Arc and the Sediment

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She wakes to noise. There is the blue and the black, and the fluorescent lights between. The noise recedes and the darkness returns, a cavern. The woman is central. She is mostly buried, though traces of her have been unearthed. It is Gretta’s duty to pay homage to her corpse. She is horrified. She doesn’t want to look. She is pushed, by what, she doesn’t know—compelled to touch the dust she is becoming. She reaches out, but her body shakes, and the hand draws back. The granules and chips and hair of grayness melt her eyes. There is no window separating herself from this place, only a faint light that seems to precede it. The grayness starts at the fingertips, reaches up the trembling arm, disperses to vital organs until she becomes a part of the discolor. The air is so dry, her nose cracks, bleeds. She tries to run but there are so many graves, so many gravestones. She looks to Lance and the children for comfort but knows this is the one place they will never be: living Navajo among the dead.

She stumbles on the granules and chips of legs, dodging bones, dodging stones, ducking and trying to protect her head with her hands from the sharp protrusions above. But the corpses, they’re everywhere, and with each step more graves are unsettled. They unleash clouds of age and mold. She doesn’t want to look, but with her eyes dripping like wax, she can’t help but see. The death, the violence, the aggravation. The discontentment rubs at her, rubs the granules and chips of her hips, her abdomen. Rubs at her chest, her shoulders, her arms. This is who I am, she thinks. This is who I might always be. She reaches up, touches the rocky skin of the cave. She
tastes only blood. She searches for a hole—a hole in the bag from which she might emerge.

She pulls herself up, feet swiping for footholds. She emerges, rests at the top. She is re-embodied. And the body, it aches. The blood runs clearer—clear, now. A bird of prey shrieks—hawk or eagle, she doesn’t know. She looks for the bird but finds instead that she has emerged into another burial ground. Uninhabited but marked by previous beings. With petroglyphs, with salt. This is not your house. With stone tools and corn. With gourds and bowls. You don’t belong here.

Suddenly she is surrounded by the living—her father, her mother, her brother. “We can’t stay,” she whispers. “You can’t touch those things. Leave them be.”

“Touch what, honey?”

She looks for the hole in the skin of the sky, but finds herself on a ledge of crumbling sandstone. The canyon below is so deep, she can’t make out the bottom. The ledge, so narrow. It’s a vast emptiness growing nearer. She shouts to her mother, “Don’t plug it in! There’ll be dirt and hair all over the place.” But when she turns around, she sees that she is alone again. She is dizzy. Her ass tingles, her toes curl. She wants to vomit, but—If I move…if I move…

“You think she’s okay? Maybe we should just call him.”

It’s death that she wants and death that she fears. It’s the long teeth-aching fall. She can’t bring herself to jump, but gravity is getting the best of her. Gravity pulls her deep into the Mason jar. She closes her eyes and hears the lid screw shut. “She’s out again.”

The sheets smell clean but feel gritty. Braden has been eating in her bed. She can’t get up. She can’t move. The air presses down on her. She listens to the clicks and groans of the old house. They prefer her to stay in bed. They sedate her.

Lance wanders around the room, wondering what he has forgotten. His hair has been cut short and his waist and arms seem to have grown heavier.

“You’re my piece of bread,” she explains.

He looks at her but does not seem to see her. “Huh?”
“When the cookies go hard. When I left out the cookies.”

He insists he put a tape measure in the bottom drawer of the dresser. The dresser presses down on her. Soon she will be unable to breathe. She must say what she has to say in order to say it right.

“You put the cookies in a bag with the bread and by morning they’re soft again.”

“You had to have moved it. Think. Think.”

_What would I want with a tape measure?_ she thinks. _It hasn’t been given to me._

He is standing over her. The dresser dissipates, becomes an immovable object behind him, a dresser half-covered with bottles of perfume and cat figurines. A tapestry and a rug on the wall, side-by-side.

She looks around. She’s in Angela’s room, in the trailer house—no Braden, no bread crumbs, no bread.

Much sun comes through the window. She tries to put together what Lance is saying but can’t quite, until he says, “…words for later.”

Her vessels contract. She wakes and stares at the ceiling a moment; the room slowly comes to a standstill. “Did you go through my files?”

“Should I have?”

Her notes, her letters to James…. _Recent Documents._ She tries to gather her thoughts. “Did you?”

He laughs. “Things are different around here. Otherwise, you’d be in jail still,” he says. “Where are the kids?” It is possible he didn’t read them; otherwise she’d be in jail—_still?_”

“The kids. God, my head.”

“The kids?”

“The kids are with Jackie.”

“I called your mother.” He always calls the mother. Everyone, it seems, calls the mother. “She says she has them.”

The smug tone of his voice hurts her head. “Oh. Yeah.” She wishes she had orange juice.

