

Of the Spidery

The early morning had yet to dawn, its gray boundaries unfolding to reveal a cloak of fog barely visible to the eye. I stood outside taking the clammy air, my shoes sinking into the dew of the grass. I stepped onto the porch to go back inside when I felt the work of spiders catch at my arms. It was like gauze being applied to my dry, unwounded flesh. The webbing kissed scabrously across my skin. There are few things in this world I know of as unsettling as this tickle of hairy twine. The work of arachnids and their unflappable patience building a snare so that they might murder and eat and digest, but now caught on something too large to yield fruit.

Is there anything else so weightless and sheer that has such power? We feel the filament stick to our arms or flit the edges of our cheeks like dust particles on a string. It causes the senses to shudder as the prickle of adhesive moves over us. There is something in the very back of our brain that knows we would be dead if not for our mass; that by our size alone do we go through their sticky curtain. We brush it off, disgusted for it to gather upon our clothing. We rub ourselves to make sure the animal is not clinging to us. It is horrible to think of carrying one in our shirt as we walk through the day. The sight of a lonesome spider pokes us in our evolutionary ribs.

My mind darted back to someone I no longer cared to think about. It stood there long enough for me to gather a series of emotive responses before I shut it all out. I opened the curtains a crack to welcome the onslaught of day, then walked to the breakfast table and picked up a novel I was reading. It was penned and published during an era when full-length explorations of people and their lives were just that: novel. Long before the myth-making machine of Hollywood created an endless demand for narrative content that birthed a million would-be storytellers. I set it down and thought about alcohol and divorce. The cool, stoic eyes of the three Bronte sisters looked up at me from the impermeable depths of time itself. Strange to think they could write with such vigor, such passion and deft command, yet didn't live long enough to have their likenesses photographed. An invention we take for granted, but which they never got to experience. Yet we have this painting of them radiating their ethereal vitality, this small window to peer back into before typhus arrived at their doors.

The cover of the book was cropped to show only the three women, but the surviving work in its entirety was much more interesting. Their only brother, Branwell, had originally inserted himself into the portrait, positioned between Emily and Charlotte. At some point, he painted himself out of it, leaving a column of murky yellow where his likeness had been. It strikes a haunting absence, a glaring removal that is neither subtle nor easy to look away from. A sheer curtain has obscured someone who was so obviously there among them. The effect is stunning. Though the fierce expressions of the girls - particularly Anne - seem to project their power and ambition out of the ages, we are forced to contemplate this golden finger from heaven that has taken away an anonymous person and left the viewer with an omissive blot. It is too purposeful to not appear sinister, though the accepted explanation is that he felt his visage made the work seem "cluttered."

Was he fully there in the painting before he took himself out? Was it purely a compositional choice, or was there more to it? I wonder this often. His life dissolved into booze and laudanum, with some opium thrown in to round out the balance of 19th century vices. I suppose his death from tuberculosis -worsened by addiction- is a demise like any other. It certainly has more personal choice involved than melting into sweaty bedsheets in the throes of typhoid fever.

I stood up and looked at a spider in the windowsill. It was one of those varieties with a fat body like an acorn, with speckled patterns and furry eyes. I've always called them wolf spiders, but only because someone used that term when I was a child and I repeated the designation without question. Critters receive so many names depending on regional parlance. Sometimes they're just bits of colloquial nonsense repeated down through the streams of generations. To a student at the university this small predator is known by its Latin family. To a little boy on the playground it is merely

something to point at and step on, proving his might over the bug he doesn't wish to share the same space with.

I got closer to it, this wolf spider. In what unknowable realm of thought did its decision-making cause it to sit for days in the same spot, as if time meant nothing at all, simply wanting something to come to it? Is existing somewhere a form of work? The spider doesn't seem to be trying very hard. It hangs out, hoping that the phone will ring. Or get a knock on the door with good news; that special message delivering what they want to hear.

There wasn't any food in my refrigerator. Perhaps if I built the perfect web it would fill itself. Maybe if I waited long enough my prey would arrive and I could apply nourishment to a body that seemed to shed weight each day. I found a slimy bag of baby carrots and ate two of them before giving up. The spider and I locked eyes again. It would have been nice for me to share, but I put them back in next to some lemonade I would never drink.

My phone was in my hand looking at something. I was thumbing at an advertisement for denim jackets before my thoughts registered what I was doing. I shut the screen and put it on the kitchen table, suddenly feeling ill. It wasn't a strong sensation, just a meek pinch in the stomach that made me wince. It could have been the carrots, or the lack of substantial food. It might have been the recurring displeasure that I often take the device out of my pocket and look at it without thinking, as if the simple act weren't even a conscious choice on my part. Before I realize what actions I have taken to get there, my hand is holding images being mentally processed that want my money but do not return happiness. Whoever built this particular web knew, with increasing levels of nefariousness, what they were trying to achieve.

