CRY FOR THE GODS: GRIEF AND RETURN

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Sacred Love

Fires were raging in the hills near Hearst Castle in the late summer of 2016. They spread and spread, consuming the Monterey pines and golden hills of the most remote area of the California coast, extending close enough to the castle that, at last, tours were cancelled and plans were made to remove the most precious art. From the darkened dining hall, the orange shadow of the flame cast an eerie half-light on the stone walls which, for the first time since their construction, shone no light, were hid by no tapestries, echoed no sound. The Mediterranean towers and domes once spoke of the power of humanity's conquest and wealth—now they stood abandoned, a desperate testament to the beauty humanity creates and is unworthy of.

Then the firefighters came, with their hoses and shovels, and the rains came too, and saw off the flames, and I received a call saying my grandfather would die of the cancer which, even then, was growing in him, and I too was doused and drenched and felt as though I were walking toward the sea.

I always remembered Hearst Castle in sunlight. It could be seen from the wooden deck of my grandparents' hilltop coast-side home in Cambria. It could be seen atop the land that jutted into the Pacific

northward in San Simeon. Its thousand orbs of soft electric light could be seen high atop the dark coastline and the frail ribbon of headlights along Highway 1 in the night.

I grew up along the golden grassy hills, Cambria pines, sea-breeze salty air, sandstone cliffs, and tide pools. I experienced absolute freedom in that fenceless open coastal country. I was blown with the crisp, fresh winds among the beaches and hills. Highway 1 brought in some hippies, road-tripping college students, retirees, but mostly it was a quiet and isolated country. The cattle in the hills and the anemones in the tide pools were my most constant friends. The sea covered everything in salt and the smell of seaweed. Everything seemed to shine, and once the morning fog blew off, every day was sunny and bright. Every sunset shone orange and pink over the sea.

My grandparents were the quiet custodians of my life along the seacoast. They lived with quiet dignity, shadows of a world untouched by the rattling buzz of technological modernity. For them were the simply joys of a walk along the shoreline, an afternoon of cribbage, a book read on the deck in the noontime light.

My grandpa was jovial, boisterous, presumptive. My grandpa was cautious, elegant, wise. They left me alone for the most part. I observed them more than I was observed by them.

I had passed through the final months of Church trials just days before we got the prognosis. Bishop Johanson had smiled and said he wanted me to be happy in the Church and I said thanks and went outside and lit another cigarette.

I don't know when I made the realization, but it was within a day of learning my grandpa's prognosis. It came upon me not as a possibility to be weighed by as a decision wholly formed, a truth to be accomplished. I needed to quit smoking and drinking, submit myself to the Church, and go through the temple for my grandpa.

So, on September 10, the five-year anniversary of my baptism, I swore off cigarettes. The next day, I was on my way to California.

At the south end of Big Sur everything opens up, the coastal range retreats from the cliff-lined coast, and the highway rolls smoothly on the grassy hills between the mountains and the sea. It is home to me. From Lucia to Morro Bay I know every barn and hamlet, every copse of trees, every rivulet, every beach and every hidden path down to it. It was golden-green and blue everywhere. It was always vibrant and bright.

What welcomed me was a barely-familiar landscape. The grass was dead and ocher, the skies dark and darkening, the sea was like grey-blue glass cut by a thousand white-capped blades, the road was full of yellow tractors and orange cones. Only the template remained the same; the roads and the distance between roads, the silhouette of the ash-colored hills.

I drove up to my grandparents' house atop the hill. My heart was pounding as I took a breath before going up the stairs to the front door.

"Neil!" My grandma said with feigned, almost rehearsed enthusiasm. It's not that she wasn't delighted to see me, but that her world had grown so dark.

We made small-talk in their kitchen. We talked about my job. We talked about her volunteering at the library. There was a lot of silence. There were a lot of compassionate glances. There was a lot of love.

Grandpa came down the stairs slowly—his face still lively as he clung to railing, his typical pale blue flannel on. At the bottom he hugged me. It felt at once a softer and more powerful hug than ever before. He leaned on me, hung from me, his emaciated arms like limp leather around my back, and he wouldn't let go.

On the way to the doctor's office in San Luis Obispo he said "Look at my little chickadee. You'll be lucky if you can find one nearly as good as her, Neil. One in a million. I'm a lucky guy."

I walked grandma around downtown while grandpa was getting his biopsy. She was so stressed in the waiting room she was shaking. "That took so long I was really getting cross," she said. I put my hand on her shoulder.

