

Mediation

The shadows aren't right yet. Streetlight, not sunlight seeps through the shut wooden blinds. 4:45 my guess. I'm always close. They say a natural clock runs inside us. I say we are conditioned.

Can't look at the clock or the time sticks. I still have enough fatigue to go back to sleep.

I peed already, probably thirty minutes ago. I didn't have to but knew just the thought would itch, would keep me from sleeping. Have I fallen asleep since?

I extend my left arm, right arm bent under the pillow. Soreness radiates from my left shoulder. From swimming. Try the right side, turning slowly, hoping blood shifting from one to the other hemisphere will bring dizziness. It's my concept.

From the right shutter, not closed tightly enough last night, the light from the neighbor's porch teases through my eye lid. Why is it on all night? They have no delinquent teenagers. We have no crime. Did they once have an intruder? Did her alcoholic father often wander home drunk? In Memoria?

Too warm. The sheets seem moist. My lower left leg lifts the thin quilt above the knees. I lower the top down to my waist, balancing the stasis of cool and warm. Better.

I turn onto my back, laying the quilt across my crotch like a Gandhi loin cloth or what they painted on Jesus for the cross scene.

I set my hands face down atop my hip bones, and begin to count backwards from 200 in full syllables—

two hundred,

one hundred and ninety nine,

one hundred and ninety eight...

I stop at *one hundred and seventy*. Still too precise. No flubs. This isn't going to happen.

I swing my legs down to the floor, touch the leather ottoman with my feet, then move two small pillows, red with a wooden button and two large navy blues back onto the bed. I keep my eyes shut. I feel for the small blue and white striped pillow, shape it into the crack at the back of the chair, then skooch myself over.

The cool leather chills my legs and back. I find the thin red comforter on the desk chair, wrap my legs loosely on the ottoman, lean back and rest my head.

My shoulders arch too much atop the wide, padded arms. Down by my side, my arms pinch in too much. I cradle my forearms below my lower stomach, fingers of the right hand intertwining with the left.

The fingers begin pressing, pulsing, so I untangle them, cradling the left below the right, like the sisters would do on their rosary walks. I roll my head slowly to the left, stop, then slowly to the right, then slowly back until I reach dead center. I soften my cheek. I allow my jaw to drop.

Stop.

Still.

Wait.

My lower back begins to twinge. I wriggle my back. Wriggle my neck.

Stop.

Still.

Wait.

My right leg hyper-extends over my left ankle, so I reverse. My left leg hyper-extends, ankle rubbing on ankle.

I kick the blanket off, bend my knees and shove the ottoman away. I rise up and move the small pillow under my butt so that my pelvis sits above my thighs. I plant my feet squarely beneath my knees on the smooth floor. I place my hands, palms upraised across my thighs. I sway side to side until my back is centered. I dip my head towards the left shoulder, then slowly back across to the right, listening to the little vertebrae crackle. I roll my head down across the front, return to the left, then slowly raise up and back until I am centered.

I inhale, counting to six, holding for three, exhaling for six. In through the nostrils for six, hold, then six out. My chest rises, my stomach contracts. My chest droops, my stomach extends. Repeat. I tilt my head for one last crackle, then center it above my spine. I drift to my forehead, to a spot just above my eyebrows. My eyes cross, I feel dizzy. I am floating. I begin.

Kyrie Eleison

Slower.

Keer-ee-ay Eleison

Slower

Keer-ee-ay Ay-lay-ee-sone

Air arriving

Keer-ee-ay

Air departing

Ay-lay-ee-sone

Again,

and

again,

and

again....

A metallic clicking, then rumbling rolls through the window screen behind the closed plantation shutters. The big black truck. Jim's truck. Jim is going to work. Jim is leaving later than usual.

Kyrie Eleison

Kyrie...

Breath in.

The truck backs down the drive way, engine purring, over the low curb.

Eleison

Breath out.

