

What Remains

On still, windless nights, Teresa climbed the water tower buffered by the river that flowed both ways, sliding by in its singular enormity and cohesion like a long ago glacier that made the place. She put her dog in her backpack with its greying muzzle and face protruding from the top and went hand over hand up the narrow shaky ladder to the platform that wrapped around the enormous rusty receptacle that was shaped like an acorn. She drew things with white paint that she carried with her on the rusted, black paint chipping hull of the water tower. Her dog's name, her own name. Pictures of birds and other animals. People's faces she recalled. She drew most everything on the side of the tower facing the river so people couldn't see it from the town and the only ones who did were passersby on freighters and joy boats. At night when the freighters glided past in their semi-silence, she would flash signals to them with a flashlight. Sometimes an anonymous person would signal back or call out some echoing, hollow words, but if there was no response at all, she would turn out the light and sit cross-legged on the creaky metal deck in the dark, the sky to the south tinted orange and lights everywhere except straight ahead on the cliffs, and sitting there she would hold her breath a moment and listen to the steady displacement and movement of the water as the massive ship passed on.

Nobody ever knew she was there. Her mother lived in Queens with her own mother and her father was an anesthesiologist and rarely home. She'd been raised by a collection of West Indian nannies since she was a baby, but six months earlier when she turned thirteen, they stopped coming. After school she would let herself into the big quiet house that overlooked the river and busy herself in the emptiness of her home.

She liked dusk and she liked the dawn. She took her dog out with her in the early evening or early morning and went along the old dirt path that snaked north-south through the town, walking parallel to the river, passing the procession of suits and business-casual bound to or from the trains, gathered up in their purposeful striding and purposeful lives.

She went out with the dog one evening, the sky still bright and clear to the west on the mantle of the cliffs, sections of the river appearing enflamed where the failing light reflected. She walked fast down the hill, her shoes slapping loud against the concrete as her dog strained and pulled her over the cracked sidewalk, past the pristine houses with their managed lawns, to the

path. By the time they reached the path it was twilight and only a few bodies straggled past her as she walked beneath the darkening canopy of trees.

There was still light in the sky, but on the ground it was hard to see, and as she walked the sky darkened down and the half moon to the west became more prominent, the light it cast making things spectral, the timid luminescence covering the woods and the path and the ball field down an embankment and off to her left making everything somehow speculative, unreliable, like nothing that Teresa saw was actually as it was.

She sat at the top of a small steep hill that led down to the ball field. The pulsing lights of airplanes dotted the sky to the south. The night was calm and quiet. She stood up to go home and the dog padded about, shaking its whole body, and then went stock-still. He started to growl in the direction from where they had come. They were in a clearing and Teresa could see down the path fifty feet or so, but where the trees began again it was like a black wall had been erected and there was nothing to be seen beyond it. She took the leash and pulled the dog toward her. He strained against the collar, wheezing from it pressing against his throat. She stared down the path into the dark, and ever so slightly shapes began to take form at the edge of the trees. She could see the outline of a still dog and to its left the shape of a still man. He was tall and thin and his shoulders sloped, everything about his shape and presence turned inward except for the extended hand that held the rope that held the dog. As the two figures took on more clarity Teresa watched as he stepped forward into the weak moonlight, the dog moving from its haunches and forward onto its feet with serene compliance, as if they moved as one.

For a moment she thought of yelling, then she thought of running, but the further the man advanced into the clearing and the more discernible he became, the less threatening he seemed. Even Teresa's dog calmed down, the leash slackening somewhat when he saw the demeanor of the pair, the other dog striding along with calm and measured steps, making sure not to get too far ahead of its master, but when Teresa saw the empty eyes of the man, she almost wondered who was walking who.

The man had a thinning grey and white beard and a mess of darker thinning hair on his head. His face was long and gaunt and prematurely old. He took long, slow steps in her direction and stopped some ten or fifteen feet away from her.

"Hi," Teresa said.

"Hello," he replied. "Are you going to the fair?"

"What do you mean?" she said.

"The fair," he repeated. "It's not far from here. If we were higher we could see the lights. The lights from the fair. All types of lights."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He spoke with an airy intonation, his voice deep and hollow sounding. She saw the distance in him. She saw the way his presence dwelt in some different realm, but she was not scared. There was nothing about him that scared her.

