

A Departed Sun

He was cold—his lungs tight from winter's clasp, squeezing him tightly within his mottled and worn sleeping bag. The day was making way outside, the light sweeping across the frozen pines and onto the still lake; spires of forest and rock cast shadows into the thick plume of morning fog. The lake, nestled on one side by a steep incline, would remain dark until mid-morning when the sun's breath would rise over the precipice and stretch across the mirrored surface in warm and expected exhalation. Opposite of the incline lay an alcove in which his tent stood quietly, its navy canvas splotted with bits of melting snow drift and pine straw. His campground was barren save a small tarpon covering his fishing tackle and camping gear, both propped protectively against a mound of firewood laced with rot and grub. Ten meters away lay the ashen waste of a campfire, the embers long subdued from the penetrating winds of the night prior.

The tent's zipper disrupted the silence. As he stepped out, the calm in the wood gave way to subtle chatter: the thumping cadence of a woodpecker, the gurgle and hush of water some distance away, the wispy, dragging heels of a late winter breeze, pushing up over his collar and across his unshaven face and reddening ears. He stretched, loosening the stiff muscles in his back and neck, exhausted from sleep as he shivered through most of the night. He popped his knuckles, rubbing his dried and calloused hands together before starting on a fire.

He gathered the felled branches of pine and birch that he had lain under the tarpon for kindling, and took logs from the top of the pile to add once the kindling had taken. The pit, surrounded by a small perimeter of smooth and blackened river stone, was cold to the touch as if unlit for weeks. He set the kindling down and stood unmoving and pensive. The days were becoming warmer, the mornings less still. Spring was approaching, her caress slowly drifting onto the lake to blossom and unfold across the wood. Winter's grip was creeping into his core and drawing the breath from his lungs, but soon the honeysuckle and pine would mingle and the sway of the tree line would provide healing from winter's scorn. Spring felt like breathing for the first time. Spring felt like going home.

After the fire had taken, he took out his cast iron pan from his supplies and laid it on the river stones. He also took a can of beans and a canister of dark-roast coffee from a leather satchel containing assorted goods: some cans of succotash, a few cans of condensed milk, a large plastic bag of venison jerky, a bottle of diminishing rye whiskey and an abundant collection of canned beans. In the side pocket of the sagging satchel, he had a small canister of matches and lighters slack on fuel. A box of .22 shells were wrapped tightly between two soiled scraps of linen and bound by a rubber band; the pistol was holstered to his hip.

Once the cast iron was hot, he added some water and watched as it bubbled and spit, spewing steam and shadows to dance across the fire's rim. He slowly poured the boiling water into a large metal canister holding some coffee, contained by a mesh stopper attached to a metal plunger on its lid. He set the coffee down to steep, and returned the cast iron to the stone and added the beans. He then poured the steeped coffee carefully and methodically into a chipped mug he had by the pit and drank in its warmth. After eating from the pan, the beans caramelized and smoky, he took the mug and pan to the lake to wash. He swirled the lake water over his dishes and threw the scrap onto the thin sheet of drifting ice a few feet from the shore. He looked over the lake, its contents hidden and unknown, rippling and sitting intermittently between lapses of time man never knew. Even in movement the winter lake was still, like a microcosm of infinite static. He had often looked out on the lake in the mornings, and the time before spring made him anxious for rejuvenation. The winter was like a depthless hole, but he was sustained, and sometimes it felt like home on the cusp of the void.

The sun's rays were starting to kiss his cheeks, and he knew it would be the warmest morning of the new year. He set out to gather his fishing gear, a fly rod and a small burlap fold containing an assortment of flies and hooks. He checked his pistol, its metal handle exhilarating to the touch, the clip

unused. He didn't need the gun for protection, nor did he ever feel up for cleaning the vermin that sometimes scattered about, their hides mangy much like himself, but it made him feel safe to know it was there, to know that he could take a life if persuaded.

He laced his boots tightly, and pulled his toboggan snug over his ears; the river was not too far away, but the trail was damp and foreboding like the air of a tomb. He made his way up the small incline that housed his camp, and into a small winding pathway. In the wood, the light crept through and danced with the shadows of tall pines and fallen timber, the small mounds of snow reflecting the sun but none of its warmth. Beneath his moving feet the matted leaves sloshed and then lay flat and dead and in their first stages of decay, the detritus smelling of rain and muck, like expiring life or the birth of something more.

On the latter half of the trail, the rise and fall of the river's whispering pace became clearer, its echoing tone speaking to him in repressed song. The soothing voice calmed and excited him in combined fervor but also spoke to something in his past. His pace slackened for a second, and doubt took him by the throat, but he trudged on toward the calling siren.

He stood out on a small mound of rocks lodged together overlooking the river, the steady flow lapping up on the river's edge beneath his feet, licking away at the smooth clay in a slow, fixed smothering. He opened his mouth as if to speak, pausing—contemplating. He exhaled, put down the burlap fold and began to cast out over the river in a relaxed, methodic fashion, the fly and line stretching and receding under his cast, fizzing back and forth at his command. He had fished the spot many times over the years, and he knew of a drop in the river's bed a little way from the shore where the river trout would sometimes lie.

