

He is watching the trail that snakes upward into the hill that lives behind the red school. It's a thing of odd proportions - jagged and unkept, but it draws one in like a flame. He remembers something she said when they would walk this toward it every day: "What if we kept walking?"

The question that hummed over the treeline does again. The life of the question was never put to rest. He couldn't have given an answer to the devious direct line of question, as often simple questions are. In the moment it was just a question and like many other moments in their short lives together, it was often left unexplored.

Now. Now while he steps on the threaded trail that leads to the bludgeoned hill, the hill she always looked at with wistful air, he would have drafted a book to answer that question: what if we kept walking, indeed? Every question she posed but never answered would be explored, catalogued, and recorded as proof of some solution she could have, but not now. Never again in this mortal life.

Chris is left with it: the questions. The 'what ifs' that plague memories of her, his companion, like some inevitable mold. Chris fears he will perish like his parents, who have succumbed to this virus of the mind. Their bodies now shells with a vacant premise of humanity. The cocoon they have wrapped themselves to cushion hindsight, whatever it may be in their mind's form, has ripped. Their change could be compared to murky residue forming on a once

pristine body of water. 'Family' activities serve as an attempt to start new traditions and wipe the old away: a purge of it all, including the pain.

Despite all the midnight ice-cream trips and seemingly random day-long lake excursions during school weeks, there was a lack that a year could not fix.

He feels inside they know this. But he does not blame them for trying to fix it all. This lack is a void that slowly devours each of them.

He believes they had found the answer to why she had committed to it. Maybe that's why they walk dead, he thinks while he tumbles a rock: they have seen the truth.

Chris wonders when he will see it too.

For now, he can only walk where her steps once were upon this blessed mud. He walks parallel to the treeline.

At his side, muddy tracks and flickering anomalies lay in the brush with the overgrown bushes. It resembles the dusting of raindrops on leaves after rain. Water drips from above and soaks the tree bark into a deep, rich brown. There's a hum in the air, bouncing and folding over the wet landscape. In front of the trail, fifty feet ahead, a thin layer of clouds falls on the forest trail, turning the landscape into a haze-like reflection at an edge.

If he walked right where she walked, following her now-erased footprints, would he see what she saw? Felt what she felt? He pauses at the forest edge and waits for something to occur - a jolt, a shudder, a lapse of her in the air. Anything that could bring her close to him again. He stands still for her to grace him but wonders if her spirit *would* if it even existed.

Her spirit had crossed an edge. It brought her to the depths quickly. She had walked over that edge knowingly - but what pushed her there? He wonders if it was him who urged her there - that physical edge, yes, but the invisible one that lies within everyone. Himself. His mother. His father: how close were they? He is shaking. Did he take his pills? He can never remember if it was 12 or 1 - he was never good at listening. He was never good at realizing he wasn't listening. *Lost boy* is the unanimous nickname from his peers and of late, without a choice, he's slipping into it. These lost boys are known to go forward with deaf ears but they don't see the trail they follow. They can't hear the warnings. He imagines her as one of them calling for him.

Did he ever listen?

He's shaking harder. How close was he to his own edge? He imagines it deep and unending. It's opening up inside him. He kneels by the mud to let shudders pass. Nothing waits for him. He thinks he should turn back. He thinks of her. He thinks about what she would say to him in this state. He thinks of running to California. To Alaska. He thinks he should lie down and not move. He thinks...

Then, before another thought, a fox emerges at the forest's edge.

He looks up at the creature. He takes in the thing: sleek with wet, a smear of red paint upon grey from some artist's hand. The ancient gaze of the animal is like an old man observing a small child. It is big but somehow small - simultaneously collapsable but gargantuan. It plays with this depth the boy owns. It prances by the edge of this forest like a showman. But it observes the boy intensely all the while, like he were some thing that could just float away at a

moment's notice. Perhaps he could. But after minutes of the trance-like prance, it merged back into the forest with a seeming smile.

He considers the haze that lays with a curtained flow into the forest. Inside the mist would be the farthest he'd be on this trail without her. It felt wrong to move forward in this unknown space without her, the curious explorer.

Was it the haze or the feeling of obligation that urged him into the unknown? He turns to see the trail he climbed to get to this point. Did it seem steeper? Greener? The red building he left was not visible. He wonders how far he had walked to this point.