"There will be dancing there, and swimming in the river. Have you ever swam at night?"

"No."

"You should swim then."

"I don't know about any fair."

"It's not far from here, not at all. I'm meeting my Katie there. She said yes, you know. She said yes." At this his eyes widened and focused slightly from what she could tell in the mild darkness of the clearing. "We'll be married in the spring. But the fair first, the fair." He smiled at her and the dog shook his muzzle slightly. "If you see the lights, you'll let me know, will you?" he said.

"Okay."

"Good. My Katie is waiting for me. You should go too. Stay or go. One or the other."

He walked on down the path past Teresa and past the house with its dark, boarded windows outlined by lines of light on the first floor.

"Good night," he called out as he walked away.

"Bye," she said to his sloping back.

The man and the dog moved away silently. She watched them slide like shadows into the darkness further on, and she watched a long time after they had disappeared, almost waiting for something else. Something more.

When Teresa got back home, she heard her father talking toward the back of the house in that intense voice of his. Not loud but not soft, attacking words with his acute pronunciation. But the voice was less violent now, as close to calm as it would ever be. Even before she saw him she knew the glossy look his eyes would have, the dumb upward curl of his lips, the way he might hug her and hold her longer than usual. She called it his passing feeling, because deeper into the night, if he was home, she would hear him sighing deeply and pacing about with awkward spaces between each footfall, sometimes even crying with choking, staccato sobs. She always knew where he was in the house by the shallow sound of pills rattling inside the plastic case that he carried around with him at all times.

He did not hear her come in, and as he continued to talk on the phone she took off her shoes in the front hallway and walked in her socks to the wide doorway of the living room that looked out west to the river. Her father was talking on the phone with the phone positioned over his face and he was splayed out across the floor. His glasses lay at the base of the floor to ceiling windows and his right hand was suspended above him. He stared at his hand with a look of rapt disbelief as he rotated his wrist and moved each of his fingers with slow and deliberate motions. She didn't know who he was talking to but he said something about a patient not dying gracefully, and she went upstairs.

She went back to the path each night at the same time each night for a week, but the man and his dog never showed. It was October now. The air smelled vaguely of something burning and clouds moved across the sky with surprising speed, dappled and shadowed by the low, descending light of that season, pushed by incessant winds. Kids huddled in groups when they walked anywhere, especially the girls, but she had no group and she didn't want one. She thought it was strange how they would want to be tripping over each other, bumping into one another, cackling and screaming over each other's voices. She could go faster on her own. Sometimes she thought that she could walk forever beneath the twisting brown and orange tinted canopy that arced over the path.

She was alone in the house with the dog on Halloween night. She found some old candy in a cupboard and put it in a bowl and gave it out to the children that came by. Their parents stood on the sidewalks with their hands in their pockets or clinging to cameras with looks of dazed satisfaction as they watched their costumed kids. At one point, a man came to the door with his young boy.

"Are you alone here?" he asked.

"No," Teresa lied smiling at the man. "My brothers are upstairs."

"Well that's good. People do crazy stuff on Halloween. Have a good night."

"You too," she said.

She closed the door and stood with her back against it, and for the first time ever the silence of the place unnerved her. The absence of sound like a loud noise. There were a few more children that came to the door but by ten o'clock there were no more people on the street. She grabbed her backpack with the paints and her flashlight and put on her jacket. She put the leash on the dog and turned out all the lights in the house, standing near the door until her eyes adjusted to the dark, and she left.

She went down the steep curving hill with dry and brittle leaves skittering across the road, the sound they made like a record skipping, the full moon to the southeast projecting everything in a fine, milky light. She passed through the town where there was no one around except for smokers at a bar far off down the street, wisps of smoke pillared above them and then dissipating. She crossed the train tracks where there was a persistent electrical buzzing, walked over a section of flattened fence, through a vacant lot and then hugged beside an abandoned brick warehouse to the water tower.

