



# The Thirst of Knives

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The sky pummels the earth with rain but the earth does not yield. The ground reverberates from the blows with a hollow percussive sound lacking resonance or richness: no scent of the soil made fertile, no promise of new life. Though the ground is a medium over which water travels, it remains dry.

When sky and earth alike have exhausted their fury, neither gaining or losing in their incessant struggle, the sun returns. I look down from the ridge into the basin in which his little shack sits, solitary on the bare ground, exhausted and depleted.

He will see me and he will recognize that in me all things of the earth dwell and none of the sky. He will see what I have suffered; he will know the words I spoke, the tools I wielded, the wars I fought, the skins I wore, my withering touch. Clouds do not drift through my eyes; my eyes are not skies. My veins recall the sensations of needles but none of the pleasures the injections brought. I have never looked upon god. I have no memory of the sea but sense memory, bereft of longing or the promise of infinity: only the recurrent rhythm of the inscrutable gray water, heaving in its predictable pattern day after day.

He has prayed to an unlistening, horseless sky. He has wandered through a grainless sea. No riches befell him: None are to be had here. His shack is trembling despite that there is no wind; the sparse grass clinging to his fenceposts for shade yields not the slightest tremor. Strawn across his trembling table are the fragments of mirrors and the hammers with

which we will shape a new world.

We sit and I remove a piece of cloth from my pockets, faded to a nondescript shade of no particular color, and set it on the table.

"I have brought the seed," I say.

He spreads the cloth out to examine its contents.

"This is a stone," he says.

"It is a stone, but it is also a seed."

The trembling subsides. His scrutiny dies and his features soften.

"I have asked after you from time to time," he says. "But the sea is too wide. The meanings of words are changed, along with the voices that speak them; they are reconfigured by the ceaseless undulations of the ocean. They scatter on the wind."

"I have done nothing worthy of recounting: weathered seasons, endured hunger, grew strong from work, grew weak from grief, grasped at things I thought were precious, suffered their loss. I have walked no straight path. My path is a tangled knot, like the course you imagine a word takes on the ocean, consisting of many confusing strands. Though few touch, though few bear any relation to any other, all are entwined. And always, there has been war. This you can see."

"You were so young. I knew you would suffer."

"It is the fault of our blood."

"It is not the fault of our blood. It is the fault of the knives we wield—knives possess an innate thirst that binds the hands that hold them."

We fall silent and sit waiting at the table as the day ends and the room grows dark. I think perhaps my father is praying; he is, in any case, motionless, his brow furrowed in concentration, his eyes closed. His face has after so many years come to resemble this room, or at least the shadows that engulf it, his features molded by unending repetitions of the weight of this particular configuration of darkness.

"Is this him?" she says. It is late at night. I was not asleep but I was not aware that someone else was here in this room and her voice feels very much like it is waking me from a dream.

"Yes, this is my son. Come sit with us."

When she is seated her hand finds mine on the table in the darkness and she holds it with the kind of tenderness one uses to console those for whom words no longer offer consolation.

"My memories are fleeting and disjunct," she says. "Their sequence is uncertain. It might be that the last thing I remember is traveling in a car through a night not unlike this one. I held something that belonged to you as a child and imagined what it would feel like to be holding your hand like I am now."

"Such a memory could not be very recent," my father says. "No road leads here. When people come here, they come on their feet. This is the place one finds after they have reached the limits of their endurance but persisted, nonetheless, in walking."

"But there *are* roads," I say.

"They are roads but not for traveling," she replies. "They are roads that—along with swarms of silver fishes, letters from long-absent lovers, bolts of fabric no longer rich with red dye, and all the other things that occupy my imperfect memory—swelled the stomach of the pregnant sky, until some wound was inflicted in it and these memories came tumbling down from heaven, littering the landscape in a purposeless disarray. The memories are mine, but the wound is your doing."

"And thus we find ourselves here in this room together."

Her grasp on my hand tightens. "It will not be easy."

"Understand this: I did not come here out of a sense of duty. I came simply because I no longer find toil beautiful; I have exhausted all other means of finding purpose. I have walked all my other roads."

She sighs. "I had hoped you would maintain some vestige of conviction."

"Do not ask me to believe I risk death for any good reason. It is enough to know that I am not afraid to die. Do not be troubled by my lack of conviction. The most dangerous fanatic is the one who realized long ago that his path was ill-chosen—his cause hopeless or pointless or even harmful—who persists in it nonetheless because he knows it is too late to turn back. The fanaticism of youth is a feeble thing, contingent on a naïve hope of victory and vindication of one's cause. But I, a cynic who persists in his struggle, not out of conviction but out of simple mechanical adherence to the routine of war, am invincible. I will do what needs to be done."

That night we say no more. When morning comes we are all still sitting at the table. None of us has slept. I am looking into the fragments of mirrors, artifacts of this woman's faltering recollections. She gets up to leave.

"What should I call you?" I ask as she opens the door.

She is silent for a moment. "Our relationship is not yet clear. But I think it's best if you do not call me anything at all, or directly look at me, or speak to me. You must train yourself to integrate me into every moment of your life without ever again acknowledging my existence; otherwise, our work will fail."

"Very well."

Time has passed which I only measure in the growth of the seedlings emerging from the morning glory and sweet pea seeds I scatter, with idle, haphazard persistence over the barren ground—first by my father's fences, then further and further afield. I do not recall the days I spend ambling aimlessly through this broken land, seeds sifting through my fingers, my hair trailing down in tangles that resemble the vines that entwine my legs to greater and greater heights. Clouds race through the sky in a wild panic and below them I, awake but dreaming, imagine the clouds are

herds of elk, or the ghosts of elk, fleeing from the memory of whatever took them from this world. I can not measure days or even seasons but only the growth of vines.

