

LITHIC

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I'm going to try one more time to put it all in order. Even now, I can feel it slipping away, moving in my head in waves. Things spin and snap into place, seeming so clear, so perfect; but only for a moment. Then they fade and drift and disappear. But, for now, I have something. Something to hold on to.

Listen.

--

I was on the phone with Nan again. Two years of my life leading to one long, messy breakup spread across the northeast from New York to Vermont. The place I fled to lick my wounds.

New York was full of places I didn't want to go and people I didn't want to see. It was winter break, and Nan was staying. I ran home to Vermont. A place Nan and I always talked about visiting, but now, would never see together. It was smaller than I remembered. Like everything there had been shrunk by half a foot behind the scenes in some weird conspiracy.

"What's wrong with you? You don't sound right," Nan said, a wash of noise in the background.

"I'm trying to get my head together," I said. And I was.

Still am.

Through the phone, I could hear Penn Station. A million snippets of time rushing by the receiver as Nan waited for me to speak. The ghost-whispers of a million lives.

For some reason, it made me hungry.

--

The memories show up, and I really don't know what to do with them. They smash and pile up and collide and combine, and I don't know how to sort them. This happened...after Nan. It must have. I was home in Vermont. Home again.

I think.

"Don't go up on Indian Hill no more," the man said, touching my shoulder. I wasn't paying attention, I was looking up at the mountain, and I turned and found myself face to face with him. This was...I don't know when. It was evening. Early evening.

It was clear, his voice, and not slurred, though his breath was a wave of liquor. I was buckling the belt on the rent-a-cop suit and crossing on the corner of Ulysses Street, and I jumped a little when he stopped me. It had been a long time since I was in town and I wasn't expecting to see anyone. I wasn't expecting to be stopped.

Anyway, I didn't know him. Then at least.

He was that age homeless people become when they've lived outside for too long, a prematurely aged look that hovers between thirty and sixty, depending on the time of day and how deep in the bottle they are. We didn't get many homeless in Stoveton. Vermont was well outside the area friendly for year-round outside habitation, and you got used to the idea that past freezing, everyone was inside somewhere, tucked in, listening to the storm. It's what gives the area that "everything in its right place" feeling that the tourists go nuts for. It isn't hard-headed New England pragmatism that keep the streets perennially clean, it's the fact that homeless people die in Vermont in the winter.

Most got the hint and headed for more southern climes.

He looked at me for a moment, eyes a lucid blue shot with red, and then moved his hand away. As he did, I saw a thousand bouncing fleas on his jacket and I jumped back a little, self-consciously wiping the jacket where he had touched it.

He stepped backwards, hands up. Was he old enough to think "peace" or young enough for a simple "dude"? I couldn't tell. He didn't seem dangerous. In any case, I'm a big guy. I had a foot on him, at least.

As I looked at him, he seemed to shrink. He turned down the utility road next to Sharkey's Pizza and walked away fast, a single unlaced boot flapping in the dirty snow behind him. He didn't look back.

For a moment I wondered what his life must be like. Digging through dumpsters behind Aces. Eating stale, frozen bagels out of fragrant plastic bags. Sleeping next to laundry exhausts and heated patios, under piles of papers and in crawlspaces. Burrowing into things for warmth. I tried to place myself in his world. But it all fell away as I thought about it, failing to come together in any clear narrative. Still, that lifestyle seemed familiar. Somehow.

"How do you know where I'm going?" I shouted after him.

I feel like I saw him more than once, so that could have been another day, or a dream.

--

There was a night on Indian Hill where I almost killed someone. This memory is old. Tommy something. He'd been goading me all night. Mocking me. Pushing me, even

though he was small, scrawny. We drank and listened to Radiohead and watched the stars, and at one point, it was like someone whispered something in my ear, and it was on.

I looked up at Tommy and he was looking at me, smirking. And it was like it wasn't Tommy. His eyes were lost in shadow, and his uneven teeth were lit with red and yellow from the fire. It wasn't Tommy.

People talk about their first punch. They say it hurts. They say it's ineffective. This punch was neither. It didn't hurt. Tommy went flying. He rebounded off one of the stones, rolled and then dropped into the fire, still rolling, pant cuff flashing with a momentary flame.