We walked downtown as the sun was coming out from the clouds.

"Grandma, I hope you know I'm here for you. We all are."

"Oh I know Neil, we love you very much. I don't want to be a burden to anyone."

"Grandma, you're not a burden. We want to help."

"That's nice of you Neil."

Exasperated, I followed behind her and we kept walking.

I saw a Habit burger grill across the street, and told my grandma how much I loved their cheeseburgers. She suggested we go, and we went. We split a burger—she tried to pay, but I wouldn't let her. We were, for a moment, happy. It was like old times, or rather like how old times would have developed in a world that did not press upon us with deepening sorrow.

Grandpa was waiting outside the x-ray room, under a skylight in an otherwise dark hallway, wrapped in a coarse white blanket. He looked to be at pained peace, face stretched long, eyes closed, perfectly still.

It was as though we were in the waiting room of mortality itself.

It was as though we had joined him in the antechamber of heaven. There was peace.

When we returned, there was a spot of sun breaking through the clouds over the sea, causing a thin slice of the dark grey sea to shine white like the sun. The breeze came down from San Simeon through the pine needles and bit my cheek and I noticed the texture of the wood railing in my grip, at the tips of my fingers.

I turned through the open screen and called "Grandpa, it's lovely out here" but he was asleep and would not wake up.

"Let's take pictures before I go" I said, and we did, and grandma fiddled trying to figure out the camera, and we all laughed.

I sat in the car a moment before driving off. I looked at the photo. Grandpa stood in the rays from the skylight, slightly shorter than me, smiling in his goofy, surprised way. He looked happy.

That's how I remember him—happy. He was always cracking jokes with waitresses and gas station attendants. He was always pretending to pull coins out from my ear, smoking in the sunlight, saying "O boy!" when the dog, Brie, ran up panting with a new throwing stick in her mouth. His eyes were lined with the leathery evidence of eighty years of smiling—smiling despite watching his mother die of fifty years of arthritis and dementia, smiling despite dead dogs and business deals gone south. Smiling because the world was beautiful and his wife was beautiful and his sons were strong and because the sun shone in just such a way off the sea in the afternoon that made him feel alive.

"I'm lucky to have your grandma," he said one night when I was a boy and we stood watching the stars from the deck and heard the sound of the waves booming on the shore through the night.

"I'm lucky I found you, chickadee," he said as he woke on his leather armchair years later just before we took the picture.

I drove off and my grandma stood at the gate waving, and my grandpa walked back inside to sleep.

As I drove off I found another picture, taken my accident in the antechamber of heaven. My grandpa faces up in peaceful pain into the shaft of light, eyelids closed to the light. My grandma bends over him, her fearful and anguished face on his shoulder, her hand on his chest, her hand in his hand, holding him down as he flirts with flying into the light.

Profane Love

I had drowned the anguish in alcohol in the best bars in San Francisco. I had tried unsuccessfully to hit on a girl after several absinthes at Vesuvio's, lost myself under the stained-glass lamps and '50s posters until it was all just a spinning whirl of dim light. I had sat among the crowded throngs of hipsters in the Tunnel Top bar, red lighting, adobe walls, craft whiskeys, a chandelier of Edison bulbs above it all, and overlook-

ing that from the balcony, an elegant iron mission-style cross at which I stared for hours.

I walked alone around the dark and fashionably industrial streets of downtown Seattle and couldn't stop thinking of Michael—Michael with whom I played pranks late into the suburban night in Glendora California, with whom I swam in the golden warm waters of Hawaiian afternoons strong, shirtless, laughing, youthful … Michael who held me tight after my baptism, Michael who refused to come with me when I at last received my endowment at the temple, Michael who hadn't returned my calls when I was almost excommunicated and who was even at that moment was laughing with his pretty wife—a laughter I brought forth once and have longed for all since. Michael bore to me the seeds of Mormonism, alongside the seeds of those various griefs and frustrations which made my Mormonism unviable. He was the last friend from my childhood, and the first friend of my adulthood. My mind always wanders to him. I throw panicked looks around for him, shoot my arm out that he might grab hold before I am drowned, but neither hands nor eyes meet their aim anymore, and I drown myself in alcohol.

I walked into a bar and downed whiskey, one after another honey-colored glittering glass, until I felt death ripen in me, and I walked out back with the girl sitting next to me with the nice smile, and we kissed passionately, grabbing, groping, and caressing despite not knowing each-others' names, and despite the wrathful eyes of God watching from beyond the fluorescent-lit city above and the over-clean navy blue night hanging above that.

