

Uncovering

In honour of and dedicated to N56

Hear Me

The Stone that cannot be moved

Erosion

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Covering

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Hear Me

It takes time for a soul to understand that there isn't a reason to hold on to life. Some recognised this sooner than others and their empty bodies were thrown over the side into the endless water. I was young, very young and strong and stubborn about my life. And the endless water, it scared me more than anything. For me, water is a river that fits into the landscape of other things. I'd heard of the sea, but nothing I'd heard prepared me for this. It filled every direction, with only the sky to answer to and the sky gave no reproach. No reproach to the foaming, ravenous water or to the pale, colourless men that came from it.

And why? How wrong must things be before there is judgement?

I was young and would never have given myself the authority to question the order of things in this way, but order had been undone.

I decided that I would talk to God and that God would listen. Even here beyond the boundaries of all that was good, She would hear me and She would count my experience on the fingers of her many hands the size of trees and hold my speaking there. It is a story that the winds in the trees are the whispers of the dead and only God can understand them. I was not dead, not yet, not yet, but no longer living either and I decided that She would understand me too. My whispering and God's listening were one. This was a stone that could not be moved. And although I couldn't hear my own whispers amidst the groaning and wailing of sea, wood and people, God heard and She carried my whispers back Home between the branches of her fingers and She counted every one.

My mother told me I was a strong and clever girl. Her voice stayed with me. I began every day that I woke in the stench and darkness with the prayer my mother gave me as a child. And God listened, and the pounding in my chest would lessen a little.

That is all I choose to remember of the passage and my arrival to this dreadful place.

And all I will ever tell.

A Stone that cannot be moved

Once, I was free to wander along the river as I pleased with my feet in the clear water, looking for pretty stones. The river makes all stones pretty, only some keep their colour once they're dry but I'd developed a discerning eye. The shape was as important as the colour for I liked to take collected stones, sticks, leaves and plot them out on the ground. I would spend hours on my own assembling grand designs with deep concentration; I was that kind of child. Sometimes I would follow patterns that were comforting in their familiarity, designs that could be seen all about the village on walls and cloth; squares, triangles and circles aligning with each other in perfect harmony. But my greatest thrill was to watch a pattern unfold without a plan, to have my hands follow something that I could not see.

Once, I was free to wander along the river and I saw under the clear water the prettiest stone of all. A perfect pale yellow circle with a line of pink drawn right through the middle as though it was prepared to be shared fairly in half. However, when I bent to pluck it up I found that it was stuck fast, lodged in the rock beneath it.

Once I was free to worry away at something as insignificant as a pretty stone in a river, and even to run and fetch my brother who was big and strong and always knew what to do. He let me drag him away from more important matters and came to look at the stone.

I need to get it out, I told him.

This stone cannot be moved, he replied.

I looked at him perplexed. But you are big and strong and the stone is only little, I said.

He smiled for he liked to be called big and strong, but he said, It makes no difference how little it is. This stone is stuck here for good.

Then he returned to more important matters.

Once I was free to ponder over pretty stones, to wonder how something very small could hold against a force much bigger than itself, to brood on the stark dilemma that, no matter how much a thing may present itself in my world and no matter how strong my desire, some things remained out of reach.

Erosion

At the beginning, when everything was taken, I held fast to the belief that I could keep Home and the knowledge of who I am untouched and intact in my mind. That I only needed to close my eyes and point my thinking in that direction to see myself whole and complete, my feet firm, back on the rich earth of my belonging.

But this existence leaves nothing untouched and nothing intact. My memory is eroding, leaving holes that crumble further with each passing day. These holes are deep. The kind that would have one tempted to drop a stone and listen for the landing, the plop of distant water maybe, or the muffled thud of a cold solid body on dirt. I've learnt to not let my attention drift down a hole like this, to not let my eye search down its dark empty tunnel. For what I long to settle my gaze upon is forever swept to the farthest corners of my vision, with nothing but an absence at the centre.

The stone that enters these holes is lost.

There's a child indulged by a father to remain in his lap by the fireside in the dark hours. Her ear is pressed to his chest enjoying the deep vibrations of his conversation with the elders while she licks something honey sweet from her fingers. But though the fire burns brightly she cannot look up and find her father's face.

There's a wide wooden bowl full of palm nuts, gathered as an offering by her mother, the colours a melody of yellows, greens, oranges and browns. But the touch of the loving hands that gathered these nuts is lost.

There's the sound of the river that ran behind her house or is it her sister's laughter as they run together along the side of the river? She, the older, always a little bit in front, now too frightened to look behind her at the empty place where her sister should be.

Ghost

Out in the field, in the bare open heat, a man cried out a name. Nobody had ever heard him say the name before or the voice he said it with, for he is a silent man. He is not from my people but he is not from here either and his silence has always been respected by those around him as his way to keep a piece of himself intact. The lash and time have taught him to mumble a subservient phrase to save his skin when necessary, but that mumbled voice with bowed head was not the one we heard in the field. This voice, torn from him without warning, came from a deep and buried place. He repeated the name again and again like there was nothing else in the world but this.

