

A Sea that Carried Nobody Away

I remember that day as many days: the day Rebecca died, the day I was unfaithful, the day those dogs went mad and danced in circles, when they bayed like a miracle gone wrong had turned them demons and snarled like they'd never been tame.

That day, like each one after it, the hot air rattled with the city's bones. That day the factory's musk did not wash off my skin but tainted the water to smell like chocolate too. That day it did not rain for the eighteenth day in a row, or maybe it was only seventeen. The hours were so hot that their substance still seems molten, the time that passed within them not yet fixed.

That day I tried to map the limits of my goodness and at once both succeeded and failed. I should have sat a virtuous shiva for my only almost-sister. I should have resigned my grief to Adam instead of letting Damien leave long kisses above each breast. I should have stopped those dogs with a word or a hand on their necks but instead I ran with blood painting my bare leg, damning them with all the air left in my lungs.

In that day were many days, as many as I've lived. Though they've all been spent I still wait like a mourner unconvinced, looking for some impossible rebirth.

Rebecca was the first to call the drought a drought, just days before she died.

“What’ll happen to Mom’s flowers if this drought keeps up?” she wondered as she watched the wind stir the pale grass. Her fingers wiggled like gasping fish through the passenger-side window.

“It’ll rain soon,” I murmured as I steered through orange cones and jaywalkers. I felt her eyes tracing the stars and moons of my profile while I waited out a red light.

“Wishful thinking,” she accused me faintly, and did not raise the subject again.

She was right. Some days Adam nearly passed out on construction jobs and came home shaking with what the sun had done to him. Shorelines bloated, leaving boats stranded. The heat punished us, the wind baited us to anger. The rain was worst, sly and indifferent, a palpable memory never quite made manifest. It loomed lovely and ghostly and, like a girl in a Dylan song, always gone.

Damien and I tried everything to chase nonexistent breezes during those dead afternoons. I poured us glasses of cranberry juice (a taste I’d never liked) and spiked them hard with vodka. I began keeping my hair off my neck in delicate bedswept buns. I learned to walk like a woman carefree; when we surrendered to the heat I’d walk my new walk to the balcony and we would stand there, elbows baking on the iron balustrade.

I closed my eyes and pressed my face, my formless kisses, to his shoulder. To make use of the lightness he sold me I wished and wished for rain.

I hadn’t planted flowers but if I’d prayed for anything it would have been for that. Rain was all I wanted. If enough rain fell maybe the droplets flapped from the

wings of crows would chase away the flies. Enough rain could wash pennies into dollar bills, bring in a harvest of untasted fruit. Rain might stir up tides to lift city buses and wash them to alien shores.

In the middle of it all I had a dream, vivid and unfixed, threaded into the patchwork nights that came after Rebecca's death.

I lay at the center of a circle of limbs and did not know which I loved, which ones I was mourning. *Who are you, I'm sorry, let me go*, I said, but they did not respond. Doubting, I pressed a kiss against the skin that looked most like Rebecca's. The stain of my affection came out a dirtier red than lipstick might've left, and I realized my mouth was as blood-slick as the back of mad dogs' teeth.

While nurses numbed and cleaned my leg I thought only of that dog: would they have to slip a needle under his skin, was his death sentence sliding into place?

They'd've told me if she'd died, I repeated to myself, outrunning the thought of the girl I'd gone there for.

In half an hour they'd stitched me up. Fifteen minutes more and I found that Rebecca had been taken to the back and evaded my waiting-room vigil. Yet for all that'd happened it was barely past noon when I ran my fingers through the damp riot of her hair.

When we were young we chewed on lemon wedges until the taste echoed like a hymn. When she was alive, she was so desperately pretty.

They brought in my aunt while I stood there, unthinking. She walked quickly and not yet unsteadily, her jaw slung wide in feral grief. I watched her features split open like unraind-upon earth in the sun and found I could not stay there any longer.

I don't remember why I checked my phone. If I was looking for denial, divine intervention, I came up dry. But I did see Damien's name lit up expectantly, persistent thought I'd been uprightly cold.

Not once had I thought I'd be swayed by him. But then, you never do think they'll die.

I didn't read his message, then or afterwards. I simply texted him "Now" and walked off as hazy as if strung out on the morphine I'd begged them for. Later, no one would question my absence. In grief, no one knows you're gone.