He ducks into the space of grey and tries to follow the now fading silhouette of the creature. It's wet, he thinks. While the wet fills the air, infuses the dirt, and moistens the forestry, he feels held by this damp air. In the droplets hanging in the air is familiarity. It's an adoresless aroma but it can be traced to every moment it filled his nose: at the lake, in the playground balancing on the wet slide, the fall with her in hand. It can fill the mind, this odorless aroma. It does. But he focuses on the walking fox and its certain path. It does not dart into the sides or look behind at the pacing boy; it follows its path with the knowledge he would follow.

And Chris does for many steps and many more minutes. Chris forgets about the watch on his wrist. He forgets about the school at his back. He forgets about his ghost-presence, his pills, and even the area he has trekked. He could have dropped out of Earth but still stared at that animal; the Fox is his sole occupation.

Fox gradually holds his attention by the continuous unbreaking pattern of the animal's stride. It grips the boy's mind with the flick and occasional gaze from behind. Its sway becomes

entrancing. The predictability in every swing, tap, twitch, and snap from the creature is constant. Soon, the green life around him takes on the form of repetition too. The grass on either side of the Fox sways with the steps and drips in pattern. There is even a slight glow. The canopy of trees bends over like a tunnel forming.

He sees where he and the creature will step. For the first time in 300 days, Chris falls into a pattern of familiarity.

The creature suddenly makes a sharp right. It goes through the brush and tall grass. Chris follows blindly and in a moment he's at the edge of a dirt hill. His foot moves over the space without control. He realizes too late and fumbles downward. The ground rushes upward to meet his body, with it the jagged and unknown sources of pain. He feels the wetness all over him - on his face and his clothes. The world becomes a blur, a streak of grey and green. His face is cold.

The tumble stops after minutes. Down on grass now he lies but his body buzzes. In front, by his right hand, a golden T glints. He stares at the T.

*The truth shall set you free.* It was told to him with scoffs over dim light, followed by a face and laughter that echoed in their room. Sometimes at night they'd pull whatever quotes were in the book and speak with such ironicism, they'd abolish the scripture completely.

But that phrase came again with potent meaning when he learned the truth. The full truth, anyway. *She had drowned.* One half of the full truth. When he learned the complete version, with all its implications and realizations toward her state of mind, it was that phrase that returned to him, refurbished with a despairing meaning.

But he didn't feel free. Even when the small unit of family, minus her, began going to church and was given the gold T by the pastor who spoke of eternal forgiveness and the quest for salvation with crumbs of bread on his beard, it felt more like a cruel joke than divine intervention. The Spokesman of God. Chris took it for what it was: a truth that filled him up with cold nothing and weighed him down like lead.

The murmurings of water flowing catches his ear. A river, perhaps? A lake? His mind goes when he was young. They were at a lake in the woods somewhere away from here. Early in the morning, she woke him up with a grin and said, "let's go to the lake". They tiptoed with towels away from the camp through a winding path. Their thin white bodies were like ghosts already layered on the dark green of the woods.

When they arrived at the edge of the lake it was clear and steaming, as if something had warmed it for them in particular. Chris saw the stars gleaming, like her freckles had been transposed above. She jumped in with a shout - a pale meteorite that set the whole body of water churning. Her own body sunk for a moment before catching under the surface edge. She looked up at him from under, the surface disrupting her form.

Now he's here in the mud thinking of that image, freezing that second of sinking and unwillingly imagining her in the watery grave for the rest of time. His mind conjures her, face down, floating in a stream where some figure of black awaits at the end of it all -

Chris presses his eyes closed, weary from this disrupted body and implacable mind. Death is exhausting. If it strikes your proximity, you're prone to its septic atmosphere. It sits on

the mind and weathers the surface until the core seams of the unfortunate individual are raw and burning like exposed nerves unwarranted in their untimely discovery.

How long has he been lying there in the heavy mud? He glances at his watch but it is broken. Too long? He ambles upward from the mud. It clings to his skin. The bog-like hill rises behind him where the top is hidden beneath the fog, which seeps all around like a viscous fluid. Chris walks away from the area and deeper into the fog. There is no way to climb to the top with the wet mud and his bruised body.

He meanders deeper into the fog while looking for the red creature. It is nowhere. The silence is encompassing. He thinks he hears a sigh from somewhere deeper towards the right in the abyss of the fog, but nothing is clear anymore. His body is battered. He walks in a daze. The fog obscured his direction. What else is there to do but go forward then?

