothes clinging to my sweaty skin. I remember remembering. Contemplating and remembering. I dreamed that night about a buffalo hunt in my youth, when I first heard about the danger we were in.

The dream began with the steady bobbing movement of a horse under me, my small legs straining over its saddle. I hugged Damian as we trotted over the yellow grass. James followed with his own horse to our side. I remembered the two horses glassing over the hillsides and the red rock somewhere in the distance and the light from the sun haloing about our heads as the shadows bounced over the burnt reeds. “Yeah, here are the sons of bitches,” James murmured, and we looked far over the rolling prairies, where countless black blobs dotted the landscape moving with the wind. Back then the buffalo were everywhere on the grasses, and Damian and the others would hunt them as much for sport as food.

“Don’t you use that language around my son,” Damian snapped, and James’s face turned red in response. James was a hulk of a man, but Damian, the first born, had always been able to shut him up with a single word. The two adjusted their rifles, and then we turned around to rejoin the hunting team from the village, which stood in wait over the crest like an army. There, Damian handed me over to my mother. I waited, safe and with Johona, while the hunters rode out in that distinct business-like sense that always accompanied the hunts. And while their business was dealt with, I stayed away.

From our distance, me and my mother could barely make out the panicking buffalo, who had been razed from their rest by the gunmen, kicking up the red dust. We would have had a clearer view if not for the dust. The gunshots and the thunderous footsteps of those beasts barely

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crossed the distance to our ears, but we could still see the bison that fell. It was a long wait, and to pass the time I stalked and killed invisible buffalo of my own, while Johona sat upon a blanket and read from a leather bound book, every once in a while calling me back when I ran too far away, or bringing me in close to kiss my forehead. But I hated kisses and just wanted to be out there, with the men, one of the men, killing the buffalo, being strong, strong like Damian.

When we saw the two brothers again, James's face was bright red. "You think you can just keep telling them no? The world's changing. Pretty soon these fields and villages will be just the same as Tennessee or any of them other states."

"Ain't nobody taking this land. Not until I'm dead."

James turned to look at me, "Your father's an honest man. But he is a fool."

Of course, I didn't know what they were going on about. Not back then, anyway. Only when I saw the uniformed men for myself did I understand.

I remember being with Damian in the middle of our daily fieldwork. I have a vague memory of him instructing me about why the way I collected grain was inefficient, and stepping in to show me the correct way. Throughout the day we worked, with the sun rising consistently higher and the wind swelling and ebbing like a heartbeat. The land worked against us, but ultimately, like always, submitted to our labor.

Damian noticed it first- his eyes were always looking outward- while it took me a second to recognize the team making its way across the grass.

We continued working patiently until the horsemen were directly upon us. I noticed their uniforms and rifles and made the connection. But only when the men spoke to us directly did Damian turn and look at them.

"Mr. Damian," said their leader, the only one without a weapon. "Have you reconsidered

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my offer?”

Damian said nothing, just continued working.

“You old bastard. That pipe’s going to be built.”

Damian spat. “Not while I’m standing. Ain’t no pipe being built on this land.”

“These fine young fellows from the United States Army say otherwise.”

“I won’t change my mind for any man, or men.”

“Do you realize what you’re saying? Think about your family Damian. Think about your son.”

“I won’t bend my knee to you.”

The man grinned through a graying beard, and had his horse trot in a circle before turning back to Damian. “This pipe means so much for so many people. For our country to grow, we need it to be built. You can’t stop that. You can’t stop our progress.”

“Maybe not. But I can’t change neither. So. If I see any of you here again, I’ll force you out.”

The man laughed, “But surely a religious man like yourself wouldn’t turn to violence? And against men of the army no less? That’s treason against your country. You will turn to violence against your God and your country.”

“Some things are more valuable than that.”

“Fine then. Over your dead body, I’ll take what’s lawfully mine. Tuesday I’ll be back, with a warrant for the seizure of this land, and your capture.”

Damian spat on the ground.

After the team finally turned to leave, Damian looked away and immediately went back to bundling the grain. “What are you waiting for? Get to work.”

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Our land. Damian would never let them take our holy land, our holy place. Given to Damian by Johona's father for the marriage. Entrusted to us. She translated the name of the land for me as *sanctuary*. And the Ute's in the village would come to offer tribute on our land. Damian had sworn to uphold the dignity of those fields. And today, those fields have forgotten all about him.

I remember working on the fields after the men left. Working, slashing grain, collecting grain. Thoughtless in its action. Dulling the mind, helping me to forget. Like a dry, dusty elixir. Forget the broken promises, forget the failed oaths.

The sun woke the world in what I first thought to be a foggy light. I was wrong. It was just dusty, it was always just dusty. How could there be fog or moisture in that country?

I heard a crash downstairs. I clothed myself, suddenly wishing I had my own cigarettes to smoke, or elixirs to drink, or work to accomplish. My fingers shook with each button of my shirt that I fixed. The cloth felt stifling on my skin. I would have sweated if it wasn't for the dust sapping away all my moisture. I closed my window to keep out the dust, and then left my room.

Downstairs. Johona sat on her rocking chair, arms crossed, rocking, rocking. Like a rock herself. A rock whose movement was as stable as the earth. A rock on which the ocean of prairies and dust would break upon and wash back from. I moved towards her, positioning myself by her, and tugged at her cotton dress. I simply wanted to touch her.

Only Uncle James came. For all the other villagers and farmers around us who had pledged their companionship to Damian and the holy land, James was the only one who came to support us at the end. All the others had already sold or were selling or would someday sell their land to the railroad men. All the white men and the Ute and any other wonderers who the village

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had accepted. All sold out for a gain of pleasure on the margins of their lives.