Our cold and sunstruck lake— close and titanic, gray-laced, blue-shattered— used to seem so much larger than any ocean pilgrims crossed.

Rebecca and I could see it from the parking lot of the restaurant where Aunt Gloria worked. While she took orders for corned beef and Bloody Marys—while my father lived his life between brief intervals of caring for me—we watched cargo ships go by and gave old-fashioned names to their rusty modern parts. We pointed to steel goliaths and repeated words from children's books: *crow's nest*, *gangplank*, *mast*. We snuck extras from un-bused tables and spent hours sucking lemon wedges, pouring Splenda over ice cubes until they melted sweet.

Sometimes Indians lived across the lake, teepees, bearskins and all. In winter they were Eskimos, the ice warming and protecting them in a way it did not favor us.

We learned the intersections of our sidewalks, collected secret *Cosmo* magazines, watched just-yellowed leaves slough from branches like kisses blown by delirious trees. In school we learned that across the lake were only other cities every way as poor and gorgeous, as wasted and smoked down.

Often no one had discovered what lived across the lake. We would be its first explorers, our maps of untouched hills the only copies in existence.

I got a job at the chocolate factory, a place I'd once have called heaven, and married the boy who French-kissed me outside Food Mart the day I turned sixteen. Rebecca bought a house for next to nothing on one of the wronger sides of town and started saving the mutts that came in her way.

One night we sat down cross-legged in the parking lot we remembered so well. A hundred yards before us the sluggish tide hollered and writhed. The wind slashed at our faces and stirred up our hair, for which the lake rasped an apology. Between the blue air and tar-black asphalt we said an old hello to the place where we knew we'd live and die.

Even if we sometimes daydreamed otherwise, we were never meant to leave this city.

The first time, I kept my eyes open with Damien.

My mind threatened to riot but I kept my focus narrow: the slick drumming of mouths, the shadows dancing in his crow's feet, the strangeness of our selves and what we did with them.

I did not ask whether I was under lust or love. I simply added his penny to the jar labeled the latter and tried not to think of the hospital. The human warmth of his body called for an echo, which I supplied.

I do not love him less for you, I thought of saying when no speaking was required. He might love me less if he knew. Rebecca is not alive again just because I'm here. Her death does not make me less awful.

He rolled me between his palms and called me pretty. I hummed my permission and he stripped me more naked than I had ever been. Though we were perfectly gentle, I felt dark circles sprouting. I heard the pink trails of cuts being traced, our lips splitting open from inside.

I found her because my aunt could not bear to. It was, of course, not as simple as that, but in the end that's how it unwound.

Rebecca's house stared at me blankly, innocent as Pandora's box. *She won't answer her phone*, my aunt had said, hysteria rattling not far from her voice. *I'm sure it's fine*, I'd replied for lack of anything better to say.

I stared at her concrete porch, the door I'd have to open still tight shut, as the twin flames of my panic and faith touched and bled. I could almost hear the door being bombarded from inside, a series of insistent thumps.

She is not dead, I entreated or declared. I thought of using some more holy syntax but the prayers I learned were all in Hebrew, a language I no longer spoke. Only snippets of blessed-sounding phrases lingered on.

I stepped forward in a show of boldness but paused when I remembered my aunt's voice. Then, with manic suddenness, her door split open and the dogs flooded out.

I can't imagine how they could tell she would never be brought back. But they must have known, because they flew at the ground with such hysteria that I would later find paw-prints pressed deep into the dirt. They bayed, the sound unbroken, their hundred bright teeth barred. I froze, holding up my hands. The smallest one looked up at me and smelled or sensed my fear. His next howl came out muffled by my calf, and as soon as I got loose I ran.

In between diagnoses, we truly believed Rebecca had been cured.

We cooed with relief when her hair reemerged, denying that the patchy growth looked as sorry as it did. On her birthday we bought a gold plastic crown and set it in her floppy spikes. *Many more*, we toasted fervently; *l'chaim*, someone said.

While she filled the dogs' bowls I took charge of the flowers people had given her during her illness. I made her an indoor paradise immune to heaven's restlessness, taking faith in leaves that budded green, petals that didn't spot.

"Tell me something to make me laugh."

“I don’t know any knock-knock jokes. I know some political jokes. But they’re mostly out of office.”

“See, that was funny.”

“But you didn’t laugh.”

“I did, a little. Just not out loud.”