I was spinning through dark streets, steaming brick walls, and the hyper-iron eloquence of the city—spinning in my penthouse downtown hotel room—the judgmental lights of the tower southward pouring in like laughter from the great and spacious building—and I got high and spun and flew and every new reality seemed less friendly and I would sit on my bed detached from everything warm, naked unable to move as death laughed in the pit of my stomach.

I went every night to a hipster bar—dark and luxurious, though simply decorated. They had Rasputin Imperial Stout, and I got several each night.

I sat alone there every night until close, and several girls passed through the seats next to me. Some of them were pretty, some were happy, some were smart. Some I flirted with, some I didn't.

One I made out with, but I was drunk and don't recall the context but that the bartender told me it happened.

The bartender was a skinny brown-haired clean-cut guy with glasses and a piercingly smart, stoic, friendly face. He had dimples like Michael's, and Michael's mouth, but the squinty eyes, slim build, and the clean-cut parted brown hair of Johnny, my old buddy from DC. Something in his way was familiar. Something in his face was home.

"Rasputin, huh?" he asked.

"Yep, it's my favorite," I responded.

He scoured the bar silently.

"Pretty good stuff," he said at last. And, after a pause, "What brings you to town?" He raised his eyebrows, the first movement on his stone face.

"I mentor philosophy students," I said nervously, with a feigned air of distraction.

"Really?" he looked at me, brow raised higher. Then, looking away, "I majored in philosophy at Fordham."

We were soon deep in conversation about Kierkegaard, whom he had studied.

At the end of the night he gave me a glass of Braulio liqueur for free. "For your work for Philosophy."And so we carried on the next three nights—chatting about life at an empty bar in downtown Seattle—and every night he would give me a free drink.

That night after a chat about our experiences skinny-dipping I wrote my phone number and email on the receipt and walked out. He caught up to me and said his girlfriend, and his girlfriend's best friend

were going to a hot springs the next day, and asked if I wanted to join. He touched my hand as he asked.

"No, I'd better not," I said.

He was disappointed—obvious even on his stoic face.

"Well, you'll be back tomorrow night, right?"

"Yep," I said and walked down the street.

"Neil?" he called after me.

I kept walking.

I knew I wouldn't be back the next night and I knew he would never call me and I knew it was all a silly thing no one would understand.

I found an old brick alley, black iron pipes sticking out of cold brick walls, and I sat down, and I heaved sobs—weeping not for my poor grandpa or for my sins or for my country, but because of a nameless bartender and the times we would never share together. I wept sore until my throat burned and my chest ached, and kept weeping.

In the library of George Fox University was a copy of the St. John's Illuminated Bible. The pages shone in gold, precise lettering spelled out the sacred words that have bound together our people, which kept hope in the hearts of my enslaved Irish ancestors. I felt very small, as though were I to look too confidently upon the sacred words of the book, they would somehow condemn me. I reverently snuck glances at the pages and walked on as a guard stood over the magnificent book.

That night I went to the apartment of a friend of mine, Graham Sorenson. Graham's as granola as they come; a smiling bodhisattva of good vibes and weed. His blonde hair flows from under his beanie, and he thinks everything is funny. His roommate was there—a quiet, handsome guy with a beard and athletic clothes and a flat-brimmed hat, but with a certain sharpness in his face, an intelligence in the controlled way he shifted his gaze across the room from beneath the brim. Graham's female friend was also there—a beautiful girl in the overdone, heavily made-up sort of way. She was quiet. She pretended to be dumb. She cautiously hid some past, giving no clues as to how she ended up in this strange place with these strange people.

The apartment is lined with Tibetan prayer flags and lava lamps. We passed the bong around, blasting ourselves into a relaxed cosmic reality more pleasant than reality. Time drew on and we grew quiet. I made eyes at the girl, the roommate left, and before long we found ourselves wrapping legs in Graham's room in a hot, disjointed, fleshy dance, devoid of shame and darkness.

That night we all lay in bed, me face up behind the girl, and Graham facing her across from me.