And then I was on him. I beat him for a long time. I don't know how long. I recall scraping up clots of earth and yellow grass and shoving it in his bloody mouth, up his nose.

For a second I felt the pulse of a million dead generations. People half-naked and starving on the mountain who gathered together there to appease something unseen and sleeping. They fought, they fucked, they killed. We had hit a current there, at that moment. We tapped into something alive and older than anything.

Finally, somehow, I brought myself under control.

When I looked up, wheezing, Tommy was nothing but a broken lump of blood and dirt beneath me, shaking and bleeding. I saw a ring of faces, all lit by fire from below, staring at me. They didn't look human. All their faces were illuminated with something other than the fire.

Anyway, no one tried to stop me. Nothing came of it. I signed his yearbook later that year like nothing had ever happened at all.

Maybe it hadn't. It's all so disjointed.

--

When I was growing up, Indian Hill was called the stoner's garden. It was about three miles from town, and by the time we were sixteen, we were tooling up there in a 4x4 to blast music and get drunk and smoke up. Everyone went there. All the kids from town.

I spent a million drunken nights there in various states of adolescent disrepair. Once, I woke in my underwear, alone, on one of the stones in the middle of August, covered in dew. It was that kind of place. A place to try a drug for the first time, or to lose your virginity, or lose a fight. It was our clubhouse. Sometimes it got so you couldn't think, being up there. Too many people, too much energy, too many drugs.

Other times, we'd simply camp out near the ring, watching the stars and passing the bottle. It was the only local hang-out where we could get away with the things our teenage selves wanted to do. It was our place.

Some time after New York, I found myself working up on Indian Hill, like an ellipses bracketing my life. I lived the cliché. Small town boy launches himself for wonderland, only to smash into the same small town on the far side of the arc. It didn't seem like such a stretch. The Grove was putting a ski run up there, and due to insurance concerns, they'd fenced off the area around the stones and put up a guard shack.

At dusk every night, I'd hike up the Booth road, take the cut off, and march up Indian Hill through the pines. Every morning I'd catch the first fuel truck down to town, drag my ass to my mom's house, crash out and do it all again.

(I haven't seen my mom in some time. I can't recall the last time clearly. Every night in the house seems the same now.)

I rode that shack five nights a week, reading scripts and books on film-making, bidding my time. Soon enough, I'd be back in New York, running around with a camera, playing pretend for twenty-six thousand a year. Nan would be there. But I didn't like thinking about that.

After New York, it was something like a vacation from people. It was nice, for once, to sit alone in the dark with the knowledge that nothing human was around me for miles. And to get paid for it, not so bad. I didn't mind the dark.

Anyway I remember a lot of nights on Indian Hill. It seems to be all I can focus on, now. It's hard to think of anything else for some reason.

--

I also remember finding an animal, when I was...younger. Maybe half the age of when I was working up on the rise. This was near Indian Hill, in the woods. 1995? 1996? I don't know. I was little. Years before Nan, New York and the guard booth.

Why am I thinking about this? It's hard to think about this.

I'd walk the woodlots on the lower mountain when I was little. Summer break. Wandering through silent woods, listening for animals in the underbrush, spying on the few people I'd come across. You didn't see many people up there, then.

When I heard this, I knew it was something special. The noise was bad. Something small and in distress. The noise carried.



Anyway, I followed it through the ferns for ten minutes, maybe twenty. Finally, I thought I had it boxed in, near a deadfall and some old trees. Something furry and small and making noises in the underbrush.

There was something wrong with it. I thought it was a cat. It wouldn't let me see it. I caught a glimpse of it in the brush, something grey and white, but it skittered away from me, making noises that were wrong. It sounded like something in pain, something squealing and mewling but trying to be quiet at the same time.

I chased it. It's what kids do, after all.

I caught one clear view of it, pulling aside one of the big ferns in time to reveal it, frozen in fear, in the middle of a clot of dirt next to a rotting stump.

It wasn't a cat. It was a rat. A rat as big as my arm. Grey and white. Something was wrong with it. The front third of its body was knotted with some transparent grey *web*. Something like a cord of latex filled with pulsing curd. These webs went down its throat, up one nostril, and kept its mouth open so that it left a constant pool of dribble as it went. It was wheezing with terror.

It looked up at me, almost resigned to its fate, trembling with exhaustion.