Tires roll across the pavement, closer, close, then farther, far, as they drift with the rumbling engine around the corner of the cul-de-sac and down the hill into silence. The center of the forehead radiates. Floating, floating on the chair, body numb.

Kyrie Eleison

Kyrie Eleison

Christe Eleison

Caw caw. Crow. On the lamppost. Tilts its head to listen.

Caw caw. Sends a signal. They are smart birds.

Caw caw. A crow on Jim's roof. Did the crow move? Are there two?

They are one voice, one piercing voice.

Caw caw. From the top of the palm tree. There are three. They are one. One voice.
One voice checking in, reassuring. The heads crane. The heads bob.

Caw caw. One voice filling sleeping ears. One voice filling, echoing.

A sudden flutter. They fly off into silence.

Chest rising...falling...rising...falling.... The chair expands and contracts. The house expands and contracts, the street, the world expands and contracts, expanding in hope, contracting in retreat, expanding in purpose, contracting in a sigh of...

Kyrie (flow)

Eleison (retreat)

Tires on asphalt, tearing like a slow, curling wave. A car creaks with rust. The engine purrs. *Plop*. Folded newspaper hits a far driveway. *Plop*. Closer. The car circles the cul-de-sac, a fat white man in the car. *Plop*. A short brown man in the car with a large, lidded Dunkin' Donuts cup wedged between his legs, he has no cup holder, newspaper print rubbing off on brown towels covering the torn upholstery. *Plop*. Faces of candidates and murderers flying through the window, striking the ground where they talk to each other, flat on their backs. The creak and purr fade, the shrill whoosh of the tires fades, the wave recedes into the ocean.

The palm fronds whistle in the breeze. Cool air seeps through the screen, through the shutters, rolling across bare, curious shoulders. A train horn. A train horn in the distance, on the track by the beach. A train horn weaves its way through the canyon, sound waves bouncing off

the hillsides, bouncing off the house walls, bouncing off the sleeping eardrums, swirling around, back through the canyon rushing to the wheels of the train that squeak and screech and rumble up the coast beneath the swaying seat of a young girl in a proper dress who holds a stuffed doll with red hair and freckles while her mother sleeps, looking out across the water at the silhouette of a man paddling a large board beyond the mist of waves breaking off the shoreline.

The man is actually a chubby boy with high-top black Converse and white socks that creep up his legs toward the cut-offs that used to be holes in the knee's jeans, now soft, white threads dangling. A t-shirt striped with purple, brown, green and thin white filled full beneath rosy lips, red cheeks with freckles, blazing green eyes and a white shock of hair, running through a wet forest of redwoods, darting through slits of sunlight and mist, playing hide and go seek, staying off the worn, dirt path, then leaping across to the other side without touching, leaping through the undergrowth, his shoes and socks now moist with dew, laughing, running away, laughing, what's that?, what that you're saying? *Can't catch me...can't catch me...* running toward an open valley, high above the train that rolls down the tracks and curves around a sudden cliff, a conductor in a blue suit, white shirt, tie, and cap with a shiny brim standing out back, leaning against a rail, waving a red lantern before the dawn, the red light melting in the salty, moist air, as the train serpentine away, as the back of the train undulates, as the red light sways and shrinks, away, above the heat waves rising from the empty track.

Caw caw.

Empty train tracks glistening. The black crow hovers above.

Caw caw.

The black crow bobbing up and down atop the lamppost next to the tracks.

Caw caw.

The crow's black feathers shimmer in the early morning sunlight, streaming above the darkened forest that ingests the tracks. The crow clutches tightly with its talons, tilting its head left, its dark black eye curious for movement, its dark black eye reflecting the green branches, the golden rays of sunlight that streak through its pupil like a fractured geode. It tilts its head to the right, toward the sound of water rippling over an expanse of small rocks. It spreads its wings and with one downward swoop bursts into the air, disappearing through the smoky green canopy above a worn path on the forest floor.