I was haunted by dreams. I saw the slums of downtown Seattle steaming, saw myself crying in the alleyway, saw strobe lights gyrating into the void and they seemed to be communicating something, as though through Morse code; I could not understand it, but it was sinister and I was afraid. All was dark and increasingly dark; chaotic and increasingly chaotic. A table sat in the midst of it, set with a fine dinner. The tablecloth was whisked away and beneath were three large reptiles gnawing at what remained of the legs of the table. In a moment their gnarled ugliness made clear that resistance or protest was futile, and that the foundation of comfort and security was suddenly gone. I saw the pages of the St. John's Bible as though they were alive, colors flaming and bleeding across my line of sight, and I saw monks in stone hovels on the coast of Ireland gilding the halo of Christ as the dark set in upon them, and I saw a bearded fellaheen man with a dirty face and fire in his eyes and he stared at me as from the storm clouds above the Nephilim came shooting down in flames to the earth. He held out his hand.

I awoke, packed my things quietly, kissed Graham on the forehead, and left.

Cast Outward

I drove through the Cascades in the misty morning as the silhouetted mountains came forth from the brightening grey. I drove humbly. This time I was listening. The road directs us at first to ourselves, then out

of ourselves, to others, then away from others, and finally to God, who lies at the intersection of here and nowhere.

After hours of barren planes, pine-lined highways and bad drivers, I turned off at St. Regis Montana and drove the narrow windy roads through a place that seemed like it could be home to me. That part of Montana is all mountain valleys, open and golden in the late summer, framed and edged by pine-covered hills and mountains. The speed limits are fast and police nonexistent, so I sped as fast as I could go without losing control of the car. The afternoon was setting bright and the grass in the fields had the white glimmer of fall coming on.

It reminded me of the sort of scenery they show at the end of old Western movies to instill awe, just when the trumpets start playing and the guy in the white hat looks into the sun and says "see that weren't too bad after all" and the kid chuckles and the mother comes up behind in her apron and admires it all with them.

It reminded me of afternoons watching John Wayne movies at my grandparents' house, looking out the window and over the ocean when I got bored with the movie, sitting in the warm sunlight that flowed through the huge windows under the vaulted wood roof.

It reminded me of the beautiful landscapes of Utah and New Mexico with which God had calmed my racing, anxious, anguished heart when, as a college student, I began to realize that I was unloved and unloveable, utterly alone, and that my Mormonism, my community, my project, had failed utterly before it had even really begun. I would hit the road at that state of despondency beyond rage, but I would be calmed by the sunrise over Abiquiu or Flagstaff and God would hush me and remind me that the whole world was outside of me.

It was completely dark by the time I got out of the Rockies at the east end of the park and finally found a McDonalds, miles away in Cut Bank on the other side of the Blackfoot reservation.

I tried sleeping in the car, but there wasn't a place dark enough in the parking lot, and couldn't fall asleep for more than a little while at

a time. It was a run-down parking lot right by the side of the highway, lit by those obnoxious square fluorescent lights that seem too dim when you need them to see by, but too bright when you're trying to sleep.

Around 4 a.m. I drove back to the Blackfoot reservation. I pulled off the road. The air was cold and smelled of manure. I could see more stars than I have ever seen in the whole of my life—the whole Milky Way bright above me like a marvelous arch leading up to the infinite dark. The moon barely illuminated the outlines of the terrain—miles of flat land, the stony face of the mountains in the distance. The city of Browning lay at the foot of the mountains, some street lamps still on created a soft electric haze around the city. The stark contrast between yellow electric light and pearly moonlight was beautiful, but for the most part all was dark. After a while, a train came along the track half a mile to the north of me. Its horn sounded through the still night, and its rumble seemed to shake through the earth. Its light cut the darkness before it as it sped by.

It was that moment, under the stars, beside the train, away from the distant lights of town, in my Carhartt jacket against the cold of the dark night, that I remembered myself. I remembered the part of me I left on a desert roadside not much different from this in the wilds of northeastern Arizona. I had just been tamed then, was going to the Mormon temple before long, and would soon be in Washington, DC working for the United States Senate. I needed to put off the old ways, the nights drinking in my car, the random road trips whose cost could be counted more in grades than in cash, the lonely holidays, the cigarettes and beard stubble and smell of gasoline. Ahead I saw a life much more rooted, much more responsible, much more stable. I would forsake the image of homelessness, but become truly homeless, for homelessness had become my last home. I would surrender the image of irreverence, but become truly irreverent, for waywardness had become sacred to me. And so I stopped by the roadside outside of Winslow, Arizona as

the sun was setting. I left a piece of myself there, and promised I would return somehow.

There I was, between Browning and Cut Bank, and that piece of myself came up upon me swiftly with the breeze, and despite the cold and despite not having a friend within five hundred miles, I was at home. The train left, and all was silent, and I was silent, except for the words "thank you" whispered into the wind.