“Your father’s a fool,” James had once told me, “A stubborn, prideful fool. Doesn’t realize there’s no place for him in this new world.” He would tell me this multiple times. He would say this to me right in front of Damian. Damian would laugh like it was a good natured joke. It was only around James that I saw Damian’s eyes sometimes bend, and see him smile, and maybe even laugh.

Now Damian had already rolled up more tobacco, and lit the stick and placed it in his mouth. His shirt unbuttoned to where the crucifix around his neck could be seen. He placed his straw hat over his head, the brim of it hiding his eyes. So that I could not see his eyes.

James clocked his rifle, “I hope you’re ready for this you old bastard, because I won’t risk much out there today.”

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

James’s bulky frame hogged the door frame, while Damian kissed Johona on the lips. “I’ll be back soon. It’s all going to work out.”

“I know,” she replied.

I didn’t understand them, the ones I once called father and mother. Nor did I see them. Perhaps they was just too much dust and smoke back then. Do I understand them now, now that I am a man?

James interjected himself, “And here I thought you were a pacifist. Wouldn’t shoot a thief.”

“Some things are more sacred than a human’s life.”

I don’t understand that, either. But now he had returned the cigarette to his mouth, and the smoke reappeared.

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Damian loaded his rifle, and turned to me. "Stay inside, son."

My head shook, as all the dust in the world brewed up under the sun outside. The sun lovingly caressed each particle, and was allowed through, but now the light was coated in the color of the dust. And the edges of this light burst through the edges of the smoke of the cigarette.

He shook his own head, and stared at me with those infinitely persistent eyes.

"Remember, it's not your fight. Remember, we were not made for this world."

"Why?"

"Because there is an order to life, and you must abide by that order."

But then, why? Why, if the things of this world are not what is important? Why protect your family and your land? That question eats away at my mind like a sack of worms. The world, my father- everything seems so admirable on its surface, but so contradictory when I begin asking the questions. What order is this? What perversion is this, where weakness is glorified, and power vilified? What is more sacred than a human life?

James and him go outside. James sits in the chair with his rifle spread across his lap, while Damian stands on the wooden steps, lingering in the entranceway's frame. About twenty feet out, they had already firmly entrenched two large pieces of scrap metal firmly in the ground. They were around five feet apart, and provided even enough cover for James's large frame to hide behind. Both protected a stock pile of ammunition and two more rifles.

The riders appeared on the horizon, and the dust is dancing, dressed in their dark uniforms, holding their weapons at the ready, and the dust dances and dances. Johona grabs me and pulls me away from the window.

So, today, I can only hear the shots and the voices and the dancing. It is a blur. A muddy

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blur of shots and screams and swears of hatred by James and the riders. My father's voice never shakes the air. When the shooting stops, I finally squirm from my mother's grasp and race to the window.

I remember that scene so incredibly lucidly. The barren earth below, nuanced in its every dried out cress. The dust which flies from the earth into the sky, seeking something higher, but distorting the vision of those around it. James, scuffed and red and harmed, his overalls ripped, his hands clawed. The lines in the scars on his hands, each one with its own red extensions, an infinite series of detail. And the steel rifle thrown out in between the steel bunkers in a form of surrender. And James calls out to Damian, who makes no response. And the sun, the madman of the sky is the master of the sky, alone in the sky, weary in the sky, with nothing around to threaten its control, looking down upon all of us, its pagan light bursting through the steel and the dust in magnificence. And the riders on the edges of the dust turning to secure the boundaries of the land must worship this sun.

I only see Damian when he is carried in by James, blood seeping through his shirt and mixing with the caked dust on his face. Johona is in tears.

"He never fired a goddamn bullet," he says while choking, "He thought if we stood our ground they wouldn't dare take us by force. He was wrong."

I wonder. If one leads a life like Jesus, will one always die like Jesus?

"Your father gave his life for this land. For the dignity of your mother and father-in-law," James looks deeply into my eyes, "And now these bastards are just going to take it. We have to keep fighting now. You and me. Take revenge for your father. For my brother."

But Damian's corpse is sitting there in front of me. I can do nothing. For Damian, even when dead, his eyes... They look steadily and calmly towards the sky. Past the sun, into

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something even higher.

I turn to James. “No.” For Damian is not my father. A man like him can have no son. Perhaps I was born of his seed, perhaps he loved me like a son, but no. I must do as he did. I must turn away from what is of the earth and its laws, and look towards the sky. Towards what is truly important. I must live as I was intended to. And I must promise to never bend, even though I know I always will.

I dug the hole for Damian to be buried in. From dust to dust. And if any of the riders had died that day, I would have buried them on that land as well. Because Damian had once told me that all men were brothers. Because, at that moment, I simply decided to stop asking, “Why?”

I did as Damian would have wanted. I left that land, and took Johona with me. I did not seek revenge. From that day forward he was no longer my father, and I founded my own family and land. There, I have been trying to abide by the order.

For what is the earth but the stones made from the bones made from the corpses? Billions of people and billions of histories calling up from the dust. All screaming about something, something above. To stay here and dwell is disrespectful; we must join in the movement. We must row through the deserts towards an oasis, we must move upwards past the sky. Will I be able to forgive myself for this moment of weakness, this moment of dwelling, this moment of questioning?

I wrote this manuscript to forget. To disperse the blasphemous ghosts which still persist in my mind. Tomorrow, I will burn these papers. In your honor... the most perfect form of reverence to your cause... Damian, these memories will burn.