“You think you need to…you know, go back?” He waits. “To the hospital, I mean?”
“I went to the hospital?”
“Not last night. The state hospital—at the U.”
She gathers her thoughts, and with them an ache and an understanding. “Fuck you, Lance.”
He rubs his head, sighs at length. “You should be with the kids,” he says.
“You should be with the kids.”
He lies down beside her on the fresh-smelling bedding and holds her. It is his wide warm hands that she loves. The near hairlessness of his arms. He kisses the back of her head, her hair, and she is reminded of the tequila man.
“I’m sorry,” she says.
“For what?”
“For smelling like this.”
“It’s not that bad. We put you in the shower last night. As for your breath—well, we sprayed your mouth with that stuff.”
“Where’s Angela?”
“Visiting a friend.” The bed creaks as he unhinges himself from her and rolls off the bed.
“Did you miss me?” she asks.
“I did,” he says. He pulls on a T-shirt. “Come on.”
“Get my pants, please.”
“No one’s home. It’s okay.”
“Did you know the Mormons believe your skin is dark because you’re cursed?” she asks as she follows him into the kitchen, tugging her shirt down to her thighs.
“Yeah, I know.”
“And then when you’re converted—” He gives her a sharp look.
“I mean, according to them...when the Native Americans convert, they will turn light again or something.” He doesn’t respond. “I mean, I’m sure no one really believes it anymore. Except the dumb ones.”
He pours Gretta a bowl of Pops with whole milk, her favorite. “Not everyone has to be full-on converted and baptized to get lighter. The
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Navajo people ‘are fast becoming a white and delightful people.’ You know who said that? President Spencer Kimball.” He adds, in a mocking voice, “‘The Indian children in the home-placement program in Utah are often lighter than their brothers and sisters in the hogans on the reservation.’ Lucky I wasn’t adopted by Mormons, huh? I’d lose my year-round tan.”

“Huh…that’s fucked up. So why does Sylvia…?”

“Why does Sylvia do anything?”

“Just for the record, I don’t think you’re cursed by God.”

He laughs. “You don’t believe in God.”

“Yeah, well.”

“Thanks. Just for the record.” He rummages through the pocket of his coat, which is hung on the back of a chair. “See?” he says. He sets a bag of ribbon candy on the table. “I went shopping for you. Sorry, no bread. I tried to find your pills, but I couldn’t see them anywhere. How you feeling this morning?”

Her Zoloft had to be in the pickup when he looked. She checks her pockets—nothing. She looks around for her keys, her pack, her jacket. Nothing looks like hers. “Where did you put my keys?”

“I didn’t put your keys anywhere. You thinking of leaving?”

“Maybe,” she says.

“Can you answer my question first?”

She walks outside but there is no pickup. She feels a little silly. She sits at the kitchen table to steady her head. Was it towed? Could I have wrecked it? She’s pretty sure she would remember that. It would’ve hurt, wouldn’t it have? There would likely be a hospital involved. The pickup could be at the side of the road somewhere. She won’t know how to get there. She’ll have to ask someone to take her there. She’ll have to ask Lance or—shit!—Angela.

Lance stands in the doorway. “Blowing around in the night sky, are we? Will she starve? Will she freeze? Will she…,” he says, smiling nervously, staring at her with a big chin nevertheless—he is the winner: “…unbutton her blouse?”

“What?” She would like to feel as though, for once, she is in control
of herself and she can politely ask the world to cooperate with her. She
doesn’t know where to start.

“You were narrating again,” he says.
She pushes past him. He follows her into the kitchen.
“When?” Her face is hot. Her hair feels greasy and she’s not even
touching it.
“You called. Last night.”
“That call wasn’t meant for you.”
“No? Who was it meant for?”
“I didn’t mean to call anyone.”
“You know, a person should have to earn the right to drive a car. A
person should have to prove himself. You—you shouldn’t even have
a license,” he says. “On many counts.” An attempt at funniness is in
his voice but she is certain he’s serious, and maybe afraid. Definitely
angry.

He rubs the back of his head. “How can I leave the kids with you
when you just—”

“That’s right, how could you?” She wants to say more, to point
out his error. Tell him he’s cursed, he’s getting lighter. Tell him he’s
a bad driver. Tell him she doesn’t like powwows—she never has. Too
many people are mean to her, petty. And he doesn’t stick up for her.
And the garbage disposal is broken, as is the dryer, the truck, the air-
conditioner—and he hasn’t done a fucking thing about it! And Braden
got on a bike for the first time, and who’s to thank? Not Lance! And
it’s his fault she was given oral sex because… Because damned if he was
giving you anything. She wants to feel like she knows something and
her life will be easier because of it. She would like a sense of dignity,
as when one buys cheese from the deli: “I want a pound and a half of
that, please, and slice it thin.” But there seems to be no way of asking,
“Has my truck been impounded?” and “Will you give me the respect
I deserve?” Not in the same moment.