The sun was rising just as I skirted the mountains between Browning and Glacier. The sun rose green, then yellow, then bright red, then orange as the moon shone over Browning and the plains. It was one of the most beautiful sunrises I had ever seen. Before long, the colors were arrayed like a Navajo pot above the earth, all milky and smooth and distant in a way that made me realize how big the sky really is and how infinite the air and open spaces are in the West.

As I stopped to take it in, a man walked up the highway to my car. He couldn't have been more than twenty-five, and was wearing a leather jacket. He was either a Blackfoot or a Flathead Indian.

"Hey man," he called from far away. "Could I get a ride?"

"Where you going?"

"West."

He hopped in and we drove off.

We got to St. Mary's Lake just before 8 a.m. By this time the sky and the mountains were both a milky wash of gold and red and pink, and the whole world seemed illuminated by the dawn.

Glacier is the grandest of the national parks. Everywhere the mountains tumble off dramatically into deep valleys filled with aspen and pine trees. I couldn't stop gaping open-mouthed at the scenery around me.

I dropped him off as we left the park and went on my way.

As I drove through Kennewick the idea of Portland seemed to loom large in my head before me. I felt as though I were driving into the Holy of Holies where lay the wrathful God who had remembered my history and who lay lurking amid the pines and the skyscrapers.

Cast Inward

The first night in Portland I drove to Sara's house, where Graham and Sara sat in the backyard, with her beautiful view overlooking Vancouver.

"Welcome to my palace," she said, with her round sunglasses and dark lipstick on. "This is where I do yoga every morning—can you believe it?"

"I can almost believe it," I said, and Graham chuckled at the overly earnest way I said it.

We sat there, taking in the sunset, for a few hours.

"Man, I can't believe you went to Glacier dude," Graham said.

"Seriously, I was so freaking pissed you have no idea," Sara chimed in.

And we laughed there as the sun set green and gold over the Pacific Northwest.

We got burgers and went to a park, where Graham and Sara talked long into the night about where their childhood friends ended up. Graham left quietly, and Sara and I went on a hike down to a waterfall. A mile through the dark ferns we went and talked about love and loss and how healing could be had. We had met as staffers in DC, Westerners lost in the Kafkaesque hellscape of the East. We would sit on my porch back then and talk about the West and our desire to go home. I'm not very similar to Sara, and we've taken different approaches to healing, but we shared our wounds openly and felt real trust for each other. We sat there under the bridge over the waterfall, and it was dark, and I was jumpy, constantly thinking I heard footsteps over the din of the falls, and she kept calming me down and saying "You're at peace with the world, you're at peace with the world."

We walked back up the hill to the car and I kept thinking as my hand glided over the ferns, "I'm at peace with the world."

The next day I explored around Portland. I bought a new backpack at a hipster store near Powell's Books and spent an hour bitching about the East Coast with the woman behind the cash register. She thought I was into her at first, then thought I was gay, then realized I just needed someone to talk to.

I went to the Portland Oregon Temple. It was Monday, so the temple was closed and the parking lot empty. The Portland Temple is one of the truly otherworldly temples the LDS Church had built back in the '70s and '80s when the Mormons were more comfortable, more audacious, more willing to be different. It rises out of the pine trees overlooking the highway with six glowing white marble spires, round and angular, pointing upward like something out of a science fiction movie. The ferns and pines provide dark contrast with the brilliant white glittering marble building. The peculiar design of the building, with a low nave and six huge spires and two low domes on either side, make the building strangely deceptive. From some angles it looks massive, from others, quite humble.

I walked around the grounds in the sunlight and prayed. It hung over me that, in some inevitable future, I would be in the temple, doing the rituals for my grandfather. I would whisper his name through the veil, and sit in the presence of God enrobed in his memory.

I had quit smoking before the journey. I had acted in lust, smoked pot, cursed my way all up and down the coast, but I knew that this life was drawing to an end. I knew I would return to Pennsylvania, put off the old ways and return to the temple for my grandpa.

I never thought I would return to the temple after that day in Provo. I had only been endowed several months before, and had gone often, but I felt, as I drove through spring rains up to the Provo Temple with Michael, that this would surely be the last time. I was tired and aching and already my faith was being overrun by a need to escape, an anger toward the simple happy people, a desire for alcohol and sex.We went through that session and I tried to notice every detail; the way the patroness' dress hung off her knee, the way the old man in front of me crouched in his robes as beneath some weight, the orderliness of it all. We passed through the veil; Michael first, and since he was a veil worker, he was Elohim to me, and we grasped each other through the veil, and he, playing God, searched my hand and wrists for the wounds of Christ,

wounds which he, God, and he, Michael, had inflicted me with, and we embraced through the veil and I said those sacred words that always send me reeling, and I thought I could hang from the veil in the darkness forever. He drew me into the bright celestial room. There I had experienced so many miracles, sighed away so many of my problems, felt so much warmth, shed a few tears. Michael and I sat in the corner, enrobed and watching the silent happy people walk here and there in white like angels.