I stopped in my tracks, terrified to go any closer. It ran off into the woods. I never saw it again. Never thought about it again, until now.

I could find it now, I suppose, if I looked for it. It's still here, somewhere, I bet.

What a strange thought.

--

One of the millions of evenings on the hill, I let myself in the gate, and carefully pulled it shut. It was winter, but still early. Still so there was standing water during the day at least.

The road, what of it there was, was ripped up. Mud flung everywhere in frozen chunks, the grooves from giant tires cutting patterns in the earth like maps. My boots squelched as I climbed the incline, trying to keep out of the deeper mud, preferring the frozen edges, which cracked under foot.

Martin was there, outside the shack where I knew he would be, but he didn't see me. He was flushed red when I came up the rise, and a plume of white poured from his lips as he flicked the cigarette out into the pines. He leaned his head back, put his hands on the small of his back and stretched, letting out an audible grunt.

Martin was built like a leprechaun linebacker. He was tiny, but strong and wide and a little bit scary looking, with a ruined nose and thick cheeks crisscrossed by burst capillaries. Anyway, he was old, or older than me. That's about all I really knew about Martin. We'd exchanged some forced pleasantries in front of the company man, once, and since then, it'd been hand-off after hand-off. Nothing much more.

"Missed some shit today," Martin said when he saw me, obviously pleased.

I raised my eyebrows and stepped past him to the shed. Checked the fuel on the heater, and put my stuff down. Unperturbed, Martin just kept on talking.

"Some nut was up here. Took a crowbar to the bobcat. The cops just hauled him off."

I stopped.

"One of the Dowdys?" The Dowdys owned a house on the far side of the run, and they weren't too pleased with the construction. There had been words on more than one occasion.

Martin shook his head.

"No. Like I said, some nut." Martin surveyed the road going up the slope towards the stones.

"How'd he get to the site?"

"Didn't come in the gate. Must have hopped the fence," Martin turned and looked at me with a smirk.

"Huh," I said, thinking about the man on the street this evening.

"Anyway, he didn't stop shit, they hauled off the second stone before the whistle blew."

For a moment, I felt light-headed.

"Where did they take it?" I asked.

"What?"

"The stone? Where did they take the stones?" Even in the memory, the fact seemed important, monumental. Vital.

He glanced down and smiled with a look on his face like an adult talking to a child. He shook his head.

"Kid, who the hell cares? Not me."

And then I was alone for the night. Whatever night that was.

--

The memory fades away like a dream when you first try to recount it. I used to write them down, but my handwriting is poor. Gibberish is all I get from those half-sleep composed notes. Anyway, the thought, It was about Martin, Martin and Indian Hill.

I try to focus on Martin. I close my eyes and all I see is the back of a naked man, face down in the winter mud, his head split open like a gourd with pink-white brains spilled out.

It is night, and his skin glows blue white, as the blood and heat leave his body. His head juts mist as the warmth inside him spills out to fill the night.

And a voice inside me is muttering a million different things. Threads of thought so fine they form an unbroken wall of ideas so complex and interwoven that looking at them simply throws into focus how incapable of understanding them I am.

I'm weeping there, in the memory, I think. If it is a memory. The voice is there too, muttering, chanting, speaking to me, but it is too much. Someone else is speaking.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..."

It's my voice.

--

I'm thinking too much about Indian Hill. I need to think about other things, but it's like the further they are from the Hill, the more difficult they are to focus on.

I think about Nan. Even though it hurts, I think about Nan.

There was a time when Nan was calling me. The phone was ringing but I was far away. My head aching, my hands raw and numb. From my vantage point, inverted on the bed, I was looking at four stretched squares of light crawl across the ceiling in time-lapse. Everything felt wrong. Time was like a greased rope, spilling out of my hands and into the black, I was dropping with it.

My face felt puffed, my nose was raw, my eyes nearly swollen shut. Was I crying? Who knows.

The phone rang again, and each time it would reach its peak, the sound would shake through the air, shaking my head, shaking my fillings, blurring my vision. Each time it stopped, I thought it would be the last, but it wasn't. It kept ringing.

I felt exhausted. Cracked open and hollowed out. Empty. Nothing could bring back the order to my life now. It was too late. Too much had happened. It was beyond me now. I was just reacting. Everything was jumbled up already.

Something had happened on the Hill.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, the ringing stopped.