My footsteps made a path to the sliding glass door. The birds were making noises at each other, the way living things often do. I put on a thicker jacket and went back out into the gathering light. A packet of cigarettes went into my hands and I lit one, exhaling a plume of satisfying mist and smoke into the air. I walked around to the edge of the house and noticed a pair of early risers coming back from the market. It was a tall woman with reddish brown hair holding hands with a child, a bag of groceries slung over her arm. They moved quietly along the sidewalk like a pair of phantoms that might fade away into the ether at any moment.

As they got closer the woman stopped and took her hand away from the little one to set the bag down and reorganize the items inside. The kid had a frown, a look of distaste as the mother arranged the things she had just bought. I felt as though I recognized that expression. It was the pain of having something taken away from you. At that age, having a fixed point of love and attachment is crucial to our well-being. It reinforces that immediate need for connection. Somewhere in the mind of this three-year-old, a light had been switched off. A bond had been severed. The moment arrived when the mother gave her hand back and they continued on their journey. The fear was gone. There was no opportunity for abandonment.

I ambled back to the rear of the property, taking a last drag before putting my new hobby into an ashtray. My eyes scanned up to the rafters of the deck awning. It was full of clustered webbing, long dormant. The spiders who had built these structures had either been successful, or simply not. Do they have a concept of time? Do they feel a sense of sorrow when nothing arrives to validate the hard work and sheer effort behind each maze of thin rope?

There are more spiders on earth than humans, I thought. They outnumber us like three million to one. How lucky they are to be able to focus on a single task, without the constant desire for self-improvement. It must be nice not to be a social creature, or to consider how to spend the weekend.

I took my phone out and looked at it again. The home screen was a photo I had taken on a vacation the year before, standing in the mouth of a volcano. The time said 6:57. I didn't know what I wanted from this thing resting in my palm. More accurately, I craved something that wouldn't happen. She was never going to call me again. I knew this, but still imagined a message popping up, stirring whatever was dead inside back to life. I both shunned and yearned this possibility. I fantasized her

slender hands on me again, but also wanted her to go away from my mind with urgency. The mournfulness of being emotionally bent backwards followed by anger and frustration at my own thoughts was a hamster wheel of mental hell. One begat the other in succession. It was like playing a shell game against a skilled conjurer who could turn a bouncing ball into a rabid weasel.

My thumb instinctively held the button to power the phone down. I shut it off, then tossed it meaninglessly onto the cushion of the sofa and walked away.

How strangely rebellious it felt to do this. It was as if I were performing an act that would get a visit from a uniformed agent asking why I had removed my tracking device. What if my parents became sick and needed me? Maybe there would be some kind of emergency. An alert from the federal government notifying the populous of an impending nuclear strike. I decided that none of it mattered. My parents had 911. If the doomsday clock struck 12, I'd rather see the fallout and think it was merely an unforeseen dusting of snow before my organs became lethally radiated.

I went out the door and locked it behind me. The best part of living along an intersection of roads is that you have four different directions to take depending on mood and time of day. I picked West because it was uphill and led away from town. The exterior of my house sat innocently behind me like a cute cottage and not the arbiter of perpetual gloom that it had become in recent weeks.

The nervous stroll down familiar streets that won't ever let you get away from yourself. I was becoming a master of these, even when I mindfully tried to pick out things to look at and interact with. It usually didn't work, and this time was more of the same. I thought about her some more. The different ways she wore her hair. That lingering scent when she would first jump into the front seat of my car. Then I patted my head and tilted it, the way a swimmer might try to remove water from within their ear. Fighting a cerebral obsession with some physical response has never worked, but then again it's probably why I took up smoking again.

If only Branwell Bronte was around and could tell me where to score the good shit. Maybe even pal along for the weekend and party until we became columns of yellow light stricken from our own story. Impossible. Old Bran was deep in the web that catches us all eventually. The vast network that makes us feel how we were before being born. It didn't sound so bad, really. My life stretching out long and terrifying before me was the real scaredown. It's better not to waste time on inevitability. It's simply there at the end of it all. That one unavoidable spider with the biggest, darkest mouth. Death is just the nap I don't have to wake up from.

I looked at the trees and saw the wind in them. I thought about the day's date and added up the numbers in my head. It came out to 16. And $1+6$ is 7, which everyone knows is lucky.

"Today will be great, dammit!"

I said it swinging my legs like a kid in a parade, then looked around to see if anyone noticed me talking to myself and otherwise behaving like a lunatic. I was like the Scarecrow about to make his way through Oz, but hoping the Wizard could lobotomize me instead. The street was clear. I could resume believing in my silly, offhand declaration. Indeed, I decided to double down on it.

"Even if the minutes *are* hours, I am here. I am still *here!*"