She stood at the base of the water tower and looked straight up, the tower set against the fast moving clouds above, the scope of it all making her dizzy. She picked up her dog and placed him in the backpack and started to climb the ladder. He whimpered softly as he always did as she went higher, the ladder creaking and quivering slightly but sturdy still. She reached the platform and pushed herself up so she was sitting at the base of the huge water barrel, each sound made from contact with the structure reverberating throughout its entirety, the vibrations carried away

through the metal. She often thought that even when she was old and eventually gone how the water tower could still be intact, still persisting, Unused and dejected.

Her drawings from the last time she had been there had mostly washed away. Faint white streaks stretched vertically toward the base of the barrel. She took out the can of paint and a brush and started to draw, starting as high as she could reach and working her way down, drawing the shape of a gaunt man standing with a dog, drawing the rope that connected them, drawing the beard and the close-set, empty eyes and the composed features of the animal. She drew for almost an hour, her work lit by the full moon, the river and the valley caught by the silvery light and portrayed in fine detail. Freighters stretched out to the south in an unmoving queue, their lights casting far out across the choppy water. When she was finished she stepped back against the railing that surrounded the platform and regarded the picture, the man and the dog appearing like ghosts recalled out of some past world and time.

Teresa turned around to look over the river once more before descending the ladder and going home. To the north on the same side of the river she saw something moving away from a small cove. A white streak in the black water. She moved to the north side of the platform and looked harder in the direction of the moving shape and saw it was a person cutting quickly toward the middle of the river, turning north and swimming with measured strokes against the tide. A dog's howl went up from the direction of the cove, tempered and calm. From her perch she could see the little beach at the banks of the inlet and on the beach she saw the dog she had encountered on the path some weeks earlier, the same dog in her picture. It sat with its muzzle raised to the sky and slowly bowed its head between each cry, then raised it in a steady arc to howl again. She looked back toward the swimmer. The person had stopped moving and was now treading water, the head of the old man visible now, bobbing with the slight undulations of the water. She could just make out his face, the long beard and hair pressed down. He lay on his back in the water and drifted to the south toward the tower so she could see him better. His eyes were closed and he appeared content, smiling vaguely as he floated.

He turned over in the water and started swimming back in the direction of the cove. Teresa heard sirens and the urgent acceleration of cars. She looked back toward the town and saw two police cars tearing down the hill, moving in and out of view between the trees and warehouse buildings, trailed by a regular car. She picked up her dog and positioned him in her

backpack, leaving the remaining paint and the brush on the deck, and descended the ladder to the ground as fast as she could. She hit the ground and started running in the direction of the beach, the backpack bouncing out of sync with her choppy strides, the dog grunting and yelping as she ran.

Teresa reached the road and got to a small rise and from there she could see the two police cars parked where the small beach met the road, their searchlights trained upon the river. The regular car, a grey station wagon, was pulled up behind the police cars and the woman who had been driving the car was at the water's edge yelling toward the middle of the river, her frantic words echoing into the night. She was wearing loose pants and had a white shawl or blanket wrapped around her shoulders. The searchlight backlit her and made her appear larger than she was, her long and narrow shadow cast far out into the cove, appearing obscure and inhuman with the shadow of the shawl projected, as if she had wings. Teresa slowed down and walked when she was close enough to see the woman's face, long and withered, her cheekbones in stark detail. Nobody noticed that Teresa was there, but she was used to that.

"Pleeeaaase," the woman cried. "Danny please. Daaanyyy," she called, over and over.

The dog howled intermittently but without urgency, the hollow and melodic moan so much more in mourning than in distress, like the dog knew what the man and the woman had lost already, what was bound to be lost even more, that loss was the predominant mode of the world.

Slowly, the man made his way back to the tiny beach where the woman and the dog waited, the two young cops appearing more disturbed than worried. At one point as the man was plodding along through the water one of the cops had seen Teresa there but he had not said anything, and still, as the man stood up in the water, naked and boney and shivering, no one said anything to her. The woman covered him in the shawl that she was wearing and one of the cops handed her a blanket, but he did not approach the man. The old man was wide-eyed, alert, and yet whatever it was in his eyes or look or his mere presence, he appeared so incredibly far away, unreachable.

"There you are Katie," he said to the woman. "I couldn't find you before. I thought you weren't coming."