I slept.

I dreamt of swimming in warm water. Floating around me in the current were the prone bodies of others, people drifting along in an amber river, still. As I watched, through the blurred water, I saw them twitching, as if asleep.

What a strange dream. I don't like thinking about it.

And just like that, it fades away.

--

Night on the mountain comes on like this: first, everything settles, then it fades.

On this night, it wasn't winter yet, but there was some snow, and moment to moment, it seemed to bleach the warm colors out of the world like a photo fading in time lapse. The yellows and reds thinned, leaving purples and blues, split by black pickets of trees, until the sky at the forest's edge was the only bright thing in the world.

I had been up here a thousand times. A million. I had seen the play of light before dusk in rain, in heat, in winter. I felt I had seen all that Indian Hill had to offer me, still I watched it, arm propped up on the plywood table in the shack, with the lights out.

Finally, like some magic trick, someone turns it all down, all the colors. For a few minutes, as the last of the air fades to black, I sat in silence in the booth, in the dark, listening to my breath. Finally, with a click, I snapped on the lights.

All that's left by five-thirty is the guard shack; a wave of light in four directions from the windows, the dim pearly glow of nearby snowbanks, and silence. You couldn't see the town. There were no other lights except the shack.

I turned the heater up, spun the egg timer for 30 minutes, folded open my book on Tarkovsky, and began reading, but the page seemed uninviting. I kept starting and stopping and turning back to the beginning. The words seemed to drop from my mind as my eyes tracked them.

This could have been any of a hundred nights. A thousand.



--

Then this other time, I'm running in the woods. This is recent. I think. I'm running with a slung shotgun and a flashlight. Every footfall the shotgun swings away from my shoulder, and every other footfall, it smashes into my shoulder blade. But I don't care.

I'm very, very frightened.

My feet are screaming. My back, bent. I'm stumbling on snow and branches and over deadfalls, flatfooted and without any grace — terrified. I've dropped the gun and the flashlight more than once, and scrambled to pick them up just as quickly. My breath is coming out in plumes that are lost behind me before I can even see them.

It feels like I'm surrounded. In the dark, just past my vision, it feels like a crowded room. Like a theater after the lights go down, like I am the main attraction. I am being watched. I am the focus of something terrible which waits for me in time.

Confusing. Is Martin here?

--

Sitting on the mountain seems to take up much of my mind.

Guarding something as ambiguous as a proposed ski-run is difficult to picture, so I'll walk you through it. The timer goes off, you pick up the shotgun and flashlight, and walk the run. The shotgun was standard now in podunk assignments, as Vermont was going through a nasty resurgence of its Black Bear population. Having been chased by one the previous summer at Yale Lake, I didn't need to be told twice. Anyway, everyone local knew their way around a scattergun.

The flashlight didn't do much. I mean, it's big and heavy, but the light is pathetic in the face of the night. It's like walking along the bottom of the ocean. Your breath in your ears, the crunch of snow and pop of twigs, a dim light plucking a tiny circle of normal out of the black.

Thanks to the recent snow, you could find the footpaths. There was the main run, from the entrance to the stones, and then a skein of boot marks tracking an octagon around the perimeter of the fence. I followed that one. Walked it. Maybe it was a mile all told. Didn't see anything except trees and snow and dark.

When I cut back on the far side to walk to the stones, I stopped, shifted hands, trading the shotgun and light, and began up the hill.

About five minutes up, the men had been to work. The old growth trees that had crept in in all the years of my youth around the stone circle had been plucked like rotten teeth. A

nearly perfect rectangle of cut trees swept past the stone circle like a frame pointed at the sky. The ground, which was once covered in thick yellow grass was bare mud, torn up by construction equipment.

In the center were the stones, or what of them were left. There were nine when I was a kid. Nine big rocks cut at strange angles worn down over time. Older than the United States, older than the Indians. They were carved and cut and graffitied by a million hands throughout the years. I myself spray-painted my name on one in the summer of 2005, the year I graduated high school.

*That* stone was still there. Others, two of them, had been plucked from the ground leaving an ugly black and brown squelch in the ground. Each of these holes had been marked by pickets of snapped paint-sticks, painted with fluorescent orange to mark them.