“I see,” he murmured mock-solemnly, rolling away. I trapped his ankle between my feet. “I’ll be back,” he said. “I just need a smoke.”

“Give me one?”

“What, you smoke?”

I shrugged. He took the lit pillar out of his lips, balanced it in mine, and walked to the balcony, where I followed him.

“The city looks so real,” I offered after half a cigarette’s silence.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Solid. Unpretty.”

In laughing he let out a lungful of ash-sweetened air. “I don’t think ‘pretty’ has ever been the word for this place,” he pointed out.

A week after Rebecca’s chemo first began she called me up unexpectedly. Let’s go to the beach, she said in one breath.

It’s barely sixty out there, I hedged, glancing at the autumn-muted sky.

She said, Pick me up in twenty minutes.

I remembered the way—which freeway exits to take, which gravel lot to park in— better than expected. I had not been to the beach in years, since my teenage

friends and I got drunk and fell asleep in the sun, ignoring the smell of dead fish to imagine ourselves on some more glamorous coast. But I remembered the brine and gulls and broken shells more clearly than was rational.

The wind doused us in goose bumps, and the water could only be colder, but we thought ourselves tough and pretended not to mind. We splashed in alone, a few distant fishermen presiding.

The sunlight through her threadbare lashes sparkled like something more than solid. I had not thought it would happen quite so soon.

Rebecca swam in aimless half-circles, her sunset-and-cinnamon hair getting caught in the water's claws and staying behind when she paddled on. My hands lingered on the surface of the tide. Every so often a runaway lock brushed my fingertips.

She dove underwater and came up for air a few inches from my face. Stripes of bare skin scrawled missives on her scalp. A few orphan strands clung to her collarbone.

"It's freezing," she pointed out needlessly.

Back at shore we dug a pair of travel scissors out of the bottom of my bag. I cut her hair short, then shorter, clumsy and throbbing with cold. While I worked she watched the waves cough up thin strawberry ribbons, mementos of what it had first begun to take.

The fisherman could not see us or, if they could, they did not care.

The beads of water that shivered from us were hope and desperation all at once.

The day of the funeral heat dripped from us, stifling and lascivious. It melted into our skin and refused to be chased from our hair, our faces, our funeral black.

Adam kept his hand on my back while I took my share of consolations, the hesitations and half-begun phrases regretting that her death had not been simpler. The air was not like air, dry and solid, spiteful, hot. I could not bring myself to breathe it.

In some respects, I did not pity her. She could've died smelling of sugar's smoke, doubly indebted to her conscience and her husband. She could've had all heaven's devils plaguing her like biting flies.

We dropped our eyes, let our damp palms linger in each other's. It was leukemia that killed her, we tacitly agreed. Blame the upset in Rebecca's blood.

But drowning could not have been so torturous. Beyond all her losses would've waited, I imagined, the comfort-laden arms of sleep and sky. Wasn't it a relief no longer to store up happiness, to ration her regrets?

Shame, such a shame, was on everybody's lips.

And I did not think she could've been aching, any more than was inevitable. Happiness is a longing for the same and so Rebecca, when she died, must've been some kind of hopeful. I pictured her skinny limbs returning to the shape of comfort as she folded herself into the tub, her head beneath the spout so that if second chances beckoned the metal tap would block her bid for air.

The hundredth mourner kissed my aunt and she dissolved like a sugar-spun rose. My comfort, when I went to her, did as little as anyone else's. *Let go, let's go*,

let her go, Adam whispered. I complied because I loved him, though I had never chosen that. I had never asked for the life, inescapable, that pooled at my ankles and kept me up at night.

I did not know if she thought of her mother, thought of me, thought of heaven as she died. But I did know she opened those eyes I'd loved, there inside the water. She'd have longed to see the ocean, to know its cold and dirty taste, to take in the tides and hidden caverns of the only sea that would ever carry her away.

"Come here, beautiful," Damien warbled, his rich voice buzzing on the bone-dry air.

I stood on the balcony, daydreaming into the bricks and branches of the city I'd once loved. I was tipsy, just enough to be dizzied by the splatter of cars that trickled by below. Somehow I never got as drunk as I planned to when I crept away to Damien's.

The trees' staring faces had never been flesh and blood. The thing I called sky was only secondhand light through passing clouds.

Sometime soon, I knew I'd leave him. The traces of myself were forging a trail by which memories might find me, and my everyday sins made a shabby disguise.