So he does, and the fog slowly thins into strands of white, revealing an ocean stretching on towards infinity. The woods that he walked through cut off abruptly to a beach of jagged rocks holding tidepools large enough for multiple bodies. Waves crash heavily upon blackened rocks and explode in foamed arches. Chris stops in his tracks to realize where he is for the first time. He turns wildly behind to see the trees gone, dissipating the moment he turns like an eye trying to focus on a floating protein. In their place are jagged rocks leading to the base of a sandy cliff browned by wet. He can't understand it. He stands in a state of shock to wait for this illusion to pass. A trick of the mind, perhaps, from the earlier fall. But no - after five minutes of standing, the sting of salt in his nose and the layer on his skin are real.

The coastline continues with jagged rocks of all sizes for miles. He looks right to see the ocean with a grey translucent hue, churning and gurgling upon the pools. The sky now has otherworldly qualities. The clouds spiral in small circles like whirlpools but maintain ovals of light upon random spots in the ocean like random points from God. Chris sees the pools. Some are small, holding only small mollusks and stones. Others are large enough to dive in. The bottom is clear with starfish, sea urchins, small fish, and other creatures. He feels a desire to jump in; an odd desire he didn't understand but an urge to submerge himself completely to feel the temperature of the beckoning water.

Instead he stumbles forward. He looks above to see birds circling in a perfect circle. Are they real or figments of his imagination? Maybe even the distant oval of yellow floating and glimmering behind the drifting clouds is just a poked hole through a canopy.

And yet, he walks despite himself with the knowledge that this place should not be.

He pauses. In the distance upon a jagged rock is the wet Fox. It stares at him with a humanlike tenderness, sitting as a red flame upon a canvas of grey and black. Chris feels a rush of familiarity for the animal followed by confusion for the very feeling. He begins to tread toward the animal while maneuvering the sleek stone. Fox turns and makes its way away from him, down the other side of some slope. He yells at the animal to wait with the assumption it can hear and understand him.

He arrives at the peak of the small mound and sees the Fox at a large tidal pool below. It faces away from him.

Chris eagerly climbs down to the side of the Fox. In front is a massive pool of water. The tidal pool is larger somehow, the size of a small meteorite. The Fox barely registers his presence while he carefully kneels.

He glances at the creature's eyes. The irises now take the form of swirling clouds. Scarlet red shifting in-between the miniature chasms that flow freely with its eyes glued to the tidepool.

Turning to the pool, Chris begins to see the extent of its magnitude. The edges go deep below, fading into a sapphire hue of blue, while others are shallower and easy to touch. Sealife flows swiftly like dreamlike fragments caught in watery ripples. Starfish hug the wall, crabs skitter underneath, and fish of all kinds swirling in pods and releasing suddenly like chaotic fragments. Clear and glassy, everything is transparent from his height.

At his feet, on the edge of the tidepool, is a large mass, undefined at first, revealing itself as a massive sea anemone. Chris peers down and sees the tentacles drifting like strands of hair, endless and beautiful; the colors shift along the cnidarian inconsistently- vibrant and strange- a moment bright pink, the next a heavy purple. The tentacles flow calmly despite the color shifts. His eyes are glued in an act of cross-specimen hypnosis, ensnared by the constant metamorphosis. In the middle, a small hole opens. He subconsciously places his hand in the water warm to the touch and hardly noticeable. His finger slowly reaches down towards the hole barely above the surface of the creature. The colors entrance him, shifting to yellow, blue, salmon. It lays on his senses like a soft hand. Images emerge of bottomless oceanic pits; clouds opening into chasms; fire sprouting like a weed, spiraling upward.

Chris places his finger in the hole and feels a gesticular warmth that encompasses him. It spreads under the skin. It melts over the body. Heat rises everywhere. It grips every pore and every hair and every portion of skin this boy has and he doesn't see or feel anything else in that moment but an endless, encompassing warmth. Then the spell is broken with a slight pain on the fingertip. It causes Chris to gasp and shoot away from the edge. His fingertip is clean with no blood. Below, the sea anemone's color becomes a subdued permanent salmon; the Fox, once beside the boy, now makes its way towards the other side of the tidepool.