State hospital. Who will bring her edible food? Your mother?
“Where is the truck?” she asks too loudly. She sounds like a goose.
Honk honk.
“Don’t you remember?”

She squeezes her head. She rubs her face and rubs her eyes almost out and still she is mad. She calls information. “I need the number of the police in Fort Defiance, Arizona, please.” Lance hangs up the phone.

“Angela has it. She’s going to town for a couple of hours. Believe me, you don’t want the police to come back here.”

Gretta punches the box of Pops and cereal flies everywhere. “You clean it up, asshole. I fucking hate you!”

She runs back to the bedroom with her arms flailing like a four-year-old’s, the goose chasing her inside the room. _Don’t cry._ She leans against the door and braces her leg against the dresser so he can’t get in. Of course he gets in. He always gets in. _Am I a victim?_ Her limbs feel drained and her heart is racing. She gives up and folds over on shag carpet, trying to catch her breath. _Do I like it?_ 

_Spare me the anguish and the human suffering, will you?_

He stands over her for a long time. His breath slows. She is angry still, but she doesn’t have the energy for another performance, and the goose is completely out of hand. He lies down next to her on the bedroom floor. They lie motionless; she listens to an unseen clock. Her throat hurts, her head aches.

He strokes her arm, and she wonders how feeling alien has come to feel so familiar.

“What happened to Angela’s dog?” she asks once the sob in her throat dissipates.

“He ran away,” Lance says.

“Poor thing.”

“You never liked him anyway.”

“He bit me.”

“What happened to the truck?” Lance asks.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s all…dented…and scratched up and everything.”

“Oh, that.” First she pulled out in front of a minivan, then she left Tulip and Braden with her mom for a long weekend on a suggestion
from her caseworker. Tulip was so angry, she scratched up the truck and the coffee table the day she got home. “Neighbor kids. They had a party. It got really wild…when the cops arrived, these strippers from Denmark…” She reaches back to touch his shoulder. “Just kidding. I did it. It needed a paint job anyway.”

“Were you keeping up with the insurance?”

“Yes, but…I mean, it would be easier if you could help.”

“I guess you don’t know.”

“Don’t know what?”

“I paid for it two weeks ago. You didn’t even notice, did you? I paid for the whole premium. Paid the utilities, too. You know they were going to shut the power off?”

“It’s been hard.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” He brushes her hair back, then tickles her arm again, says, “You used to love me, didn’t you?”

Once, during an argument, he’d pulled a quilt her grandma had made her from the closet. He made her take a look at the tiny hand stitches that made up every two-inch square of the blanket. “That’s love,” he challenged her. “We’re not even close to that.” She responded by pouting.

Her response today: “What makes you think I don’t love you now?”

“Christ, Gretta. Why do you always have to ask stupid shit?” The tickling stops. He waits, maybe for an answer. “Why can’t you just say you love me or you don’t? Everything’s like that with you. I want…I really want to see the kids…be at home with the kids, with you…but I can’t take it. You can’t say what you feel; you can’t say what you think. I ask you something, and you answer with a question, or it’s this…blank stare. A blank stare and a shrug.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Oh! See? One after another. And you’re drinking all the time. You think I don’t know, but I know. Do you have any idea how hard it is to stay sober? Maybe I shouldn’t tell you this, but it’s hard. Every day is one long fucking day for a good two years, and then it’s still hard.
And there you are, right in the house, with your stupid stash that you think I don’t know about, or trying to get me out to the bar with your stupid, fucking friends.”

“Friend.”

He’s right, though, she does have questions—lots of them. But this time she really would like to concede an answer. What does she feel? She searches. Affection? Repulsion? Fear? She thinks very, very hard. She senses that this is the moment she is supposed to tell him that she loves him, that he should come home because she loves him, and she will quit drinking, and they will live happily ever after, as a family. She might ask that he not break things. She might offer that she will be more tolerable. But the key words sound so disingenuous: I love you. Even if it’s so. How do I love him? What for? She wants to offer substance, she wants to be convincing. She considers various avenues—ways of loving. One is blocked by her mother, another by her father, another by the man cut in fourths. Still another is blocked by his mother, his aunt, his sister. In another, Jeff, the frog. In one, another woman stands at the end of the street, her arms folded, waiting. Men. So many of them. So many avenues, so many barriers. In what way can I love him? What’s left? She wants to deliver at least one good answer. She listens closely. Nothing comes.

“I missed you,” she says.

He falls back, closes his eyes. “I missed you, too.”