

The Playing Field

Close your eyes, she says to me, and count to ten.

Her voice is hoarse, the edges of her words rusted over, like a plow abandoned too long in a farmer's field. There are others with her, I hear them shuffle around me. My hands are bound behind my back. There is wetness on my head. Snow. I smell pine, we have entered the forest. Someone jabs a foot into my back. I fall to the ground on my knees. I am taking too long.

Count, hisses a different voice, impatient, close to my ear.

This voice slithers, runs up the length of my back. I see its black eye, cold and cunning, I see its tongue flick out and writhe. Rust and Serpent, I name the voices and catalog them in my mind. It is better to know prisoners' voices than their numbers, than their faces. Mostly because they don't expect you to pay attention to them in that way. I have caught many prisoners by knowing their voices. I begin to count.

One

I wonder why Rust tells me to close my eyes when I am blindfolded. Can it get any darker? Will I see less with my eyes shut? Since my capture, I have come to know well the different shades of dark. There is the freezing dark of morning and the muted dark of afternoon. There is the hungry dark of mealtime – a stale crust of bread and weak broth – the lonely dark of evening, followed at last by the vacant dark of night. I have grown accustomed to these shades, these hues, and they no longer frighten me. The only dark I do not know is the dark of death, the

eternal dark. I do not fear this dark but hasten towards it, as it is the endpoint of my journey and I will not stop until I have arrived.

Two

The prisoners disgust me. They pick lice from each other's hair, from their heads and from in between their legs, and they put the lice into their mouths. I have heard prisoners betray their friends for a mere crust of bread. We are taught they are lesser than us, lower than the lowest beast. I have watched them. None have proven themselves otherwise. We are taught they will take everything from us if given the chance. It is unfortunate I find myself in their hands now. They will not have mercy on me, I would not expect them to. They have been given the chance.

Three

I consider my own voice as I count aloud. It is low, dim. I am hungry and beaten so it is also tentative, roving. It skirts through the trees, seeking cover in their shadows. Will the prisoners name my voice and catalog it in their minds? Will they call me Dog? Wolf? Moon? My mother had the voice of an angel. I cataloged it as Grace. She knew the eternal dark very young, as did my father. As will I. I want to say to Rust: If you are already in the dark, it does not matter how wide you open your eyes.

Four

I enlisted the first chance I got. There was nowhere else to go. I drifted into it. I stayed because I found a home there, among my comrades. We shared everything, cigarettes and ale,

coffee and women. The female prisoners had such soft voices. When I was finished with a girl, I asked her to sing me to sleep. My comrades would never betray me for a mere crust of bread.

Five

I keep track of the prisoners I introduced to the eternal dark. Fire, Dirt, Mouse. Maiden, Maggot, Winter. Elephant, Clown, Gold. Flea, Sheep, Dew. Their voices stay with me though the bodies that held and carried them are long gone. I heard Winter say once, cold and halting: If God speaks to us, why have we never heard his voice?

Six

I do not remember my father's voice. I cataloged it as Nothing. It has not comforted me on the frontlines. But neither has it been able to reprimand me, as it would now if I could recall its sound. And that is in its own way a small comfort. I release the contents of my bladder. Not from fear, but because I have not emptied it since the freezing dark of morning.

Seven

Someone laughs at me. A shrill cackle, circling, closing in on its prey. I name the voice Jackal and catalog it alphabetically, after Ivory, before Jester. I wonder where all these voices will go when I go. Will they settle on the tops of the pine trees, or will they drift down to the ground and decay with the leaves?

Eight

These prisoners will be caught. Crimes do not go unpunished. It will be their turn one day, as it is my turn now. There is not a single one of us, neither prisoner nor soldier, who will escape the eternal dark. I wish only that I could be there to see them pay. It would be sweet to hear their cries.

Nine

The gun is cocked, I hear the metallic click. The sound is familiar, like the only home I have ever known. The prisoners are silent. Grace beckons from the heavens. I hasten towards it, and even in the dark it is easy to find my way. I take my final breath and my voice does not waver. I am not afraid. War is a game I know how to play.

Ten