I stopped at the peak of the hill, huffing. I shone the light around up there, marking the stones and the lack of stones. It felt wrong, unbalanced. But I didn't know if that was just the artist in me. For no reason at all, I wandered over to one of the gaps and looked down into the hole.

It was a three foot deep slack of mud, which sunk in an uneven pyramid to a black gap, about the size of my fist, in the center. I shone the light down the hole, but all I could see was black. It seemed wrong too. I had leaned up against the rock that had been there

for *years*. It was cool all year round, tall and grey and flat, well mostly. If you leaned back facing the center of the ring, and looked up, a slight dip in the stone seemed to frame a star in the center of the sky.

No one knows who put them up. The Indians have stories. Back in high school I dug up some books on the stuff and poked around. It's a habit I have. I find something out of the ordinary, I latch on, and I read about it. Or at least, read about it as much as I can. Then I think about it. The summer I became interested in the stones, I read seven books on them. I have a notebook somewhere.

First off, the Indians didn't build them, and that's according to the Indians. Rogue Vikings, a moon-faced white people who feared the sun, some unknown pre-native civilization, take your pick. The whole of New England is peppered with them, stone forts, old rings of stones, gullies and gunnels and fences of chipped rock—monolithic structures which thumb their nose at modern science. Some of the rocks are huge, three, four tons. They were standing when Champlain blew through here in 1609, dropping a flag along the way, and they were standing when the state was founded.

Strangely, no one really seems to care too much who put them up. It's amazing what people choose to ignore when it bothers their pre-established sensibilities. It's also useful when you want to knock them down. There's no definitive culture to protect. Some Indians might raise a stink, and some sad little faux-Wiccans, but past that, there's no one left to stand up and complain. It's a shame, really. The rocks are incredible.

Some studies, for instance, of the rocks at King's Chamber (another site in Vermont) dated it 10,000 years *before* the Indians got here. Trouble that. It was ignored. I mean, they printed it, but no one looked any deeper. Who was I to complain? I didn't really take it upon myself either. Just because I read a few books and took some notes, didn't make me any better. I just went along with it like the rest of them. Complaining about it didn't help.

I still think about them a lot.

--

This must have been a dream.

I was on the mountain. It was a warm and clear and a spring or summer morning. Nan was there. We were walking together in the pines, holding hands. There were no bugs yet. Birds were crying in the trees, there was a clear, warm grey white light and the shadows that the sun cut divided the world into a grid of darkness and light.

Nan turned from me, releasing my hand, and began walking up Indian Hill towards the stones. I stopped, refusing to follow. She didn't look back. In fact, I couldn't recall seeing her face at all. Her back was to me, wearing the same green sweater torn at the sleeve, the same capri pants. I knew it was her. But I couldn't see her.

I wanted to see her face, but I didn't want to go up the hill. She continued up the rise until she was nearly a hundred feet away.

The tug was sudden.

My right arm was suddenly pulled forward with a shocking force, causing me to stumble forward, arm outstretched, barely keeping my feet.

It was only then I realized that my hand wasn't just my hand. The skin at the ends of the fingers kept going, snaking out from my finger tips like it had run like hot wax, congealing into a messy knot of muscle and fat, forming a rope of flesh that tumbled to the ground and coiled up the hill towards Nan.

The hand she had been holding with mine was connected by a hundred foot rope of grey-pink flesh.

I don't remember what happened next. Maybe I woke up.

--

One morning, pre-dawn, on the run. Don't know when. I was standing outside the booth, taking a piss down the run when I heard it.

As I stopped peeing, I heard a thin, high sound — something far off and distant and directionless. I zipped quick, unable to identify the noise, worried someone might be coming, but as I moved, the sound vanished beneath the crackly and shuffle of my clothes.

I froze in place and listened again. A moment later the sound, a voice, maybe a child, or a woman or a man singing. High and thin and far off. It floated through the air and seemed to hover for a moment before vanishing. There were no words I could pick out. No structure. No pattern. Just a voice that rose and then faded. But some birds can sound like people. But it was too cold and too dark for birds.

I stood still and listened again. Waiting.

While I was waiting, I don't know how long, the dawn came. Slowly filling the gaps in the air with light. Finally, with my legs getting stiff and my fingers growing numb, I went back into the booth to warm up.

It never occurred to me to go up the hill to the stones. Not then.

I think.