"Isn't this place awesome?"

I nodded.

"Hey look, that guy was from my mission."

I looked away.

"What's your favorite temple?"

Finally, he was silenced, and looked around with that stupid grin on his face.

I looked him in the face.

"I love you like a brother," I said.

He smiled.

"Always."

And a while later;

"We will never be here again," I said quietly.

"I don't know about that."

I knew about that.

And there I was in Portland, a year and a half later, faced with the premonition returning to the place I thought I could never return to, and the irony that it was my family that was driving me back to it, and I sat amidst the ferns beneath the ethereal tower and thought of how God had laid such strange seeds in the soil of my heart, and how tears are pointless after all.

I went straight from the temple to Graham's apartment. I sat in the parking lot talking to my grandmother. She had been so strong in all of our previous conversations, but in this one she broke down.

"I just can't believe how quickly it's happening" she said, and I knew he wouldn't last the week. "I'm glad your Uncle Bob got here in time," but there was no gladness in her voice.

I sobbed in my car, composed myself, and went into Graham's apartment.

"Hey dude!" he said in his over-jolly way.

We passed the bong around, I took a huge hit, and was soon spinning in my mind again.

We drove to Sara's house, though I don't remember how we got there, and watched the Presidential debate, though I don't remember watching it. I don't remember how or whether I got back to the hotel. The next memory I had was landing in Philadelphia. There, around the time I landed, I checked my phone. I had texted Michael late the previous night;

"I love you dude."

He had just responded "I love you too."

The next morning, I awoke and went to work. It was my brother's birthday. I had stopped at the gas station in Kennet Square when I got a call from my mother. It was 5:30 a.m. there. She didn't need to tell me what had happened.

"It's your brother's birthday," she said, crying.

But I didn't cry. I tried to comfort her, then drove the long way to work, through the forests and old farmhouses along the creek. Fall was beginning, and more sunlight was poking through the yellowing leaves than I had ever seen before. I stopped and heard birds singing and the brook babbling and everything in harmony as the sun rose over Delaware.

"Take him, God."

I thought about how lucky he was to have had my grandmother. How lucky we all were to have her. She's one in a million.

I looked around at the ruin of a stone house overgrown with weeds, a tree growing in the midst of it.

For years I had prayed for reconciliation between my faith and my family, and when that had proven futile and my faith died, I prayed for death. Now I was my grandfather, and he was me, and we were dead together, and we were dead with God, who died for us, and the togetherness of it all is the only life we have left. I realized that my Mormonism could only have ever worked if it were in the secret service of my family, and that my family would get on regardless of my prayers or anguish, and that God had been working all along, planting the seeds of grief and redemption secretly, mischievously in the day of my comfort, watering them in the night of my grief. And all of it—my grandfather, Michael, Graham, my Mormonism—would all pass away silent and un-mourned but for me, and all that would be left would be this tree growing in this ruined-out house on the side of a road in Delaware, and maybe that's how it should be after all.

I felt my heart beating, felt the wind on my cheek, looked at a picture of my dear grandpa, heard his laughter rolling on the wind, and I smiled. Somewhere at that very moment, my grandma had collapsed into a chair and was sobbing as they took the body away, men and women were enrobed before the veil raising hands high to God and praying over the name of my grandfather and over my name, light crept over the coastal range to the pre-dawn Pacific as the sun made its westward course and once again discovered the waves booming on the shore of my home south of Big Sur, carrying this place we clung to slowly to the sea, and my grandpa flew with the gulls who laugh at the futility of it all; all this clinging, all this praying, when death and decay are really just part of life and grief is the falling out of some fiction, and the cold hard reality we fall into is Edenic and tender unlike anything we've ever known before. I thought of Michael awakening with his pretty wife and kissing her forehead before another day, my mother tenderly shaking my brother out of sleep into the reality he was about to awake to, Graham cleaning out the coffee machines in Vancouver before the

morning rush, and I stood there near an old ruin in the woods as the sun rose over the living and the dead.

"I've fallen in love with you, God."

It felt like walking into the sea.