The woman said nothing, gripping him by the shoulders and guiding him with gentle severity across the little spit of sand and up on to the road. The searchlights from the police cars still burned across the dark river, illuminating the area around the three cars. Later on, Teresa would not know what made her step forward or made her say anything, but in the moment she did so for no greater reason than to hear his voice at least once more.

"The fair was great," Teresa called out. Everyone there turned toward the direction of her voice. "Best fair I've ever been to." She took several steps toward the man and the woman, the cops hanging back with a sort of detached, bemused air. The woman glared at Teresa and then tried to guide the man into the passenger seat of the car, but he did not budge.

"Have you seen the lights yet?" he asked. "There. Look at all the lights."

He pointed out to the river and the queue of stationary freighters, their lights like suspended orbs, the vessels camouflaged by the darkness. A wild smile was spread across his face as he stared out at the boats, at the black cliffs, at the silent river reflecting moonlight. But the smile passed and his eyes came to rest fully on Teresa. His eyes held his isolation, his own mind banished from the harbors of reason and memory. In his eyes there was all of time, unmoored from a particular history. In the emptiness and blankness was the indifference of the world.

He walked toward her and stopped within arm's reach, placing a bony hand on the top of her head, soft and almost weightless like a bag of feathers.

"I'm going now, but you stay. You remain."

The old man bent down and kissed the top of her head. He smelled of salt water and was shivering all over from the cold, but despite the fact that he was the strangest person she had ever met, she felt loved. She looked up at him and his eyes were suddenly focused, his whole presence grounded in that moment and less removed, and she knew full well she would never see him again.

Teresa stayed off the path all winter. She walked the dog in the woods near her house or let him out into the yard. In March, the town tore down the water tower and built ten condominiums in its place, and she didn't go down to the river any more.

Spring came, and with it the heavy overtones of things in bloom, the clouds gaining volume and borne with steady speed across the sky, the cliffs to the west across the river tinged a coy yellow-green. It was in the evening of one of the lengthening days that Teresa took the dog down to the path for the first time in months.

She walked north with the sun behind her until she started feeling cold and turned around. As she was nearing the street where she turned off the path to go home, she looked up ahead to the intersection of the next street. Light filtered through the branches that held precocious white buds, the day in decline, and further ahead on the path Teresa could see a woman and a dog. As the pair got closer and became more visible, Teresa realized it was the old man's wife and his dog. The woman followed the dog, holding the leash of rope with her arms crossed across her belly and her eyes to the ground. The dog never strained or made the leash go taut. It was tan and had high set ears and it walked with a methodical gait. The woman's strides were slow and rhythmic as well, her body rising and falling slightly with each step.

The dog stopped and sniffed at the air as it got closer to Teresa, sitting down on its haunches and staring in her direction. The woman glanced up but didn't seem to recognize Teresa. The woman tugged at the leash but the dog refused to move. She pulled at it again and said something in a soft voice to coax the dog away and off the path but it would not budge. She looked up the path and then started walking toward Teresa, the dog resuming its calm striding with the woman in tow.

Teresa gave a quick look up the street that led back home, then started walking forward toward the woman and the dog. A brief glance passed between the two of them before they redirected their gazes to the ground. When they were close enough the two dogs sniffed at each other. Teresa smiled at the old woman.

"He's so calm," Teresa said.

The woman nodded.

“Yes, he is,” she murmured.

When Teresa’s dog lost interest, the old man’s dog stepped over to Teresa and raised its face up to her. She pet the underside of its jaw and then the dog licked her hand. It rubbed the side of its head and neck on her leg, almost caressing it seemed, and then walked off, the woman following, a faint “Goodbye” spoken to Teresa as she walked away.

Teresa couldn’t help thinking about the old man. She thought about his parting words, about what they meant, if they were intended for her or had merely been the spoken ramblings of his fading mind. You stay. You remain.

She didn’t go up the hill to her house. She kept walking south, by now accustomed to the cold, the sun pressed down more and more into the horizon each passing minute. She walked further than she had ever been on the path, moving into places unknown while the darkness gathered around her. After a long time walking, the path ended at a busy road and she did not know where it continued on or if it did at all. She stopped at the road, turned around, and went back home.