This was before the homeless guy maybe. Near there at least. It wasn't a dream.

I climbed from the cab at about eight in the morning, and the town was already up and about for hours. I skirted the plow-line to the salted sidewalk and considered myself in the glass of Griffen's. My hair was standing in sleep-spikes, my eyes were deep and bruised with lack of sleep. I looked ruined. My bed was two hundred yards from here, up a rickety set of steps, in a room with a whistling water heater and frayed quilts. It sounded like a dream. Like heaven.

I turned to walk home and found myself facing Armin Dowdy, no more than fifty feet from me, moving at a clip in my direction.

Everyone knew Dowdy. He was the terrible old man from our childhood. His house bordered the garden. He'd run up on parties on the stones three or four times a year, scattering kids with his screams. He was frightening, tall and thin and scarecrow-like, forever in insulated overalls and a down vest. His was older now, thinner, but none of his presence had left him. He saw me, and I saw him and without thinking I turned back and stepped into Griffen's.

With my back to the door, I found the paperback rack and began searching it. The door opened behind me with a BING and I kept my eyes down. Then, silence. The clerk was lost in her magazine and the music playing was soothing. I tracked titles but all the words seemed jumbled. Reversed, mixed-up. Gibberish.



“You’re guarding the run,” Dowdy said to me. His voice was close behind me. For some reason, I didn’t turn. I pictured him, a tall old man hunching down to speak into my ear.

“Don’t turn around. I can see it hasn’t got ya yet,” his breath was warm and smelled of coffee and denture-cream.

Confusion, now. I smirked a little, uncontrollably. A picture formed in my mind. Crazy. Dowdy had slipped off his rocker quietly somewhere along the way. What was he? Seventy? Dementia. Burning out slowly up on the hill in a big ratty house. Losing his mind piece by piece. I didn’t turn. I was confused, embarrassed.

“I don’t know how many in the town been taken, hard to tell in winter,” I could sense him turning his big head to look around.

“You listen up. Don’t let no one touch you. No one. Skin to skin. Don’t you do it.”

I turned to look at him and was startled to see his eyes filled with fear.

“I can’t talk you off the run. You be careful. It’ll come for you soon.”

The old man exited the door with a bang, and was gone.

But maybe that was earlier?

--

Once, I dreamt of warmth. A womb-like warmth and nestling close to others. Other people in a dark liquid. There was a sound like a drum. Something banging away somewhere else in the warmth, shaking it, shaking me. It felt safe, but also tomb-like, enclosed, buried.

I opened my eyes and in the blurred half-light I saw a dozen naked bodies, floating in a yellow-brown gel, mouths open and filled, eyes alive and searching in the murk. The next thing I knew I was wobbling in front of my bathroom mirror, face covered in cold water, eyes wide and blank and frightened. I ran cold water through my hair and slowly came back to reality.

Then I went downstairs and made myself a turkey pot pie and watched the news.

--

One night, I opened the gate at four-forty, expecting to find the last dregs of workers leaving the area, and Martin or Davis at the booth, instead, I found no one. The trucks were gone. The booth was closed and locked, but no one was there. I locked the gate, unlocked the booth and got in to get it over with.

I would ignore the strangeness and simply mark the countdown. Then, back to school.

This is one of the few moments I can track with any certainty.

--

A night, in the booth.

I felt it right away. Even before the first timer went off, I could feel it. The buzz at the base of your neck when someone is watching you. I sat staring at the same paragraph again and again, eyes flicking glances out the window into the dark. I had read nothing. The idea of being watched had spun up to a monstrous size in my mind, consuming all else.

Finally, unable to stand it, I stood, picked up the shotgun, slung it, and grabbed the flashlight. I stepped out into the dark and clicked on the light.

"Hello," I said to no one at all and felt immediately embarrassed. What was I doing?

There was no one to hear me.

With a muffled DING the timer sprung in the guard booth and I spun and came within a fraction of a second of shooting blindly at the door, cutting it up with shot.

My breath huffing out of me, I let the shotgun hang from its strap and stared in wonder at the safety of the booth. I put my hands on my knees, the shotgun spun and dropped and butt first, dangled in the dirt, and I laughed, shaking. How would I explain a booth peppered with shot in the morning? God. What was I doing?