And although I didn't recognise the name, I recognised its chill. It is only those who come from a place before this who are haunted in this particular way. He looked directly at the sun as if he meant to blind himself, his face drenched and twisted. Those near him stopped, frozen, frightened of him, frightened for him, knowing this must end soon before he was seen.

I picked up a stone and threw it at the centre of his chest. I shouted in my real tongue though I knew I would lose it if I was heard. They weren't his words but something in them drew his gaze away from the fierce sky. He looked around, unable to focus, angry, confused, and then he fell to the earth, wept. People rushed to quickly comfort him and urge him back to his work. That was the end of it. Nobody spoke about it. And that name he said, I won't repeat it because I know too well what it is to unravel and one haunting can bring on another.

Covering

In the light of the sun my mouth is covered, sealed. All our mouths are. A covering invisible to the ignorant eye but thick, made from the blood of this time and this place. Made from our blood. This covering smothers everything, a kind of drowning and yet I'm not dead, not yet. Not yet. But no longer living either. It repeats on me, an ugly tide, washing up the bones of those forgotten.

In the light of the sun my mouth is covered, sealed. What teeth are left are a shame that I won't show. Yet they will stay long after I'm gone to give me away. My head bent towards the ground. My eyes cast down. Light is my darkness.

But the dark can bring a little light. The cool night wind blows high in the very tops of the trees, whispering prayers that only God understands. I whisper too, here flat on the ground on the mix of rag, dirt and straw that I must call my bed, my belly tight with hunger that I am too exhausted to acknowledge with anything other than my hand laid upon it. I whisper the prayer my mother gave me and the pain eases a little.

I let my lips part and the night air fill my mouth.

I let the sound of the night frogs fill my ears.

I let my eyes look up at the sky black and the moon sharp and round against it.

I take a stick, scratch old markings in the dirt floor. A forgotten game, remembered.

I take a stone, a fragment of broken glass, a leaf, a lost button; things that can hide in a closed hand.

I take these tired crumbs that come my way, and in the dark I place them in old alignments.

A Brother

There is a man that looks to me like a brother. He could so easily be from Home. But he was born here, grew here, and although, each day, we fight to stay human alongside each other, his fight has a different tone to mine. He is only of now and this place. He holds no history. He told me that he could not remember his mother and I looked away from his eyes, because I could not bear to ever forget mine.

He thinks I am proud and that is why I so often choose to be alone. But it is not a choice, I am alone. My people are not here and I can't help but look for them over the shoulders of those that are in front of me. But this man, he finds reasons to stay by me, to offer me a smile when I can offer none back. And when we lie together in the dark he reaches for my hand and whispers, tell me of where you came from.

And then I cry. I have so little left to tell but I share these fragments with him and, because he cannot remember his mother, I whisper to him the prayer my mother gave me. It is the only thing I have left that is whole. Then he cries too. I have come to the conclusion that he is my brother after all.

He asks, what do you hold on to? But I cannot answer.

Everyone needs to hold on to something, he insists. I know he is thinking of his liberty, it is all he thinks of and plans for. But my mouth is covered. I am too ashamed to tell him that I am waiting for death. I am ashamed because my mother told me I was a strong and clever girl, and to wait for death is neither of these things.

Broken

In the short time that she was in my arms, I saw nothing else. It was all I could do to breathe her in and to marvel that something so perfect could be born in this place. All my will and thought was bent on her. I would have given up every memory, surrendered every whisper to keep her, to have her be my stone unmoved. But why would a child choose to fight fever in the embrace of a mother that is not allowed to call the child her own? And why would a child stay when her mother's greatest wish was to keep her small and hidden and have her never grow, for what is there here for her to grow into?

Some recognise sooner than others that there isn't a reason to hold onto life.

After, there was nothing left to hold me up in the fields and no beating could change that. I fell into the fever and hoped it would take me too. I stared into the deepest hole of all, the one of no return, and longed to follow my child down into it. I don't know why enough of me survived to keep me here, still breathing, in and out.

My longing for her didn't leave me with her passing. Instead, it turned inwards and not as a stone whole and smooth from the river but shattered and sharp. The arms that were meant to hold her and could not, now hold this slow, long ache that grows in her place. Shards are wedged between my bones. Fingers that would have been tender are now set into claws much older than their years. There is no salve. There is no forgetting. Permanent and mine. It cannot be soothed.

The Saddest Song

Some think they can keep the ghosts at bay with a special word or a gesture of their hand. But nothing works for long. Here, the line between living and dying is undefined and the ghosts are not limited to the cemetery. People do their best to summon a life but I know what a life is, and this is not it.

The fever that comes regularly to claim the small and the frail didn't take me, even though I wished it would, so I go into the hut where they suffer on the ground in the putrid smell. There is someone here who has been kind to me. I sit by her and do what I can to ease her suffering. She likes it when I speak in my own tongue and in here, where nobody would wish to be, I am free to do so. She says it reminds her of her mother, although she cannot understand a word.

There's little time between one burial and another. Those left breathing stand together and some sing but I don't sing. My mouth is covered, and ever since my child was taken, I don't remember any songs. I know how to dig a hole and that is the saddest song of all. But I can sing it. I sing it for my daughter. I sing it for my friend.