Chris is tired. Eager to be near the animal, Chris steps toward the creature's path but falls. Blood rushes to his head and a cold sensation covers him.

He looks down at his hand and sees uncanny ripples from under the skin. It reverberates across his arms like earthly tremors. On the skin's surface emerges mixed variants of colors and fluids, some flowing and swirling like a snake, others jagged and violent; each type is a different color: black, turquoise, yellow, violet, varying in form and aesthetic. They emerge from his body like spirits. Chris laughs in a panic as he watches his feelingless skin erupt from the budding substances, some stretching over his skin, some spurting outward. He thinks he is finally becoming a ghost and death has now come for him from within.

The substances sprout and spread over his arm like wildfire on dry bush. It encompasses his pores and inflaming every inch of skin in seconds. His body is composed of only these substances. It fulfills the image of himself: almost ghostlike. But he feels no physical change except the terror. He tries to rise but the swirling substances take form in force. The substances move autonomously and uniquely like tentacles lost in the current of waters. He is panicking as

loses himself, his own presence of mind. The hole sighs deep inside crusted with panic and fear. He cannot see when his eyes are open, so he closes them and unwillingly pictures the pastor, unclear, looking down at him from his oak chair, unable to give solace.

Then, he sees her. He sees his sister under that distorted surface of water looking up. He cannot do anything but stare as she sinks and waits for the rise that'll never come. He can feel hot tears running down his face over the chaos on his skin. Wetness on ghostflesh, pondering what he could have done. What he could have said to save her from that surface of distortion.

He lies on the ground curled into himself.

The only sound is the endless whirring from his skin. Like an endless freefall, it is everywhere and does not stop.

He feels something watching.

He looks up, peers past the blossoming substances, and sees the red Fox watching him from across the tidepool. He thinks he can see its mouth moving as if speaking to him, but only hears the ocean wailing in the distance.

He stands like an awakened giant and begins walking toward the Fox. The substances ebb softly now but he senses a light flame under his skin and a budding strength waiting to burst. It rushes up and grips him. He accepts the fire and glides over the slippery rocks like a phantom-focused secure in his footing over the terrain.

He rounds the corner of the tidepool and sees the Fox pacing away from him. But it looks over its shoulder, watching. Chris follows and images surface in his mind with each step as

subconsciously walked as the last. A force, unknown in nature, allows the unfiltered images to flutter in his mind, rubbing over the crevices, and tingling the inner workings. He opens, allowing it to come forth, and when they come in, they are vivid in nature. Her features are prominent, nearly touching him, her blazed brown eyes lined with wriness and a knowing glance. She smiles, the environment around her flexing outward as if the air abides her. The memory is now crisp and he is by the lake. He still sees her under the surface, that moment frozen in time, and the image continues starkly. The progress causes him to stop suddenly upon a hill that overlooks a million tidepools, the indefinite ocean, and the red Fox by his feet looking up with a similar wisdom.

He blinks and feels himself moving past that moment of her immersion. What came after that prolonged submersion was a breaking of the surface, the rupturing of the distorted water, as she flips her hair in a highlighted arc to catch the glowing light behind. She turns and laughs for him to join and he does, diving in and emerging, and he sees her swimming toward the middle of the large lake, her pale body like bleached driftwood. He doesn't know what she swims towards. Something in the distance, under the water in the depths below perhaps. But he remembers she swims with excitement, her laughter carrying through the trees of that quiet morning, and he wanted to follow her to wherever that may be. He still does. He wants to feel that serenity seeping over the water like a sweet flu. He will search for it indefinitely.

He is crying on that hill when the images subside. The substances shimmer over his skin like a smoldering fire, and the Fox watches him patiently as an established comrade. The sky is

opening for the sun, and the tidepools glitter like beached stars. In the distance, the curvature of the beach appears infinite.

Chris snuffles and walks down the slope to a nearby tidepool. He cleanses his face and feels the salt drip over the substances. He looks out at the ocean folding into itself, the light bouncing over endless ripples that spread out in all directions- nonlinear by all accounts.

He thinks he can see a small speck rising to the heavens far out but he doesn't know. He accepts that vacant knowledge with a smile.

He turns to begin walking down the beach of rocks and tidepools with the ocean at his side. Chris accepts its improbability and lets the impossibility exist as fact. The red Fox walks quietly behind him, the enlightened wanderer.