That's when I heard it. The soft crunch of footsteps in the snow. I didn't look up, but the shaky humor faded from me quickly. I sat there, leaning on my knees, huffing out pillars of smoke. Was I afraid? I don't know.

Finally, not really moving, I looked up to the left.

Past the edge of the light of the shack, maybe thirty feet away, stood a person. She was short, maybe five feet tall, and a woman, that much was clear. You couldn't see much. She was dark, and it wasn't just the light. Her skin was dark, and there was a lot of it, because she was nude. She was covered in black chunks of mud.

Standing in the snow at night, nude, watching me.

My breath caught in my throat as I watched her watch me. She stood still, but in the silence, I could hear something else. It sounded like a rubber-tire dragged along grass, a slow, low hissing sound.

Suddenly, I flicked the flashlight up on her. For a moment, she was there, clear as day. Naked, brown with frazzled, mud-stained black hair. Dark eyes. Pearl white teeth pulled back in a grimace. An Indian.

Next, she was in the air as if she had leapt backwards eight feet, then ten, flying backwards, hands flailing out in front of her. She made no sound, but her form vanished in seconds into the black of the trees, up the run towards the stoner's garden.

I stood there for a long time, in the dark, shaking.

--

I remember some of it, now.

Some morning, when Thomas showed up, everything was in order. My face was fixed in a bored expression I had practiced the last few hours. I hopped the fuel truck down the mountain. What nobody knew is I spent the night in the shack curled up in its base, avoiding the windows, a shotgun clutched in my hands, waiting for any noise. I didn't walk the perimeter. I didn't check the stones. I didn't leave that booth. I didn't even pee.

When I was off the hill, the feeling of relief was palpable.

I didn't sleep when I got back. I ate, went upstairs, and sat on the bed, rolling the night over in my head.

It was difficult to place last night's events in any order. I could still see them in my mind, but there was a powerful urge to discard them. To cover them up with other things. Had I seen what I thought I had seen? Was there a naked woman up there that night? Was it a trespasser?

I had to know.

--

It's almost clear now.

I went up the mountain with a box full of slugs in my jacket that night. No more shot. I didn't think it would do any good. This is still when I thought it was under control. I had suspicions, but they were so crazy, I didn't even really believe them, though my body did. On some primal level I was terrified all the time.

When I made it to the booth, I loaded up the shotgun, left the booth and marched up the hill before the sun went down. The march was slow. A new snow had fallen. The garden was clear of all but one stone. Eight muddy holes, criss-crossed by a thousand muddy footprints, truck and bobcat tracks and picket fences.

I sat on the last stone. It was a huge, low, hill-like stone. It was the stone I woke on so many years earlier after a night of drunken partying. I sat very still, breath pouring from my scarf in gouts. Shotgun on my lap. I placed the flashlight on the rock next to me.

From my vantage point, I had a clear view of all of the holes.

I decided, then, that I would spend the night here, just to see what might happen.

Though then I really didn't know why.

--

Nan is yelling at me. She's marched from the living room to the bathroom and saying something hurtful. But now I know this is not real. Nan was there, sometime in the past. Some other point before all of this, but this here, this moment, is not real.

I know this because she throws a box of letters at me, letters I wrote to her, I think. The box hits me and tumbles and catches the air and scatters papers everywhere. She slams the door.

On the ground, in front of me, a dozen letters are all arrayed all over the ground, staring up at me. Every line on them is gibberish. A jumble of letters which seems to shift and change as I look at it.

I know.

--

On the last night, when the first thing slithered from the hole, I was asleep. I had nodded off. It was a slow sound, broken by a squelch and a pop, waking me immediately. I clicked on the light. Unsure if there had been a noise at all of it my imagination had startled me from sleep.

It had gone full dark a few hours before, and as the stars spun through their tracks and nothing happened, the fervor I had felt in waiting for something had faded. My eyes closed sometime after seven.

I grabbed the flashlight and clicked it on, pointing it north, but all I saw was empty, muddy holes and the night sky cut by the tops of pines further down the mountain. Then someone said something.

The voice was low, keening. It took a moment to realize it was terrified, that voice, wheezing. Barely under control.

My light tracked around until it found the woman. It was the same woman I had seen earlier. Muddy, naked in the snow. She was an Indian. She was curled on the ground



near one of the holes, lips drawn back in a grimace, wheezing, mumbling words in a language that I didn't know.