Soft reddish soil lies beneath a light filament of pine needles. The line of trees recesses back on either side, their bark lightened on the path side, while darkness grows in the depths of the forest beyond them. A cool breeze brushes the leaves, tickling the arm-hairs that coat the skin. The trees arch upward, then inward, forming a nave that extends forward for a bit, then winds off to the right. Water crackles over a distant rise of river rocks. Bare feet caress and stroll up the soft path that winds to the right. A low mist rises from the moist red soil which sticks, then falls off the bottom of the feet. Arms sway slowly, side to side, gliding through the air. Coos of mourning doves massage the ears. The trees with their dripping, rivulet brown barks drift from the front to the side, then recede in the back as the path continues to wind through the thickening forest until the rustling breeze and rippling water subside into the soft voice of a young boy in a robe who chants unfamiliar syllables with the same note, that then rise upward, lengthen, and arch into a pause. A chorus of men continues in unison, their monotone notes echoing through the forest, rising up, traversing the canopy until, for a moment, the forest goes black and the notes waft through the darkness.

The trees harden into smooth stone walls extending into vaulting arches high above.

The rust carpet extends toward a distant figure moving forward. The walls breath in, breath out as the figure approaches, cloaked in a black robe, taking large, ponderous strides with legs and feet hidden beneath the cloak. It stops three feet away. The dark cowl reveals a deep void. The marble floor begins to pulsate as the right sleeve of the figure rises and bends, revealing a large dark hand with wrinkled fingers reaching up to take hold of the edge of the cowl, then pausing, as the breathing becomes quicker, shallower and the ear drums pulse in pain. The fingers extend out and one points, a dab of amber ointment on the tip, reaching forward, closer, closer until it rests on the middle of the forehead between the eyes. Light beams down in mists through the stained glass windows. The breathing and the beating become the voices, the deep voices in unison, then the one voice...

Kyrie Eleison

The ointment begins to burn.

Kyrie Eleison

He inhales deeply to slow his rapid breathing.

Kyrie Eleison

I lift my eyelids halfway open.

Kyrie Eleison

Horizontal dashes of light on the far wall pulse with my heartbeat. In the blank screen of the computer monitor I see light radiating behind the shutters.

I scoot forward, then up from the chair, the leather peeling away from my skin.

I leave the shutters closed. I reach over and press the power button to the computer. As it whirs into life, I stand up, open the door, and walk out.

I sit at the kitchen table on a rattan chair that leaves grooves in my skin. I do not slip on my sandals, get the paper, empty the coffee grounds, rinse out then fill the coffee pot, balance on one leg while bending down to pull out the toaster, retrieve the bread loaf from the refrigerator, turning away as I listen for the refrigerator door to shut.

A silver gun lies flat in its sponge mold inside a thin metal box in the cabinet above the microwave, next to the stove vent and two dusty wine carafes. She insisted on buying the gun because she doesn't trust the neighbor's gardener on her days off when I am away at work.

I sit by the patio door, staring out at the empty concrete fountain. A hummingbird darts to the top tier, searches for water, then darts away. I open the door to the chill air. Goose bumps arise on my bare legs. Dark leaves above the rusting, wrought-iron fence silhouette the light pink sky above the expanse of black hills. I think about pouring fresh coffee grounds into the thin, white filter, dropping seedy slices of brown bread into the toaster, slipping on my sandals and retrieving the folded newspaper from the driveway under the crow's watchful eye, walking outside and peeing into the succulents. I hear the computer whirring upstairs. I see the folder, the folders in the folder, the files in the folders of all the stories lying like corpses, breathing in, breathing out, breathing in, breathing out.

I flip open the two latches of the unlocked box, reach down to cradle the handle of the gun in my closing palm, then raise it into the air. The crow, perched on the highest branch, stares down. I squeeze the trigger millimeter by millimeter, awaiting the announcement, awaiting the publication.

I feel my chest rise, rise, rise, then fall.