The clouds passed over quickly, rushing over his head and across the sun's eye. He gathered his equipment and moved down some thirty yards, the standing skeletons of briar and reed following the river's edge, pushing up and brushing his hip. He stopped at a small bend in the earth where his son would often go, a ledge of clay and rock overlooking a pocket of rushing water, a swirling eddy that spun the sky's reflection and kicked up the metallic scent of spring water and silt. He began to cast, composed and relaxed, the breeze waning, the impending warmth of spring brushing the nape of his neck and drawing out the cold.

His line quickly went taut, pulling and straining in the passing water. He pulled up, setting his hook, beginning to reel. The fish struggled, swimming erratically through the passing current. The man pulled up on his rod again, pulling the fish to the surface, its rainbow sheen like oil across a puddle. He continued to reel, the fish swimming left to right, right to left, arriving closer to the shore's edge. The man lay down on the stiff ground and reached over the ledge and into the water to grab the struggling fish, its flailing last attempts slapping river mist into his face. He collected it and rose to one knee, holding the floundering trout in two hands, the mouth opening and closing, its gills expanding and deflating, its tail stiffening and relaxing, slowly drowning. It reminded him of the past, a creeping nostalgia, but the moment was fleeting, like a goodbye spoken on a passing breeze, the fish suffocating on the winter air, growing limp in his hands and far away in the eyes, the flicker of life growing dim and faint, the fish choking and reaching—choking and slipping.

He pulled the fly from its mouth and held the trout under the water, the stirring current oxygenating the fish and restoring his world. It swam away slowly and then quickly, the struggle a forgotten moment in time.

The man rubbed his hands in the water and stood, drying them on his pant leg. He inhaled deeply, the winter air filling and consuming his lungs. He picked up his supplies and looked downriver, the earth dropping off and into a bend, the water rushing and quick, subtle but violent, tranquil and frightening in one consuming grip.

He returned to camp and crouched by the fire's embers, blowing gently to stir the warmth. He collected more wood and corralled the embers back ablaze and sat back to rest. He sat aimlessly, the

day half gone, the breeze slackened and warming now. He leaned in, studying the fire and its primordial glow. It contained a characteristic that transcended the present, like a moment in our collective memory, and he found comfort in losing himself in days long gone. Fire was for contemplation, and the feeling left him to ponder if there ever was such a thing as tomorrow. He closed his eyes and drifted.

The leaves swirled along the ground in no particular direction, wintry breath pushing the trees to and fro, dancing upon the skyline to mock the barely rippling lake. The pines dropped their boughs of needle and cone, the seedlings to borough under the red and gold leaves and into the dark soil growing stiffer with the cold. Squirrels skittered in the backdrop of the camp, storing their bounty for the impending snap, the mockingbirds darting about while the gnawing of wood beetles resonated through space. He stopped by the cool, ashen fire pit and soaked up the dwindling rays of the autumn sun, the peak of day hiding shyly behind the cloud cover of wisp and cotton.

He gathered his gear and went on to the mouth of the wood, the trees dense and in orderly disarray. His pace was brisk, walking along a mix of freshly fallen leaves and those that crunched under foot. The whoosh of the river lingered nearby and the air grew cooler as he approached. He broke the tree line and found the sun, its glory swallowed up by the rivers rush. He looked to his left and saw no one or no thing and covered his brow with one hand to block out the light. He turned and looked down stream, finding nothing but an unknowing river and rock and brush. He made his way down the path, whistling loudly, studying the shore and the churning current, fallen limbs of pine occasionally jutting from the water's surface.

When he found the boy, the river was slower and hushed. He would not have spotted him if it weren't for the burlap fold lying by the river's edge. The man reached down and grabbed him in a state of panic, pulling the back of his bloated canvas shirt from the surface, the boy unmoving and fixed. The man leapt into the water, wrapping his body around his shoulders, his form stiff like the sap that oozed from chilled pines. He climbed onto the now damp edge of clay and rock and laid the boy on the ground. His head sagged onto the clay as if his pillow and his cheeks were sunken and hollow, his eyes glinting in the showering sun with his wet and disheveled hair now dirty with the debris of decomposing leaves; a bulbous knot swelled just above his brow like the galls on the pines still swaying behind them. The man slammed his fists onto the boy's chest and wantonly searched for a response. He brought down his fists again, directly on his sternum by the boy's now lifeless heart. He pulled apart his lips, the hue of dusk, and forced in every ounce of his breath until he felt his lungs would explode. Lightheaded and faint, he collapsed in agony on the boys cold, wet chest as unmoving as the river stone all around and wrapped his arms around his body, holding his boy gently as if a chrysalis or a memory. The coming winter breeze picked up and all seemed quiet, and he wished he could forget the day or the day his name.

When he came to the afternoon was late and the fire dwindled by his feet. He was stirred by hunger, and his head ached from the ground. He rustled the fire and stood to make some dinner. He paused and studied the camp, the snow dwindling from the day's warmth, and he felt encouraged by the promise of spring and her approaching embrace. He looked up at the ridge and stayed there until the light faded and the wood became soft from the glow of twilight, and he again sat down by the fire to wait, turning his back on the dark portion of the wood where the sun went to die.