To what end do we heal this dying place? Whoever killed it made us into something we never wished to become. We forfeit something in becoming more powerful than the forces that were already at work here. God's broken body lies here before us, a heap of shattered bones, an anguished mouth issuing silent words, weak words that no longer carry the force of creation, a faintly heaving breast that no longer contains the fury of storms. We repair god, reassemble the body's disjunct parts, breathe life back into the breast, mend the bones and skin. But who among us will be able to forget that it is we upon whom god depended? Who will forget that god's blood has been on their hands?

My father spends much of his time scrutinizing the indistinct reflections in the dusty surfaces of the mirrors. As she instructed, I do not acknowledge the woman; although we are in one another's presence often, my father and I also almost never speak—our work is such that it confines each one of us to his own world.

Utterly absorbed in the languid, rhythmic familiarity of my endless task, the knowledge a momentary distraction, I see that he is seeding the landscape with fragments of mirrors. In some places, they break. This is where the land could not bear whatever memory the mirror reflected. These are windows into whatever trauma caused her recollections to vanish. He is mapping her pain as it is experienced by the land. I see him trudging along a distant ridge, bent under the weight of a lifetime of memories he does not, unlike her, have the capacity to relinquish, scattering mirrors among my vines. In the twilight, in some place remote from the house, we pass one another in silence.

I stand on top of a mountain and look west. I feel the familiar allure of travel again presenting its irresistible temptation, but now there is nowhere left to go. The taste of fruit, the touch of lovers, thirst for justice, love of the sun—even if I had a means of escape, all these things were dead in me before I arrived here.

Her actions have an increasing capacity for distraction. Now I see that my proclamation that conviction is not necessary for me to complete my task is more true than I imagined: My fatalism is allowing us to survive. Were I afflicted with hope, I would also, as she makes my task increasingly

perilous, be susceptible to fear. I sit beneath an oak surveying my work while she paints my face with intricate designs; I neither speak to her nor otherwise acknowledge her presence. She binds herself to me as I am walking through the hills; I do not shift my weight despite that she almost causes me to topple. While I sleep beneath the stars she feverishly growls vitriolic obscenity into my ear; I hear it vaguely for a moment before it drifts immaterially into the vivid imagery and consuming illogic of my dream.

One morning as I watch the sun rise I draw my knife. I carve the words I need to remember to keep myself strong into my skin. Knives have an innate thirst that binds the hands that hold them.

When I return to the shack my father is waiting. The table is bare, the hammers and mirrors are packed in a burlap sack lying next to him on the floor.

"I could use your help today," he says.

I nod and follow him outside.

As we walk he says, "Even if you hope for nothing, cherish nothing, feel no joy, it is good to see that you have in your manhood grown so strong. Strength is, regardless of whether the efforts to which it is applied are futile, its own reward."

"It is true," I say. "All virtues are in themselves a source of joy, and otherwise a promise of suffering."

We reach the spot that he has chosen and scatter the mirrors on the ground.

"Memory curses this place. Let us divest this place of it," he says.

With the first blow of the hammer, the sound of screaming—either hers or the wind's—rises up from the distance. I see that the grass in which I am kneeling yields not the slightest tremor: There is no wind. We have survived the first blow. We have survived her first scream.

I give her approach no attention. I do not listen to her keening wail, do not hear her footsteps coming closer and closer, do not hear her tear branches from the trees in a frenzy of superhuman rage; the mirrors have their own story to tell and it is only to this that I listen. Here is the lingering uncertainty associated with taking one road over another. Here is the shock of tenderness and protectiveness I felt for a woman, which caused me almost to recoil as if stricken, when I

took her into my arms for the first time. Here is the camaraderie I felt for my friends as we stood around a fire, waiting for the morning we knew would, for some of us, bring death. Here is the shame of my age and my scars, the absurdity of my torments. With each blow, I vanquish these things.

If I were aware of her existence, rather than knowing nothing other than the joyous victory over memory, I would know that she is upon me and that she is at the paramount of her rage, screaming vicious insults, tearing out her own hair, a weapon in her hand. If I could feel the air breaking above me as she brings down the fatal blow, I would also feel with repulsion in the pit of my stomach the misshapen, swollen mass of unmitigated hatred she has become. If I knew anything but freedom from memory, I would know her, and in knowing her, I would destroy the world.

If I knew her, I would know that I decided the night I met her that I would not stand and fight when this moment came. But I do not know this, and though I have surrendered my hands, the knife in my belt still thirsts for blood.

The memory of my unborn child has grown confused for me with the memory of my own childhood. She is not, strictly speaking, a memory—she is a presence that pervades my experience of the world as if she was a memory. But she is something else. Something I did not give life to. Nonetheless, I see her, her wild tangle of golden hair, her surfeit of energy, her unabashed gaze, in everything. Why would I confuse such a creature with myself as a child? Why would I confuse such an innocently smiling face, a face which the world for all its cruelties has failed to blemish, with my own?

It is more than I can bear. Although I fell, like all men, like all other creatures, from the sky, I can not bear this recollection. I am giving my memory back to the sky, and along with it, my pain.

For the first time since the night I arrived here, I allow myself to acknowledge the existence of the woman. She lies at my feet with her throat cut, her face halfway between wearing her mask of rage and some other mask she was just donning as her life ended, her long hair splayed out in a pool of blood.

“Who was she?” I ask my father.

“God in someone else's skin,” he replies.

“Now that god is free from this skin, will the land live?”

“I don't know. We have done what we could.”

Into her mouth, I place the stone I brought with me from far away.

“Are you planting the seed?” my father asks.

“I am not planting anything. This is not a seed. It is only a stone.”