Damien sidled up behind me and knotted his hands across my waist. He let out a soft smoke-shadowed breath and I recognized the rhythm of his body as it kept itself alive. It was then, suddenly and slightly too late, that I felt the one-two pang of innocence lost, coldly impossible, like snowfall in Eden.

After the funeral, I remembered something a relative had told me years before.

“Seven miscarriages,” the old woman had whispered at some party, shaking her head incredulously. “And two more after Becky was born. I don’t know what kept her trying, poor thing. Nine! Can you even imagine?”

I’d stared at her, a cup of Diet Pepsi sweating in my hand. Her green eyes bore the same the veins that cut her neck into factious territories and her words rattled with the echo of her years. No. No, I could not imagine.

I did try to understand my aunt’s grief, her mourning for a miscarriage a quarter century delayed. But she quickly fled where I could not quite follow, returning to synagogue and praying endlessly in the seat where she’d briefly broken down at the funeral. She began believing that all her lost children were alive with the God she told herself she’d always trusted. She once explained to me, late at night, something to do with angels.

I used to see her dreaming, swollen with visions of children whose faces shone under some elusive sun. Each morning she went to temple and waited there for her God or her ghosts, whichever came first, as the dust settled into her hair.

Damien didn’t argue when I told him I wouldn’t be back.

He half-smiled, then kissed me so hard that for a moment we were entangled like snakes in the boughs of a hissing tree. “Call me sometime,” he murmured as I turned to go.

“I’m a married woman,” I replied, without a point.

I’d never denied how Adam and I were entwined, febrile and unalterable, bound inextricably deep. I felt all his failings and he took up my past. But I saw a different face in the face of everyone I passed as birds sang the freedom of being once unfaithful. I tried not to think of it but I knew I wouldn’t soon forget how to find him, the idea a temptation impossible to unlearn.

The second betrayal of Rebecca’s blood arrived with a blow that seemed to come from our own bodies, a black weight dropping in our lungs.

She came to see me during my shift, parking her car next to mine and waiting for hours until I got out. As she talked she braided her hair, hanging on to the curls like a shipwrecked sailor to a rope. The rustle of her fingers kept time in the quiet once her words had tapered off.

We watched the dust of our expectations spin quiet cartwheels in the air. I now understand what she was deciding.

And, just at that moment, it began to rain the very last rain of her life.

When I went back to Adam, I brought a bottle to celebrate.

He asked the occasion and I simply shrugged. The sun swam headily across his shoulders and when I saw he still waited I told him, We’re alive.

I don’t know how he took my cryptic answer, whether he thought me mad or only a little far-gone on grief. But we drank. We finished half a bottle of Svedka

between us, pouring it like poor man's champagne. We promised love into each other's wrists. He kissed every one of my ribs.

Then our shirts were off, our pale underwear discarded, and we lay naked on the kitchen floor, drunk and exhausted, awash in the sun. Adam passed his thumb over a red starburst on my collarbone.

"You'd never cheat on me, would you?" he murmured, knowing the liquor would be his forgiveness and that I would not blame him in the morning.

My pulse struggled to catch the rhythm of his breath against my navel. "No," I promised, "No," taking comfort in how the lie tied up what I no longer wanted loose.

Since the day she died it still has not rained in this city.

The sunlight sings pale, wisp of a blood-colored sunrise turning the sky into stained glass. Days like these I badly miss my childhood, when the whole world lived and was lovely. I can still trace, in some old trees, the faces I used to see in their bark. But that was before we gorged ourselves on everything we found in the garden, pressing strangers' lips against our own and stalking the moon with hunger on our tongues.

In sleep Adam falls across me, his throat finding its place behind my ear. I once had a dream we were given new bodies, two untarnished sets of bones. If I could have one thing in the world it would be this, a body and soul made from scratch. I'd paint the inside of my mind's eye as pure as if we both were virgins.

If it ever rained in this city I might have treated him better. If God's grace were kinder I could have understood.

If her dogs had not attacked me Rebecca might've been breathing when I walked to her door. Somewhere in time the day does exist in which I find her alive behind gentler beasts. Once or twice I've tried to pray that version of the past into being, to remake the miscarried salvations that fit nowhere but the cracks in our lips and blank spaces of our hands. It's a corpse-cold surgery at which I haven't yet succeeded, to which I haven't yet learned the trick.