I stepped forward, and she seemed to shake convulsively. I brought the shotgun around and pointed it at her. She didn't react to the gun, she just stared at me with crazed eyes. Eyes that reminded me of something I had seen years before.

I crept up on her like that. Shotgun in one hand, flashlight in the other, in a shuffling gait.

I was only a few feet from her when I saw it.

A clear, grey white tentacle tracked from the shadow behind her, curling into the muddy hole from one of the stones, emerging from it like a worm from the ground. It slid lazily back and forth, easily fifty feet long and as thick as my thigh. Inside it, when the light crossed it, I could see liquid pumping through it.

When the light hit it, it shifted as if it could feel it, sliding back and the Indian woman was pulled from her feet with a scream.

My mind dropped through my feet and the fear was on me in a way I never thought possible. The tentacle was attached to the back of the Indian woman's neck. It held her like a marionette...attached.

The sliding sound woke me from my revulsion.

Other tentacles had emerged from the ground. One, with a tip barbed and cut like a lamprey, was almost at my boot when I saw it.

I opened up. I pumped a 10 gauge round into it, and it flailed back, spraying the ground with a grey-white soup which seemed to melt the snow beneath it. The smell was like a swimming pool gone over in high summer. A whiff of chlorine filled with the swampy stink of green. There were screams, the Indian woman was yanked back as if an invisible giant had swept her off into the dark.

I ran down the rise and fired three times, cutting one tentacle that popped up in front of me in two with a single shot, leaving an end flopping in the dirt, when I was knocked from my feet.

I was struck by something big which hit me from the side with the force of a linebacker's tackle. The air left me, the shotgun fell. The flashlight went flying through the night air in arcs, landing in a drift, pointing up towards the ceiling of naked pines.

The Indian woman was there. The Indian woman had struck me. Her face was a mask of tears. Her mouth moved soundlessly. She was sorry, she was exhausted, she was not in control.

Something was *in* her.

I scrambled backwards like a crab until my hands fell on the shotgun. The tentacle LIFTED her off the ground by her neck, making her look as if she was floating, her eyes rolling back in her head and her hands opening in front of her in a strange gesture like a cat in repose. She crossed the ground I had crab-walked in a second, landing with a leg on either side of me, her face a mask of terror and regret.

I rolled, pulled the shotgun around and pushed it into her chest. Fired.

There was a huge explosion. Her eyes rolled in her head, and her lips pulled back in a grimace which was more of a grin. With a shake, her body dropped, hollowed out by the slug, like a sack of wet flour. I was covered in a soup of grey white jelly mixed with blue black clots of blood, which flooded from the hole in a gout. The tentacle roiled back until it was a dozen feet off the ground, two dozen. It looped, and curled and tracked me, covered and pinned and screaming.

I went to fire again, but the shotgun was empty. But that's not important right now, I think.

Not important.

In the gap between my memories and the world, something hovers. It is alive and terrible, and has slept a long, long time. It speaks to me, and uses me and makes me whole. It has taken me into it and has made me real. I sleep in it in the cold mountain and it keeps me warm.

I gave myself to it before I knew it even existed. I gave it blood on the mountain and worshipped at its stones and made the proper ablutions. It heard my pleas even when I didn't know I was making them. It heard me and watched me and waited.

It took me, one night on the mountain, and now I am with it forever. It speaks to me from time to time. It manages me. It works through my memories, it keeps me from going mad by moving my mind from subject to subject.

SLEEP it says to me. A word so complete and total, so encompassing it washes away all that has come before in my life like a wave of white. Erasing all want, all need, all time.

I will sleep soon, and when I sleep, I will forget. But not forever.

Nothing human lasts forever. Does it? Please. Is there someone there with me In the dark.

Hello?

Listen.

--

In the Pacific, there is a fish which poisons its prey in such a way that it causes the fish to flail about, to swim in circles and to let off a distress chemical which calls other bigger fish for it to feed on.

It waits, this predator, until the other bigger fish get close, and then it feeds. The poor bait fish can be poisoned dozens of times in this manner before succumbing to death. Bloated with the poison, mind reeling, body reflexively going through a terror-dance, it can sometimes last days in this stupor.

I think about that fish a lot, beneath the water, screaming.

I can't remember why.