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My Lover, the Moon

At times like this, I can almost have it back. Sitting on the skiff on the loch and hearing the call of seabirds above and the rush of water below, feeling the warmth of the sun and the roar of the engine and the gentle purrs that vein their way through the boat wood, the hot and splintery bench under my seeking palms, the scent of petrol and sweet pine and Sheila's light perfume on the speeding wind. The air always feels thicker in Scotland, imbued with more weighty substance, as if we were powering through a thin water undulating invisibly in some primal synergy with the sombre depths below. I squeeze my eyes tightly shut. An old reflex, I suppose. I grasp in the darkness with my four-fingered soul. I know it's gone forever, but at times like this, I swear I can almost have it back.

The frustrating thing is that I remember seeing so well and I've also completely forgotten. I tried to explain it to Sheila once, this odd irony. That's the thing with senses, touch, sight, taste—you remember the accompanying emotions so well but the actual feeling, the connections of those neurons somewhere deep in the mind, they wither so fast. You forget so fast. Forgetting takes place on an almost daily basis. That's my theory.

I remember sitting here summer after summer as a child, my bare thighs pressing into the fallen pine needles as I shucked corn outside the squat grey house, my legs scratched from careening games of tag through brush and bracken. Our ankles were always whipped by nettles, long puffy lines marking the remnants of our play. I can't recall the sensation of those stings, but I can still see, in my mind's

eye, a bit, those long red nettle lines and the accompanying wild pride of the subtle pain in my boyish innocence.

Sometime during those early years my brother had dared me to keep my hands in the January sea for ten minutes. He waited with a big, bronze pocket watch, but let me take my hands out when half the time had passed because they had turned a sickly blue colour, an unhealthy cool shade that fascinated us both. I remember the colour very well. My hands must have been almost frozen, but the memory is purely warm to me now, tinged by the association of my mother. I can remember only specifics—not the entire forest, just a section of bark, or a tile of the house, or the pattern of a china cup. I've lost the ability to remember the whole scene unless I saw it translated into a photograph. Then, curiously, I can recall that flattened, frozen world with freakish accuracy—but what good is that when the beauty of the world lies in its motion?

I told Sheila when I met her in the waiting room that I'd rather die than go blind. She laughed and tossed her silvering hair and bought me a flat white and told me to stop whining because some people—like her, I suppose—had it worse. Five years later I allowed them, begged them really, to take out my eyes, to take the pressure from off my optic nerves. When they measured it, they said I should have been screaming. I think I was on the inside.

I think I stopped for a while after Sheila and I got together. Sheila kept me alive, I suppose, through that first day after, when I went from gray blurs to utter darkness. If I had realized how black blackness could be, maybe I wouldn't have done it. I don't remember much except for a horrific feeling of suspension, of teetering, my life transformed into a labyrinth of obstacles. Fear.

A lot of that. My mind clutched at its soft remembered footprints of perception, making me feel enormous one day and minuscule the next. I was a rat one day, a tanker the next, always scurrying, rifling mole-like through this new foreign soil of reality. But the ghost gained a form once more, and memories reigned where vision had once stood. For many years I hated this. But now, I couldn't live without it. I don't want my sight back. I wouldn't trade anything in this whole goddamn world to have my eyes back, especially not her. Don't fucking ask that again.

After the surgery, we experimented with lots of different translations. That was what she called them. She ran a hairdryer over my arm. “See?”—“Obviously not.” We laughed—no sweeter sound—“You don’t need to see the desert anymore. You can feel it instead.” Then she read me some poetry from some tiny green volume about this place called Tintern Abbey and how perception lies to a man and he must learn to feel his surroundings even when he’s sighted. I personally thought it was a load of bullshit but she loved the words and I loved her so I came to love them too.

Ice cubes melting on my chest *became* ice. Do you understand? Marshmallows and crackling logs and heat became the sight of flickering flames. It was miraculous. I couldn’t conjure her face up in its entirety after a while, but I could remember the curve of her silhouetted face, or the specific point in her iris where the two brown specks intruded on the blue. The warmth of her velvet skin was all I had left of her, and her musky perfume.

One morning when we were in Scotland together I was waiting in the boat as we prepared to go fishing and she said she’d be right back because she forgot something in the house. “The sky is so beautiful today. I don’t want there to be any world beyond those mountains,” she told me, and then she said she had to run back to the house. She took that perfume bottle off our dresser and brought it out to the boat and before I could say anything—I *couldn’t* say anything, couldn’t even see to protest—she crushed it against the wood of the boat. The scent unfolded its petals and blossomed almost sickly into the air, an overwhelming and hallucinatory rush. That day I saw white for the first time in six years. I had forgotten what white looked like.

We would go to Scotland and walk through the pine trees and Sheila would say, “Isn’t the moon so bright and white?” And I would nod and agree, not wishing to interrupt her reverie. We were never able to transfer the moon the way we were the sea or the sunshine. Moonlight brings no heat; it brings no cold. It is one of those rare beauties that exists in just one sense.

Life without Sheila won’t be another finger cut. It will be a grasp into the darkness with a bloody stump. It will be darkness dissipating into darkness. It is inconceivable, even now. I sit on the boat on the

loch in Scotland and I can hear the sounds and smell the perfume and feel the wood and nothing will ever change if I pretend it is exactly how it was when I last saw this scene. Sheila with her silver hair at the bow, my hand on the vibrating engine, and, our house the sole one on the pebbly shores.

When they brought me back to the house to scatter the ashes, they told me that there's a new house being built now at the head of the loch.

I spent a lot of time at the hospital when I was diagnosed with glaucoma, endless hours under bright lights and having white-robed doctors peer into the depths of my empty eyes and prescribing me useless drops in tiny blue bottles. But there I was never focused on my surroundings, so they didn't enter my memories the way that Sheila's face did, or the Scotland house. I honestly couldn't reconstruct the machines when I started to go back to the hospital with Sheila. Some things the void has just plainly claimed. I could only conceive of a sort of white rectangular shape, which in its fuzzy conception defined sinister. The hospital, with its sanitized scents, existed during that period as a mere soundscape. The beeps of machines were sidereal sounds puncturing the vast darkness. I spent a lot of time at the hospital this past year as well but I spend it now in Scotland, where I felt the ashes dissolving into the cold water, my hands submerged like that time of my boyhood in icy, veiny blue.

I'm not afraid, she had said. I'm smiling, she told me. Here. Feel my face.

I felt her face and felt that she was smiling then, ran my fingers over her hard and slippery teeth, still warm from their incubation behind the walls of her soft lips.

This darkness, she asked me softly. You know. Do you think it's your same darkness? She paused, labouring, crackling.

I don't know.

I hope it is.

I love you, I said stupidly.

I wonder, said she, soft, soft. The void took on a velvet shimmer. She laid her hand over mine and drummed her fingers absent-mindedly, and in that dappling flash of cooling touch, I wept and saw the moon.